

Christine Ammirati
Elementary Reading/Language Curriculum
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Tutorial: Case Study

Pre-assessment data:

Nick is an upbeat child with a highly positive attitude towards school. He is an eager reader who enjoys joke books, simple graphic novels, and nonfiction informational books with strong photo support. His interest in reading is belied by his lack of comprehension. Nick exhibits reading difficulty not only in his guided reading work with the classroom teacher but also in all content area reading. His lack of comprehension is manifested in incorrect understanding of math instructions and confusion and misinterpretation of science and social studies facts. His grades are adversely impacted by his lack of comprehension. This weak comprehension's negative effect on his academic performance might soon erode Nick's cheery disposition toward academics. I feel that time is limited to work with Nick to improve this skill in order to preserve his positive attitude and motivation toward school.

Nick's initial RIC assessment showed that he made very little use of strategy in decoding words or reflecting on meaning and syntax. When presented with a reading sentence or passage, he simply moved through it, reading words in apparent isolation with no awareness of context and no reflection upon meaning. Reading quickly with few self-corrections and repetitions, Nick showed little self-monitoring and reading for comprehension.

As noted in the "Initial Passage" assessment, Nick generally has strong word recognition ability. He was able to read through Level 6 with only two errors. However, this skill does not transfer to his writing ability. Nick's Words Their Way assessment places him at a low ability

level for his grade and as a result Nick has just begin to receive special word study work with the Reading Specialist. While he may have strong sight recognition of grade-level words, he is unable to spell these words correctly in his own writing.

Nick's comprehension difficulties were clearly flagged in the RIC. The dichotomy between his word recognition and his weak comprehension was certainly apparent. He had poor command of facts gleaned from the short passages. He consistently omitted identifying details of characters, setting, and plot points and often entirely missed the broader level details. In short, he generally had little clue about the meaning of the passages.

Analysis of instructional decisions:

My overarching focus of one-on-one instruction with Nick was to focus on improving his recall of facts, increasing his overall comprehension, and developing his self-monitoring about whether he was truly attending to the text or just reading by rote. To achieve these multiple objectives, in our third lesson, I began using sticky notes with thought bubbles drawn on them as a visual alert to Nick that we would be pausing at specific points in the book to review. These tangible reminders were successful in focusing Nick's attention to correct misperceptions or review for meaning before moving deeper into the book.

I learned that positioning of these notes was critically important. Nick is so habituated to read "without his brain" (as he once explained it) that he needs to see a sticky note prompt in order to shift his brain into "reading for meaning" mode. For example, the first week I used this strategy, I positioned a few sticky notes at the top of the left hand page and Nick could not see them until he turned the page. He literally crashed right into the sticky notes with a head jolt and an exclamation. These upper left page notes meant that he encountered them without preparation and therefore without successful recall. I learned that in order for Nick to use the

sticky notes effectively, he had to see them well in advance as a reminder that he must soon pause and tell me what he had just read. I therefore began placing the sticky notes on the bottom right of the pages whenever possible thereby avoiding surprising Nick with a sticky note on the upper part of a left hand page.

Another effective comprehension strategy was the creation of a character map to focus Nick's attention on the traits and descriptive details of the protagonist. Referring back to the character map when Nick paused at his thinking bubble markers, I would ask whether any comments or descriptions about Mike would be useful to include in the character map. After Nick had finished reading that session's reading selection, he would contribute any pertinent details to the map. I learned to keep the character map casually open on the table during Nick's silent reading and he would occasionally make a connection between a word in the text and the map. At these points, he would exclaim and say, "Mike's nervous again!" and point to the word *nervous*. When Nick could see the character map his focus was heightened and he was more attentive to the details of what he was reading.

Reading a pair of related books was effective. By using these books, Nick had two short manageable experiences with plot sequencing and was able to build on his existing knowledge of characters, setting, and the author's style. His attention was then free to focus on additional details from the texts. I also felt he was less intimidated and more engaged by the format of these two specific Matt Christopher texts. Both books were in a larger font than he generally encountered in the classroom and had a high level of picture support. When considering this series, I worried that Nick might have felt these texts "looked" too young relative to the Horrible Harry books from his guided reading group. To the contrary, Nick talked about how he liked them. I observed him using the pictures for support when he encountered complicated passages

and I believe that the layout put him at ease and made the texts *feel* more accessible despite their Level L challenge.

