



High Interest, Easy Readers

The Bridge to Authentic Materials is Spanned by Language Learner Literature

by Bryce Hedstrom



High interest, easy readers (also known as language learner literature) are books that are written with controlled vocabulary for novice and intermediate language learners. They can be the bridge to authentic materials.

We all want our students to engage with literature written by natives for natives, but those materials are often out of the reach of even intermediates. When given too early, authentic literature just frustrates students... and then they give up. Those lingering feelings of frustration can cause them not read anything voluntarily in the TL ever again. Using books written for language learners is the way to get students to continue to grow and learn until they are ready to engage authentic materials.

This is a guide to select books to choose and how to begin a successful self-selected reading program using language learner literature.

When choosing reading materials, look for books with these characteristics. The first two, **comprehensible** and **interesting**, are necessary, the rest are nice to have. Many modern authors are creating materials with all of these features.

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|------------------------------------|---|
| • Controlled Vocabulary | <i>Is it comprehensible?</i> |
| • Engaging Story | <i>Is it interesting?</i> |
| • Life Lessons | <i>Is it relevant?</i> |
| • Quality Graphics | <i>Is there visual support?</i> |
| • T.L. Setting / References | <i>Is it (in some sense) cultural?</i> |
| • Glossary | <i>Is there help with unknown vocabulary?</i> |

Books on the lists below are presented from easier to more difficult reading levels based on:

- 1) **Unique Word Count**
The fewer new words in a text, the easier it is to understand. Most of these authors are highly aware of the utility of high frequency words and write with tight vocabulary control.
- 2) **Main Verb Tenses in the Text**
Word analysis indicates that the present tense is by far the most used in Spanish.
- 3) **Total Word Count**
Many students are intimidated by thicker books. Shorter ones can help to ease them into reading.
- 4) **Idea Density / Novelty**
Even when the reading level is appropriate, if the ideas are unfamiliar the reading can be difficult.
- 5) **General Level of Comprehensibility as Reported by Students**
 - This is admittedly subjective, but comments by my students and by teachers lead me to believe that some of these books are just easier to read than others.
 - The comprehensibility of a text can vary greatly. Themes in the text and student familiarity with the material are major factors.
 - Publishers may categorize books differently based on their own criteria.

KEEP IN MIND: **Interest beats everything.** *When the content is interesting to students, they can often read books that are above their presumed reading level, so let them read what they want to read. At least let them try. Telling a student, "That*

book is too hard for you,” is not only discouraging, it is often wrong. Guide their choices, but let each reader decide what they will read. The same goes for books that are “too easy.” Students acquire the subtleties of language that teachers do not think to teach by reading “easy” books.

The books below are listed based on independent student reading level in a print-rich classroom that focuses on high frequency verbs and comprehended input.

- When students know high frequency verbs, they can read independently at a higher level than is traditionally supposed.
- Books will be more comprehensible when guided by a teacher and read together as a class.
- With more reading, students acquire more vocabulary and become more fluent readers.
 - Students that read for 15 minutes a day tend to score in the top 20% of all readers.
 - Students that read for 30 minutes a day score in the top 2%—this can’t happen in class, but they can read at home.
- How many words will your students read in the target language this year? 20,000? 100,000? 1,000,000?
- See *The 10 Steps to a Complete Reading Program* below

UNIQUE WORD COUNT is important to be aware of because it is **related to comprehensibility**: the lower the number, the easier a text is to read. Many of these authors are writing with high frequency verbs and unique word counts in mind. Upper level students should be allowed to read lower level books.

TOTAL WORD COUNT is important to consider because **the more words your students read, the more fluent they will become**. With books like these, students can read tens of thousands of words per year and acquire hundreds of words and accompanying grammar joyfully, painlessly and independently.

Titles highlighted in gray = Books available on brycehedstrom.com

UNIQUE WORD COUNT	MAIN VERB TENSES/MOODS &/OR EMPHASIS	TOTAL WORD COUNT
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BEGINNER READERS / EARLY LEVEL 1

If you teach high-frequency verbs early, beginners can read these books within the first weeks of class.

