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# Making Instructional Decisions: Deepening Our Understanding of English Learners' Processing in Reading

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While both classroom teachers and Reading Recovery® teachers may use running records every day, it can be difficult to know if they are acquiring the most important information. Since running records are intended to guide instruction, the skillfulness of a teacher's analysis can significantly impact the instruction a student receives and therefore her reading development (Clay, 2013; Fried, 2013; Kaye & Van Dyke, 2012). English learners (ELs) are learning to read and write while simultaneously learning the language of instruction (English), and little research has been done on analyzing ELs' running records. Since oral language is the foundation of beginning reading (Clay, 2001), young ELs' reading behaviors are likely to develop in differently patterned ways than monolingual English students' behaviors.

In order to better understand the reading behaviors of struggling EL students who are learning to read in English while learning the English language, we analyzed 123 running records from nine EL students' Reading Recovery lesson series, looking for language-related patterns across the whole series of lessons. In this article we explore the existing research on running records, the role of oral language in reading acquisition, and some aspects of second

language acquisition (SLA) that may impact young EL students' literacy acquisition. We then share the five most common language-related errors found in this study and make instructional suggestions for supporting ELs as they simultaneously acquire English language and literacy. Our aim is to help teachers of ELs reexamine running records with a second language lens so they can better craft targeted scaffolding for the needs of their EL students.

## Running Records

Clay's (1967, 1982) running record provides a consistent pattern of recording reading behaviors that can be used to infer changes in processing over time. Teachers code the sources of information (meaning, syntax, or visual — M, S, or V) that students use at point of difficulty (Clay, 2011, 2013). Running records are intended to reduce the error of personal bias in the observer to a minimum (Clay, 1982, 2013), and when analyzed are



*When coding running records we infer what sources of information a child was using at point of difficulty. Second language acquisition research can help to predict some reasons for common errors among ELs based on what is known about how English is commonly acquired as a second language.*

evidence of students' in-the-moment literacy processing which increases in complexity as students become more proficient readers (McGee, Kim, Nelson, & Fried, 2015). An effective means of identifying changes in children's processing of text, running records show that beginning readers significantly increase their use of productive strategic actions (e.g., self-monitoring, cross-checking, self-correcting) over time, while their use of unproductive actions and incorrect attempts decline (Schmitt, 2001). Running records have also been used to determine that emergent struggling readers tend to use primarily meaning and structure but neglect visual information (Kelly, Klein, & Neal, 1993).

Since "detailed observations can provide feedback to our instruction," (Clay, 2013, p. 4) running records have long been used to plan more-targeted lessons (Clay, 1967, 1982; Fried, 2013; Kaye & Van Dyke, 2012). In fact, running records were identified as a best practice in effective schools (Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001), and one study found 12% greater student achievement in reading in schools that used running records compared with schools that did not (Ross, 2004). Additionally, deeper analysis of running records, and the subsequent ability to better identify language-related versus literacy-related learning difficulties, could potentially decrease the over-identification of EL students as requiring special education for reading difficulties (Harry & Klinger, 2006).

One possible reason for the positive impact of running records may be the type of information they provide to teachers and the resulting instruction. When taking running records, teach-

ers observe the child's reading behaviors and infer from those observations how the child processes text (Clay, 2013; Doyle, 2013). The teacher then looks for patterns to determine what the child is able to do independently, what needs reinforcement, and what needs to be taught. The coding of running records, therefore, directly impacts instruction: If the teacher does not consider language-related errors, the instruction may not adequately address the EL's needs.

Clay (2001) found that students' cognitive and perceptual working systems strengthen when they work on continuous texts. Changes in these working systems can be observed over time using running records, "for it is in processing complete messages that the working systems for literacy are engaged and developed" (Doyle, 2013, p. 637). Therefore, our study did not focus on item knowledge such as letter identification or even vocabulary knowledge. Instead, we used running records to explore how children process text to make it meaningful.

