SCALE Up Your Students' Writing

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Have you ever wondered what exactly is meant by the term writing complexity and how you should measure it? During spring 2024, I, along with a team of doctoral students enrolled in the Reading Recovery® doctoral theory course, spent time attempting to answer that question. Our result was the creation of a measurable rating scale that we used to evaluate students' writing complexity for sentences, vocabulary, and student independence. Our manuscript published in *The Journal of Reading Recovery* (Shaw et al., 2024) details our research process and the tool we created, which we called Syntactic Composition and Authentic Language Evaluator (SCALE).

SCALE (see Appendix) uses a 1–6 rating, with 1 as low and 6 as high for each component (sentence structure and vocabulary). When scoring, a child may receive the same or different 1–6 score for each component. For sentence structure, many Reading Recovery children begin writing a simple declarative sentence with a subject, verb, and direct object that includes an adjective (score of 2). Throughout lessons they will use adverbial and prepositional phrases to provide more details (score of 3), and they will write compound sentences (score of 5 or 6). Hopefully, the first graders also learn various sentence types (imperative, interrogative, exclamatory). Likewise, their early attempts at writing vocabulary often include simple words that may include names of family and friends (score

of 2 or 3). With scaffolding, their vocabulary complexity grows to include more book language (score of 4), topic-specific words (score of 5), as well as varied and emotive language (score of 6).

In this article, I present SCALE data voluntarily given by three Reading Recovery teachers plus their teacher leader on their second-round Reading Recovery students between March and May 2025. They used two (sentences, vocabulary) of the original three SCALE aspects to measure their students' growth once a month. In addition to the SCALE assessment data, teachers also reflected. My research question was, "How does teacher use of the SCALE writing assessment support student writing growth and their teaching reflection of writing?" In this manuscript, my goal is to analyze SCALE as an assessment of Reading Recovery student writing, but also as a potentially useful tool for teacher reflection that hopefully influences their teaching. I glean and share theoretical foundations, provide an overview of the research methodology, present the findings, then draw conclusions and implications for Reading Recovery teachers and future research.

Theoretical Foundations

I begin with seminal quotes from Marie Clay and the questions we asked at the start of our research project. Perhaps you've found yourself relating to some of these inquiries. In *Change Over Time*,

Clay (2015b) wrote, "By the time children complete their early intervention lessons they need to have fluent control of writing sentences and be well-prepared to produce stories of greater length and quality back to their classrooms" (p. 26). In *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, Clay (2016) wrote, "A Reading Recovery teacher needs to become a good judge of increasing complexity in the daily writing. It is not easy to capture what increasing the complexity of construction means" (p. 79). Clay provided an example of one student's change from simple to complex sentences between lessons 1 and 65, stressed the importance of teacher interaction to support the child's initiations towards complexity, and then referenced a model (Jack's profile) of successful progress in writing (2016, p. 201). At the conclusion of Jack's profile, Clay said, "It is a very complex task to track the changes, and the interchanges, that occur during writing!" (2016, p. 211).

Clay's quotes challenged our discussions about Reading Recovery students' writing. In our collaborative work we asked questions such as these:

- What is writing quality?

- Is quality comparable to complexity? (a term Clay used more often)

- Am I a good judge of writing complexity?

- What does writing complexity look like?

- Is complexity simply the difference between simple and compound sentences or is there more?

- What role does sentence type play in complexity?

- What about conjunctions, adjectives, adverbs and prepositions?

- Is complexity based on the child's independence in writing?

- What about the child's use of written vocabulary?

- How can we quantify differences in vocabulary?

- What role do known words play in complexity?

We also discussed Clay's (2016) phrase, "track the changes and interchanges" (p. 211), what that meant for us as educators, and how that tracking should look on our daily lesson records and documented over the 12–20 weeks of intervention. We also spent a lot of time discussing the relationship between reading and writing and its influence on complexity.

Clay (2016) described reading and writing reciprocity using analogies "having two hands" and "common ground." Much like each hand can work independently, there is also unity and strength when using two hands. Oftentimes we have a dominant hand, but both hands can complete many similar tasks. Likewise, the ground (or the basis) of reading and writing has commonalities in strategic activity. In *Literacy Lessons*, Clay (2016) mentioned reciprocity in six different sections. In *Change Over Time,* Clay (2015b) embedded reading and writ-

ing reciprocity throughout the book, outlined a possible progression of literacy processing for both reading and writing (Table 1, pp. 84–85) and often used descriptive terms for reciprocity like "extra power" (p. 9) and "two for one bargain" (p. 11). Educators who understand the connections between reading and writing can maximize the child's strategic efficiency by "linking invisible patterns of oral language with visible symbols" (2016, p. 5) and "lift" the child's processing. Having stated the importance of reciprocity, we now turn our minds to a child's processing of mental networks, followed by message composition and vocabulary because they shape how ideas are generated, structured, and expressed.

