



The problem with the "just right text level" theory - and what to do instead - with Dr. Tim Shanahan

Reach All Readers Podcast #248

Anna Geiger: Welcome, Dr. Shanahan!

Tim Shanahan: Happy to be here. How are you doing?

Anna Geiger: Really good. Thank you so much for coming here to talk to me about your book, *Leveled Reading Leveled Lives*. Before we do that, I know this could be a whole book in itself, but if you could give us a little overview of your history in education.

Tim Shanahan: Ooh. I've been doing this, for just over 55 years now. I've been teaching reading and studying reading. I actually started when I was 18 years old. I started tutoring in the inner city and got curious about that and took some education classes, not with the idea of becoming a teacher, though that's where they led.

Over the years, I have been a primary grade reading teacher, a title one reading teacher, a college professor, researcher, director of reading for the Chicago Public Schools, and so on. So it's been a very long and rich experience for me.

Anna Geiger: So what led you to write your book or publish your book, *Leveled Reading, Leveled Lives* now?

Tim Shanahan: Well, in 2010, many of the states got together and adopted something called the Common Core State Standards. It was the first time most of the states had ever agreed that they had the same educational goals when it came to things like reading and mathematics.

And one of the things that they did in those standards was to indicate that if students were to meet the reading standards, they had to be able to do the various things included in the standards, but they had to do them with texts that they indicated were grade level texts. If kids went through from grade level to grade level successfully, when they left high school, they'd be able to read well enough to do the kinds of things that 18 and 19 year old students do when they leave school. Some go to college, some go into the workplace, some join the military, and they wanted to enable those students. Publishing companies upped the game and made sure that the texts they were using to teach reading were including texts at those levels.

States, of course, adopted those goals, those standards. Tests got into alignment with that as well. It looked like, wow, things are really moving in that direction.

But then in 2017 or 2018, we started getting national surveys of teachers that were indicating that, in fact, teachers were even less likely to teach kids with grade level texts than they had been before their states had those standards. And so it seemed to me that there was a need for a book that would explore the

research and the history of all of this to show teachers where this came from, where its shortcomings were, and what they really could be doing if they were teaching kids with grade level texts instead of trying to match the books to the kids, the way that they'd been doing.

Anna Geiger: And something else I've read that you've said was that when teachers were given this expectation that students should be reading a grade level text, they were kind of just dropped in the pool without being given any support as to how to actually give kids access to those texts.

Tim Shanahan: Absolutely true. You know, this is one of those times where I'm criticizing an educational practice, but I'm certainly not criticizing the teachers who've adopted it.

As a teacher, I tested my kids every year to make sure that I knew what their levels were. I had all the little groups and the kids matched to books the way that you're supposed to do it, at least, as we were told we were supposed to.

When it came to the states adopting these standards, for the most part they did very little in terms of professional development or anything like that, that would prepare teachers for a very big "C" change in what they were being asked to do.

Anna Geiger: You mentioned that you also bought into this idea, I certainly did. I was a balanced literacy teacher and I grouped kids by reading level. I thought I was figuring out their reading levels, and it made sense to me to teach them where they were at. That just made sense. And like you said, many of us were taught to teach this way in college.

Can you walk us through a little bit the history of this whole idea so we can understand why it's become so commonplace, even if it's not backed by research, which we'll get to?

Tim Shanahan: Sure. Well, if you go way back, say the 1600s or 1700s, if you wanted to learn to read in the United States, you were likely taught from a book. *The New England Primer* would be a good example. It was a single book, maybe 125 pages long, and it would go from the ABC's to college level text in a very short span.

One recognizes, well, that means most people didn't learn to read. And there were very few people who would get all the way through that short book and so on, but that started to change right around the time of the American Revolution when we became a nation. What changed was this recognition that there was a lot more to teaching reading than that.

And so there started to be programs, but they were very loose programs. They had two or three books. There were more pages, clearly there were different difficulty levels. The early books would teach kids some of the decoding patterns and so on so forth, those kinds of things. But again, it was a very quick ramp up.

You get into the 19th century and teachers' biggest problem was keeping kids in school, and so they do any number of things to try to make reading and schooling more palatable. Examples of that is they start putting illustrations in the books. They're having pictures in there. They start intentionally putting in articles and stories and so on that they think would appeal to children, which they hadn't done before. So you'll see, as they go through edition after edition of these books, this sort of adult-focused text is going away and it's becoming more child-focused text.

Then finally in the 1840s, the notion of trying to have several years of education and taking kids through some kind of a sequence of learning leads to the graded school. Folks visited Prussia, that's Germany today, and they see these graded schools, and they set those up in the United States, and the publishers respond with text for each grade level.

So you're going to teach first grade and second grade and so on. And the texts do get harder, but each publisher, and there were dozens of them, makes up the levels and what that progression is and how they do it. That goes on for most of the 19th century, this idea that now we're taking kids through a sequence of text and they're going to learn. It's this notion that reading has levels, and the levels somehow coordinate with the grade levels.

By the end of the 19th century, beginning of the 20th century, getting kids into schools isn't a problem anymore. Schools are packed. There have been laws put in to keep kids from working; there are laws put in to make education compulsory, and so on.

And so there are lots of kids in school, especially in the cities, and it's very typical that a classroom might have 60 or 70 kids. Teachers figure out they're not all the same. There are differences in these kids, and so there's a great desire to differentiate the instruction.

Initially we want to smooth the way, and we want to make it easier, but now we want to recognize that kids are different and they might need different things. And so for the first half of the 20th century, there's this, it seems like, nationwide search to come up with a scheme that would allow teachers to successfully differentiate instruction, teach kids at their levels, and so on.

