

Strategies for an Emergent Reader

It is my goal as a literacy teacher to support my students in becoming confident, self-reflective readers, writers, and speakers. Students need to be given many opportunities to practice and build on the various components of literacy in order to become proficient readers. Phonological awareness, “the knowledge that words are comprised of individual sounds and the ability to manipulate these sounds” (Troia, 2008) is one of the key components of reading that is essential to master in order to become a competent reader. In the study that follows, I summarize and critique my work with an incoming first-grade boy who is learning to read and developing phonological awareness.

The student that I chose to work with for the purpose of this project is a six-year-old boy who I will refer to as Matt. He is going to be in first grade this coming school year at Austin Elementary in Dunwoody, GA. He is a Caucasian boy who speaks English. Matt has no disability status, although he did meet with our school’s EIP (Early Intervention Program) teacher in a small group setting on a daily basis for his kindergarten year due to the fact that he was reading slightly below grade level. Matt has a slight speech impediment, but it does not severely affect his ability to communicate effectively, nor does it seem to affect his confidence. His kindergarten teacher shared with

me that she did try to push to get Occupational Therapy services for Matt as he has some major struggles with his handwriting and would most likely qualify. However, when his mother took him to a pediatrician, she was told that there were multiple areas of concern, such as attention, and she felt overwhelmed and got a bit defensive. In the end, she made the decision not to turn in the doctor's form. As a result, Matt did not receive support services from an O.T. and continued to have a difficult time with especially his handwriting for the remainder of the year. Based on my observations from our work this summer on the progress he has made, I am guessing that his first grade teacher will have concerns early on this next school year and recommend that he works with an O.T. Matt's mom does understand that he is reading slightly below grade level and is inconsistent with his handwriting skills, which is why she asked me to provide him with additional assistance this summer.

I have been tutoring Matt since the beginning of the summer, a time period of approximately two months. During our tutoring sessions, we have been focusing primarily on reading and handwriting, as these are the areas that Matt struggles with and that his kindergarten teacher had concerns about. We have met twice a week for a half hour the past two months, so Matt has become very comfortable with me. Each time I go over to their house, which is

where we work, Matt is enthusiastic and ready to work hard. At the beginning of the summer (end of kindergarten), Matt was reading at a level C based on the Fountas and Pinnell leveling system, which is slightly below grade level. He has made incremental progress this summer and we are now able to focus on books at levels D and E. Matt seems to enjoy reading and consistently does his best job when we work together.

I had an idea of what I wanted to focus on with Matt for the purpose of this study before I formally pre-assessed him, just from observing him reading over the summer. One thing I noticed Matt seemed to struggle with was recognizing high-frequency sight words. He would continually stumble on these words in his reading, and would sometimes try to sound them out, without success, as they were words he needed to memorize or figure out based on the context of the story. One activity I did with him over the summer was to choose ten basic sight words he missed on a list of 100 high frequency words for kindergarten and wrote each on a small index card. We put all ten cards on a ring and used them as flash cards to practice on a daily basis. Once a week I would assess him on the recall of the ten words, and if he mastered 4/10 words for example, we would add four more words to the ring. I believe this technique was somewhat effective, but not to the extent that I hoped, and that is why I was thinking I

might focus one of my lessons for this study on learning sight words in order to improve fluency. **(Standard I)**

On one of our usual tutoring mornings, I arrived at Matt's house and we went into the kitchen to work. This is where we typically work, in a bright setting with a large workspace, free from noise or other major distractions. I explained to Matt that I needed his help for a project I was doing for my college class. I told him we would be doing the same sorts of things we usually did, and I would have him read for me, and then I would teach him some reading strategies. He smiled and agreed to help me with my work.