Networks

Learning is not an isolated task, and the brain works most efficiently when internal networks are linked. Initially, the brain networks may seem to work slowly in tasks such as forming letters, putting letters together to form words, learning directionality, and so forth. Even though students can't describe what is happening in their brain, Clay (2015a) said that "the constructive nature of the task in writing is probably more obvious to the young child" (p. 109). This quote implies the value of daily writing time. As the unseen internal networks strengthen, the brain speeds up and integrates new learning. For example, forming individual letters takes less attention, and more effort is put towards writing unknown words. Through active processing students use various sources of information. They reread and check their written message and correct

their errors without prompting. They become more independent at controlling the task by keeping the message in memory, applying sound analysis when needed, quickly writing known words, and using what is known to write a new word. Their written text becomes increasingly complex and difficult over time.

Messages

The daily written message should be the child's ideas and words; however, "the message construction is a literacy task completed jointly with quality teaching interactions" (Clay, 2015b, p. 23). The teacher open-endedly invites the child to form a message through conversation. Oral language should be linked with writing (Clay, 2015b) and children's development in vocabulary and sentence patterns grow rapidly (Clay, 2015a). The teacher may guide the child's message to be expanded (Clay, 2016) and support the child to hold the message in his working memory. During the composition process, the child will parse the sentence, word-by-word, and use cognitive processing to assemble the message through strategies such as monitoring, rereading, and checking (Clay, 2016).

Vocabulary

Children rely on oral communication until they reach formal schooling. It is imperative that adults talk with a child and provide the child "many opportunities to hold a real conversation with a competent and flexible speaker of English" (Clay, 2015c, p. 31). Through conversation, children grow in their vocabulary knowledge. Beck, McKeown, and Kucan (2013) classified vocabulary in three tiers: general vocabulary,

specialized vocabulary, and technical vocabulary. Tier 1, general vocabulary, are everyday words, such as "mom," "play," "run," and "look." Tier 2, specialized vocabulary, are useful in multiple settings and may have varied meanings. Examples include "bat" (sports equipment/animal), "howled," "pretend," and "characters." Tier 3 is technical vocabulary connected to a specific discipline, such as "photosynthesis."

As children gain control over oral language they attempt to apply their spoken vocabulary to their writing. Robinson (1973; as cited in Clay, 2015b) found that a student's writing vocabulary—which is the number of words the student can write in a given time limit—was "the main predictor of early reading progress" (p. 65). Thus, a teacher's time spent building writing vocabulary is worthwhile. Students have words they know and can automatically write, words that are coming under control, and words they have never attempted to write before. A wise teacher will judiciously make choices on what words should be taken to sound or spelling boxes, which words should be mastered quickly, which words have generative aspects (Clay, 2015b), and which words the teacher should simply write for the child at a specific point in time.

In sum, Reading Recovery teachers should be a good judge of students' writing complexity. Theoretically, there is a connection between reading, writing, and oral language that influences the child's structure and vocabulary produced in their oral message and written message. Strategic processing occurs in the brain when students engage in reading and writing tasks.

Methodology

I have chosen a collective case study methodology for this research. "The case is a specific, complex, functioning thing" (Stake, 1995, p. 2). Features of a case study include being (a) particularistic, which is good for designing practical problems; (b) descriptive, which uses literary techniques to present the data; and (c) heuristic, which focuses on new insights and interpretation in a real-life context (Merriam, 1998). Since I am interested in understanding the "process" of teachers using the SCALE assessment to measure student growth and support their decision making, the case study methodology is particularly suitable (Merriam, 1998). Collective case study implies that several cases are presented, providing richer data interpretation than an individual case.

Participants

In this manuscript, there are a total of eight cases; each case is bound by one teacher and one Reading Recovery student with data from three lessons. Three Reading Recovery teachers and one Reading Recovery teacher leader (hereafter mentioned as the four teachers) at a midwestern school district each taught and submitted data for two first graders who received Reading Recovery second-round intervention spring 2025.

