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...Instruction can manipulate the balance of challenge and familiarity to make the child's task easy or hard.
— Clay, 1991a, p. 288

Achieving a balance between keeping the learning-to-read task easy and providing enough challenge to continue children's development of a self-extending system is a major teaching issue in Reading Recovery lessons. In working with children at beginning levels of their programs, this dilemma of balancing ease with challenge is frequently easier to solve; however, as texts become more complicated and students achieve more competency, this “balancing act” becomes more intricate. How do Reading Recovery teachers continue to provide strong instructional support after children have achieved beginning levels of competency and are moving into higher text reading levels?

We have come to realize that the issue of instructional support at higher levels of text reading is critically important for students’ successfully completing their Reading Recovery lessons and maintaining the gains they achieved while in the intervention. We make a case here that independence is fostered through teaching throughout children’s series of lessons and that some of the most-critical teaching and support must happen when children are reading in the upper levels of text. It is at higher levels that children are developing a greater depth of visual processing which must continue to be integrated with information from meaning and structure to assure continued acceleration and ease of learning, even in the second half of their lesson series.

From our observations of Reading Recovery lessons and our own tutoring of children, we acknowledge the feeling of urgency with which we teach in order to foster children’s accelerative growth. However, too typically it seems, once students are into upper levels of text reading (and for purposes of this article, let’s say levels 10 and up), many teachers think that they should begin to withdraw their support from children’s interactions with text. We have observed teachers withholding teaching support during familiar text reading, in book introductions, and during the first reading of the new book. Hence, texts get hard, lessons go over 30 minutes, reading becomes disfluent, and children who have been willing pupils begin to balk at reading the new book for their daily lessons. The learning-to-read task has become hard and unproductive.

Our hypothesis is that in our zeal to prepare children for the rigors of discontinuing assessment and successful performance with classroom literacy tasks, teachers mistakenly reduce and may even withdraw their support once children have developed some strategic processing capabilities and are into higher levels of text reading. In this article, we discuss the structural characteristics of higher-level texts, we consider the several types of processing demands that higher levels represent, and we conclude with a description of specific ways in which teachers can support children from midpoint to near the end of their lesson series.

Structural Characteristics of Higher-Level Texts

Peterson (1991) describes the several ways in which books get more difficult as reading levels increase. Some of the ways in which texts change relate to amount of picture support, greater sophistication in grammatical constructions, increased vocabulary and concept load, and more-elaborated episodes and events. Of the several characteristics she discusses, for our discussion here we will focus on the increasingly more-complex grammatical constructions—that is, more-sophisticated structure—and how they pose very real challenges for emergent readers.

Because, “... the young child’s guesses at points of uncertainty in
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his reading tend to be dominated by his control over the syntax of his language” (Clay, 1982, p. 35), children who are moving into higher levels in their lesson series have learned to use their own language as a source of prediction for “what will come next.” One major aspect of the language structures of higher-level texts is that they consist of more passages of literary language, that is, “book language,” which differs greatly from children’s natural language patterns and that, therefore, they will not be able to predict easily on the basis of their language knowledge. Consider these phrases and sentences from selected texts:

“Creep, creep under the log … Scamper, scamper through the forest …” (Cowley, The Terrible Tiger, Level 12)

“That Ratty Tatty is no good. I would catch her if I could… But he couldn’t, so he didn’t… ” (Cowley, Ratty-Tatty, Level 13)

“Along came a crab, a big blue crab …” (Buckley, The Greedy Gray Octopus, Level 12)

“10 little garden snails by the old gray gate … two climbed and saw the sun and then there were 8 …” (Randell, Ten Little Garden Snails, Level 13)

“Honey for me/Honey for me/Honey for breakfast/ And honey for tea.” (Randell, Honey for Baby Bear, Level 9)

“Soon Sammy said, ‘I want beans in a pot and toast that’s hot. That’s what I want for supper.’” (Hollander, Sammy’s Supper, Level 16)

Literary language, illustrated by the examples above, requires that readers possess an “ear” for unusual phrasing, for words in uncommon places but which make sense in the flow of the language, and oftentimes, the ability not only to hear rhyme but to use it as a source of prediction during reading.

