

# Riding the Reciprocal Teaching Bus

A teacher's reflections on nurturing collaborative learning in a school culture obsessed by results

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## Notes on contributor

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## Abstract

This article examines the author's interactions with the teaching strategy known as Reciprocal Teaching, sometimes also called Reciprocal Reading, which involves students learning to read collaboratively in small groups. Reciprocal Teaching typically involves students teaching each other by following a rubric of activities that are aimed at primarily improving their comprehension skills. In brief, students read a text in a group and collectively try to understand it, using prescribed procedures. This article scrutinises the original research by Palinscar and Brown (1984) which created the strategy and questions some of its claims. While many other investigations into Reciprocal Teaching have aimed to prove or disprove its efficacy, this enquiry studies the discourses which inform the strategy, arguing that there are problems with its presentation in the original article which have affected subsequent representations of Reciprocal Teaching. The article shows how the author, an English teacher in a large secondary school, taught Reciprocal Teaching to teenagers for a year and argues that the presentation of Reciprocal Teaching he read in a well-regarded teaching handbook caused him to deploy Reciprocal Teaching problematically. It was only when he taught Reciprocal Teaching in a more imaginative fashion that he found greater success.

## Key Words

Collaborative learning, Reciprocal Teaching, Reciprocal Reading, Teaching Reading, Palinscar & Brown, secondary English teaching, improving exam results, autonomous literacy strategy.

## Introduction

I first encountered Reciprocal Teaching as a pedagogical strategy in early 2013 when I read Geoff Petty's *Evidence-Based Teaching: A Practical Approach* (2014). The deputy headteacher at the school where I was then teaching secondary English to 11-18 year olds had urged all teachers to adopt 'evidence-based teaching strategies', and lent me Petty's book to read. I was originally sceptical because I was wary of the notion of evidence-based teaching ; I did not know much about it and saw it as yet another 'fad' that would be discredited in a few years' time. However, I was enthused when I read Petty's instructional manual carefully; many of the points chimed with my own experiences as a teacher. The book promoted as it does the effectiveness of feedback, collaborative learning and reflective practice. I was particularly drawn to his chapter on Reciprocal teaching because it appeared to offer a collaborative method of nurturing reading skills which was 'proven' to work.

At the time, I was teaching 4 days at Rose Comprehensive, and studying one day a week at Tulip University for a PhD in Creative Writing and Education. I had passed the Quantitative and Qualitative Methods component which all educational researchers are required to take as part of their doctoral studies. This is important to stress because I understood what Petty meant by the statistical term 'effect size', without having to read his explanation. My PhD tutors had revealed how problematic concepts of 'effect size' are, but they had also shown that if the research had been conducted thoroughly and with due procedure the notion of 'effect size' could provide teachers and educators with useful information. According to Petty, the 'effect size' for Reciprocal Teaching is particularly high: 0.86, a fact which Petty interprets as meaning that students who were 2.5 years behind their peers in reading comprehension caught up within 20 days when taught Reciprocal Teaching (154-155). This makes Reciprocal Teaching one of the most successful Evidence-Based Teaching strategies there is; this, in part, persuaded me to use the technique with my Year 9 and Year 12 students, all of whom, for reasons I will explore, were struggling with their reading.

This article will scrutinise in more depth why I chose to use the method; it will also situate my use of Reciprocal Teaching within my own unique teaching context. The English school system is a highly performative culture (Craft and Jeffrey 2008) which is focused on raising standards by improving exam results. Schools, teachers and students are all ranked – in differing ways and by different means -- numerically. The hegemony values quantitative data far more than qualitative reports.

I wish to 'get under the bonnet' of Reciprocal Teaching, re-examining the initial research that Palincsar and Brown (1984) conducted using the method, and the ways in which it is presented and utilised. I will look critically at my own practice and see whether my interpretation of Reciprocal

Teaching was in fact in line with what Palincsar and Brown proposed, and whether my own practice benefitted from my interpretation of Reciprocal Teaching.

Although Reciprocal Teaching has been popular in New Zealand and the US for some time, as a specific strategy it is still relatively unknown in the UK, although this is changing: the University of East London is working with several primary schools in the capital to ‘cascade’ knowledge about Reciprocal Reading (another term for Reciprocal Teaching, the implications of which I discuss later), claiming ‘the impact (of RR) on children’s reading progress has been outstanding’ (Project Oracle, 2018). The Educational Endowment Foundation is examining 100 primary schools and the effect of RR upon Years 4-6, with results due to be reported back in autumn 2018 (2017) . Several other smaller projects are currently underway looking at RR (Fischer Family Trust Literacy 2018). For this reason, I believe my article is very pertinent. I will examine in depth how I presented the strategy and explore how my pedagogy was shaped by my reading and its underlying discourses. My research highlights some key issues facing all teachers when nurturing Reciprocal Teaching in the contemporary classroom, and both celebrates and problematizes Reciprocal Teaching in an original way.

## Methodology, purposes and research questions

Above all, I wish to examine my teaching of Reciprocal Teaching in a critical light. I aim to explore different definitions and iterations of ‘reciprocal teaching’ – in the broadest sense of the phrase -- and question whether the strategy has a productive role to play in cultivating enlightened pedagogies. In this sense, my methodological approach is informed by two key thinkers: Paulo Freire (Freire, 1996) and Michel Foucault (Graham 2005). Using a Freirean lens, I ask whether the strategy can nurture what Freire terms ‘critical literacy’ (Freire and Macedo 2005). Margaret Meek’s description of Freirean pedagogy highlights the core principles that inform my research:

Freire is an eloquent advocate of methodologies which change the learners’ view of what reading and writing are all about...he exhorts them to be critical of their reality, of institutions and practices which shape it, it is always to enable them, as learners, to emerge from the ‘culture of silence’ (2005, 2–3).

