

## You Can't Learn Much from Books You Can't Read

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Many students in grades 5–12 struggle to learn from content-area textbooks that don't match their reading levels.

It seems so obvious—students need textbooks that they can actually read. But the young man who offered the observation in the title was a young man in trouble. He had always found reading difficult. Even with good classroom instruction and effective remedial interventions that continued through middle school and into high school, he still struggled with the textbooks that filled his backpack. In many respects, he was lucky because the instruction he had received kept his reading development near grade level, at least on standardized tests. Many students like him have no such luck. Too few schools offer effective remediation for older struggling readers. As a result, too many students don't learn much from textbooks that they can't read.

Recently, education policymaking has focused laser-like attention on improving reading instruction in the preschool and primary grades. Policymakers have targeted almost no attention or funding on efforts to improve the reading proficiencies of students in grades 5–12—the very grades that need improvement, according to recent international comparisons. Those comparisons indicate that the reading, science, and math achievement of U.S. 4th graders ranks among the best in the world, but by middle school, U.S. achievement levels hover around the international average, a substantial decline. And everyone knows how poorly our high school students rank (Allington, 2001; National Center for Educational Statistics, 2001).

Any number of causes might explain the dramatic slide of U.S. students in the international comparisons, but I will focus on two related factors: the mismatch between the demands of content-area texts and student reading proficiencies, and the limited instructional support available in grades 5–12.

## The Problem of Mismatched Textbooks

Chall (1983) noted that the demands of reading increase dramatically for students in 4th grade as their learning begins to rely more on textbooks. The vocabulary they encounter is less conversational and less familiar, with more specialized, technical terms (*delta, plateau, basin*) and abstract ideas (*democracy, freedom, civilization*). The syntax of texts becomes more complex and demanding. The reasoning about information in texts also shifts, with a greater emphasis on inferential thinking and prior knowledge. (For example, what stance is the author taking on industrial polluters? Is there another stance that others might take?)

Many students who have been making satisfactory progress up to this point now begin to struggle with reading, especially content-area reading. Many never seem to recover.

Schools have typically exacerbated the problem by relying on a single-source curriculum design—purchasing multiple copies of the same science and social studies textbooks for every student. This “one-size-fits-all” approach works well if we want to sort students into academic tracks. It fails miserably if our goal is high academic achievement for all students (Baumann & Duffy, 1997).

Even worse, research shows that many classrooms use textbooks written two or more years above the average grade level of their students (Chall & Conard, 1991; Budiansky, 2001). Imagine what happens in those classrooms to students who are struggling to keep pace with grade-level reading development.

Even students who read on grade level may have trouble learning from their textbooks. Historically, a 95–97 percent accuracy level has been considered appropriate for instructional texts (Harris & Sipay, 1990). But texts of this level of difficulty are simply too hard for assigned content-area reading. Consider that a student reading a book at his or her “instructional reading level” will misread or skip as many as 5 words of every 100. In a grade-level high school science or social studies text, then, students will misread 10–25 words on every page! They won't misread *if*, *runs*, *locate*, or even *misrepresent*, but rather unfamiliar technical vocabulary specific to the content area, such as *metamorphosis*, *estuary*, *disenfranchised*, and *unicameral*.

Given the way textbooks are often used—what I have called “assign and assess” usage—we might profitably consider purchasing content textbooks written at students' independent level of reading proficiency (Budiansky, 2001), where students misread just 1 or 2 words in every 100. In other words, if schools use textbooks as the key curriculum content provider, then students need textbooks that they can read accurately, fluently, and with high levels of understanding.

Unfortunately, the idea of harder textbooks has captured the attention of educators and policymakers interested in raising academic achievement. But harder books won't foster the growth of content learning. Think about your own attempts to acquire new content knowledge. Imagine you want to learn about building a Web site. Do you reject many of the books you might use because they are too easy? Do you say to yourself, “Gosh, only 11 words on this page that I can't pronounce—not hard enough for me!”

Adults won't read hard texts voluntarily—not because we lack character, but because we've had too many frustrating experiences trying to learn from texts that were simply too difficult, had too many unfamiliar words, and had complicated sentences that seemed purposely tangled in an attempt to frustrate us. (Consider government tax manuals, any software manual, or even the directions for programming your VCR.) Adults use the easiest texts they can find when they want to learn about a new topic. Why do these same adults think that hard books are good for children and adolescents?

