Editor’s Note
Literacy Instruction remains the cornerstone of a solid education, and educators are revisiting traditional approaches to teaching reading while also introducing new strategies and technologies. In this Spotlight, read how schools are creating authentic reading experiences for resistant readers, building early literacy among English-language learners, and the role of ed-tech tools in differentiating reading instruction.

Contents
2 Should Teachers Still Be Using ‘Just Right’ Books?
3 Early Jump on Oral Literacy Crucial for ELLs’ Later Success
5 Can Latin Build Young Vocabularies?
7 Literacy Gets a Personalized Makeover
9 To Boost Reading, Stop Blaming Teachers and Start Building Knowledge
10 The Importance of Real Reading for Resistant Readers
11 Beware the Racist Subtext of Children’s Books
classrooms around the country use variations of what’s known as the “five-finger rule.” It’s a method for choosing a book at a child’s “just right” reading level, and the directions for students go something like this:

Pick a book. Open to a page in the middle. Read the page and whenever you get to a word you do not know, put a finger in the air. If you have more than five fingers in the air at the end of the page, the book is too hard for you. Zero fingers means the book is an easy one. And one to five fingers means the book is “just right.”

The idea is that students should be reading at their “instructional level” (just a few mistakes per page), which will challenge but not overly frustrate them.

However, according to literacy expert Timothy Shanahan, that idea simply isn’t backed by research.

In a series of recent blog posts, which stirred up some impassioned responses, Shanahan argues that students in 2nd grade and above are motivated by and can learn from a wide range of text levels, including those much tougher “than we might have dared to use in the past.” He writes:

“[T]he idea that we want students to be challenged, but not too much—they can miss some specific number of words, but only that number and no more—just hasn’t panned out. When learning and book placement have been studied there has usually been no connection at all or the harder placements have led to more learning. (In other words, our relatively easy book matches may be holding kids back, preventing them from exposure to more-challenging features of language and meaning.)”

He points to more than a half-dozen studies—the most recent of which was a 2010 study by O’Connor, Swanson, and Geraghty—showing that there’s no reason to adhere to “instructional level.”

“The idea that we want students to be challenged, but not too much—they can miss some specific number of words, but only that number and no more—just hasn’t panned out.”

TIMOTHY SHANAHAN
LITERACY EXPERT

Curiosity Outweighs Fear?

Shanahan also says that researchers have found repeatedly that students choose to read books that would be considered too hard for them, or at their frustration level, for independent reading.

“Of course, with really low readers, what else could they choose?” he writes. “But this appears to be the case for the better readers, too. I guess their curiosity about the content of the harder materials outweighs their fear of failure.”

Giving students more challenging texts also won’t hurt their decoding, Shanahan writes. Sure, kindergartners and 1st graders will guess at words they do not know. But after 2nd grade, the methods students use to get through tough texts “have not been found to slow kids’ reading development or to disrupt their growth in decoding ability from that point,” he writes.

Overall, Shanahan recommends giving students texts at all levels, and switching up the amount of support they receive depending on what they’re reading.

Debates about text complexity have been going on for years, and more so recently in light of the Common Core State Standards, which more than 40 states are now using. The standards say students should read complex texts at their grade level—but many educators argue that’s unrealistic in diverse-ability classrooms. And though the common-core standards have been out for six years now, and the majority of the country’s students are being taught and tested on them, it’s clear there’s still plenty of disagreement that grade-level text is the best way to go.
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Early Jump on Oral Literacy Crucial for ELLs’ Later Success

By Corey Mitchell

At a time when the value of play is a raging debate in early education, Liliane Vanoy has an almost singular focus for the prekindergarten students enrolled in her school.

Vanoy says the word three times for emphasis: vocabulary, vocabulary, and vocabulary.

“I don’t care if your student comes here with two words. At the end of the year, he needs to know 5,002,” Principal Vanoy tells her teachers at the city’s Dual Language Academy.

Vanoy understands the expectation may seem intense and stressful for 4- and 5-year-olds, especially those learning English as a second language.

Parents often question her about how much playtime their children are getting at the school, where at least two hours per day are dedicated to teaching literacy. Vanoy agrees that children should play, but she also explains to parents that their children are tested early and often in kindergarten.

In Oklahoma, student literacy is assessed during the second week of kindergarten classes, and children are tabbed as above- or below-grade-level before some of them have even adjusted to classroom routines.

“Early childhood is not what it used to be,” Vanoy said.

For nearly two decades, Oklahoma has provided universal access to free prekindergarten classes for every 4-year-old in the state, and Tulsa’s programs are considered the crown jewels.

The laserlike focus on literacy has produced notable early results here, especially for English-language learners—those students who come from non-English speaking homes.

Despite the program’s early success, questions remain about the long-term benefits.

Overall, the Hispanic children who pass through Tulsa’s pre-K classrooms come to kindergarten more academically prepared for school than those who don’t, according to a long-term study from Georgetown University.

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LILIANE VANOY
PRINCIPAL, DUAL LANGUAGE ACADEMY, TULSA, OKLA.

The Georgetown researchers have found that they are, on average, months ahead of their peers who don’t enroll in pre-K in reading and four months ahead in writing.

The team has spent 15 years studying Tulsa’s efforts, and the data indicates that English-learners are among the student groups who have benefited most from the access to free pre-K classes.

But Tulsa’s state test scores in elementary reading have remained stagnant for the past decade and have even slightly declined for English-learners.

Seeking out solutions, Tulsa has undertaken a small-scale experiment at the Dual Language Academy, where the classrooms are an almost-even split of native English speakers and Spanish speakers.

Dual Language Learning

The dual-language approach makes it possible for an English-learner to help a native English-speaking child sitting next to him learn Spanish and vice versa.

Like Tulsa, more states and school districts are aiming to reach English-language learners in the earliest stages of the education pipeline.

