Effective Use of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

By

Dr. Douglas Fisher

Professor of Language and Literacy Education
San Diego State University

Evidence on effective instruction is accumulating at an amazing rate. We know that all learners need purposeful instruction in reading skills and strategies, motivation to read, access to a wide variety of texts, and authentic opportunities to read and write both inside and outside of school (Farstrup & Samuels, 2002; Fink & Samuels, 2008). We also know that students need to develop their expertise in all aspects of reading and writing, including oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension (Frey & Fisher, 2006). And we also know that the skills of the teacher, and how the teacher uses valuable instructional time, matters.

This evidence on effective literacy teaching, which includes small group instruction, differentiation, and a response to intervention, presents a challenge for many teachers and schools. Clearly, whole-class instruction will not work to improve the literacy achievement of our children. To be effective, teachers have engaged students in purposeful instruction designed to meet the needs of individual and smaller groups of students.

The Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

A common way that teachers can do this is to use a gradual release of responsibility model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983). The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction requires that the teacher shift from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task … to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211). This gradual release may occur over a day, a week, a month, or a year. Stated another way, the gradual release of responsibility "… emphasizes instruction that mentors students into becoming capable thinkers and learners when handling the tasks with which they have not yet developed expertise" (Buehl, 2005).

The gradual release of responsibility model of instruction has been documented as an effective approach for improving literacy achievement (Fisher & Frey, 2007), reading comprehension (Lloyd, 2004), and literacy outcomes for English language learners (Kong & Pearson, 2003).

Components of the Gradual Release of Responsibility Model

As delineated in the visual representation in Figure 1 (Fisher & Frey, 2008), there are four interactive (or interrelated) components of a gradual release of responsibility model:

• **Focus Lessons.** This component allows the teacher to model his or her thinking and understanding of the content for students. Usually brief in nature, focus lessons establish the purpose or intended learning outcome and clue students into the standards they are learning. In addition to the purpose and the teacher model, the focus lesson provides teachers and opportunity to build and/or activate background knowledge.

• **Guided Instruction**. During guided instruction, teachers prompt, question, facilitate, or lead students through tasks that increase their understanding of the content. While this can, and sometimes does, occur with the whole class, the evidence is clear that reading instruction necessitates small group instruction. Guided instruction provides teachers an opportunity to address needs identified on formative assessments and directly instruct students in specific literacy components, skills, or strategies.

• **Collaborative Learning.** To consolidate their understanding of the content, students need opportunities to problem solve, discuss, negotiate, and think with their peers. Collaborative learning opportunities, such as workstations ensure that students practice and apply their learning while interacting with their peers. This phase is critical as students must use language if they are to learn it. The key to collaborative learning, or productive group work as it is sometimes called, lies in the nature of the task. Ideally each collaborative learning task will have a group function combined with a way to ensure individual accountability such that the teacher knows what each student did while at the workstation.

• **Independent work.** As the goal of all of our instruction, independent learning provides students practice with applying information in new ways. In doing so, students synthesize information, transform ideas, and solidify their understanding.

Importantly, the gradual release of responsibility model is not linear. Students move back and forth between each of the components as they master skills, strategies, and standards.

How is the Gradual Release of Responsibility Used?

The gradual release of responsibility model provides teachers with an instructional framework for moving from teacher knowledge to student understanding and application. The gradual release of responsibility model ensures that students are supported in their acquisition of the skills and strategies necessary for success.

"As part of a gradual release of responsibility model, curriculum must be vertically aligned."

Implementing the gradual release of responsibility model requires time. Instructional planning can consume hours of a teacher's time. As teachers, we have to plan for a diverse group of learners, students learning English, students who find reading easy and those who struggle, and students who need strategic intervention to be successful. As part of a gradual release of responsibility model, curriculum must be vertically aligned. Our students do not have time to waste on skills and strategies they have already mastered. Similarly, without strong vertical alignment as part of the gradual release of responsibility model, skills can be missed.

What is vertical alignment?

Vertical alignment is both a process and an outcome, the result of which is a comprehensive curriculum that provides learners with a coherent sequence of content. Vertical alignment ensures that content standards and reading skills and strategies are introduced, reinforced, and assessed. Vertical alignment guarantees

that instruction is targeted on the intersection between student needs and content standards. In curricula with strong vertical alignment, content redundancy is reduced and the curriculum is rigorous and challenging.

Why is vertical alignment important?

