



A MATTER OF **KNOWLEDGE**

Making in-the-moment teaching decisions

By **Robin Griffith** and **Jan Lacina**



Robin Griffith

(rgriffith@tcu.edu), an ILA member since 2001, is an associate professor of literacy at Texas Christian University (TCU).



Jan Lacina

(j.lacina@tcu.edu) is a professor of literacy and the associate dean of graduate studies at TCU. She has been an ILA member since 2005.

Lauren, an experienced teacher, prepares a thoughtful guided reading lesson for a small group of first graders. She uses running records and keen observations of reading behaviors to select a “just right” book. She introduces the text and the students begin to read independently. As she watches Devon process the guided reading text, she notices that he stumbles over the words “Here come the fish.” He reads “He come, he come, he....”

In this moment, Lauren must make a teaching decision. She knows that Devon is attending to the beginning part of the word *here*, and that he is using parts of words to solve words not yet known. As he continues to reread the sentence, it’s clear to Lauren that Devon is monitoring his reading. He is noticing that something

doesn't sound right. She sees that Devon is searching the picture for clues, and she notices that his eyes skip ahead to the words on the rest of the page. Still, Devon cannot solve the word *here*.

In this moment, Lauren must make a teaching decision. She has choices. She can decide to prompt Devon to check the end of the word and make the next sound. If she chooses this option, she must decide how to word her prompt and if she'll model that strategy.

She can decide to allow Devon to read on, hoping he will gather enough meaning from the rest of the sentence to self-correct his error.

She can remind him that this word is on the word wall as a way to support the development of an ever-increasing core of known words.

She can praise his attempts to reread and look at the picture so as to validate his attempts to search for more information.

She can also decide that because this is the first word in the sentence and his meaning is breaking down, telling him the word is the best decision so he can move on.

It is those in-the-moment teaching decisions that are difficult to make, but are so important in promoting the development of strategic reading behaviors.

Teaching decisions matter.

Drawing on teacher knowledge

In order to make the best teaching decision in the moment, several things have to happen in a matter of seconds. First, Lauren must recognize the opportunity to make a decision. She must realize that her choice of words and actions could impact Devon's understanding of the goal of reading as well as his belief in himself as a reader. She must also be thoughtful about her in-the-moment decision in relation to moving this reader forward, not just in this book, on this sentence, or on this word, but moving him forward in his development of a strategic system of reading behaviors.

Though one wrong prompt won't forever scar a reader, every encounter with a reader builds a foundation of knowledge upon which he or she must draw. That foundation can be solidly built upon effective reading strategies, or it can

Though one wrong prompt won't forever scar a reader, every encounter with a reader builds a foundation of knowledge upon which he or she must draw.



be shakily constructed on unconnected and unreliable stabs at reading.

Knowing the learner

After Lauren recognizes the opportunity to make a powerful teaching decision, she must draw upon a vast bank of teacher knowledge. She must consider what she knows about the learner, the text, and the task. Using pedagogical knowledge, she must consider what motivates Devon, what teaching techniques work for him, and how much wait time he needs as a learner. She must also think about the pacing of the lesson because 20 other children are vying for her attention.

Knowing the reading process

Drawing upon her understanding of reading as a strategic process, Lauren accesses her pedagogical content knowledge to make decisions about the text and this particular word-solving dilemma. She must access her knowledge about developmental stages of reading (e.g., what strategies should a student reading a level D text be using?) while considering the supports and challenges this text provides (e.g., the challenge of language structures that are unlike the spoken language of this learner).

She must also consider her language. She must choose words carefully so as not to confuse Devon or muddy the cognitive waters with unnecessary information.

Her prompt must be precise.

Metacognitive decision making

Sometimes the routine of guided reading becomes just that—routine. The teacher takes the running record and introduces the new book that she's introduced 20 times before; she leans in and listens to the readers, reciting her tried-and-true prompts; then, she closes the book and leads a conversation about the story. The challenge is to go beyond the routine to make thoughtful and deliberate in-the-moment teaching decisions.

Understanding and raising awareness of teachers' beliefs, goals, and knowledge related to planning, assessing, and revising instruction provides useful insight for improving instruction. Teachers can benefit by engaging in what we call "metacognitive decision making."

Metacognitive decision making involves identifying, drawing attention to, reflecting on, and evaluating teaching decisions. It is the act of raising awareness about specific teaching decisions and the reasons behind those decisions. With that heightened awareness, teachers can make more thoughtful, deliberate, and powerful in-the-moment teaching decisions.

Teaching reading well is hard work. No program, script, or app can take the place of a knowledgeable teacher of reading, especially one who gives due attention to the crucial teaching decisions made during reading instruction.

Teaching decisions matter, just like they did for Lauren and Devon. ■