

Language Not Levels: An Inquiry into Book Selection

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As Reading Recovery® teachers, daily and weekly reflection is necessary to make strong instructional decisions in response to a child’s reading and writing behaviors. As teachers engaging in regular reflective practice, we continually aim to improve our responsiveness to individual children. One way that we can reflect on our practice is to delve into Clay’s teaching procedures in *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals* (2016) and deepen our understanding of how we make decisions to design instructional opportunities tailored to each learner. Importantly, Clay tells us that “*the teacher must be tentative, flexible, and immediately responsive to the best opportunity for a particular learner at this moment*” (p. 24).

In this article, we share an inquiry project to impact the appropriateness of teachers’ book selections for particular children. We wanted to learn more about the ways in which teachers were choosing new books, as well as to draw teachers’ attention to language structures children controlled and the language structures in texts as a consideration for selecting books. Prior to launching this project, we gathered observations, engaged in conversations, and reviewed lesson data to identify some challenges related to selecting books:

- For some children, the books selected are either too easy or difficult and offer few opportunities for new discoveries about print;
- Sometimes we rely on our favorite books and book series, perhaps without thinking carefully about matching the book to the child;
- Sometimes we may rely on the reported book level as a major consideration when selecting books for individuals, perhaps overlooking factors related to the language of the book and the child’s strengths and challenges when reading a particular book.

We know that some of us find it challenging to consistently select new books for some children, particularly for English language learners and children needing additional

support for language. Given this, we invited colleagues to reflect more deeply about our practice, with a focus on improving the book selection process.

To begin this process, we turned to guidance from Clay (2016): “Teachers should have opportunities to talk with colleagues about features of books they have found unduly challenging” and “particular attention should be paid to the child’s control of oral language structures or syntax ... Syntactical knowledge enables the child to construct sentences to anticipate which way a sentence might go” (p. 114). Knowing attention needed to be given to book selection, we wondered if teachers’ heightened awareness of the child’s oral language competencies and the language of books would result in their applying these new understandings to the book selection process.

As Reading Recovery teachers, we are encouraged to evaluate our teaching and ask “What are the strengths?” “What are the weak aspects?” (New Zealand Reading Recovery, 2018), and when writing Predictions of Progress we note, “I will need to pay special attention to ...” (Clay, 2016, p. 28). As teachers, we ask ourselves, why am I doing what I am doing? To further investigate and learn more about selecting books for individuals, we can ask, what conditions do I need to create for my own learning in order to make better book choices? What do I need to learn more about? How can my colleagues support me? How do I attend to the ways in which I select books for children?

We knew it was important to think about these questions in relation to the procedure for choosing a new book. In *Literacy Lessons Designed for Individuals*, Clay (2016) provides some key considerations regarding book selection. “From the hundreds of books available, the highly trained teacher will select one that the particular child will:

- want to read
- be able to relate some personal knowledge
- succeed with and enjoy
- use to establish new competencies.” (p. 114)

Clay also tells us, “The teacher must preview the book and weigh up its suitability for this child at this time. A successful book choice will be well within the child’s control, using language structures, words and letters he knows or can get to with his teacher’s help. A few things in the book will require new learning” (p. 114). As Clay (2013) reminds, “[I]n every way the information produced by systematic observation reduces our uncertainties and improves our instruction” (p. 3). To select ‘just right’ books for students, we need to become keen observers of children’s use of language, what captures their attention, and what motivates them as readers and learners.

Essentially, Clay (2016) encourages us to engage in inquiry to strengthen our teaching, “think about new insights and explanations that may apply. You are likely to have some blind spots in these areas, and the opinions of colleagues could be most useful for adjusting your teaching” (p. 166). Indeed, we felt it was essential to examine how we might improve the selection of books for children with varied language competencies.

The Inquiry Process

To guide the inquiry project we asked, “If we heightened teachers’ awareness of the child’s oral language competencies and the language of books, would teachers apply these new understandings to their book selection process?” We hoped that asking this question might help us focus on a range of considerations including, and very importantly, the role of language, to “weigh up its [a book’s] suitability for this child at this time” (Clay, 2016, p. 114).

Participants

A group of seven experienced Reading Recovery teachers participated in this inquiry about book selection. The teacher leader selected the teachers because at the start of the school year, they had expressed concerns about a particular student’s oral language and were aware that specific attention needed to be given to oral language learning in their teaching. The teachers all had successful experience supporting students with limited control of English language. They were a reflective group of professionals with a desire to further their own learning in order to better support students.