Another general characteristic of texts at higher levels is more-complex sentence structures. Children may see, for the first time, question-sentences with verbs at the beginning. For example, in Mushrooms for Dinner (Randell, Level 11), Baby Bear asks, “Will you help me find some mushrooms?” and in, The Cooking Pot (Cowley, Level 10), the frequently repeated, “Is it cold? Is it hot?” may require children to apply word analysis to simple words that they have learned but have not seen in the initial position in a written sentence. These are examples of what Clay (2005) calls unexpected known words, which, along with partially familiar words still being learned and new, unknown words may require the ability, “… to take words apart, on the run, while reading…” (p. 132).

Sentences at higher levels also become more descriptive with adjectives and/or adverbs between nouns and verbs. Here are some examples that illustrate more-descriptive language, with what the child might be likely to predict instead of what is in the text:

Text:  Baby bear went uphill and downhill looking for mushrooms… (Randell, Mushrooms for Dinner, Level 11)

What the child may be expecting: Baby bear went looking.

Text: We ride in their big brown van … (Hoffman & Griffiths, Visiting Grandma & Grandpa, Level 11)

What the child may be expecting: We ride in their van.

Text: Tyrannosaurus Rex looked at the three big horns, and he went thumping away… (Randell, Brave Triceratops, Level 12)

What the child may be expecting: Tyrannosaurus Rex looked at the horns, and he went away.

In these examples, the intervening words, in which otherwise would be predictable structures for first-grade children, pose unique instructional opportunities for teachers. Children may need scaffolding to use visual analysis to problem solve the novel constructions that are beyond what they know and use at this early age. But we don’t want reading to become a word-by-word analysis task either! Helping children use what they know about structure to get to novel constructions is facilitated by thorough preparation for the new structures by allowing children to hear them prior to reading. (We will discuss and provide a rationale for teachers to continue to model and provide an aural rendition of novel structures in the final section of this article.)

Language use in upper-level texts also reflects structures which get longer as children are introduced to compound and complex sentence constructions. Compound sentences contain two complete thoughts expressed by two (or more) subjects and verbs joined with a connector. The major challenge here is that children will know and have seen common connectors (e.g., and, or
but) however, not in the function of joining two complete thoughts. In the following examples, we point out how compound sentences, which generally are longer, also increase the demands on children’s reasoning skills:

“Tim and Michael and Anna were all good runners, but Tim was the best.” (Giles, *The Cross-Country Race*, Level 14)

In this example, the first part of the compound sentence has three subjects. To fully understand the second part, the reader must infer that, of the three children named, Tim was the best runner, information which is given only in the first part of the sentence and which must be connected to, ‘Tim was the best [best what?]’

“He thought it would be fun to join the big boys in their snowball fight, but he knew he wasn’t old enough—not yet.” (Keats, *The Snowy Day*, Level 18)

The first part of this compound sentence presents the subject and (simple) verb in the first two words, but another 13 words intervene before the second half of the sentence! And the second part of the sentence gives qualifying information that explains why the boy can’t join the others; that is, he is too young but will be old enough some day. Essentially, all of this “action” is taking place in the boy’s mind (he thought and he knew); the events of the snowball fight and not being able to participate are necessary inferences the reader must make to fully understand the sentence.

“Jessica and Daniel pushed and pushed, but the rain had made the sheep’s wool very wet and heavy.” (Randell, *Loose Laces*, Level 17)

This example contains a double subject in the first part of the compound sentence and a new subject (rain) and verb (has made) that provide information that has not yet been related to the first part of the sentence.

Another challenging and new construction for children is the structure of complex sentences. These contain one or more dependent clauses and can pose different sorts of difficulties for children. Information in introductory clauses is removed from the subject and may not be remembered after subsequent problem solving; many times it provides conditional or temporal information about the action of the story and is less accessible as information that children can consolidate into overall meaning. Consider these examples:

“When Karen walked into her room, some children began to laugh.” (Randall, *Loose Laces*, Level 18)

The introductory phrase here provides temporal understanding of when the action of children laughing occurred.

“If you let me go, I’ll never forget what you’ve done …” (Fables from Aesop, Level 18)

The introductory phrase here provides information about the conditions under which the mouse will be grateful to the lion.