In other words, I ask whether Reciprocal Teaching can help students not only with their functional reading but also their reading of the world; can the strategy help readers become aware that reading texts can illuminate their perceptions of the environments they inhabit?

I use Foucault’s method of tracing the origins of a cultural practice by exploring the genealogy of Reciprocal Teaching and the discourses which inform it, looking critically at the way it is framed within the rubric of being an ‘evidence-based strategy’ (Foucault 1995 1977: Ball 2013: McHoul & Grace 2002). I use discourse analysis to explore important articles which have promoted Reciprocal Teaching (Coyle, 2007), and to analyse a wide data set – videos, lesson plans, field notes, pupil

interviews -- of my teaching the strategy to a mixed ability Year 9 class (13-14- year-olds) and an English Literature Year 12 (16-17- year-olds) class, investigating these data sources to see if there are common discourses. My methodological approach is that of bricolage, using a mixture of discourse analysis, Freirean and cultural materialist critique to scrutinise my data (Rogers 2012).

My research questions arise from two purposes for the article which are:

a) to critically investigate how Reciprocal Teaching was first presented

b) to explore the impact Reciprocal Teaching has upon my own practice as a secondary English teacher

For a) my questions are:

What is Reciprocal Teaching? Where and why did Reciprocal Teaching emerge as an effective reading strategy? What discourses of power, learning and pedagogy inform the strategy? Has Reciprocal Teaching usurped the place of other equally valid pedagogies? Is the way it is framed as an 'evidence-based teaching strategy' a problem, a boon or neither?

For b) my questions are:

To what extent did Reciprocal Teaching improve my teaching? What problems did I encounter when using it, and why? How might these problems be overcome?

As I have indicated, I draw from a wide range of data. I examine some important texts which have advocated Reciprocal Teaching; transcriptions of my teaching of the strategy derived from videos, and my own reflective diary and field notes which collate my results, thoughts, feelings, plans and assessments (September 2014-2015). All my data from school was generated as a result of my day to day work as a teacher; I gained ethical approval from my institution to do the research and permission from care-givers to video students and transcribe their comments.

## Genealogies of Reciprocal Teaching: definitions and discourses

Smidt defines Reciprocal Teaching as 'teaching which is dialogic in that both teacher and learner contribute as equals in dialogue, each being both learner and teacher' (2015, 144). Smidt, a pedagogue and researcher who has written extensively about practical strategies for applying Paulo Freire's principles in the classroom (2010), offers a simple definition here, interpreting the idea of reciprocity as meaning equal 'give and take' between teacher and learner. Implicit in her definition is the notion that Reciprocal Teaching is about equality and social justice: teachers have just as much to learn from their pupils as the pupils do from their teachers. This is a radical idea which is still not

accepted by many teachers who favour a more traditional approach in which the teacher is the voice of authority and knowledge, and the pupil the recipient of that knowledge. Smidt's definition shares some similarities with Palincsar and Brown's promotion of a more complicated teaching strategy called Reciprocal Teaching in that they advocate students becoming teachers. However, Palincsar and Brown are not explicitly concerned with Reciprocal Teaching as a vehicle for breaking down traditional teacher-student relationships or bringing social justice to the classroom. Furthermore, Smidt's definition has none of the technical detail which Palincsar and Brown's strategy involves.

Their original article published in 1984 is informed by different discourses than those exhibited in Smidt's definition. Their review of 'traditional reading education literature' reveals their overall methodological approach. They state that there are six components that assist students' comprehension when reading:

(1) understanding the purposes of reading, both explicit and implicit; (2) activating relevant background knowledge; (3) allocating attention so that concentration can be focused on the major content at the expense of trivia; (4) critical evaluation of content for internal consistency, and compatibility with prior knowledge and common sense; (5) monitoring ongoing activities to see if comprehension is occurring, by engaging in such activities as periodic review and self-interrogation; and (6) drawing and testing inferences of many kinds, including interpretations, predictions, and conclusions. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 120)

In many ways, this is a very useful summary of what effective readers do, but it should be noted that there is a distinct absence of any discourses connected with affect or social class. First, Palincsar and Brown do not talk about the roles the emotions play in reading: there is no mention of pleasure.

There is a considerable body of research which indicates that when children learn to read for pleasure they engage much more productively with the reading process in a variety of contexts (Kucirkova et al. 2017). Palincsar and Brown talk about how strong readers 'understand the purposes of reading', 'allocate attention', 'evaluate', 'review' and 'self-interrogate', but neglect to discuss the vital role enjoyment plays in fostering these skills. Second, much research shows that social class plays a crucial role in how children engage with reading in school (Yandell, 2013). Brian Street is particularly critical of the approach that Palincsar and Brown and many other 'reading experts' take because for him it exemplifies what he calls the 'autonomous' model of literacy which is:

the assumption that literacy in itself, autonomously, defined independently of cultural context and meaning, will have effects, creating inequality for those who 'lack' it and advantages for those who gain it. In fact this perspective is itself deeply ideological. One of the most powerful mechanisms available to ideology is to disguise itself (Street 2011, 581)

