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Using *Choice Words* in Nonfiction Reading Conferences

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“Human learning presupposes a specific social nature and a process by which children grow into the intellectual life around them.”

-Vygotsky (1978, p. 88)

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Sunday Cummins

In *Choice Words* (2004), Johnston argues that complex learning is accomplished by “powerful and subtle ways teachers use language” (2). His extensive research has revealed that when working with children, exemplary teachers engage in deep listening, careful observation, and thoughtful conversations to nurture each student’s identity and self-efficacy related to academic achievement. Language is a critical teaching tool in these classrooms. Across the school day, in a multitude of exchanges, how we engage students orally shapes how students see themselves and how they become strategic, independent learners

(Genishi & Dyson, 2009; Reninger & Rehark, 2009; Smith, 2001).

The inquiry described in this article is meant to extend the work of Johnston and others (Harvey, 2007; Keene, 2008; Stead, 2009) specifically in the area of naming the effective ways teachers use language during conferences with students who are reading nonfiction. Strategic reading of nonfiction differs from that of fiction (Block & Duffy, 2008; Mooney, 2003). Nonfiction texts can have multiple text structures, features, and formats requiring the reader to be more selective in determining what is

important based on her purpose for reading and then to synthesize. The complexity of these texts and the strategic reading required to understand them can make observing, assessing, and assisting students who are reading these texts a challenge (Smolkin, McTigue, & Donovan, 2008; Williams, 2008). In an effort to identify what might occur during this type of conference, I audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed eight reading conferences with third grade students who were reading nonfiction texts during a reading workshop.

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Reading Conferences with Nonfiction Texts

The reading conferences were part of a larger study examining assessment-driven instruction that facilitated third grade students' synthesis of information in high-quality trade books read aloud to them (Cummins & Stallmeyer-Gerard, 2011). The classroom teacher and I, a university professor, were co-participant researchers for one school year. In April of this year-long study, the classroom teacher and I realized that despite the students' high level of engagement with nonfiction texts read aloud to them, they were not choosing to read these texts independently. We planned for and implemented a series of four, 45-minute lessons aimed at helping students choose just-right texts and then at coaching the students as they read, took notes, and wrote responses. Our objective for instruction during the mini-lessons and conferring continued to

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focus on students' synthesis of information – specifically, their ability to identify an author's big ideas and determine important information.

During one of these four lessons, I conferred with eight students while they were reading; the conferences ranged in length from less than one minute to five minutes. While this is a limited set of data, my purpose in thinking carefully about these conferences was to inquire into the kind of language I was using; as a result of this inquiry process, I would be able to think more definitively about how to help students during nonfiction reading conferences.

Four categories of language use described by Johnston in *Choice Words* (2004) were used as a framework to analyze the exchanges that occurred during these eight reading conferences.

1. *Noticing and naming* – Language used by the teacher and student that identifies what the student is doing to read strategically, how the student is using a particular feature of the text, and what the student is learning from a text.
 2. *Identity* – Language used by the teacher and student that positions the student as an active agent in learning, that helps a student see herself as productively engaged in the act of reading.
 3. *Agency and Becoming Strategic* – Language used by the teacher and student that makes clear to the student how she is being strategic and, as a result, accomplishing her goals for learning.
 4. *Knowing* – Language used by the teacher and student that serves to help the student construct knowledge and extend her thinking.
2. Discussion that provides an opportunity for the teacher to nurture the student's ability to name and notice in a way that helps the student determine what is important and synthesize;
 3. Co-construction of knowledge that positions both the teacher and student as learners of content in a text.

Ways of Using Language During Nonfiction Reading Conferences *Conference Openers - Positioning the Student as Active Agent*

The transcripts revealed that I began each of the conferences with a question like "What are you thinking about?" or a statement like "So tell me about [title of the book]." My language revealed to the students that I saw them as readers engaged in the act of reading; in other words, I positioned them as an active agent in their learning. Observing the student's response to this opening by the teacher is a critical next step. At this point, the student has to choose to assume responsibility and actively engage in discussion or she can choose a passive role (Johnston, 2004, p. 23). In seven out of eight conferences, the student chose the former position as in the following excerpt with Cassie who was reading *The Sound that Jazz Makes* (Weatherford, 2000), a book that traces the historical development of jazz. (All students' names are pseudonyms.)