Dependent clauses in other positions within complex sentences usually provide additional detail that is secondary to subject/verb information. In these examples, dependent clauses provide rich, additional information to the main action of the sentence:

“When Karen walked into her room, some children began to laugh.” (Randall, *Loose Laces*, Level 17)

“Then Mr. and Mrs. Biggs and the two little Biggs drove away down the road in the little red camper for a vacation.” (Randell, *The Little Red Bus*, Level 13)

“She stayed as snug as a bug in a rug, with her coat to keep her warm.” (Cowley, *The Tiny Woman’s Coat*, Level 13)

These examples from narrative texts related to types of dependent clauses illustrate how language becomes more tightly compacted in terms of the number of ideas expressed within a single sentence. Each represents a condensing of two or more units of information into one sentence; hence, children must learn to attend to several pieces of information being provided in single grammatical constructions (sentences). The four narrative examples cited are more condensed versions, and therefore more-efficient constructions for the ideas listed in Figure 1 on the following page.

Now consider this example from informational text, which illustrates how expository text also frequently utilizes dependent clauses embedded in complex constructions. (Reading Recovery teachers need to take special care when introducing informational texts to children. We address this issue later in our recommendations for instructions.)

The sky changes because Earth is always turning around.

When our side of Earth faces the sun, it is daytime.

When Earth turns farther around, we are in the dark.

It is night.

The sun in shining on the other side of Earth.

Earth keeps turning and another day begins.

(Bruce, *Sky Changes*)
The many examples we have provided in this section reflect how the nature of higher text levels poses new challenges for children in terms of new and novel language constructions. However, children’s access to the meaning of higher-level texts requires more inferential reasoning as well as more familiarity with ever more-complex language structures. Indeed, the two go hand in hand: Language becomes more efficient as more ideas are expressed with fewer words through more-complex sentence construction. To attain meaning, children must learn how to “read between the lines.” In the next section, we consider other processing demands that higher levels of text represent to the developing reader.

**Processing Strategies at Higher Levels of Text Reading**

We have just observed how higher text levels require more-sophisticated levels of thinking for children to access meaning, and also how these advanced levels represent longer and more-complex language structures. In effect, as children approach higher levels of texts, they require every bit as much support (if not more) from the teacher to access meaning and use structure as they needed at lower levels of text. Now, they must learn new ways of thinking about more implied relationships among ideas. In addition, they must learn how to suspend their use of their own language as the primary source of anticipating text structure in order to integrate such attempts to predict with an ever-more-sophisticated level of visual analysis. Going up levels means that the ante has risen considerably! Hence, higher-level text reading poses new structural challenges and new meaning-based challenges. Now, let’s look specifically at the visual processing demands at these higher levels of texts.

Clearly, students must command a large number of the high-frequency words that occur in the English language in order to read at higher levels. We have already considered how familiar words in new places and new functions of familiar words can pose word analysis challenges for children. Teachers need to be sensitive to how “ordinary” words can fluctuate in position and function in text, thereby posing new learning challenges.

In addition, children face an increasing load of unusual, unpredictable, and frequently uniquely spelled words. Words such as *delicious, excitedly, speckled, beautifully, enormous, knowing, waddled, and slither* pose these sorts of challenges for young readers. To “get to” these words through an integration of cues, they have to be learning more about word parts and spelling patterns. Our observations of Reading Recovery lessons indicate that teachers may be using primarily the reading portions of the lesson framework to teach about spelling patterns, word parts, or how to apply other forms of word analysis.

For instance, sometimes the flow of rereading familiar books is interrupted in order to point out visual similarities with known words, or the first reading of the new book is allowed to become a word-by-word, letter-to-sound analysis task in the name of providing enough “work.” (We say more about appreciating the role of keeping it easy below.) However, Clay (2005b) says with respect to teaching during familiar reading,

> The teacher will arrange things so that the child is able to enjoy reading books that are easy and give him a sense of achievement. The child will have scope to practise a range of complex behaviours on a familiar text, and what he does sounds like “good reading.” (p. 87)
Clay reminds us that teachers should support independence and keep out of the reading as much as possible. The teacher may identify some words she might attend to later during the remainder of the lesson (2005b). Rather than overrelying on problem solving during reading, we have come to appreciate how a tripart approach for building word analysis skills throughout lessons offers powerful support for children at higher levels of text. This approach requires that the activities being engaged in by students in the writing and breaking/word work portions of the lesson are advancing to higher levels commensurate with the demands of reading higher reading levels. For instance, Clay tells us that the learning to be done during the writing activity, “…is also about constructing words from their parts” (p. 50), in addition to being about the story-composing process and creating messages to be read.