• El capibara con botas , Mira Canion	55	present	2,100
• La Leyenda de La Llorona Embedded Reading , Bryce Hedstrom	80	present	1,700
• Brandon Brown dice la verdad , Carol Gaab	75	present	3,800
• Juliana , Rosana Navarro & Margarita Perez Garcia	92	present	2,650
• La piñata de Renata , Craig Klein Dexemple	102	present	1,760
• Papacito , Craig Klein Dexemple	130	present	2,360
• La familia de Federico Rico , Craig Klein Dexemple	140	present	2,300
• El ratón Pablito , Craig Klein Dexemple	180	present	2,400
• Feliz cumpleaños , A.C. Quintero	100	present	3,100
• Pobrecita Ana va uno por uno , Blaine Ray	100	present	3,800
• Brandon Brown quiere un perro , Carol Gaab	100	present	4,600
• Berto y sus buenos amigos , Chris Stolz	110	present/past	3,800
• La clase de confesiones , A.C. Quintero	125	present	4,000
• Los niños detectives , Patricia Verano	100	present	3,000
• Daniel el detective , Landor & Tottingham	150	present	4,700
• Berto y sus buenas ideas , Magaly Rodríguez	200	present	2,500
• Las aventuras de Isabela , Karen Rowan	200	present	2,200

THE CASE FOR EASY BOOKS

“I think we don’t do nearly enough ‘very easy’ reading. It may look easy and seem easy to understand, but there is lots of acquisition going on. More complete acquisition of word meanings, grammatical properties of words.... I suspect that lots of i+1 moves into i with lots of easy reading. My impression is that we feel the urge to include too much ‘new stuff’ all the time in reading, forcing it in.”
 —Stephen Krashen, PhD
i = Right at the reader’s level of acquisition i + 1 = Just a bit above one’s acquisition level, but still comprehensible

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UNIQUE WORD COUNT	MAIN VERB TENSES/MOODS &/OR EMPHASIS	TOTAL WORD COUNT
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MID LEVEL 1 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN EARLY LEVEL 1

If you teach high frequency verbs and students read some short class stories, many will be able to read these during semester 1.

• Agentes secretos , Mira Canion	100	present	4,700
• La bella mentira (la clase de confesiones, pt 2), A.C. Quintero	150	present	6,200
• La isla más peligrosa , John Sifert	200	present	5,200
• Brandon Brown versus Yucatán , Carol Gaab	140	present/past	5,000 <i>each side</i>
• Fiesta fatal , Mira Canion	140	past	4,800
• El escape cubano , Mira Canion	140	present	3,000
• Isabela captura un congo , Karen Rowan	250	present	3,500
• Carl no quiere ir a México , Karen Rowan	250	present	5,000
• Ataques de hambre , Eric Herman	200	present	9,900
• La chica nueva , Jennifer Degenhardt	250	present	4,800
• Don Quijote, el último caballero , Karen Rowan	200	present/past	1,400 <i>each part</i>
• El nuevo Houdini , Carol Gaab	200	present/past	5,600 <i>each side</i>
• Tumba , Mira Canion	170	present	3,500
• Pobre Ana (original), Blaine Ray	300	present	6,000
• Pobre Ana moderna , Blaine Ray	300	present	9,600

Why books?

MORE WORDS → BETTER READERS
 It's the total number of words students
 read that makes them fluent readers.



LATE LEVEL 1 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN EARLY LEVEL 1

Level 1 students with access to books and time to read have been able to read these, as well as the books in the next several categories.

• Piratas del Caribe y el mapa secreto , Canion & Gaab	200	present	6,800
• El silbón de Venezuela , Craig Klein Dexemple	250	present	4,100
• Superburguesas , Mike Peto	250	present, yo form	4,200
• El Ekeko , Katie Baker	200	present/subjunctive	5,800
• Rival , Mira Canion	270	past	5,400
• Noches misteriosas en Granada , Kristy Placido	300	past/ present	8,200
• Piratas del Caribe y el Triángulo de las Bermudas , Carol Gaab	280	past	9,900
• El Jersey , Jen Degenhardt	320	present	5,540
• Patricia va a California , Blaine Ray	400	present	6,400
• Casi se muere , Blaine Ray	400	present	5,800

AUTHENTIC TEXTS



“The use of authentic texts with learners often has an effect opposite to that intended:
 instead of helping the reader to read for the meaning of the message, an authentic text
 at too difficult of a level of language forces the reader to focus on the code.”

