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When Children Have Trouble Reading and Writing: Using Cut-Up Sentences as an Instructional Method

ARTICLE BY **SONDRA KEARNEY AND JUDITH M. THOMPSON**

What does one do when faced with the frustration of knowing that the school year is half over and that your best efforts as a teacher are ineffective? In many cases you share your frustration with a friend. As fellow graduate students, we frequently discussed the problems of Sandy's first-grade Chapter I students last year. Observations of the first-grade Chapter I students in Sandy's program in an urban elementary school revealed the following scenario at the beginning of January: After five daily choral readings of "The Three Little Kittens," the students were unable to identify the rhyming words. When asked to find the letter *m*, students framed the words *mittens* and *mother*, suggesting that they were confused about the meanings of the two terms. When asked to find the words *the* and *to*, the students experienced difficulty. They were perplexed when asked to find the letters *l*, *k*, *b*, *w*, and *s* at the beginning of words. In addition, the children were withdrawn and inattentive during the lesson.

Last spring, we had the opportunity to collaborate on a study that examined the effects of modifying an existing classroom activity, which was being used with these students, in the hopes of improving word and letter recognition skills, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and motivation. In discussing the eight first-grade Chapter I students, we reviewed the instructional activities that were being used with these students: choral reading of nursery rhymes, using predictable books, reader's theater, and taking the "whole to part and part to whole" approach for letter/sound recog-

nition. We discussed the students' lack of alphabet knowledge, lack of phonemic awareness, and poor reading comprehension. These needs, coupled with limited sight vocabularies, were creating frustration and resistance among the students. We were concerned about their attitudes. They appeared to be losing self-confidence. We felt they were in danger of developing learned helplessness, a pattern of negative thinking in which children view their failure as evidence of lack of ability, rather than lack of effort (Brown, Palincsar & Purcell, 1985, p. 124). Learned helplessness can lead to a lack of persistence and lack of personal responsibility for learning (Rosenholtz & Simpson, 1989). We realized that something had to be changed to meet the needs of these diverse, at-risk learners.

We discussed the Reading Recovery program and wondered if adapting part of its five-step lesson plan would benefit these first-graders. Reading Recovery is an interactive, early intervention program, developed by Marie Clay in New Zealand (Clay, 1985; DeFord, Lyons & Pinnell, 1991). Clay believes that early identification of students who have trouble learning to read is important. She advocates intensive, individual, short-term tutoring to accelerate progress. The program is based on several dimensions: (1) individual instruction takes into account where the child is, and instruction is designed to fit the child, not the curriculum, (2) daily instruction enhances the effectiveness of intervention, (3) the program stresses careful teacher observation of student perfor-

mance, and (4) students are taught specific strategies, such as self-monitoring, predicting, and integrating various cue systems (Clay, 1985).

We realized that Clay did not intend for the components of the Reading Recovery program to be used in isolation. However, we were intrigued with her notion of cut-up stories. We focused on cut-up stories because, as Clay notes, "Cut-up stories provide the child with practice for: (1) assembling sentences, (2) one-to-one correspondence of words spoken and words written, (3) directional behaviors, (4) checking behaviors, (5) breaking oral language into segments, and (6) word study ..." (Clay, 1985, p. 67). In addition, we felt that incorporating the cut-up stories procedure would allow us to provide repetition in a game-like context, teach various reading strategies, and individualize instruction.

It was apparent that the eight first-graders were experiencing failure with reading, and that we needed to do something to prevent this failure from escalating. We did not want the students' experiences to become patterns of nonsuccess. We believe that all children can learn. Sandy was not satisfied with her current instructional strategies. We needed to find an alternative methodology. Marie Clay's cut-up stories procedure presented a means for the students to gain insight into the conventions of written language. It could be easily adapted in conjunction with the students' Special Word Book activity.

Modifying the Special Word Book Activity

Before beginning the study, we divided the eight first-grade students into two groups of four students. To facilitate scheduling for the two first-grade teachers, each group was comprised of students from only one classroom. As a result, the students in each group varied as to the severity of their reading prob-

lems. Each group met in the Chapter I room for 45 minutes, four days a week.