The implicit assumption of Palincsar and Brown in their article is that certain core reading skills can be extracted from their own previous research and other experts which could provide an 'autonomous literacy machine' that could, if properly instituted, improve students' comprehension skills. David Barton offers this helpful explanation of what Street means by the autonomous literacy strategy:

it is the idea that literacy can be described autonomously, separate from any context; that there is a psychological variable called literacy which can be measured and which remains the same in different social contexts and at different historical times (2007, 116)

This is what Palincsar and Brown – and many other educational ‘literacy’ researchers who primarily use quantitative methods – subliminally seek to show regarding Reciprocal Teaching; that it can operate ‘autonomously’ in any social context; that once its machinery is properly operated by the teacher then it could have just as big an effect with struggling readers in any country. Based on their reading of the literature, Palincsar and Brown opted for four main activities that they believe help readers regardless of social context:

Therefore, in this series of studies, we decided to train the four activities of self-directed summarizing (review), questioning, clarifying, and predicting, embedding them in the context of a dialogue between student and teacher that took place during the actual task of reading with the clear goal of deriving meaning from the text. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 121)

Here is the heart of what they conceive Reciprocal Teaching to be: in groups, initially directed by a ‘real’ teacher, students read a text which is in their Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978), and each person summarises what they think the text is about, asks questions which will help them further their understanding, seek clarification on parts they don’t comprehend, and predict what might happen next. Although there are many ways of enacting this process, this is what Palincsar and Brown conceive Reciprocal Teaching to be. Their conception is an example of the ‘autonomous’ model of literacy in action: they argue in their article that if teachers use Reciprocal Teaching in class, then students’ reading scores will very significantly improve without mentioning the role that cultural context might play (145) despite their referencing of Vygotsky who stresses throughout his work the pivotal role context plays in shaping learning (1978). Their interpretation of Vygotsky’s ideas is, as we will see, necessarily narrow so that they can shoehorn his ideas into their ‘autonomous’ model. They seek to provide the pedagogue with an ‘autonomous package of strategies’ which they believe can be transferred to any classroom and work effectively – regardless of social context. This approach is very much in line with their quantitative method which uses randomised control tests (RCTs) to assess the statistical effect of Reciprocal Teaching. As I hope to show, while this quantitative method has its strengths, reading the nuance of their paper indicates that there are a number of factors that are very difficult to ‘control’ for.

## Driving the Reciprocal Teaching bus in the secondary English classroom

My reading of Petty’s summary of Reciprocal Teaching convinced me that the ‘Reciprocal Teaching package’ was, to use an extended simile, like a ‘bus’ that I simply had to drive and I would take my students ‘on a ride’ to higher reading scores. The autonomous literacy strategy discourse was unconsciously ‘passed on’ to me. This is the appeal – and drawback -- for teachers of strategies like

this: they open the door to shiny vehicles and invite you to take the steering wheel without considering in depth the purposes of your journey and who your passengers are. They provide you, to a certain extent, with a map of how you might get there, and they definitely have a destination which appeals to most teachers in our school culture which is obsessed with students achieving good exam results (Jones 2016: Jeffrey, Troman 2012). It should be noted that I was not a naïve teacher – if I had taken time to deeply reflect upon Reciprocal Teaching I would have seen that the promises of higher test scores were problematic – but I did not reflect deeply because I was very busy under pressure to gain high scores in a performative culture that does not provide pauses or ‘psychic’ space for profound reflection. I chose to deploy Reciprocal Teaching because I was concerned that the students I was teaching in my Year 9 and 12 classes were not engaging with the meaning of the texts that they were reading but were used to ‘feature-spotting’: picking out ‘features’ (techniques, isolated, decontextualized ideas) in a text but not engaging with its meaning. For example, after being taught this for years at primary and secondary school, many of them would gravitate towards focusing upon the metaphors, similes, alliteration, onomatopoeia and other ‘techniques’ when they read a poem, novel or play, and would ‘PEE’ in their writing: they would make a ‘Point’ (isolate a technique), provide some ‘Evidence’ (always a quotation), and then ‘Explain’ the effect of the technique (Marshall 2003). It has happened because it’s a good way of getting all students to write clearly in exam situations. However, it can be poor at requiring students to read deeply for meaning. I perceived that Reciprocal Teaching, with its focus upon summarising the meaning of a text, asking questions of it and clarifying any misunderstandings, was already a better technique than encouraging ‘PEEing’.

You can sense my enthusiasm for Reciprocal Teaching in this transcript of a talk I gave to my Year 9 students (13-14-year olds) while requiring them to use the strategy when reading Steinbeck’s *Of Mice and Men*. This class was a mixed ability group of thirty students who I had taught for a week in September 2014 before embarking upon using Reciprocal Teaching with them.