Each teacher was teaching four students and of these students, one was selected as a case study student for the teacher’s additional time devoted to planning, reflecting, and analyzing the case study students’ records. All of the case study students’ lessons began in September of the

Grade 1 year and all were identified as needing further language support. Five of the seven students scored below 13 on the Record of Oral Language. Clay, Gill, Glynn, McNaughton, & Salmon (2015) suggests, “These children should be considered for special attention in oral language development” (p. 22). Additionally, the students’ instructional reading levels ranged from level 3 to 6, with five of the students reading level 3 and 4 books.

Timeline

The inquiry into book selection took place over 6 weeks in the fall of the school year. At the time of the start of the inquiry project, all students had been in Reading Recovery lessons for approximately 6 weeks.

Materials

A list of recommended titles organized by level is available as a “guide to the selection of storybooks for students in Reading Recovery and represents a gradient of difficulty for students who are finding it difficult to learn to read. Text selection is always based upon the professional judgments of trained Reading Recovery teachers and determined by the needs of the individual child” (Canadian Institute of Reading Recovery, 2017, p. 2). However, for this inquiry, teachers selected *new* books outside of their typical Reading Recovery book collections. The books used in this inquiry project also included those that might be found in classrooms or school libraries.

We wondered if eliminating text levels as a criterion for book selection would serve as a catalyst for teachers to look at book language in new ways for particular children. It was our intention that each teacher would devote extra attention to “preview the book and weigh up its suitability for this child at this time ... using language structures, words and letters he knows or can get to with his teacher’s help” (Clay, 2016, p. 114). To ensure that this would happen, we decided that for this 6-week inquiry, the teachers would not use books listed on their Reading Recovery Book List.

Also, because this project coincided with the field testing of books for possible addition to the Canadian book list, the seven teachers were given a bin of approximately 40 new books to be field-tested and available for use with their case study student. The new books were from a variety of publishers and authors and included both fiction and nonfiction titles. Teachers were also encouraged to select new books from school and classroom libraries. Most of the books were unseen texts, but some of the

books were familiar to the teachers through various classroom shared reading experiences. The combination of the new books and the books from libraries meant that teachers would work with an expanded array of texts not on the Reading Recovery Book List and with which they were unfamiliar. Teachers would select the new books from the expanded set of books and use them within the Reading Recovery lesson framework: introduction and first reading of the new book, followed the next day with a second reading and the teacher taking a running record, and books for familiar reading (Clay, 2016, p. 35). Following the 6-week inquiry, teachers would return to using books from their established Reading Recovery leveled book sets.

Procedures

To support teachers in building knowledge about using a child's language strengths and interests as considerations when matching books to individual readers, a 1-hour initial meeting, at the beginning of the 6-week inquiry project, and a half-day final meeting, at the end of the project were planned.

Initial meeting

The teacher leader held an initial meeting to introduce the inquiry project, which included attention to process, assessments, and record keeping. *Biks and Gutches: Learning to Inflect English, A Guide for Teaching* (Clay, 2015b), unfamiliar to most of the teachers, was introduced to the teachers at this meeting. The Biks and Gutches assessment "gives a strong indication of how far particular children have come along the path to controlling the language in their reading books" (p. 8).

At the meeting, teachers were invited to review and discuss the characteristics of their new, field-test, unlevelled books. The teacher leader guided the teachers to think about the features of the books that would support the development of their case study students' literacy processing systems. The teachers were excited to preview the books and reflect on the importance of matching stories to their students' language strengths. During the discussion, the teacher leader prompted the teachers to talk about how they were selecting new books and why.

Through this process, the teachers began to reject some books entirely and to trade some books with each other as they discussed the particular interests of their case study students. In their ongoing work with children, teachers were encouraged to learn more about each of their case study student's interests and consider this as important

for selecting books for their students. Teachers were also encouraged to engage in more conversations with children and prompt them to tell stories about topics that were important to them. These topics included family and friends, favorite things, likes and dislikes, feelings, imagination, and other books of interest.

Consistent with Reading Recovery practice, the running record taken on yesterday's new book was used to evaluate the teacher's choice of book and provide information to select the next new book. Teachers were encouraged to think about the child's current literacy processing behaviors as evidenced on the running record—attempts at difficulty, self-corrections, errors, sources of information used or neglected, and how the reading sounded—always aiming "to have the child read the book fluently. The outcome should be that the reader is keen to move on to the next exciting exposure to new things" (Clay, 2016, p. 114).