Partner reading with Nick was a positive part of our one-on-one sessions. We read aloud after Nick finished his silent reading and alternated reading different parts in the dialogue. Nick's expression progressively grew stronger and his reading became more fluid. As he focused on punctuation marks and intonation, his attention was also on the meaning of the text. That is, in order to read the dialogue effectively and accurately, Nick needed to understand the meaning and the context of what he was reading.

Our word study work evolved as our sessions progressed. Nick was not strongly engaged with the simple reading of the words and their placement in pattern categories. In an attempt to maintain his high level of focus, I changed our format and incorporated a "concentration" game into our word study. Nick's interest and attention in the word sort instantly increased. Later, I shifted focus once again and used the word sort cards to play a tic tac toe game. Both games maintained the integrity of the word study and could be played within our five-minute word study time allocation. I also chose to include a large number of homophones in the second group of words to heighten Nick's attention on the details of individual spelling. When he read each homophone in the context of either game, we would discuss the meaning of that specific word and highlight the vowel pattern. He was required to pay attention to the details of spelling

Writing proved to be the most challenging aspect of my one-on-one sessions with Nick. As in his classwork, Nick generally rushed through his writing. Even when we previewed what he would write by discussing answers to my guiding questions in advance, he would abbreviate his oral response and write simple, direct sentences. Frequently, Nick would simply write, "Yes" and push his notebook back. After encouragement to expand, he would write the bare

minimum. Also consistent with his Words Their Way assessment and classwork, Nick was challenged to apply his word recognition knowledge to his writing. For example, together we broke down, decoded, and used a mnemonic (“It itches”) for “itch” and also for “pitch”, yet he was unable to remember this word work when the time came to use “pitch” in a sentence describing action from the book. After I added the word to our word bank, I would still need to prompt Nick to use the resource even when it was directly in front of him. Similar to his lack of self-monitoring when reading, Nick is not yet connecting his physical writing with his knowledge of writing. He is neglecting to capitalize the first word in every sentence and rarely remembers his punctuation. In addition, he routinely misspells the “ed” when using past tense. I envision that a personalized editing checklist (as described in Taberski’s Ch. 9 Reading-Writing Connections) might be an effective tool for Nick’s monitoring and self-correction and that such a checklist would prompt him to double check his word bank, punctuation, capitalization, and verb endings.

Post-assessment data:

Nick’s post-assessment performance on the RIC showed strong consistency with the initial assessment done two months ago. In fact, three mispronunciation errors on the “sentences for initial passage selection” were identical. He avoided errors on three other words (“manage”, “evidence”, and “hoped”) but paused at each, began the word, and then read them correctly. I did not compare these assessments until days after administering the post-assessment and was interested to see such parallels between the results. I found it particularly notable that Nick had paused at the three words noted above and focused on the word before pronouncing it. Using this self-monitoring, he avoided prior nonsensical sentences such as “Serious players machine to

practice a lot.” I hope that I glimpsed a reflection of an internal process where Nick is monitoring for meaning during reading.

Nick’s overall performance on the reading passages did not show great differences. His summary chart numbers appear to show vast improvement but in fact the earlier assessment’s numbers were severely inflated because I asked Nick to continue on to higher-level passages where he amassed a large volume of miscues, thus distorting the original data set.

Fluency is the most pronounced change in Nick’s reading over the last two months. He is now using his ample dramatic skills to inject expression and meaning into his oral reading. Dialogue provides an opportunity for Nick to showcase his attention to punctuation and understanding of character and plot. For example, in the Level 1 passage, Nick read the mother’s comments with an understanding of how a parent would interact with a child on a birthday. When he read aloud, “Today is your birthday, Pat. What do you want to do?” I was fully aware of his comprehension of the sentence.

Although Nick’s performance on the “sentences for initial passage selection” indicated a higher starting point, on this administration of the RIC, I asked Nick to begin at Level 1 in order to allow more comprehensive assessment of his overall reading level. Nick’s oral reading accuracy surfaced some errors but none were meaning disrupting. Despite this strong word calling ability, Nick still showed significant comprehension difficulties. Even in the least challenging passages, Nick provided minimal plot summary unaided and when prompted was unable to recall specific character names, settings, or plot points. For instance, he misunderstood a key element in the birthday party passage by not picking up on the detail that the girl said she only wanted to play for her birthday. He said that she wanted to have a party thereby flagging that he had missed the nuance that this party was a surprise organized by the

mother and that the girl's overall level of pleasure about a party was compounded by the element of surprise.