All four teachers were veteran teachers with 18, 25+, 35, and 36 years of experience. Specifically in Reading Recovery, one was in her training year while the other three teachers had 6, 13, and 15 years of experience teaching Reading Recovery. Three of the teachers held master's degrees.

A total of eight first graders participated in this study as they daily met their Reading Recovery teacher. One first grader was a girl and the remaining seven were boys. Since this was volunteer participation and I did not want to overwhelm the teachers, I asked the teachers to choose two of their four students to participate. There were no discriminating features for which students were included in this study. The teachers offered their student selection rationale by stating they were curious about some aspect. For example, perhaps the child was slow to accelerate, showed signs of dyslexia, showed greater strength as a reader than a writer, a child said writing was his favorite part of the lesson, and so forth.

Data sources

Teachers submitted three data sources: the child's writing samples, the SCALE assessment score [see Appendix], and reflections to a short questionnaire:

1. What did you learn about your student's writing from using SCALE?

2. How will that knowledge impact your teaching?

3. Feel free to share any additional thoughts, questions, or concerns.

The student writing samples, SCALE writing assessments, and teacher questionnaires for all eight students were scanned and uploaded

Table 1. Organization of Spreadsheet to Analyze Data								
Teacher Name	Student Name	Month of Data Collection	Child's Composed Sentence	Sentence Structure Score	Vocabulary Score	What the Teacher Learned	What the Teacher Planned Next in Teaching	Other Notes or Thoughts from the Teacher

to a shared folder at the end of the school year. These three data sources (one of each) are called a data set and were collected at three points (March, April, May) during Round 2.

In addition to the three data sources, during the summer the teachers were asked to give their overall feedback via email. The teachers were asked to write a healthy paragraph about how they viewed the writing assessment, time spent using SCALE; feedback specific to the SCALE assessment for improvement; and any other pertinent information they wished to share.

Data collection

Second-round Reading Recovery lessons continued as expected. The teacher leader sent an email to all 32 district Reading Recovery teachers. Three teachers volunteered to participate in the research study. The teacher leader provided SCALE assessment training. The teachers were asked to collect data sets during each of these three time periods: March 3–7, April 7–11, and May 12–16. They could choose the day during the designated weeks that best suited their schedule to collect a writing sample from their two first graders. Immediately after collecting the writing sample, they were asked to complete the other two data sources: analyze the sample

using the SCALE (see Appendix) and complete the short questionnaire. After the final May data were collected, the teachers were asked to upload to the shared folder each student's writing sample, scored SCALE assessment, and teacher questionnaire.

In July, the teachers were sent an email requesting their reflection about the use of the SCALE writing assessment.

Data analysis

Summer 2025, I took all the uploaded data and entered it into a spreadsheet for easy comparison in one document. Table 1 shows how the spreadsheet was organized.

Each student had three rows of data (one row per month of data collection). Because I was interested in each case, I printed and analyzed each child's three rows of data including the composed sentence, ratings in sentence structure and writing vocabulary, what the teacher learned and planned for next steps in teaching. This holistic analysis enabled me to create a picture of each case. After creating the picture summary of each case I looked across all eight cases to see if I could find some lasting lessons about student growth and the teachers' reflection of the SCALE.

Even though the summer teacher email I sent to obtain their "after the research study" perspective does not directly answer the research question, their responses provided valuable information. Therefore, at the end of the case study findings I include a summary paragraph from the teachers. I individually collected the emails and combined them into a Word document. I looked through the responses for themes to incorporate into the final section of the findings.

Findings

To answer my question, "How does teacher use of the SCALE writing assessment support student writing growth and their teaching reflection of writing?" I begin presenting each case with students' numerical SCALE data, selected writing samples, and teacher reflection from the questionnaire. In all cases, the teachers and Reading Recovery students are given pseudonyms. Please note that each child received a numerical score 1–6 rating on sentence structure and vocabulary. The sentence structure and vocabulary scores may be similar or different at each point in data collection. For example, a child may write a simple sentence with an adjective (sentence structure score of 2), but include an inflected ending (vocabulary score of 3). (See Appendix for the complete SCALE.)

See Table 2 for a brief review of scores 2–5 for sentence structure and vocabulary. Scores 2–5 were most common in the findings. See Appendix for complete descriptions of scores 1–6. Also, please note that both the sentence structure and vocabulary are listed under the same numerical score, but the child did not have to have both the same sentence structure (SS) and vocabulary (V) score.

