

Intervention Essentials

Leveled Texts for Reading Recovery Students

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To begin, let us be clear: Books are leveled, not children! Leveled books are temporary scaffolds used by teachers providing superb literacy instruction ensuring students gain proficiency and experience success reading texts of ever increasing complexity. We find this important for both Reading Recovery® and classroom teachers. This discussion reviews factors key to text leveling and the importance of using leveled text with Reading Recovery students and echoes the authors' perspectives on the use of leveled texts in primary grade literacy instruction (Briggs et al., 2025).

What is text level? Text gradient?

In general, text level indicates the difficulty of a text. It is often labeled the 'readability' of a text, and as such takes into account a number of features, including layout, nature of the language structures, decodability of the words, familiarity of the topic, interest to the reader, among many other factors. Different text leveling schemes, accounting for these features in some form, have existed since the 1840s.

Reading Recovery teachers have an implicit theory of text difficulty emanating from their understanding of early literacy development. Recently, the identification of a valid gradient of text difficulty has been verified by Connie Briggs and Jerry D'Agostino in an extensive study

using a leveling process accounting for the multidimensionality and sophistication of texts (Briggs, personal communication, 2025). Consequently, Reading Recovery teachers have a research-based procedure for identifying text difficulty and determining a reliable gradient of texts of increasing difficulty. This allows teachers to identify and select texts of appropriate challenge for each of their struggling readers with confidence. This is important in the contexts of both teaching and assessing young readers.

What is the importance of leveled texts to students?

The following key reasons for using leveled texts in primary literacy instruction pertain to all learners and are especially important for Reading Recovery students.

The very early, beginning leveled texts provide students opportunities to learn the foundational skills of reading, including concepts about print. Many students come to school understanding these concepts as they have been exposed to books in their homes and have been read to by caregivers. Those children who have not had opportunities to engage with books at home or have not yet noticed how print works in English need specific instruction addressing foundational concepts of print and how books work. Instruction in the early levels of text difficulty allow for and support this learning.

As readers gain control over concepts about print, they need opportunities to encounter high-frequency words and apply newly acquired decoding skills on unknown words in continuous, meaningful texts. As levels increase, the complexity of the texts increases in multiple ways, including use of more multisyllable words and more advanced vocabulary. These texts offer opportunities for students to problem solve by applying their word analysis skills, to monitor, and to read fluently with comprehension.

Young readers have the best opportunity to learn and practice proficient literacy processing strategies when given texts that are under their control. Most theorists (e.g., Shanahan, 2025), agree that with beginning readers teachers use texts that are at an appropriate instructional level. It is informative to review three levels of text difficulty.

How do varying levels of text difficulty affect learning?

Reading Recovery teachers apply these varying levels of text difficulty in both teaching and assessing. This review highlights the impact of these alternative levels on learners.

Independent Level: Learning Opportunities Independent level texts are easy for the child to read and provide rich learning opportunities. Reading Recovery teachers encourage their students to read volumes of books at the independent

level in order to create opportunities for them to

- build reading fluency,
- experience proficient literacy processing (reading as an expert reader),
- focus on meaning,
- apply decoding skills successfully on the run,
- engage in self-monitoring,
- respond to meaning with a personal connection,
- learn new vocabulary, and
- acquire deeper understanding of concepts.

Enhanced learning results because their successful processing—which entails recognizing or decoding words with ease—allows them to attend, albeit often unconsciously, to aspects of the text that might be novel (e.g., new words or literary features). These opportunities allow readers to view themselves as successful readers, experience enjoyment and motivation for reading, gain enhanced appreciation of the place of literacy in their lives, and view reading as a life-long endeavor.

Instructional Level: Learning Opportunities This is the level that is read by the child with the teacher's support. At this level, students meet challenges that, with teacher's instruction, extend their competencies in the wide range of literacy skills, including decoding unknown words, acquiring word meanings, monitoring and applying fix-up strategies, self-correcting that is self-tutoring, comprehending what is read, and gaining familiarity

and control of a wide range of literary conventions, including text structure and author purpose. With instructional support, students experience successful problem solving and gain confidence in their reading and thinking abilities.

Frustration Level: Challenges to Learning Opportunities The frustration level is a text level that presents challenges beyond a student's current level of proficiency even with teacher support. As a result, the reader is unable to benefit from the teacher's instruction as there are too many challenges in the targeted text. Among these challenges are

- unknown words (often multisyllabic words) difficult to recognize as that require more advanced decoding skills;
- unfamiliar vocabulary terms that surpass the learner's capacity to learn and integrate; and
- new concepts that do not link to the learner's background of understandings and therefore, even with a teacher's explanation, are too difficult for the reader to comprehend.

The learner experiences inability to read fluently, to decode unknown words independently, to self-monitor and self-correct, and hence the need to rely on frequent teacher direction. The learner is not able to comprehend at a level that ensures new learning of concepts and vocabulary. Such unsuccessful experiences negatively impact the learner's motivation and confidence. Reading could easily become an

avoided activity. Additionally, experiencing struggles and lack of success may lead to learned self-helplessness making new learning hard for the student.

Conclusion

Understanding text leveling is one key to creating high-quality instruction, whether in one-to-one tutoring or classroom instruction. Thoughtful, responsive teaching with appropriate texts helps us ensure that all students realize their potential and become confident, capable readers.

References

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