Research indicates that early exposure to a language boosts a child’s odds of better academic performance later on.

That’s crucial for Tulsa, a district of nearly 40,000 students that has undergone a dramatic demographic shift in recent years.

Hispanic students are now 31 percent of the student population, outnumbering all other races and ethnicities in the public schools here.

In the past decade, the number of Hispanic students in Tulsa has more than doubled, and many of them are native Spanish speakers. Overall, nearly 1 in every 3 students in the district speaks Spanish at home.

“The urgency of getting this right is even more pressing,” said William Gormley, one of the lead Georgetown University researchers and a co-director of the university’s Center for Research on Children in the United States.

At the Dual Language Academy, a pre-K through 5th grade school, science and social studies lessons are taught in Spanish, while math instruction is in English.

The school’s 40 pre-K students bounce from teacher-led dance- and sing-a-longs to science and art stations every four minutes, with native Spanish- and native English-speakers often paired together to increase their exposure to the languages.

Recent research has found that there are benefits of dual-language learning over English-only classes for English-learners.

A joint study published in 2015 by the Houston schools and Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research found that native Spanish-speaking students in the district have more success learning English when they’re enrolled in two-way dual-language programs that include native English-speakers in the classroom.

It’s among a growing body of research that points to the benefits of teaching students in two languages.
In several North Carolina districts with two-way, dual-language instruction, students score statistically significantly higher in reading in 4th grade than their nondual-language peers, a pattern that continues through 8th grade, researchers from George Mason University found.

Thus far, the Dual Language Academy is the only school in Tulsa that provides dual-language instruction for pre-K students. That means less than 5 percent of the district’s 500-plus pre-K English-learners are experiencing the model.

Hopeful that the school’s approach will yield results for the district’s burgeoning English-learner population, administrators are closely monitoring assessment scores for students who have come up through the dual-language program.

Anecdotal evidence shows that the dual-language approach is working, said Laura Grisso, who oversees the district’s ELL programs.

Kindergarten students who participated in dual-language pre-K are working on writing half-page stories that they can explain in English and Spanish; and English-learner kindergarten students in English-only classrooms are working on recognizing and reciting the alphabet, she said.

Learning English Takes Time

The stakes for achieving student literacy are high in Oklahoma.

State law requires that students who aren’t proficient on a 3rd-grade reading test repeat the grade. It’s one of at least 16 states that requires a do-over for 8- and 9-year-olds who do not meet grade-level reading expectations by the end of that year.

More than 90 percent of children in the Tulsa schools who’ve been affected by the law have been special education students and ELLs, said Andy Mackenzie, the assistant to the superintendent for early-childhood services.

Exemptions are granted for students with a limited grasp of English, namely those who have had less than two years of academic English instruction.

“When you’re learning a second language, it’s all a matter of time,” said Vanoy, the principal. “And sometimes our time does not match up with what our state requires. The law doesn’t even take into consideration how much a child has grown,” in literacy skills.

Third grade is considered key for student literacy, as it’s the year that students transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn.” In other words, they’re expected to focus less on reading and more on the information they’re reading.

An early focus on literacy is key if children, especially English-learners, are to make that crucial transition, said Maria Adelaida Restrepo, the director of the bilingual language and literacy laboratory at Arizona State University.

“We need rich conversations, exposure to vocabulary, complex language,” Restrepo said.

English-learners who enter kindergarten with a basic grasp of academic language, “either in their primary language or in English,” are more likely over time to be reclassified as former ELLs, an analysis from Oregon State University researcher Karen Thompson found.

Thompson, an assistant professor of cultural and linguistic diversity in the university’s college of education, reviewed nine years of student data from the Los Angeles Unified School District to gauge how long it takes students to develop proficiency in English.

Thompson’s analysis shows that students who don’t reach proficiency by the time they reach the end of elementary school are less likely to do so at all.

Those students share a common characteristic: They enter kindergarten with a limited command of academic language, the skills that allow children to retell stories or solve word-based math problems. Students in this category are 24 percent less likely to be reclassified than their peers. They are also more likely to score lower on academic tests. They also graduate from high school at lower rates than their peers, Thompson’s analysis found.

Does Pre-K Help ELLs In the Long Run?

Even with universal pre-K, Oklahoma has been treading water as it tries to keep up with the average national gains in 4th grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress.

Gormley, the Georgetown researcher, said the reliance on state and national exam results to measure the program’s effectiveness is shortsighted.

“Fadeout occurs whether it’s an early-childhood program or piano lessons or anything else that kids are exposed to,” Gormley said.

The larger question, Gormley said, should be whether there are any long-term benefits, such as increased enrollment in honors courses, better grades, and improved discipline and attendance records, for the students who participated in pre-K.

“What I see is kids banging blocks in the corner and fighting with each other for the naked baby [doll] in the preschool classroom and nobody’s building the language.”

English-learners enrolled in English-only courses often face two challenges: Their English instruction is often oversimplified, and there’s no reinforcement in their primary language, she said.
The pre-K classes at Tulsa’s Dual Language Academy could help address those issues, but finding bilingual teachers to staff classrooms has been a struggle in Tulsa, just as it is in many school districts.

**Latino Families Least Likely To Access Pre-K**

Oklahoma has put a premium on increasing access to prekindergarten, and Tulsa has one of the highest participation rates in the country, with 3 out of 4 4-year-olds enrolled in a pre-K program.

But participation among Hispanics, and English-learners in particular, lags behind other groups here and elsewhere.

Historically, Hispanic parents have been less likely to enroll their children in early-childhood-education programs and Head Start, the federal education program designed to support the needs of low-income children and get them ready for elementary school.

Though Oklahoma offers pre-K that is open to all age-eligible children, the ability for families to access it isn’t universal.