I had already been teaching for over two decades and had used many collaborative reading strategies in the classroom, but I was very inspired by what I had read about Reciprocal Teaching. I modelled to the whole class what Reciprocal Teaching was for nearly 10 minutes, asking the whole class to watch and listen to 6 students who enacted Reciprocal Teaching under my guidance. I noticed that the students listened keenly as I asked the group to appoint a teacher who asked all the remaining group members to read the first page silently. Following my instructions, the student-teacher then asked everyone to discuss what the passage was about, to ask any relevant questions, clarify any misunderstandings and predict what might happen next. The rest of the class listened



carefully to this fishbowl demonstration and indicated using thumbs up that they all understood what to do. I followed up this demonstration by saying:

So the Reciprocal Teaching is where everyone has a go at being a teacher. This should be done quite quickly. You can have an open and honest discussion in your group about what the text is about, with the teacher making sure that everyone says something. During this time, if there are things you do not understand, it's a place for you to look things up if you are not sure. As the real teacher, I will be circulating around to make sure you are behaving and doing things correctly (.) I may intervene and answer any other questions you may have. Is that OK? It is an amazingly effective technique for improving reading (.) Does anyone know why? (2) It's been proven over thousands of studies to really work and improve people's reading (.) Does anyone know why it might improve your reading?

This excerpt is worth looking at depth because it illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the strategy and its multiple representations. The idea that everyone in the class learns to become a teacher is an emancipatory concept (Freire 2014) which breaks down the barriers between teacher and pupil and, if pursued systematically, helps to generate 'critical literacy' in the classroom (Beck 2005; Roberts 2016 ). This is the great strength and potential subversiveness of Reciprocal Teaching: it breaks down traditional relationships between teachers and students, by requiring all students to think and act like teachers. Central to its implementation is the demand that everyone adopts the teaching role at some point.

Notice that I say that everyone should have a go at being a teacher 'quite quickly': this was because I sensed that the students were uneasy about being teachers – there was some rolling of eyes and groans in the class when I mentioned it. When questioned later about this, it was clear that some students – though not all -- didn't like being in charge of a large group and felt uncomfortable with being authority figures. In the transcript, I exhort the students to have an 'open and honest discussion' about the passage they have read. On reflection, this seems to contradict the idea that they should be teachers 'quite quickly'; meaningful discussion about texts often takes time. I then claim that I as the 'real teacher' will be there to intervene and 'answer any other questions'. Here, I appear reluctant to fully embrace a Freirean conception of Reciprocal Teaching which is that students work things out for themselves ultimately and learn not to rely on the 'real teacher'. Furthermore, I deploy hyperbole to say it is an 'amazingly effective technique' and 'thousands of studies' show it improves 'people's reading'. Unfortunately, I was incorrect; at that point when I was speaking, September 2014, there had been 52 studies (Petty 2014, 65). In my defence, I had been reading *Evidence-Based Teaching* and had misread the numbers: 'Feedback' has thousands of studies which show its effectiveness (65).

I am pointing out my own mistakes here because I think I am representative of a busy but well-intentioned teacher who is trying to use a collaborative learning strategy which he believes will work in the classroom, but feeling he has to frame it within three constricting and contradictory discourses:

- that of the 'autonomous model of literacy' discourse which offers a bespoke package of strategies which improve literacy in any context, a 'literacy machine';
- the 'teacher-as-authority' discourse which insists ultimately only the teacher can provide the 'answers';
- a 'performativity' discourse which demands that every new approach is only used because it has been 'proven' to produce superior exam results.

Ironically, these discourses mitigate the power of the 'intervention' because if a 'literacy machine' is used, then both teachers and students tend to use it uncritically and are reluctant to adapt it for their own unique needs and contexts. The 'teacher-as-authority' discourse means that students continue to rely upon the teacher for answers: they are fully aware that there's always a 'stop-gap'; and the performativity discourse means that the focus is upon performance in tests rather than the learning acquired, which much research shows diminishes learning (Watkins 2010).

Above all, it is the 'machine-like quality of Reciprocal Teaching which I emphasize in my delivery to my students; implicit in much of what I say is that if you follow the correct procedures you will attain 'amazing results'. In a certain sense, this proved to be true on a few levels. Because of the strong 'evidence-base' for it and a supportive deputy head, I became the only teacher in our English department to deploy collaborative reading strategies in a sustained fashion in my lessons; the other teachers told me that they all either read from the front themselves, asked students to read around the class, and only rarely required students to read in pairs. I, on the other hand, required my classes to read in Reciprocal Teaching groups of 4-6 on a sustained basis for the whole of the year, meaning the students read to each other for approximately 60 hours during the course of the whole year. The normalisation of the process of collaborative reading led to a more convivial culture within my classroom: I found my classes much easier to manage because they immediately began reading in groups when the lesson began and clearly enjoyed discussing the meaning of passages with each other. Their end of term assessments revealed that they were much more original in their comments about their reading – *Of Mice and Men* with Year 9 and Sylvia Plath's poetry with Year 12 – because they had engaged with more emotion with the meaning of the texts and offered different points of view in their interpretations of these texts (Field notes, 2014). Both groups went on to achieve above average value-added in their GCSE results and A Levels, although whether this is attributable to Reciprocal Teaching is not in any way provable as I did not teach them in subsequent years.

But there were problems from the outset: most particularly, sometimes groups were disrupted by unenthusiastic readers who misbehaved. At the time, my reading of the relevant Reciprocal Teaching literature left me ill-equipped to deal with students who were 'off-task'. But I took steps to

remedy the situation. I reminded the misbehaving students of the amazing effect of Reciprocal Teaching upon test scores, but they were unconvinced. My encouragement of them had a bigger effect; I would set reading targets for the reluctant readers and then provide rewards: 'merits' (the school's reward system), positive notes to parents in their planners and certificates for making an effort.