## The Role of Oral Language in Reading

One of the sources of information children use when reading, and the one relied upon most heavily by beginning readers, is language (Clay, 1982, 2001). Clay wrote, "The successful early reader brings his speech to bear on the interpretation of print. His vocabulary, sentence patterns and pronunciation of words provide him with information which guides his identification of printed words" (2013, p. 51). Young children rely on their syntax at points of difficulty when reading, using their oral language to anticipate what words might

come next and using visual information to filter possibilities (Clay, 1982). Consequently, self-monitoring and self-correcting may be challenging for emergent ELs who are learning about serial and hierarchical order while still unsure if what they are attempting to read sounds right in English (Clay, 1991). Despite Clay's (2004) suggestion to "look more closely at language behaviors ... Knowing what the pupil does leads to more significant teaching" (p. 105), running records traditionally have not been used to consider specifically the impact of ELs' language on their early literacy progress. ELs may still be developing some of the structural and vocabulary knowledge that could help them read, and less English linguistic knowledge may interfere with their ability to predict text (Johnston, 1997). For example, if a child is unfamiliar with a vocabulary word, he may be able to decode it, but the ability to decode the word will not help the child comprehend text unless he also knows the word's meaning in continuous text.

Unfamiliar book language may interfere with the reading process (Clay, 2001, 2004, 2013). It is critical, therefore, that in the earliest stages of emergent reading teachers observe the oral language students control and match the books and instruction to the child's language, scaffolding book language that might hinder literacy processing (Clay, 2004). Very quickly teachers can begin to introduce new language structures within the child's zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978). Clay (2004) reminds us that children learn new structures as they negotiate meaning both in conversation and while reading texts. Experience and practice with different types of language are

necessary for students to develop a wide repertoire. Cazden (1983) wrote, “Ideally we should provide opportunities for children to practice a growing range of discourse functions (explaining, narrating, instructing) first in situations where models and supports are available, then gradually with less help” (p. 13).

## Second Language Acquisition

Clay reminds us to value children’s home language:

Children who come to school speaking any language will have a preparation for literacy learning that is to be valued, whatever that prior language is ... We need to see them as competent children who speak and problem-solve well in their first culture. (2005a, p. 6)

Oral language helps children transition to written language. Consider the similarities between the acts of negotiating meaning when reading and when in conversation. In conversation, an EL can ask her interlocutor a clarifying question; this negotiation of meaning through conversation facilitates language acquisition. As Long (1996) stated, “Negotiation for meaning, and especially negotiation work that triggers interactional adjustments by the [native] speaker or more competent interlocutor facilitates acquisition because it connects input, internal learner capacities, particularly selective attention, and output in productive ways” (pp. 451–452). Negotiation of meaning, or communicative competence, is the goal rather than accuracy in the use of language; accuracy may or may not develop over time.

In reading, students cannot ask the author clarifying questions. Instead, they must learn other ways to self-monitor for comprehension, including rereading, using pictures, and relying on visual cues, which are absent during speech. Similar to the concept of communicative competence, we argue that active comprehending—rather than 100% accuracy—should be the goal of reading. When accuracy is emphasized over fluency and comprehension, a child’s understanding of the text may be inhibited (Pikulski & Chard, 2005).

When coding running records we infer what sources of information a child was using at point of difficulty. Second language acquisition research can help to predict some reasons for common errors among ELs based on what is known about how English is commonly acquired as a second language (Larsen-Freeman, 2010). Since the 1970s, it has been known that most ELs acquire the –ing ending before the –ed and –s endings on verbs (Brown, 1973; Hakuta, 1976; Krashen, 1977; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). However, an EL’s first language impacts how they acquire English. ELs who speak languages that add an –s to denote a plural are likely to acquire the plural –s in English sooner than ELs who speak languages that mark plurals in other ways or that do not use the sound /s/ in the final position (e.g., Mandarin, Korean, and Japanese speakers) (Hakuta, 1976; Luk & Shirai, 2009). Like English, Spanish uses an –s to identify plurals and both languages employ inflectional endings to denote verb tenses. However, the languages are different in other important ways that impact literacy acquisition (Briceño, 2016). For example, there are many more contractions in Eng-

lish than in Spanish, which may be one reason that contractions provide difficulty for Spanish-speaking ELs.

