Webinar 2: Handout 2

Guidance on developing decodable and leveled text

Decodable text

Decodable text is text in which the letters and words are controlled. That means that the author of the text will only use letters and words that the children have already learned. Therefore, individual decodable texts are linked to the introduction of specific letter sounds.

Developing decodable readers begins by creating a scope and sequence of letter/grapheme introduction for a given language. The scope and sequence can be drawn from a national curriculum or be created if one does not already exist.

Recommendations for developing decodable text across languages

Source: Room to Read's Book Publishing program in collaboration with its Reading and Writing Instructional Program. This method was field tested in Bangladesh and Nepal in 2012 and 2013 and cited in Davidson, 2014.

1. Develop a scope and sequence of letter sound instruction that may include individual letters, syllables or consonant-consonant or consonant-vowel combinations. For some languages, this will mean determining how many of more than 200 possible letters/combinations will be taught and in which order.
2. Create a list of sight words that progress from simple to more difficult that can be used to make the text more meaningful.
3. Make each decodable story range from 12 to 16 pages, including front and back covers and title page.
4. Use a 22-point font size and use Andika or another easy-to-read font if the language uses the Latin alphabet (download from SIL) unless the script is developed under a different system, for example, the Khmer language.
5. Make each page include one to three lines of text and three to six words per line.
6. Use approximately 75 percent new words and 25 percent review words for each decodable story after the first text in a developmental sequence.
7. Relate illustrations to the text, but do not provide the reader with the option of figuring out the text without having to read the words.

Writers in Northern Nigeria develop decodable text using Bloom software as part of the Enabling Writers Workshop Program

Photo: Reading within REACH (USAID)

Leveled text

The purpose of leveled text is to provide beginning readers with opportunities to read independently, or with some support, to practice the skills they have learned, without becoming frustrated by text that is too difficult for them (Davidson, 2013). Leveled books help children to build vocabulary skills, develop comprehension skills and learn the structure of narrative or expository text, and develop fluency (Davidson, 2014).

Leveled text usually comes in the form of short fictional stories or non-fiction passages, referred to as "leveled books" or "leveled readers," which range from very easy to complex. In some cases, leveled text may be linked to subject-matter curricular content for the grade level, to support both content learning as well as to provide children with an opportunity to build their vocabulary and practice fluency.

Guidance on developing leveled text across languages
Source: Davidson, 2014.

The following steps describe general procedures for creating a system of leveled books:
Step 1: Determine how many grades of school/standards will need books. That will provide a guide for estimating the number of levels in the continuum.

Step 2: Ten levels are recommended for a system spanning grades 1 through 3. Within each level, it is recommended that a minimum of three different titles be created initially. The first books serve as the anchor against which newly developed titles will be compared.

Step 3: Convene a knowledgeable group of authors of children's books/stories for a two- to four-day workshop with two goals: having the authors write storybooks that can easily be leveled according to the Rog and Burton (2011) criteria provided in Table 4 [see reference below], and field-testing the new material with children in the grades targeted for leveling.

Steps 4 through 7 take place during the workshop. Step 8 may take place in a follow-up session.

Step 4: Ask each author to create a short passage. Practice estimating an appropriate level of difficulty based on the qualitative leveling criteria.

Step 5: Use Emmett Betts' levels for ensuring that children are provided with books at their reading skill level. In it, the percentage of words that a child reads correctly is used to estimate the child's reading ability or level:
- Easy = 95 percent or better of words read correctly
- Instructional = 90 to 95 percent of words read correctly
- Frustrational = less than 90 percent of words read correctly

Count the number of words in each story created by the authors. Calculate how many words would be read at the 89 percent or lower level, how many would be read at the 90-94 percent level, and how many would be read at the 95 percent or higher level.

Step 6: Field test the stories in classrooms with at least six children per grade across at least three schools. Ask the teacher to select three children who are average readers, and three who are good readers, to read a set of stories aloud individually to a member of the team conducting the field testing.

- Ask each child to try to read the three stories designated for that grade level. Determining accuracy is a first step in validating the book levels.

  o If the stories are too difficult—the child misses more than 10 percent of the words she reads—go to the next lower level. (If the stories are at the begnning of the level, then simpler stories must be written.)
  o If the stories are read with 90 percent accuracy or better, then ask the student to read the next level up to see whether these books are more difficult to read and to validate the sequence of the texts.

The goal is for children to read one level easily; the higher levels should be progressively more difficult.

Step 6 may be repeated several times until a clearly defined progression of levels is established across the designated grades.

Step 7: Authors reconvene and adjust the stories if necessary according to the field test results.

At the end of the workshop, there should be at least three stories for each of the levels created and at least 20 copies per title available for students.

Step 8: The validated stories become the anchors for creating new stories at these levels. All new stories should be field tested, but with anchors for comparison, the process should become much more efficient.

See Davidson (2014), Table 4 (pg. 17) for information on how to determine book levels of existing text.

References

Davidson, M. (2014). Books that children CAN read: Decodable books and book leveling. JBS International. Available at https://www.globalreadingnetwork.net/publications-and-research/books-children-can-read-decodable-books-and-book-leveling

Case study: Developing leveled text in Niger

Source: School-to-School International (2018). Personal communication.

The Niger Education and Community Strengthening Plus (NECS+) project is piloting national language literacy instruction in grades 1 and 2 at 160 schools. School-to-School (STS) was responsible for the development of teachers' guides, student booklets and teacher training, as well as a set of leveled and decodable readers and other supplementary materials to support this approach.

STS worked with a curriculum development committee comprised of language specialists from MEP. Committee members used Bloom software to develop the leveled and decodable stories for four national languages (Hausa, Kanuri, Zarma and Fulfulde). (Bloom software was used to write stories. Levels were established in the system, and the software highlights a word if it is not decodable at that level, or if it doesn't meet the leveling criterion.) The committee produced six stories for grade 1 and six stories for grade 2. An example of one story can be found below.

STS trained committee members on the elements of a captivating story for children. Story-writing development focused on the need for each story to have a beginning, middle and end, rising action, problem resolution and other quality elements such as a primary character, gender sensitivity and the use of animal characters or topics from children's daily lives. Stories were developed across four levels. The Level 1 stories contained very few words, used large font and multiple spaces between words, were limited to six pages in length and utilized targeted sounds from the grade specific curriculum. After Level 1, each level was comprised of words with additional sounds that increased in complexity. Furthermore, the page numbers of the text increased at each level. Levels 1 and 2 stories contained illustrations on each page of the story, whereas Levels 3 and 4 stories contained one illustration every other page. Story topics included: getting water from the well, watching traditional wrestling matches, getting lost, enrolling in school and going to the market, as well as others with animal characters or traditional tales.

Burŋe

1. Hunkuna Faati gonda jiiri gu.
Ŋaŋo, Safi na burŋe soola.

2. Safi na habu fonda sambu. Habo mo ga mooru.

3. Faati dake ŋaŋo banda.
Ŋaŋo ne : « ye fu ! »

4. Faati mana ma kaani. A ga ba ŋaŋo ganayaŋ.

5. Faati naagu ŋaŋo ga.
Baabo ka moota ra.

6. I furo ga ne habu.
Faati go ga ma kaani.