—Eddie Williams (1983). Communicative Reading. In K. Johnson and D. Porter
 (Eds.), *Perspectives in Communicative Language Teaching*, p. 175

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UNIQUE WORD COUNT	MAIN VERB TENSES/MOODS &/OR EMPHASIS	TOTAL WORD COUNT
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EARLY LEVEL 2 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN LEVEL 1

Don't hold your level 1 students back; some will be able to read these books. But also let level 3 & 4 students to read these for pleasure.

• Cómo salir de la zona de amigos , A.C. Quintero	200	present/past/subjunctive	5,100
• El mensaje , A.C. Quintero	200	present/past/subjunctive	6,000
• Bianca Nieves y los 7 toritos , Carrie Toth	150	past	6,400
• Conexiones , Bryce Hedstrom (Short cultural non-fiction articles)	300	present/past	22,300 words total
<i>Part 1 (Level 1): 5,000 words Part 2 (Level 2): 9,300 words Cultural Dictionary (Levels 1 & 2): 8,000 words</i>			
• Esperanza , Carol Gaab	200	present, yo form	6,500
• Pobre Ana bailó tango , Blaine Ray	300	past	9,100
• Las lágrimas de Xóchitl , Virginia Hildebrandt	300	present	7,000
• Los Baker van a Perú , Nathaniel Kirby	375	present/past	7,300
• Robo en la noche , Kristy Placido	380	present/past	8,400 each side
• El viaje de su vida , Blaine Ray	400	present	6,400

"You all have different interests and different abilities.
 To develop them, you need to be reading different books."
 —Bryce Hedstrom



MID LEVEL 2 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN LEVEL 1

Level 2 students do not have to read only level 2 books. They will acquire deep features of the language even with "easy" books.

• Felipe Alou , Carol Gaab	150	past	6,000
• El brazaletes mágico , Margarita Perez Garcia	225	past	5,700
• El pombero , Craig Klein Dexemple	240	past	5,000
• Mi propio auto , Blaine Ray	250	present	8,500
• Los sueños de Xóchitl , Virginia Hildebrandt	300	present	6,900
• El escape (formerly "Casi me mata el celular"), A.C. Quintero	350	past	10,400
• Rebeldes de Tejas , Mira Canion	400	past	10,700
• ¿Dónde está Eduardo? , Blaine Ray	350	past	8,600
• El viaje perdido , Blaine Ray	350	past	8,900
• ¡Viva el toro! , Blaine Ray	350	past	8,000
• Noche de oro , Kristy Placido	290	past	9,000

THE POTENTIAL RESULT OF FVR

"You let me borrow a Goosebumps book, *Sangre de monstruo*,
 when I was in my second year of Spanish. I would read it during my
 math class, and I enjoyed learning new vocab... then I got a PhD in
 Spanish American literature. ¡Gracias, profe!"

—David Dalton, PhD
 Spanish literature professor at the University of North Carolina
 Former student



LEVEL 3 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN LEVELS 1 & 2

If level 3 students are finding books labeled level 3 too challenging, steer them towards a book with a lower unique word count.

• Frida Kahlo , Kristy Placido	150	past tense	7,200
• La Llorona de Mazatlán , Katie Baker	300	past tense	10,000
• Las apariencias engañan , A.C. Quintero	350	past/ subjunctive	10,700
• El armario , A.C. Quintero	350	past/ subjunctive	9,600
• Soy Lorenzo , Virginia Hildebrandt	400	past	7,600
• La maldición de la cabeza reducida , Nathaniel Kirby	400	past	7,200
• La Lucha de la vida , Jen Degenhardt	450	past/ subjunctive	11,100
• Maria Maria , Jen Degenhardt	450	past/ subjunctive	11,225
• Los ojos de Carmen , Verónica Moscoso	450	1 st person, past/subjunctive	7,500
• Vida o muerte en Cusco , Lisa Ray Turner	500	past/subjunctive	10,000
• Todo lo que brilla , Chris Mercer	(# not provided)	past	12,400
• El último viaje , A. C. Quintero	(# not provided)	past/subjunctive	(# not provided)

SHINE YOUR LASER POINTER AT THIS WHEN STUDENTS COMPLAIN ABOUT HAVING TO READ ALL THE TIME.

