School Talk

Independent Reading

Children who spend more time reading become better readers. Few people would argue with that statement, and many teachers believe it so fervently that they build time into their instructional day to let children "just read." But some teachers struggle with maintaining classroom libraries and often wonder if their students are really reading. And independent reading didn't exactly get a rousing endorsement from the National Reading Panel. So what's a teacher to do? We hope that this issue of School Talk *will help you confront the challenges presented by independent reading and allow you to be confident that the time that kids spend reading is valuable.   —Eds.*

"Shhh . . . I'm Reading":
Scaffolded Independent-Level Reading

Claudia Anne Katz with Laura Polkoff and Debra Gurvitz, National-Louis University

Although they are firmly committed to the benefits of sustained silent reading (SSR)—or DEAR-Time (drop everything and read)—many teachers find it a challenge. They are frustrated when students linger aimlessly at the bookshelf or book bins. They lose patience when a student finishes one book and loudly proclaims, "I'm done. I need another book." Teachers find themselves becoming reading police, observing their students to catch someone who is not reading. And students don't seem to be accountable for their time, causing some parents and administrators to challenge teachers by suggesting that the students are "just sitting there reading." Additionally, classroom libraries take up a lot of space. They gather dust and age badly and become a storage problem rather than an instructional tool. Allowing silent reading that provides students with a choice of books can be just too maddening; many teachers give up or succumb to the pressure and allow students sustained silent reading time no more than once a week. Yet, deep in their hearts, teachers know that their students would benefit from independent reading—if they could only make it work.

What Is Scaffolded Independent-Level Reading?

Scaffolded independent-level reading is one component of a balanced reading program, which Fountas and Pinell (2001) characterize as a program that provides opportunities for pleasurable, independent reading for a specific purpose, as well as interaction through discussion, response to literature, research, and inquiry. Cunningham (2002) states, "Independent reading is essential for the development of fluency. Fluency comes from the ability to identify immediately and automatically most frequent words. This is the key to the success of a life-long reader." In her book *Reading Essentials*, Regie Routman defines scaffolded independent-level reading as the process in which "on their own, readers choose and read books they enjoy and understand. This involves daily sustained silent reading in school. The process is carefully monitored by the teacher." Routman suggests that this practice should get 30 non-negotiable minutes per day in any good reading program and become the fulcrum of a first-rate reading regime.

How Is Scaffolded Independent-Level Reading Different from SSR or DEAR-Time?

SUSTAINED SILENT READING OR DEAR-TIME

Student chooses any book to read

Daily reading time is 10–30 minutes

Optional classroom library

Books may be above reading level

No checking by teacher

No writing involved

No instruction involved

No reading goals set

SCAFFOLDED INDEPENDENT-LEVEL READING

Student chooses any book to read with teacher's guidance

Daily reading time is at least 30 minutes

Classroom library is an essential instructional tool

Student reads "just-right" books

Teacher monitors comprehension

Student keeps a reading record and writes a variety of responses to what has been read

Instruction occurs during mini-lessons and one-on-one conferences

Teacher and student set goals

From Reading Essentials *by Regie Routman, p. 85.*

The Logistics of Scaffolded Independent-Level Reading

Scheduling

Teachers should attempt to hold scaffolded independent-level reading for at least 30 minutes per day. It is tempting to let other activities take over this time, but teachers should maintain the importance of having this supported practice every day.

Organizing Books by Genre

Sort the books in your collection by genre. Keep the genres simple, especially if you do not have an extensive classroom collection. Fewer genres can enable students to select and vary the genre they choose to read. Here are four simple genre categories to use when sorting materials: fiction, nonfiction, poetry, and periodicals. After your scaffolded independent reading sessions are up and running, you can begin to introduce students to some of the subgenres in the fiction category, such as mysteries or historical fiction.

Organizing Books by Reading Level

A teacher with a rather small classroom library could use a large table to divide books into genres and then further divide those genre piles into reading levels. There are many excellent publications that suggest finite reading levels, which are definitely worth using for guided reading, but I believe "less is more" when it comes to leveling your classroom library for independent reading. Fewer levels make it easier for the teacher to divide the books and for students to have many book choices at each reading level. While the teacher needs to decide on the reading level for books initially, students should eventually be able to level new books on their own, as they are added to the classroom collection.