I found that I had to model how to read expressively repeatedly to my classes, and to talk about my thought processes as I was reading. I was aware that this is a highly recommended meta-cognitive teaching technique but did not realise that this is central to the strategy. I relied on Petty's lively summary of the strategy (2014, 54-164) which does not show how and why meta-cognitive thinking needs to be employed. The fundamental process being the importance of getting students not only to summarise what they know, but also what they don't know, and figure out ways of addressing this knowledge deficit.

Ironically, I felt guilty for not following the rubric of Reciprocal Teaching. Furthermore, I was consistently confused: there were -- and are -- so many different forms of how to do Reciprocal Teaching in the literature and on the internet. Even its name is uncertain: is it Reciprocal Teaching or Reciprocal Reading? I used the term Reciprocal Teaching with my students because that's what Petty calls it -- and indeed the original creators -- but many researchers and teachers label it Reciprocal Reading. The UK's Educational Endowment Foundation uses Reciprocal Reading (2017) . But I found that the term Reciprocal Reading was constricting because it presupposed reciprocity only happened with readers. I began to realise that the more I used the strategy flexibly, adapting to it my own needs and classes, all teaching is 'reciprocal'.

Thinking for myself and not relying on any guru, website or research, I simplified the process of Reciprocal Teaching, returning it to its absolute basics with my classes, explaining again and again that 'reciprocity' was what we were after: 'You give something, you get it back'. I also spent some time illustrating to them the key idea that it's the teacher who learns the most in the classroom because of his/her mindset: a teacher predicts what learning will happen, instructs him/herself and the learners to do things to help them learn, and asks questions to help the learners understand. I would regularly ask students to work in pairs, with one person being a teacher, and the other a learner, and explain what they knew of the topic being in role as a teacher. Then I asked them to swap. This helped them feel comfortable in the teacher's role: something which the literature does not point out is very difficult to do.

Yet a significant minority of my students did not want to be teachers. Furthermore, I found that this point was intricately linked to the issue of social class, gender and race: students who were from

more marginalised backgrounds did not initially enjoy adopting the teacher role. Many of them came from homes where being a teacher was entirely foreign to them; you listened, obeyed or rebelled against teachers, you didn't become one. Dealing with this resistance took time and effort, and spontaneous thinking: whenever I could I would get students to play the role of being teachers, frequently modelling the kinds of language and thought processes a teacher might have.

I was moving far away from the specific approaches laid out as being the authentic 'Reciprocal Teaching', and this troubled me. Would this mean that my students wouldn't achieve as highly as the studies suggested? I was still in thrall to the notion that there was a right way to deliver Reciprocal Teaching.

As I worked with my classes, I began to realise that 'amazing results' could only be attained by constantly adapting the principles of Reciprocal Teaching rather than insisting upon set procedures. I perceived that Reciprocal Teaching was not an 'intervention' at all, but a starting point for an investigation into collaborative learning in the secondary English classroom. This required constantly reflection and refinement on everyone's part, not least the teacher's.

I learned this only through bitter experience: students not wanting to be teachers, refusing to work together, becoming distracted. And so, I was forced to vary and adapt it according to my classes' mood and attitude at any given time. For example, with my Year 9 class, during the mornings, they were alert and responsive to reading in groups, but in my afternoon lessons they did not work well in large groups of four. After some experimentation I found that they would work in pairs, reading for small stretches of time (5-10 minutes) and with specific jobs to do. I would constantly vary the activities so that students had to adopt the role of a predictor, motivator, questioner, assessor, or another activity that was relevant to what they were reading such as relating the text to their own lives, comparing and contrasting with other texts, role-playing or creative written responses. When planning these lessons, I would use tried and tested English teaching resources such as English Allsorts (English and Media Centre 2008) to bring variety to the lessons.

The crucial point here is that while notions of reciprocity and students teaching each other undergirded my pedagogy, nothing recognisable as the Palincsar and Brown conception of Reciprocal Teaching might have been seen in these lessons. I would argue nonetheless that 'reciprocal teaching' was happening; but I had most definitely abandoned any notion of Reciprocal Teaching being an 'autonomous literacy strategy'. This idea of representing reading comprehension – and comprehension in general -- as a process of 'summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting' has a real appeal because it breaks down what is a very complex process into four clear stages. My lessons that year were full of discussion and explication of these four points within a

many different activities; this gave my lessons a renewed sense of purpose. So, for example, if students were doing a role-play of the Sheriff interviewing George at the end of *Of Mice and Men*, I would explain that part of the reason they were doing it was to make a creative summary of what they had read, and to use the Sheriff role to 'clarify' any misunderstandings and develop their questioning skills. Thus, the principles of Reciprocal Teaching were 'folded into' the role-play. I also found that more mundane strategies like 'PEEing' could easily be worked into the Reciprocal Teaching cycle by simply asking the teacher to require students to PEE (!). Although I was sceptical of the benefits of PEEing, I found that the students felt comforted when using it, and that I could get them to question how effective (or not) it was in groups. This provided them with some effective 'Learning How to Learn' moments, where they reflected upon what strategies helped them learn better (Watkins, 2007).

The more I researched Reciprocal Teaching, the more I realised that it has many different iterations, and many of them are not suitable for sustained use with secondary English students because they are presented and conceptualised for either students with Special Educational Needs or primary school students. You only have to type into Google Images 'Reciprocal Teaching', and you find many different interpretations of these key points. I have used these diagrams myself with classes, explaining that they are only starting points. The more attractive representations are useful to prompt students to consider important questions while reading and yet, if not used appropriately, they can quickly become redundant in the secondary English classroom because they are nearly all far too simplistic (Google images, 2018). Students need to be pushed conceptually far beyond their parameters and can feel patronised if required to rigidly use its format.