Although teachers had administered the Record of Oral Language at the beginning of the child's lesson series, it was not re-administered at the start of the inquiry project, as Clay recommends that the administration be 6 months apart (Clay et al., 2015, p. 34). However, teachers were encouraged to use the child's responses to the initial assessment as an important way to "observe aspects of a child's control over oral language utterances and assess a child's ability to handle selected grammatical structures" (p. 9) and apply this information to choosing books for their student throughout the 6-week project.

Also at the initial meeting, the teacher leader and teachers reviewed Clay's procedures for "Choosing the new book" (2016, p. 114). At the end of the meeting, teachers were provided the following readings to encourage even more support for their ongoing reflection related to strengthening the books chosen for use with their case study students:

- Shaping the PM Story Books (Randell, 1999)
- Introducing Storybooks to Young Readers (Clay, 2014, pp. 186–199)

The teacher leader also encouraged the teachers to read the following articles:

- The Power of Story (Cowley, 2015)
- Where Did Baby Bear (and All Those Other Stories) Come From? Writer Shares Sources of Her Ideas (Randell, 2014)

The inquiry was planned primarily as a self-study. Teachers would review Clay's procedures for selecting books for children; engage in some additional professional reading; think about what they felt were important considerations for their case study student; and put their learning and thinking into action, exploring what seemed to work or not work with their student. The teacher leader and the colleague group were available to answer questions and discuss book choices.

The 6-week inquiry

During the 6 weeks, teachers selected books with a focus on the child's language strengths and interests. The teachers reflected daily, writing in diaries, and completed a book log with comments. Although not part of the original plan, teachers requested additional time to meet mid-way through the project. They had appreciated reviewing and talking about books together at the initial meeting. Teachers appeared to draw deeply on their understandings of language structures and text features and not rely on habits developed from using only the leveled books with which they were already familiar. This also led to some dissonance as they grappled over whether a particular text would be appropriate for a child. At times, teachers questioned their abilities to select suitable books, as they seemed somewhat less confident about their understanding of text features and language structures. As a result, they wanted to continue their colleague conversations around the characteristics of books.

Accommodating the teachers' request, the teacher leader facilitated an additional 1-hour meeting about mid-way through the inquiry project. The discussion centered around the teachers' daily records, reviewing daily lesson data, and evaluating how the selection of texts was supporting students' processing systems for reading and writing. Teachers were encouraged to talk about what they were noticing, why it might be happening, and consider implications for their teaching. Teachers discussed their learning and were challenged to think about linking children's observed language competencies to the language of books.

Data collection process

Data were collected to examine teachers' attention to and awareness of the child's oral language competencies as related to the selection of books. Teachers collected data at the beginning, during, and at the end of the inquiry project.

Pre- and post-project data — The teachers administered Biks and Gutches (Clay, 2015b) at the beginning and the end of the 6-week inquiry. The Record of Oral Language was administered only at the end of the 6-week inquiry, although all the teachers had administered the Record of Oral Language when the case study student began lessons in September.

During the 6-week project — Teachers kept daily records of their case study student's progress and recorded their reflections about the child's language competencies and reading behaviors. Sources for this record keeping and the teacher's written reflections included the daily lesson record, daily running records; Change Over Time in Writing Vocabulary chart; the child's writing booklet, and the child's longest utterance.

Teachers also kept daily reflections summarizing what they had noticed related to the child's language competencies and responses to selected books. This daily log (see Figure 1) included comments about language structures and an overall evaluation of whether or not the teacher would recommend the book for inclusion on the Reading Recovery Book List; daily reflections recorded in a blank diary format; and a summary reflection at the end of the inquiry project. The teachers' daily logs and reflections revealed their reflective practices with specific attention to language competencies, book language, and children's interests with the goal of selecting books that would be a match for each case study child.

What We Learned

The aim of this inquiry was that through focused attention on children's language and the language of books, teachers would apply their new understandings to the book selection process on a consistent basis. We predicted that using unfamiliar texts that had not yet been leveled as a criterion for book selection would support teachers in focusing more precisely on language, not just text level, as a way to "preview the book and weigh up its suitability for this child at this time ... using language structures, words and letters he knows or can get to with his teacher's help" (Clay, 2016, p. 114). We wondered if teachers' attention to children's language and the language in books would affect how they matched books to their case study students. Our observations about the teachers and students are as follows.

