

# Cueing systems vs. context analysis

**Tim Shanahan**



**Teacher question:**

*I attended your recent webinar and you said that students should figure out the meanings of words from context and that they needed to be able to deal with syntax. But I've also read that you are against the three-cueing systems. Isn't that a contradiction? It seems hypocritical to criticise teachers for teaching three-cueing and then to turn around and recommend that they do just that.*

**Shanahan responds:**

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote that, "Foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of small minds."

What I said may seem inconsistent, but it would be foolishly so if I had ignored the fact that two distinctly different processes have to be developed in reading – word reading/decoding and reading comprehension. That these two processes have different purposes and operate somewhat differently shouldn't be beyond the grasp of even the "small minds" among us.

The idea of cueing systems comes from analyses of oral reading errors (or miscues), and a theory of how words are read that simply has not held up to scrutiny. The late Kenneth Goodman examined word reading and found that when words were misread, you could categorise the errors. For example, a student is reading a sentence like: "The man drove his automobile into the drive."

But instead of saying "automobile", he reads "car". This error obviously shows no attention to the orthographic/phonological characteristics of the word (its letters and sounds), but car and automobile are both nouns (so they are syntactically similar) and they are synonyms or have similar meanings (which brings in semantics).

From this, Goodman (1973, p. 9) theorised that a reader collects as little visual information as possible when reading; that he guesses or predicts what is coming based on the semantics and syntax and then "sampl[es] the print to confirm his prediction". In Goodman's theory, the best readers minimise the amount of orthographic/phonemic processing that they do and figure out the words as much as possible based on context.

The problem with that theory is that it isn't right. It turns out to be inconsistent with what we learned about how words are processed during reading. For instance, we know that readers don't "sample the print" in that way; in fact, studies show that we look at pretty much every letter in a text, including those words that would be highly predictable from context.

Additionally, readers are able to recognise words in about a ¼ second, too fast to allow for the amount of neural processing that would be needed to sample all of these types of information. *And we also know* that the best readers are the ones who are proficient with orthographic/phonological processing, and poor readers are the ones who rely on alternative ways to read the words.

If the reader could have read “automobile” he would have, but since he couldn’t, he used the syntactic and semantic information to make a best guess. (The reader found a workaround since he couldn’t really read the word.)

Teaching kids to use these cueing systems to figure out the words is essentially an effort to teach them to read like poor readers. Good readers avoid using anything but the letters and sounds to figure out the words; the poor readers lack this facility so do the best they can.

Eye movement studies, speed of processing studies, neural processing studies, instructional studies, and so on, all concur. Good readers recognise words by translating letters to phonemes, and poor readers are stuck relying on pictures and semantic and syntactic contexts to do the best they can under the circumstances.

I do not support the idea of teaching students to read like poor readers, even if this was an interesting and provocative idea in 1965. (And, I’m stunned by people who refuse to change their minds after the accumulation of 55 years of contradictory evidence – talk about ‘flat-earthers’.)

But reading is not about recognising words alone. It is also about comprehending and using the information in text.

Reading the words properly enables us to make sense of the message in a text – but that making sense requires additional processing.

That’s why we need to teach

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phonemic awareness, phonics, and oral reading fluency so thoroughly and so well. We want readers to have automaticity with these; that is, we want them to read the words accurately, but with little conscious attention. This allows readers to devote their cognitive energies to thinking about the ideas in text.

What do we do to comprehend?

One thing comprehenders do is to figure out word meanings. For words we already know, we simply retrieve meanings from long term memory. In other cases, figuring out a word meaning (not the word, but its meaning) may entail the use of a dictionary, guessing based on context, analysis of the morphemes, or asking somebody for help.

Comprehenders also need to make sense of sentence structures and text structures, and to track ideas across

a text. They need to bring their prior knowledge about the content to bear on the text, too, and to apply their critical senses to the information (is the information true?).

Word reading needs to be automatic and instantaneous. That’s why you don’t guess words using syntactic and semantic information.

Comprehension, on the other hand, is slower and more consciously thoughtful. It requires analysis, reflection, critical thought, and consideration of the language and the content.

My research-based advice is to teach kids both to decode words and to comprehend texts. Those are different things, they entail different abilities, and therefore sound teaching advice is going to differ for each.

When it comes to word reading, I’m going to teach students to decode. When it comes to figuring out word meanings, I’m going to teach students to use context to make sense of the words (and morphology and references). Just like the research says.

That’s wisdom, not inconsistency!

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*Timothy Shanahan is Distinguished Professor Emeritus at the University of Illinois at Chicago and was formerly Director of Reading for the Chicago Public Schools, and president of the International Literacy Association. He is a former first-grade teacher and is a parent and grandparent. His website [www.shanahanonliteracy.com](http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com) is popular with parents and teachers.*

