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"Teaching then can be likened to a conversation in which you listen to the speaker carefully before you reply" (Clay, 1985, p.6).

What makes an exemplary teacher of literacy so effective? Literacy instruction is complex; many decisions are made instantaneously. However, the best teachers are both responsive and intentional (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001). In order to make expert decisions teachers need to have knowledge of content, pedagogy, and curriculum (Schulman, 1986). It is the application of all three of these types of knowledge that leads a teacher to "on-the-spot" decision-making during instructional conversations. The focus of this article is the decisions the teacher makes in *verbally* scaffolding young readers; that is, the responsive manner in which teachers verbally interact with students in order to increase learning.

According to Vygotsky (1978) learning is a social act; knowledge is constructed through social interactions, especially with a more knowledgeable person. Language is one tool used to mediate knowledge construction (Wertsch, 1985). The teacher, as a more knowledgeable other, uses spoken interactions as one means to guide and extend student learning (Mercer, 1995). However, the teacher is not alone in this endeavor; it is not enough to merely provide information; the student learns by engaging in conversation. It is through such conversation that guided problem solving occurs, which leads students to think more critically and reflectively (Duke & Pearson, 2002; Hogan & Pressley, 1997). Classroom discourse does affect student thinking and ultimately achievement (Cazden, 1988). Therefore, it is important for teachers to think about possible ways to talk to students and to consider the types of verbal scaffolds one might put into place for learners.

## Verbal Scaffolds

Roehler and Cantlon (1997) conducted a study in which they analyzed the instructional discourse between the teacher and students during guided reading and writing. The verbal scaffolds identified in the study were categorized and coded. The following offers a brief description of verbal scaffolds, based on Roehler and Cantlon's (1997) definitions.

*Direct explanation.* Verbal scaffolds that explicitly describe concepts and/or the implementation of strategies are called direct explanations. This type of scaffold is often used by the teacher to introduce a new strategy. Re-explanations of previously taught strategies or concepts can be categorized this way as well. Direct explanations may be used frequently with struggling readers who require more direct teaching in order to apply a strategy.

*Explicit modeling.* Similar to direct explanations, explicit modeling may be used to introduce or reinforce a strategy application. However, this type of verbal assistance includes overt demonstration about how to "work through" a strategy through verbal example. Think-

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alouds and talk-alouds allow the students to have a deeper understanding of a strategy by providing a window into the teacher's thought process.

*Invitations to participate.* A third type of scaffolding through talk provides students the opportunity to become involved in the conversation or elaborate on a response. The teacher encourages student conversation by eliciting students' reasoning or encouraging elaboration on a response. For example, the teacher may ask a student to clarify his or her thinking or provide evidence from the text to support an answer. Invitations to participate are often used to focus the conversation during instruction or to ensure that all students are engaged in the conversation.

*Clarification.* Teachers may use guided discussion and/or questioning when students demonstrate a misunderstanding of information or strategy application. Just as the name describes, the teacher clarifies student understanding with this type of verbal scaffold.

*Verification.* Teachers may use affirmation to confirm the relevance of a correct student response; this can often lead to further discussion. This type of scaffolding is known as verification. This type of assistance may be used to praise a correct response, encourage strategy application, or to revisit a concept for struggling readers.

*Telling.* Telling is the final category used to describe verbal assistance in this paper. At times the teacher may need to provide information to the student in order for the lesson or reading to continue. However, when the teacher provides the needed response, student opportunities for problem-solving are diminished; therefore it should be used judiciously.

## Classroom Application

Teachers can adjust the amount and types of verbal scaffolds that they provide to meet the needs of individuals in the classroom. Such interactions must be responsive in nature; that is, the teacher must make immediate decisions about what to say in order to coach the learner through the act of reading. By becoming familiar with the types of verbal interactions that are helpful to students (i.e., the verbal

scaffolds listed above) teachers can become intentional in their instructional conversations.