Gina Adams, a senior fellow with the Urban Institute in Washington, has studied the barriers to preschool participation for immigrant children and English-language learners in Silicon Valley and Chicago.

In cities around the country, transportation, cost, and lackluster outreach efforts are among the issues that emerge as obstacles for those families who want to enroll children in pre-K but don’t have the resources or time to do so.

The language barrier between schools and families with a limited command of English is often the primary hurdle, said Adams, who worked as a child-care teacher for infants and as a home visitor for low-income Latino families in Austin, Texas, before coming to the Urban Institute.

“If there’s nobody there who can connect, it makes sense that parents would be hesitant to take their children,” Adams said.

To attract more parents, pre-K providers have to actively recruit families, Adams said.

“If you don’t, the school readiness gap is not going to be addressed, because the kids who need [pre-K] most are not going to be there and they’ll still be coming to school unprepared,” Adams said.

One of the city’s early-childhood-program providers, Community Action Project-Tulsa has started opening Head Start sites in the city’s most heavily Hispanic neighborhoods in its push to get more families through the door.

Paving the way for families to enroll can make all the difference for the English-learners, said Restrepo, the Arizona State University professor.

“We’re trying to make up for lost ground,” she said.

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**Can Latin Build Young Vocabularies?**

By Liana Heitin

FAIRFAX, VA.

With students gone for the day, 6th grade teachers Joy Ford and Ryan Rusk sat in a classroom discussing the Latin root “temp.”

After determining that “contemporary” and “temporary” share the root, which refers to time, the two Woodlawn Elementary teachers then turned to the word “temptation.”

“I’m tempted to eat this chocolate,” said Ford. “That doesn’t have to do with time.”

“But if I’m tempted, I want it now,” responded Rusk. “So could it?”

Along with a half-dozen other K-6 teachers, the two were participating in a study group in which they meet weekly to learn how to incorporate Greek and Latin roots into their daily instruction. The group was doing a “word sort” activity from the book *Greek and Latin Roots: Keys to Vocabulary Building*.

The exchange between Ford and Rusk about “temp” (which, by the way, is not the root of temptation) mirrored the kinds of conversations the teachers were hoping to inspire in their own classrooms. And in many classrooms, it seems to be working—students are finding root words in their own vocabulary and silent reading, chatting with their peers about what words could mean, and bringing words they’re curious about to class.

“It’s a paradigm shift in the way we teach vocabulary,” said Newton.

**Breaking the Code**

A group of Ohio professors from Kent State University and the University of Akron—Timothy Rasinski, Nancy Padak, Rick M. Newton, and Evangeline Newton—wrote the 2008 book, *Greek and Latin Roots*, and designed an accompanying curriculum, which some teachers in Fairfax and other schools around the country are using. (Woodlawn’s Newton is the daughter of Rick and Evangeline Newton.)

According to Rasinski, a literacy education professor at Kent State, teaching young students about morphology (the study of word forms) and word patterns improves their ability to gain meaning from unfamiliar words, which helps with reading overall.

“This is one of the most promising ways for developing word knowledge,” he said. “Anybody who’s ever taken Latin in high school...
there, they build out dozens of words as study one root word per week. From and Greek stems, students often onlyhaps 10 or 20. But in classes using Latin to master by the end of the week—per-

classrooms, students get a list of words trying to break that code.'”

There’s a code in here, and I’m puzzle. ‘This is something I’m trying to and Latin roots. “They see it more as a

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ing. ‘I don’t think [students] see it as ‘I’m learning Latin,’” said Chris Schmidt, a 3rd-5th grade gifted education teacher in

Buncombe County; she was teaching kids words now say they don’t focus too much on the idea of introducing a whole new language, which can seem overwhelming. “I don’t think [students] see it as ‘I’m learning Latin,”’ said Chris Schmidt, a 3rd-5th grade gifted education teacher in North Carolina’s Buncombe County district, wrote about efforts in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and other cities to teach Latin to young students. “Educators have long believed that a pupil who knows the Latin roots, pre-
fices, and suffixes has the keys to unlock the meaning of countless English deriva-
tives and cognates,” he wrote.

However, some teachers using root words now say they don’t focus too much on the idea of introducing a whole new language, which can seem overwhelming. "I don't think [students] see it as I'm learning Latin," said Chris Schmidt, a 3rd-5th grade gifted education teacher in North Carolina's Buncombe County district. He uses a program called Caesar's English to teach vocabulary with Greek and Latin roots. "They see it more as a puzzle. 'This is something I’m trying to figure out. There’s a code in here, and I’m trying to break that code.'"

In many traditional elementary classrooms, students get a list of words to master by the end of the week—perhaps 10 or 20. But in classes using Latin and Greek stems, students often only study one root word per week. From there, they build out dozens of words as

sees how profoundly it’s affected English and can help build vocabulary.”

Latin class has long been a staple in high schools, but the idea of teaching Latin in el-

ementary schools isn’t new either. In a 1984 Commentary piece for Education Week, Ru-
dolph Masciantonio, then an administrator in the office of curriculum for the Philadel-
phia school district, wrote about efforts in Baltimore, Chicago, Cincinnati, Los Angeles, and other cities to teach Latin to young students. “Educators have long believed that a pupil who knows the Latin roots, prefixes, and suffixes has the keys to unlock the meaning of countless English derivatives and cognates,” he wrote.

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RUDOLPH MASCIA N T O NIO
FORMER ADMINISTRATOR, OFFICE OF CURRIC U LUM, PHILADELPHIA SCHOOL DISTRICT

a class, and students look for words on their own in other contexts. Many of the activities students do with those root words involve creativity and inquiry. A task called “odd word out,” designed by Rasinski and his colleagues, asks students to figure out which word is different in a set. Sometimes a set will include a word that doesn’t use the same root. But often, there is no clear right answer. For instance, students might see the words “precook,” “preheat,” “premixed,” and “pretest.” One student might say pretest is different because it doesn’t have to do with cooking. Anoth-
er might choose premixed because it’s the only one with an -ed ending.