Observations about teachers

The teacher’s ear would be tuned to language structures. We predicted that the teacher’s ear would be tuned to the types of language structures the child was using in speech and the language in the books read by the child. By recording the child’s longest utterances, teachers found they were taking on the role of being more observant about the child’s language use and somewhat more present in lessons with their students. The teachers also felt they paid more attention to the different aspects of the lesson as they pertained to children’s language use and how children’s language was changing. Teachers’ written reflections recorded in daily logs provided evidence that they had a heightened awareness of the new language structures being used by students (see Figure 1). Their ‘before reading’ entries noted the structures and vocabulary which the teacher would use in the new book introduction. Their ‘after reading’ entries indicated the structures and vocabulary that challenged the child during the reading of the new book and that surfaced as difficult on the running record taken the next day.

In reviewing the daily logs and the running records, we identified some patterns in the teachers’ notes before and after the reading of the new book. Teachers seemed to have a basic understanding of language structure as it related to selecting books. Overall, the teachers’ observations of language structures align with the different types of diagnostic sentences in the Record of Oral Language, in which declarative statements had been transformed into more complex structures— imperatives, questions, negatives, phrases, and clauses (Clay et al., 2015). Some specific observations based on the teachers’ reflections concerned the following:

Prepositions — Teachers had awareness of prepositions being challenging for the students, often describing an intention to attend to prepositions in the orientation to the new book. However, only two teachers noted prepositional phrase structures to introduce prior to the child reading the new book. For example, ‘in the white, white snow’ or ‘on the top of the water.’ One teacher stated, “I have become more aware of introducing those prepositional phrases realizing that they may not be part of children’s natural language.” On some running records, some children seemed unable to anticipate the prepositional phrase structure and waited to be told the word.

Pronouns — Only one teacher identified pronouns as a language consideration when selecting and introducing new books. For example, in her diary entry she stated, “My student was struggling with understanding and using ‘it’ ... so as I was thinking more specifically about structures really tried to get him to understand how we use ‘it’ so encouraged him to use ‘it’ in conversations.” For other students, there was evidence of pronouns presenting challenges on a number of running records. Generally, teachers noted pronouns as vocabulary that needed to be addressed but neglected to note that the child might not have understood what the pronoun (‘it’ or ‘this’ for example) referred to as the book was being introduced.

Questions — Teachers identified questions as potentially challenging language structures. For example, Can you come? Where are you going? If you are ... or Who am I? It is not clear why the teachers thought these structures would be challenging for children, since they typically described children as having successfully read sentences that were questions. One teacher selected a book format with a question and answer structure as a potentially supportive book structure and, as she had anticipated, the child easily read the story.

Verb tenses — All teachers noted an awareness of verb tenses and used this as a factor when thinking about book selection. One teacher noted how the student read present tense verbs with ease but had difficulty when a book contained both present and past verb tenses. “At first I was struggling to find that appropriate book, but then I became so much more aware of past tenses — went, was, yelled, liked, saw, looked — which my student was really struggling with.” Another teacher selected a book anticipating that the child would easily take on similar verb forms — catching/catch, swimming/swims. Yet, after the child read the book, the teacher noted that the child did not successfully “handle the variety of verbs.” And, another

Figure 1. Daily Log Sample

Language Not Levels 'Daily Log'				
Book Title & Date	Before Reading Make note of language structures (S) and vocabulary (V) that support this student	After Reading Make note of language structures (S) and vocabulary (V) that challenged this student	Would you recommend this book?	Longest Utterance
My Bike Can Fly Nov 19 (pulled from classroom)	S=uses prep. he had read previously -only -present tense -V= using verb V= familiar with	S= flies flying V= re-structure showing street	Yes, good use of over, under, but want a lot of information on language off print for	"He rode back good" 4 words
The Case of the Missing Pat Nov 20	"all over" "I will read" N+V will illustrate S= I am, I will V= a clue "I" phrase	S= Some difficulty with... present to past - (an up/get up) the start, make up	Yes, but not so some challenges like "I should" - (strongly recommend)	The shark saw the sea lion. 6 words
Chen's Xmas Tree Nov 21	S= story structure repeated throughout V= keeps all eight words but 4, had notes	S= very easy for story V= send, got tree, that, this	Yes! Great accessible story.	Charles was looking for stuffy 5 words
Where did all the water go? Nov 23	we depicted in illustrations - saw, cat S= mostly present tense V= words present tense (the present tense)	S= saw, V= could not find out the words	Possible, but for a student reading above what's level.	My shaver is coming here for shaving. How's it looking? 6 words
Honeybees & Bees Nov 26	words but this can be used to know words can't get them now, some others S= tense quite, but I think be will handle these as, catching, catch, swimming, swims V= eat, controls all high- freq words used in story	Clouds/sky, wind/hit S= did not handle the song with/its clearly V= begin/ending him/her/past probably all eyes/each all a challenge	Legends for a adventure reader than space and	The harpoon almost got the humpback whale. 7 words
Other Comments	will handle these as, catching, catch, swimming, swims V= eat, controls all high- freq words used in story			

