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Book Reading Interactions: What Parents and Children Say

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Recommended Citation
Children's awareness of how they learn to read or how they view literacy events contributes to the way they approach book reading (Edwards, 1962; Johns, 1972; Muskopf, 1962; Stewart, 1988). Picturebook reading and story reading are the most common forms of interaction that occur between some parents and young children. Both kinds of interaction provide a rich context for language learning and for the development of story comprehension (Harkness and Miller, 1982; Morrow, 1989; DeLoache and DeMendoza, 1987). A number of studies have documented mothers as models in children's acquisition of literacy (Harkness and Miller, 1982; Morrow, 1989; Ninio and Bruner, 1978; Snow and Ninio, 1986). Interactions that occur during book reading provide a structure in which the adult elaborates, expands and relates information in books to the child's personal responses. The adult provides the arrangement of appropriate sequencing of materials and tasks, thus transmitting information and skills that help the child become literate. What and how parents interact with their children provides a framework for expectations and rules for reading.

When parents read to young children, parental styles and interaction patterns may differ due to function of age, competence of the child and sociocultural factors (Heath, 1983;
Schickedanz, 1986; Pellegrini, Brody and Siegel, 1985). Parents label different parts of the storybook reading as important, ask different questions and engage in different types of interactions. What the parents transmit through verbal statements during story reading or other types of literacy events will influence what children come to know about literacy. Stewart (1988) observed in the homes of four children and found that the parents were involved in monitoring the child's daily living or deliberate literacy events and that the home literacy events were directly related to their awareness of how they learn to read. Furthermore, children who engaged in story reading at home indicated in their awareness responses that home was the place where they learned to read. Children who were not read to often said that they were not learning to read at home.

The analysis presented here of the parent-child interactions during book reading events can provide a window for observing how parental beliefs and behaviors about literacy help to provide a home literacy context, shaping children's reading awareness and competencies. Although wide attention has been paid to the young child and parents reading picture books, story books and favorite books, there has not been significant attention paid to the beginning reader and how the interaction proceeds with parents attempting to read with those children. The present study was designed to expand our knowledge of the nature of verbal interactions that occur during book reading of mothers and young readers. The goals of the study were to 1) provide descriptive data on joint mother-child book reading; 2) analyze the structure and content of the interactions; 3) examine the types of strategies that the mother used to aid the child; and 4) relate home literacy events and children's awareness of how they learn to read to the structure of the book reading interactions.
Methods

Subjects. Subjects were four pairs of mothers and their children — two boys and two girls, six years old. Two children, Joseph and Donna, attended a school in a rural town about forty miles from a major university. Both of these children received instruction in kindergarten that emphasized decoding. The other two children, Erica and Sean, lived in a town near a large university and attended a magnet school that focused on individualized reading and small group activities in kindergarten. The children were selected as participants of this study in the beginning of their kindergarten year on the basis of 1) some knowledge of letters; 2) low SES; 3) parents' willingness to participate in home observation; and 4) teachers' assessment that the children were making satisfactory progress in reading. One child, Erica, was a reader during this study. The other three children were attempting to read or were able to read very simple texts. All children were from low SES families, and parents reported reading to their children by age one.

Procedure. Four children were observed in their homes eight times for two hours each week over a two month period the summer before entering first grade. The book reading session took place during the next to last observations. During this observation session the mothers were asked to read a book with their child as they normally would do. The sessions were taped while an observer noted both verbal and nonverbal communication. The observer tried to maintain the role of a friendly, non-evaluating, nondirective and non-participating person who was interested in family reading.

The book was a handmade paper book with one to four words on each page. Each page was illustrated with predictable pictures. The child who was a reader read through this book quickly, not allowing any interaction to occur
between the child and mother. Therefore, another reading session was coded. The selection was made by the child from a workbook and included several short stories and comprehension exercises that followed each story.

Since all observations were naturalistic and accepted as they occurred, the setting for the book reading session varied for each child. Sean and his mother sat on one side of the dining room table while two toddlers that his mother babysat crawled around the floor. Erica sat at the kitchen table with her mother while her cousin Terri, age three, tried to participate. Donna and her mother sat outside at the patio table while her brother, David, age two, interrupted with his own "reading." Joseph and his mother sat on the living room couch while his younger brother, Dennis, age two, played with a toy.

The audio tapes of the book reading sessions were transcribed. The transcripts were verified and nonverbal communication was recorded from the observation notes. The home literacy events were identified through observation notes which were compiled during eighty hours of observation in the summer.