In breaking/word work activities, students need to go beyond simple analogies and substituting endings and beginnings. Clay (2005b) provides guidance for helping children to develop higher levels of word analysis in Section 13–More About Attending to Words in Isolation. She asserts, “There is no end to the permutations of breaking up or constructing words in isolation that children will have to do as they progress through school” (p. 149). As always, however, she warns against too much emphasis on working with isolated words and urges, “Once the child knows how to work on words in different ways and is showing evidence of initiating several kinds of analysis in his reading and writing there should be much less need for word work in isolation” (p. 149).

The learning to be done through writing stories and learning more about “how words work” (breaking and isolated word work) are important and complementary to students’ being able to progress in word analysis, or being able to take words apart in reading. Indeed, the reading components of Reading Recovery lessons (reading familiar books, the first reading of the new book, and a second reading the next day) represent the opportunities we provide children to apply what they are learning about words, word parts, and spelling patterns during the writing and breaking/word work components of lessons.

**Teaching Implications: Working with Students at Higher Levels of Text Reading**

We propose several ways in which Reading Recovery teachers can help to keep the processing easy for students working at upper levels of their programs.

1. **Appreciate the role of “keeping things easy” in learning.**

Contrast the model of learning to read by children before they enter school — they did not learn because it was made hard for them. If you, as a reader of this article, can confidently and successfully play golf, use the computer, do complicated needlepoint, or another complex activity, someone at some time probably made it easy for you to accomplish the component skills involved. If you are saying, “No, I don’t enjoy golfing, computing”…or ?, is it because it was never made easy for you?

Learning how to read should never be hard; too much is at stake. (It’s one thing not to be a golfer or needlepointer — quite another to be a nonreader!) Perhaps we have confused the idea of “reading work” with “hard work.” The interesting thing we have come to notice in Reading Recovery lessons is that if we make it hard, the young child becomes discouraged and learning seems to drop off; however, when we make it easy, the same child seems to accelerate her own learning, and she learns more. While this whole notion of making it easy to learn seems to fly in the face of the kind of respect for work that has influenced our culture, Clay (2005a) reminds us in her discussion about acceleration that, “Acceleration depends upon how well the teacher selects the clearest, easiest, most memorable examples with which to establish a new response, skill, principle or procedure” (p. 23, emphasis ours).

2. **Think differently about book selection by adopting a new way of looking at higher texts from that used when selecting lower texts.**

When selecting upper-level texts for the new book component of lessons, we need to look for implied meanings and associations, and watch for constructions that will be new and unusual to children in terms of how they typically speak and write as first graders.

Clay (2005b) reminds us to select the new book very carefully: “Choose it for a particular child with certain strengths and challenges at this time” (p. 89). Books should also be “within the child’s control….One or two things in the book will require new learning…” (p. 90).

The principles for text selection should be employed at higher levels of text as much as for the first texts we choose for our students; at the same time, however, we need to identify the new kinds of challenges that
children will meet at higher levels (and which we have explicated here).

3. Continue to provide book introductions that thoroughly prepare students for the meaning, language, and visual demands of new texts.

In preparation for the child’s reading of the new book, the teacher will need to prepare an orientation to the story that provides the child with the whole meaning, by taking into consideration implied meanings and associations which may be difficult for the child to grasp during the first reading. The teacher will want to “take the ‘bugs’ out of the text” (Clay, 2005b, p. 91) before the child tries to read it. Her role is to make sure that the child knows what the story is about and has access to the language and meaning before he begins reading. According to Clay, the first reading of the new book “is not a test; it needs to be a successful reading” (p. 91). “As the child approaches a new text he is entitled to an introduction so that when he reads, the gist of the whole or partly revealed story can provide some guide for a fluent reading” (Clay, 1991a, p. 335).

