

Exploring Text Level Difficulty and Matching Texts for Reading Achievement

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Abstract

This qualitative multicase research design focuses on the topics of text levels and guided reading practices. Most of the research related to levels of reading difficulty began with Betts (1946). Betts noted that maximum learning begins at the level of instruction where children are challenged intellectually. Research shows (Stanovich, 1986; Allington, 2005) it is important for children to read the right books at the right level to achieve the greatest growth in word knowledge, fluency and reading skills, and not risk falling behind their classmates. Specific activities for instruction included administration of assessments, selection of texts at independent, instructional and frustration levels and implementation of four block lesson records. Primary assessment tools included interest inventories, informal reading inventory and running records.

Why is it so important for children to read the right books at the right level of difficulty? How do teachers use assessment data to match books to readers? Can we motivate children to read and want to read more with books at varied levels of difficulty? These lines of inquiry need to be considered for all children to achieve the greatest growth in reading.

Most of the research related to levels of reading difficulty began with Emmett A. Betts (Betts, 1946) and his text *Foundations of Reading Instruction*. Betts is recognized for *guided first reading* which involved silent reading before oral reading. He created reading levels we still employ today when assessing and evaluating readers with respect to their grade level placement. His focus was on the learner and reading achievement, and the central theme of his book was to identify the academic needs of the students and offer methods to meet the individual needs of children in the classroom, which is still a major issue today. Betts proposed using an informal reading inventory to discover reading strengths and areas of development, establishing four basic categories associated with levels of reading difficulty including Basal, Instructional, Frustration

and Capacity. Betts suggested if children can read, both silently and orally, with 90% comprehension and 99% pronunciation, they can read independently and successfully. Betts also noted that maximum learning begins at the level of instruction where children are challenged intellectually. Betts defined instructional level as the teaching level with 75% comprehension and 95% pronunciation. Betts did not support the use of reading materials at the frustration level with comprehension less than 50% and pronunciation less than 90%. The capacity level is the highest level at which children can understand by listening to someone read and respond to questions, with 75% comprehension, and with accurate pronunciation/language and the ability to *add* information due to background of experience.

When contemplating how to help children read, there are a number of critical aspects to plan instruction so readers make progress, including finding the right books at the right levels for all readers. The ability to analyze books for readers is an important part of the literacy equation, and both experienced and inexperienced teachers can benefit from determining appropriate level books for readers (Mesmer, 2008).

The more time children spend reading books at the appropriate level, the greater the growth in word knowledge, fluency, and reading skills (Stanovich, 1986). The process of matching books to readers is often one of the missing *pillars* of effective reading instruction (Allington, 2005). Children should be reading a book at an appropriate level of text complexity all day long. If children are engaged in reading books that are manageable and at a proper level they are less likely to fall behind their classmates (Stanovich, 1986).

Selection of texts that match readers' needs corresponds to The International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professional (2010), Standard 2: Curriculum and Instruction, Element 2.3 - "Use a wide range of texts (e.g., narrative, expository, and poetry) from traditional

print, digital, and online resources.” Evidence that demonstrates competency for teachers Pre K-High School includes building a diverse *multilevel* classroom library (International Reading Association, 2010). Recent implementation of the Common Core Curriculum Standards in the United States has also inspired reexamination of texts and text levels for readers (Fisher, Frey and Lapp, 2012). One goal is to make certain students have the necessary reading, writing and *thinking* skills for complex texts. Texts of the past may have been too easy, and children need to be challenged or even struggle in order to grow as readers (Fisher, Frey and Lapp, 2012). Further, that reading more complex text with proper guidance and instructional support should serve to increase the reading achievement of readers today (Fisher, Frey and Lapp, 2012).

Planning instruction for achievement, however, does not stop at just providing more complex texts. It is vital for teachers to provide instruction for reading complex levels of text. Teachers can best estimate the selection of books for readers by conducting running records to verify the level of difficulty. Practices of leveling texts have for some time been part of the field of education. Even William Holmes McGuffey, who created one of the first and mostly widely used series of textbooks, the *McGuffey Readers*, was grading difficulty of levels of texts in his basal series as early as 1848 (Betts, 1946). Text difficulty was originally measured by first level readability formulas. Readability formulas are mathematical equations to estimate text difficulty and are foundational to our present understanding for analyzing text difficulty (Mesmer, 2008). Readability formulas are defined as any number of objective methods to estimate the difficulty level of reading materials by analyzing samples, with results expressed as reading grade levels. The word length and average sentence length are the most significant predictors of reading difficulty as measured by readability formulas (Harris & Hodges, 1995).