er teacher acknowledged, “I failed to prepare my student for the past tense ‘like’ to ‘liked’ and now realize how all the components of the structures of language need to be thought out.”

Imperative sentences — One teacher described selecting a book that included imperative sentences, for example, “Eat your peas Louise!” The teacher had predicted that the book would be a good choice as it was written in rhyme and therefore should pose no problem for the child. On reflection, however, the teacher commented that the child was unable to use rhyme to anticipate the imperative language structure. Essentially, greater attention needed to be given to the language structure itself, instead of assuming that a rhyme would make it easier for the child to read the text.

Verb contractions and adverbs — Interestingly, only one teacher suggested that children’s control over contractions such as ‘don’t’ and verbs (‘do’) modified by an adverb (‘not’) would be important considerations for the children’s reading. However, on some running records, errors were made or students engaged in problem-solving behaviors in order to read texts that included contractions and the corresponding verb modified by an adverb. In their notes pertaining to ‘after the child’s reading,’ teachers acknowledged that some of these verb examples posed challenges for certain children and that perhaps had they anticipated the challenges (can’t/cannot and wouldn’t/would not) they might have attended to them in their preparation for a particular child’s reading.

In general, teachers described themselves as analyzing language structures and vocabulary in a more disciplined way when selecting books. One teacher stated, “It made me critically think about the structures and language in the book.” They considered the structures controlled by the child as well as the text structures that were challenging. Another diary comment described the student initiating conversation topics and using more-complex language in both speaking and writing. One teacher suggested this might be due to having been introduced to a variety of language structures. “I was surprised that my student took on some challenging language structures, but it was because of his high interest in the books.” Alternatively, perhaps knowledge of the topic and meaning making enabled the child to overcome language structures that have been anticipated to pose challenges to the reading.

Likewise, by heightening the teachers’ attention to language structures and book structures, they seemed to become more aware of the need to continue to deepen

their understandings about language. One teacher admitted, “I feel that I need more practice in analyzing language structures and text features found in the books I am using with my students.”

A focus on composing: Using books as prompts to conversation. In planning the inquiry, we predicted teachers would notice students wanting to use books as the context for the child-teacher conversations that precede writing with children wanting to either write about the story or use the story ideas as a jumping off point for their own composing. As conversation might be more spontaneous and genuine, we anticipated compositions to include more complex story ideas and in turn provide more opportunities to learn how to solve more complex words.

Teachers’ reflections included comments about books prompting some of the child’s compositions. Typically, the writing samples about books were a comment about something that had happened in the story. For example, “The big cat didn’t have food in his bowl.” or “Baby Bear went fishing. Baby Bear caught a fish.” Or “Pete the cat looked in the sand for the treasure box! “TREASURE BOX!” said Pete the cat.” There were very few samples of informational writing based on books, i.e. “Peas turn into pods. They grow on vines.” or “They can hear very good because their ears are big.” Some stories showed the child using features of texts likely borrowed from reading — paragraphing, dialogue, and varied punctuation. One teacher reflected, “I am beginning to realize that supporting my student to compose a good story for writing is really complex.”

A check at week 3 of the inquiry indicated that teachers felt composing “took off” and children had more ideas that they wanted to write about based on the books they were reading. “Confidence in writing is higher. He is more excited to write about these books. Although the spacing and font were unusual in some books, with exposure to different styles of writing and different page layouts, he became more independent and engaged. Now wanting to take his own stories home!”

Teachers also noted that when children are highly interested in a particular book, the teacher needs to use this opportunity to foster genuine conversations to support composing for writing. One teacher said, “I need to use books that are high interest for the students as conversation starters for writing, otherwise I’ve missed an opportunity.” Another asked, “Do we miss opportunities to use high interest books to gain more complexity in story writing?”