Coding. The coding system was designed to describe both the structure and content of the book reading interaction and yield information that would allow the observer to analyze the nature of the strategies used by both the parents and children during the book reading interaction. The categories were expected to provide an insight into the relative contribution of the two partners, the parameters of their contributions and how they approached the levels of print during the book reading interactions.
Appendix A gives a detailed description of the coding system that was applied to the transcripts. Generally, each speech act was coded based on a coding system that allowed examination of the interactive nature of the book reading sessions (DeLoache and Mendoza, 1987). Each statement, question and comment made by the child and mother was coded. The verbal interaction patterns then were coded by looking at the turns of each speaker. A turn is made up of speech acts; a speech act is defined as a complete expression consisting of a word or groups of words intended to communicate an idea, statement, question or response during the book reading interaction. A turn includes all verbalizing and pointing relevant to a given topic by one person before that person changed the topic or the other person said something about the same or different topic. It is possible for one speaker to have several turns before the other speaker responds or makes a statement.

The children's speech acts were coded as either assertives or responsives. The assertives included voluntary reading, statements or comments which the child made that were not responses to a directive or statement from the mother. The responsives included speech acts that were in response to the mother's directive or statement. The mother's speech acts were coded as requestives or responsives. A requestive speech act is a directive or a statement that requests the child to carry out or figure out an action, or supplies information, rules or explanations. Responsives are negative, neutral or positive statements that include praise, correction or confirmation of an answer without any value attached. Aid statements were usually speech acts by the parents that demonstrated the response was intended to signal an answer to the child by supplying practical information (see Appendix B for a full description of strategies used when aid was given). To assure reliability a second scorer independently coded a random
sample of 15 percent turns. The interrater reliability in speech acts was .96.

Both the mother's and the child's speech acts or turns were coded according to the kind of reading strategy indicated by the verbal exchanges with respect to the attention given to the print level. The print levels were book/management, pictures, words, and letters. Book or management statements, questions or comments are those speech acts that relate to book conventions or book reading. Pictures are speech acts that refer to pictures in the book. Words were statements, questions or comments that focused on words, phrases or sentences. Letters were statements, questions or comments that called attention to decoding letters or sounds. The interrater reliability on the levels of print was .89.

Results

Turns. The interaction between Erica and her mother shows that Erica took 59 turns and her mother 34 (see Table 1). Donna and her mother had a small number of turns during their book reading interaction, eight for Donna's mother and seven for Donna. Joseph and his mother had the highest number of turns (100), but Joseph only accounted for 38; his mother took 62. Sean and his mother took 65 turns to complete their interaction. Like Joseph's mother, Sean's mother took most of the turns (40).

Initiation. Most of Erica's statements were assertive (38). Donna made four assertive statements out of a total of seven. A major portion of Sean's (17) and Joseph's (21) interactions were responses to their mothers' statements, directives or questions (see Table 1).

Attention to print levels. For all mothers, the emphasis was to direct the child to the word, phrase or sentence level.
Joseph’s mother was the only mother who used a large number of statements, questions or comments in the context of letters or sounds. All mothers used a few management statements (e.g., "turn the page"). Three of the mothers referred to the pictures to help the child read the text (e.g., "what does it look like?"; "what is he doing?"). Erica’s mother did not refer to the pictures; most of her directives, questions or statements centered around drawing Erica’s attention to a word she read incorrectly, rereading of a sentence or facilitating comprehension (e.g., "what does that say?"). When Erica read "It is sweet to taste, we taste it with our nose," her mother responded, "with your nose?" Erica’s mother directed 91 percent of her statements to words, phrases and sentences. Sean’s mother had the highest proportions of statements related to pictures. Most of Donna’s turns were tied to the picture content of the book. For example, Donna read "eating cookies" when the text was "mm cookies." The picture showed a boy eating cookies. Donna’s mother did not correct her reading but accepted the words she read. Her mother called her attention to the picture once when she wanted her to say tummy ache and there was a picture of a boy holding his stomach. Joseph divided his turns between letters and words; since most of his reading was focused on decoding words this is not surprising. Sean spent more time on the picture content than his mother. He directed almost an equal number of his turns to both the word and picture level while his mother directed her turns at the word level (words, phrases or sentences) using the picture and letter level only once.

**Types of speech acts.** This category represented what kind of strategies mothers used and how they implemented the strategy. Erica’s mother used the least amount of directives; most of her speech acts were directed toward giving aid (50 percent — see Table 2). Three of the parents used repetitions, such as
repeating a word phrase or sentence for the child. Most of the parents' evaluations were either positive (e.g., "good") or neutral ("o.k., o.k.").