One of the reasons it is problematic is because it does not stress to a sufficient degree the vital points about Reciprocal Teaching: modelling, scaffolding and collaboration. It only becomes clear when you read Palincsar and Brown's article (1984) in its entirety that these Vygotskian ideas are absolutely central to the strategies success. They write:

Work on proleptic instruction has been influenced by Vygotsky's (1978) developmental theory. Vygotsky believed that a great deal of development was mediated by expert scaffolding. Children first experience a particular set of cognitive activities in the presence of experts, and only gradually come to perform these functions by themselves. First, an expert (parent, teacher, mastercraftsman, etc.) guides the child's activity, doing most of the cognitive work herself. The child participates first as a spectator, then as a novice responsible for very little of the actual work. As the child becomes more experienced and capable of performing more complex aspects of the task, aspects that she has seen modeled by adults time and time again, the adult gradually cedes her greater responsibility. The adult and child come to share the cognitive work, with the child taking initiative and the adult correcting and guiding where she falters. Finally, the adult allows the child to take over the major thinking role and adopts the stance of a supportive and sympathetic audience. Initially, the supportive other acts as the model, critic, and interrogator, leading the child to use more powerful strategies and to apply them more widely. In time, the interrogative, critical role is adopted by the child, who becomes able to fulfill some of these functions for herself via self-regulation and self-interrogation... What is distinct about Vygotsky's theory is the important role attributed to the social context and expert scaffolding. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 123)

Palincsar and Brown's understanding of Vygotsky is interesting to examine because while it acknowledges the vital role 'social context' plays in his theory of learning (1978) at the end of the passage, this is not what is emphasized enough in any of their work. Rather, they place prominence upon the cognitive skills that a 'real' teacher can model with a pupil over a period of time so that the child eventually is able to take the initiative themselves and begin to 'self-regulate' and 'self-interrogate'. For Palincsar and Brown, this appears to be how they conceptualise social context: the article only discusses the context of the teacher talking to the pupil; what happens outside the classroom is not talked about in their article.

The problems with this narrow conceptualisation become clear when they examine some case studies in their article. They highlight 'Charles', a struggling reader; the transcripts of the teacher's interventions with Charles are fascinating to examine in depth and highlight for me the problems with their presentation of the strategy. Charles has to read a text about a viper on the first day – his inarticulacy should be noted before you read:

Day 1: TEXT: The water moccasin, somewhat longer than the copperhead, is found in the southeastern states. It lives in swampy regions. It belongs, as do also the copperhead and the rattlesnakes, to a group of poisonous snakes called pit vipers. They have pits between their eyes and their nostrils which, because they are sensitive to heat, help the snakes tell when they are near a warm-blooded animal. Another name for the water moccasin is "cottonmouth." This name comes from the white lining of the snake's mouth.

1. C: What is found in the southeastern snakes, also the copperhead, rattlesnakes, vipers-they have. I'm not doing this right.

2. T: All right. Do you want to know about the pit vipers?

3. C: Yeah.

4. T: What would be a good question about the pit vipers that "why?"

5. C: (No response)

6. T: How about, "Why are the snakes called pit vipers?"

7. C: Why do they want to know that they are called pit vipers?

8. T: Try it again.

9. C: Why do they, pit vipers in a pit?

10. T: How about, "Why do they call the snakes pit vipers?"

11. C: Why do they call the snakes pit vipers?

12. T: There you go! Good for you. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 138)

Reading all the transcripts in the article – of which this is typical – the reader can see clearly why Reciprocal Teaching works with struggling readers like Charles. A teacherly eye can perceive that it is not primarily the importance of the strategies of 'summarizing, questioning, clarifying and predicting' which enable the students to progress, although these are unquestionably important, but more the motivational attitude of the teacher who, throughout, appears to be 'listening deeply' to

what the learners are saying. The above passage emphasizes the importance of the teacher asking questions but also encouraging the student with phrases such as 'try it again' and 'there you go! Good for you'.

Furthermore, in the above passage, there is an intuitive, 'in the moment' interpretation of the strategy which is not mechanical; the teacher clearly decides not to ask what the passage is about here (this happens in other transcripts) but focuses upon questioning the student and encouraging him to ask questions. This is because this is what is appropriate at that precise moment; an example of responsive, spontaneous teaching. We see this again in line 10:

T: How about, "Why do they call the snakes pit vipers?"

In the above line, the teacher rewords Charles' inarticulate phrase – 'Why do they, pit vipers in a pit?' -- into a clear question which clarifies what Charles should be looking for in the passage. The teacher, in a non-threatening way, reshapes Charles' syntax.

By Days 11 and 15, under the intensive tutelage of the teacher, Charles has improved significantly, we see this with these two excerpts:

Day 11: TEXT: One of the most interesting of the insect-eating plants is the Venus's flytrap. This plant lives in only one small area of the world-the coastal marshes of North and South Carolina. The Venus's flytrap doesn't look unusual. Its habits, however, make it truly a plant wonder.