By about 1946, a scheme comes up that catches on. What it requires is that you test each of the boys and girls, and you find out what kind of text they can handle. There are criteria that are set that allow you to say, this book is too hard. This book is just right. The notion is if you do that, you're going to get higher reading achievement.

Of course this isn't a research study per se, and what's going on while all these schemes are being tried out is we're increasing the length of the school years. We're making sure that teachers get some kind of professional training, and so on. So there are a lot of things that contribute to growth in literacy, but it's not surprising that folks would look and say, well, one of those things might be that we're teaching kids at their levels, and so it becomes very popular. It makes great sense.

Teachers like you and I, when we were told that, we thought, yeah, that seems very sensible. And the claim was that there was research behind the idea, that there was some science to it. That turns out not to be true, but that claim was made at the time.

So there's a long history of trying to make schooling easier for kids so they'll like it, and making it more differentiated so everybody will get what they need then. It was those two driving ideas that led us to this.

Anna Geiger: So maybe we can talk first about that research that we thought we had. Can you talk a little bit about Betts and his idea for reading levels and what that led to?

Tim Shanahan: Yeah, Emmett Betts had been a school superintendent. I think he was a teacher, but I honestly don't remember that. He was a college professor. He was certainly a reading guru in the 1940s and fifties and even into the 1960s.

People for 30 or 40 years had talked about the idea of teaching kids at their level. That would be a common thing that you'd see in the professional literature and the idea that there was a level at which kids should be taught was something that had, I think, become a fairly widely held belief. Betts wanted

to come up with some way of determining that. We can say everybody has to be taught at their level, but how do you and I know what that level is?

And so he comes up with this notion of you're going to give kids a test, and at the time, it wasn't really a formal test. You were going to take the school books that you had available. So say you're a third grade teacher and maybe you have some second grade books and some third grade books and so on. You're going to have the kids try these out. You'll sit each youngster down one at a time. You'll have them read a passage from say the third grade book, and you'll ask them questions about it, and they're going to read this aloud to you, so you're going to know how many mistakes they make. You can calculate a percentage, and that's how you would determine a youngster's level.

And then he goes a step farther and he says, look, if you want kids to make the biggest reading gains they can make, if you want to optimize their learning, the way you're going to match kids to books is you're going to make sure that they make no more than five mistakes when they're reading aloud, say a passage of a hundred words. So what he's shooting for is passages that youngsters can read with 95%-98% accuracy. And that if you ask them questions about it, and this is without any instruction, they'd be able to answer 75%-89% of the questions that you asked. And if you put kids in books at those levels, they'd be able to comprehend the text and you'd be certain that they would make gains in reading. And that was the scheme.

Now, over the years, there would be arguments like, oh, no, it's not 95%, it's 94% and that kind of thing. But all these different schemes and variations on this come out the same.

How did Betts come up with this, these numbers, these criteria, for book placement? The study that he was referring to was a study conducted by one of his doctoral students. It was completed in 1942. I've got to tell you, as a young researcher, the study that I imagined was that they had placed kids in text at various levels, that some kids would be put at this 95% to 98% level, and some kids would just be in the grade level text and we'd compare their gains, their learning gains, and we'd see that some kids did better than others. That's what I assumed he was referring to.

But the actual study was that they had kids read some passages, orally reading passages aloud, and they calculated how many mistakes they made, and what they were looking for was what was the most oral reading mistakes you could make and still score in that 75% to 89% reading comprehension. Since his theory was that the kids had to comprehend the text, the way you'd guarantee that is you'd make sure the text was easy enough to guarantee that level of comprehension no matter what the teacher did. And so that's how they set that 95% to 98%.

Later on when they were asked about where did the 75 to 89% comprehension come from, they couldn't remember, but they assumed it was just something they'd made up.

Anna Geiger: Oh, wow.

Tim Shanahan: And so, you know, teachers like me and you were trying to hit these levels, trying to get kids into books at these levels or approximately at these levels, with the idea that we were doing our kids a favor, and in fact, no one had actually tested it. No one had checked it out to see if it actually worked.

And that's why, in the early 1980s when I was in my early years as a researcher, I wrote an article about this. I had never read this study that had been done in 1942, so I got the doctoral dissertation. It had never been published, but I got the doctoral dissertation, and I read it, and I was stunned.

Now, I published my article about it, pointing out that we really had no evidence that this worked, but then I didn't want to talk about it, because of course, the first question any smart teacher would ask is, if we don't do that, what's the alternative?

Anna Geiger: Yeah.

Tim Shanahan: And I had no idea, so I didn't want to talk about it. Perhaps there were other people in the field who were similarly silent, out of ignorance, but I think probably most people just had no idea how these levels were determined.

Anna Geiger: So one thing you mentioned too, which I thought was super interesting because I can look back at my experience teaching guided reading and putting kids in what I thought was the instructional level, but I didn't always know what to do with the book because, like you said, they were already reading it pretty well. You said instructional level theory minimizes teaching. Can you talk a little bit more about that?

Tim Shanahan: I often tell teachers these days, if your kid can read a text with 95% to 98% accuracy and they can answer almost 90% of the questions without any kind of instruction, declare victory, and move on. There's nothing to be done. There's very little for the kids to learn. It's not zero.

And part of the problem, of course, is we're not very good at putting kids at exactly their levels and the text levels vary a lot beyond what our schemes account for. And so there are kids who end up in books that are really harder than was intended. And those kids certainly manage to learn something, but often without much instruction.

I mean, if you think about it, what teachers are really told to do is you're going to put kids in a text that's going to be relatively easy. You're going to pre-teach some of the vocabulary words that you think are new to them, words that you think they might not know in the text. We're going to pre-teach that, so we'll take that difficulty away. We're going to do a certain amount of, it's always referred to as background knowledge these days. We'd talk about prior knowledge. You'd either teach kids something that would be relevant to the text or you would get the kids to share what they know about it.