Sunday: So tell me about *Sound that Jazz Makes*.

Cassie: It's about jazz and how it started. I think it's really interesting 'cause I bet most people think it was started by people that were rich and fancy, but really it came from Africa and people from Africa they are called [inaudible on tape] and they make music like jazz.

Cassie's response revealed that she had taken on not only the identity of a reader,

As I read and re-read through the transcripts, I underlined specific phrases and marked series of exchanges that fell into these four categories of language use; I wrote the category in the margins of the transcripts. Frequently, the categories overlapped; for example, while the student is constructing knowledge, she might also be developing agency or that "I can do this" sense of self. Then I grouped the marked exchanges from the transcripts by category and began to look for commonalities across the eight conferences. Three patterns surfaced and each is discussed in the following sections of this paper:

1. Opening statements that position the students as active agents of learning and propel students forward in sharing information that a teacher can use to assess and determine teaching moves;

but also the actions required by a reader. She identified a main idea in the text and thought about how the author's message compares with "most people's" assumptions about the origins of jazz.

My analysis of the transcripts also revealed how students' responses to my opening provided me with information I could use to assess their understanding of a text and determine which teaching moves I could make next. Cassie's response demonstrated she was in control of the act of reading to understand. Other students' responses to my invitation revealed less control of the act of reading. The following is the beginning of a conference with Quinton who was reading *Lightship* (Floca, 2007), a book about ships with lights positioned high on each mast and were anchored where lighthouses could not be built.

Sunday: Can you tell me a little bit about what you read in this book?

Quinton: It's like a book about a pilot ship, and it's like they got this little pet and stuff like that.

Quinton's response is that of a student who sees himself as a reader and who has attempted to engage in the act of reading. His comment, though, revealed a superficial understanding of the text. My assessment of Quinton's response provided an opportunity for me to confirm the identity of reader that Quinton had chosen for himself and to nudge him toward a more productive identity.

My teaching moves following seven of the students' initial responses focused primarily on helping them engage more effectively in the act of reading. If you consider the transcript with Deondre, though, his response to my initial query revealed a student who had not taken up the identify of reader or who did not see himself as a successful reader – a vital

step in moving towards making meaning of what he is reading. When I approached Deondre, he was slumped forward in his chair, lying face down on the book he had chosen to read – *I Get Wet* (Cobb, 2002) about the attributes of water.

Sunday: So what are you thinking about over here, Deondre?

Deondre: Nothing.

What happened here? Deondre appeared to have taken a passive position in response to my invitation. At first I was frustrated and wanted to walk away, but by thinking about Deondre's oral (and physical) response, I realized that before I could help him engage in the act of reading, I had to help him take on the identity of a reader. As I probed further, I also assessed the text was too difficult for Deondre, requiring background knowledge he did not have. My next steps were to engage Deondre in the construction of knowledge by choosing excerpts of the text that I thought Deondre could understand and by building knowledge with a demonstration of water "soaking" (a term Deondre acknowledged he did not know) into a paper towel by the classroom sink. Deondre's position shifted as a result and while he did not develop a deep understanding of the ideas in the text, he did have the opportunity to take up the position of reader and begin to take control of the act of reading as a result.

The analysis of the beginnings of the conferences revealed the potential impact of a teacher's language. My opening queries placed each child in the position of reader, an identity crucial to becoming literate. In addition, the children's responses allowed me to assess whether they had taken up the identity of reader and whether they were engaged in actions that readers of nonfiction take to make meaning.

Extended Discussion - Nurturing Noticing and Naming

As noted earlier, nonfiction texts are complex. In addition to multiple text structures, there are an endless array of formats and numerous features to attend to while synthesizing the big ideas in the text. Teachers need to help students see what might be noticed and then name what was noticed (Johnston, 2004). After I assessed that Quinton only had a small grasp on what he was reading in Floca's *Lightship* (2007), I coached him in noticing particular aspects of the text by naming what he needed to do and by naming the features of the text he needed to pay attention to while reading. The following is an excerpt from the conference with Quinton. During this part of the conference, Quinton and I were viewing the inside cover of Floca's book which included a diagram-like illustration of a lightship with labels for the different parts of the ship like generators, anchors and antennae.