Assuming that we don't want to continue the tradition of using difficult textbooks and allowing large numbers of students to fail content courses, we have two possible solutions. We could

search out texts that cover the topics at lower levels of reading difficulty (Beck, McKeown, & Gromoll, 1989). Or we can provide more instructional support to help students in grades 5–12 develop greater reading proficiency. Observations of exemplary teachers suggest that these teachers use both approaches to produce substantial reading, writing, and thinking growth in their students.

## **How Exemplary Teachers Avoid the Textbook Problem**

Over the past decade, I served as a member of a scientific team working out of the Center for English Learning and Achievement, which carried out a large-scale research effort to understand how some of our best teachers teach. The research team studied teachers across the United States who had reputations for excellence and who produced superior learning levels in their students as indicated by a variety of measures of student achievement, including standardized test scores. These excellent teachers implemented classroom instruction that combined multiple-level content texts and additional instructional support for struggling readers (Allington, 2002; Allington & Johnston, 2002; Langer, 2001; Nystrand, 1997; Pressley, Allington, Wharton-McDonald, Block, & Morrow, 2001).

The exemplary teachers we studied were not typically familiar with the research that supported the sort of teaching that they offered. None had seen the findings of a recent study of success and failure in high school:

Research in adolescence suggests that students will be more successful at new tasks when the tasks they face are closely targeted to their academic skills, developmental stage, and the resources they bring to that task and when families and schools structure tasks in ways that provide appropriate levels of challenge and support. (Roderick & Camburn, 1999, p. 336)

Nonetheless, these teachers provided instruction that fit Roderick and Camburn's prescription perfectly.

### **Multiple Levels of Instructional Resources**

First and most conspicuously, exemplary teachers created a multi-sourced and multi-leveled curriculum that did not rely on traditional content-area textbooks. They didn't throw those textbooks out but saw them as just one component of their total set of social studies and science curriculum materials.

In state history, for instance, the textbook provided a general organizing framework, but students acquired much of their historical content from tradebooks of multiple genres. In addition, original source materials, Web-based information, and local historians (professional and amateur) all supported students' study of state history.

### **Student Choice**

Second, the exemplary teachers offered students what we labeled “managed choice” as they learned content and demonstrated what they had learned. In a global studies unit, all students

didn't study and color the identical map of Europe. Instead, students selected regions or nations to study on the basis of their family history and personal interest. Each student or cluster of students was responsible for learning and then teaching their peers important content about their region.

When they studied insects, each student had to capture an insect and develop field journal data on its habitat and habits. Each student drew and labeled diagrams of his or her own insect rather than all students labeling the same ditto of an insect. They chose from several methods of presenting their insect to peers: a two-minute Be-the-Bug activity (Hi, I'm a dragonfly. Let me tell you a bit about me and where I live . . .); a HyperStudio presentation; or a written report. Giving students several options helped match assignments to students' abilities and learning styles, and enhanced their motivation (Allington & Johnston, 2002; Baumann & Duffy, 1997).

### **Individualized Instruction**

The exemplary teachers offered instruction tailored to each student's individual needs. Their classes experienced more personalized teaching and discussion and spent less time on whole-group lecture and recitation activities. Other researchers studying effective teaching at both elementary and secondary levels have reported similar findings (Langer, 2001; Nystrand, 1997; Taylor, Pearson, Clark, & Walpole, 2000).

These teachers provided students with models and demonstrations of the strategies that effective learners use when confronted with unfamiliar words or with difficult text. But they demonstrated these strategies in the context of the text that the student was reading or composing. In other words, none of the exemplary teachers used scripted one-size-fits-all instructional materials. The teachers taught students, not programs. They worried less about student performance on state-mandated tests and more about engaging students with reading and writing in the content areas.

### **The Continuing Challenge**

Improving learning in the content areas will require a substantial rethinking of what curriculum and instruction should look like. The exemplary teachers in the Center for English Learning and Achievement studies used practices that fostered improvements in student learning across the curriculum. But for now, most teachers who want to teach effectively have to teach against the organizational grain. Too often, teachers must reject the state and district curriculum frameworks and create their own curriculum packages, often spending their own funds to do so.

Good teaching should not be so difficult. But until more states and school districts dramatically modify their existing one-size-fits-all instructional resources and curriculum frameworks, many students won't receive the support they need to succeed in content-area learning.

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