

# Teaching Reading

## Ditto reading strategy

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In the America Reads Program, a federal initiative in the United States to promote literacy, particularly in the lower elementary grades (K–3), university students across disciplines are selected and trained to tutor at-risk children at local elementary schools. Tutors' responsibilities include assisting identified children with reading and writing skills such as comprehension, word identification strategies, coding (decoding and recoding), fluency, and mechanics of writing.

Having worked with special needs children at different grade levels, I have found that for skill instruction to be effective the children need to understand the underlying reason for learning a given skill. A child is taught a particular skill because that child has yet to demonstrate usage of that skill or strategy in the literacy act. If a tutor can effectively demonstrate to children, without belittling them, that their current performance does not show an intended specific skill and why that skill is important, teaching the skill becomes less challenging because the purpose has been established. The key to establishing the purpose for learning is bringing children's attention to their own performance, which can be a challenge. The proposed ditto reading strategy is one way to meet the challenge.

As tutors, when we build on students' metacognitive knowledge of language and reading (i.e., what children already

know about language), our teaching becomes more effective. For instance, young children know many concepts about language, such as words contain meaning, language serves various functions (Halliday, 1982), print is spoken language written down, printed words consist of letters of the alphabet, and printed words have spaces in between. Children may not necessarily be able to articulate their metacognitive knowledge, but the knowledge is reflected through their performance.

One's performance is guided by one's knowledge (competence). Thus, if we understand a new concept at the level of competence, expected performance will be a natural outcome. Ruddell, Ruddell, and Singer (1994) mentioned that "metacognitive knowledge has served as a base for metacognitive experiences that are perhaps best described as awareness, realizations, 'ahas'" (p. 718). However, once learners observe and become aware of their own reading behavior, the tutor's job of instruction on a needed skill is simplified.

The purpose of the ditto reading strategy is for the tutor to demonstrate to the child the reading behavior that is intended for instruction. The task becomes child directed instead of tutor directed. The strategy brings the child's attention to the objective of the reading instruction. The reading behavior selected for this purpose is one the child needs to work on. Caution must be taken to not include reading behaviors due to speech or hearing challenges; dialect-related behaviors; or autistic, special education, or English as a Second Language cases.

## Description and illustration of the strategy

The purpose of the ditto reading strategy is for the tutor to perform an exact demonstration of the reading or writing behavior of the child targeted for instruction. The targeted grade levels are K–3.

1. The tutor observes the specific reading or writing behavior in the child that needs improvement.
2. The tutor directs the child to note anything different in the tutor's performance.
3. The tutor demonstrates the act, copying the child exactly.
4. The tutor and child discuss the modeled reading behavior.

The child gets to listen to and see what he or she is doing, in a mirror image manner. Many times, children get so used to performing a certain behavior that it is no longer visible to them unless they step out of that role. When another person, especially an adult, does the task in the same manner as the child, the behavior becomes visible. Once the purpose of the intended strategy is understood and the importance of learning the strategy becomes clear to a child, the road to teaching the strategy is smoother. The focus of the strategy is directly on a targeted skill with which a child needs help, setting up the scaffold for the subsequent tutoring session.

After the demonstration, the tutor and child discuss the act, what makes the act a problem, why it needs to be done differently, and so on. The metacognitive awareness of what one is doing and why the task needs to be done differently is

an important part of learning. The following three cases exemplify the ditto reading strategy in action. All names are pseudonyms.

Amber, a second grader, would simply call out words in the text with no expression and intonation in her voice. She had no difficulty with decoding text; however, her oral reading exhibited a flat tone of voice. It was choppy, hesitant, and slow. Amber was identified by the teacher for additional help with fluency. One of the tutor's objectives was to build Amber's reading fluency and have her read with expression. The tutor had role-modeled reading aloud with expression many times, but it didn't seem to change Amber's reading behavior. What the tutor had been using was an indirect approach to model the targeted reading behavior, expecting that Amber would pick up the skill on her own. However, role-modeling didn't work with Amber, so we tried the ditto reading strategy.