Sunday: Look at this diagram of the ship. What do you notice? What does the author or illustrator do to tell you about the lightship?

Quinton: They like show you what the parts are called.

Sunday: Yeah? Say more. What are you noticing?

Quinton: That when it's like (pauses) they keep two lights so that if one light breaks, they can um...(pauses)

Sunday: What makes you think that? (Student points to figure in text.) Oh, right here.

When I analyzed this transcript, I began to underline the language that indicated I was coaching Quinton to notice and name what he was doing and learning. The question "What do you notice?" has several purposes. I am inviting Quinton to be a reader who notices and thinks carefully about the features of nonfiction. I am "normalizing the practice of trying out new possibilities—stretching beyond what one already controls" (Johnston, 2004, p. 13); in other words, I am asking

By working at his leading edge, Quinton has developed more control over the act of reading: by naming and noticing what he is doing and learning, he has started to develop a sense of agency and, as a result, he has constructed knowledge.

Quinton to engage with the text in a less familiar way and to interact with the text cognitively in order to respond.

When I ask the question “What do you notice?” I’ve also opened up the conversation; I do not know how Quinton will respond and I have to listen carefully to move the conversation and Quinton’s ability to name what he is doing and learning forward. My responses to Quinton with questions like “What makes you think that?” and the comment “Say more” push Quinton to extend and clarify his thinking. This kind of thinking – noticing, extending, and clarifying are essential to becoming skilled readers and by engaging in this kind of conversation with Quinton, I am helping him develop inner-control of this process.

After Quinton and I discussed Floca’s (2007) illustration further, I needed to move on to confer with another student. I would return in a few minutes to check in on Quinton and continue our conference as he read further into the book, but at this point the following interaction occurred to close this part of the conference:

Sunday: What do you think Brian Floca wanted you to know about lightships when he drew this picture?

Quinton: Like, probably that if you didn’t [know] there was such a thing as a lightship, you probably know that [now].

Sunday: Oh, yeah. I can see that. So introduce you to what a lightship is. How does he do that through this picture? He could just give you a real picture of a lightship, right? Instead he drew one and put these labels. Why do you think he did it this way? What do you think he wanted you to know?

Quinton: Like what the parts are called. So like if you get one [or] get on one you know what the pilot does.

Sunday: So could you write on here (pointing to sticky note) maybe one sentence about what you think Brian Floca was trying to do when he drew this picture for you?

In just a few minutes, the conference between Quinton and I has moved him forward in many ways. By working at his leading edge, he has developed more control over the act of reading – by naming and noticing what he is doing and learning; he has developed a sense of agency and, as a result, he has constructed knowledge. I located similar interactions in the other seven conferences. In particular, I noticed a tight focus on the objective of the four lessons the co-teacher and I planned – synthesizing to understand the big ideas in an informational text. By fostering naming and noticing, nurturing identity, and coaching for self-efficacy related to this particular objective for learning, the students were meeting their learning goals at some level.

Teacher as Learner – Co-construction of Knowledge

During the conferences, there were exchanges when the student and I built knowledge about the topics in their books together. This may be a unique feature of reading conferences with nonfiction texts. While teachers may not have read every fiction book a child selects to read and confer with us about, we have a basic idea of how these texts work. With nonfiction, the content and structure may be less familiar. This may seem like a barrier for the teacher, but, in reality, it provides an opportunity for the teacher to engage in a conversation with a child where the child plays “an active role in ownership and construction of knowledge” along with the teacher (Johnston, 2004, p. 27). As I looked through the transcripts, I realized that at certain points I was engaged in genuine learning with the students. The following is a short excerpt from a conference with John who was reading *Caves* (Walker, 2007) about the attributes and locations of caves around the world. During this part of the conference, John and I were looking at the book together.