Irregular past tense verbs also tend to be difficult for ELs (Hakuta, 1976; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1985), as well as for some native English speakers. Yet, early reader texts are full of words like *came*, *ran*, and *went*. Many teachers have heard incorrectly generalized versions of those verbs: “comed,” “runned” and “goed.” While it may be somewhat counter-intuitive, young EL students tend to acquire irregular verbs that vary significantly from the root verb (e.g., *was*, *were*, *am*, *is* and *are* all are from the verb *to be*) sooner than irregular verbs that conjugate similarly to the root verb. In other words, a child will likely include *said* (past tense of *to say*) and *went* (past tense of *to go*) in their oral repertoire sooner than *says* or *goes* (Ionin & Wexler, 2002). As students begin acquiring the regular –ed endings, they may also overgeneralize and say words such as “singd” and “swimmid” instead of *sang* and *swam* (Clay, 1983; Rumelhart & McClelland, 1985).

Second language acquisition research has also recognized how difficult prepositions can be for ELs (Bitchener, Young, & Cameron, 2005). Prepositions perform many functions in English and are used to express where, when, and with whom something is done. Often the choice of preposition is seemingly arbitrary (e.g., why do we get *on* a plane rather than *in* a plane?), making them exceedingly difficult for English learners. While SLA research has identified some common patterns of language acquisition, individual students’ English acquisition will vary, as students take different paths to common outcomes (Clay, 2014).



## Methods

This study explored teachers' use of running records with EL first graders who were struggling to learn to read. We collected ELs' lesson data across a Reading Recovery lesson series and asked ourselves: What types of language-related errors do EL students make when reading? To answer that question, we gathered weekly running records, lesson plans, and postlesson notes from nine monolingual English Reading Recovery teachers in California and Texas. The teachers in the study had between 2 and 15 years of experience in Reading Recovery. Each teacher submitted weekly running records and analyses for one first grader; running records for a total of nine students were analyzed. To maintain confidentiality we refer to the teachers as T1, T2 ... T9.

The students were first-grade ELs who were struggling with English literacy and, therefore, were receiving Reading Recovery lessons. All students were native Spanish speakers classified at the *emerging* or *expanding* stage of English language proficiency at the beginning of the lesson series per the California English Language Development Standards (2012) and were in English-only instructional programs. Emerging and expanding actually represent six EL designations, as students can be classified as beginning, middle, or exiting each designation. The selection of the California designations was arbitrary; the students were from two states. Texas teachers assigned a level to their students based on the results of the Texas English language development assessment, their knowledge of the student, and the California language level descriptors.

We coded 123 running records containing 649 errors and identified 349 language-related errors based on codes we had identified from the literature (e.g., Gibbons, 1993; Nemecek, Klein, Briceño, & Wray, 2011; Weber, 2008). Specifically, we focused on the linguistic knowledge required for reading tasks. We each independently coded all of the running records and then discussed our analysis of each error. Only errors were coded; self-corrections, repetitions, and other markings are outside the scope of this study.

## Findings

Of the 123 running records, 117 (95%) contained language-related errors, and 54% of the 649 total errors were language-related. For each student, 44–69% of errors were language-related, with an average of 54%. The text levels ranged from

3–16, with a mean and median of 9. For the purposes of this paper, we will discuss the five most common reasons, which comprised 94% of all language-related errors: Tolds, inflectional endings, irregular verbs, contractions, and prepositions. The largest group of errors (31%) was instances in which the teacher had to tell the child the word (give a Told) because the child was unable to read a word and did not continue. Irregular verb tenses (e.g., *came*, *fell*) comprised 19% of language-related errors, and inflectional endings (e.g., *-ing*, *-ed*, *-s*) were the cause of another 19%. Contractions (e.g., *I'll*, *he's*) constituted 13% of language-related errors, and prepositions (words that show spacial, temporal, or other relationships) comprised another 12%. There was relative consistency across the nine students. Table 1 summarizes the findings.

**Table 1. Language-Related Errors**

Language-Related Error	Percent of Total Language-Related Errors	Explanation
<b>Tolds</b>	31%	When a student comes to an unknown word, stops, and is told the word
<b>Irregular Verb Tense</b>	19%	Verbs that conjugate in nonstandard ways
<b>Inflectional Endings</b>	19%	Word endings that (1) determine verb tense ( <i>-ing</i> , <i>-ed</i> , and <i>-s</i> , and (2) denote plurals on nouns ( <i>-s</i> )
<b>Contractions</b>	13%	A word produced by connecting two or more words together and leaving out some of the letters or sounds (e.g., <i>isn't</i> is a contraction of <i>is</i> and <i>not</i> )
<b>Prepositions</b>	12%	Words that express relations to other words, such as "He went <i>to</i> the park." "It was <i>under</i> the chair."
<b>Other</b>	6%	

### Tolds

The majority of Tolds (62%) were likely due to unknown vocabulary such as *thermos*, *roller skate*, *log*, *barked*, *net*, *detective*, *hippopotamus*, *biscuits*, *whiskers*, and *galaxy*. It is unclear how these Tolds impacted comprehension. Figure 1 is an example of a student needing two Tolds within an eight-word span. Not knowing the words *log* or *flowers*, the student needed to be told both words on this page.