**Structure of the strategies.** The range of how the child was assisted varied across mothers with one mother waiting until the child had completed the sentence before giving aid to another mouthing sounding out each letter for the child or supplying the word.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
<th>Mother and child interactions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Speaker</strong></td>
<td><strong>Turns</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph's mother</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna's mother</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean's mother</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica's mother</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Proportions of mother turns for the type of speech act**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Directive</th>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Repetition</th>
<th>Aid</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Neutral</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph's mother</td>
<td>.37</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.32</td>
<td>.05</td>
<td>.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna's mother</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean's mother</td>
<td>.42</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>.20</td>
<td>.12</td>
<td>.18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica's mother</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>.06</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.50</td>
<td>.03</td>
<td>.12</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Erica's mother used the word strategy when she corrected Erica's reading of *it's* to *it is*; she also corrected her pronunciation and supplied words that Erica omitted while reading. Her phonics strategy consisted of reminding Erica of certain vowel rules. Her semantic strategy included drawing Erica's attention to making sense out of her reading of the text by relating it to her experience. Erica's mother initiated these strategies by waiting until Erica had completed several sentences or hesitated on a word. She also repeated the sentence or phrase that included the problem word or words. Erica's mother asked guiding questions which directed Erica toward phonic, semantic, or word corrections. Her strategies included encouraging Erica to sound out the words aloud to indicate to Erica her own mistakes.

Since many of the mothers' turns were in responses (depending on the structure of the interaction) it follows that the children's proportions of print levels within the interaction would be similar to their mothers'. Donna's mother used aid once. Donna read the text, used the pictures and supplied her own words. When she said "eating milk," she relied on a pattern that she had created from the pictures — "eating sandwiches, eating cookies." Her mother did not make any corrections until Donna said, "eating milk." Her mother responded by giving aid that focused Donna's attention on the meaning of what she just read or said.

Sean's mother's strategies focused on phonics, words and semantics. His mother provided cues until she believed the information was sufficient. When she tried to get Sean to read the word "lunch" she gave semantic cues. After Sean was unable to give the correct response from his mother's cue and the picture information, she said, "What time of day do you think he was eating that? Do you think that it was
breakfast or dinner or what do you think that it was?" Sean responded, "breakfast." His mother added, "You think that might have been breakfast with sandwiches? What else could it have been?" Sean still had difficulty responding correctly and said, "dinner." His mother continued her assistance by turning to phonic cues. "Look at this; it begins with an L. What other meal do you have that begins with an L?" This time Sean correctly responded with the word, "lunch." Sean’s mother used various strategies to give Sean aid. She used questions and provided information that helped Sean pay attention to meaning, letter and word connections.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Levels</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Letter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joseph</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mother</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Joseph’s mother’s strategies were primarily to assist Joseph by urging him to sound out the words. She aided this process by either beginning the sounding out of a word or...
completing it. Often she did not provide the completed word but waited for Joseph to blend and come up with the word. Joseph's mother, like Erica's mother, reminded him of certain vowel rules (e.g., "remember what this sounds like; the y sound is what?" or "remember that's silent, isn't it?"). Joseph's mother did use some aid that focused on meaning at the word level ("it's another word for his stomach"). She also tried to help Joseph relate to the text by developing associations with his experiences, and when Joseph's response was still incorrect she provided aid at the word level and finally at the letter-sound level when she sounded out the word tummy ("t-u-m-ee").

Discussion

A look at the structure and content of the mother and child interactions shows how the parent frames and communicates aspects of the literacy experience of book reading with the child. By examining these interactions we can see how the parent directs the child to the important features of the experience as perceived by the parent. It is not a question of whether the parent should focus on the letter and sound correspondence, meaning or picture or word learning. More likely, what parents do depends on the materials and intentions, and whether they expect children to remember the words taught, understand their meanings or just learn to love reading. The book reading interactions observed among these mothers and children are excellent examples of how scaffolding occurs in a natural way. When parents help their children in a manner that facilitates learning they are often working in the zone; e.g., the developmental area where a person can accomplish a task when aided by someone more capable (Vygotsky, 1978). Parents, teachers and more advanced children work within this zone by scaffolding the conversation or building one comment or question on the previous one, leading the child or peers from a situation where the task is
modeled to one in which the child takes over. All of the parents used the semantic cues when giving aid. It appears that the mothers realized that they were supporting and facilitating learning by the semantic contingency of their questions, answers and comments.