Key to estimating the levels of books necessary for children, as well as suggesting

strengths and areas of development for oral reading print knowledge and comprehension of narrative and expository texts, is the knowledge and application of an informal reading inventory for each reader (Afflerbach, 2010). The inventory can provide the basis for selecting books at varied levels for instruction. One instructional program that uses a varied book collection categorized by levels of difficulty is guided reading (Pinnell, 2002). Ford and Opitz (2008) examined guided reading literature that spanned 50 years, and identified common understandings that have stood the test of time, including goals that provide different guided reading experiences to demonstrate that reading can be fun and something children can do on their own; encourage children to become independent readers as quickly as possible; and help children accomplish reading at their independent and instructional reading levels so they become competent at reading.

Although there are several factors that relate to children's reading success, there is general agreement that children who read with 95-100% word accuracy and 75-100% comprehension are reading at the independent level and children with 91-94% word accuracy and 60-75% comprehension are reading at the instructional level. While educators continue to study programs and practices that influence reading achievement, it will be important to make certain that children are reading texts at the appropriate reading levels for their grade placement and learning capacity.

Methodology

This qualitative multicase research design (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007) focused on the topics of text levels and guided reading practices. Specific activities for instructional practice included administration of target assessments, selection of texts at the independent, instructional and frustration levels and implementation of 4-Block Lesson Records. Research began with the

academic year, Spring Term, 2013. Four graduate candidates enrolled in an advanced level practicum were the participants in the studies to match text levels to readers. Two of the participants were classroom teachers and two were Title I teachers. Title 1 teachers support school classrooms by helping improve the academic achievement of children.

Candidates administered a minimum of six target language and literacy assessments and compiled data in a pre and post-test design. Identifying data included information about the reader's age and grade. Case studies were coded without names appearing. Assessments summarized for target data comprised the following: interest inventory (Hildebrandt, 2001; Reutzel & Cooter, 2012); reader attitude (McKenna & Kear, 1990) or Rhody Secondary Scale (Tullock-Rhody & Alexander, 1980); oral language sample; writing language sample; Bear, Invernizzi, Templeton & Johnston (2012) Spelling Test, and the Qualitative Reading Inventory-V (Leslie & Caldwell, 2011).

Using Leslie and Caldwell's Qualitative Reading Inventory, instructional levels for reading both expository and narrative text as well as listening comprehension capacity were determined pre (the beginning of the tutoring sessions) and post (the end of the tutoring sessions). This data helped the teachers determine learner process strengths and areas of development for each basic process. Candidates analyzed the assessment data by determining the number of miscues for both word recognition and comprehension for each type of text. Candidates shared data with peers and the professor during planning, problem-solving and collaborative sessions throughout the term. For purposes of this study, the primary data gathering language-based assessment tools included interest inventory, informal reading inventory and oral reading running records for texts to reader match, and ongoing monitoring and measurement of reader gains during reading sessions via running records. Running records were typically

completed in three to five minutes. The target assessment data were revisited at the end of the term to note progress.

Four Block Instructional Model with Guided Reading

A four block literacy model (Cunningham, Hall & Sigmon, 1999) was used to plan instruction to help readers improve in reading and literacy. This flexible model was used to teach children according to individual reading needs. Although originally designed for primary grade readers, this model can be modified for use with intermediate and higher grade readers. Four blocks can transition to reading workshop and/or writing workshop in the middle grades. A typical tutoring session was approximately 60 minutes in duration with 15 minutes per block which included guided reading, writing, self-selected reading, and word recognition/spelling, respectively.

Four Block Lesson Components

The guided reading block centered on helping readers improve reading comprehension, with books of interest at the reader's instructional reading level. The level of text employed related to reader background knowledge, reader skills and strategies, motivation, organization and structure of text, and listening capacity of the reader. Running records were accomplished pre and post with this block. The writing block offered opportunities for children to learn to practice writing and build writing skills. Teachers encouraged the think-aloud process of writing (Davey, 1983; Harris & Hodges, 1995), as well as, modeling writing by writing with children during the process (Cunningham, Hall & Sigmon, 1999). The children benefited from learning procedural knowledge for writing in relation to books they read in the guided reading and self-selected reading blocks. The self-selected reading block was intended for children to spend time reading books of interest and choice. The books used were compiled by the teacher and the

reader was encouraged to engage in silent adult-like reading (Gardiner, 2005). In this block, the children typically read books at their independent reading level or instructional reading level. Running records (Clay, 2005) could be accomplished to verify the match of the book for the reader in this block, too.