The length of children's stories varied. Table 1 shows samples of the shortest and longest stories written by each child during the 6-week inquiry project. However, the length of stories for each child seemed to be somewhat random during the project. Only one student showed a steady increase in story length from the beginning to the end of the project. When using books as the provocation for the child's story, the compositions were usually a restatement of the plot and rarely about the story's characters, actions, or events, or a link to their own lives. This prompted teachers to think about keeping better records about the contexts that supported the child in composing and recording lengthier stories. Perhaps in future lessons, the teachers might also note whether a child's stories are related to a book read in the lesson, a personal story about an event, or an object or a topic prompted by classroom activities.

Although teachers felt the writing vocabulary had taken off in the first 3 weeks of the project, students continued to add to their writing vocabulary at typical or expected rates. The majority of words added to the writing vocabulary sheets were high-frequency words and not high-interest words. "Sometimes I found myself stuck helping the student with high-frequency words to add to the writing vocabulary and I missed opportunities to use the child's interest words," one teacher noted. Another teacher noticed her student would get excited about a word or group of words in a text leading the teacher to suggest "let the child choose the word they want to learn." The child's enthusiasm aside, choosing which words might be learned and allocating precious lesson time to support learning 'how to learn' words, seemed imperative.

Teachers' observations and extending their understandings. We predicted teachers would see themselves as actively constructing new understandings related to both language and book selection. Teachers wrote daily in diaries. They explored criteria for choosing a book for a child, noting how the book supported the student's developing processing system. Comments included notes about fluency, independence, reciprocity, language development, running record analysis, writing, and the selection of the new book for the next day's lesson.

Teachers also thought about motivation and enjoyment in selecting books. They commented that books connected to the child's identified interests were highly motivating and some children were able to orient themselves to books with less teacher support because of their high interest. Teachers felt students seemed to view themselves as readers and made comments like, "He felt he knew how to read them easily" and "Students began to request to read books when they saw the covers," and "It was amazing how, despite a child's limited control of language, they can be motivated to persevere to read more-difficult texts simply because they are interested in what the text is about. By taking part in this project [the student] challenged my assumptions and predictions about how successful she can be." Teachers commented that this confidence was also evident in the classroom and children became comfortable with self-selecting new books for reading during and outside of class time.

Teachers found it "rejuvenating to take a look at books in a fresh way" and to expand the available choices for children. More choices created opportunities for children to be exposed to different genres, page layouts, fonts, spac-

Table 1. Length of Sentences Composed During the 6-Week Inquiry Project

Student	Shortest Sentence	Longest Sentence
1	He was hungry for cat food.	Mom was looking for the spider but she cannot go to bed.
2	The shoes are mixed up.	The sun is too hot for the cactus. He is happy.
3	I got ketchup chips.	There was three blue ones and the middle one was a bumpy one.
4	Mom and Zia went on their bikes.	Mommy and me, Mommy and me, Mommy and me. We went to see some ice cream.
5	We played four square in the gym.	At my home I eat a sandwich for lunch.
6	Peas turn into pods. They grow on vines.	Pete the cat looked in the sand for the treasure box! "TREASURE BOX!" said Pete the Cat.
7	Dad almost ate the spider!	Meg was just trying to get the bird. He was cold on the rock.

ing, photographs, and more nonfiction books. Teachers commented that they felt this would support transitions to classroom reading opportunities and expectations.

Teachers also commented that the inquiry project supported their continued professional learning. Their comments included, “the in-depth reflection propelled my teaching to the individual” and “reflection time on books leads to better book choices” and “re-honing my focus on language structures in the stories helped me to better select and introduce books” and “journaling was hard to do but it was important.” The project promoted thinking about children’s oral language structures, syntactical structures in books, and book selection for individual students.

In summary, the project teachers agreed that it was challenging to find additional time to preview possible texts with consideration for individual children’s control over language structures. This was especially the case because the books were also new or unfamiliar to these Reading Recovery teachers. Additional time was also needed to reflect on the observation data in order to strengthen teaching decisions and to write daily reflections. Yet, each of the participating teachers seemed to value the inquiry project experience and its impact on their continued professional learning.

Observations about students

Change over time in text level. We predicted that students would read increasingly complex text through the inquiry project and that by the end of the 6 weeks each child would achieve an increase of six text levels, an average of one text level per week. Book levels were not known

during the 6-week inquiry; however, pre- and post-inquiry text levels were recorded. Children’s increase in text levels from the start of the inquiry project to the end of the period ranged from three to seven levels in 6 weeks with two of the seven students making the predicted growth of one text level per week.