"Boys and girls, we're going to read about this family that goes on a vacation. Have any of you gone on a vacation?" And the kids will share their ideas on that and what vacations are like and so on.

So you do all that preparation. Then the kids read what's relatively easy for them, if you've placed them the way you intended. And you ask them questions about what they've read, and supposedly the questions are going to give you practice with meeting the standards or being able to do the things that you need to do in reading.

And so we'll ask some literal recall questions, or we'll ask some inferential questions, or some drawing conclusions questions, or whatever, but there's not much real teaching going on. It's the kids read the book, I ask them questions, and we move on to read something else. And so it really does limit the amount of teaching.

What happens, of course, if you put kids in texts that they can't read that well, now there's something for them to learn, and that opens up the possibility of teaching. You maximize the teaching rather than minimizing it when you move kids to texts that are a bit more demanding.

Anna Geiger: You wrote about how, when we teach strategies, reading strategies, with these simpler books, sometimes it's basically manufacturing. Like, let's pretend you can't understand this part, so let me show you what you would do if you don't.

I remember that exact thing happening because I was teaching fifth grade, it was my first year of teaching, and we had these inference questions, which were ridiculously easy for them. They made no sense at all. But you're right, it was like we were supposed to pretend that if you don't understand this is what you would do. And that's why it made no sense to us or the kids.

Tim Shanahan: Well, those strategies that you talk about, and there are a whole bunch of them that have been studied and they are effective in helping kids to become better comprehenders.

But in fact, you can kind of think of two situations when you're reading. Sometimes you read in text and either you don't care that much about it and it doesn't matter if you don't comprehend it or get it fully.

And there are other times when, frankly, it's just easy for you. It's in your wheelhouse. You picked up the newspaper this morning, you read an article about whatever, and you got it. You maybe read it superficially, but you felt like you fully understood it and you're satisfied. You don't use strategies when you're doing that kind of reading.

Now you're at work and your boss is asking you to read something or you're dealing with a lawyer or whatever, and it matters that you comprehend, but the text is hard for you. And then all of a sudden, previewing it or summarizing each part of it to make sure that you're understanding and asking yourself some questions about it make great sense.

But they only make sense in the context of wow, this was hard. And if I do these other things, it'll increase my understanding or it'll increase my recall of the information because I need to remember this later.

And so, when we teach kids with instructional level text, we've gone out of our way to select text that we don't believe will give kids any problems, and then we give them techniques to use to apply to those texts where it'll solve the problems. Well, but you're solving problems that aren't there. So what you're really asking is for the kids to pretend this is hard, pretend you're not understanding it and do this, and you're going to see how much better it is.

And so it's not terribly surprising that even though the research shows that teaching strategies is helpful, when we look at studies, say, of college students, even if they're struggling with the text, they don't use those strategies. They just eschew them completely. And I assume the reason is because they never saw any benefit to them. There wasn't any chance that was going to help, and so they just blow them off.

If you want to teach kids what to do when they run into trouble in reading, when I can't understand this sentence, or this section isn't making sense to me, or I don't know what to do with this table, that's when you can actually teach kids how to do something.

And so what we've been doing is, yeah, we know some of the things to teach, but we teach it in a context where the kids can't possibly use it. And so it's this make believe setting. Young kids go along with it. They don't mind; you ask them to do it, they'll do it.

But by the time kids are in middle school, they start to resist that a bit. You mentioned fifth graders, fifth and sixth graders start to say that I don't want to pretend. I don't have any trouble. Why can't I just read this? Why do I have to stop and do this silly thing?

And so what happens quite often is those middle school teachers go, well, this isn't any good. I'm not going to teach that. The kids hate it. Well, what they hate is the pretend aspect of it. This isn't really helpful. This isn't authentic.

Anna Geiger: We're going to talk in a second about what we learned from research about why using these more complex texts is important. But could you talk a little bit more about why teachers might resist this idea of using more complex texts? Like when the Common Core State Standards came out with that expectation, why there was this resistance to doing that?

Tim Shanahan: Well, I mentioned earlier my own kind of panic attack of if we taught kids with harder text, what do I do? If you look at any textbook on reading instruction written in the last a hundred years, what you're going to find is they are absolutely silent on what do you do if some of the kids struggle to read the text? I mean, beyond telling you to find an easier text, they don't have any kind of guidance.

And it's not just true for the reading textbooks for teachers. If you say, well, I'm going to teach science and some of the time I'll be teaching with textbooks, or I'm going to teach history or social studies, some of the time I'm going to be teaching with textbooks. You would think some of those books aimed at teachers would say, well, here's what you do if the kids are having trouble reading the text.

Instead, if you visit a lot of classrooms, you're going to see either teachers do what they've been told, which is, wow, they can't read the fifth grade social studies book, so I'm going to read it to them, or have the better readers read it to them. I'm going to tell them what it says. They don't have to read the social studies or the science book. I'm going to ignore the fact that they're struggling with it. All these kinds of avoidance techniques, instead of teaching kids how to surmount the difficulties, we're actually just getting around them.

And so teachers just don't have any kind of background or preparation in, what do you do if some of the kids struggle with the text? Since we've been silent on that, in all their preparation, their pre-service preparation, the workshops we've given them and so on, essentially teachers are on their own when it comes to now half your class is going to struggle to read this book, what do you do?

And it's, well, what I do is I read it to them. What do I do? I told them they don't have to read it. I can tell them everything that they're going to have to know about this aspect of social studies or science or literature. And that just isn't cutting it.

It means the kids aren't going to learn to do these things unless they're inventive enough to figure some of this out all by themselves and some are, but it does mean we're holding a lot of kids back.