I decided to use the Sight Word/Decodable Word List as a pre-assessment tool to get information on the kinds of mistakes Matt makes when reading words as well as to determine what words he knows. As the name suggests, this list is comprised of both sight words and decodable words, which I thought would give me a more complete understanding of what Matt knew specifically about word recognition. To begin the assessment, I set the *Preprimer* word list in front of Matt, exposing only one word at a time. I would have him continue reading each word listed until he missed five consecutive words. After completing the *Preprimer* word list, we would move on to the *Primer* list, then the *First, Second, and Third Grade* lists. Matt only missed 3 of the 20 words on the *Preprimer* word list, and was feeling

confident. He said, "These words are easy! This isn't tricky!" On the *Primer* list, he read 19 of the 20 words accurately. On the *First Grade* list, he missed 11 of the 20 words, but self-corrected himself on the word *also* to bring his score up to 10/20. Still, we moved on to the *Second Grade* list, as he hadn't missed five consecutive words yet. Right away he stumbled on the first word and did not even attempt it. He knew the word *room*, but then missed five words in a row. I uncovered the rest of the words on the list, as directed, and asked Matt if he knew any other words on the list. After viewing over the words, he responded, "No." I noted that initially Matt seemed enthusiastic and confident as shown by his willingness to try to read the words, and this diminished slightly as the words became increasingly difficult. To complete the assessment, I totaled up his scores and found that the highest list where Matt scored a minimum of 13 was the *Primer* word list, which makes him an Emergent reader. Overall, I was happily surprised by the amount of words Matt read successfully. It was evident to me that he had been practicing his flashcards and reading at home in addition to our time together.

The next step was to analyze incorrect responses, mispronunciations, and substitutions that Matt made on this pre-assessment to determine his strengths and areas for instruction. One thing I noticed right away was that Matt called out quite a few words

that had the same beginning sound as the word he was reading, but he did not seem to be hearing the ending sound, and that is what was causing him trouble. For instance, he read *there* instead of *that* and *they, an* instead of *any, see* rather than *say, by* for *boy*, and *more* for *mother*, to name a few. Based on this data, I decided he needed a lesson on hearing beginning and ending sounds. I also noticed that Matt made a couple errors with words in the -ad family. He read *hat* instead of *had* and *by* rather than *bad*. He did not seem to be making connections between words that follow the same pattern, so I decided as a second part of my lesson I would do an activity on short vowel a patterns, such as -ad. He needed practice making words that follow this pattern in order to recognize that some words are spelled similarly, and when you know how to read and spell one word, that can help you figure out another word. I checked the Georgia Performance Standards to make sure that the skills I felt Matt was lacking and needed instruction in were developmentally appropriate. Two standards in particular fit the areas of instruction I had in mind for Matt (ELA1R2: The student demonstrates the ability to identify and orally manipulate words and individual sounds within those spoken words; ELA1R3: The student demonstrates the relationship between letters and letter combinations of written words and the sounds of spoken words). **(Standard II)**

I had two solid ideas for lessons I could do with Matt, but I couldn't help but think about the difficulty he often displayed when encountering common sight words. Although he succeeded in reading the majority of the sight words accurately on this assessment, I knew from my work with Matt over the summer that he was inconsistent with his sight word recognition. Often times when he reads books at his instructional level, he struggles to figure out some of the sight words that were on this assessment. Due to his inconsistency and through my observations of Matt's reading and strategy use, I thought that a useful lesson would be to teach him about using the context of the story along with the word sounds to figure out unknown words.

(Standard III) I thought that using the context of the sentence and story, along with mini-lessons on beginning and ending sounds and short a word families would be appropriate and beneficial to Matt's success as a reader.

I went back to Matt's house a few days later to do the first part of my three-part lesson. We talked for a few minutes about how his day was and he told me he was getting excited for school to begin.