“The conversations students have with each other, that’s really that reasoning we’re after,” said Rosemary Floccari, an instructional coach for Akron public schools, who learned about the approach while taking courses at the University of Akron sev-
eral years ago, and now leads professional development on it.

During a lesson on roots one morning, Ulrich asked her students to figure out the definitions of made-up words. She showed them a story she’d written in which the father was referred to as an “unporter” because he didn’t help bring the groceries inside the house. The students had learned that the prefix un meant not, and port meant to carry. Then Ulrich had students make up their own words using prefixes, suffixes, and roots they had learned.

“I wanted to reiterate that each of these parts hold meaning, and when you move them around it does affect the meaning of the word,” she said in an interview after the lesson.

Newton said that, while teachers shouldn’t use a steady diet of nonsense words, that kind of activity can make for an engaging and helpful review of learned roots. “We want to show the kids how those bases can connect, that they’re the building blocks of words,” she said.

Between 2014 and 2015, Woodlawn saw increases in its standardized test scores for reading, particularly at the grades in which most teachers were using Latin and Greek roots. (The percentage of 4th grad-
ers passing went up by 28 percent, and for 5th grade, it rose 19 percent.) However, Newton was reluctant to attribute the gains to the vocabulary approach, since it wasn’t formally required and because of the many other school factors that may have contributed.

False Etymologies

The approach is seemingly in contrast to another vocabulary instructional method that’s gained prominence recently: teaching words in context, through thematic units that build background knowledge. Some reading experts, including those who helped write the Common Core State Standards, say the best way to learn new words is by learning about individual topics deeply.

Schmidt, the Buncombe County gifted education teacher, agrees that teaching in context is ideal, and he has students apply their roots in research projects. But overall, he said, learning roots individually is a timesaver.
“Sometimes, it’s just expediency,” he said. “One of the lasting things the kids take from Caesar’s English is the fact that when you learn one stem you have some knowledge of countless words, and that hooks them,” he said.

The common core does ask students to learn common Latin prefixes, suffixes, and roots as part of its language standards starting in 3rd grade. But some educators say the vocabulary-building approach is useful even for students who are in the early stages of reading.

Diane MacBride, a veteran 1st grade teacher in the Akron school district, went to a professional-development session on teaching Latin and Greek roots three years ago and has been using the method ever since.

“I thought this would be a great way to develop the kids and help them take control of their learning,” she said. “Having conversations about words in 1st grade is huge. It’s amazing to watch.”

With her students, a root word often takes two weeks, rather than one, to fully learn. “That was definitely one of the challenges—I was trying to do it too fast in the beginning,” she said. “We weren’t going deep enough.”

She said her students get excited when they see the roots they’ve learned in a book they’re reading on their own. And the roots have helped in other subjects—for instance, students picked up on what regrouping meant in math quickly because they’d learned the prefix re.

One challenge with the approach is that students at all grade levels often stumble on false etymologies. A student who learned the prefix un, for example, might think it applies to the word “uncle.” But teachers say that kind of mistake can lead to productive conversation—the kind the Virginia teachers were engaging in at their after-school book study meeting.

During that meeting, the Woodlawn teachers also discussed what to do in a common, yet even more thorny scenario—when even the teacher is stumped by a word’s etymology.

“You don’t have to own all this knowledge,” Newton told the group. “You can put ‘words we want to know more about’ on the board and say, ‘Does someone want to go home tonight and look up some of these words?’ We’re sharing that ambiguity with kids. ... That’s what real readers and thinkers do.”

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Literacy Gets a Personalized Makeover

By Benjamin Herold

From online news articles written at five different reading levels to algorithms that create personalized vocabulary lists, ed-tech tools are rapidly expanding the ways in which teachers can differentiate their literacy and reading instruction.

Experts say the new technologies have the potential to transform learning, one child at a time.

“The problem up to this point is that when we’ve designed curriculum, we’ve done it with a mythical ‘average student’ in mind, then tried to fix the curriculum after the fact to address the needs of particular children,” said Bernadette Dwyer, a lecturer in literacy studies and education at Dublin City University, in Ireland, who has done research in both Europe and the United States.

“But digital tools can help us anticipate the needs of children upfront, particularly for struggling readers,” said Dwyer, who is also a board member of the International Literacy Association.

To better understand the new landscape, Education Week spoke with researchers, industry officials, and a representative from Graphite, a Consumer Reports-style website with ratings and recommendations on ed-tech tools run by the nonprofit Common Sense Media.

Here’s what they recommended:

1. Customize Texts to Each Student’s Reading Level

Digital tools have made a well-established classroom literacy practice more efficient and powerful, said Heather Schugar, an associate professor of literacy at West Chester University in Pennsylvania.

“Up until a few years ago, the most dedicated of elementary teachers would send home plastic bags with books written on children’s individualized reading levels,” Schugar said. “Today, that seems to be a practice of the past.”

Instead, a growing number of teachers are using online products like Raz-Kids, which offers a wide variety of e-books written across the full range of reading levels, allowing teachers to easily assign each student a text written at the level that is just right for him or her. (Other tools take the inverse approach, adapting each individual text to a number of different reading levels.)

Both strategies are valuable, Schugar said, because research has long made clear that students make the most progress when they are reading in their “zone of proximal development”—the sweet spot that’s neither too frustrating nor too easy.

One of the more popular such tools for older students is Newsela, a Web-based software program that provides daily news articles, each adapted to five different reading levels, in both English and Spanish.

A big benefit, said founder and CEO Matthew Gross, is that students of different skill levels can now share the experience of reading about the same topic, while also getting to read text that is appropriately difficult for them personally.