“Picking up word meanings by reading is 10 times faster than intensive vocabulary instruction.”

—Stephen Krashen

All of us, even on our best day, are teaching and learning in slow motion if we are using only vocabulary lists and drills. Reading is a more efficient, more effective, and more enjoyable way to acquire language than studying and memorizing.

LEVEL 4 / ADVANCED STUDENTS IN LEVEL 2 & 3

Organize your classroom library by unique word count—it will make it easier for students to find materials at their reading level.

	UNIQUE WORD COUNT	MAIN VERB TENSES/MOODS &/OR EMPHASIS	TOTAL WORD COUNT
• Casa dividida , Chris Mercer	(# not provided by publisher)	past	16,600
• Vector , Carrie Toth	400	past	7,100
• El camino del café , Adriana Ramirez	(# not provided by publisher)	past/subjunctive	(# not provided)
• Vida y muerte en la Mara Salvatruchas , Anónimo	400	past	7,600
• El condor de los Andes , Adriana Ramirez	(# not provided by publisher)	past/subjunctive	(# not provided)
• La calaca alegre , Carrie Toth	425	past/subjunctive	9,900
• Las sombras , A. C. Quintero	500	past/subjunctive	18,000
• La hija del sastre , Carrie Toth	500	past/subjunctive	12,400
• La corza blanca , Gustavo Bécquer, Santillana Press	500	mostly past	3,400
• La cruz del diablo , Gustavo Bécquer, Santillana Press	700	past/subjunctive	3,600
• La guerra sucia , Nathaniel Kirby	600	past/subjunctive	12,400
• En busca del monstruo , Pablo Ortega López (POL)	600	past/subjunctive	10,000

10 STEPS TO A COMPLETE READING PROGRAM:

1. GET BOOKS WRITTEN FOR LANGUAGE LEARNERS

- **Interesting and comprehensible is the key.**

Students must be engaged and they must understand what they are reading.
They must understand most of what they are reading.
Focusing on the code, rather than on the message, is tiresome and distracting.

- **It's the total number of words students read that makes them fluent.**

Novice level novels may contain 2,000 to 6,000 words.
Intermediate level novels will contain 6,00-12,000 words.
These are many, many more words than students read with textbooks and worksheets.

- **Students need quantity reading and quality reading.**

Excerpts from textbooks, short stories, poems, songs and news articles are not long enough to give students the massive exposure they need to acquire large amounts of vocabulary.
Students need to read thousands of words for their minds to subconsciously process the language.

- **Children's books are not a good fit for most language classes.**

Children's books have more rare words per 1,000 words than news magazines. Read that again.
A six-year-old child has a vocabulary of 6,000 - 30,000 words
Your best students know far fewer words than a native six-year-old.
Most children's books are written for adults to read to children—your students will not understand those books.
Because of the specialized vocabulary. They will feel stupid: "I have an 'A' in Spanish, but I can't even understand a little kid's book!"
Books written for the unique needs of language learners are what novice and intermediate level students need.
They will get to the level of reading authentic literature more quickly if they read enough comprehensible and interesting material along the way.

2. GET BOOKS AT A VARIETY OF READING LEVELS

DIFFERENT STUDENTS NEED DIFFERENT BOOKS

**"You all have different interests and different abilities.
To develop them, you need to be reading different books."
—Bryce Hedstrom**



- **Your students have different abilities and different interests. They should be reading different books.**

We have an obligation to teach all students and meet them where they are.
Treating them all the same bores some and overwhelms others.
Self-selected reading is a great way to deal with learning differences.
Differentiation is equity in action, and it works. You believe in it in other areas, why not in reading too?

- **Students in upper level classes can acquire important bits of language even from lower level books.**

- **Students in lower level classes will surprise you with their ability to read books that are presumably out of their reach.**

- **Resist telling students a book is too hard or too easy for them to read.**

Let their interest be their guide.
Students will always surprise you.