The word recognition block was modified to include spelling, and was used to promote phonics and spelling, in addition to encouraging the children to collect new and challenging words encountered from reading their texts. Spelling and sorting activities associated with particular stage(s) of spelling in Bear et al. (2012) were used. Word recognition and spelling are correlated processes. Various letter and sound, syllable and word structure activities are accomplished with new words via multisensory methods. Spelling is especially helpful to writing, but the spelling activities are also beneficial to word recognition (Bear et al., 2012). Game-like teacher-made or commercial activities that encourage learning *new* words may occur in this block.

Role of the Running Record

During the guided reading block, oral reading running records (Clay, 2005) were utilized at the beginning of each lesson to determine the match of the text for the reader and to monitor the progress and apt fit of the text. A running record can be accomplished in approximately three to five minutes. Running records reveal the percentage of accuracy for about 100 to 200 words of continuous text read aloud, calculated from the total words correct divided by total words attempted and multiplied by 100, indicating the particular Betts Level Criteria (1946), be it independent, instructional or frustration. Fluency or words per minute can be calculated from total words read aloud, multiplied by 60 and divided by the number of seconds that the child read. Comprehension for the running record is estimated by rating the reader's retell

comprehension. The retell was estimated by using a teacher rating of 1, 2, or 3 for each running record sample determined. A rating of 1 indicated one idea or concept correctly recalled from text; 2 showed two ideas accurately recalled and a rating of 3 signified three ideas or more were correctly recalled from text. Retell for comprehension is an alternative procedure for the original Clay (2005) running record process in order to inform comprehension. Print deviations were the main focus for the original running record process. Clay mentioned that miscue analysis can suggest the particular clues being used by the reader during the reading process. A reader may be using one or more clues in problem-solving words such as visual or graphic clues involving beginning and ending letters and sounds, syntactic word order clues, and semantic clues for making sense of print (Barr, Blachowicz, Bates, Katz & Kaufman, 2013).

Criteria for Text Level Difficulty

The informal reading inventory and oral reading running records were used to determine text level difficulty using Betts Level Criteria (1946), modified for purposes of this study: frustration reading level, 89% accuracy or less accuracy for all grades; instructional Reading level, 90% to 97% accuracy for Grades 1 to 3 and 90% to 95% accuracy for Grades 4 to 12; and independent reading level, 98% or more accuracy for Grades 1 to 3 and 96% or more accuracy for Grades 4 to 12. The percentages used for judging text difficulty and match of texts for readers in this study are in general agreement with accuracy rates and factors related to children's reading success with guided reading in an examination of the literature (Ford & Opitz, 2008). The percentage of accuracy criteria for primary readers was altered slightly to accommodate primary readers who are developing print knowledge such as alphabet principle, letters and sounds, and sight words, and syllables as they make sense of print. Barr, Blachowicz, Bates, Katz and Kaufman (2013) thought 90 to 94% accuracy was likely too stringent for emergent

primary readers who are learning to read.

In this study, teachers were cautioned about using the more challenging or frustration reading level texts. At the frustration level, teacher scaffolding should be provided to guide the reading of texts so that children experience success. When using texts at the frustration level, teachers were advised to select books no higher than one grade level above the instructional reading level. Betts (1946) recommended that teachers observe children's reactions, body language or excessive movement associated with reading such text which could indicate the need for increased guidance from teachers. The instructional reading level is typically suggested for texts with teacher guided instruction. Instructional level texts are often termed challenging, but not excessively challenging. This level is sometimes referred to as the Zone of Proximity in the field of reading (Afflerbach, 2012; Mesmer, 2008). The independent reading level represents children reading independently, unsupported at home or at school. Ninety-five percent accuracy for Grades 4 and higher was used as running record criteria because the criterion corresponded with the original level employed for instructional reading level (Betts, 1946).

Results

Teachers administered and recorded data for the Target Assessments described in the Methods. The three major assessments for purposes of this research included interest inventories, informal reading inventory and running records. The interest inventories informed the teachers about the child's reading interests. The informal reading inventory provided the instructional reading level for the child, which then allowed the teachers to determine the independent and frustration reading levels, and listening capacity level, too. Running records verified the difficulty level of the texts and provided data about the children's ongoing progress using the percentages of accuracy described in the Methods.

The surveys and inventories revealed the children's interests. Teachers recorded the responses, and were amazed at the impact of such a basic assessment tool. The information gleaned established a rapport with the children and positioned the teachers to select books and materials centered about the children's real interests. Teachers noted the children were not only anxious to attend reading sessions, but inquired about taking books home to read more. Teachers were spending far less time encouraging engagement and motivation, and were able to spend more time on instruction, problem-solving and comprehension of text when children read books of interest.