Many teachers place colored sticky dots on their books to indicate the reading level. It's common to use red, orange, yellow, and green for the four color-coded levels because these are the colors that come in a package of dots available at local office stores. If it is determined that a book has been misleveled, it is an easy task to place a different label on the cover.

During scaffolded independent-level reading, students choose books at their **independent level,** defined by Johns (2001) as the level at which the student can read fluently without teacher assistance. Materials read at this level are read with near perfect accuracy, 95–100%, and with 90% comprehension, as determined by a brief retelling. In contrast, **instructional-level** reading is the level at which—with teacher guidance—the student is challenged but not frustrated, meaning that he or she can read accurately 90–95% of the book, with 75% comprehension. Students should not be given materials to read at their **frustration level,** which is defined as something that they read with less than 90% accuracy and 50% comprehension; in other words, materials they are unable to read even with the support of the teacher.

The chart on page 3 offers an example of how you might use the colored stickers to indicate reading level for primary and intermediate or middle-level students.

Using Book Baskets

One good way to make the books for independent reading available to students is to arrange the classroom desks so they form tables and then seat students at the tables in mixed-ability groups; four to six students at a table is ideal. Each table should have a basket of about 25 books; this is enough to provide choices for each genre and level without overwhelming students. A sample basket might contain the following:

- 4–6 books at each reading level (16 total)
- nonfiction books (4)
- multiple (4–6) copies of the same book
- a newspaper
- magazines: *National Geographic World, Ranger Rick,* etc.
- 4–6 copies of classroom magazines such as *Scope, Time for Kids*
- textbooks not currently being used

A basket intended for middle-level students may have fewer books than one intended for elementary students. Most teachers rotate the baskets weekly, with the teacher selecting most of the books but inviting students to add interesting choices to their collection, too, so they will look at books that otherwise might just sit on the shelf. After students select a book and list it on their reading record, they keep it in their individual folder. When a book is finished, it is returned to its original basket.

Making the Process Work

It is important that teachers scaffold students' record keeping and accountability. Provide each student with an ordinary, paper two-pocket folder, which can hold the books the student is currently reading, back-up books, response sheets, and a reading record. Folders and books stay in school.

Students may use one of two methods to determine the correct book for their personal reading level. They can either choose books at their color level, as determined by the teacher, or they can use the "Goldilocks method," which challenges students to ask themselves the following questions (adapted from *Reading Essentials* by Regie Routman, p. A-6):

Is the book too EASY?
Have you read it many times before?
Do you understand the story very well?
Do you know almost every word?
Can you read it smoothly?

Is the book too HARD?
Are there more than five words on a page you don't know?
Are you confused about what is happening in most of this book?
When you read, does it sound choppy?

Is the book JUST RIGHT?
Is the book new to you?
Do you understand a lot of the book?
Are there just a few words on a page that you don't know?
When you read, are some places smooth and some choppy?

Student Daily Reading Record

Students keep their own record of daily reading. The books are recorded by number with the dates of each reading session listed along with the title of the book, the genre, the reading level, a description of the type of response the students had to the book, the number of pages read each day, and the date the book is finished.

Student Response Tally Sheet

The Response Tally Sheet serves two purposes. It provides students with a resource for choosing a response and a record of which responses they have completed. Students keep this sheet in their folders.

Scaffolded independent reading addresses all of the criticisms and limitations of independent reading time. It is certain to result in improved fluency and comprehension, and a greater love of reading for your students. ▲

| Primary Grades	Level Colors for Independent Reading (95–100% accuracy)	Intermediate/Middle Grades
Beginning readers: learning to read; books have many pictures and few words	**RED**	*Transitional readers:* chapter books, under 50 pages, large type face
Developing readers: books have ⅓ words, ⅔ pictures	**ORANGE**	*Less-skilled readers:* short books, under 100 pages, medium type face
Transitional readers: ½ words, ½ pictures	**YELLOW**	*Skilled readers:* book under 200 pages, small type face
Fluent readers: chapter books	**GREEN**	*Very skilled readers:* long books, over 200 pages, very small type face

Building Classroom Libraries with Shelf Life

by Meredith Davis, The Manhattan New School

If you're anything like me, you love to read, but finding the perfect book can be so overwhelming you might just take up golf instead! I need a whole committee to recommend their favorites. When I watched my students stand in the library for hours choosing books, I felt such empathy. Then I realized that the committee I wished for is right here in the classroom. I suddenly knew that there was a more effective way to use the classroom library for teaching my young readers solid independent choice strategies.