The remaining 41 Tolds (12% of total language-related errors) seemed to be a result of structural patterns that were not yet part of the ELs language, including the use of question words at the beginning of a sentence such as *what*, *where*, and *why*. Other syntactical items that resulted in Tolds were the use of the conditional *would*; sight words such as *come* or *here* when they occurred at the beginning of a sentence and page; and the uncommon word *shall*.

### Irregular Verb Tense

Irregular verb tenses caused another 19% of language-related errors. For example, instead of reading the word *fed*, two individual students read *food*, *feed* and continued on. There were multiple instances of students reading *come* for *came*, *run* for *ran*, *wake* for *woke*, *make* for *made*, *take* for *took*, and *get* for *got*, among others. In Figure 2, the student struggled specifically with two irregular verbs, *ate* and *cried*.

Her attempts for *ate* were *eat*, *at*, a final result which made use of visual information but not meaning or structural information. She attempted “*crid*” and *crying* for *cried*, this time focusing on visual informa-

**Figure 1. Tolds — *A Walk with Dad*, Level 3, 59 words**

p. 9	✓ We	✓ see	✓ a	✓ turtle	✓ on	✓ a	log.   T
p. 10	✓ We	✓ see	✓ a	✓ deer	✓ in	✓ the	f-f   A   T flowers.

**Figure 2. Irregular Verb Tense — *Berries for Baby Elephant*, Level 8, 93 words**

p. 8	✓ “The	✓ berries	✓ are	✓ all	✓ gone	✓ down	✓ here.				
	✓ I	eat   at	✓ all	✓ the	✓ berries	✓ and	✓ I	✓ am	✓ still	✓ hungry,”	crid   crying
	✓ Baby	✓ Elephant.									

tion and meaning but not structural information.

Students seemed to use the present tense instead of the irregular past tense. Interestingly, there were only two instances in which the student overgeneralized the –ed ending to an irregular verb, reading “*fallen*” for *fell* and “*shooked*” for *shook*. Irregular verbs can be a particular challenge for EL students, as the past tense –ed rule, which they are learning to use with other verbs, typically does not apply.

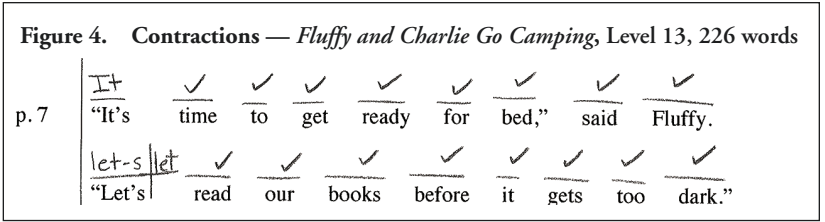
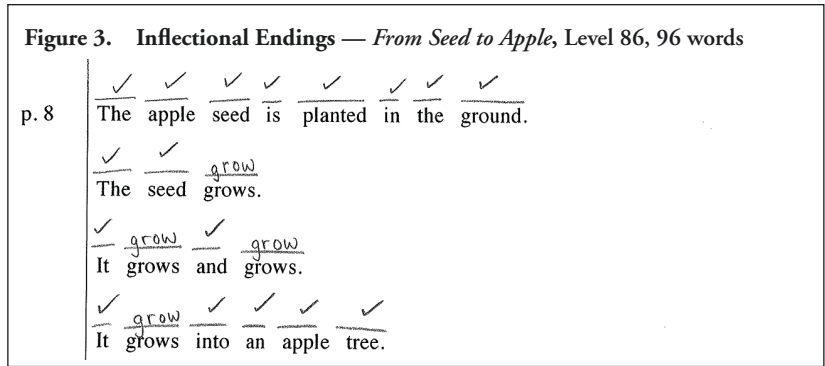
### Inflectional Endings

Inflectional endings were the cause of another 19% of language-related errors. We divided inflectional endings into two subcategories — those that attach to nouns, such as the plural –s, and those that attach to verbs.