Clay (1991a) tells us that if we think this is being too helpful to the reader, we might consider what happens during a conversation between two people. In order for understanding to occur between two people, the speaker either checks or keys into the prior knowledge of the listener, or the speaker provides an introduction so that the listener can understand where the speaker is coming from. We have a responsibility to provide a clear meaning of the whole story—not just page-by-page meanings—in order for our beginning readers to have the schema necessary to make sense of the print.

In addition, as meaning in upper-level text reading becomes a matter of more inferential reasoning, our book introductions and teaching during the first reading may need to include making links in the text that are not directly stated. For instance, in an example we cited above, the text reads, “Tim and Michael and Anna were all good runners, but Tim was the best.” Here, the teacher could point out that Tim was the best runner of all of them — he was really fast! This can serve as modeling about how to make intertextual inferences.

We believe book introductions at higher levels of text reading also must continue to prepare children for the types of structures that they will be meeting in the new book.

We have discussed the kinds of novel structures of upper levels and how length of sentences, more compact ideas, and compound and complex structures pose unique challenges to children at the same time that they are attempting to integrate a more sophisticated level of visual processing into a self-extending system of learning on text.

We would like to make a strong case for continuing to let children hear and, as appropriate, repeat key structures that may be totally new to them. Clay (2005b) appears to have this in mind when she asserts,

As the children begin to work on higher level texts some will encounter language structures they do not expect. So these need to be anticipated and where possible used by the teacher in her introduction.

Only the very competent can take these on the run. When the book’s language is more complex than language this child uses, the teacher may help the child into the reading of it by using some of the author’s words and phrases. (p. 92)

In this excerpt, Clay is specifically addressing the extra support that early readers require for reading at higher levels. The teacher may spend time letting the child hear and say the unusual structures in new texts in the interest of assuring a successful and easy-reading first reading.

Finally, supportive book introductions provide children with the schema they need in order to make predictions about unknown words which they will encounter more and more in upper levels of text reading:

Prediction in this sense does not mean predicting the word that will occur; it means the prior elimination of unlikely alternatives. . . . Such a procedure is efficient, it is supported in part by understanding what is being read, and it is strongly supported by the reader’s knowledge of the syntactic alternatives and restrictions of the language.” (Clay, 1991a, p. 336)

For these many reasons, we strongly urge that Reading Recovery teachers continue to provide structure and meaning during book introductions throughout a lesson series so that the child will “have in his head the ideas and the language he needs to complete the reading. In the first year or two of learning to read it helps if the child knows what the story is about before he reads it” (Clay, 2005b, p. 91).
Supportive book introductions provide children with the schema they need in order to make predictions about unknown words which they will encounter more and more in upper levels of text reading.

4. Develop a clear understanding of the difference between word-level “work” and phrase/sentence-level processing.

As mentioned above, one of the scenes we often see during Reading Recovery lessons at higher levels of text is children reading slowly, doing word-by-word problem solving on many words. They manage to “read” all the words, but there is little fluent reading, and completing a whole book in the allotted time becomes very unlikely. The question we must ask ourselves is, “Do we really want children to problem solve word-by-word, or do we want the language to flow as easily as possible so that the “ear” for language children need to acquire is learned?”

Here again, the teacher’s orientation to a story at these higher levels can greatly influence whether children are able to process quickly on the run or whether they need to drop down to word-by-word reading. Clay (1991b) states that introductions are “useful when it is important for children to read a new text with a high degree of successful processing” (p. 265). We maintain that for Reading Recovery children, that is always the case!

If teachers provide both rich meaning and some of the structures that may be novel for children based on their current experiences with texts, the processing more likely will be successful and the first reading of the book will be fluent, rendering further meaning upon which children may draw to figure out new words. “Prepare the child for correct responding on the first encounter. Success can be expected if the child has recent and successful encounters with the language of the book, so think about what you expect him to know…” (Clay, 2005b, p. 91).

What we want to make clear is that teaching children to problem solve unknown words is necessary, but requiring them to do great amounts of it without the appropriate support of meaning and having the grammatical structures in their heads appears to be counterproductive to acceleration.

5. Understand when and how we shift from providing a thorough book introduction to occasionally asking children to look at the pictures and tell us about the story before reading it.