Other tools that take this approach across the K-12 grade span are Accelerated Reader and LightSail.

2. Allow Teachers to Target Specific Reading Skills

A solid grounding in research around effective literacy instruction is what often separates the good apps from the bad, believes Madeleine Heins Israelson, an assistant professor at the College of Saint Benedict and Saint John’s University in Minnesota.

Earlier this year, Israelson published an article in the journal The Reading Teacher titled “The App Map.” In the piece, she broke reading instruction down into its component parts, such as understanding letter sounds and building vocabulary, then urged teachers to consider digital tools that reflect the established wisdom about the best ways to build each skill in students.

An example: Rather than just looking for a “reading app,” Israelson suggests, an
early-years teacher might instead look for a tool that will help a subset of her students hone their ability to recognize common "sight words."

Then, the teacher might vet potential apps to make sure they're actually focused on what researchers say are the correct sight words. The teacher might also consider whether students will be expected to use the app on their own or with the whole class, and independently or with an adult. Finally, the teacher might gauge whether the tool's potential digital benefits, such as engaging interactive features, will outweigh their potential downsides, such as being distracting.

That same process can be applied to tools promoting early-literacy skills ranging from phonemic awareness (e.g., letter sounds) to comprehension (e.g., the ability to understand and summarize material, answer questions, and make predictions) to writing, Israelson writes.

Different students might need different tools, based on the specific reading skills they need to develop.

Examples of the hundreds of tools on the market for such skills include SpellingCity (for early learners), Lexia Reading Core5 (which targets the full range of foundational reading skills), and ThinkCERCA (which is focused on building "close reading" and writing skills in older students.)

3. Diagnose and Respond to Individual Students' Strengths and Weaknesses

Big educational publishers are in on the action, too, especially when it comes to using “adaptive” technologies that adjust based on individual students’ abilities.

Take a company like Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, which recently acquired popular digital-reading-intervention software READ 180 as part of its purchase of Scholastic’s ed-tech division.

Among other features, the software aims to expose students to many more words than they might otherwise encounter, then help them to understand the meaning of those words more deeply than they otherwise might have.

Here’s how it works: After students choose topics they find interesting, the software provides texts written at a level that fits their sweet spot of difficulty. As the students use the software, it analyzes how they read and perform on subsequent vocabulary quizzes and exercises. From there, READ 180 seeks to identify which words each student understands and can read and spell, as well as how quickly the student can do each of those functions.

Based on the results of that analysis, the software will make sure that the words a student doesn’t understand show up in future vocabulary exercises and reading passages given to that student. The reading level of that next text will also be recalibrated based on the results of the new analysis.

It’s not just algorithms doing the work, stressed Margery Mayer, the executive vice president of Houghton Mifflin’s intervention-solutions group. The software also aims to help teachers differentiate their instruction by providing them with a constant stream of data about what students can and can’t do, as well as by making recommendations for how to group students based on their specific strengths and needs.

“Empowering teachers with digital tools is a big direction where everyone is headed,” Mayer said.

Different digital tools of this type allow for different roles for educators. Examples include Achieve 3000 (which also provides leveled texts) and i-Ready.

4. Encourage Teachers to Offer Customized Supports

Digital tools and interactive e-readers can also allow teachers to customize the reading experience for students—and make themselves an integral part of each student’s reading process.

Take, for example, digital reading platforms such as Benchmark Universe. In addition to its library of 2,500 interactive e-books, the software includes annotation tools for students to take notes and highlight; digital “sticky notes” for teachers to leave prompts for individual students, groups, or the entire class; and options for teachers to modify the text in customized ways that could include embedding videos, introducing graphic organizers, and adding voiceover directly into the book.

Jeffrey Knutson, a senior manager for education content with Common Sense Media, said educators are particularly excited about those types of tools because they allow for customized, in-the-moment supports.

“Reading, and that relationship between words and the mind, is so personal,” Knutson said. “I think the digital tools that allow teachers to kind of insert themselves into that experience are really great—they allow for a level of scaffolding that’s hard to reach [otherwise].”

Downsides can include too many distractions that interrupt the reading flow for students. It can also be extremely time-consuming for teachers to provide different videos, prompts, and notes for every student, even when done in a digital world. Other similar platforms include Actively Learn, Curriculet, and Subtext.

5. Have Students Show What They’ve Learned in Different Ways

Digitally differentiated literacy and reading instruction isn’t just about software, or even educators, targeting students in ways that are specific to their own needs and preferences.

It’s also about providing students with digital tools that allow them to demonstrate their own learning in customized ways—through multimedia creation and storytelling, collaborative writing, and more.

That could mean features that allow students to record themselves reading aloud, so they and their teachers can then check how fluent they are.

Or tools like BookBuilder, which allow students to compose, edit, and share their own e-books.

Or even iMovie, Skype, and Google Docs—all popular consumer products (for creating and editing videos, video-based communication, and collaborative writing, respectively) that Dwyer of Dublin City University said can be powerful tools to get students actually demonstrating so-called 21st-century skills.

“The promise of technology ... is around promoting higher-order-thinking skills,” Dwyer said. “I think it goes a lot deeper than just having texts on different reading levels.”
Developing Successful Readers: Refocus on the Three Domains

Our education system invests heavily in developing students into successful, independent readers. Yet, despite the promise of technologies like digital content, big data, and personalized learning platforms, the results are disappointing. Research shows that, when reading independently, today's students struggle more and comprehend less than their peers did in 1960. RRQ Research Study

What are we missing?

Yes, technology can help develop skills. But, focusing on reading as a set of discrete, separate skills to be mastered ignores how students actually experience reading.

When students read independently their physical skills, cognitive abilities, and emotions are all working simultaneously. Yet most reading programs focus on only one of these three domains and try to develop it by isolating it from the others. It’s not working.

