

Teaching Students with Low Reading Levels

By Dave Batty

This is a transcript of this training session by Dave Batty. An audio version of this session is available on www.iTeenChallenge.org This transcript has some minor editorial changes to make it easier to understand.

This session is entitled “Teaching Students with Low Reading Levels”. It does not say teaching students who cannot read, because, very rarely do we have people who can’t read. But I’m really getting ahead of myself here.

Let me back up and talk first of all about **the attitude of the teacher**. This is tremendously important when it comes to working with students. The attitude of the teacher! When it comes to working with students who have low reading levels the attitude of the teacher has a tremendous influence on the growth of that student.

First of all, accept them as they are today. I’ve said that before, but especially with low readers. Accept them! Don’t be frustrated saying, “Oh, no—another person that can’t read!” Also, this is important after you have been working with them for 3-4 days when you are ready to tear your hair out in frustration.

Don’t pity them. Some of them will try to get you to do that. “Oh, but I can’t do this work; I can’t read.” Don’t pity them, but just accept them the way they are and treat them just like you treat the other students. However, right along with that – don’t say, “He can’t read.” Because rarely is that the case. Even if they have a 1st grade reading level they can generally read 3-4 words. They can read – only 3-4 words.

Generally what they mean is that they can’t read what we give them to read. We give them the King James Version of the Bible or we give them something else that is written at about a 7th or 8th grade reading level – whatever – and they can’t read that. But don’t say, “He can’t read.” Just say, “Do you have a hard time reading?” They say, “I can’t read.” Just say, “OK, let’s just see how much you can read.”

We have some materials which we will take a look at. Even a person in the 1st grade can read a few things. They can’t read what they need to read to function at a 5th grade reading level.

Another thing that is important is **Patience**.

Let me briefly explain what happened to me when I was working in Teen Challenge Brooklyn. We had the classes divided into 3 levels – top were those with above 7th grade reading level; middle group was 4-7th grade reading levels, and the bottom group was 1st to 3rd grade reading level.

One particular time there was one student in the low reading level class and Spanish was his first language and he couldn't read Spanish and he couldn't read English. He could hardly even talk much; in fact, he never really wanted to talk. So I said, "Well, Jose, this class is in English and I'm going to speak in English so if you want to get into the Teen Challenge Training Center (the next part of the Teen Challenge program), and I know you do, you are going to have to finish all the classes in English."

He said, "I don't speak English, I can't...." I said, "Well, we will learn."

So I sat down with him and with a little bit of patience for a couple of weeks I broke it down in about 4 of 5 words and summarized the main points of a whole lesson. We went over it and over it and over it.

The end of the story is that 3 months later he was taking all of his tests in English and passing them. He was doing all of his homework assignments in English. That is not the normal situation—others may not experience such rapid progress. But he just needed to have someone work with him who was willing to say, "hey, you can do it." And he could do it.

Now if I had said, "Since you can't read and you can't speak English maybe we can find one of the Spanish brothers to sit down and read the Bible with you." Three months later that is still where Jose would have been in the program—still not reading on his own.

So **don't treat them special**; don't design their own program for them by saying – you are special, so you don't have to do what everyone else is doing. I feel it is important that we accept them, we do not pity them and don't give them special treatment. By that I don't mean that you make them do what everyone else is doing necessarily, but that you design an educational program for them which would be practical. But whatever you do, don't say – "He can't read." Don't even say it to other staff.

I went into this one center and the teacher said, "We need something for those who can't read." I said, "OK, who do you have that can't read." He said this guy ____ don't remember his name – let's call him Mel. "Mel can't read." I said, "Oh, that is interesting. Let's give him a reading test."

The teacher said, “He can’t read, so he can’t take the reading test.” I said, “Let’s give it to him anyhow.”

We gave him the test and he had a 3rd grade reading level. He could read quite a bit; but he told them he couldn’t read so he got to sit there in class and do whatever he wanted to do or go up to his room and lay down, etc. That is not how you bring about change in the lives of those in the program.