However, following the 6-week inquiry, four of the seven students maintained or continued an upward trajectory. For three of the students, teachers dropped the text level for 2 to 3 weeks before these students regained an upward trajectory. It is interesting to wonder why these teachers dropped the text level after they had already determined the child’s instructional text level using books from their Reading Recovery collections. We wondered if the teachers felt that learning opportunities had been missed as a result of not using a controlled gradient of difficulty for the previous 6 weeks. We do not know if the decision to drop text levels for a week or two was a good decision, as regardless, the children were able to resume accelerated progress.

Change over time in the child’s language. As a result of the teachers increased attention to the child’s use of language in talking, reading, and writing, we predicted an increased control of language structures used by the child.

Students’ language proficiency appeared to change during the period of the inquiry. Oral language appeared to become more complex. During the 6-week project, there were changes in longest utterances noted and recorded at each lesson, with an average gain of 10 words per utterance in 6 weeks (see Table 2). Using the Biks and Gutches (Clay, 2015b) assessment, children gained an average of

Table 2. Change in Longest Utterance Samples

Student	Beginning of the Inquiry	After the Inquiry, 6 Weeks of Lessons
1	Flash is beating bad guys.	My mom had a birthday and we ate cake it was so good.
2	The baby is up.	Tomorrow I get to see Santa at the North Pole and I am going with my sister Angelina and Bonnie and other teachers from the school and it will be so much fun.
3	I got chips.	Sometimes he scratches me. I cry and I tell on my cat.
4	I went to the movies with my grandma and watched Littlefoot.	He went somewhere and he fell in a mud puddle and there was a stick to help him up.
5	You almost got to erase this.	I sing Christmas Alvin and the Chipmunks because I hear it.
6	I like to go to Toys ‘R Us because it has a lot of toys.	Do you know the persons that skate on a competition they push them up and they land on their feet?
7	Baby Bear caught a fish.	I’m going to the movies with my Nanny – Ralph Breaks the Internet.

4 inflections, with 3 of the 7 students gaining 9 to 11 additional inflections.

The Record of Oral Language (Clay et al., 2015) had been administered 6 weeks prior to the beginning of the inquiry project. Therefore, the gains in children's language based on the results of that assessment are from the first 12 weeks of the children's lesson series. On the Record of Oral Language, all students repeated additional sentences accurately with an average gain of 2 sentences per child; 4 of the 7 students gained 3 to 9 sentences. This is important to note as the recommendation is to readminister the task at 6 months, yet growth was evident for all students in just 12 weeks (from the start of the children's lessons in September to the end of the 6-week inquiry project). It is not clear whether the teachers' attention to language resulted in these gains or if the gains would have been made otherwise.

Other interesting observations

Through engaging in this inquiry, we anticipated that teachers would make intentional connections with the classroom teacher and/or school librarian to learn more about the types of books and the processes used when children select books for their classroom reading.

Based on the inquiry project teachers' reflections, many benefits to using classroom books were noted. One teacher saw it as "a celebration to connect with what is being read in the classroom such as the *Elephant and Piggy* books by Mo Willems, *Pete the Cat* books by James Dean, and more nonfiction." Another teacher noted, "occasionally using books from the classroom makes children feel more like a reader with that classroom connection," and another noted the child was "happy to use books in lessons that she saw in the classroom." Another teacher felt that finding the "just right books" from the classroom [for a Reading Recovery teacher to use during familiar reading] promotes more effective transition back to the classroom at the time of their lessons being discontinued." Another teacher felt that her student "having seen such an array of different stories and formats [during the inquiry project] was not as afraid of new books in the classroom."

Using a wider array of stories during familiar reading was seen to support the transition from Reading Recovery lessons to working in the classroom without additional support. Reading Recovery teachers felt students had become more comfortable selecting and reading books from their classroom libraries. One teacher said she was "thinking more about including some favorite classroom stories in

familiar reading time" and another, that it "provided a professional learning opportunity to view books in a more reflective and strategic way." Teachers noted spending time reviewing books in the children's classroom libraries, but we wondered if there was also some form of collaboration with classroom teachers or school librarians around criteria for selecting books for their students, as this was not mentioned in the teacher reflections. Yet, teachers acknowledged they needed to explore school libraries more in order to become more familiar with locating books for Reading Recovery students to read as part of their transitions to their classrooms.

In the teachers' written reflections, comments included, "My student was able to take on challenges that were sometimes unexpected, perhaps because sometimes he was introduced to a wide variety of books." Another saw the future benefit of "more variety of language structures in books we select [as it] spills over to stronger readers and writers in the classroom."