We’ve lost focus on how and why students read and it has reduced our ability to develop successful readers. It’s time to remind ourselves of the three domains of reading, and the power of integrating them in reading instruction.

Today’s independent readers are struggling more and comprehending less

“IT’s not only about becoming faster and more efficient in independent, silent reading. IT’s doing it with comprehension, and with the ultimate goal of acquiring knowledge and enhancing personal interests.”

Dr. P. David Pearson, Chairman, LA Literacy Research Panel
Physical
The Essential, Yet Overlooked Key to Fluency and Stamina

Reading begins with a physical skill – the visual processing of text. When our eyes move across lines of print, we extract the features of that text and process it to construct meaning.

This physical skill doesn’t come naturally to everyone. Students who labor to read haven’t yet developed it and fall behind in vocabulary and comprehension. They spend their energies trying to process words and have little left for comprehension and even less for developing their interests.

Readers must efficiently navigate their eyes across lines of print in order to develop the fluency and stamina that ultimately, allow them to increase comprehension. Research shows the link between physical efficiency and comprehension. Read Research Brief

Cognitive
The Dominant Domain, Too Often Misunderstood

An emphasis on vocabulary and comprehension has dominated both the theory and practice of reading instruction for decades. Most approaches assume any performance improvement begins and ends with instruction and leveled practice. This is why many reading programs simply provide leveled texts, ask students to read and re-read, and then test for progress.

However, leveled texts often do not match student needs. Research shows vocabulary complexity is the best indicator of text complexity. Yet most readability measures use formulas that emphasize sentence length. So, a text with shorter sentences can have a lower readability level, even when its vocabulary is more appropriate for a higher level reader. In fact, it’s possible to manipulate the readability level of text by keeping the same vocabulary and simply shortening the sentences. Shorter sentences might lower a readability score, but do nothing to change the cognitive demands placed on the reader if the vocabulary complexity is too high.

Yet, most reading programs ignore this essential building block of reading, leaving students to continually labor, grow increasingly frustrated, and ultimately, lose interest in reading.

Students who developed their physical efficiency skills had higher comprehension levels

Comprehension by Reading Rate Quartile

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Reading Rate Quartile</th>
<th>Comprehension Grade Level</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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Text with shorter sentences can have a low Lexile level, even when its vocabulary is more appropriate for a higher level reader.

Lexile = 900
We do not simply cut sentences because this is what happens. A Lexile can change if you play around with sentences. We work in a different way because we know vocabulary is critical (since it is the better predictor of comprehension). Our sentence lengths are appropriate and they increase in length as students advance through the program.

Mean Sentence Length = 14.25
Vocabulary Difficulty = 3.62

Lexile = 230
We do not simply cut sentences. Because this is what happens. A Lexile can change. If you play around with sentences. We work in a different way. Because we know vocabulary is critical. Since it is the better predictor of comprehension.

Our sentence lengths are appropriate. And they increase in length as students advance through the program.

Mean Sentence Length = 5.70
Vocabulary Difficulty = 3.62
Measures of student interest correlate highly with academic performance. However, students most in need of improvement are rarely given opportunities to bring their personal interests into their reading practice. Instead, most reading programs focus on isolated cognitive skill development.

Ignoring student interests during reading development, essentially guarantees a lower level of student engagement in reading. And students who aren’t engaged don’t get the chance to discover reading as the way to learn more about who they are and who they can become.

Research shows the fundamental link between higher student interest and higher performance.

Read Research Brief

To build lifelong readers, integrate, don’t isolate skill development

When students read independently, they don’t engage with each domain of reading in isolation from the others. They engage with all three simultaneously – and effective reading instruction must do the same.

It must build essential physical skills, provide the personalized, leveled content that best develops cognitive skills, and tap into students’ interests to build confidence and motivation.

Reading Plus’ Integrated Reading System simultaneously develops all three domains of reading. Each student gets what they need, when they need it, at the pace that works best for them.

Integrating reading skills – it’s the research-proven way to help students become not just better readers, but lifelong readers.

Students who read what they like are more interested and engaged in reading; more interested and engaged students become better readers; and better readers become lifelong readers.

**Reading programs that ignore student interests essentially guarantee a lower level of student engagement**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interest &amp; Proficiency by Quartile</th>
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<td>Q3</td>
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<td>Q4</td>
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<td>Low Interest</td>
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<td>High Interest</td>
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COMMENTARY

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To Boost Reading, Stop Blaming Teachers And Start Building Knowledge

By Lisa Hansel and Robert Pondiscio

For more than a decade, teachers across the United States have been unfairly blamed for our nation’s literacy problems. Test after test shows relatively little growth and large gaps. Want to quickly estimate a child’s reading ability? Just ask for his zip code.

But the root of the problem is not our children’s poverty—it’s the poverty of our ideas, of our high-stakes accountability policies, and of our curricula.

Desperate to rapidly increase reading achievement, policymakers have pushed schools, especially elementary schools, to spend more and more time on reading instruction. But the resources to lengthen the school day or year are rarely available, so time has been robbed from other subjects. A nationally representative survey found that in grades K–3, just 19 minutes a day are devoted to science and a mere 16 minutes to social studies. The situation is not much better in grades 4–6, where just 45 minutes a day are devoted to social studies and science combined. Worse yet: Research indicates that schools serving our neediest students spend even less time on these important—and inspiring—subjects.

It seems obvious to suggest that if you want to get better at something, you should spend more time practicing it. But there’s a paradox at the heart of our efforts to raise reading achievement: When elementary schools take time away from science, social studies, and the arts to dramatically increase time on reading instruction, they are likely to slow children’s growth in reading comprehension. This slowing won’t be apparent right away; it might not be apparent in the elementary grades at all. But in later grades—when students are expected to read historical speeches or science textbooks or biographies of artists—they will struggle.