The cut-up stories procedure was implemented in conjunction with the students' Special Word Book activity, a daily activity in which each student suggested a word he/she wanted to write about. The word was written on a 3x5" card for the student to copy, and the student was asked to think about what he/she would like to write. When all four students had chosen their words, each child discussed his/her word with Sandy to activate prior knowledge, independently wrote a sentence that included the word (using invented spelling), and illustrated the sentence. This activity was done in a teacher-made spiral bound book of blank pages, which was reserved for this activity.

To this familiar daily lesson, we added a *cut-up sentence* component. Once a student had completed a Special Word Book page, the student met with Sandy and read the sentence orally. Sandy then wrote the sentence, using conventional spelling, on a long strip of oak tag, using a different colored marker each day. As she wrote, she discussed the sentence with the student, helping to identify syntactic and phonetic cues. Sandy and the student next read the sentence together. Then the student read the sentence aloud, as Sandy cut the strip into separate words. The word pieces were immediately scrambled on the table, and the student reassembled the sentence, with assistance from Sandy when needed. This assistance was in the form of directing the student's attention to phonetic and syntactic clues.

Each sentence piece was stamped with the date and the pieces were put in a dated envelope, which was kept by Sandy. Dating the pieces and using many different colored markers enabled the students to return the sentence pieces to their proper envelopes after activities

using more than one cut-up sentence at a time.

The Importance of Teacher Modeling

Throughout the study, teacher modeling of skills and strategies, using material familiar to all four students in the group, was a daily part of the instructional activity. For the first four weeks of the study, the modified Special Word Book activity was preceded by teacher modeling of sentence reassembly, using cut-up sentences from familiar nursery rhymes and from stories read by the group in the Chapter I class. Using the cut-up sentence pieces, Sandy presented mini-lessons in which she discussed and modeled word recognition skills and comprehension self-monitoring. For example, Sandy demonstrated the strategy of continually asking "Does this make sense?" to check the correctness of a reassembled sentence.

After one week, we began to supplement the basic cut-up sentences procedure with activities using the sentence pieces. These activities were devised as opportunities to practice skills and strategies and to strengthen the reading-writing connection. Teacher-modeling was a crucial element in each of these activities, as well.

Activities Using Cut-Up Sentences

The Partner Game provided the students with an opportunity to practice skills and strategies while interacting with a peer. Working in pairs, the students shared their sentences, with each child trying to assemble one of the partner's cut-up sentences. During this activity, the student who had composed the sentence was expected to coach his/her partner by suggesting semantic, syntactic, and/or phonetic clues to help the partner. Extensive modeling preceded this activity. Sandy worked with each group daily as she *thought aloud* during

her own attempts to reconstruct one of the students' cut-up sentences, calling the students' attention to ways that the skills and strategies taught in the mini-lessons could be used to assemble unfamiliar sentences.

This was the most difficult part of the study, as the students' progress in internalizing the skills and strategies that Sandy modeled each day was exceedingly slow. They struggled as they tried to help their partners assemble the sentences, requiring almost constant assistance from Sandy. Rather than reduce teacher frustration, we had increased it! It was important not to give up at this point. Realizing that these students needed extensive exposure to the modeling and repeated practice of the skills and strategies, we continued to include the think-aloud and subsequent partner practice daily. Progress was slow. It was not until the sixth week of the study that we began to feel that the effort involved in playing The Partner Game was beneficial.

The Mixing Game was designed to provide more practice with assembling cut-up sentences and to have the students begin to use the word pieces to write their own new sentences. Once the students were comfortable with assembling one cut-up sentence, we extended the activity by asking the students to combine words from two of their sentence envelopes to create a single, meaningful sentence. We selected which two envelopes a student would use, so that each sentence was written with a different colored marker. This enabled the student to distinguish between words belonging to each sentence. This was critical because while we did not require that all the words from both envelopes be used, the newly created sentence had to be a mixture of words from both sentences. Initially, there was a tendency for the students to simply reassemble one of their original sentences. By

stressing that the new sentence had to contain two colors, we provided an opportunity for the students to realize that their words could be used to express many ideas. The students also had an opportunity to read their words in different sentences, facilitating word recognition.