Case #1: Amy (Reading Recovery teacher) and Molly (first grader)
(See Figure 1.) Amy learned that Molly initially wrote simple sentences with familiar word choice (March), her sentence structure and vocabulary matched in score (April), and she grew consistently (May). Molly's first sentence was simple and then she wrote compound sentences for April and May. Her April example is, "My momma is the best because she is getting me a hover board." Amy attributed growth in complexity because she encouraged Molly, on most days, to use her reading text as a writing topic.

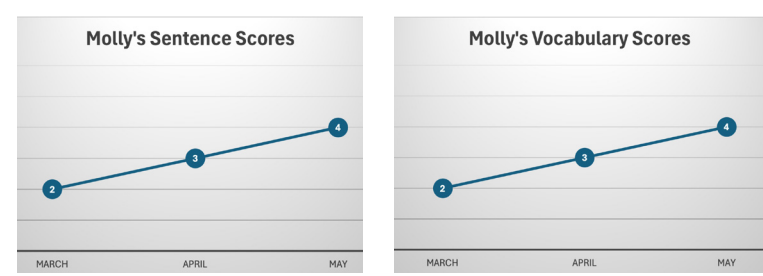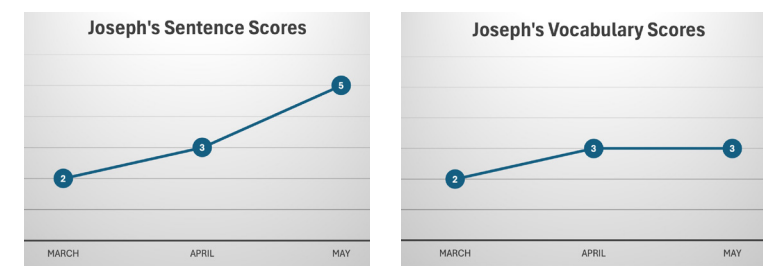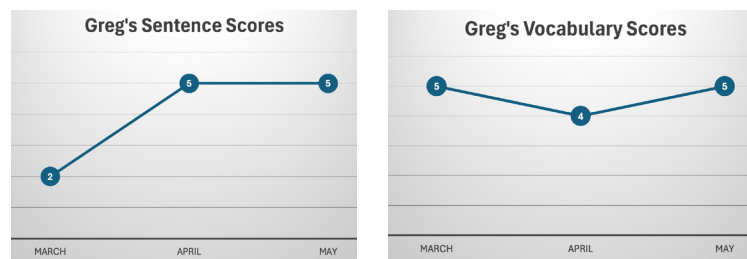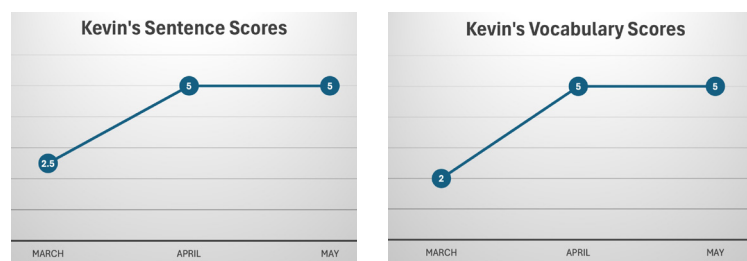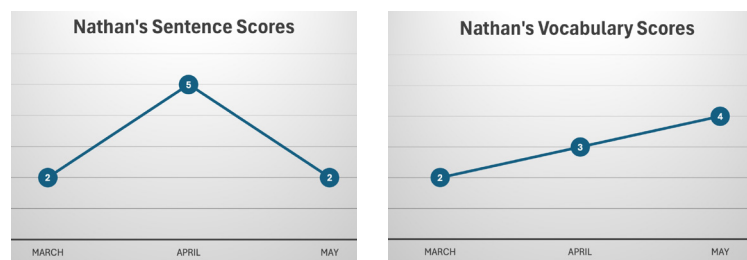**Figure 1. Molly's Numerical Scores for Case #1**

Case #2: Amy (Reading Recovery teacher) and Joseph (first grader)
(See Figure 2.) Regarding Joseph's initial sentence, "I like to work with my dad," Amy said that Joseph knew what a sentence is, and she would "love to see him add a few more details." Between March and April, Amy asked Joseph to write

Figure 2. Joseph's Numerical Scores for Case #2

about a familiar text. Amy noted, "He is growing and learning how to construct better sentences. I want to encourage him to continue making sentences that are rich in vocabulary and meaning." By May, Joseph wrote a more meaningful sentence with a compound sentence structure: "Danny is a spy and he has funny eyebrows."