Erica's behavior may be a result of Erica's independent reading and her mother's interaction pattern. Erica's mother stopped her at appropriate points in the text, directing her to use strategies that would provide comprehension. Analysis of home literacy (Stewart, 1988) revealed a high occurrence of deliberate high literacy events (see Table 3), including frequent book reading sessions. Erica's mother's behavior was typical of many instances of Erica's book reading. It could be suggested that the high incidence of aid (90 percent) provided during the book reading interactions may have been a result of Erica's reading level and her ability to read text that provided more of an opportunity for directing aid. However, observations of Erica's mother working with a younger child, a non-reader, demonstrated consistency in her strategies. She allowed the child to be assertive, taking most of the turns, directing the child's attention to the word, phrase or sentences. The interaction during this session was typical of occurrences during the summer observations, in that Erica was reading independently and in control of most of the interactions.

The majority of verbal turns by all of the mothers focused on the word level. However, Joseph's mother also focused many of her turns at the letter level. The structure and content of the interaction between Joseph and his mother are interesting in that it mirrored his school instruction. He was in an instructional program that was strictly decoding and included a lot of practice in sounding out words. Joseph was successful in this program but was not a reader at the end of kindergarten. According to study results (Stewart, 1988) that
looked at the awareness responses of these four children with respect to how they were learning to read at home and at school, Joseph indicated that he felt he was learning how to read by learning his letters and sounding out words. He also indicated that "you learn to read in school." The strategies that his mother used while Joseph attempted to read the little book centered around sounding out words and providing the word after many unsuccessful attempts by Joseph. She knew he needed a strong base for phonics and instructed him as he was being taught in school. Observations in the home indicated that Joseph valued playing with his peers as the most important and frequent activity.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Child</th>
<th>Deliberate</th>
<th>Communication</th>
<th>TV</th>
<th>Religion</th>
<th>School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Joseph (n=61)</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>17.4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Donna (n=108)</td>
<td>23.1</td>
<td>17.9</td>
<td>9.7</td>
<td>7.4</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sean (n=55)</td>
<td>41.6</td>
<td>9.1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Erica (n=70)</td>
<td>74.0</td>
<td>9.9</td>
<td>2.9</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: The % represents the frequency of observed occurrences of events in each category. Daily living events are not included.

Sean's mother was also aware of Sean's desire to play with his peers, but her approach was different. Most of Sean's mother's turns focused on getting Sean to use both word and picture information. Her aid focused on meaning and kept building on information until Sean was successful in responding. This type of interaction was typical for Sean's
mother. The analysis of the literacy events showed that 41 percent of the observed events were book reading events. Sean's mother allowed him to play with his friends during the day but insisted that he read with her or his father at night. He was also instructed to bring library books home from the library. (His mother reported that last summer he brought home toys.)

The differences in the interaction pattern between Sean and Joseph were not just a matter of content. Sean's interactions were tied to meaning, while Joseph's involved decoding. Sean's mother allowed him to read through the story first on his own. He read the pictures and used his own words. She wanted Sean not only to be a reader but to love reading. Sean had several older brothers and sisters who were reading before the end of kindergarten. It is important to note that his school instruction was similar to his mother's approach — some emphasis on decoding, meaning and reading for enjoyment with peers or siblings. Neither of the boys was reading at the end of kindergarten, but both were readers by December of first grade.

Donna's session with her mother was very brief, consisting of only 15 turns. Donna's mother did not encourage correct reading of the book. The other three mothers did. Donna's mother observed her reading by using the picture information. Only when Donna made an error that was not semantically appropriate did her mother stop her. This was consistent with literacy events in the home and the vagueness surrounding Donna's awareness responses. Most of the encounters with book reading did not involve specific decoding strategies or letter sound correspondence. The dialogue was directed toward content (e.g., "what's the picture about?" or "why is she coloring?"). Donna was not reading at the end of kindergarten but did read by the middle of first grade.
Although this is too small a sample from which to draw broad generalizations, these differences and similarities among children and mothers during literacy events at home give us some insight into how mothers structure literacy events for their children. In all of these homes, there was literacy engagement. All of the mothers structured their strategies and the content of their interaction with their children according to how they perceived what was appropriate and natural during that experience.

Some children received more direction than did others. Donna experienced literacy as a natural part of daily living. Erica realized what was needed to be a good reader and was encouraged by her mother. Sean understood the importance of reading books but was more interested in playing with his peers. His mother identified what she felt to be important and worked with Sean accordingly. Joseph was more concerned with peer interactions and regarded reading activities as part of school and something to be done there. His mother reinforced his idea of school-type reading by her emphasis on decoding.