## Methodology

The previously described verbal scaffolds were applied by the authors of this article to analyze the discourse of one exemplary second-grade teacher during small group reading instruction (Ankrum, 2006). The participant was selected from a group of teachers nominated as exemplary literacy teachers by the school district's administrators and reading specialist. This was part of a larger study that addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the nature of small group differentiated reading instruction in an exemplary second-grade teacher's classroom?

2. What decisions does the teacher make before, during, and after the small group lesson? What data does the teacher use to differentiate instruction?

3. What lesson components are constant across the groups? What components are changed to suit the needs of the group?

4. How is time used and managed in differentiated reading instruction?

The information in this article was gleaned from our attempt to answer the third research question.

*Data collection.* Literacy instruction was observed for 5 consecutive days in the final quarter of the school year. Extensive field notes were collected by two researchers, and compared for reliability. Audiotaped conversations that occurred during small group instruction were transcribed and analyzed in order to obtain a description of exemplary small group reading instruction. There were two stages of analysis for the observation data. In the first examination of the transcripts, the researchers looked for types of differentiation among the group lessons (e.g., materials, frequency of meetings, etc.) The type of teacher talk was one area of differentiation that emerged. This was the focus of the second stage of analysis; the previously described codes (Roehler & Cantlon, 1997) were applied to each verbal scaffold in the lesson transcripts.

Following the observation period an interview was conducted with the teacher to clarify questions that emerged from the observation data, as well as

to further understand the nature of her teaching throughout the course of the school year. The questions were semi-structured and open-ended. The following example was taken from the transcript of the post-observation interview:

> Researcher: During Shared Reading, on the first day, you introduced *looking for the main idea*, and then you tied it into Guided Reading, with one group...and then with some groups you didn't tie that into Guided Reading. So I was wondering why you would or would not?
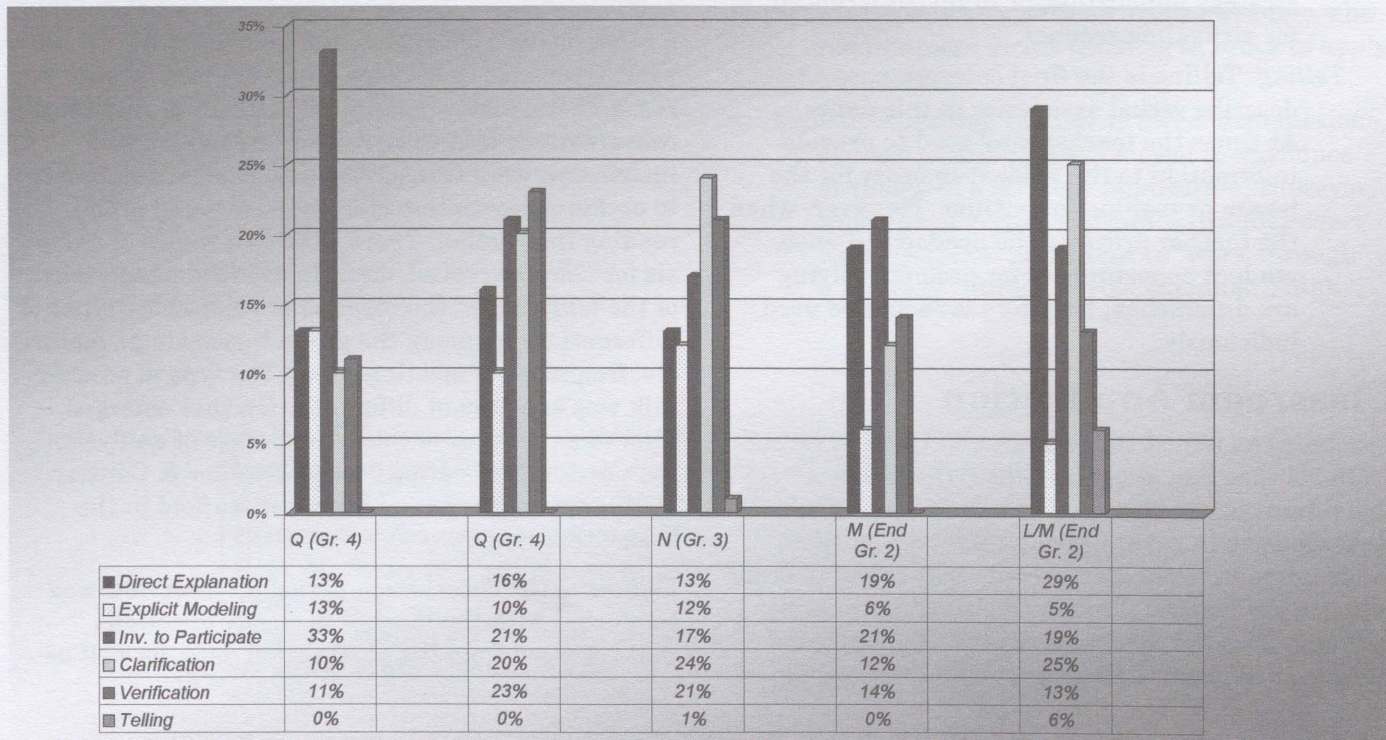
> Ms. Smith: The group that I did that with has really accomplished every other second-grade objective needed. And pulling out the main idea is really an important skill for second grade, but it's actually not listed in our curriculum. So what I was doing was taking them into third-grade curriculum. I think they should all be introduced to all of [the big skills], so I did that in the Shared Reading book, but these kids were able to do it more on their own. Whereas the other kids we just keep bringing it up in the Shared Reading, and they can get it that way.

