

Issues with a Leveled-Only Text Approach

The instructional approach of matching text difficulty levels to student ability levels is not directly addressed by the Standards, but is a widely practiced approach. While all reading experts agree on the crucial role of high-volume reading in developing student reading skill, the CCSS' emphasis on complex text challenges the notion that *all* instruction should be with texts at current student ability levels. High-volume independent reading must necessarily be at levels that students can read independently, and hence difficulty levels will vary by student. But the CCSS suggest a *balance* of high-volume independent reading with heavily-scaffolded instructional reading of more challenging text. The research below suggest that with such scaffolds even struggling readers can access significantly more complex text than that to which they have been traditionally given access.

1. Shanahan, T. (2014). Should we teach students at their reading level? *Literacy Leadership*, 14-15.

Relevant finding:

- Reviews a wide body of research and concludes that using only leveled reading keeps some students from catching up. Summarizes over 20 studies which show a variety of ways in which scaffolds and supports lead to student success with more challenging text. (see Appendix B of this document below)

2. Stahl, S. A., & Heubach, K. M. (2005). Fluency-oriented reading instruction. *Journal of Literacy Research*, 37(1), 25-60.

Relevant finding:

- Students given a variety of supports--including multiple exposures, pre-teaching of vocabulary, echo reading, and partner reading—benefitted from instruction with texts typically considered “frustration level” (85% accuracy). (pg. 199)
- Authors argue that “the instructional reading level for a given child is inversely related to the degree of support given to the reader. That is, the more support given, the lower the accuracy level¹ needed for a child to benefit from instruction.” (pg. 200)

3. Morgan, A., Wilcox, B. R., & Eldredge, J. L. (2000). Effect of difficulty levels on second-grade delayed readers using dyad reading. *The Journal of Educational Research*, 94(2), 113-119.

Relevant finding:

¹ The “accuracy level” of oral reading of the text is a typical measure used to assess the difficulty level of a text. Texts with lower accuracy levels would be texts a student initially finds more challenging.

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- Students who engaged in dyad reading (“buddy reading”) with a more proficient peer made more progress with texts 2-4 grade levels above their instructional level than with texts on their instructional level.

4. **Recht, D. R., & Leslie, L. (1988). Effect of prior knowledge on good and poor readers' memory of text. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 80(1), 16.**

Relevant finding:

- As cited above in the “Knowledge” section of this document, this study showed that poor readers (30th percentile or lower) who had high knowledge of baseball showed greater comprehension of a passage about baseball than strong readers (70th percentile or higher) who knew little about baseball. This finding implies that a student who typically reads at “level J” may be able to read at significantly higher levels if they have prior knowledge of a topic.

5. **Shanahan, T. (1983). The informal reading inventory and the instructional level: The study that never took place. *Reading Research Revisited*, 557-580.**

Relevant finding:

- Critiques the research base behind determination of instructional reading levels, finding that the determination of levels was never validated by rigorous research.

For additional research, see also:

- Fisher, D. & Frey, N. (2014). Scaffolded Reading Instruction of Content-Area Texts, *The Reading Teacher*, [Volume 67, Issue 5](#), pages 347-351, February 2014, International Reading Association. <http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1002/trtr.1234/pdf>
- O'Connor, R. E., Swanson, H. L., & Geraghty, C. (2010). Improvement in reading rate under independent and difficult text levels: Influences on word and comprehension skills. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 102, 1-19. [Independent and Difficult Text Levels: Influences on Word and Comprehension Skills,” Journal of Educational Psychology 102, no 1 \(2010\).](#)
- Pondiscio, R. & Mahnkern, K. (2014). Leveled Reading: The Making of a Literacy Myth. *Education Next*. <http://educationnext.org/leveled-reading-making-literacy-myth/>
- Shanahan, T. (2011) “Rejecting Instructional Level Theory. *Shanahan on Literacy* <http://www.shanahanonliteracy.com/2011/08/rejecting-instructional-level-theory.html>

Appendix: Studies Related to Leveled Text Cited in Shanahan (2014)

Below are bibliographic citations for the 26 studies referenced in Shanahan (2014) regarding students making gains with more complex text when given appropriate scaffolding. In addition abstracts and full-text PDF's of all studies are available as well. These references were provided by Shanahan in “Building Up To Frustration Level Text” in *Reading Today Online* available here:

<http://www.reading.org/reading-today/post/rty/2014/09/02/building-up-to-frustration-level-text>

For more information, visit achievethecore.org/ela-research

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- Bonfiglio, C. M., Daly, E. J., Persampieri, M., & Andersen, M. (2006). An experimental analysis of the effects of reading interventions in a small group reading instruction context. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 15*, 93-109.
- Burns, M. K. (2007). Reading at the instructional level with children identified as learning disabled: Potential implications for Response-to-Intervention. *School Psychology Quarterly, 22*, 297-313.
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- Carney, J.J., Anderson, D., Blackburn, C., & Blessing, D. (1984). Preteaching vocabulary and the comprehension of social studies materials by elementary school children. *Social Education, 48*(3), 195-196.
- Daly, E., & Martens, B. (1994). A comparison of three interventions for increasing oral reading performance: Application of the instructional hierarchy. *Journal of Applied Behavior Analysis, 27*, 459-469.
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- Faulkner, H. J., & Levy, B. A. (1999). Fluent and nonfluent forms of transfer in reading: Words and their message. *Psychonomic Bulletin and Review, 6*, 111-116.
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- Hall, K. M., Sabey, B. L., & McClellan, M. (2005). Expository text comprehension: Helping primary-grade teachers use expository texts to full advantage. *Reading Psychology, 26*, 211-234.
- Levy, B. A., Nicholls, A., & Kohen, D. (1993). Repeated readings: Process benefits for good and poor readers. *Journal of Experimental Child Psychology, 56*, 303-327.
- McComas, J. J., Wacker, D. P. & Cooper, L. J. (1996). Experimental analysis of academic performance in an academic setting. *Journal of Behavioral Education, 6*, 191-201.
- Neill, K. (1979). Turn kids on with repeated reading. *Teaching Exceptional Children, 12*, 63-64.
- O'Shea, L. J., Sindelar, P. T., & O'Shea, D. J. (1985). The effects of repeated readings and attentional cues on reading fluency and comprehension. *Journal of Reading Behavior, 17*, 129-142.
- Pany, D., & McCoy, K. M. (1988). Effects of corrective feedback on word accuracy and reading comprehension of readers with learning disabilities. *Journal of Learning Disabilities, 21*, 546-550.
- Rasinski, T. V. (1990). Effects of repeated reading and listening-while-reading on reading fluency. *Journal of Educational Research, 83*, 147-150.
- Reitsma, P. (1988). Reading practice for beginners: Effects of guided reading, reading-while-listening, and independent reading with computer-based speech feedback. *Reading Research Quarterly, 23*, 219-235.
- Rose, T. L., & Beattie, J. R. (1986). Relative effects of teacher-directed and taped previewing on oral reading. *Learning Disability Quarterly, 9*, 193-199.

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- Sanford, A. K., & Horner, R. H. (2013). Effects of matching instruction difficulty to students with escape-maintained problem behavior. *Journal of Positive Behavior Interventions, 15*, 79-89.
- Sindelar, P. T., Monda, L. E., & O'Shea, L. J. (1990). Effects of repeated readings on instructional- and mastery-level readers. *Journal of Educational Research, 83*, 220-226.
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