Again, modeling was critical to the success of this activity. Sandy used two cut-up sentences, each one from a different nursery rhyme and modeled by thinking aloud as she created a new sentence. The students especially enjoyed this part of the activity, for example, laughing at the comical sentences that could be made by mixing pieces of a line from "Jack and Jill" with pieces of a line from "Mary Had a Little Lamb." On their own, they found this to be a difficult activity. As the students worked on mixing two of their cut-up sentences, we noticed a great deal of spontaneous peer collaboration as they helped each other to create new sentences. As the study progressed, several students asked for more than two envelopes at a time, and this became a popular activity.

The Story Game built on the use of the word pieces to express new ideas. We asked the student to write longer stories, based on one of their cut-up sentences. The stories could be dictated to Sandy, who typed them into the computer, or the student could write the story independently, using invented spelling. Each student's collection of sentence envelopes became a source of story ideas, as the student was allowed to self-select one of the envelopes to serve as a story starter. The student could use the full sentence or select a single word for the beginning ideas for a story. Figure 1 shows a Special Word Book page that became a cut-up sentence based on the word *flower* and the story that the student created when she selected that envelope as a story starter ten weeks later.

Sandy modeled this activity as well. Group stories were written by Sandy and the students using the cut-up sentences from nursery rhymes. As the group composed the stories, Sandy wrote them on chart paper, and the collection of stories was displayed on an easel.

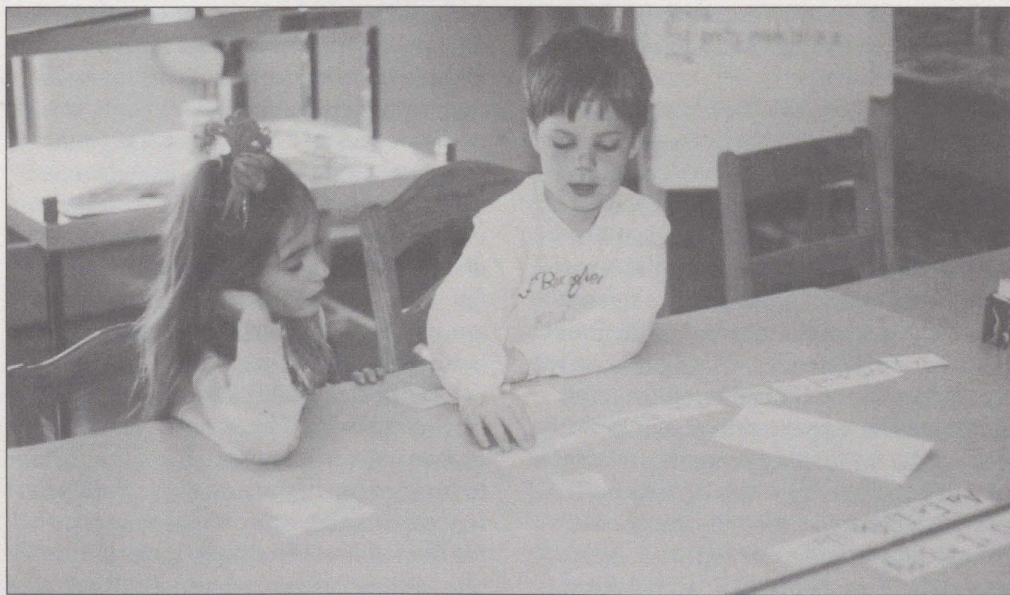


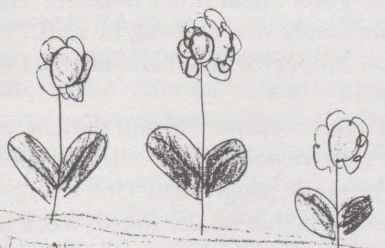
Figure 1

flower

FEB. 1, 1993

flower

APR. 14, 1993



A flower can grow

Flowers are pretty
 BECAUSE they have
 pretty colors.
 My favrit colors
 of flowers are red and
 pink. They grow up
 and they look pretty.