Case #3: Naomi (Reading Recovery teacher) and Greg (first grader)
(See Figure 3.) In March, Greg wrote, "My fish has pretty scales." Naomi offered, "He is off to a good start. He wrote a good basic sentence. I will encourage him to add when or where info." To clarify her general terms of good/basic, Naomi said she learned Greg knew noun/verb agreement and used an adjective. In both April and May, Naomi said next teaching steps

Table 2. Summary of Scores 2–5 for Sentence Structure and Vocabulary

Score of 2
SS   Simple sentence with an adjective
V   Familiar, common words and simple high-frequency words

Score of 3
SS   Simple sentence with adverbial and/or prepositional phrases
V   Vocabulary that includes inflected endings, words in a child's context

Score of 4
SS   Simple sentence with exclamation or dialogue or question
V   Book proper nouns and book language

Score of 5
SS   Compound sentence with adjectives, adverbial, or prepositional phrases
V   More topic-specific and descriptive words

Figure 3.   Greg's Numerical Scores for Case #3

Greg's Sentence Scores

Greg's Vocabulary Scores

Figure 4.   Kevin's Numerical Scores for Case #4

Kevin's Sentence Scores

Kevin's Vocabulary Scores

Figure 5.   Nathan's Numerical Scores for Case #5

Nathan's Sentence Scores

Nathan's Vocabulary Scores

should "continue to discuss his ideas in depth before determining what to write." Naomi realized the power of the conversation and its impact on writing complexity. Greg's May writing sample showed that complexity with a compound sentence and topic-specific words; "There are over 1000 kinds of snakes and they lived before the dinosaurs."

Case #4: Naomi (Reading Recovery teacher) and Kevin (first grader)

(See Figure 4.) Naomi recognized that Kevin's oral language strength influenced his writing complexity. After analysis of his March sample, Naomi said she needed to encourage Kevin to generate sentences that do not start with "I." Even though Kevin's April writing began with "I," it was personalized and expressive because Kevin was motivated to write about video games: "I need to get rid of the End Crystals to defeat the Ender Dragon." Naomi's next

step in teaching was to encourage Kevin to add information in his writing such as who, what, when, and where. By his final writing sample, Kevin included who, what, and where and he independently used a contraction.

Case #5: Julia (Reading Recovery teacher) and Nathan (first grader)

(See Figure 5.) Julia commented that Nathan's initial writing didn't match his oral language. She inferred Nathan resorted to a safe sentence because he saw the writing portion of the lesson as "hard work." Julia's next teaching goal was to "listen more closely to his conversation and attempt to 'capture' a sentence with more structure and vocabulary." By this Julia meant that the oral conversation before composition was rich with interesting details, yet Nathan only wanted to write simply. Her goal was for Nathan to include more interesting Tier 2 vocabulary words as well as elaborate to a more-complex sentence structure. By April, Nathan wrote, "My mom pretended to move and it blow my mind." Julia was celebrating Nathan's ability to connect two ideas and write a compound sentence, which happened because Julia encouraged more complexity during oral rehearsal. Nathan used the word "blow" both in oral and written language. At the end of lessons, Julia was disappointed: "Just as Nathan did during the reading portion of his lessons — he regressed to recording short, safe sentences and he became aware of my attempts to add more details to his writing and refused to do more than he felt like doing. He was happy with just doing enough to get by."

Case #6: Julia (Reading Recovery teacher) and Jackson (first grader)

(See Figure 6.) Jackson made steady progress for both sentence structure and vocabulary. In his initial sentence, "They drilled something into me." Julia said Jackson used the correct verb tense both in oral rehearsal and recording. In April, Julia again noted verb tense: "I realized that Jackson was using appropriated past tense when he easily produced "ran" instead of saying "runned" as he had been saying earlier in RAK and early lessons." Her next step in teaching was to reteach a word work lesson demonstrating the three sounds of the suffix -ed. Julia used magnetic letters -ed to have Jackson build past tense "look," "play," "pat." Then she gave Jackson the word "run." Julia explained some words don't need -ed, such as "runned." She followed up with the word "eat/eated." Julia reemphasized the role that -ed makes past tense, but we have to use our ear to know if -ed makes the word sound right. By May, Julia saw Jackson's writing reflect his reading as he included where/why details and recorded complete thoughts with a conjunction: "We pulled weeds from Jason's garden so we can make my mom happy."