Your attitude is very important in working with those who have low reading levels. The next thing that I think is so important to do is to **evaluate the student**. Now, we are in the process of providing you with some tools to do this. To evaluate the students, one of the things you can do is just ask them about their educational background. Now in some cases they have gone all the way to 10th grade and they have a 2nd grade reading level. This is particularly true in some of the urban centers. I know in NYC it is very common to find a person with a low reading level and he has gone way beyond that as far as the number of grades. So just ask about their educational background. What kind of schooling did they go to? Where did they go to school? How long ago was it? Just get into a conversation with them about it and it will give you an idea of some of their educational experiences. Then test them.

We hope within the next few months to provide you with a very short and simple test which will give you a general idea of their reading level. There are all kinds of sophisticated tests, but that is not what we are interested in; we want just a simple test.

Basically what we want to do is to find out if they have an above 5th grade reading level or below 5th grade reading level. If the student has below a 2nd grade reading level that will also give you some special input on where to start them.

If they have above a 3rd grade reading level they should be able to do the **Personal Studies for New Christians** and the **Group Studies for New Christians** classes. Maybe they will say, “I can’t answer these questions.” And what they really are saying is, “I can’t write long sentences like Joe does who has been all the way through high school and can write a paragraph in 5 minutes.” OK, just have them write down their own answer, even if it is only a few words. They may say, “I don’t know how to spell.” That is OK. Tell them to put it down the way it sounds. Even if they just put down 3 words, that is OK. Because the way you learn to write is by writing.

So when it comes to working with students who have low reading levels, evaluate them, ask them about their past education, and test them. You may also need to, in some cases, have special testing done. I would encourage you to check with one of your local universities or colleges, or even the public schools which have special diagnostic testing for reading problems. Many times they will give the tests for nothing. At Teen Challenge in Cape Girardeau, MO, they

had a student in the program that was failing all of his tests and work. So they had an arrangement with Cape Girardeau State School to come down for testing and found out he was partially blind and partially deaf. Well no wonder he wasn't getting anything out of the classes. So what did they do? They sent him home to get fitted for glasses and hearing aids. I am sad to report this story does not have a happy ending. Do you know what he did—he manipulated his doctor into believing that he didn't have any problems with seeing and hearing.

There is a life-controlling problem here that goes beyond the physical limitations this student had. I don't know what was the best way to handle that, but I feel if we find out these kind of things we need to make sure we are able to help them get what they need. If they need a hearing aid – let's build up their self image to the place where they can feel that they are not a 2nd rate citizen just because they wear a hearing aide or glasses.

In many of your local communities, the Lion's Club will help provide glasses for those who need them. I have been in Teen Challenge centers, and it frustrates me to no end when a person has been in the program for a month or two, and their glasses are at home. No one has had time to take them home to get their glasses. Maybe it is 50 miles away or so, but just one little thing like that can have a tremendous influence on their ability to grow. I feel we need to give them every break we can because they already have so many strikes against them.

I would encourage you to make the special trip to the home of this student, or send the money for the family to mail the glasses to your center. And also, if they do need glasses, is to do whatever it takes to provide glasses or at least help them to get it set up so they can get them. We can't afford to pay \$100 every week just for glasses for the students, but let's see how we can help them get them.

Use of the class materials

We are in the process of developing the Bible lessons, at least some of them, on two levels. In the Personal Studies for New Christians classes, Lesson one and Lesson 101 are basically the same right now in the 2nd edition. In the 3rd edition there will be bigger differences between the two. Lesson 101 has more difficult questions than Lesson 1.

There is another thing about persons with low reading levels—let me back up beyond that. When you went to 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th grade the teachers did not give you essay tests. They gave you true/false, multiple choice to pick out the right one, maybe put in the missing word. It is very simple questions in the design of the questions.

When you get into 5th and 6th grade they start giving you questions like, “explain how, tell why, etc.” These kind of questions take ideas from your head and put them on paper. They are

what we call “high level” questions. In public school we do not give those to students who are below a 3rd or 4th grade because their mental “development” or their mental capacity or reasoning power has not developed to the point where they know how to do that.