To bring Amber's attention to the targeted objective of reading with expression, the tutor read aloud a story with no expression and intonation, in a flat voice just like Amber. Amber started giggling. When asked for a reason, she responded that it sounded weird. With more prodding, Amber listed the reasons why reading with a flat voice was weird. "It's boring." "I don't know which character is doing the talking sometimes." "It makes me sleepy." The rationales that Amber came up with were right on target and made her aware of why one should attempt to read aloud with expression. Once Amber became aware of the purpose of reading with expression, she started her slow journey toward reading with expression during subsequent sessions. Amber became more receptive to trying the targeted skill.

Michael, a first grader, tended to write words with no spaces in between. The tutor assigned to work with Michael had modeled appropriate writing, articulating the fact that there were spaces in between the words, but it didn't seem to have an effect on Michael's writing. The tutor wrote a simple sentence with no spaces in between the words. Michael's response at first was, "I can't read that." When questioned further, Michael listed the following responses, "Coz that's a long word," "I don't know that word," "It is not English." Then the tutor read the

sentence aloud. Michael was surprised; the oral words were familiar to him, but not what was written on the paper.

The tutor and Michael worked together to find the hidden words in the sentence. This was an introduction to the subsequent tutoring lessons on spacing between words while writing. Michael's writing started showing sporadic spaces between words. Sometimes, he would forget; the tutor would remind him of the long word, and Michael would know what to do. The tutor had shown Michael the purpose for putting spaces in between words while writing. Children in lower grades find it difficult to understand why we need to put spaces between words while writing when there are no spaces between words when we talk. It was an important lesson for Michael.

Shanika, a second grader, would simply say, "I don't know that word" when she came to a word that she couldn't identify. She would then wait for the tutor to tell her the word. Shanika had come to rely on this strategy of waiting for someone to tell her the word, be it her mom at home or a teacher's aide or a peer in school, even though she had been taught various strategies for word attack. The classroom displayed a poster on the wall with word-identification strategies; Shanika had simply shut all these strategies out.

We decided to try the ditto strategy with Shanika. The tutor asked Shanika to listen to her read. As the tutor read, she came to a word she pretended not to know and stopped reading, saying, "I don't know what that word is." Shanika and the tutor sat in silence for a brief moment, and then Shanika took the lead to say, "Well, what do you do when you don't know a word?" The tutor's response was, "I don't know." To which Shanika responded in a voice imitating a teacher's authority, "You look for a word within a word, or say 'Hmm' and keep going."

It was an interesting role-reversal situation, reflecting that Shanika knew the rhetoric in terms of strategies to use, but wasn't applying it herself. She had distanced herself from the rhetoric of knowledge to application of that knowledge, a common danger in learning environments that shows loss of purpose. Shanika had memorized the strategies

but had forgotten the purpose for them, and learning and reality had become two different compartmentalized domains with no transfer of knowledge from one situation to another. This was an "aha" moment for the child, when she discovered that she could apply the knowledge she had learned.

These vignettes of Amber, Michael, and Shanika show that in some instances if we bring the child's attention directly to a targeted skill by demonstrating the child's behavior, children can articulate the purpose of the skill as well as view the rationale for doing it. The ditto reading strategy provides a structure for children to distance themselves from their own behavior and objectively view the task. In addition, the ditto reading strategy also provides direct focus on the targeted skill for tutoring.

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## References

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## Schoolwide literacy days

Darlene D. Polder

Children were laughing, reading, running up to our custodian, ducking into a passageway, seeking out the cafeteria cooks; someone passing by might have wondered what was going on. Our school was having a literacy day. This particular activity was a book scavenger hunt. Each class had been given a list of clues to decipher. Then, children had to find objects that related to a book they were about to read. After all the objects had been collected, the teacher read the story. Most classes also did a follow-up activity. The project was very successful.