But the teachers are not to blame in this. If they go into a teaching situation, they need some preparation for it. And let's be perfectly honest, people like me did not provide that to them.

Anna Geiger: Well, and you said too, part of the reason that teachers aren't equipped to do this is because we were taught by people who also believed this was not the right thing to do. And for them to show us how to teach kids to read in these complex texts would be like malpractice. So of course they wouldn't teach us that.

Tim Shanahan: Yes, that's exactly right. You know, if the appropriate thing is to teach everybody at their level and you come and say, but I can't teach everybody at their level. If I did, I'd have nine different groups in my classroom, and I can only handle three. What do I do with these other kids? Absolute silence, crickets. You can't hear anything from them. No one wants to enable you to commit malpractice.

Well, what the more recent research is saying is it's not malpractice. They can succeed better. You learn to read the way we've been doing it. You can learn to read to a higher level if we do it somewhat differently. So it's not malpractice, but it's been treated as malpractice, and so teachers are really under-prepared in this area.

Anna Geiger: So you go through that research very clearly and in a very readable way. But could you just summarize that briefly for us before we move on?

Tim Shanahan: Well, let me take one example of a study. I'll give a couple of these. There was a study done in the 1970s that I think I'm the only person who's ever cited ever, and this was a doctoral dissertation. Essentially what the researcher did is he went into second grade classrooms. He tested the children to figure out how well they could read the text.

He would just say, oh, Janie has been put in this book that I tested her on, and she can read 85% of the words accurately and she can answer 40% of the questions. Jimmy was placed in the same group and he can read 95% of the words and so on. So he would know how closely matched to the text the kids were.

And then what he does is he comes back at the end of the year and he tests the kids to see how much reading gain they make during second grade from the beginning of the year to the end of the year. And what he found was that the kids who had been taught with texts, where they were making not two to five mistakes per a hundred words, but they were making 15 mistakes or 20 mistakes, their comprehension wasn't 75% to 89%. It was in the thirties and forties and twenties. It was clearly what we would've labeled as frustration level readers. Those were the kids who were actually making the biggest learning gains. They were doing much better than the kids who were placed at those criteria that you and I thought made so much sense.

So that'd be one example of a study. Now that is just a correlational study. He didn't do all kinds of things to control for various things going on. In fact, it's not until 2000, so a full more than 50 years after Betts publishes his scheme, that somebody says, why don't we test this and see if it works?

And so a study done in the early two thousands, what the researcher does is, again, at second grade, tests a bunch of second graders, finds their level according to those Betts criteria, and then randomly assigns these children to different treatment groups.

One treatment group is going to be taught with books at their level, just the way we've been told to do, just what we thought was optimum.

The next group is going to be taught exactly the same as the first group. Remember this random assignment, they're going to be placed two levels above the level that we're supposed to teach them.

So imagine there's a youngster who reads at a second grade level, in this experiment, that kid could be randomly assigned to that first group and he's going to be in a second grade text. Perhaps he's randomly assigned to the second group. He's going to be in a fourth grade text. And in the third group, it's four levels above their instructional level.

Now, you know how this is supposed to come out. The kids who are matched to the books are supposed to make the biggest gains. That group that's a couple of years above their reading level, they might learn something, but they're not going to learn anything like the first group. And that third group is going to be terrible. They're going to act out, they're going to be discipline problems, because they're going to be so frustrated by the reading books. They're not going to learn. It's going to be terrible.

They do this for a school year. At the end of the year, they test to see how much gain the kids make. All three groups made some gains. The kids placed at their instructional level made the lowest gains of all. But that group that was placed two levels above them, they outperformed them by almost a full school year. I mean, they gained everything the first group did, plus another year. I mean, it was crazy.

And that third group that was supposed to be such a problem. Now, they didn't do as well as that middle group, but they certainly did much better than the instructional place group.

And I think you'd have to argue the reason is there was something for them to learn. There was a possibility of them confronting things they didn't know how to do, that they either figured out on their own or the instructional procedures gave them a leg up on that.

Essentially what we've found is it is not beneficial to be placed at the instructional level. It doesn't keep you from learning, it just has a tendency to suppress the learning. Placing kids at higher levels of text opens up an opportunity for learning, but now you have to take advantage of that somehow instructionally.

The studies that have been done find one of two things, either placing kids at the instructional level doesn't give them any benefit, so there's no reason to do it, or in fact it suppresses learning. It keeps those kids from making as much gains as all the other kids are making, and that's where it becomes really frightening.

So we need to increase the opportunity for kids to learn. That means teaching more kids with grade level text and we need to do some things instructionally on top of that which will give those kids maximum chance of benefiting from those harder texts.

Anna Geiger: And the whole point is that by the time they graduate from high school, they actually have a level of literacy that's going to get them into the workforce or the armed forces, or whatever it is they want to do.

Tim Shanahan: Yeah. Right now, there are various studies done showing, for example, that more than 50% of kids who get into college (so remember now we're talking about usually the 70% most academically prepared kids), more than half of those kids can't handle a freshman English textbook.

There are substantial percentages of kids who try to get into our armed services, who can't pass the test. Essentially what the armed forces are saying is they would be too expensive to train. If they could read, we'd be able to bring them up to the standards that we have.

And then, in the workplace, we see very similar percentages of well, can they do those beginning jobs? Can they take the training that their employer provides? And so on. It's a bit over 50% who don't succeed at that. And so we're not getting kids to a high enough level by the time they leave school.

I mean, think about it, if you're teaching fifth grade again, and you've got some kids who you've tested and they look like they read at a second or third grade level, so you put in a second or third grade level book, or even a fourth grade level book, when do they get a chance to read the fifth grade book? Maybe in sixth grade?

Well, if you keep doing that, you're going to get to a point where you leave high school where you're 3, 4, 5, 6 years below everybody else. And that means you don't get to fully participate in our society. You don't get the benefits that our society provides.