The same thing can be true with people who have a below reading levels. Age-wise they may be an adult, but skill-wise, they do not know how to do it. So just because someone has a low reading level and you don’t understand why they can’t answer question 3 on Project 1 in the Group Studies for New Christians class – which says explain the difference between these four words because they don’t know how to do that. Now that is just something to remember as you are working with person of low reading levels. It may be that they will not know how to answer those kinds of questions. So what you do is to have the student write down one or two words and then explain their answer to you verbally in more detail. They can do it verbally, but they don’t know how to do it on paper. Remember, just one step at a time in helping them.

What we are hoping to do especially with the first 3 lessons in the PSNC is to design them on two levels. The lower level will be at about a 2.5 reading level and the others are designed at a little above a 5th grade reading level. The questions in the higher level will be a little more difficult.

Scripture Memory Class

This class in the PSNC can easily be used with students who have low reading levels. Their reading level does not affect their ability to memorize. Don’t let anyone manipulate you into believing that because they have a low reading level they can’t memorize the Bible verse. I know you are not the kind of people to be conned, but basically what they need is someone to work with them to show them how to do it.

The methods that are given in the Scripture Memorization Class Student Manual are very appropriate. Again, when they go to fill out that worksheet and they say, “I can’t do this.” Sit down and go over it verbally with them, discussing it with them. OK, once you do that, then tell the student to sit down and go back and write down those ideas. “But, I can’t spell the words,” says the student. Just have them write down one or two words that summarize the things that we talked about. The more you make them write it down, the better they will get at it.

Character Qualities class

This PSNC class can be done by students with low reading levels, but again, you may need to do it verbally to begin with, but work with them on it. Place expectations on them.

Personal Reading Class

This PSNC class can also be done by students with low reading levels. But you may have to make some adjustments. Instead of having the student read the book, have the student listen to an audio version of the book, or listen to Christian tapes. There are a lot of Christian tapes available for us today besides sermons. Have them listen to it and take notes on it with using one or two words and then have them explain their responses to you verbally.

Remedial Reading Materials

I want to take some time and explain the remedial reading materials that are available for low level readers. The prime resource that I would suggest for you has been developed by **Literacy and Evangelism, 4202 East 59th Place, Tulsa, OK 74135. The series is called “Firm Foundations”**. You will want the English and the cost is very reasonable for the whole series. You do not need a set of books for each student. You only need one set of books – students do not write in the books. There are 6 books in this whole series. One is a teacher’s guide and it breaks it down very simple. They also hold one day seminars on this once in a while. You can get the necessary training that way also. I would highly recommend that particular series for reading.

Let me explain the format of this series. With every new lesson they introduce two new words. They use a picture of that word to introduce it. They have some exercises to work on this and it explains it. And then there are two stories. One story is a “secular” story – which I call just for the sake of this. There is another story that brings in Biblical concepts. One example lesson: It says a lot of men were with Jesus. They had to be fed. A lad let Jesus have 5 buns and two (picture of fish with word). With the buns and the fish Jesus fed all the men.

The reason they use a picture for the “fish” is because they haven’t introduced that word yet. With all the stories they are providing a gospel message.

The Firm Foundations curriculum provides you with an opportunity to teach them how to read and also teach them some of the very basic concepts in the Bible. So it teaches them how to read and it is a tool for evangelism. It is a very effective tool.

Once you go through this lesson with the student orally you can have them sit down and work through it as far as copying the stories over, to work on their spelling and comprehension.

You can use the Firm Foundations curriculum with a person at ground zero reading level. The first book is actually called a pre-reading program. It is to teach you the 40 most common

words in the English language. **These 40 words make up 40% of a person's total vocabulary.** So if you know these 40 words you can read 40% of everything you need to read. The problem then is that the other 60% of the words don't make sense with just knowing 40%. But this is a good starting point. If a person knows these 40 words they have in their hands some good tools.