The latter reading passages contained multiple levels of complexity that escaped Nick's notice. For example, Nick failed to understand that both a television show and a bedtime scenario were being described in the Level 3 passage. When I first read this piece myself and encountered the scene shift from television to home, I found that I went back to the beginning of the passage to reread and check my understanding. Had I missed an earlier clue that the horseman was not a real character? As a result of my own experience, I watched Nick carefully as he read through the passage and he did not manifest any surprise and did not reread to check for understanding. Predictably, he was unable to produce any summary of the passage and only offered that it was about "bedtime" which happens to be the title of the piece. At that point, I turned the passage over and asked some follow-up questions that confirmed Nick's overall confusion. The Level 4 piece was almost as convoluted. Nick thought the box rather than the book inside it was the solution to the problem. I also think that he had been unaware of the time setting for this passage until I asked how he knew that this story had taken place in olden days.

As seen in these examples, Nick is still challenged to focus on character, plot, setting, and story details. He reads at a broad level of comprehension and is not yet working to assimilate specifics and to reconcile discrepancies in understanding or surprises in plot line. Nick needs to become a more active reader, to self-monitor his reading, and to work to process the text information. Currently, he remains a passive recipient of information and therefore has difficulty applying this knowledge.

Summative reflection:

My instructional experience with Nick has provided me with strong appreciation of the importance of regular individual conferencing and strategy work with students. I was struck by the amount of information that surfaced in our one-on-one sessions about how he approached and processed text. I believe that this understanding is certainly more difficult to attain in a small group and that such a setting is not ideal for targeted instruction. For struggling students, needs must be addressed individually to maximize results. Our sessions provided a workable framework for individualized, focused strategy teaching that could be used during independent reading conferences or another time carved out of the language arts block.

These sessions emphasized the interconnections of each facet of language instruction and the fact that personal feedback about work is necessary for growth and improvement. I have observed the awkwardness in splitting reading and writing instruction into two separate classrooms and my one-on-one sessions with Nick emphasized how reading and writing should support one another. Again, individual work with students is the ideal venue for moving a student forward. In writing, I feel that Nick has some ingrained habits that can only be surmounted with consistent and regular teacher feedback and focused instruction. I feel that personalized editing checklists might address this difficulty.

I am also more aware of the need for visual supports for readers in the classroom and individualized versions visible on desks. At present in my two placement classrooms, no word walls or instructional charts are available for student use. The students' writing folders house a word reference sheet distributed at the beginning of the year that "is rarely used" according to my teacher. Nick would benefit greatly from a personalized word bank composed of high frequency, high-error words. If using a similar checklist to Taberski's personalized editing sheet,

he would have close hand support for his writing and could move forward in breaking ingrained spelling habits. Such an individualized self-check list could be expanded to include waypoint reminders to check for understanding. These visual cues might be the sticky note method that worked well with Nick or a predetermined list of pause pages where he would stop, pause, and reflect.

From a technical point of view, the sessions provided me with good experience in familiarizing myself with how to administer and interpret assessments. I realize that I remain especially challenged by the dexterity and coordination required to administer running records. I need to increase my writing speed and learn how to split my focus between writing down an error and remaining attentive as the student reads on. I also found that the formality of the RIC provided me with a concrete set of data points to begin an instructional plan. Without this structure and rigor to give shape to assessment, I would feel overwhelmed by the breadth and volume of anecdotal information from checklists and other forms of formative assessment.

I still have difficulty in reconciling Nick's strong word recognition with his lack of comprehension. I continue to feel that I am grasping for techniques and strategies to move students forward in terms of improved comprehension. In part, I feel that the crescendo of work at the end of this semester has created a high saturation level in terms of the knowledge that I am currently able to absorb. I may be suffering from information run-off. I need to reflect and reread in these next few weeks, to revisit Fountas and Pinnell and the Taberski articles as well as books recommended by my CT such as "Reading with Meaning" by Debbie Miller. I am particularly interested in how to integrate readers' theater and to develop a more direct connection with writing as an aid to comprehension.