BUY PAPER BOOKS

“People who use e-readers had a much tougher time remembering story details compared with folks who read a printed version. Things like holding the book, turning the pages, and touching the paper may contribute to better mental reconstruction of the book’s plot.”
—David Bucci, PhD, professor of psychological and brain sciences, Dartmouth College.

3. GET PAPER BOOKS

Paper books are better in almost every way:

- **Readers Remember More with Paper Books**

“People who use e-readers had a much tougher time remembering story details compared with folks who read a printed version. Things like holding the book, turning the pages, and touching the paper may contribute to better mental reconstruction of the book’s plot.” —David Bucci, PhD, professor of psychological and brain sciences, Dartmouth College.

- **Readers Understand More with Paper Books**

Readers comprehend significantly less with eBooks than with paper books.

Comprehension reading eBooks is about half (½!) of that with paper book reading.

– <http://www.tested.com/tech/concepts/457411-paper-books-offer-better-reading-comprehension-digital/>

– <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2014/aug/19/readers-absorb-less-kindles-paper-study-plot-ereader-digitisation>

– https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2015/01/12/the-case-against-kindle-why-reading-paper-books-is-better-for-your-mind-and-body/?utm_term=.de5747330c5a

- **Readers Read Faster with Paper Books**

People read about 25% slower on screens than they do on paper.

Probably due to the many distractions associated with electronics.

– <https://www.nngroup.com/articles/why-web-users-scan-instead-reading/>

– <http://www.readingmatrix.com/articles/al-othman/article.pdf>

- **eBooks Are Infinitely Better than No Books.**

If eBooks are all that you have available, then by all means use them.

You can develop a hybrid eBook/paper book program as you go.

4. GET A VARIETY OF MATERIALS

- **Reading Fiction Helps Develop Empathy**

We need more nice and empathetic students. Reading fiction is how to get them there.

– https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/speaking-of-science/wp/2016/07/22/does-reading-fiction-make-you-a-better-person/?utm_term=.aa33a5fd1f91

- **Reading Fiction Makes You Smarter**

Fiction readers grow healthier brains with more connections.

– <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RYpofvqVxzc>

- **Not all students like fiction**

98% of language learner literature titles are novels.

What are students supposed to do if they prefer reading about the real world?

- **Less than 10% of Student Reading Is STEM Related**

A 2016 report by Renaissance Learning states that less than 10% of student reading is STEM related.

Did you have classmates that enjoyed reading *National Geographic* or *Smithsonian* when you were in school?

Many students prefer reading non-fiction. Let them.

5. SCHEDULE REGULAR CLASSROOM READING

- **More Reading Time = Better Readers**

More reading doesn't create *slightly* better readers, it creates *way* better readers.

– <http://www.scilearn.com/sites/default/files/imported/alldocs/rsrch/30388RAExtra10min.pdf>

- **Reading Decreases Stress**

Just 6 minutes of reading has been shown to lower stress levels by 68%.

Reading lowers stress more than listening to music, drinking tea, taking a walk, or playing video games.

– <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/health/news/5070874/Reading-can-help-reduce-stress.html>

- **Reading Changes and Improves the Circuitry of the Brain**

Reading a novel heightens connectivity in the areas of the brain involved in receptivity for language.

Reading also stimulates brain areas for physical sensation and movement.

– <https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/abs/10.1089/brain.2013.0166>

- **Reading Improves Memory**

Reading is more demanding neurobiologically than watching images or listening to speech.

When we read, "**We are forced to construct, to produce narrative, to imagine.**" (*Proust and the Squid: The Story and Science of the Reading Brain*, by Maryanne Wolf, director of the Center for Reading and Language Research at Tufts University).

- **Reading Makes You Smarter**

– <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IF6VKmMVWEc&feature=youtu.be&t=45s>

6. DEVELOP PROCEDURES

- **Do you have a procedure for students to quickly and quietly get books from the classroom library?**

- **Is Sustained Silent Reading / Self-Selected Reading (SSR) a part of your weekly schedule?**

10 minutes per day at the beginning of class is a good way to show the value and expectation of reading.

10 minutes is only about 20% of total class time. Students will make big gains from it. This is the 80/20 rule at work.