Almost two-thirds (64%) of inflectional ending errors were associated with regular verbs. In many cases, the ELs left off the inflectional ending, which shows the tense, and it was

usually the –ed ending. For example, ELs commonly read *like* for *liked*, *look* for *looked*, and *shout* for *shouted*. Students also dropped the final –ing or –s, reading *shake* for *shaking*, *run* for *running*, *fish* for *fishing* and *look* for *looks*. These errors may be due to the EL student being familiar with the verb but not yet able to conjugate it consistently.

Other instances of inflectional ending errors also reflected SLA research, which states that most students acquire the –ing ending before the –ed, with the third person singular –s coming last (Hakuta, 1976; Krashen, 1977; Larsen-Freeman, 1975). Accordingly, students replaced an –ed or –s ending with an –ing ending such as *fishing* for *fished*, *jumping* for *jumped*, *painting* for *painted*, *running* for *runs*, and *smelling* for *smells*. If a child cannot determine that the verb does not sound right in the sentence, he cannot monitor for syntax and self-correct. The impact of verb ending errors on comprehension is unclear. Do students know



who is doing the action if the verb is misread? Or when the action happened/is happening/will happen? For example, in Figure 3, the student left off the final -s in *grows* four times.

While it is difficult to infer how a child is processing based only on correct responses, there is evidence that this student is looking to the end of words, as she read *planted* and *into* correctly, so it is possible that the student had not yet acquired the -s on third person singular verbs.

The other 36% of inflectional ending errors were made on nouns. ELs omitted the plural -s, reading the singular noun instead of the plural, for example, *flower* instead of *flowers*, *duck* instead of *ducks*, etc. In one running record, a child overgeneralized the plural -s, adding it to the collective noun *children* (*childrens*), but just a few pages later the same child left off the -s, reading *eye* instead of *eyes*. Seemingly, the child was beginning to acquire the plural -s but was still uncertain about its usage. Incon-

sistency and overgeneralization with linguistic rules also aligns with first and SLA theory as children begin to construct their understanding of how language works (Clay, 2004; Krashen, 1981).

**Contractions**

There are three stages of a learning a contraction: (a) the affirmative term (e.g., *do*); (b) two words either as a transformation to a negative statement (*do not*) or a combination of two words without a transformation (*I am*), showing an understanding of meaning but not of pragmatic language used in speech and some books; and (c) the contraction (e.g., *don't*), where the learner maintains meaning, pragmatics, and when reading, is consistent with the visual information on the page.

Some students appeared to be at the first stage and seemed not to notice, or ignored, the contraction, reading *it* for *it's*, *I* for *I'll*, *I* for *I'm*, and *that* for *that's*. Students in the second stage

made contraction errors that were less likely to impact comprehension, such as *I am* instead of *I'm*, *I will* for *I'll*, *didn't* for *did not*, *won't* for *will not* and *don't* for *didn't*. There was no measurable difference in contractions that transformed the statement to a negative and those that did not. In Figure 4, the student did not identify the first contraction, reading *It* for *It's*, and then noticed, but was unable to fix, the contraction, *let's*.

In one case the child seemed to struggle to coordinate the meaning and visual cues of a contraction. The word in the text was *didn't*. The child read *don't*, maintaining meaning but not structure or visual information, and then decided on *did*, maintaining visual information and structure but not meaning. Similarly, other students made contraction errors that likely impacted comprehension, such as *can't* for *can*, *wouldn't* for *would*, and *did* for *don't*. A few contractions resulted in Tolds when the child could not continue (e.g., *wasn't* and *isn't*). Finally, some students made errors in possessives with proper names (e.g., reading *Kate* for *Kate's*). These errors were not studied for the purpose of this analysis, and are linguistically different from contractions and the inflectional -s.

**Prepositions**

Prepositions show relationships such as time, place, and direction. As such, they can be important to comprehension; whether someone sits *in* a car or *on* a car may be relevant to one's safety. However, children commonly mixed prepositions that shared some visual information, such as *of* and *for*, *to* and *at*, and, as in Figure 5, *on* and *in*.

While *in* a pig, duck, or horse sounds

funny to a native English speaker, it is common for EL students to confuse the prepositions *in* and *on*.

