

The Reader, the Text, the Task: Considering Variables When Using Leveled Books



Lately, as I've been trying to help teachers whose states mandate moving kids through reading levels — called “SGO” or “SLO” or something else depending on where I am — I've been finding myself talking about the interplay between reader, task, and text.

Just how significant are the “reader” and “task” dimensions when matching books and readers?

Think of one reader in your class and consider how you'd answer each of the following questions:

- At what level can the student read a short 100 word passage out loud with fluency and accuracy when not being asked comprehension questions?
- At what level can the student read an entire chapter book with stamina, appropriate pacing, and deep comprehension?
- At what level can a child understand a text on a first read?
- How high could the level go if the student were allowed to re-read the text several times?
- At what level can a child read if you are sitting right next to him or her as he or she reads?
- At what level can the student answer questions with lots of prompting and support from the teacher?
- At what level can the reader write about his reading to show complex thinking and deep comprehension?

It's likely that you didn't answer the same level for all of the questions above.

What I've been finding is that I can think of "reader" "task" and "text level" as inter-related and often inversely proportional. As one increases, another decreases. For example, if the task is simple – perhaps reading a short text quickly to get the gist – then the child could probably read a higher level than usual. But, if the task is to read independently and write to demonstrate deep thinking (a high demand on the reader), it helps if the text level is at a lower level.

Some other scenarios to consider:

READER (Motivation, background knowledge)	TASK (Independent or with support? Talk about and/or write about?)	LEVEL (Levels of meaning, themes and ideas, vocabulary, character development, text structure)
High	(may vary)	High
Low	High	Low
Moderate	High	Low
(may vary)	Low	High

So why does all of this matter? When we are trying to help match readers to books, here are some takeaways:

- **It's not helpful to think of a child's reading level as fixed.** Depending on what we're asking a child to do with the book, and/or what the child brings to the book in terms of background knowledge or motivation, the level may be variable.
- **We have to make sure our assessment matches the reader.** In our assessments to determine appropriate text complexity, it's important we give students a choice in what they read since motivation and background knowledge are important. Or, when we can't give a choice, we need to take that variable into consideration when evaluating the assessments.
- **We have to make sure our assessment matches the task.** If we are asking students to read a whole chapter book, independently, and do high level thinking with that book, then it doesn't make sense to put all of our eggs in the "read a 100 word excerpt and answer a few questions" basket. Or, if a child can only handle a text when we are sitting next to them, walking them through it line by line, then it doesn't make sense to give them a text at the same level to read independently without that support.

- **We shouldn't rely solely on only one assessment as the end-all, be-all.** Running records? They help us learn about fluency and accuracy and a little bit about comprehension. Whole book assessments? They can help us learn about sustained comprehension across a whole book. Listening to student conversation? That helps us understand how students make meaning when they have an opportunity to process it with peers. Writing about reading? Lets us know how a student can record thinking in writing.

As reading teachers, we have to keep in mind variables such as what the reader brings to the text (Background knowledge? Motivation?), and what we want students to do with a text (Write about it? Talk about it? Get the gist? Understand deeply?). In fact, we should probably even think about how the text is read/heard (Oral reading? Silent reading? Listening to a story read aloud?) as another variable. We need to use multiple assessments and be prepared to respond when different assessments give us different information. Text leveling is not a perfect science, and we have expect that the important job of matching readers to texts may be variable, based on a number of variables.