The practice of shifting to less-supportive book introductions is done under very specific conditions, “for a child who has made great progress and who is near the end of his supplementary early intervention” (Clay, 2005b, p. 92). In other words, this is not for children who are still learning how to integrate information from various sources.

The most-common problems around this issue are (a) asking children to make a shift to reading a new text “with minimum help” (Clay, 2005b, p. 92) as early as levels 7, 8, or 9 before they are well on the way to independence; and (b) overuse of “minimum introductions” on books which require more-supportive introductions. Sometimes, teachers may be afraid that children will not be ready to have lessons discontinued if they do not shift to what they call “minimum book introductions” on a regular basis. (A careful reading of page 92 of Literacy Lessons Part Two will show that Clay does not use that term!) We have found the opposite to be true; children who receive little or no support prior to reading many higher level texts seem to deteriorate in their ability to problem solve on the run. They become word-by-word readers at levels 10 and above, when once they were quite fluent and confident.
Clay (2005b) defines when it is appropriate to provide book introductions with minimum help: “Once the child has constructed ‘a reading process,’ he can be challenged by novel text that has not been introduced (unseen)” (p. 92). Consider also the following ideas about such introductions. In Reading Recovery lessons the new book is selected at what the teacher expects is the child’s instructional reading level (90–94% accuracy). By definition, an instructional text reading level means that the new book needs to be accompanied with instruction from the teacher. “Because the Reading Recovery teacher is lifting the level of challenge in a book across the entire lesson series there are probably few opportunities for the child to ‘review the book on his own’” (Clay, 2005b, p. 92). When considering a text that will require minimum orientation and help from the teacher, teachers may want to drop a level or two in order to carefully select a book that is in the child’s independent reading level, that is, one on which the child can operate independently and successfully. In other words, the story has minimal challenges that child can get to on her own.

Sometimes using another version of a story the child has read such as The Three Little Pigs, The Lion and the Mouse, or The Little Red Hen is a good choice because the child already has an understanding of the story’s meaning, as well as some of the structures she will encounter. Another way to select a book upon which the child is likely to operate well is to find a text that has very supportive pictures and language that is easy for young children to understand. Books like Ben’s Tooth (Randell, Level 13) are easily accessible for most children.

Furthermore, teachers do not need to use books for which only minimum assistance is necessary for weeks and weeks. Nor do they need to introduce less-supportive introductions at each reading level throughout a series of lessons. Getting children “ready” for the specific tasks of postassessment and the rigors of classroom work can be the focus of the final few weeks of children’s lessons; it need not be a focus of how we are working instructionally throughout their lesson series! Rather, let us appreciate how providing strong, appropriate scaffolding all along the way provides the best overall preparation for the level of independence required for discontinuing their lessons and for meeting classroom demands.

**Teachers do not need to use books for which only minimum assistance is necessary for weeks and weeks, nor introduce less-supportive introductions at each reading level throughout a series of lessons.**

6. **Understand how the nature of teaching support during the first reading needs to change for children at higher levels of text reading.**

Because children are having to learn more about visual analysis with text containing difficult-to-predict structures and more unfamiliar and unusual words, the teacher’s role becomes one of “holding” meaning and structure as children do the “dipping down” to carry out word analysis as needed for visual problem solving. Teachers can hold meaning for children during the first reading by commenting to meaning as the child turns the page (without interrupting the flow of the reading). In this way, the teacher makes links across the story as a model of the thinking the child needs to learn how to do.

For example, in the book The Flood (Giles, Level 14), a neighbor, Andy McDonald, comes to rescue the flood victims. On page 12 the text says, “It’s Andy McDonald,” said Dad. “Thanks for coming, Andy.” As Richard turned the page, the teacher said, “I wonder what Andy will say and do to help the family?”

This comment helped Richard think about the fact that Andy would be talking and doing something to help. Richard read the next page quite fluently:

“You can’t stay here,” said Andy.

“Get your things and come to our place.”

They all climbed into the boat and went slowly away past the treetops.

During the orientation to the story, the teacher had used the phrase, “past the treetops,” and she talked about how high the water was getting, in order to assure Richard had in his head the language and meaning he needed to understand the idea that the flood waters were so high that the boat was almost at the level of the tops of the trees.