Anna Geiger: So I have a question before we move on, and I get this question a lot. How do we know what a grade level is? What is second grade level? What is third grade?

I know I once heard you talk about how the Common Core standard committee, and I might have this wrong, but you looked at where you wanted kids to be when they graduate and you just worked backwards. Is that accurate?

Tim Shanahan: Yeah. That is accurate. But it's a little more complicated than that.

As I had mentioned earlier, when we first started teaching where we tried to differentiate levels of text, which would've been in the 1840s and 1850s, each publisher just kind of decided that themselves. I mean, I can remember when I was a teacher, and there were certain reading series where folks would say, that's for urban areas. Or that's more of a suburban program, meaning usually that's a harder program if it was suburban.

There was no coordination among the companies. There were no kinds of shared standards that states or the federal government imposed. With the Common Core, they recognized that text levels mattered greatly, and so they wanted to set them up appropriately.

And so what they did, they started with Lexiles, which is probably the most widely known method these days for determining how hard a text is. But they got to another five or six schemes. They started with 12th grade. We want kids to be able to read at this level to be able to do these things.

And because these levels are far from perfect, they set not a single level or single point. They set a range of levels. So it's about a year and a half to two year span that you want to get kids to by the end of their schooling. And those spans overlap a bit. So 11th grade isn't totally different than 12th grade and so on, and they work that down.

They've been criticized a little. Oh, they're uneven. There are some grades where there are bigger jumps than others, which is true, but the fact is they overlap from grade level to grade level, and they are fairly wide levels. Frankly, it's very easy to place kids within text and to teach kids to read text in that range at each level.

Definitely there are going to be kids who find this harder than others. And there are some kids who might be so low, that you really have no choice but to try to teach them with something else.

If you're an eighth grade teacher and you've got a kid who's a beginning reader. And I don't just mean he's a low reader. I mean, he really has the skills of a kindergartner or a first grader. That's probably not going to work. But once you get above those really basic levels, and most kids do, then you're much better off teaching kids with the grade level text.

But yeah, these days what you'd see is a lot more consistency from program to program and within what they do in grade levels and so on. That's really beneficial. That's a good thing that's happened.

Anna Geiger: Thank you for clearing that up.

You talked about what the research says about why it's important to teach kids with grade level or complex text, and you talked about how instructional level teaching makes sense to many, at least it did to me, but it doesn't work. And one thing you said, for example, was that levels are imprecise. So if there's this magical level that a kid has to have to learn, we don't even have a way of figuring out what that level is accurately.

Tim Shanahan: Yeah.

Anna Geiger: Anything else about that?

Tim Shanahan: You've asked me about the history, you know, where did this come from? I thought that was really important that we talked about that and that I write about that so that folks would understand how well-meaning this was, how logical this was, and where it came from, so that we can see the limitations to it and so on.

Similarly, when I go through all the research on why this doesn't work the way we thought it did, how do you convince people that what they've been doing is wrong or not as good as it could be? And I think it becomes essential that we go through, why doesn't it work? You know, "Tim Shanahan says this doesn't work. He's got all these studies that say it doesn't work." But why is that? Why doesn't it work?

I would suggest there are three things that instructional level theory, or this notion of putting kids in just the right book, depends on. And those three things don't work.

One of them is you need to test kids and find out their level fairly precisely. You have to be able to say, Johnny reads at a third grade level, and therefore I'm going to put him in a third grade book. Or, you know, Mary is at level H, and therefore I'm going to put her in a level H book.

And so you say, well, okay, how accurately can we test kids? And as one proponent of this instructional level idea admitted, the standard error of measurement on these tests is wider than the criteria we're shooting for.

What I mean by that is when you give kids a test, and it says that the youngster is reading at a high second grade level. Oh, okay. So he's at a high second grade level. I can put him in this level book. How accurate is that? If we were to test the youngster again tomorrow without any instruction or any feedback, how would he do? And what you'd find is, well, the score wouldn't be quite the same. It might be higher; it might be lower.

We see this a lot during elections. They'll say Candidate A is beating Candidate B by two percentage points, but the standard error of measurement is four. Meaning, yeah, you know, he got 52% of the vote, or he got 48%, the other guy got 46%, but we're not really sure if he got 48% or 52% or 44%, you know? So we can't really be sure who's winning.

Well, this is the same kind of thing. The standard error of measurement is much bigger than the space we're trying to put kids in. And so what it means is, probably almost half the time, you're putting kids in books that are either easier than you intended or harder than you intended. That's a problem.

Then we look at the measurement of the books. We can come up with a very specific level for a book or an article or story. But what you're going to find is within that book or story, there are going to be any number of passages, and again, I mentioned Lexile, so I'll use them, but this criticism is for any of these schemes, essentially what they do is they take that piece of text apart and they put it into 125-word chunks.

Let's say this story is 2000 words. There are going to be 20 or 30 pieces to this, and they're not all going to be the same level. Some of them are going to be at second grade level, some of them are going to be at high school level, and oh, the average was fourth grade, so we're going to put that in fourth grade.

But what that means is a substantial amount of the time, the kids are going to be reading texts that are much easier than that, or much harder than that. So that's no good.

And then the third one is to make this thing work, since we're going to have everybody in different books, you're going to have to have small reading groups to teach them.

Let's say you've set aside an hour to teach reading comprehension. If you're going to have three groups, or four groups, or five groups, that hour gets divided among that group, and the other kids go and do seat work and go to stations or whatever. Stuff that doesn't really help much.

And the instruction that kids are going to get in a small group might be better than what they could get in a large class. But they're only going to get 15 minutes a day, and so they're going to lose three quarters of the reading instruction. And so what the studies say is, boy, small group instruction doesn't really give kids the advantage that we thought it was giving them.