Case #7: Helen (Reading Recovery teacher) and Caleb (first grader)

(See Figure 7.) In March, Helen learned that Caleb used text character names in simple sentences. For next teaching, Helen wrote, "I am interested to see how his messages change if I adjust my prompts to ask for more info like, 'And then what?'" By April Caleb wrote a
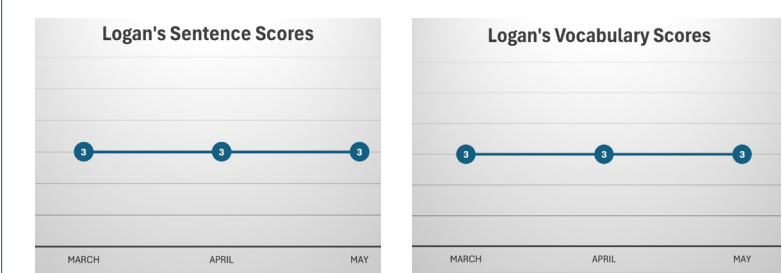
message that included adverbial/prepositional phrases: "The puppy chewed on the pages in the book." Helen questioned, "I wonder if his vocabulary will increase in complexity with more opportunities to write about the books he is reading, including nonfiction texts." By May, Helen realized Caleb used more complex vocabulary (e.g. "a big mess with paint)" and she needed to give him opportunities to try different sentence types.

Case #8: Helen (Reading Recovery teacher) and Logan (first grader)

(See Figure 8.) Logan's writing, by numerical indication, remained very similar over time. After his March writing (Gus got stuck outside), Helen planned ways to prompt him for details and stated, "getting him to talk more may help." By April, Helen wrote, "[Using the SCALE] let me know that I really need to work on getting him to say more because this sample is very similar to the first one." Logan's final sentence, "I

Figure 6. Jackson's Numerical Scores for Case #6

Jackson's Sentence Scores

Jackson's Vocabulary Scores

Figure 7. Caleb's Numerical Scores for Case #7

Caleb's Sentence Scores

Caleb's Vocabulary Scores

Figure 8. Logan's Numerical Scores for Case #8

Logan's Sentence Scores

Logan's Vocabulary Scores

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went hiking with my cousin when I was camping," showed more complexity and detail. Helen noted she wanted to score the writing higher, but his sentence didn't fit the next category of compound sentences. Helen's final goal was to have him read nonfiction books to practice more challenging vocabulary.

Summary Across Cases

I have chosen collective case study, and, in this section, I draw together some major findings across the individual cases. "How does teacher use of the SCALE writing assessment support student writing growth and their teaching reflection of writing?" Using the research question, I present findings based on the two parts: student writing growth and teacher reflection.

Student growth

First, let's look at numerical data for sentence structure. Most first graders initially scored a 2 (simple sentence structure with an adjective) and grew to a 5 (compound sentence

with adjective or adverbial/prepositional phrase) at some point, even if they regressed to a lower score in May. Writing complexity varies for several reasons, including personal student or teacher factors, as well as factors such as time/day. So, it is expected to see a range of scores and fluctuations, especially when we only took three samples. Further, end-of-lessons/end-of-school-year attitudes may have influenced first graders' May writing complexity. We can conclude, with teacher support, the first graders grew in their ability to be more descriptive through adjectives, adverbial and/ or prepositional phrases, and the children were able to compose and record compound sentences. That said, all 24 writing samples were declarative sentences, and additional variety in sentence type (imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory) was missing from the samples.

Now let's look at student vocabulary growth as evidenced with numerical data. Except for Logan, first graders showed improvements from initially relying on familiar common words (rating of 2), using common words with a proper noun (rating of 3) to recording more book language (rating of 4) or topic-specific words (rating of 5). It seemed vocabulary ratings varied more than sentence structure, which could be because sentence structure has predictability (simple versus compound, and the inclusion of descriptors and phrases) and with teacher prompting, a child's simple sentence idea can be expanded. In comparison, vocabulary may be more subjective and dependent on the child's oral language. Naomi noted both of her students had

"excellent oral vocabulary" and this strength showed in their writing. Julia mentioned the importance of having the child "converse and rehearse" before writing. Also, she commented that Nathan wrote the way he talks. Helen stated Logan's simple sentences "seem to match his oral language so getting him to talk more may help." As evidenced, teachers put forth reflective effort to grow their students' vocabulary.

