

What's Your Cue? Incorporating the Semantic and Graphophonic Cueing Systems into Students' Reading

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According to Kenneth Goodman's psycholinguistic reading theory, there are four language cueing systems that readers activate in order to read text: the graphophonics cueing system, the syntax cueing system, the pragmatic cueing system, and the semantic cueing system (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993, p. 150). The relationship between letters and their sounds is referred to as the graphophonics cueing system. This cueing system is commonly known as sounding out words. Readers who activate the syntax cueing system use the grammar and sentence structure of the text's language in order to predict what words will appear next. When readers activate the pragmatic cueing system they use their knowledge of how certain words are used in familiar situations and apply that knowledge to a similar situation described in a text. The meaning of language is often called the semantic cueing system. Many teachers also refer to this cueing system as using context clues.

All systems must be activated in order for the reader to maintain ongoing comprehension of the text. It is also important for readers not to rely on one particular cueing system more than another. Readers must be taught how to automatically cross check the cueing systems against each other while they read.

In children's picture books, especially those meant for beginning reading instruction, pictures play a large role in activating the semantic cueing system of beginning readers. For young readers, supporting pictures can provide a concrete representation of what the text is stating in words, which can aid with the reader's comprehension of the story (Newton, 1995).

The pictures can also provide needed background knowledge that the reader may lack, as well as aid in the identification of unknown words. However, as useful as pictures may be in assisting beginning readers, caution needs to be exercised so that pictures do not lead the reader astray (Newton, 1995). In order to compensate for the limitations of using pictures to activate semantic cues, readers need to be taught how to cross check the guessed word with the pictures provided and the unknown word (Fielding, Forsyth, & Roller, 1999).

I have noticed many of my first grade students place a heavy reliance on sounding out every unknown word because that is usually the first reading strategy they learn. Unfortunately, there are many words in the English language that do not follow the rules that students are taught. When my students encounter these words, they are at a loss for what to do. They often become very frustrated. Keeping this in mind, I decided to teach my students how to incorporate both graphophonics cues and semantic cues while they read.

In developing my lesson plans, I wanted to use the Gradual Release of Responsibility instructional model (Rhodes & Shanklin, 1993) as a guide for the sequence of my lesson

plans. The purpose of the first two lessons of the curriculum plan was to provide the students with teacher modeling of the use of semantic cues. I used big books with covered words because I wanted to demonstrate how to use semantic cues in a real reading situation. The next two lessons focused on providing the students with guided practice. I chose to use posters and sentence strips because I thought it would be easier to guide the practice if all of the students' attention were focused on one picture and group of sentences. The final four lessons of the curriculum plan focused on providing opportunities for independent practice as well as a chance for my students to apply their knowledge of the use of semantic cueing skills in real reading situations. I chose to use a different book for each lesson because I wanted to expose my students to as many unknown words in text as I could. A brief synopsis of the lesson plan sequence follows. The first two lessons of the eight-day introduction unit on using semantic and graphophonic cues involved reading big books. The purpose of these lessons was to model for the students how proficient readers integrate the graphophonic and semantic cueing systems while reading. The materials needed for these two lessons are two big books, Post-it tape (the tape needs to be thick enough to cover six lines of 12 point text), several sheets of large self-stick notes (enough to use one self-stick note per page of the big book), and markers.

Before reading the big books to the students I chose one word per page to cover with the Post-it tape. The word was one that could be easily figured out from the pictures and the context clues. I explained to the students that as I read the story to them, they would notice that some of the words in the book have been covered, and they would learn some ways of figuring out the covered word without sounding out every letter. I also explained that there are four steps one can use to figure out a word without sounding it out. They were: 1) read the entire sentence that contains the unknown word, 2) look at the supporting pictures for clues about the unknown word, 3) make guesses about the word that make sense when substituted back into the sentence, and 4) check your guess by cross-checking the sounds in the unknown word with the sounds in the guessed word and the length of the guessed word versus the length of the unknown word. A word has been guessed correctly when it makes sense in the sentence, goes with the picture, and the sounds in the guessed word match the sounds in the word in the book.

When I encountered a covered word, I stopped reading and indicated to the group that an unknown word was found in the book. I followed the four-step process listed above. It was very important that I verbalized all of my thoughts when guessing the word. I followed each step of the process as I thought aloud. When guesses were made about the covered word, I placed a self-stick note in the book and wrote them down. This helped the students remember the guessed words, and it helped with the fourth step of the process when the guessed word had to be cross-checked with the word written in the text. After a guess was made, I went through the list and substituted the guessed word for the unknown word. I allowed the students to judge if the guessed word made sense. If it made sense in the sentence, I asked the students to check the picture and point out clues that supported the guessed word as part of the text. If the students ruled that the guessed word did not make sense, I crossed it off the list. If the guessed word made sense, I began cross-checking the length of the guessed word with the unknown word. Then I