And so you put this together, I can't really tell you what the kid's level is very precisely. I can't tell you what the book levels are very precisely. And if I teach them in small groups instead of the larger group, I'm going to reduce the amount of instruction they get substantially, this thing probably isn't going to work. And in fact it doesn't.

And so it's really important that people understand that it isn't that we're just doing it badly or we're stupid, no. We're doing the thing as well as it can be done. But because of the measurement problems and the importance of amounts of instruction, it just is a scheme that could never have worked very well.

Anna Geiger: So even if research did support this idea of putting kids right in their exact level, we can't even pull it off.

Tim Shanahan: We can't pull it off. And when people manage to do testing of kids that has much smaller standard errors of measurement, they typically do that with highly trained diagnosticians who are there giving these tests one-on-one without 25 other kids in the room. They're just not manageable for schools or for classrooms.

And so it's a scheme that really never could have worked. It's almost random when a youngster is working at what we thought was the right level.

Anna Geiger: In your book you talk about how a lot of these studies about teaching kids with grade level or complex texts really are happening around second grade and beyond, and you talk about the difference between what should we be doing in K-1? Can you talk about that?

Tim Shanahan: So I like to follow the research really closely. I don't like to overclaim and so on. And so even with just that, if we didn't know any more than that, I'd be saying, let's not do this with kindergartners and first graders. Let's not try to ramp up text difficulty on them. Let's wait until the kids are seven and can read, let's say, as well as an average end of year first graders.

The thing is, those beginning readers, if you think about what makes text difficult for them, it isn't the syntax or the sentence grammar, it isn't the organization, it isn't the depth of the content, it isn't the confusing text structures and so on. It's none of that. My first graders used to tell me, when I'd ask them, what makes reading hard, they'd tell me it's the words.

In fact, for beginners, that is the hardest part of reading, learning to decode, learning to actually look at a text and be able to turn the print into language to be able to read those.

And so if you want to make text harder for beginners, what you do is you do one of two things or both of these things.

One, you reduce the decodability. You use more strange spellings. You use things that don't come up very often. And so instead of giving kids lots of words that have the structure consonant, vowel, consonant, like the word POT, or words like CONE, that vowel, consonant, silent E pattern... Those aren't perfect, not all words follow those, but they come up a lot and they do have a level of consistency. So we want kids to learn some of those things first.

We're not going to teach kids words like WHISTLE because that I-S-T-L-E spelling pattern, one it's pretty rare, and so on. So it's not that we'll never deal with it, but we're not going to deal with that initially.

So if you want to make it hard, you start putting in lots of words with weird spelling patterns or that require them to apply these things to multisyllable words and so on. That's one thing you can do. And we don't want to do that because we're trying to teach the kids those patterns, so we want those to be repeated often enough that they see them and come to recognize them and know what to do with them.

Another thing that we might do is we might reduce how much word repetition there is. Now I'm not talking here about sentence repetition. This isn't like those books that say, "I like ice cream. I like candy. I like balloons." And each of those is accompanied by a picture because kids don't look at the words then, they only look at the picture and they learn the pattern. They don't need a book in front of them.

What I'm talking about is much more like the old Dick and Jane readers, you know, "Run, Dick, run. Jane runs," where you use certain words over and over again, but in different sentence contexts, because of course that means those words get into memory after some amount of repetition.

And so what you really want beginning texts to do is have a fairly high degree of decodability, so that kids see the patterns you're trying to teach, and a lot of word repetition, so more words get into the kids' long-term memory so that when they're reading texts that are new to them, they're going to be able to make sense of it to some extent.

And so, given that kids have to accomplish those, you actually want the text to be relatively easy and with lots of word repetition and relatively high decodability. And if you do that, the kids will pick up the basics of decoding.

That doesn't mean that they can decode as well as they're going to need to. They're going to continue to need work with word recognition and spelling and decoding and morphology as they move up the grades. But if they have those basics in place, then it's possible for the kids to make real progress, even with harder texts. And so I hold that off until kids can read as well as that end of year average first grader, until then you can teach with grade level text.

Anna Geiger: Thank you. Thanks for clarifying that.

So this could be a whole episode, and we're not going to do that. I had an episode with Jennifer Throndsen about teaching with complex text, and you have chapters in your book about it, but could you just very briefly talk about specific things that teachers should keep in mind when teaching with grade level or complex text?

Tim Shanahan: Well, I think the thing to think about whenever you're trying to teach with complex text is you need to have some sensitivity to what might give the students trouble. What's going to be the difficulty? Perhaps you think that the text is dealing with a topic that they don't know enough about and that there's some background information missing.

Not things that are going to be *in* the text, but things that they need to know about. Or if they knew about it, they'd understand this text better, and we should prepare kids with that. Sometimes it's stuff that we even think the kids might know, but we might not be certain that they're going to use that information.

And so preparing them to read it, we might ask them what they already know about a topic or have them do some brainstorming around the topic or a number of schemes for doing that.

Similarly, if there are words that you think the kids won't know or you think some of my kids, the problem is they can't read this text fluently, they can't keep up with the other kids. What I suggest in cases like that is that we use all of the tools that we have in a school. You know, some of these kids are going from pullout reading help. Well, couldn't that reading teacher coordinate with the classroom teacher so that if next week my kids in my third grade class are going to be reading this book that I think is hard for them, couldn't you be doing fluency work with that same book this week so that next week when they come into the class, they're at the same level as everybody else with this text?

And so working on the words, working on the fluency, once you're not dealing with those, just can they read it? You start running into things.