Another way to set children up for successful problem solving during the first reading of the new book is to reread from the beginning of page and/or line in order to reestablish the
“feed-forward” function of structure and meaning that are lost when children stop to work at the word level. An example of this occurred when Alyssa was having trouble with the word *hungry* in the text *Pepper’s Adventure* (Randall, Level 14). Because the forward momentum of the reading had been broken for problem solving *cage* and *hungry*, the teacher reread the previous sentence and a half in order to reestablish meaning, stopping just before the difficult word (*hungry*) which Alyssa was then able to solve:

Sarah put some food in the cage.

“Pepper will be hungry,” she said.

A high level of support during the first reading such as in this example enables children to learn how to integrate ongoing meaning and structural information with higher levels of visual analysis. Such support on the part of the teacher will fade out as children acquire greater flexibility with more-complex structures and more-sophisticated word analysis.

7. Deliberately and carefully choose informational text to introduce as one option for new book reading. We are not big advocates of using informational text initially for struggling readers. Story structure represents an important source of anticipation that enables children with limited literacy processing experience to establish themselves, perhaps for the first time, as readers. Along with using their knowledge of ‘how it goes’ (structure) and seeking to make meaning, story structure provides another source of predictability when so little visual information is familiar:

At this early stage, perception, constructive activity, and language all work together with meaning. The child’s version of the text will be guided by his or her oral language, by the introduction of the teacher, by the pictures, by what the child can find in print that he or she already knows, by the child’s knowledge of the world, and by his or her prior knowledge of the structure of stories. (Clay, 1998, p. 173, emphasis ours)

Informational text by its very nature features different language constructions from the oral language control of children new to Reading Recovery lessons; this is important when children are working to bring their language control to their first reading attempts:

If I am working with children known to have severe limitations or poor experiences with learning to read I expect the first interactions of child and text to occur on natural language texts that are close to the way that child speaks. . . . The first thing that comes to mind will be those language forms he uses in speech. The best checks on whether he is right will come from his personal check with the language he knows so well. (Clay, 1991a, p. 195)

However, as children move into higher text levels, their own language development will be further along and they will need the challenge of varying types of text as well as structures: Informational text reading can serve an important role in helping them to achieve the flexibility that is required of them for classroom reading. When selecting informational text, watch for the same kinds of complex structures and inferred meanings as higher-level narrative text. In addition, be sure to help children understand how to expect something different; e.g., you might say, “This book isn’t a story; it gives us new information about…” A major way to prepare children for the meaning of the text is to ask, “What do you know about…?” and “Have you ever wondered about where/how/when…” Using informational text also opens the door to pointing out organizational features of books such as the table of contents, index, and glossary. However, for Reading Recovery children, the major value of higher-level informational text is providing another context for developing flexibility to read different kinds of text, becoming familiar with more-sophisticated discourse structures, and learning how to infer (or gather up) meaning across text, especially as structures consolidate ideas into fewer constructions and ideas become more dense.

Some Closing Thoughts

Teacher decisions about how much support to provide a particular child reading a specific book is always idiosyncratic and dependent upon what the child is able to do. However, as we have stated, Reading Recovery lessons at higher levels of text reading sometimes become very difficult for both teachers and children. Reading Recovery will involve high levels of effort on the part of both teacher and child, but lessons should never be hard.

We want you to consider, further, that Reading Recovery lessons should be fun for both teachers and children. We can ensure that both children and we have fun if we make
a concerted effort to “keep it easy to learn” by being more generous in using appropriate, strong support at higher levels of text reading. Perhaps we can do this more readily if we think of every day in Reading Recovery as the child’s birthday: The more we give in the way of gifts (like meaning and structure during the book orientation), the more she will give us in the way of problem solving on the run, integrating all sources of information effectively and efficiently, and evidence of achieving an efficient system of literacy processing.

As Reading Recovery teachers, we truly are decision makers whose work with children consists of managing “the balance of challenge and familiarity” across the full scope of their programs—including higher levels of text—to make their task of learning easy.

References

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About the Authors
Patricia Kelly is a professor in the College of Education at San Diego State University, where she is currently interim associate dean for faculty development and research. She was director of the Reading Recovery program at SDSU and also served as director of the SDSU Literacy Center. Her recent research and publications have examined early literacy practices, early intervention, and effective instruction for English language learners.

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