Figure 2

FEB. 19, 1993

I go to my house
 and I go to school
 and I races at the races track
 and I read a book
 and the Nam fo my School
 is Maple Wood School
 and I like my dad
 and I like my mom
 and I have a ant Beth.
 and I lov my flame.

What Did We Learn?

All eight students in the study demonstrated growth in various areas of literacy development. By focusing on two of the students, "Sara" and "Ed," and analyzing data collected during the study, we were able to document growth in decoding, spelling, vocabulary, use of comprehension strategies, writing, and motivation.

Growth in Decoding

The cut-up sentences, using the students' own language, provided the children with a reason to learn the letter/sound relationships. Rewriting their language conventionally on sentence strips provided an instructional opportunity for segmenting the sounds in words. At the beginning of the study, Sara and Ed were still confusing some letters of the alphabet, not attending to initial and final consonants, and not attempting to sound out words in context. Sara would not attempt to sound out words, insisting, "I don't know that word neither." After three weeks, she started to sound out words: "s-s-ss" for *some* and "p-p-p en" for *pencil*. By the seventh week she was experimenting with sounds in her writing. She wrote "fon" for *saxophone*, "fl" for *flute*, and "cwit" for *quit*. The cut-up sentences were a means of helping Ed and Sara to understand, use, and practice the graphophonemic cue system within the context of the children's own words and sentences, not in isolation.

Growth in Spelling

Spelling growth was an unexpected result of using cut-up sentences. In writing their sentences, the students used invented spelling, relying on their alphabetic knowledge. After each student read his or her own sentence from the Special Word Book, Sandy would put the book aside, as she wrote the sentence on a strip. While she was writing, she would

ask the student to help her with the sounds, as she modeled and thought aloud. When Sandy rewrote Ed and Sara's sentences with conventional spelling, immediately after they wrote and read their own, the students carefully observed Sandy's spelling. Often Sara and Ed looked puzzled and compared the spellings in their books with Sandy's strips. Ed was listening and observing when Sandy wrote "live," because he said, "I don't hear that *e* in there." Also, while Sandy wrote *small*, he said, "You wrote two *ls* for *small* and also *a*. I wrote *s-m-o-l*."

To our surprise, Ed and Sara became more interested in conventional spelling as the study progressed. One telling example is that by the fourth week of the study, Ed and Sara were observed covertly changing the invented spellings in their Special Word Book to newly-learned conventional spellings. At the same time, Ed and Sara's classroom teacher commented on the improvement in their spelling and on their willingness to try to spell new words.

Vocabulary Development

Vocabulary development is important for the emergent reader. Sandy's at-risk students lacked even an elementary vocabulary, and adding new words and their meanings to the students' knowledge base was critical. Using Sara and Ed's speaking vocabulary in the cut-up sentences provided a source of words for learning in a meaningful context. The cut-up sentences allowed for repeated reading. Through repeated reading of their own sentences and playing the Partner Game, the Mixing Game, and the Story Game, Ed and Sara added both their own and their partners' words to their vocabularies. With repeated exposure and multiple opportunities to read these words silently and orally, the words became a permanent part of their developing vocabularies.

The students also became interested in different types of words during the course of the study. Ed, for example, was fascinated with compound words and pointed them out in the stories the group read, as well as in his own writing. Ed's own compound words included *sometimes*, *skateboards*, and *rainbow*. When playing the Partner Game, he excitedly pointed out that his partner's sentence "My Aunt Beth plays baseball" contained a compound word. During group work, Ed always wanted to frame compound words on the story charts.

Sara, on the other hand, was intrigued with contractions. In the fourth week of the study, she used a contraction for the first time in the sentence "I don't have any boys in my family." She asked many questions about contractions and was soon using *don't* and *can't* regularly in her sentences. Her fascination extended to identifying these words in the writing of other students in the group. Sara even searched through literature books and wrote a list of the contractions she found in them. In both cases, Sara and Ed were exploring the world of words.