When a child read *to* for *at*, or vice versa, or *into* for *onto*, the EL may not yet have been able to identify that the sentence was not structurally standard, so it may not have impacted comprehension. On the other hand, the preposition miscue may also indicate that the sentence was more complex than the student was able to understand at that time. Other times students omitted prepositions entirely. The impact on comprehension in these and other cases, such as reading *under* for *in* or *for* for *after*, is unclear. In this analysis it appeared difficult to determine with assuredness when some language-related preposition errors impacted comprehension.

For the purposes of this article we have isolated different language-related errors in the running record samples above. However, as in Figure 6, we often saw multiple types of language-related errors on the same running record.

Figure 6 is an example of how all five language-related errors might appear in one running record. We suggest discussing this running record with a colleague.

## Instructional Implications

The following suggestions can be used by all teachers of emergent EL readers, from classroom teachers to interventionists to Reading Recovery teachers to teachers of students identified specifically as dyslexic. And, while this study explored EL students' reading acquisition, these recommendations may also be relevant for students who speak different English

**Figure 5. Preposition — *The Merry-go-round*, Level 3, 84 words**

p. 14	✓	✓	✓	in	✓	✓
	James	is	up	on	a	pig.
	✓	✓	✓	in	✓	✓
	Kate	is	up	on	a	duck.
p. 16	✓	✓	✓	in	✓	✓
	Nick	is	up	on	a	horse.

**Figure 6. Multiple Types of Errors — *Come for a Swim*, Level 10, 130 words**

p. 7	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	laid	✓	✓	✓
	"Coming!"	said	mom,	and	she	lay	on	the	towel.
p. 8	✓	✓	✓	childrens	✓	✓	✓	✓	at
	Dad	and	the	children	were	waiting.	They	called	to
	✓	-	did	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓
	mom,	"Why?"	don't	you	come	in	for	a	swim?"
p. 9	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓	eye
	"I	am	coming!"	said	mom,	and	she	shut	her
									eyes.

dialects and registers. For example, speakers of African American Vernacular English have specific language patterns that may impact their early literacy behaviors (Compton-Lilly, 2005). While the patterns between different linguistic groups—and different individual children—may differ, the key ideas of considering the role of students' language in reading acquisition and valuing the home language are the same.

**Check for understanding frequently.** Simple conversations about books will often provide a lot of information about what a student did and didn't understand, and explicit instructional conversations about language (Briceño, 2014) can help students and teachers clarify the language-related issues. Clay (2013) wrote, "Conversation with a child about the story after taking Running Records adds to the teacher's understanding of the readers in useful ways, and leads the

child into discourse about stories" (p. 63). In addition, analyzing running records for language-related errors can help a teacher identify potential sources of confusion. Teachers can ask themselves a few questions, like those that follow, about language-related errors to check a student's understanding.

### *Could the Tolds have impacted understanding?*

For example, if a student read a book about Geoffrey the Giraffe and needed to be told the word *detective* a few times, it is possible that *detective* is a new word and might need explaining (or additional clarification, if the book orientation already addressed the word and concept). If the teacher simply gives a Told without explaining what the word means—in the book introduction, after the running record, or both—the child may be able to mimic the word but comprehension will not be



aided unless the child already knows the word's meaning. However, if the teacher explains and defines the word after the running record, it will likely support a student's understanding of future readings of the text.

Teachers can check on their use of Tolds by asking themselves questions such as these:

- Why did the student require a Told?
- Did I provide sufficient wait time?
- Did the student try something? Why or why not?
- When not taking a running record, do I prompt for action before giving a Told?
- Is the student relying on me for a Told instead of trying something himself? (Fried, 2013)

*Does the EL understand who is doing the action and when it is happening (past, present, future, etc.)?*

Inflectional endings relate to who does the action (e.g., I/we/you/they walk, he/she/it walks) and identify when the action is done (past, present, future, etc.). If a student is misreading inflectional endings, check that he knows who is doing the action and when the action is happening. Similarly, irregular verb tenses may confuse students. A student who knows the word *shake* might not understand *shook*, even if she decoded it accurately. Consistent conversations about who and what is happening in the text could support the student's understanding of both language and stories.