We all know the importance of constructing a well organized library, rich with a variety to match our young readers' interests and reading needs. In *Still Learning to Read,* Franki Sibberson and Karen Szymusiak (2003) give us a detailed and inspired map for organizing our classroom libraries. However, building a classroom library with "shelf life" is the next step toward supporting independence in young readers. A classroom library with shelf life not only provides reading material for our students but also acts as an interactive tool in the reading workshop, enabling young readers to be more independent, reflective, and confident about their reading lives.

Below are some methods I have found effective in a fully interactive classroom library.

Student organizers. When arranging book baskets, encourage students to review some books and discuss in which basket they belong. See which topics they come up with. The conversation allows students to be reflective about their reading as they familiarize themselves with what books are available for them to read. Some topics for book baskets might be humorous books, tear-jerkers, mysteries, classics, books with animals as main characters, books with sports themes, books about kids in school, and books where girls (or boys) are the protagonists.
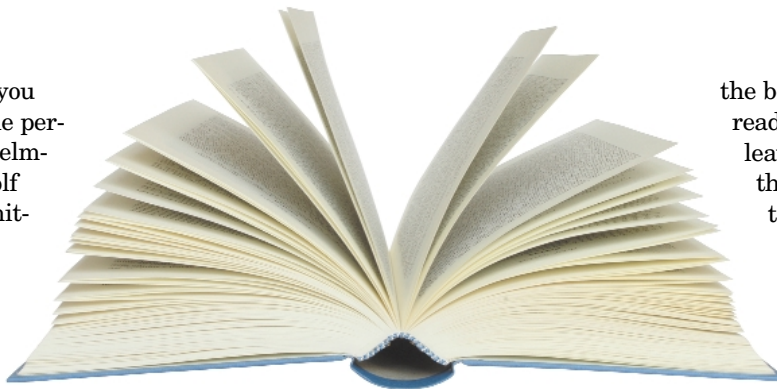
> A classroom library with shelf life not only provides reading material for our students but also acts as an interactive tool in the reading workshop, enabling young readers to be more independent, reflective, and confident about their reading lives.

Book basket experts. In pairs or small groups, students can be responsible for a particular basket in the library. These students study the books within and become the classroom experts on that basket. Each morning one resident expert shares some interesting findings from that basket, and classmates keep a running record in their reading logs of high-interest books for future reading.

Text supports. Have your book sign-out records in folders within the book baskets. Readers can record their name, date out and date in, and any supports they discovered while reading the book that might assist future readers. For instance, readers can leave notes on the difficulty of the dialogue, unusual text features, or whether or not difficult vocabulary is explained within the text.

Shared wonderings. Encourage readers to leave their wonderings on sticky notes at the ends of chapters in the books. This encourages readers to discuss their thinking with a prior reader of the book.

Book reviews as a purposeful response to literature. Early in the year, teach your students how to write book reviews. At the end of a book project, they can write their reviews and leave copies in the books or the book baskets for other readers to access. For more information on writing book reviews, read *Writing about Reading* by Janet Angelillo.

Encouraging reading across genres. Label some of your nonfiction baskets "Background Information" and link those topics to the historical fiction in your library. Requiring students to read more background information helps them understand people and events and ultimately deepens their comprehension of their fiction choices. If a student is reading *The Watsons Go to Birmingham* by Christopher Curtis, they can research more information in a background information basket labeled "Civil Rights." They can record titles and pages where that information can be found on a form placed inside the front covers of the fiction book. This adds support for future reads while broadening the reading horizons of your students.