Reflections on teaching

As I read through their notes, I saw a pattern for each teacher. Amy encouraged students to write their story based on their reading and to grow complexity with sentence details and rich vocabulary. Naomi's reflection always included terminology directly from SCALE. Naomi's two teaching foci supported students adding details (where/when/who/ what/why) and the importance of a deep conversation before writing. Similarly, Julia paralleled Naomi's idea but differentiated between two connected ideas: "listen more closely to his conversation and attempt to capture a sentence with more structure and vocabulary" and ensure oral rehearsal before recording ideas. Julia was the only teacher who specifically connected the word work portion of the lesson to the child's writing. Helen had three foci, and they differed from the others. First, she spoke about her prompting, specifically one prompt (And then what?) to expand the child's writing. Like Amy who mentioned including story books as a writing topic, Helen differed in her focus on nonfiction text. Finally, Helen also realized her students'

writing was comprised of declarative sentences, and she needed to give opportunities for additional sentence types.

In summary, student writing complexity growth was expected and documented through a visual score. Teachers judged growth by sentence structure (simple, compound), sentence type (declarative, etc.), descriptors (adjectives, adverbial and/or prepositional phrases) and written vocabulary (e.g. book language and topic specific words). Also, four themes arose from teachers' reflections. First, teachers need to focus on oral conversation in various ways: listening to students, supporting students' idea generation, increasing students' oral vocabulary, orally rehearsing students' composition, and prompting students. Second, teachers should have students write about their reading text (including nonfiction) to expand their writing complexity. Third, teachers should consider connecting the child's word work to writing (repeating a word work lesson is okay). Finally, teachers should look over their students' writing samples for sentence types. If only one sentence type (e.g. declarative) is consistently used, teachers can intentionally teach children to write a variety of sentence types.

Email teacher perspective
I would like to share some additional comments the teachers gave at the end of the research project. All four teachers said that SCALE was an easy assessment to use. It took them initially about 10–15 minutes to evaluate each student's writing sample as they had to study the SCALE indicators.

However, they said, by May, they were able to move through the SCALE indicators more efficiently. Julia offered some great formatting suggestions for the SCALE that will make it more teacher friendly. (See discussion.)

They also said the time evaluating writing was worthwhile because it helped them think more about their teaching of writing in relation to reading. Amy, who was in her Reading Recovery training year, said that she really liked using the writing assessment because it gave her new valuable information to consider that she had never contemplated. For example, she had previously thought about structure, spacing, capitals, and punctuation use, but she never thought about vocabulary. Julia said she found evaluating student writing with the SCALE "to be a valuable way to slow down my thinking and look for opportunities to accelerate my student's writing growth and attempt to make it match their reading growth."

Discussion

This study has attempted to show how a writing scale can illustrate student writing growth and support teacher reflection that hopefully influences teaching. I have three take-aways for Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders:

- Have a system for writing.
- The SCALE is an in-progress tool.
- Connect writing to reading.

First, if you have a system for analyzing student writing that is working well, please continue to use

> The teacher leader can provide initial training, have the teachers use the tool and come back together to reevaluate their specific ratings on a writing sample. Also, the teacher leader can provide support for how the teachers can reflectively use the collected SCALE data to inform their teaching.

that system. However, if you are not systematically analyzing your students' writing and find the SCALE indicators of sentence structure and vocabulary helpful, then consider using the tool to periodically measure growth numerically and/or reflectively. When Clay said a wise teacher would be able to discern writing complexity, she didn't give us more specific language (such as including parts of speech or varying sentence structures and types). The SCALE is to support Reading Recovery teachers to be a good judge of writing complexity (Clay, 2016). As teacher data showed, the specific sentence and vocabulary descriptors indicate the SCALE may be a helpful tool for teacher reflection. Further, across a district the SCALE provides specific terminology for all the teachers to commonly use as they discuss student writing.