*Data analysis*. The findings and examples that follow were taken from the small group transcripts from this study.

Direct explanations were used most frequently with the lowest readers in the observed class, and least frequently with the highest readers. Explicit modeling was seldom used with the two lowest groups, perhaps because their lessons were focused on reviewing concepts previously modeled in class. The teacher used invitations to participate frequently with each group. There was a difference in the number of invitations to participate issued in the top two groups, both performing at the fourth-grade reading level. However, since the group members were reading different books, different conversations ensued. The teacher's use of verification was stable across all groups. Telling was used most often with the lowest group, but still rarely applied at all. Figure 1 illustrates the manner in which the teacher differentiated the conversations to fit the needs of the learners in each group.

*Direct explanation: An example*. The following example was taken from the discourse used by Ms. Smith (a pseudonym) to help her lowest reading group decode unknown words with the c-h combination in them. Ms. Smith used direct explanation to

**Figure 1. Different types of verbal scaffolding**



| | Q (Gr. 4) | Q (Gr. 4) | N (Gr. 3) | M (End Gr. 2) | L/M (End Gr. 2) |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| ■ Direct Explanation | 13% | 16% | 13% | 19% | 29% |
| □ Explicit Modeling | 13% | 10% | 12% | 6% | 5% |
| ■ Inv. to Participate | 33% | 21% | 17% | 21% | 19% |
| □ Clarification | 10% | 20% | 24% | 12% | 25% |
| ■ Verification | 11% | 23% | 21% | 14% | 13% |
| ▨ Telling | 0% | 0% | 1% | 0% | 6% |

explicitly teach a strategy; in this case, when decoding alone did not work Ms. Smith explained that the reader must also try to make the story make sense.

> S: (Reading from text.) He also loved match-, mat-, match-
>
> T: So we know and we've talked about a lot of different words that have sounds in it that don't match how the letters look. And you've got to keep track of that. And 'machine' is just one of those words. When you see the 'ch' and you start out with 'match' and it doesn't make sense, you have to think, what else can I do to change that word? What else can I do to make it make sense? In (student's name) case, which is page 4: 'He also loved machines.' And then it said "Once he bought a movie camera." So you need to think, what is a movie camera?

This excerpt illustrated the way that Ms. Smith helped the students apply multiple strategies to decode new words. As indicated in Figure 1 direct explanation was the predominate type of verbal assistance coded in the observed lessons of the lowest reading group.