Since I reorganized my classroom library, my students no longer linger there for hours. They talk to each other, record their thinking, observe their peers, and are confident about where to find the books they need. Maybe I'll take them with me to the bookstore next time. ▲

Independent Reading:
Teacher as Model

by Katie McGann Dolan, Community School, Ladue, Missouri

As a second-year teacher, I was asked to chair our school's Research and Development Committee, a group of teachers working with a professor from a local university to examine our own teaching practices. I chose reading as my topic of focus. As the school year progressed, I began to feel concerned about whether my third-grade class was following the school policy of reading nightly for 20 to 30 minutes. All I heard were students complaining that they did not like to read! (How could a child not like to read??)

As I pondered my students' comments, they finally struck a chord with me: As a child, I didn't really enjoy reading either; I always found a myriad of other things to do. But as an educator, I know the importance of instilling a love of reading in my students. This was my new job. I set about to create an action research project aimed at motivating my students to read.

I began thinking about what I wished my teachers had done differently when I was in grade school. Would it have made a difference if someone had said, "Katie, this is a great book. I really think you would like it." Would it have helped if they had followed up with me and asked my impressions about the book? I felt excited thinking about a variety of strategies I could try with my students. My first plan involved having more conversations with the children so that I could discover their interests. It made sense that students would be more likely to read if the books related to their interests.

In order for me to be able to suggest titles, I needed to become familiar with literature my third-graders might be interested in. But in addition to not really enjoying reading as a child, as a "grown up" I still just wasn't into reading. It was my dark teacher secret.

What would people think? A teacher who doesn't love reading? The funny thing is I really enjoy reading aloud to my class, so I decided that that was the place to start.

Since our school has an annual book show where families donate 20–30 books to each classroom, I decided to motivate the students to read the new books by displaying them on shelves (covers facing out). Then each day during "read aloud" time, I let the children each select one of the new books. I would read aloud the first few pages of every new book—just enough to pique their curiosity and encourage them to continue reading. It was great! The students were soon begging to hear more of the stories, and they could hardly wait to read on their own.

Many schools incorporate DEAR (drop everything and read) time into the academic day. While I think this is a wonderful practice, like other teachers I often used this time to grade papers, get ready for the next lesson, or help a student with work. However, after this experience, I made a decision that DEAR time would apply to me, too. Just as the students did, I selected a book from the classroom, found a spot on the floor, and read for fifteen minutes with the class. It made a big difference: The students wanted to read what I was reading, they became more focused, and they appeared to enjoy reading!

But something else happened: I started to enjoy reading, too. Those "kid" books were pretty good. They not only held my attention, but reading them allowed me to make informed suggestions to my students and discuss the books with them. At the beginning of my action research project, I expected that I would discover different ways to motivate students to read. Little did I know that I would motivate and develop a love for reading in one of the most reluctant readers I knew—ME! ▲

Does Strategic Independent Reading Work for English Language Learners?

by Mayra Daniels, Northern Illinois University

In America's classrooms today, 9.96 percent of students are English language learners (ELLs) struggling to achieve bilingual literacy (NCES, 2002). Many of them do not have first-language literacy skills to build upon, and a student who lacks those skills does not have strategies to transfer to the L2 (second language) reading process. The school's goal should be to help these students become readers by encouraging them to read independently and by teaching them strategies for choosing books that will be comprehensible and will promote L2 acquisition.

In strategic independent reading (SIR) the teacher models for the ELL how to choose texts and how to use strategies before, during, and after reading. The student learns ways to determine if a book will provide the right input in its language and content (Krashen, 1993). In SIR the student evaluates the topic of a book and the difficulty of its vocabulary, and decides whether it will be boring or captivating.

ELLs must be taught many of the same reading strategies that are taught to monolingual readers if they are to become fluent independent readers of English. Introducing SIR for L2 readers begins with the teacher's awareness that the language patterns of L1 take precedence over those of L2 and that prior knowledge of content, language, and text schemas (cognitive constructs that help "predict" content) affects the L2 reading process. A student's L1 literacy level delineates the skills and knowledge base that will transfer to the L2 reading process, including phonemic awareness.

SIR assists ELLs to acquire bilingual literacy because it promotes metacognitive awareness and decisive participation in the L2 reading process. When Krashen (2001) proposed that readers only have to ask if a book is comprehensible and interesting to determine if it is a good choice, he acknowledged the student's ability to use SIR. An English language learner who learns how to choose books for independent reading is better armed to evaluate a text and has a greater chance of becoming a lifelong learner. ▲

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