26. C: What is the most interesting of the insect eating plants, and where do the plants live at?

27. T: Two excellent questions! They are both clear and important questions. Ask us one at a time now.

Day 15: TEXT: Scientists also come to the South Pole to study the strange lights that glow overhead during the Antarctic night. (It's a cold and lonely world for the few hardy people who "winter over" the polar night.) These "southern lights" are caused by the Earth acting like a magnet on electrical particles in the air. They are clues that may help us understand the Earth's core and the upper edges of its blanket of air.

28. C: Why do scientists come to the south pole to study?

29. T: Excellent question! That is what this paragraph is all about.(Palincsar and Brown 1984, 139)

But again, note the vital role of the teacher encouraging Charles with positive responses such as saying 'excellent questions'. He also models a key aspect of Reciprocal Teaching which is summarising. But it's vital to observe that throughout Palincsar and Brown's article the definition of summarising is widened beyond the narrow definition frequently found in many schools where it is seen as a form of putting a text into your own words. Palincsar and Brown emphasise the significance of learners learning how to sum up their understanding in a clear way:

Summarizing was modeled as an activity of self-review; it was engaged in to state to the teacher or the group what had just happened in the text and as a self-test that the content had been understood. If an adequate synopsis could not be reached, this fact was regarded not as a failure to perform a particular decontextualized skill, but as an important source of information that comprehension was not proceeding as it should, and remedial action (such as rereading or clarifying) was needed. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 122)

As I have already mentioned, I completely missed broad definition of summarizing when I first taught Reciprocal Teaching with my classes. I simply told my students to say what they thought a text was about but I'd omitted a vital component of the strategy, 'self-review and reflection'.

This is very evident in Palincsar and Brown's article but is missing in many subsequent explanations of Reciprocal Teaching. What is crucial is that the learners take a positive attitude towards not understanding a passage and regard their inability to understand as 'an important source of information' and they should therefore take 'remedial action (such as rereading or clarifying)' (122).

Having now deployed Reciprocal Teaching for four years in different contexts, I would say this is imperative to the whole process; the teacher needs to model how to be positive about *not* understanding a passage and must nurture the students' enthusiasm so that they continue reading. This is why, after several lessons of using Reciprocal Teaching, I adapted the strategy and required that one of the students in a Reciprocal Teaching group had to take on the role of being a motivator; this is a learner who has the specific task of being positive when things are going well and motivates people when they don't understand a difficult passage.

Recent research into educational outcomes amongst disadvantaged students indicates that when students are taught how to be positive about their mistakes and adopt a 'Growth Mindset' which sees difficulties as an opportunity to grow, then outcomes are much improved (Claro, Paunesku & Dweck 2016). We can see this clearly in the transcripts with Charles, as well as in much other research (Coombs 2016; Schunk & Zimmerman 2008) and is unsurprisingly endorsed up by my experience: reading is an affective experience and motivation plays a central role in improving students' reading. It's a fairly obvious point, but in the quest to impose a so-called successful strategy, this idea can be missed. Palincsar and Brown sum up their article with this message:

The reciprocal teaching method itself could be the prime reason for success. First, it involves extensive modeling of the type of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities that are usually difficult to detect in the expert reader, as they are executed covertly. The reciprocal teaching procedure provides a relatively natural forum for the teacher to engage in these activities overtly, and hence to provide a model of what it is that expert readers do when they try to understand and remember texts. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 168)

Here we see the deployment of a mechanistic vocabulary about reading with phrases such as 'extensive modelling of the type of comprehension-fostering and comprehension-monitoring activities' (i.e. summarising, questioning, clarifying and predicting). While there is no doubt that there is much to recommend Reciprocal Teaching, the way it is framed by the discourses of 'autonomous literacy' in this article is problematic and it is easy to see why subsequent representations of it, based on Palincsar and Brown's original research, adopt the same discourse, which both overtly and covertly promotes the idea that with the right strategies in place, Reciprocal



Teaching can be the 'prime reason for success'. More quietly stated in the conclusion is this statement:

As the students adopted more of the essential skills initially undertaken by the adult, the adult acted less as a model and more like a sympathetic coach. (Palincsar and Brown 1984, 169)

My experience as a teacher indicated that there is a reciprocal relationship between modelling and being 'sympathetic coach'. I regularly showed struggling groups how I read passages (modelling) but also sympathetically coached them that they could do this if they tried. This, in turn, after repeated coaching, led to the students coaching each other in a more sympathetic fashion. After several months of working on this and explicitly drawing all pupils' attention to the importance of motivating each other, many groups would spontaneously clap each other if they read a difficult passage with real concentration. Reciprocity was generated in the largest sense of the word.

My own students (all given pseudonyms) revealed some interesting responses to Reciprocal Teaching, providing some salient reasons as to why it might work. One fourteen-year-old student, Al, said of Reciprocal Teaching that 'it's kind of like you're getting the students to go into more detail. You're using your own brain to figure things out instead of asking other people to tell you, you have to actually think about it...' Here, Al implicitly reveals the vital role of motivation; 'you're using your own brain to figure things out'. In other words, for Reciprocal Teaching to work, you need to think for yourself what the meaning of a passage might be, rather than passively 'asking other people to tell you'.