*Were there any contraction or*

*preposition errors that may have led to a misunderstanding?*

For example, if a student read *can* instead of *can't*, a misunderstanding might have ensued. However, the common error *in* for *on* (and vice versa) may be less likely to lead to confusion. Checking in about the story related to these particular errors might shed light on students' understandings.

Finally, Clay (2013) reminds us to adapt the complexity of our own language so that it is understandable to children: "The answers to comprehension questions depend more upon the difficulty of the sentence structure of the question than on the child's reading" (p. 63). ELs, in particular, will only be able to answer questions they understand.

## Ongoing Language and Literacy Assessment

*Reanalyze running records with a focus on language.*

Similar to Fried's (2013) recommendation to complete additional analyses on running records to check for Tolds, high-frequency words, self-monitoring, and to summarize problem-solving actions, we suggest reanalyzing running records through a language lens. Teachers can look for the following types of language-related errors:

- Tolds that were necessary due to unknown vocabulary or unfamiliar syntax
- Irregular verb tenses
- Inflectional endings
- Contractions
- Prepositions

- Other errors that the teacher thinks might be language-related

Noticing language-related errors enables teachers to begin to distinguish them from literacy-related errors and to remain tentative. Instruction can then be more focused and better meet the individual student's needs.

*Consider all sources of information when analyzing running records and stay tentative.*

We often hear teachers say the child is not looking through the word, implying the student needs to do more visual work. If the child is looking through words consistently with the possible exception of inflectional endings, the error may be language-related rather than visual. As a result, the teaching would differ significantly. If the child is not looking through the word, the teacher might focus on left-to-right scanning of visual information. She might say, "Look at that word again and check it with your eyes." If the error is language-related, the teacher might model, "We say it this way in English." Or, if there is evidence that the child is somewhat familiar with the structure, the teacher may offer two alternatives and ask which sounds better. Of course, it is not helpful to ask if something sounds right if the child is unfamiliar with the structure or vocabulary word — it would be similar to asking a child to use the first letter of a word when the letter is unknown.

*Closely examine Tolds and remember to code attempts.*

Tolds are lost opportunities for problem solving. It is important to consider why each Told was given, as

students who are given fewer Tolds tend to be more successful in Reading Recovery (Fried, 2013). Consider why the child needs to be told the word. Is the word familiar to the child? Is the sentence structure new? Asking these questions helps us to remain tentative in our thinking about the child. While a Told without any previous action from the child cannot be coded, we should code attempts at words, even if a Told is then given (Clay, 2005b; Kaye & Van Dyke, 2012). Fried's analysis with native English-speaking students shows that the number of Tolds can be highly dependent on a teacher's actions and the patterns of interactions she develops with the students.

#### *Continually assess oral language.*

Consistent observation and notation of oral language (vocabulary and sentence structure), or "tuning in" to the student's language (Dixon, 2014, p. 17), will help the teacher to become increasingly familiar with the child's language patterns and how they may be changing over time. Clay (2005b) suggested writing down the child's longest utterance because it "provides a rough indication of this child's control over the structure or grammar of his oral language; that is, what complexity you can reasonably expect of him" (p. 68). This same recommendation is made in the *Record of Oral Language* (Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon, 2015). Audio or video recoding students consistently may help teachers to look for patterns and observe changes. Over time, the teacher's ear may tune in to language patterns in speech, writing, and reading. Knowing about the child's language will help the teacher to more effectively prepare students for successful reading and writing.

## Prepare Students for Successful Problem Solving in Reading

### *Consider the EL's oral language when selecting books.*

At the earliest levels the book should match the child's language so it is easier to match print to text (Clay, 1991). Soon, more complex structures can be introduced. Knowing the child's language is necessary to know which books to select and what language might be new. For example, has he shown evidence of using contractions in his oral language? If not, options include choosing to scaffold the contraction in the book introduction.

### *Provide a book introduction that takes out the bugs.*

Clay (2005b) directs us to "Take the 'bugs' out of the text before he tries to read it" (p. 91) by providing an introduction that will help that particular child orient himself to the story and experience success with that particular book. Knowing the types of language structures and vocabulary that an EL controls will enable the teacher to provide a more targeted orientation to new books. A book orientation might include familiar words that are used in new or different ways, unfamiliar vocabulary, and tricky language structures, and the teacher may ask the student to practice new or unfamiliar language (Clay, 2005b). The book introduction should provide enough language support to enable the EL to focus on the task of reading.