(Standard IV) He was eager to get started, so I pulled out a pile of picture cards and explained that we were going to play a game called Sound Dominoes. "The use of associated pictures, manipulatives like counters, and visual cues such as squares representing the number of

segments in a word can help reduce demands on working memory and make phonological awareness tasks more concrete” (Troia, 2004, 2). I began by telling Matt the purpose for our lesson: to practice hearing the beginning and ending sounds in words to accurately decode text. I then modeled the activity and showed him a picture of a house. I asked him what sound we hear at the beginning of *house* and he answered correctly, /h/. I said the word aloud again, exaggerating the ending sound and asked Matt what sound we hear at the end of the word *house* (/s/). I then took a picture of a sun and asked Matt what sound we hear at the beginning (/s/). I pointed out how the ending sound of the last word matched the beginning sound of this word. I prompted him to tell me the ending sound of *sun* and then added a picture of a nest to the chain. I asked him how I knew that I could put a nest next to the sun, and he told me it was because “sun ends with an /n/ and nest begins with an /n/.” I felt that Matt was ready to play so we set my example to the side and picked up a picture of a house to begin with. I sat and observed while Matt patiently looked over the cards lying face up (about 20 of them) until he found a card that would connect with *house*. He quickly became engaged and got excited when he found a word that had the same beginning sound as the ending sound of the previous word. He blurted out, “Star!” and placed the picture of a star next to *house*. I allowed him to move at his own

pace and provided little assistance as my goal was to assess how easily and quickly Matt was able to match the beginning and ending sounds. For the next match, Matt located *rake* before I had even spotted a match (I found that it was somewhat difficult to find matches when there were so many choices laid out in front of us. This is something I will address more in my reflection). The next matches Matt found were *cake, crib, box, bone, net,* and finally, *tub*. He clearly understood the concept as he was able to correctly locate word matches, and he was able to hear the beginning and ending sounds in all of the words we worked with. I told Matt that I noticed he was working hard to listen to both the beginning and ending sounds in the words, and then I explained how he could use this concept to help him with his reading. This positive reinforcement boosted his confidence as well as helped him understand how he could apply this skill in his reading.

The first lesson did not take too much time from start to finish, and I felt that Matt seemed to grasp the concept and was ready to move on to my second lesson on another reading strategy, learning common short a vowel patterns. The lesson I planned, which I adapted from Fountas and Pinnell's phonics lessons, had both a spelling and a reading component. **(Standard V)** I told Matt that we were going to notice parts, or patterns, in words. I explained that

some words have the same beginnings and some have the same endings. I wanted to support Matt in analyzing word patterns to help him decode words in the future. "The more reflective and analytic a child is about words and spelling patterns, the more rapidly he or she progresses in learning to read" (Gaskins et al, 1997, 318). I then wrote *-at* on a white board, which he read aloud. I asked him what word it would make if I added an *h* before the *-at*. Matt correctly read *hat*. I had him help me come up with a couple more examples (*sat* & *mat*), and then I wrote *fat* and asked him to read it. He succeeded, so I asked him what word it would be if I changed the *f* to *r* (*rat*). At first he struggled and said *rap*, missing the ending we were working on. When I covered up the first part and asked him the sound of the ending *-at*, he was able to tell me. I took my finger away and told him to read the word again, and that time he got it. Then I told Matt that we were going to look at another pattern. I wrote *can* and *man* on the white board and had him read the words, then tell me what he noticed about them. He said that they both end in *-an*. He added the word *pan* to the list. I then asked him to read the words I added to the list. I added *fan*, *ran*, and *plan*. At first he read *fat*, but when I said, "Oop..." he checked it again and read it successfully, and then read *ran*. I summed the mini-lesson up by reemphasizing that he can look at patterns he knows to help him read words. I told him that this

is something good readers do. I then explained that he was going to have a chance to build some words with magnetic letters. I knew that Matt had experience doing this in kindergarten, but I still modeled and made the word *tap*. I told him to use the letters to build as many words as he could that followed the same ending pattern. Each time he made a word, he was to mix it up, remake it again, and then write the word on the two-way sort sheet. **(Standard VI)** I observed how easily and quickly Matt worked through this task, once again, and saw that he was thinking hard to come up with words. He stumbled to come up with another word after the first word (*map*), so I gave him a clue (what is another word for a hat?) and he made the word *cap*. We went through this same process with the pattern *-ad*. Matt made *bad*, *sad*, and *glad*. He recorded all of these words on his sorting sheet so we then went back to read through the words he made. He stumbled a couple of times, but when I signaled him to try again, he got the word the second time.