First and foremost, strong vertical alignment accommodates a wide variety of developmental levels and is designed to increase the intellectual, personal, physical, social, and career development of all students. Vertical alignment allows teachers increased precision in their teaching because they are not teaching content that is covered elsewhere or that students have mastered previously. Vertical alignment also ensures that specific content standards are not entirely missed as a teacher at one grade assumes someone else focused on that content.

Conclusion

With strong vertical alignment and purposeful instruction, students learn. While there are many reasons that children struggle with reading and writing, there are not endless numbers of solutions. Students who find literacy tasks difficult deserve increased attention from their teachers, quality reading materials, and authentic opportunities to read and write. If we provide them with these essentials, we can expect great things. If we do not, we cannot expect students to know themselves or their world.

References

Buehl, D, "Scaffolding," *Reading Room*, 2005, <www.weac.org/News/2005-06/sept05/readingroomoct05.htm> (November 11, 2006).

Duke, N. K. and P. D. Pearson, "Effective Practices for Developing Reading Comprehension," in A. E. Farstup & S. J. Samuels (eds.), *What Research has to Say About Reading Instruction,* International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware, 2002, pp. 205-242.

Farstrup, A. E. and S. J. Samuels (eds.), *What the Research has to Say About Reading Instruction*, 3rd ed., International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware, 2002.

Fink, R. and S. J. Samuels (eds.), *Inspiring Reading Success: Interest and Motivation in an Age of High-Stakes Testing*, International Reading Association, Newark, Delaware, 2008.

Fisher, D. and N. Frey, "Implementing a Schoolwide Literacy Framework: Improving Achievement in an Urban Elementary School," *The Reading Teacher,* 61, 2007, pp. 32-45.

Fisher, D. and N. Frey, *Better Learning Through Structured Teaching: A Framework for the Gradual Release of Responsibility,* Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, Alexandria, Virginia, 2008.

Frey, N. and D. Fisher, *Language Arts Workshop: Purposeful Reading and Writing Instruction*, Merrill Education, Upper Saddle River, New Jersey, 2006.

Kong, A. and P. D. Pearson, "The Road to Participation: The Construction of a Literacy Practice in a Learning Community of Linguistically Diverse Learners," *Research in the Teaching of English*, 38, 2003, pp. 85-124.

Lloyd, S. L., "Using Comprehension Strategies as a Springboard for Student Talk," *Journal of Adolescent and Adult Literacy*, 48, 2004, pp. 114-124.

Pearson, P. D. and M. C. Gallagher, "The Instruction of Reading Comprehension," *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, 8, 1983, pp. 317-344.

Teacher Responsibility

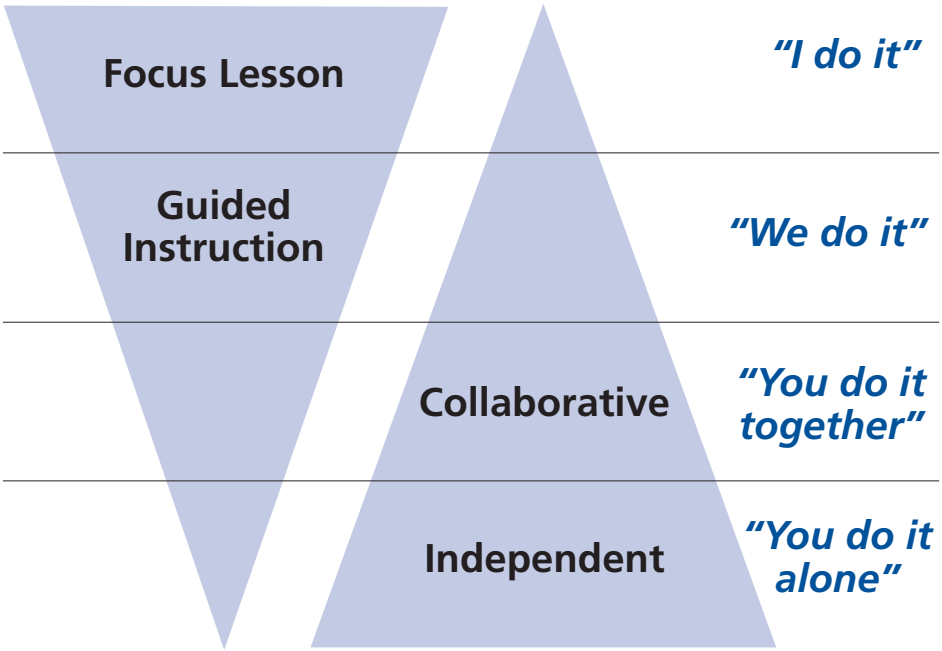

Figure 1

RD 08 W 6641
12/08 10M