What's Next? One Inquiry Leads to Another ...

This "Language Not Levels" inquiry project focused on book selections matched to children is just a sample of our ongoing efforts to support strengthening of instructional expertise. Clay (2016) tells us:

The teacher must be able to design a superbly sequenced series of lessons determined by the particular child's competencies and make highly skilled decisions moment by moment during the lessons. (p. 20)

Through listening to teachers' conversations, reading their reflections, and reviewing records and assessment tasks, we have learned that the exploration of language in speaking, reading, and writing strengthens teacher decision making around book selection.

What inquiry might we engage in next? You might find an inquiry project among the following suggestions that we see as possible next steps. We encourage everyone to ask questions and continue to engage in in-depth exploration of improved teaching. Like the teachers who participated in this project, we value continuing to extend our professional learning, seeking out resources and colleagues for support, and further advancing our instructional expertise.

Possible further inquiry 1. Work with colleagues to analyze and discuss factors that may contribute to the difficulty of a book in order to better understand what to look

Selected Resources to Support Further Inquiry into Book Selection and Children's Language

- Briceno, A., & Klein, A. (2016). Making instructional decisions: Deepening our understanding of English learners' processing in reading. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 16(1), 55–66.
- Briggs, C., & Forbes, S. (2009). Orientation to a new book: More than a picture walk. *The Reading Teacher*, 62(8), 706–709.
- Bufalino, J. (2013). Understanding text complexity (K-2). [RRCNA webcast; available online].
- Clay, M. M. (2004). Talking, reading, and writing. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 4(2), 1–15.
- Dixon, M. (2014). Put your ear a little closer: Tuning into a child's language. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 14(2), 16–24.
- Flight, J. (2017). Learning language—Run, run as fast as you can. What might be possible in 3 weeks of Reading Recovery lessons? *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 17(2), 19–34.
- Kaye, E. L., & Van Dyke, J. (2012). Interpreting Running Records: Re-examining common practices. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 12(2), 5–21.
- Konstantellou, E., & Lose, M. K. (2016). The role of powerful language interactions in Reading Recovery lessons: Developing strong literacy processing systems. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 16(1), 5–28.
- Lose, M. K. (2013). Selecting and introducing texts. [RRCNA webcast; available online].
- Neal, J. C. (2009). Teaching for comprehension and language development of English learners: Insights from Reading Recovery. In C. Rodríguez-Eagle, Y. Freeman, & N. Freeman (Eds.), *Achieving literacy success with English language learners: Insights, assessment, instruction*. Worthington, OH: Reading Recovery Council of North America.
- Van Dyke, J. (2008). Reading books and discussing stories: Constructing knowledge through talk. *The Journal of Reading Recovery*, 8(2), 18–24.

for in selecting a book for a particular child. Examine current book collections with a focus on book language and text structures and how these change at higher text levels.

Possible further inquiry 2. Work with colleagues to develop a process for evaluating book choice, possibly through an analysis of the book introduction; the teacher's teaching before, during, and after the first reading the new book; and the analysis of the running record taken after the second reading of the new book. We suggest recording book introductions and asking ourselves: Why did I select this book for *this* child? How did I support *this* child to orient himself to the text? Did this book pose some challenges for *this* child and if so, how were these challenges addressed or how could they have been addressed?

Possible further inquiry 3. Add additional rigor to analyzing daily and weekly lesson records. For example, when acceleration is compromised, review the child's longest utterances with consideration for language structure. Further examine the child's writing samples, running records, and books read by looking across all records. Summarize and record weekly patterns looking for changes over time and make adjustments in book selection and the support provided to the child at the earliest indication of difficulty.

Conclusion

Through participation in this inquiry project, teachers were challenged to reflect more deeply about each child's interests, control over language, language structures, and the language in the books they choose to support the child's successful reading. Teachers reflected that the project "shook their thinking" about the ways in which they select books for students and challenged them to re-examine the language in books in their Reading Recovery book collections. In the words of one of the teachers, "I feel like I am living the quote from Clay where she says to 'put your ear closer and concentrate more sharply' when thinking about supporting my student with those harder structures in the books (2015a, p. 69). The teachers in this project were keen to become actively engaged in their professional learning and to seek out resources and colleagues for support. Through their participation in this project, the teachers advanced their understanding of the role of each child's control over language and importantly, the role of *language*, not *levels*, in the books they select and introduce to children.

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