### *Practice new language structures with students, and know when to back off.*

This can be done at any point across a Reading Recovery or small-group

reading lesson. Students should hear and practice saying new language structures before being asked to read or write them. Clay (2004) wrote,

Get the new phrase or sentence:

- to the ear (listening)
- to the mouth (saying)
- to the eye (reading)
- to the written product (creating text) (p. 5)

For example, if a student says he "goed" to the store with his mom, the teacher might rephrase the sentence to see if the child takes the hint to self-correct his speech. If the child is ready to take on the structure, he will likely change the sentence and use *went*. If not, the conversation may go something like this:

Student: I "goed" to the store with my mom and we "bued" candy.

Teacher: Really! You *went* to the store with your mom and *bought* candy?

Student: Yes, that's what I said, I "goed" to the store with my mom and we "bued" candy.

In this case, Clay (2005b) strongly advises us to "back off" (p. 56), as the child may not yet be ready to incorporate the irregular verbs *went* and *bought* into his oral repertoire. The teacher can continue modeling standard English but should expect the EL's independent writing to reflect his own oral language, not the teacher's language.

## Expand the Complexity and Flexibility of Students' Language

There are many ways to expand students' language complexity. Sentence combining, supportive book introductions, and shared reading of rhymes, songs, poems, and chants can develop students' fluency with a variety of sentence structures. Knowing the types of structures the student controls will help teachers to determine how to progress. If a child gives a short nugget of a sentence, asking where, when, and with whom will add prepositional phrases to the sentence. Asking different types of questions, like 'what else?' or 'why?' might result in the student using conjunctions such as *and* and *because* (Clay et al., 2015; Gentile, 2003). The conversation should be of genuine interest to the child and not a quiz.

Saying things in different ways also encourages flexibility with language. For example, if the sentence a child wants to write includes a contraction or words that could make a contraction, the teacher could talk about whether the child wants to use *can't* or *cannot*, and show that they are different ways of saying the same thing. Similarly, transforming a child's statement into a negative, question, or command/exclamation also builds flexibility. For example, if the child says, "I went to the park," the teacher might say, "How could we turn that into a question? You ask me if I went to the park." The negative would be "I did not [didn't] go to the park," and the command might be "Go to the park!" (Clay et al., 2015; Gentile, 2003). Table 2 summarizes the instructional recommendations.

## Conclusion

While this study had a small sample and the findings were never intended to be generalizable, the large percentage of language-related errors found reflects the importance of the topic for future exploration. To reiterate, 94% of the 123 running records analyzed contained language-related errors, over half (54%) of all of the 649 errors analyzed were deemed language-related, and almost one-third of the language-related errors were Tolds. This has significant instructional implications:

Identifying and analyzing LR errors could help teachers determine when, where and why comprehension breaks down, and whether or not the child's difficulty is literacy related, language related or both. The resulting teacher talk could more effectively support monitoring, searching and cross-checking

with a particular EL's strengths and needs in mind. (Briceño & Klein, 2015, p. 17)

The findings from this study argue for the systematic observation of children's language for the purpose of literacy instruction and for supporting ELs' language alongside literacy development. Many of the findings are consistent with SLA theory, underscoring the importance of teachers of emergent EL readers being familiar with SLA. As we further develop our Literacy Lessons™ programs specifically designed for English learners, we will need to work together to learn how to best serve this linguistically diverse group of students in ways that acknowledge, value, and respect students' home culture and language.

*Authors' note: We would like to thank the Reading Recovery teachers in California and Texas who contributed their lesson records to this study.*

**Table 2. Summary of Instructional Recommendations**

### Check for understanding

- Did the Tolds impact understanding?
- Did the student understand who was doing the action and when it happened (tense)?
- Were contractions understood?
- Were relationships understood, even if prepositions were not read correctly?

### Use ongoing language and literacy assessment

- Reanalyze running records with a language lens.
- Consider all sources of information and stay tentative.
- Closely examine Tolds and remember to code attempts
- Continually assess oral language.

### Prepare students for successful reading

- Consider the student's oral language when selecting books.
- Provide a book introduction that takes out the bugs.
- Practice tricky language.

### Expand the complexity and flexibility of students' language

- Ask questions that support language expansion.
- Practice different ways of saying something.
- Transform sentences from statements into their negative forms, questions, and commands.

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