Second, please know the SCALE is a working document. The purpose of this research study allowed teachers to try the SCALE and use it reflectively. In my analysis of the student

numerical data scoring their writing samples, I would have changed a few of the teachers' ratings for either sentences or vocabulary. This brings two thoughts to mind. First, the numerical rating is much less important than teaching and teacher reflection. Like most tools, there can be variation over a "rating." Also, there should be ongoing SCALE teacher training. The teacher leader can provide initial training, have the teachers use the tool and come back together to reevaluate their specific ratings on a writing sample. Also, the teacher leader can provide support for how the teachers can reflectively use the collected SCALE data to inform their teaching.

The SCALE, as a working document, can be adapted and changed for your district as needed. For example, Helen's comment that Logan's message should be scored higher but didn't fit the next category is one indication that adjustments can and will need to be made. When we created the SCALE, we used a 6-point rating, but perhaps there should be more ratings (such as an 8 or 9 rating scale) with more specificity in the indicators to represent growing complexity. Based on the data gathered spring 2025, I now suggest adding another rating row for simple sentences that show greater nuances, rather than jumping into a compound sentence for a rating of 5. Also, since the 24 samples only included declarative sentences, the ratings could be reworked to differentiate sentence types. Perhaps the column "sentence structure" should focus solely on simple and compound sentences with adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. Then

a different column can focus on "sentence type" (declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory). Julia suggested adding a rating column on the right side of vocabulary (currently the rating is only on the left side by sentence structure). Julia further recommended a box at the top or bottom to record both sentence structure (SS) and vocabulary (V) scores so the teacher can quickly look back and compare scores over time. A key take-away is that the SCALE is a working document, trialed on a very small scale, and has potential to be revised by your Reading Recovery teachers. Much like the purpose and use of a daily running record, there is value in having a consistent writing tool for teacher reflection. The SCALE can show specifically how students' writing changes over time in greater length and complexity (Clay, 2015b).

Third, the teaching of reading and writing should be connected throughout lessons and a writing assessment tool can facilitate that connection. The idea of linking reading and writing is not new. However, more teaching awareness about writing complexity can strengthen that relationship and make the connection more intentional and explicit to our students. Since its inception, the running record has afforded insights into students' strategic processing during reading. It has also provided evidence of reading growth. Across the districts I know, writing assessment has primarily been recorded as the number of known vocabulary words each week. Now, the SCALE offers one more possibility for an intentional

evaluation of writing that relates to and supports reading. SCALE does not take long to use; teachers become more efficient at analyzing their student writing over time. Teachers also really liked the two reflection questions (What did you learn about your student's writing from using SCALE? How will that knowledge impact your teaching?). These helped them think about the importance of oral conversation, using reading text as a writing topic, and integration across the lesson. Julia summed up the reading-writing connection:

> Understanding the importance of the reciprocity between reading and writing makes daily student analysis imperative! The running record provides the teacher with a daily tool while using the SCALE and [two] follow-up questions provides a process for taking a deeper dive into writing over a period of time since writing development tends to progress at a slower rate than reading growth.

As with all research, this study has its limitations. I did not focus on teacher interviews, which would get more in-depth into their thinking. Also, I did not collect teachers' daily lesson plans and the students' working pages in their writing books, which would have enabled rich data. An additional limitation is the fact that only a select number of teachers and students participated so the findings are not generalizable. In sum, with limitations in data for both the number of participants and data sources, there are possible avenues for future research. These

include an analysis of how Reading Recovery districts currently score their students' writing to see what is currently being used to measure complexity. Increasing the sample size of participants and extending the timeline, such as first-round students, also are some ways to further writing complexity research. Additionally, there are great opportunities for analyzing teacher's lesson plan/notetaking as well as in-the-moment observation of teacher and student interchanges during the writing portion of the lesson as Clay (2016) emphasized the need for capturing quality teaching interactions and interchanges during writing.

Conclusion

The goal of this research study has been to show how the SCALE writing assessment can support student growth in sentence structure and vocabulary. It also provided evidence that teacher reflection prompts instructional next steps. With recommendations for future SCALE tool revision and research, the study shows potential for a writing tool to assist Reading Recovery teachers and teacher leaders to consistently and systematically analyze their students' writing changes over time and purposefully inform instruction.

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About the Author

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Author's Note:

The original SCALE assessment includes three aspects to measure student growth: Sentence Structure, Vocabulary, and Independence. For reader convenience, the full assessment is included in the Appendix on the following pages. Only the first two aspects—Sentence Structure and Vocabulary—are the focus for this article. For more information on the SCALE assessment, email donita.shaw@okstate.edu