*Explicit modeling: An example.* Making personal connections was the comprehension strategy focus with the average reading group in Ms. Smith's class. The teacher chose to relate a character from the novel to one of her students to demonstrate the use of this strategy. The following excerpt highlights Ms. Smith's use of modeling:

> T: Sometimes when you're really sad…don't people…sometimes people don't know how to act and sometimes when they're really sad…they act mean or they act angry just because they don't know what to do.
>
> S: And they don't listen to each other. The mom may say something else, then take it back, like how they got married…
>
> T: Do you know what I remember (Student's name)? I remember when your grandpa passed away this year, and you were really sad when you came to school. But then I remember something happened, and you were angry with somebody, but it really wasn't that you were angry with somebody, it was really just that you were

sad and they kind of got you on a bad day.

> S: I remember that, but I don't know what it was about.
>
> T: I don't remember what it was about either, but I just remember saying "'I bet you're really not mad." And we talked about how it was kind of like you're sad, and you don't know how to deal with those feelings. That's hard, and she's [the book's main character] in fourth grade, and that would be really sad. And I know when we started the book, we talked about what it would be like, because nobody here has parents that are divorced. Yet it was important to make a personal connection with the character.

The self-to-text connection modeled by Ms. Smith in this lesson was previously taught to the whole class on several occasions. Ms. Smith reiterated this comprehension strategy when she discussed how the main character's struggles were similar to one of the student's problems. This reinforcement was necessary for this group so they could apply the strategy to their own reading. This type of scaffolding was observed less frequently in the lower ranked groups than in the higher groups.

*Invitations to participate: An example.* Ms. Smith involved students in the book discussions in a variety of ways. At times, she posed a question to initiate the discussion and assess student knowledge. The following example taken from the lowest reading group illustrates this:

> T: So just by looking at this and by the cover, what genre are we guessing?
>
> S: Non-fiction?
>
> T: It's going be non-fiction, right. How do you know? What about the cover tells you that?

Ms. Smith monitored the students' understanding of genre through the use of invitations to participate. Ms. Smith was then able to be more intentional and responsive as she introduced the next book to the group; she used her previous conversation to inform her text selection. Ms. Smith also issued invitations to participate when she required her students to provide evidence from the text to support a response. In the post-observation interview she explained that this was a requirement in the school's third-grade writing curriculum, so she attempted to prepare her

students by expecting them to do this in small group conversations.

*Clarification: An example.* Ms. Smith used guided questioning with members of the lowest ranked group to monitor the comprehension and encourage the students to engage with the text at a higher level. The following excerpt of classroom discourse provides an example of clarification:

> T: What made her [the main character] change?
>
> S: Because she thought about it, and she wanted to write about a boy, a sad boy, and a wild horse…
>
> T: She gets her horse story going, doesn't she?
>
> S: Yeah
>
> T: Does her aunt just let her run and write down her story?
>
> Students (in unison): No.
>
> S: You have to think a lot about it.
>
> T: Yeah, her aunt…
>
> S: It takes time…
>
> S: It is really hard to make up a story.
>
> T: Why doesn't her aunt let her get her ideas down on paper though?
>
> S: Because you have to do all the work first.
>
> T: Why? Why does her aunt make her wait?
>
> S: You have to think, about what you are going to write about.
>
> S: Because you could just write some-thing…whoopee do dah something…
>
> T: It's kind of like what [I] tell you in Writing Workshop, isn't it? You have to sketch your ideas, brainstorm your ideas, get them down, get them down before you jump into writing that story. You have to do that, don't you? And I like how her aunt keeps her busy. That was a great and very important part, (student name), that you pointed out.

As indicated in Figure 1, Ms. Smith frequently used clarification during the observed small group lessons. Ms. Smith facilitated a conversation through guided questioning that provided the students with the opportunity to grapple with and make meaning of the text.

*Verification: An example.* Ms. Smith asked the students in Group 1 to provide the main idea for a chapter they had read in the new text. Verification was used several times in this excerpt from that lesson:

> S: You need a lot of equipment to enter a dog sled race.
>
> T: I like how you put that right into one sentence. You took that [information]-there's a lot of different equipment. Good job.
>
> S: The main idea is about finding gold in 1898. The main idea is about taking sup-plies to Nome.
>
> T: Ok. So you realized you had two differ-ent main ideas going in your chapter and you focused in on both of them. Good.

