

Professional Teacher:

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

Melissa's miscue analysis helps me respond to teachers' questions about readers. In this article, I look at Melissa's ability to actively construct meaningful text.

What do you mean by "constructing text"?

Although Melissa demonstrates a great deal of strength and flexibility in her reading strategies, we only examined her word-level substitutions in the previous article. The important question is this: Is Melissa constructing meaning from the text she is reading? On the first page of the story (see page 53), Melissa produced three sentences that would appear to interfere with her construction of story meaning. One of those sentences is descriptive and not important to understanding the story. But in two cases, Melissa substitutes *mother* for *monster*, leading to a possible misconception of key elements of the story. In the sentence, *She was always forgetting her monster manners*, Melissa reads: *She was always forgetting her mother's magic . . . meant.*

One teacher suggested that Melissa appears to lack a background in the monster-story genre. A child steeped in fairy tales about monsters and trolls would surely predict phrases like *strong teeth and sharp little claws*, but Melissa has difficulty interpreting this passage. This suggestion matches my own knowledge of Melissa, who had little opportunity for reading outside of the basal text program before entering my fifth-grade classroom.

Predicting, Confirming, Integrating

While Melissa has used her knowledge of semantics, syntax, and graphophonics in sentence-level construction, she is using other strategies to construct a story text as she reads. Her habit of carefully studying each illustration before reading is our first clue that she is attempting to integrate the whole picture as she reads the story.

In the next four pages of the story, Melissa's miscues give further evidence of her story construction.

She reads:

Monsters are \$polowed to finding that their friends . . . I mean . . . to fight with their friends and break each other toys. (Laughs).

Rose played nicely with everyone.

That made her mother very unhappy.

Monsters are s'posed to grow \$ludly then they answer the telephone . . . when they answer the telephone.

Rose answered . . . Rose always forgot . . . Rose always forgit and says, "Hello" in the \$poso film. Her father found this very upsetting.

We can tell Melissa is involved in the story when she laughs in response to Joanna Cole's humor. She is beginning to actively predict events as well as wordings as she reads. In the substitution of *answered* 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 *to 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 *with*. It is the sentence itself that provides Melissa with a clue that her prediction isn't working, and when she reads *their friends*, she regresses to self-correct.

Real stories tend to provide cues for correc-

tion 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 context-rich 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 and predict 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 miscues. 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 *Rosie* is a subject, *forgot* a verb, and *always* an adverb, but she certainly knows how these words work in sentences. Her miscues give continued evidence of her ability to use English grammatical structure in order to understand text. In fact, miscue analysis demonstrates that we have underestimated children's abilities to process text. We have traditionally grouped reading skills under the headings: phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, disregarding syntax all together.

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 text construction across the story. In working with the phrase, *Rosie always forgot*, Melissa abandons the author's dialect *forgot* for her own dialect *forgit*. 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 forgit and says, "Hello."*

Another striking example is Melissa's use of the common pronunciation *s'posed* in her second encounter with the word *supposed*, after substituting a nonword *\$spolowed* the first time

Monster Manners

Monsters are \$polowed supposed

to fight with their friends "I mean"

and break each other's toys.

Rose played nicely with everyone.

This made her mother very unhappy.

Monsters are \$sposed

to grow \$ludly loudly

when they answer the telephone.

Rose answered \$forgit

and said "hello"

in a polite voice.

Her father found this very upsetting.

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 mentally corrected the sentence at some point prior to reading the same pattern again? On the first page, where Melissa reads *mother's magic . . . meant*, for *monster manners*, I was concerned that she would fail to understand key story concepts. However, Melissa reads the words *monster* and *manners* without miscues consistently throughout the remainder of the story.

In two phrases, Melissa's miscues would appear to disrupt meaning, *grow ludly* for *grow loudly*, and *the poso film* for *a polite voice*. Should we assume that Melissa has missed the contrast between Rosie and other monsters because of these miscues? 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 miscue analysis is only a window into her true understanding of the story.

→ For more about Melissa, see pp. 53 and 58.

→ See: Goodman, pp. 20, 47, 62, 79, 88, 89, 99, 114, 115, 120, 121, 146, 148.

Excerpt from *Monster Manners*, by Joanna Cole (New York: Scholastic, 1985). Reprinted with permission of Scholastic, Inc.