Here we see how although Reciprocal Teaching affords the chance for students to socially construct the meaning of texts in a collaborative fashion (Yandell 2013), this student realises that it also involves the individual making sense of it (or for themselves), what Watkins calls 'learning is individual sense-making' (2003). Other students saw Reciprocal Teaching as an important place to work out the meaning of texts together. John posed the question that they were doing it because 'we can learn from our friends?' The spontaneous use of the word 'friends' is important here: in all my talk about Reciprocal Teaching, I had never once used the word. Once again, we see a student implicitly understanding the motivational element to Reciprocal Teaching: it's a chance to discuss the meaning of passages in convivial company, amongst people you like and trust. Building upon John's point in the class discussion of the purposes of Reciprocal Teaching, Mo said: 'It's like coz you're getting to discuss different points of view so that's why you get to understand the situation...' Here we see the idea that students believe that 'different points of view' will not confuse them as to the meaning of a text, but will be the very reason 'why you get to understand the situation'. Mo perceives that she can 'triangulate' a variety of points of view from her peers and this will help her better understand a passage.

This is important and not usually stressed in the Reciprocal Teaching research. Group discussion affords multiple interpretations of a text and because it is conducted in a low-stakes, friendly atmosphere. Students process different points of view. This enriches their understanding and enables them to make judgements regarding the interpretation (Vygotsky 1962).

Meaning-making is an enjoyable, sociable activity which is an end in itself; motivation and the reading process are implicitly one (Yandell 2013). There is no need for people to encourage each other to read through positive comments because everyone is engaged in the process. I noted during the second term of using Reciprocal Teaching with my classes, the applause and praise that students which I have mentioned occurred a few months into the process had died down, and instead students were more intently focused upon the reading. They no longer needed to praise each other regularly because they were all enjoying the process calmly. The motivation had become the learning journey because it felt purposeful and sociable (Watkins 2010).

So, we can see that my students in their feedback understood some of the key theoretical tenets of Reciprocal Teaching. They emphasized the importance of Reciprocal Teaching giving the learner the space to make sense of a text by 'figuring it out for themselves' and also providing a social space to explore different points of view and come to an individual understanding of a text based on other people's comments: cognitive and social constructivist learning theory respectively.

But what was missing from the classroom discussion was a wider exploration of what happens outside the classroom and how this impacts upon classroom practice.

In order to support young readers, it is clear that new and more equivalent reading relationships need to be constructed with families and community members; the potential synergy between teachers', children's and parents' reading lives and practices deserves to be explored. (Cremin, T. et al 2009)

Much of Cremin's research underlines the central point made here: teachers need to be given the time to expand their own reading repertoires and skills in order to find books which their students might enjoy; they should encourage reading for pleasure. Reducing reading to a set of mechanical questions to be asked in a group could be counter-productive in nurturing reading skills if teachers/pupils are led to believe this is all they have to do to raise standards.

## Conclusions

I aimed to investigate the discourses which inform the presentation of Reciprocal Teaching; here I showed that discourses connected with collaborative learning were subtly intertwined with discourses of 'autonomous literacy'. This can cause problems for teachers wanting to use Reciprocal Teaching: there is the constant temptation to present Reciprocal Teaching as the panacea for reading in the classroom rather than situating it within a wider reading context. In this sense, there is

a problem with the validity of Reciprocal Teaching as a strategy: it decontextualizes the reading experience and distracts the teacher from developing their own 'reading repertoires' (Cremin et al 2009). This is not to detract from its genuine worth, rather it is to emphasize that Reciprocal Teaching could be enriched by situating it as a way of nurturing reading within multiple teaching strategies, and various reading communities.

The responses from my students showed they were possibly more sharply aware of the merits of Reciprocal Teaching than I was in that they saw its value in nurturing learning as 'individual sense making' (Watkins 2010) and in the way it could enable them to construct meaning in a social way (Yandell 2013).

One of the reasons why Reciprocal Teaching was successful with the groups was because I adapted the strategy and sought to implement its spirit rather than rigidly sticking to the Reciprocal Teaching cycle in every lesson, which I have would be boring and repetitive for the students. In this sense, my research endorses what Drummond and Marshall found when exploring the impact of Assessment for Learning in various English classrooms (2006): evidence-based strategies like Reciprocal Teaching and AfL are most successful when reflected upon deeply and utilised in an open-minded, flexible way.

There are no 'prime reasons for success' in reading, but a complex myriad of factors, and teachers -- if they are to be successful -- need to be cognizant of this. As Gaskins points out:

It appears that children who are delayed in reading require more than reading instruction. They need quality programmes across the curriculum characterized by staff development, congruence with regular programmes, and ample time in which to learn and apply what has been taught. Such programs are grounded in teachers' understanding of instructional theory and research. These programmes need to be matched according to where the students are, proceed according to the competencies they develop and teach explicitly what they do not figure out on their own. Such instruction would be ideal for all students, but it appears to be essential for delayed readers. (Gaskins 1998, 545)

Although writing two decades ago, Gaskins' central argument is more pertinent than ever: teachers need to be aware that students who are struggling with their reading and in other ways too cannot be 'cured' by 'autonomous literacy strategies' like Reciprocal Teaching. As we have seen by examining my own teaching, it is important for educational writers and teachers to understand that learning is a complex process in which motivation plays a central role. Crucially, in the original article which propelled Reciprocal Teaching onto the global educational stage, it is clear, as I have shown, that it is the encouragement of a teacher who models how to read and comprehend in a positive, responsive and spontaneous fashion which is vital in helping struggling readers. Again, this is lost in successive explanations of the strategy, and, as a result, teachers feel compelled to follow a set of mechanistic processes, and believe that if things go wrong, then it is their fault for not implementing the strategy correctly.

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