A lot of it is language. Written language is more demanding than oral language. The sentences get more complicated; the vocabulary gets rarer. All those kinds of things happen. You take a look at the text and you say, are there any really hard sentences here that I think are going to mess the kids up? Are there any that have a lot of internal punctuation or that are particularly long, or that are in passive voice or that maybe have lots of phrases and clauses in them that might be confusing?

You don't necessarily have to pre-teach that stuff. What you do is you come up with questions that will reveal whether the kids understood that sentence, say, and so if you've got this complicated sentence, you come up with a question for it. You don't draw the kids' attention to the sentence. It's just one more of your comprehension questions. You ask it. If the kids can answer it, you were wrong. That sentence didn't trip them up. They were fine.

If they can't answer it, you take them back into the text. You read and reread the sentence, you show them. What do you do when you come to a sentence that you don't understand? How do you break that down? What do you do with the punctuation? How do you figure out where the pauses go? Can you find the verb? All those kinds of things become really useful and it allows you to teach them.

And you can do that with connecting ideas across the text. You can do that with the discourse structure of the text. You can do that with teaching kids how to connect the tables with the language in the text, the graphics with the language in the text, say in a science book. It's really a good idea to try to anticipate what some of the problems might be and then to reveal that through your questions and then to teach it if it's needed.

Anna Geiger: I love that idea of using questions to reveal possible teaching opportunities versus just checking as a checklist, but really to inform your instruction in the moment.

My 12-year-old was asked to be a part of the language arts Academic Bowl for her school, and they gave us the book list pretty late, so we only had like three weeks. She had like six long books, and she's not a fast reader, and so she's like, "Can you read some of them with me?" So I'd sit on the couch, I'd read it to her, and she'd follow along. But a lot of times she'd be like, "You're reading too fast, Mom!" So I'd slow down.

Then it was interesting that she would pick out the things that you talk about, you know, like cohesive ties. She's like, "What is that talking about? Who's the he?" Or she'd say, "What's a slough? What's a

gorge?" A lot of these books were from the sixties, and she's like, "What's a ditto machine?" I'm like, all right, let's get a YouTube video and find out, because I'm not really sure myself to be honest.

It was just interesting that when you're going at a pace walking with the students versus "Go off and read," then you can be slow enough to figure out where the gaps are and fill those in.

Tim Shanahan: Absolutely. And the fact is kids do get tripped up by... You know, they're reading along, the text is talking about something initially that seems really clear, but as they introduce other ideas or other characters, all of a sudden I don't know whose being talked about.

Nobody is taking the time to teach kids. "Well, if the text is hard for you, what could you do to deal with that? How do you figure that out?" And that's really what we should be teaching kids.

And so what happens is some of those things just become automatic. We learn how to do those in our heads. I still run into texts that I get confused on and have to say, wait a minute, let me see who this is. You know, you read Hemingway and it's all those simple little sentences and all those tiny words, they're not even multisyllable. You're halfway through some part of it and oh, I can't tell who's talking. Did she say this or did he say this, and you've got to go back and label it. And oh, okay, so he's complaining. I thought, okay, now I understand.

Kids don't know how to do that stuff. Again, some figure it out, applause to them, but a lot we just keep passing them on.

And the fact is that reading becomes less meaningful and less enjoyable for them. And the idea that they can take it on even in a difficult situation, they just don't even believe it. They don't have any reason to believe it. And so we're really short-changing kids by not teaching them to read.

Anna Geiger: And so much of that I think, as you mentioned too, is teachers don't know how to do that, which is why your book and Jennifer Thronsdon's book are so important because, now we can know, but we have to practice that ourselves.

One of my favorite parts of your book is at the end where you have conclusions and answers to practical questions. I just picked out a couple to address, but I think teachers will really appreciate those because they're definitely the kinds of questions that I still had at the end.

One of those would be, sometimes I'll be in groups and someone will say, "Well, if we're not supposed to use levels, how do we know if a book is too hard?"

And some people will say, "Well, once you can decode, you can read anything."

We know there's more to it than that because it's not just the words. Maybe they try a book and they realize, oh, I think this is even too much for my class. What might be a sign that even with scaffolding, maybe this isn't the right choice?

Tim Shanahan: Well, it's always a balancing act. Teaching is not just this simple, oh you just find out the Lexile level and you go and you teach it and it'll all be fine. Teachers are in different circumstances. There are classes here in Chicago that still have 35 or 40 kids. Most don't, but the fact is some teachers are dealing with that, and it's a lot harder to actually teach in a classroom when you have a lot of kids. Some classes are more diverse than others.

Say I only have 25 kids, but if I were to do the kind of leveling we've done in the past, they're at six different levels. The lady next door is dealing with a class where they'd only be at three or four different

levels. And so, wow. I'm going to have to provide more scaffolding than she does, and that makes it harder.

Say my class is disruptive. The principal thought I handle behavior problems better than the other teachers, so I got the kids who've been retained in the past. I've got the kids who've been kicked out in the past. And so I'm dealing not just with the teaching part of it, but a classroom management nightmare.

And so there are all the, these variations on this. The trick is not to overwhelm either yourself or the kids. Sometimes it means doing kind of what you were doing with your daughter. I can reduce the difficulty of this by reading part of this to them. Or instead of reading a text that's 20 pages long, we'll read a text that's 10 pages long when we're doing this. Those kinds of things.

These days people tell teachers, oh, we want productive struggle. And we do. But the purpose isn't just to get kids to struggle. The purpose is to teach kids things. If the kids are just overwhelmed by it, you can still work with something much harder than you used to even if it's not quite grade level.

In fact, in my book, I suggested that in fact you don't want kids always reading the hardest thing. You want that some of the time. And I suggested some schedules by which you might vary the difficulty levels up and down, in ways that could help kids to master this.