Judging from the data gathered from these interactions and the observations, it seems that although there are differences in the opportunity for the children to engage in deliberate literacy events and differences in some of the strategies used when reading with the children, the parents were successfully monitoring literacy engagement (according to the parents' understanding of literacy and their child's conception of a reader). These children were learning how to read through different experiences and instruction. The parents in this study used various strategies while reading books with their children. For further study it may be interesting to
observe longitudinally the interaction patterns between parents and children as they become readers.

References


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Appendix A

Coding

A. Coding for mother speech acts

Requestives

Directive. A question or statement that requests the child to carry out or figure out an action. Example: "Look at the picture"; "sound it out"; "can you sound it out?"

Statement. An expression of information, rules or explanation. Example: "This is the letter m and it makes this sound."

Responsives

Positive. These statements include acceptance and praise to the child's answer. Example: "that's good"; "yes."

Neutral. Usually a confirmation of an answer without any value of encouragement attached. Examples: "o.k."; "mm mm."

Negative. Includes correction and admonishment or an indication by the mother that the child's response was unacceptable. Examples: "No, it's not y"; "are you sure?"; "you are not trying."

Aid. When the intent of the mother's response to the child's answer or assertive is to correct the statement by giving the child partial information or by supplying the answer if the child is incorrect. May include statements or questions that draw the child's attention to previous information or experiences related to prior knowledge. Examples: "l-u-n-c-h, lunch"; "remember when I sat down with you to read..."; "another word for stomach"; "Do you eat milk?"; "What other meal do you have that begins with an l?"; "remember what the silent e does?"

B. Coding for child speech acts

Assertives. Statements and comments that describe, give information about the current reading task. Includes reading that the child does voluntarily, without the mother making a directive or statement.

Responsives. Verbal responses to the mother's prompt or directive.

C. Level coding for mother and child turns
Both the mother's and child's speech acts or turns were coded according to the kind of reading strategy indicated by the verbal exchanges with respect to attention to the print level.

**Book/management.** Statements, questions or comments that were related to the book or convention of book reading. Examples: "turn the page"; "let's start at the top of the page."

**Pictures.** The mother's or child's speech act refers to the pictures in the book. Example: "look at the picture to see what he is eating."

**Words.** Refers to statements, questions or comments that call attention to words, word phrases or sentences. Examples: "look at those words"; "what do those words say?"; "the word is many."

**Letters.** Statements, questions or comments that call attention to letters, sounds or aspects of decoding. Examples: "what sound do those letters make?"; "sound it out." All speech acts, whether requestives or assertives for the mother or assertives or respondives for the child, were coded according to the levels of print.

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**Appendix B**

*Mother's strategies for giving assistance*

Erica's mother

Seventeen turns were coded as aid.

**Phonic.** Reminds child of vowel rules. Example: "The a says its name."

**Word.** 1. Supplies word that child has omitted. 2. Says word that child has incorrectly sounded out or read. 3. Supplies word emphasizing syllables. Examples: "mud/dy."

**Semantic.** 1. Corrects based on meaning. Example: "Taste with your nose?"

**Implementation of strategies.** 1. Usually waits until the child has completed the sentence or hesitates at the word. 2. Reads entire sentences that include the word or phrase that gave the child a problem. 3. Gives information or asks a guiding question. Example: "that's a silent e." 4. Corrects own errors that she may make while assisting the child. Example: "mud-dee, no my fault, muddy."
Donna's mother

Semantic. Correct or aid related to meaning. Example: "you don't eat a mile, do you?"

Implementation of strategy. Donna's mother has one turn related to aid and this was accomplished with a question.

Sean's mother

Eight of Sean's mother's turns were coded as aid.

Phonic. 1. Called Sean's attention to beginning letter sounds.

Word. 1. Says the word.

Semantic. 1. Based on meaning, uses text or pictures to relate to child's previous knowledge. Example: "You think that might have been breakfast with the sandwiches?"

Implementation of strategy
1. Used questions during and after child read the word or phrase. 2. Makes statement and leaves off the answer to allow the child to fill in (cloze type aid). 3. Repeats word or phrase.

Joseph's mother

Twenty of Joseph's mother's turns were coded as aid.


Word. 1. Supplies part of a word by saying a word with the same meaning. Example: "another word for stomach."

Implementation of strategies. 1. When the child is attempting to sound out the word, the mother takes over the decoding attempt. 2. Mother begins decoding and waits for child to finish. 3. Instructs child to put sounds together. 4. Asks questions or makes statements providing information, usually phonic based. 5. Supplies word after child has attempted decoding usually at the word or letter level, seldom at the phrases or sentence level.