John: This is supposed to be a glacier cave. And this is made out of ice?

Sunday: I think so.

John: That’s cool!

Sunday: Oh, what does it say? “As the water moves it makes tunnels and caves in the ice. The caves are called glacier caves (p. 15).” Yea. That is pretty cool.

At the beginning of this excerpt, John took the lead by introducing me to the sub-topic of glacier caves (“This is supposed to be a glacier cave”) and pulling me in as a co-constructor of knowledge (“And this is made out of ice?”). We continued to build knowledge together by thinking aloud about the pictures and the text, learning about the locations of the glacier caves.

These types of interactions build on the notion that we are a community of learners engaged in the practice of reading to build knowledge. By positioning myself as a learner and the student as my partner in learning, I am providing students with “a sense of their responsibilities, and reasonable ways to act, particularly toward one another and toward the object of study” (Johnston, 2004, p. 24). I have modeled in a genuine way working with others to engage in productive relationships. The trick for teachers seems to be not only listening to students and affirming what they are learning, but also thinking about how to extend the student’s learning. One way to do this is the teacher being open to developing her own content knowledge during the conference.

Not every partner was as equally engaged in constructing knowledge as John, though. Some students like Cassie will not need a partner. While other students like Deondre will require a stronger partner. While I conferred with Deondre, I found myself looking ahead in the book, quickly trying to construct knowledge on the spot in order to engage Deondre. Despite this I still misled Deondre at one point. In the text (Cobb, 2002), the author poses the question “Does water stick to you?” Deondre responded “No” and I agreed with him. We discussed how water “soaks” into your skin, but we were not

thinking that it “sticks” to your skin. As we read further, we realized we were wrong – water does “stick” (in the author’s sense of the term) to your skin. My lack of understanding of the physical attributes of water turned out to be okay, though. During this conversation with Deondre, he had an opportunity to see me as a reader who is thinking about what I already know, making predictions about what I will learn, and then adjusting my understanding as I read new information. As teachers, we cannot be experts or even semi-knowledgeable about every topic our students might choose to read about, but we can be attentive to the texts in ways that allow us to construct our own knowledge.

“Naming” Complex Teaching During Nonfiction Reading Conferences

Much of what I did during these reading conferences with third grade students was done intuitively. It was not until I analyzed the transcripts and used Johnston’s *Choice Words* as a framework that I could name explicitly my actions during these conversations. When we interact with students, positioning them as active readers is important. In a sense, students cannot take on the act of reading if they do not see themselves as being readers, if they do not see themselves as having the “I can do this” sense of self. Once they have positioned themselves in this active role, they need to be able to notice and name what they are doing as readers of nonfiction texts. As a result, they can begin to construct knowledge - they can read to learn. Teachers have to position the students as readers, listen carefully, observe and assess while also paying attention to the text and the strategic reading required, and then move in ways that help shape and extend what might be possible for a child to do.

In his research on how teachers’ use of language might be linked to their students’ academic achievement, Johnston (2004) discovered that, despite their success with students, the teachers did not always feel adequate.

I frequently watched teachers accomplish remarkable things with their students and at the end of the day express guilt about their failure to accomplish some part of the curriculum. This guilt was, in my view, both unfounded and unproductive. It was caused, in part, by the teachers’ inability to name all the things they *did* accomplish. (p. 2)

Hence, one of the goals of *Choice Words* is to “reduce this guilt by showing the complex learning that teachers produce that is not recognized by tests, policy makers, the general public and often even by teachers themselves, but that is particularly important” (p. 2). Similarly, while teaching comprehension strategies with nonfiction has become commonplace in the elementary grade curriculum, the nitty-gritty of this teaching – the kid-watching, the choice words a teacher uses as a result, to shape identity and agency – is frequently taken for granted. As a professional who works closely with teachers in the field, I am better able to name effective ways to support students during nonfiction reading conferences as a result of this inquiry. Hopefully, these results will serve to extend Johnston’s endeavor as well - to name the choice words teachers use to confer with students reading nonfiction texts, and, as a result, to expand teachers’ own sense of agency related to producing complex learning during these conversations.

notes

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