- **Is Sustained Silent Reading a regular routine or is it just an occasional a fill-in activity when you have time?**

- **Students that read for 15 minutes a day will read about 1 million (!) words a year.**

Reading 1 million words per year is what American 4th grade teachers suggest for their students.

Reading that many words will increase your students' vocabulary and understanding of language substantially and painlessly—and without studying or quizzes.

<https://www.statisticbrain.com/reading-statistics/>

- **What is the procedure for checking out books from your classroom library for students to take home?**

If students want to continue to read—let them.

- **How are you encouraging your students to do Free Voluntary Reading (FVR)?**

FVR is reading because you want to read and on your own time

FVR is reading outside of class for no credit and no extra credit.

FVR is the ultimate in target language reading.

FVR is where the biggest gains in fluency happen.

7. USE DIFFERENT WAYS TO CHECK FOR UNDERSTANDING

- **Informal Comprehension Checks**

Just talking with students about what they are reading is best.

- **Quick Reading Reactions**

Have them write a short impression of what they have read—occasionally. Not every day.

- **Dual Entry Journals**

Two columns. On one side, a short summary of the page they read, on the other, their thoughts and/or questions.

- **Short, Relevant Reports**

1-page reports describing what they noticed in the reading or how it affected them—Once a week or so.

Examples of the above comprehension checks are available at: <http://www.brycehedstrom.com/free-stuff>

- **Avoid traditional detailed written questions about reading**

Highly detailed questions tend to kill the desire to read, making it a chore instead of a joy.

Teachers often have trouble creating short reports—we all keep gravitating back to highly detailed questions!

- **Do not check for understanding all of the time**

Do reading comprehension checks sparingly—once a week is sufficient.

Constantly asking students to demonstrate understanding kills the intrinsic joy of reading.

8. DEVELOP CLEAR READING EXPECTATIONS DURING SSR TIME

- **Let the students know what is expected of them during regular class reading time**

<https://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/2011/09/SSR-Reading-Poster.pdf>

- **Show students how good readers behave and think**

- **Keeps the teacher focused on what is important during reading time**

- **Make reading behavior measurable**

Yes, the goal is for students to read voluntarily

We are fighting against an anti-literacy wave in our culture right now

Students need to have clear expectations

<https://www.brycehedstrom.com/wp-content/uploads/Reading-Rubric.pdf>

- **Use a rubric for grades when you must.**

9. MODEL READING YOURSELF

- **Read in the target language in front of your student while they read.**

Do *not* sit at your computer or get caught up on paperwork.

Show them by your behavior how important reading is.

Don't just talk about reading, read.

- **Demonstrate that you value reading by reading while your students read.**

- **Read what you actually like to read, and read at your level.**

Read in the target language, but also read in a new language to you from time to time in order to show life long learning and to maintain awareness of what it is to be a novice language learner.

- **Occasionally read the same books that some of your students are reading.**

You will be able to connect with students more.

It is an encouragement to students to see you reading what they are.

- **Make it obvious.**

Talk about books that you are reading, especially books in the target language.



Leave books you have read lying around for students to notice, pick up and browse.

10. ENCOURAGE READING OUTSIDE OF CLASS (FVR)

- **Students reading on their own outside of class for no credit is true Free Voluntary Reading (FVR).**

The greatest gains come from this kind of self-selected, volitional reading.

FVR is reading for no credit and for no extra credit.

FVR is reading because you want to.

FVR is the kind of reading schools pretend does not exist.

FVR is what some students will do if they have the materials, the skills and the motivation—
and teachers can provide all three.

- **Lavish attention on students that read independently outside of class.**

Let them know it is OK to be smart in your class.

Read the same books your students are reading so you can engage with them.

Say: “Oh, I read that book too! What did think about the part where...?”

- **Allow students to take books out of the classroom to read on their own for no credit—just for the joy and satisfaction of reading.**

This is when you know you’ve got them.

Reading for pleasure provides the greatest gains.

- **Free Voluntary Reading (FVR) is the goal.**

SSR is all students quietly reading in class.

FVR is self-selected students reading on their own outside of class because they want to... for no credit.

Every student needs to do SSR, and the gains are substantial.

Not all students will buy in to FVR, but for those who do, the gains are tremendous.