Interest Profiles for Case Studies #1, #2, #3, and #4

- #1 Grade 3/8 year-old girl enjoyed fantasy genre, dolls, free time and movies
- #2 Grade 3/8 year-old boy enjoyed history genre and information texts
- #3 Grade 5/11 year-old girl enjoyed mystery genre, music and crafts
- #4 Grade 2/7 year-old boy enjoyed science genre and stories about nature and animals

Completion of the information reading inventory revealed the grade levels/ages, instructional reading levels and literacy challenges for the children involved in the Case Studies. Teachers recorded the instructional reading level and literacy strengths and areas of need discovered for their learners in order to select texts at the appropriate reading level.

Reading Levels for Case Studies #1, #2, #3, and #4

- #1 Grade 3/8 year-old girl; instructional reading level for expository text at Grade 1 and instructional reading level for narrative text at Grade 2; child struggles with decoding text;
- #2 Grade 3/8 year-old boy; instructional reading level for expository text at early Grade 3 and instructional reading level for narrative text at early Grade 3; child struggles with decoding text which in turn affects his comprehension;

#3 Grade 5/11 year-old girl; instructional reading level for expository text at Grade 5 and instructional reading level for narrative text at Grade 4; child struggles with comprehension;

#4 Grade 2/7 year-old boy; instructional reading level for expository text at Grade 1 and instructional reading level for narrative text at Grade 1; and the child struggled with comprehension.

Teachers used the instructional reading level as a beginning to their plans for instruction for the child. They also determined the child's independent and frustration reading text levels, and designed and conducted a minimum of three lesson records for each Betts level of text difficulty. In the guided reading block of the lesson record, teachers selected objectives and defined procedures to address the child's literacy needs and interests. Teachers recorded the level of text difficulty, the text and materials chosen to read and recorded findings and observations of what was successful, what they would change in the next lesson, what the child learned and what the child needed to learn. Teachers also accomplished a writing block, self-selected reading block and a word recognition/spelling block to support literacy achievement.

Throughout the process of conducting lesson records, teachers accomplished running records to verify the difficulty level of the texts and monitor the child's ongoing progress. The running records gave the teacher immediate process information about the reader's performance with letters, sounds, words, syntax and semantics of the text. Running records also allowed teachers to determine children's proficiency with publishers' suggested text levels, which may or may not match the levels of an informal reading inventory and the needs of the children. Teachers recorded and analyzed miscues made by the children as they read texts at varied levels to determine the children's performance.

Varied Levels of Instruction and Progress for Case Studies #1, #2, #3, and #4

#1 Grade 3/8 year-old girl made progress with text/materials at the instructional reading level, with the teacher noting improvement in percentage of accuracy in total # of words correct for the number of words attempted/read, fluency rate and rate of retelling (comprehension). At the independent level, there were no significant gains as compared to the instructional reading level. Reading at the frustration level indicated no progress.

#2 Grade 3/8 year-old boy made progress with text/materials at the instructional reading level, with the teacher noting improvement in percentage of accuracy in total # of words correct for the number of words attempted/read, fluency rate and rate of retelling (comprehension). At the independent level, the child seemed more willing to read and made significant gains without really working to capacity. Reading at the frustration level was very difficult, and the child would not put forth any effort.

#3 Grade 5/11 year-old girl made progress with text/materials at the instructional reading level, with the teacher noting some improvement in percentage of accuracy in total # of words correct for the number of words attempted/read and rate of retelling (comprehension). At the independent level, she was able to retell and comprehend more successfully. Reading at the frustration level took more time, but the child did attempt to learn unknown vocabulary by posing questions, talking about the words, and attempting to discover meanings.

#4 Grade 2/7 year-old boy made progress with text/materials at the instructional reading level, with the teacher noting improvement in fluency rate and continued struggle with rate of retelling (comprehension). At the independent level, the child's rate of fluency and rate of retelling improved. Reading at the frustration level, the child searched for meanings to help him gain knowledge and asked more about the meaning of the text.

