

What text level should students read during instruction?

Alison Madelaine

Statement of the problem

It is claimed that there is an optimal level for text read as part of reading instruction, and that reading more difficult texts is damaging.

Proposed solution

The proposed solution has been to match each student with a text at their instructional level, a level at which there is a manageable amount to learn.

The theoretical rationale – how does it work?

Texts used in the classroom are sometimes described in terms of a student's ease of reading. 'Frustration'-level texts are read with less than about 90% accuracy, 'instructional'-level texts are read with about 90–95% accuracy, and 'independent'-level texts are read with greater than 95% accuracy. Frustration-level text is to be avoided, instructional-level text is to be used during reading instruction, and independent-level text is to be used when students read by themselves (e.g. when they read for pleasure). Instructional-level text is said to provide a manageable amount of learning and is therefore optimal for use during reading instruction.

What does the research say? What is the evidence for its efficacy?

The practice of teaching students at their instructional level has originated from an unpublished dissertation from the 1940s by Emmett Betts. Betts' criteria for instructional level were based on anecdotal evidence rather than empirical research. This concept was picked up by others, and it has found its way into classroom practice and textbooks on teaching reading.

Eventually, research started appearing that challenged the idea that students must be taught at their instructional level and that reading material at frustration level is damaging.

Studies have shown that students at a variety of grade levels make reading gains when reading material above their instruction level, that is, at a frustration level (Brown et al., 2018; Lupo et al., 2019, Morgan et al., 2000).

Moreover, research has also demonstrated that when students are placed on instructional-level text, they either did no better than students placed on more challenging texts, or they learned less (Lovitt & Hansen, 1976; Shanahan, 2025).

In 2025, American literacy educator, Professor Timothy Shanahan, released a book detailing the history of instructional level use, and the research on the best level students should read during instruction (Shanahan, 2025). He contends that students are being held back by being taught using books they can already read fairly well. In his book, he provides information on how teachers can assist students to comprehend complex text.

Conclusion

There is little evidence that teaching students using texts where they can already read most of the words (i.e. at their instructional level) results in the largest reading gains. Instead, students should be reading more challenging texts with scaffolding from the teacher. Note that the main alternative to teaching students at their instructional level is to teach them at their grade level. The concept of grade-level text is used in the United States and is not as common in Australia. When students read by themselves, they should read texts with a high level of accuracy.

Key references

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