To understand this paradox, you first have to know that reading comprehension is not a “skill” like riding a bike or throwing a ball. A child does not become a strong reader by learning to sound out words and practicing reading alone (though these are important). Reading comprehension—the ability to make meaning from text—is largely a reflection of a child’s overall education. Good readers tend to know at least a little about a broad range of things. The best way to build a strong reader is with high-quality instruction in science, social studies, and the arts—as well as in reading.

Knowledge, vocabulary, and reading comprehension are intimately intertwined. This is particularly important for disadvantaged students. Think of it like compound interest: If one kindergartner comes to school on day one having heard 30 million more words than her less-fortunate peers (not to mention the advantage of travel, museum trips, and ballet lessons), the “interest” on her knowledge and vocabulary allows her to grow far richer. Her less-fortunate peers fall further behind day after day—unless schools see dramatically increasing all children’s knowledge as their most important task.

With the new federal education law, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), state and district leaders have—for the first time since early this century—the flexibility to incentivize schools to make long-term investments in building academic knowledge. But unless teachers raise their voices—and educate their leaders—about how reading comprehension grows, they and their students will continue to suffer from the reading paradox. All children, but particularly the disadvantaged, deserve to benefit from a knowledge-rich curriculum from the earliest possible moment.

At its heart, the achievement gap is an opportunity-to-learn gap. To close it, teachers need time to collaborate on a grade-by-grade, coherent, knowledge-building curriculum. They also need time for their efforts to bear fruit; the broad foundation of academic knowledge that all students need takes several years of well-coordinated effort to build. To support teachers, policymakers will need to take a careful look at their new assessment and accountability policies under ESSA, asking: Do these policies incentivize schools to patiently invest in building students’ knowledge and vocabulary? Or, do they spur schools to look for quick gains?

To date, policymakers have pursued reforms—like charters and “merit” pay—that have little to do with what children actually learn. Making the acquisition of knowledge a priority has been missing in the press for short-term gains on tests. It’s a powerful lever, hiding in plain sight, which few have thought to pull. But under ESSA, teachers and parents could pressure elected leaders to change that.

The new federal education law provides states the flexibility they need to appropriately value reading test scores, while also ensuring all children get the well-rounded education that leads to strong comprehension. Of course, ESSA also provides the flexibility for states to ignore these issues. It’s up to all of us to ensure that the new freedom is used responsibly—especially to enrich our neediest students and equalize opportunity to learn.

Lisa Hansel is director of Knowledge Matters, a campaign to restore wonder and excitement to the classroom through a rich, well-rounded curriculum. Robert Pondiscio is executive director of Knowledge Matters, and a senior fellow and vice president for external affairs at the Thomas B. Fordham Institute.
The Importance of Real Reading for Resistant Readers

By Meaghan Hanrahan

Or students who don’t read widely and regularly, current high-stakes reading tests may lead to failure and frustration. Failing these tests often lands students in intensive remediation classes, where schools offer them endless practice in test-taking but few opportunities to engage in meaningful, self-directed reading. While we may ultimately teach students enough test-taking strategies to eke out a passing score and earn that high school diploma, we are missing a crucial opportunity to show our students that they, too, can be real readers.

I recently attended a workshop for high school teachers who, like me, teach students who have failed state-mandated English tests. Vocabulary is a huge weakness for these students, and my colleagues and I earnestly discussed ways of incorporating context clues, roots, and affixes into our instruction.

But let’s not forget self-selected reading. I suggested, as there are only so many words or strategies we can teach our students in the limited time we have. Of course the strategies are valuable, but real reading, which gives students much broader exposure to words than our selected texts and exercises ever can, should be a part of the equation.

The response: Some shrugs and rolls of the eyes. A few teachers were honest enough to give voice to their thoughts: These kids? They won’t read. Good luck.

Faced with kids who don’t or won’t read, we decide instead to teach strategies—many of them very good ones—but not to insist that these students also deserve rich reading experiences. We do this with the best of intentions: for students on the brink of dropping out, it seems a waste of precious instructional time to devote some of it to reading—and then to struggle to get students actually to read.

I know the frustrations: the hidden or not-so-hidden cell phone, the head down on the desk, the turning of pages without actually reading. I face these frustrations in my classroom in the alternative high school where I teach. Many of my students have completed all the required academic credits for graduation and are in my class simply because they have been unable to pass state tests in reading and writing.

Self-Selected Texts

Despite these challenges, I remind myself that my students need more meaningful reading experiences, not fewer. And so I still ask my students to read self-selected texts every day in my classroom. I know that by developing the habit of reading, my students will build their vocabularies, encounter a variety of sentence structures, and experience reading as a process of making meaning, not just the chore that comes before answering multiple choice questions.

And here are a few things that have happened: A student who has taken our state reading test five times already, and who never fails to come to class with headphones on and his phone at the ready, has read three complete novels in the first semester of school. After completing two novels from the always popular Bluford series, he moved on to more challenging text, The Blind Side, and finished it within a few weeks.

Another student is so resistant to reading that he announced at the beginning of the year, “Ms. D, I don’t read books.” This student, however, has a deep interest in current events. After trying unsuccessfully to interest him in various biographies, I reminded myself that the goal is real reading; books aren’t the only option. With a daily newspaper in our classroom, he now willingly puts his phone away and buries himself in the day’s events.

These students still need plenty of support to become strategic readers, but I know that I haven’t denied them the significant experience enjoyed by their more academically successful peers—that of engaged, authentic reading.

If, like me, you’re not ready to give up on helping struggling or even resistant students become readers, here are a few suggestions:

1. Require only one thing: reading material that appeals.

My only requirement is that students like what they read. No expectations for length, superior authorship, lexile level, or having never read the book before. Students are often surprised when, at the beginning of the course, I announce that I want them to choose a short book, one that they can finish in just a few weeks of reading in my class. Graphic novel? Sure. Verse? Give it a try. Magazine or newspaper? We can start small and build stamina as we go.

