

Breakthrough Levels in Moving Students From Level A Through Level Q in Leveled Text

The purpose of this document is to share my current thinking about “big jumps” in text difficulty as a struggling K-1-2 students move from Level A to Level I books (Fountas & Pinnell, 2006). Research I conducted with classroom teachers, administrators, and Staff Developers in the Columbia University--Teachers College Reading and Writing Project revealed that some students plateau at certain levels that they could read independently (96-98% accuracy with adequate comprehension). But, when they moved students to the next level, it took forever for them to achieve the same success they were having at the previous level. Teachers held them at their level of success with many questions about what they should do to help students over the next hurdle.

This document is organized in this way. First the breakthrough level is identified (for example a boxed heading “Moving from Level B to Level C”). Then a brief explanation of why this “jump” becomes difficult is given. During my presentation, I will identify some procedures and practice that will equip students to break through to the next level.

Moving from Level B to Level C

Because the text at level C continues to be very patterned and predictable and the content deals with topics familiar to students—home, school, and family life—this is a relatively minor jump with only a few new characteristics that must be mastered. In order to achieve success at this level students must have accomplished the following:

1. Mastered many high frequency words because prepositional phrases, questions and sometimes dialogue statement are added.
2. Have consonant letter/sound relationships under control, because it is often necessary for students to use the first letter to identify the correct word. Envision an illustration showing a house in the snow that covers everything. The text reads, “Snow on the house.” It would be quite logical to read, “Snow on the ground.” But, a student is required to use the sound of the first letter “h” to read snow on the house. As the student becomes skilled with this strategy, they can easily use the same strategy to accomplish checking ending letters to get the correct word that is introduced in Level D.
3. An understanding of more complex sentence patterns, the use of adjective to modify words, as well as, reading the tense changes in verbs from present to past tense. Challenges here often puzzle English Language Learners because the syntax of our language differs from theirs.
4. Thinking about the story (or topic of a non-fiction text) and what words might be in book of this type. I found that teachers were so concerned about Early Strategies—one to one matching, moving correctly in text, and recognizing known words from their “Word Wall”—that they forgot to teach children to focus on the meaning of the text they were about to read. One cannot survive in Level C and onward if this importance of reading text was established from the “get go!”

A Final Note on Moving from Level B to Level C

There is a span of difficulty within books at any level. Some are easier and only have a few of the new characteristics of the level. Some, like the Rigby Literacy book *Help*, are more difficult because they have more characteristics of the level. When a teacher feels she has a student that cannot move from Level B to Level C, she must ask herself, “Am I assuring that my students are making the transition into Level C with the easier Level C books, or am I expecting this student to read the more difficult Level C books like *Help!*” Specifically *Help!* is one of the harder Level C books because it has the following:

- dialogue statements assigned by “said.”
- split dialogue—the same character continues speaking after his/her first statement is assigned by “said.” (“Look,” said Marco. “My cat can get down.”).
- contractions (can’t).
- several pattern changes, but the student is supported because the pattern change begins with high frequency words. In *Help!*, the pattern begins to change on page 8, and there are pattern changes on every page to the end of the book. Notice how each sentence begins with high frequency words (I can help...) (I can get the...) (Cat, come here...) (I can help you.) (“Look,” said Marco. “My cat can get...”)
- a wider range of high frequency words (said, get, down, help, can, come, here). These go beyond the beginning words on most High Frequency Word lists.

Moving from Level D to Level E

Moving from Level D to Level E is a difficult jump because many new characteristics are added in all areas of meaning, structure and visual.

1. Stories are more complex.
2. Content of the story is often outside the reader’s background of experience.
3. Illustrations are less and less supportive requiring students to glean meaning from what is being said in the text.
4. Sentences are longer with more complex syntactic patterns.
5. Even though a student who belongs at Level E may have many high frequency words under control, he/she can no longer rely on checking first or last letters to read tricky words. To read Level E books students must begin to attend to the first part of the word (consonant letters plus the next two letters).
6. Even though students may still have difficulty analyzing the internal word parts, they can use “mediated word recognition.” (A student misreading the word “Men’s” as “Man’s” could use the “en” from the known word “ten” to read “Men’s” correctly.)
7. The visual strategies mentioned in 5 and 6 above are often useless if the student is not thinking about what is going on in the story as they use them.