Growth in Monitoring Comprehension

Beginning and poor readers are less likely to monitor their comprehension than more skilled readers. Throughout the study, Sandy modeled this strategy repeatedly, stressing the need to ask, "Does this make sense?" when reading the cut-up sentences. In the beginning of the study, Ed and Sara did not consider meaning as they put their sentences together. Their initial strategy was to try to memorize the sentences before they were cut apart. If they were unable to remember the sentence, they were unable to reassemble it.

After three weeks, they both relied less on memorization and started to look for word cards with capital letters and words followed by a period to begin and

end the sentences. In order to complete the sentence after identifying the first and last words, they started to look for context clues and to consider the sentence meaning. By the end of the study both Ed and Sara were asking themselves "Does this make sense?" Sometimes they verbalized this strategy. While trying to arrange one of his sentences, Ed read the sentence and then changed the order of his word cards, saying, "Oh, no — this goes here and that goes there. It needs to make sense." Sara initially verbalized her comprehension monitoring by saying, "Doesn't sound right" whenever she read an incorrectly assembled sentence. In an interview at the end of the study, Sara noted that "reading has to make sense." Ed and Sara were beginning to self-monitor and self-correct.

Growth in Writing

The cut-up sentences provided a starting point for the students to write stories. By arranging their own words into new sentences and then into stories and sharing these with others, the students were beginning to enjoy writing and to experience success. In addition, their attitudes toward the process of writing changed.

Ed was not a willing writer. Before we began the study, he spent a great deal of time on his illustrations but refused to write in his Special Word Book unless Sandy was sitting next to him. By the end of the study, Ed's attitude had changed. He even willingly played the Story Game. We were surprised when Ed suddenly expressed a preference for writing his own story, in contrast to his previous preference for dictating his thoughts and having Sandy type them into the computer. When Sandy asked why he wanted to write his story by hand, Ed responded, "I like to write my own stories. It's fun and because I need to learn." At the same

time, Ed's classroom teacher commented on Ed's progress in his writing, in terms of willingness, content, spelling, and centering around a theme.

Sara also showed growth in writing. After four weeks, the sentences that she wrote in her Special Word Book increased in length and complexity. She used descriptive words, such as *old*, *two* and *black*, as well as the conjunction *and* and the contraction *don't*. The first story Sara wrote during the study was one long run-on sentence with a period at the end (see Figure 2). The story in Figure 1 (dated April 14) illustrates the progress she made during the study.

Attitude and Self-Confidence

Using cut-up sentences with Sandy's at-risk first graders resulted in a noticeable increase in both motivation and self-confidence as readers and writers. At the beginning of the study, Ed usually began lessons with the comment, "I can't do this." Near the end of the study, Sandy heard him say, "I'll get this yet. I like doing this," after several attempts at trying to make a new sentence when playing the Mixing Game.

Halfway through the study, Sara expressed her feelings about working with the cut-up sentences, saying "This is fun. It helps me learn better. It helps me learn how to spell words and know lots of new words. Can I make another sentence?" Cut-up sentences provided a novel, non-threatening language experi-

ence which increased interest and motivation.

Using cut-up sentences also resulted in dramatic changes in the way the students viewed their classroom work. Near the end of the study, Ed and Sara's classroom teacher asked Sandy, "What are you doing with Ed and Sara? Their confidence has grown." Ed's response to reading and writing changed. His newfound willingness to read orally and to share his work in both the regular and Chapter I classes was amazing. He took pride in his written work, as well. After writing a story, he asked Sandy, "Are you going to hang this up? I want it up." Sara also showed a new eagerness to read her stories to her classmates as evidenced by her request, "May I have a copy of my story? I want to practice it. May I read my story to the class?"

Conclusion

Although we focused on Ed and Sara in this article, all eight of the first-graders gained in each area of literacy development that we have discussed. Their gains varied, but results were positive in every case. We used the cut-up sentence procedure with reluctant remedial readers and writers in a Chapter I classroom. However, we believe the methodology has potential for regular classroom instruction. Using cut-up sentences, children can explore language during game-like activities, allowing students to be active in a risk-free environment.

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