

In the Loop – Fall 2006 Issue
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Reconsidering the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

Since 1984 when Pearson and Gallagher wrote about the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model (GRR), it has served as a framework for many literacy instructional programs and approaches to developing comprehension lessons. The GRR model is based on the transfer of responsibility for a particular learning task (eg. reading a text) from the teacher or more proficient reader to the novice reader or student. The focus of this model is the level of responsibility the teacher must maintain to ensure a successful learning outcome or completion of a particular task, or the amount of responsibility the teacher *releases* to the student. It assumes that responsibility initially resides with the teacher and is given over to the students or learners. By focusing on the amount of responsibility released by a teacher this becomes a model for teaching, not learning.

In the opening chapter of *Lessons in Comprehension*, I wrote about a different perspective, namely an Emerging Expertise Model (EE) based on Pearson and Gallagher's work. The EE model I described focused on the student's emerging expertise or involvement in the learning experience, rather than the release of responsibility from the teacher. The focus in this model is on the student and the amount of responsibility the student *accepts*. The focus of this model is on learning, not teaching. I believe that both the teacher's and

student's involvement are equally important components in any learning situation, and must remain part of any instructional model.

Margaret Mooney reconceived the GRR model according to the terms “To, With & By” referring to the teacher’s role in literacy instructional experiences. Teachers were required to include reading TO students, reading WITH students and reading BY students. Again, the focus is on the level of involvement of the teacher, assuming that students will accept the level of responsibility not accounted for by the teacher. However, when teachers are reading TO students, their role is to listen to the story and attend to the demonstrations being given. When students are reading BY themselves, it is the responsibility of the teacher to monitor the students’ progress and maintain a successful learning experience.

Scholarly work addressing the GRR model generally refers to a graph or diagram that looks something like the one displayed here.

[insert diagram here]

In this diagram, the amount of responsibility is represented along the horizontal axis and is transferred from teacher to student as we move from left to right.

The diagonal line running through this diagram represents the optimal amount of assistance the teacher can offer the student. Below the line would suggest confusion, asking students to accept more responsibility than they are capable, and above the line would represent, redundancy or boredom, providing assistance with what students can already accomplish independently.

Theoretically, this line represents what Vygotsky called the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In other words, the line represents what learners can do with assistance but not on their own. Having a straight, narrow line to represent the ZPD may be misleading. A line assumes that the level of assistance or responsibility is stable and easily identified. The ZPD changes during an interaction or instructional experience depending on what a child is capable of doing *in that learning context*. The ZPD might be better represented as a shaded area or range of support, rather than a rigid line, to suggest the flexibility inherent in the amount of support a teacher offers a student at any one moment in the learning event.

The level of support offered by the teacher, or the amount of responsibility released, has also been referred to as “scaffolding” by Bruner, Wood and Ross in 1978. In their seminal article, scaffolding has three aspects: 1) allowing a learner to do what they are capable of individually, 2) offering support for what a learner can almost do on their own, and 3) doing for learners what they cannot do. Drawing upon these three aspects, it remains the teacher’s responsibility for maintaining the quality of the learning experiences provided students. Referring to the GRR and EE models, the teachers need to shift the line in response to the needs of the learner in the context of the learning event. It is not a level that can be simply determined by an assessment, nor does it remain stable throughout a lesson or learning experience. The level of responsibility a teacher provides must be in response to the amount of “expertise” a learner develops. The optimal

amount of support or scaffold can only be determined in the context of the actual learning event through close observation of the learner's ability and competence. We do not know what learners are capable of doing on their own or with our support until we get them involved in a learning task. This would require our assessments are always conducted in actual literacy experiences or tasks.

The scaffolds we provide can *within* a task, for example how much response we give a reader in a particular shared reading approach, and *across* tasks, for example when teachers decide to read a text aloud to students, with students or allow them to read independently. What we want to provide students, both within tasks and across tasks is a *manageable amount of challenge*. We don't want students to become overly frustrated, however, we want them presented with enough challenge to require student involvement and thinking. This level of challenge will differ for each reader and cannot be accurately assessed outside the actual learning experience. It must be assessed in the context of the learning experience and is based on the child's developing competence or expertise. Because of this, teachers' close observation of student literacy behaviors is paramount. What an individual can do with the help of a more capable other can only be understood in the actual context of learning something new. It is for this reason that the line representing the transfer of responsibility or the level of emerging expertise must remain flexible to continual revision during literacy instruction.