I certainly would always tell kids ahead of time that I'm going to be teaching them with harder books than I would've in the past. I want them to know they're being asked to take on a real challenge so that they can really kind of gird themselves for it and get them on the same page that I'm on. I tell them that this text is a problem and we're going to solve it together.

There are a bunch of things that can be done, but the point isn't to overwhelm either the teacher or the kids. Yeah, that's really important. I'm glad you asked that.

Anna Geiger: And you have a nice chapter in the book too called "Maintaining Motivation" about just that very thing. It's about setting kids up for this, having points throughout where you talk about, look what you did, you figured this out, and keeping motivation going. But also one of the points you made was varying text level difficulty and not always feeling like we have to be doing something really challenging.

Another question I have is about that sweet spot, at least from that one study it was around two years above their level when they saw the greatest gains for kids. But of course, in a classroom you've got kids at all different levels. So whatever text you pick, for some kids that'll be two years above level. For some it'll be three years, for some, it'll be maybe a level below. How does this benefit kids who are reading above that level because of what you need to choose for the class?

Tim Shanahan: Yeah. You know, if kids are reading above that level in some sense, a lot of us would say, well, don't worry about them. They'll be fine. And there's some truth to that, but their moms and dads are going, wait a minute, if he's a third grader and he can read like a fourth grader, I want him to be able to read like a fifth or a sixth grader. So that's an issue.

But again, clearly those kids we need to bring up to level have got to be the priority in any classroom. It doesn't mean we ignore the other kids, but it's priority.

One thing I would suggest is what we know about those kids who can usually read above level is they have a tendency to be able to work more independently than other kids. I don't just mean, oh yeah, they can read, but they also tend to be able to manage themselves better. They don't get in as much trouble

and so on and so forth. So it becomes quite possible for a teacher to do things like set up a book club for the kids who are above grade level.

And I don't think this should happen all the time. I want those kids working with the rest of the groups at least some of the time, if only to include them socially, for them to be part of it.

I remember studying a youngster who'd been essentially set aside because he was a low reader, so he was put on a computer, which he really liked for about a month, and then started going, I'd rather be embarrassed with the rest of the kids. I want to be with other kids.

And I think that happens to the best readers too. It's, yeah, I could read this harder thing and I like this, but I want to be part of the group. And so I don't want teachers just to set these kids aside, but it is possible to come up with cooperative learning activities. It's possible to come up with projects for them to do where they get to use their literacy skills and to extend them. And the teacher can certainly work with them, but probably not anywhere near as much as with the other kids.

Anna Geiger: And as the teachers are planning those questions that they're going to ask at stopping points, they might consider questions that would challenge those high flyers.

Tim Shanahan: Absolutely. And of course, there's a benefit to everybody seeing "I didn't know that some of the kids would have trouble following that, him and her thing," that they might tuck away the technique that you showed them for dealing with that. And then, two years from now, they run into a text like that, and they know what to do. There are benefits to having them there, even if the text isn't really challenging them in quite the same way.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you. I just have one final question, and thanks for humoring me and going through this long list of questions.

The last one I have is a question that some people might have as they read the book, and you're very clear from the beginning that this book is not about independent reading. This is about instruction, but teachers still wonder, how do I help kids choose books to read when I'm not supposed to level my classroom A, B, C, D, E, F, G, but they can't read just anything. What do I do?

Tim Shanahan: I'm not only a teacher, I'm a father, I'm a grandfather, and so on. I deal with this on a personal level, not just on a professional level. I'm a big believer in giving kids a lot of leeway in reading what they want to read. It gets into both content and levels.

As a kid, I liked to try to read things that I wanted to read. There were times I read books that I didn't understand. That's not harmful. It's aspirational.

There's nothing wrong if you have that fourth grader who's not a good reader, but he's trying to read the *Harry Potter* book just like the other kids are. "It's going to hurt him. He is not going to get the practice he needs." That's just silly.

On the other hand, we do want kids to enjoy reading. We do want kids to see it as beneficial, and if everything they're reading, they're not understanding, that's really hard to maintain that beyond that particular book or whatever.

And so there, I give an anecdote of a school librarian. You know, the little kid comes up and he wants to read about World War II because he's interested in war. A lot of little boys are, and he brings up a book that frankly, and there's no question, this 7-year-old can't read this book. He's probably going to look at

the pictures, and that's probably what pulled him in. And so the librarian could say, and a lot of schools do say, "Oh, you can't take that one. You have to stay with the blue bins. You can't take just anything. These are the blue shelves. You can't take anything off of over here." Even though that's what's interesting to him.

I'd much rather have the librarian say something like, "Wow, are you interested in World War II, Johnny? That's a terrific book. You might find it hard. If you do and you'd like something else on it, come to me and I'll help you find something easier."

Or she might say something along the lines of, "I think that one's going to be very hard for you. I'm going to let you take it out because I'd like you to try it, but I've got an easier book here that I think you'd enjoy too. Would you like to take two books out this week?" I think that's very supportive.

Anna Geiger: Right, and we just want to make sure that we're giving practice opportunities in school that we know will work, which might be partner reading. Versus sending them off on their own.

Tim Shanahan: Exactly. So there's a lot of nuance to this, which is I think why you asked the first question about why'd you write this book? That's a big part of it. There's a lot of nuance to this that I don't think people who are saying, oh yeah, teach with grade level text, or we want kids to struggle, or that they haven't necessarily thought through.

I hope this book helps teachers to think some of this through.

Anna Geiger: Well, thank you very much. It's definitely one of a kind and mine is all marked up. I used all my reading strategies to work through it.

Tim Shanahan: You, you've done well with it, I can tell you really did read it.

Anna Geiger: Thank you so much. I really appreciate your time and all the work that you've done for teachers over the years and continue to do.

Tim Shanahan: Thank you so much, Anna. Keep doing this!

Anna Geiger: Thank you.