To assess his understanding of this concept, I made the word *tap* and asked Matt to change it to *cap*. I continued asking him to form different words by changing a letter at a time (for instance, *cap* to *tap* to *tan* to *pan* to *plan*). Matt had to think hard about how to make a few of the words, but he self-corrected himself several times. For instance, when making *tap*, he first made *tat*, but when I told him to

“check it again,” he changed the ending *t* to a *p*. I then changed a letter at a time to form a few words and had Matt read the words. “Successful decoding occurs when the brain recognizes a familiar spelling pattern or, if the pattern itself is not familiar, searches through its store of words with similar patterns” (Cunningham, 1998, 197). He read every word accurately, which led me to believe that he understood the concept and was making connections between words. If I had more time, I would provide him with a book that included many short vowel patterns to see if he was able to apply this concept in his reading. I might also give him a short spelling test on words with these patterns. I could tell by this time that Matt needed a break, so I thanked him again and told him I’d see him soon for our last lesson.

On the third day I told Matt that I was excited to teach him a fun game that would help him with his reading. He was ready to go so we began right away. The game I showed him is called Guess the Covered Word. I explained that I had a sentence written on a sentence strip with one word covered up. I made a point of providing personal sentences that would be meaningful to Matt. I had Matt read the sentence aloud saying “blank” when he came to the covered word. The first sentence read, “Matt likes to go to the blank.” I took out a white board and told him that I wanted him to think of all of the possible words that would make sense in the blank. To assist him with

this, I read the sentence a few more times out loud so he could think about what would make sense. Right away he called out “movies!” so I asked him to write that down, using best-guess spelling. Right away I realized that writing his guesses out was going to be challenging for him and take away from the point of our lesson, so for the rest of his guesses I wrote his responses. He guessed *store, circus, museum, pool, and mall*. I praised his responses for making sense. I explained that the next step of the game was to show the first part of the mystery word. He was eagerly anticipating what the word might be and was highly engaged. The first letter of the mystery word was *p*. I showed Matt how to cross off any of his responses that did not start with a *p*. I reemphasized that they were all good guesses because they all made sense in the sentence, but now that we knew the first letter, we knew that some of the guesses would no longer work. The only word he had guessed that still worked was *pool*, but I told him that before we showed the rest of the word, we needed to think if there are any other words that start with a *p* that would make sense in the sentence. Again, I read the sentence out loud to assist him. He told me to add the words *party* and *playground*. I provided him with a little more wait time to encourage him to think, and he blurted out, “park!” We exposed the next letter and found it to be an *a* so Matt went ahead and crossed off *pool* and *playground*. We continued this

process with the next two letters before showing the entire word. The mystery word was *park*, which Matt was very excited about. We play Guess the Covered Word for one more sentence, "Many first graders like to eat blank." For the first round of guesses, Matt said *fries*, *sweets*, *cheese*, *apples*, *chicken*, and *yogurt*, none of which start with *p*, the beginning letter of the mystery word. However, they all made sense and I emphasized that to Matt. I told him that when he is reading, he can use this exact strategy when he comes to a word he doesn't know: he can think about what would make sense. I then explained that we should also look at the beginning sound of a word we don't know to try to figure it out. Since none of his responses began with a *p*, we had to come up with a new list of words that would make sense and start with the letter *p*. Matt thought of *pie*, *potatoes*, *pickles*, and *pizza*. We followed the same process, exposing another letter, one at a time, and discovered that the word was in fact *pizza*. Matt was very proud that he guessed the covered word. To sum up the lesson, I asked Matt, "What does this teach us? What do you need to do when you come to a tricky word in a book?" He responded, "See what makes sense!"

