Professional Teacher: Debra Goodman

Teachers Ask About Melissa, a Middle-Grade Reader Who Needs Lots of Teacher Support: Constructing Text

It is also possible that we’re giving Melissa too little credit. As she integrates the text within her own schema, we begin to see real evidence of her reconstruction across the story. In working with the phrase, ‘Rose always forgot,’ Melissa abandons the author’s dialect for her own dialect forti. Here Melissa’s involvement in the story prompts her to integrate the author’s language with her own language. She continues this present-tense construction, reading ‘Rose always forgets and says, “Hello.”’ Another striking example is Melissa’s use of the common pronunciation ‘spotted’ in her second encounter with the word ‘supposed,’ after substituting a nonword ‘Esplowed.’ The first time she read ‘supposed.’ When did she make this correction? Did she realize the meaning of the word ‘supposed’ only upon seeing it for the second time? Or might she have misread the sentence at some point prior to reading the same pattern agin? On the first page, where Melissa reads ‘mother’s magic . . . meant. . .’ the words ‘monsters and mana-without-misices’ consistently through the rest of the story.

In two phases, Melissa’s misices would appear to disrupt meaning, grow loudly for grow loudly, and the poor film for a polite voice. Should we assume that Melissa has missed the contrast between Rose and other monsters because of these misices? Or is it possible that Melissa is constructing meaning in her mind that goes beyond her surface-level reading? We know Melissa is paying attention to the picture, which also provides cues supporting the story meaning. We can only observe Melissa’s strengths through the oral text that we can hear. We can ask her later what she can tell us of her understandings, but misice analysis is only a window into her true understanding of the story.

Monsters Manners

- Spotted
- Dappled
- Monsters are supposed
- To fight with their friends
- Break each other’s toys.
- Rose
- Rose played nicely with everyone.
- This made her mother very unhappy.
- Rose
- Rose always forgot
- to answer the phone.
- Her father found this very upsetting.

We can tell Melissa is involved in the story when she laughs in response to Joanna Colle’s humor. She is beginning to actively predict events as well as wordings as she reads. In the substitution of answer for always in the phrase ‘Rose always forgot,’ Melissa understands that Rose is answering the phone. Melissa is also predicting on the syntactic level, expecting that a verb (rather than an adverb) will follow the subject.

Melissa’s reading of finding that their friends for to fight with their friends is further evidence of syntactic prediction. Once she has predicted finding for fight, she can’t use wish. It is the sentence tense that provides Melissa with a clue that her prediction isn’t working, and when she reads their friends, she reverts to self-correct.

Real stories tend to provide cues for correction in a way that word lists and controlled vocabulary stories can’t. Melissa confirms or disconfirms her predictions as she makes sense of the text. In the example of answered for always, Melissa uses her confirming strategies and realizes that the subject-verb pattern she predicted doesn’t work. She then reconstructs the sentence using the author’s subject-adverb-verb pattern. Melissa doesn’t need a teacher to correct her; the story itself provides the correction.

Isn’t Melissa relying too much on the illustrations?

Some teachers have suggested that the first thing we should do is give Melissa text to read that doesn’t have pictures. I feel this would be denying Melissa an opportunity to use a cueing system that appears to be very useful in helping her to construct story meaning at this time. All real text occurs in an integrated context. As a reader having difficulties, Melissa needs access to all of the rich-context cues she can get.

Illustrated books are no less beautiful, valuable, or complex than any other type of book. As adults, we also make use of visual cues while reading signs, labels, maps, instructions, and advertisements. To limit Melissa to pictureless books would be similar to limiting her to reading words instead of whole stories. I am not suggesting that Melissa only read illustrated books; I would encourage her to use a variety of texts. But I would also encourage her to enjoy illustrated books, especially since she may feel self-conscious about reading them. I have picture books readily available for all of the students in my room.

When we give children the idea that one type of text is better or more advanced than another, we are limiting instead of expanding their reading progress.

Aren’t you giving Melissa too much credit?

It does seem amazing that Melissa would intuitively understand subject-verb patterns and then correct to subject-adverb-verb patterns. These syntactic distinctions can get complex, and are often difficult for me to sort out as I look at Melissa’s misices. Is always an adverb or is it an intensifier? Are intensifiers also adverbs? It’s easy to wonder if we aren’t giving a ten-year-old child a little too much credit.

However, we recognize that there is a difference between knowing a grammar (cognition) and being able to discuss a grammar using linguistic terminology (metacognition). A five-year-old uses oral English with few grammatical errors. Although they don’t know the labels: noun, verb, or adjective, they seldom confuse their functions. Melissa probably couldn’t tell you that Rose is a subject, forgot a verb, and always an adverb, but she certainly knows how these words work in sentences. Her misices give continued evidence of her ability to use English grammatical structure in order to understand text. In fact, misice analysis demonstrates that we have underestimated children’s abilities to process text. We have traditionally grouped reading skills under inference, vocabulary, and comprehension, disregarding syntax altogether.

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