The purpose of the Firm Foundations curriculum is just to teach someone to read. It is not designed to teach you all of the grammar rules, spelling and English verbs and predicates, etc. That is not the purpose of this curriculum; it is simply to teach them how to read. As they do that they will learn about subjects, predicates, etc. There some other highly sophisticated remedial reading programs that costs hundreds or thousands of dollars and take years of time. But this is a very simple practical tool.

Let's say you have a student with a 3rd grade reading level. Do you start them with book one in the Firm Foundations curriculum? No. What you do is take book two and open it to have them read the story. If they can read the story easily – no problem, move onto the next story. Or go to book three. If they are having trouble with it, then back up one book. Start where they can read easily. Take them from there. It is a very simple procedure.

All the lessons are designed exactly in the same way, so from the teacher's point of view it is very simple. It is an excellent tool. By the time they finish the Firm Foundations series, they will have a good 5th grade reading level. How long will it take a person to go through that? It all depends on where they start and how fast they are. Some students simply have not had anyone work with them. They have the ability but they just don't have the skills. Others have limited abilities. It may take them more time.

The Firm Foundations curriculum is also available in Spanish and other languages. Just to show you how easy it is with Spanish there are only two manuals and they are much shorter. To learn the Spanish language it is far easier to learn than English. The cost to do this is very reasonable. These are designed in the same format as the English ones so that if you had a bilingual person they are easy to use.

There are some materials that are designed for low readers or new readers from the American Bible Society – Good News for New Readers. The American Bible Society produces these. They are Bible stories that are written in very simple English. They start (I'm just guessing from the top of my head here) from 2nd grade, more like a 3rd grade reading level. They give the Bible stories and you could have them read this to bring some variety into their reading and also give them more experience in getting into the Scriptures.

I already mentioned that there are a number of audio tapes available. I don't have them with me today, but the Harvest House Publishers, no I think it is Vision House. I can give that to you later. They have produced a series of short books and a tape that goes with them. Even having them listen to the tape would give them some practical materials.

Dealing with students with low reading levels can be very demanding. But it is an area where we can have an effective ministry. I talked to one student from Brooklyn some months ago and he said, "The main reason why I came to TC was to learn how to read." Five years ago, I would have said, "find another program. We are here to teach people how to come Christians." But I've changed my mind because if the student cannot read, that is a life-controlling problem. If we can help them with that life-controlling problem we can have a disciple of Christ.

A year later I talked with one of the students when I was experimenting with these materials in Brooklyn. He came in with a 2nd grade reading level. We had him work through some of these lessons—and talk about having patience! We really needed it, because every paragraph there was at least 5 words that he didn't understand. But I was talking to him at the Teen Challenge Training Center where they have a more sophisticated reading program, where he continued to receive help with his reading. On the day I talked to him, he took the New Life Testament and opened it up and started reading. He was reading very fluently. I was excited and he was excited, too. He was a changed person. His self image had changed dramatically. Now he could read; he wasn't a total failure. There can be some dramatic changes in their lives very rapidly if we can give them this tool.

If you come across resources that are good for low level readers we are interested in knowing about it. Also, have them read comic books. There are a lot of Christian books that have been packaged as a comic book. At least your students will get something out of the pictures!

Questions & discussion:

What do you think about having someone read the lesson to them or using tapes, do you think they would do OK?

I think it is appropriate tool to use (video and cassette tapes, CDs) but I'm very concerned that it not be our only tool. Because that really isn't dealing with the life-controlling problem which exists in their lives—it doesn't require them to learn how to read. Sometimes we can provide too many tools and not really deal with the root problem. So I would encourage you to develop a remedial reading program. It will take time and there is no way to get away from it. It will take time.

Some of your older students can be trained to help with this in some cases. But still you are going to need to have a staff or volunteer head up this area of your ministry.

Also, you may be surprised who may be sitting around and wanting to volunteer. We had a lady at the farm whose specialty was remedial reading. If you once get into this and have it set up it can be led by a team, including several volunteers. You may find that many of your students are not good readers. They can all use help in this area.

If a fellow can read and doesn't have any other skills he can get a job and move up the ladder just by his reading skills.

This transcript is based on a training conducted in 1987.