Discussion of Multicase Research

There are many teachers who are not aware which children may be struggling with reading, and it is important to know what readers need so that help can be provided (Allington, 2010). If teacher educators and teachers take time to identify, collect, examine and analyze assessment data, the data can be used to change outcomes for children (Lipton & Wellman, 2012). When teachers are able to directly observe a child reading a book, writing a story or talking about something of interest, the knowledge teachers gain can influence their instructional practice to benefit children (Afflerbach, 2010). In this multicase research, teachers discovered early on through the use of running record data, the importance of using texts at varied levels, instructional, independent and frustration, and all reported the children made the most progress at the instructional level. “The number criteria for reading levels are not absolute standards; they are guidelines to help teachers evaluate a student’s reading in conjunction with observational data.” (Johns, 2008, p. 9). Afflerbach (2012) referred to factors that are important to increasing reading achievement, naming interests of the child as useful for motivation and development in reading. There are a number of interest inventories available to teachers such as the one created by Reutzel and Cooter (2012) that is timely for 21st Century learners. There were some reports that children showed progress in fluency and comprehension at the frustration level. There is research that students learn more when instruction includes more challenging and difficult texts (Morgan, Wilcox & Eldredge, 2000). Teachers were asked to report the text level and the most progress for specific reading processes, such as word recognition, fluency and comprehension. Most children improved in word recognition, fluency and comprehension at the instructional level. Teachers also reported comprehension improved for expository texts more often than narrative texts.

The use of the four block lesson records and guided reading program selected for this

study provided a systematic, research-based framework for the teachers to plan instruction to improve reading processes at all levels of reading difficulty, instructional, independent and frustration. According to Schmoker (2010), good lessons begin with well-defined objectives and assessments, followed by planned instruction, guided practices, checks for understanding (soul of a good lesson) and ongoing modifications to instruction to meet objectives. Solid research demonstrates students learn four times as quickly from these lessons.

Conclusions and Next Steps

Research shows it is important for children to read the right books at the right level to achieve the greatest growth in word knowledge, fluency and reading skills, and not risk falling behind their classmates (Stanovich, 1986; Allington, 2005). Together, the guided reading program and four block lesson records provided *a model* for effective teacher instruction. The data teachers obtained revealed how the children were developing and how the teachers could help them improve and encourage them to read more.

Following their extensive involvement with educators as they learned, implemented and evaluated guided reading, Ford and Opitz (2008) conducted a survey of 1,500 teachers in the primary grades. The findings indicated that teachers continue to struggle with how to implement guided reading effectively. In this study, teachers were able to analyze the data collected from the assessments to plan instruction and match texts to readers. Next steps will be to expand this research to involve the advanced level practicum clinic and/or extend the investigation to schools and grade levels not previously studied which would allow candidates to increase the amount of time spent with the children and offer more opportunities to work with varied levels of text difficulty, varied sequences of text levels and varied language and literacy processes to determine reading achievement and encourage more reading. For example, perhaps it will work

best to improve fluency by beginning with the independent level, following with the instructional level and concluding with the frustration level. Or, when addressing comprehension and teaching a particular strategy while children are reading the text, it may be more helpful to use the independent level to reduce the cognitive load so children can attend to the strategy as well as the meaning of the text.

In this study, the Professor recommended teachers have a minimum of three to five books of interest to the children at each Betts level to be used in the guided reading block and the self-selected reading block of the lesson records. It is crucial to have an adequate number of books of varied genres and levels for readers to read and appreciate (Allington, 2006). In the Preface of her book, Messmer (2008) quoted Mayo Angelo, noting that bringing books and children together can have far-reaching consequences. Unfortunately, there are some schools without libraries and many have limited titles or collections of books, a common problem in high poverty areas. The availability of books is essential to the success of any reading program to encourage children to read.

Some of the critical problems that need to be examined so that we can improve practices with text levels according to Ford and Opitz (2008) are helping educators expand selection of books to ensure that children are reading at the instructional level and developing independent reading opportunities when children are not spending time with teachers. As Mesmer (2008) stated “the more that children read, the better they get; the better they get, the more they are able to read.” (p. 1)

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Resources

<http://www.arbookfind.com/default.aspx>

Book levels using Accelerated Reader book finder info.

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/readers.html>

Free Book Reading Resource

<http://home.comcast.net/~ngiansante/>

Book list by reading achievement level and author and title (For K to Grade 7)

<http://bookwizard.scholastic.com/tbw/viewCustomSearchForm.do?RowsPerPageOptions=%5B10%2C+50%5D>

(Scholastic) Find all levels of books from PreK to grade 12. Search by interest level and reading achievement level. Other categories: language, book type, unit topic/subject and genre/theme.

Helpful Children's Literature Resources and Links

<http://www.acs.ucalgary.ca/~dkbrown/>

<http://school.discoveryeducation.com/schrockguide/fry/fry.html>

Useful readability and book finding resources

<http://www.reading.org>

International Reading Association Book Selection Resources including annotated Children Choices and Teacher Choices. This link provides further rationale for why matching books to readers is SO IMPORTANT.

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