I felt confident that Matt understood the concept taught, but I wanted to assess his application of this concept by having him read a book at his instructional level. I told him we were going to finish up

the lesson by reading *Peanut Butter and Jelly* by Dona McDuff. This book is a level E on the Fountas and Pinnell leveling scale. He read most of the book with much ease. He stumbled on the word *spaghetti* and used the picture to help him figure it out. I praised him for using the picture clues, stating that it is a strategy that good readers use. Then he turned the page to find the following sentence: "On Tuesday, Mom gave me some soup." At first he read *made* instead of *gave*, which shows me that he was indeed thinking about what makes sense. On his own, he went back to self-correct and figured out that the word was actually *gave*. I stopped him and told him what I noticed; that he was using the strategies we just learned (thinking about what makes sense as well as paying attention to the sounds in the word) to figure out an unknown word. I told him that this is something good readers do. There was one more similar occurrence in the book, when he read the word *today* instead of *away*. This time the word he read did not make sense, and Matt realized that and corrected himself. I was very pleased to see Matt successfully implement the strategies I had taught him. My original goal of this lesson was to provide Matt with a strategy to use when reading sight words, but I came to realize that this is a strategy that can be used to figure out unknown decodable words as well. It is a great tactic for a reader to have in his/her repertoire in order to monitor comprehension of text. I am sure that

Matt would benefit from additional lessons on reading strategies focused on comprehension strategies, but for the limited amount of time I had with him, I felt that Matt grasped the new concepts taught and gained some confidence in his reading ability.

In reflecting on the lessons I taught Matt, I definitely observed evidence of his understanding in the short, guided lesson activities that practiced specific phonological awareness and reading skills. Matt successfully matched 100% of the words based on their beginning and ending sounds. In the lesson on short vowel patterns, although Matt displayed some difficulty at points throughout the independent practice time, he learned from his mistakes and was making self-corrections, sometimes without being asked, which shows me that he is beginning to grasp the concept being taught. He continues to learn to discriminate between the types of words that can be sounded out or need to be memorized. Matt was able to isolate beginning and ending sounds in single-syllable words as well as add, delete, or substitute target sounds to change words, which are two of the first grade Georgia Performance Standards. Matt was also able to utilize context clues to figure out unknown words, which was the objective for the third lesson. For this reason, I feel that Matt achieved his lesson goals. However, Matt would benefit from more practice to achieve automaticity.

I think the next step for both of these lessons would be to listen to Matt read a just-right book to determine if he is able to consistently apply what he learned in text. Just as I did with the last lesson (Guess the Covered Word), I might have Matt read a book at his instructional level to see if he is able to apply the skills of listening to both the beginning and ending sounds to decode unknown words, as well as make connections between words and use patterns he knows to figure out tricky words. I believe that with more practice, Matt will become more confident in his ability to decode text, which will lead him to becoming a more proficient reader.

I think my work with Matt was successful for a few reasons. I provided explicit instruction and modeled the skills I wanted Matt to learn. I engaged him by connecting the activities to his life and allowing him opportunities to manipulate words and pictures. I ensured that the activities and concepts I was teaching him were age-appropriate and the goals I had for him were attainable. I used multiple methods for instruction, and provided him with ample time to practice on his own. When I adjusted the lesson, realizing my initial expectations for him to write his guesses were unrealistic, I showed flexibility. Matt responds really well to positive encouragement and I made an effort to give him constructive, descriptive praise. Overall, Matt had a positive attitude and was very focused and attentive

throughout my lessons, which added to his success. This case study has showed me that although time consuming and at times, tedious, pre-assessments are valuable tools that allow a teacher to develop lessons that tailor to individual students' needs. It will continue to be my goal as an educator to meet all of my students' unique learning needs in order to support them in reaching their potential. When students are given opportunities to feel success in the classroom, they become confident, reflective lifelong learners.

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