Ms. Smith used verification with multiple groups to restate and validate student responses. Verification was used both to praise correct responses and to re-teach concepts for others in the group. This type of teacher talk was coded most frequently in one of the highest ranked groups, as well as in the average ranked group in Ms. Smith's classroom

*Telling: An example.* There are times when a reader simply stalls at an unknown word or cannot arrive at an answer to a question. The teacher may respond by providing the needed word or correct response to the question. Ms. Smith infrequently resorted to telling; instead she employed the other types of scaffolding more frequently with each group. The following is one of the rare examples of telling used by Ms. Smith:

> S: Luckily, the door *was* quite…qu- qu-i.. quite?
>
> T: quiet. The door was quiet
>
> S: Oh! She snuck in…The door was quiet. No one saw Samantha…

## Findings

*Areas of differentiation.* Ms. Smith varied her small groups in a number of ways (e.g., materials, fre-quency of meetings, etc.). One of the most interesting forms of differentiation that emerged from the data was the way in which she talked with her students.

The nature of her verbal interactions changed to scaffold the learners as they worked through texts.

*Varied conversation.* The nature of Ms. Smith's verbal scaffolding varied across her small groups. The types and amounts of scaffolding were not necessarily related to level of text used for instructional purposes. Instead, Ms. Smith differentiated the amount of verbal support she provided for students in response to their conversations. This responsive teaching was a hallmark of Ms. Smith's instruction.

*Intentionally responsive teaching.* In the post-observation interview Ms. Smith explained that she did not *consciously* plan to talk differently to each group; however, she did intend to engage in conversations and *respond to students' needs* as they occurred. Because the students had different needs, her conversations were different. Ms. Smith provided assistance to allow students to problem-solve at the point of confusion or to deepen their thinking. As a result, two groups reading books at the same instructional reading level participated in two entirely different lessons. For example, both Group 3 and Group 4 engaged in lessons using chapter books at the second-grade level. However, the nature of the teacher's instructional talk was different in these groups. It was also interesting to note that the two highest rank groups were placed in different level texts for the observed instruction; this may explain the different amounts and types of scaffolding observed.

## Conclusion

Research tells us that exemplary literacy teachers do coach their students; that is, they provide verbal scaffolding to foster literacy development (Taylor, Pearson, Peterson, & Rodriguez, 2003). Not all teachers are exemplary, but all should strive to become so. A starting point for teachers is to become aware of the importance of their verbal interactions with students, and to understand the impact it has on literacy learning. The purpose of this article was to provide one example of how an exemplary teacher verbally scaffolded her students. By looking at quality teacher talk, others can learn to intentionally incorporate this into their instruction.

According to Johnston (2004) teaching, for the most part, is an automatic process. Although *teaching* often occurs on the spot, teachers must have forethought about and knowledge of instructional conversations in their repertoire and intentionally implement this talk in classroom practice. Still, "thinking through what we are going to say next *as we interact* with children would mean that we were not giving them our full attention and not being genuine" (Johnston, 2004, p. 7). Verbal scaffolds that are tailored to each conversation can increase student achievement (Maloch, 2002). However, such "tailored" discussions cannot be scripted or overly planned; instead they need to be responsive to the student, the text, and the on-going dialogue. In order to teach in this way, it is important for teachers to deeply understand the reading process, know their students, and know how best to respond to their thinking.

Insight may be gained by tape recording a lesson and analyzing one's own discourse with students. It could be interesting for teachers to analyze the manner in which they scaffold their students through conversation, paying close attention to whether they are differentiating the scaffolding based on learner needs. If the scaffolding is differentiated, teachers should reflect on why. For example, do I frequently provide my struggling readers with telling answers? If so, the students may not have the necessary opportunities for independent problem solving; I need to scaffold differently. By understanding the nature of verbal scaffolds (i.e. pedagogical knowledge) teachers can strengthen future instructional conversations, and ultimately increase student achievement.

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