A Final Note on Moving from Level D to Level E

Level E is a critical level because it sets the foundation for dealing with the text characteristics of the next several levels (F, G, and H). There are just a few new characteristics added at these levels such as more longer stories and structures without repetitive episodes. Less and less high frequency words are used, requiring students to have word solving strategies grounded in meaning (What word would make sense here?) and structure (What kind of word would come next in this sentence?) that they can use quickly and efficiently.

Moving from Level H to Level I

In order to make the jump to Level I books students must be very efficient at word-solving and corrections should be made at the point of error. This requires that students self-monitor to assure that words they read sound like it would in a book, make sense, and look right. Self-monitoring comprehension to know when meaning fits with story events or noting that meaning has broken down is also critical, because stories become longer and more complex. Some people call putting all these things together to monitor one's reading *self-regulation*. Characters are no longer one-dimensional or flat. In addition, success at this level forms a foundation for moving on to books at Level J where we groom our readers for the next big jump to K/L books.

The Wright Group book *Quack, Quack, Quack* contains all of the Meaning Changes that are characteristic of this level. A father likes to tease his children, and one rainy day while driving his children to school, he tells them, “*Good day for ducks. Quack, Quack, Quack.*” The children are in the car with him and they frown. But, when he walks them to the school gate in front of their friends chanting the same Quack, Quack, Quack mantra, the children are truly embarrassed. After school they tell mom they don't want to go to school with dad because he embarrasses them. Mom calls Dad from the shower, and tries to have a talk with him. All he is wearing is a towel. When he finds out that the children complained about his teasing, he says, “*If I want to make duck noises I'll make duck noises.*” He runs out of the house in his towel, yelling, “*Quack, quack, quack.*” Mom and the children decide to lock all the doors in the house so Dad couldn't get back in. He bangs on the door. Mom comes to the window, and says, “*No more duck noises.*” “*Alright,*” says Dad. “*No more duck noises.*” The next day is rainy again, and Dad takes the children to school. He doesn't make duck noises, but he does have a new mantra, “*Good day for frogs. Croak, Croak, Croak.*”

Now that you have the general plot for this story, I will briefly give a few examples of the text complexities that are mentioned above.

1. Notice how complex this story becomes with multiple events requiring students to realize that the main characters tried to teach Dad a lesson, and stop his teasing. But, it didn't work.
2. Notice that the previous strategy of using the consonant letters plus the next two does not work in the word “noise.” Word-solving become more complex,

- requiring students to know diphthongs, and realize that the next two in this word is really three letters.
3. Notice the more complex language structure in Mom's response, "No more duck noises." Readers must feedback through all of the events of the story to comprehend that she and the children demand that he stop making duck noises before they will allow him to come back into the house.
 4. A reader I worked with read, "Dad greened, 'Good day for ducks. Quack, Quack, Quack.'" Immediately, at the point of error, she realized, *Dad wouldn't greened. He is making a funny face, and he's teasing the kids again. And when I look at that word I see gr+in—it's grinned.*" This may not be exactly what she thought, but she had developed into a student who corrected at the point of error, automatically. This example also shows how English Language Learners can get to the pronunciation and meaning of words by using meaning (Dad is still teasing the kids and he is making a funny face.), structure (This word tells about the face Dad is making when he refuses to stop teasing the children.), and visual cues (When I look at the internal part of the word, I see "in," this word is "grinned.") Level J will enable students to use these same strategies and become more proficient at using them as they approach Levels K-Z.

A Final Note on Moving from Level H to Level I

Students' successful movement through Levels F, G, H, into I is a critical step toward becoming a life long reader. After working with thousands of readers, many of whom were struggling to learn to read, I found that if a student can make the climb up the Level A to Level I side of the reading mountain to the peak, or watershed, with accurate reading and meaningful comprehension, they will move from Level J through Z if they receive good comprehension instruction and are taught strategies to deal with polysyllabic words and new vocabulary they encounter. Students can become life long readers, because they will be skilled enough not to get bogged down and frustrated as they read. The changes at Level J are minimal—sentence structures get more complex and many words with complex letter sound relationships. Level J will enable students to use these same strategies and become more proficient at using them as they approach Levels K-Z.