Many of my students (and for many, this is their fourth or fifth year in high school) report that they have not read a book since middle school. My goal for these students is that they experience reading a text—any text at all—from start to finish, just
because it holds their attention, and not because they will have to take a test on it.

2. Let them change their minds.

Students will start books that they don’t like. I give them permission to stop. As a reader myself, that’s what I do. I don’t require students reach a certain goal or complete a project. Instead, I work with them, and, with the help of our incredibly well-read school media specialist, we find a book that works.

3. Read in class every day.

For kids who don’t read at all, even ten minutes a day helps to form a new habit. Short books with short chapters suit this purpose well, but if students want to read a longer text, they can read to the end of a paragraph or page when time is up. That way, students can carry a finished thought with them before the next day’s reading.

Offering opportunities for real reading matters because none of us would ever say, “My students don’t like to write, so I’m just not going to ask them to do it anymore.” Or, “It’s so frustrating to get my students to use punctuation; I just won’t bother teaching it.” However, we get so worried about tests that it seems reasonable to us to say, “My students aren’t readers, so I’m not going to ask them to read.”

Fostering Authentic Reading

Let’s use every reading strategy at our disposal, scaffolding learning opportunities for our under-prepared students. But let’s not forget that we all became good readers by finding texts we wanted to read and reading them for our own purposes. We can’t lose sight of the most important thing that readers do: read with the expectation that they will learn or enjoy something. It’s a false choice to say we don’t have time to encourage real reading because we have to teach strategies for passing tests. We can and should do both.

While passing a standardized test is an important short-term goal for our students, fostering true literacy is the larger vision. Real reading gives resistant students the experience they need to become more accomplished readers with better odds for success on high stakes tests. More importantly, maybe, just maybe, once they pass that last standardized test, they will see themselves in a new way: not just as high school graduates, but as readers.

Meaghan Hanrahan Dobson is an English teacher at Bryant Alternative High School in Fairfax County, Va. A National Board-certified teacher since 2001, she is most interested in fostering literacy and teaching composition.

As a former New York City elementary school teacher, a professional stand-up comedian, and a budding social entrepreneur, I am also working personally to inspire young black boys to identify as readers. In 2013, I founded Barbershop Books, a community-based literacy program that places child-friendly reading spaces in barbershops to increase black boys’ access to and engagement with culturally relevant, age-appropriate, and gender-responsive books.

Despite these and other efforts, accurate and dignifying portrayals of the experiences and history of people of color remain an ongoing challenge in children’s literature. Last month, for instance, a high-profile controversy over the depiction of slaves in a Scholastic children’s book, A Birthday Cake for George Washington, led the publisher to stop its distribution.

As publishers increase the number of children’s books that feature nonwhite children, they must be careful to include diverse representations of the people and groups they seek to highlight. Otherwise, they run the risk of reinforcing stereotypes and propagating racist ideology.

In response to recent debates over the lack of positive representations of nonwhite characters in children’s books, far too many people echo the U.S. Supreme Court’s 1896 majority opinion in Plessy v. Ferguson, which asserted that if “separation of the two races stamps the colored race with a badge of inferiority ... it is not
by reason of anything found in the act, but solely because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.”

Are we to believe that stereotypical, degrading, and dehumanizing representations of nonwhite people in children’s books do not communicate messages about good and bad, significance and irrelevance, superiority and inferiority?

How educators use children’s books also significantly shapes students’ self-perceptions and their perceptions of others. Relegating books with nonwhite main characters to diversity/ethnic book lists or social studies units created for Black History Month, National Hispanic Heritage Month, or Native American Heritage Month creates a form of implicit and de facto segregation.

As children’s book author and illustrator Christopher Dean Meyers noted of children’s literature in a 2014 New York Times op-ed essay, “characters of color are limited to the townships of occasional historical books that concern themselves with the legacies of civil rights and slavery but are never given a pass card to traverse the lands of adventure, curiosity, imagination, or personal growth.”

No child’s introduction to African-Americans in children’s literature should be limited to slavery, the civil rights movement, or the countless other oppression narratives that so often characterize books about the African-American experience.

Negative and misleading depictions of nonwhite people in children’s books, often under the guise of diversity or celebration, interfere with students’ right to an equitable and humane education.

According to the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress results, 85 percent of black male 4th graders in the United States read below “proficient.” Low literacy of this proportion is not merely a matter of deficient reading skills. The reading struggles of many nonwhite children, especially those living in poverty, reflect a revolt against reading experiences that omit or misrepresent their interests and culture and, in effect, diminish their self-worth.

The persistence of disproportionately low reading scores among black boys and other underserved student populations reveals a systematic failure by American society and our education system.

The societal indifference toward the struggles and disenfranchisement of nonwhite citizens didn’t begin in adulthood at a voting booth, but on the colorful rugs of early-childhood classrooms during read-alouds. Children’s literature, read-alouds, and the resulting discussions will continue to shape children’s perceptions. The extent to which all children, especially white children, are exposed to books with diverse characters in diverse settings across diverse topics will determine, at least in part, if future generations of Americans gain a genuine appreciation of difference or languish in bigotry, racism, and white supremacy.

Publishers must publish more diverse children’s books, and teacher-preparation programs must better equip educators to create engaging year-round learning experiences using diverse titles. In sum, I advocate for diversity in children’s literature that affirms the humanity and culture of all children.

Alvin Irby is the founder of Barbershop Books, a program that places child-friendly reading spaces in barbershops. Previously, he taught kindergarten and 1st grade in New York City public schools and served as an education director at the Boys’ Club of New York.
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