slowly peeled the Post-it tape back revealing one sound at a time and checked the sounds of the unknown word with the sounds of the guessed word. I circled the word that was the correct guess and reviewed why that word was correct. The same procedure was followed as the rest of the book was read. Towards the end of the book, I allowed the students to make some guesses and participate in the cross-checking process. The objective of lessons three and four was to demonstrate through the Gradual Release of Responsibility's use of guided practice how proficient readers could use semantic cues when encountering unknown words. The following materials were needed for each lesson: a colorful poster, 4-6 sentence strips with one sentence written on each describing the poster, 4-6 small pieces of sentence strips to cover up words within the sentences, several large self-stick notes, markers, a pocket chart, and paper clips. Before the lessons began, I wrote 4-6 sentences about the poster on the sentence strips. I chose one word in each sentence to cover up with a blank piece of sentence strip. I secured the blank sentence strips over the chosen word using a paper clip. I displayed the poster and allowed the students to make comments about it and question what they saw in the poster. I displayed the first sentence strip in the pocket chart. As a group, we read the sentence noting which word was covered with a blank piece of sentence strip. I placed a self-stick note near the end of the sentence and wrote down the students' guesses about the covered word.

After the students guessed the missing word, I led them through the cross-checking process: 1) Did it make sense in the sentence?, 2) Was there support for the guessed word in the picture?, 3) Did the length of the guessed word match the length of the unknown word?, and 4) Did the sounds in the guessed word match the sounds in the unknown word? If the guessed word matched the unknown word, I circled it in the self-stick note. As the lessons continued, I encouraged the students to take more initiative in asking the questions during the cross-checking process.

The objective of the last four lessons of the eight-day unit was to provide the students with additional independent practice using semantic and graphophonic cues as well as provide opportunities for students to apply their new knowledge in a guided reading format. A different book was used for each lesson so that students would encounter several unknown words in the context of real reading. I also used a dry erase board and marker to record the students' guesses.

During the lessons I invited the students to read each page of the book to themselves. After each page, I asked if they found a word that they did not know and needed to figure out. I encouraged them to be honest and share when they did not know a word. I explained that if they did not know a word others may have been "stumped" by the same word too. If a student volunteered that he/she came across an unknown word, I had the student point the word out. It was very important that students who did know the word not shout it out. I made this point very clear before the reading began. The students covered the word with their finger, and the student who volunteered the word read the sentence containing the word indicating the unknown word with a pause or the word "blank." I encouraged the students to guess words that could be the unknown word emphasizing how important it is that the guessed word made sense. I also encouraged them to

substitute the guessed word in the sentence to see if it made sense and check the picture for clues that supported the guessed word in the sentence. I only wrote words on the dry erase board that made sense in the text. After guesses were made, we eliminated words that did not fit the unknown word's length and finally cross-checked the sounds in the guessed word with the sounds in the unknown word by having the students move their fingers that were covering the word very slowly revealing one sound at a time. When the unknown word was figured out, the group read the page together.

The students seemed engaged in all of the lessons, especially the first four. I think using big books as a way to model the use of semantic and syntactic cues was very successful. Not only were the children provided with an opportunity to be read to, but also they were able to participate in the read aloud towards the end of the lessons. By the end of the second lesson, the students were already beginning to realize how important it was for the guessed words to make sense. To me, this was a great accomplishment because many of the students were guilty of shouting out any word that began with the first letter of the unknown word regardless if the guessed word made any sense in the sentence. The children also enjoyed the lesson using the posters. Using the posters as a supporting picture was a different experience for many of the students. They enjoyed the discussion of the posters. The two posters I chose for the lessons depicted a forest scene and a tree house so we were able to build background knowledge about those two subjects. I was also very pleased with the success of the guided reading lessons. It was during these lessons that I could see who understood how to use semantic cues and who still needed some guided practice. When the students were reading, I could hear them say, "That doesn't make sense. I need to guess another word." Some students also made remarks about how letter sounds did not match between the guessed word and the unknown word in the text. I was pleased to see that some of the students were able to apply the use of graphophonic cues so quickly. However, there were some students who understood the importance of using semantic cues, but still needed me to ask guiding questions such as "Does that make sense?" and "What letters do you hear in the guessed word? Do you see those letters in the word you don't know?" These students needed a longer period of time to internalize the process of cross-checking. Using semantic cues will be a skill that I will focus on for the remainder of the school year.

In order to assess the success of my lessons, I decided to do a running record on each of my students both before and after implementing the unit. I used prepackaged Reading Recovery testing booklets. The Reading Recovery testing booklets place students on a reading level between 1 and 20. At the end of the first grade year, I expect students to be reading and comprehending between a level 14 and 16. When I tested my students before the cueing system unit was implemented in the middle of the school year, they were reading between a Reading Recovery level 3 and 5. When these levels are translated into grade level performance, these students were reading on a Kindergarten to beginning first grade reading level and were reading four to six reading levels below the expected Reading Recovery levels at this point in the school year.

Six weeks after the initial running records were administered, I administered another set of running records to see if my students made any growth after completing the eight-day

cueing system unit. My goal for the running records was that my students would increase their reading levels by two levels. Out of seventeen students, all of my students except for four students achieved this goal, and six of the students gained five or more reading levels. Overall, eight students were reading on grade level after the implementation of the eight-day unit. Since most of my students made gains in reading after the cueing system unit was implemented, I feel the lessons were successful. However, my goal is to continue using similar lessons throughout the rest of the school year as a way to help increase the reading levels of those students who did not make the gains I hoped they would make.

Work Cited

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