

# Graded Readers in Indonesia: A Review

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*Abstract— Book leveling system is indispensable to prepare children to become life-long readers. In literacy learning, children read books according to their level of reading competence, and graded readers help teachers and parents select books that suit children's reading level. To enhance School Literacy Movement, the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) has recently established a book leveling system. This study seeks to review MoEC book leveling system by comparing graded readers in Indonesia and the United Kingdom on the basis of the following indicators: structure and format, comparison of level, content, language, and graphic work. Taken as samples were graded readers published by Yayasan Literasi Anak Indonesia (Indonesian Children's Literacy Foundation; henceforth, YLAI), Indonesian digital graded readers distributed by The Asia Foundation through Let's Read, and the book leveling system established by MoEC. Meanwhile, graded readers published in Oxford Reading Tree and Ladybird series were used as samples from the UK. The results of the comparison reveal that the indicators used in MoEC system needs to provide more details so that it can be used as a better guideline for writers and teachers.*

**Keywords:** book leveling system, graded readers, School Literacy Movement, indicator.

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the growing enthusiasm to foster reading practice among Indonesian students, access and availability of books become the main concern in School Literacy Movement. It is essential for the government to provide regulation that allow students to access books that are in accordance with their reading level of competence. Graded readers are books that are carefully graded by reading levels, and are written for language learners.

In general, graded readers aim to prepare children to become readers who are ready to read longer and more complex texts. Graded readers are needed to produce literate readers, who are able to comprehend information

critically so as to improve their quality of life. Considering the central role in children's literacy development, graded readers are used in extensive reading programs in various schools in developed countries. Extensive reading is meant to provide time for pleasure reading. Three characteristics of extensive reading program that use graded readers are quantity, reading for main ideas, and reading [1]. In the Indonesian context, the role and use of graded readers for extensive reading are mentioned in a number of guidelines produced to support the School Literacy Movement, among others: *Desain Induk Gerakan Literasi Sekolah* (Grand Design of School Literacy Movement) [2] and *Panduan GLS untuk Sekolah Dasar* (Guidebook for School Literacy Movement in Primary Schools) [3].

Graded readers are especially common in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) and can be categorized into rewrite and simple original books [1]. To assist readers in comprehending texts, graded readers limit the number of headwords [4] and simplify the vocabulary and syntax of the original text [1]. With adjusted lexis and syntax, teachers or parents will be able to predict students' reading level. Therefore, they will be able to select books from different reading schemes with confidence, knowing that they are the right level for their children/students.

Different publishers use different leveling system and labels. Colours, numbers, and alphabets are commonly used to indicate levels of difficulty. Graded readers are a proven approach to developing successful readers. Book leveling system helps schools to grade their books by difficulty level carefully. A book leveling system provides a comprehensive structure for teachers and parents. Studies also show that graded readers, when combined with instruction that employs reading strategies will help students become aware of their achievement in reading comprehension. It helps them to follow each child's reading development, while accommodating a whole-school reading programme [5].

Many schools grade books by colours to help children choose the right books for their reading ability. For

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example, a low-level book can be labeled using pink colour, while the highest one is identified by lime colour label. Different colours are used by different leveling system, but principally graded readers match readers to text on the basis of children’s level of competence [6].

Studies on the use of extensive reading programmes and readers and how they impact language development are abundant. Hill conducted surveys of graded readers published in the UK and the US [1][7] and consistently demonstrate that graded readers are excellent resources for language learning, but often underestimated in language curriculum, given the idea that graded readers are used for reading for pleasure. Hill’s surveys compared how different publishers produce graded readers in terms of content, format and artwork, support for reading, level of reading task, and pedagogical support [1][7].

In Indonesia, book leveling system is still new. In some schools, access to books is low [8] and graded readers are still few, but are beginning to gain attention. However, very few studies have been conducted. Some of the few graded readers were written and published by YLAI (62 books), consisting of 6 levels. Meanwhile, The Asia Foundation created Let’s Read, an application and digital graded readers that comprise six levels. The Centre for Research and Development, Ministry of Education and Culture has recently issued a regulation regarding book leveling system, which categorises seven levels of books: A (red) for pre-readers; B (orange) for Early Readers; C (yellow) for Beginning readers; D (green) for intermediate readers; E (blue) for advanced readers; F (indigo) for fluent readers; and G (purple) for critical readers.

In this study, the above-mentioned graded readers were compared to graded readers from the UK. In particular, the selected graded readers were Read at Home (Oxford Reading Tree)<sup>2</sup> that consist of 30 books (five levels) and Read it Yourself (Ladybird)<sup>3</sup> that consist of 50 books (four levels).

Indicators and descriptors in book leveling system serve as guidelines for users, writers, and publishers to determine reading competence level. Most book leveling systems use content, language, and graphics as the elements to determine the leveling.

**II. METHOD**

This is a comparative study that compares between indicators of book leveling system produced and used in Indonesia and those from the UK. The comparison was done on the basis of how the leveling system address the aspects of content, language, and graphics.

**III RESEARCH RESULT**

Based on the comparison, the study revealed some commonalities and differences between the book leveling system used in Indonesia and the UK. The following table provides the result in terms of structure and format, comparison of level, content indicators, language indicators, and graphic indicators.

**A. Structure and Format**

The structure and format of existing book leveling systems used by YLAI, Let’s Read and MoEC are somewhat different when compared to the system used by several publishers from the UK. The following table provides the result in terms of the structure and format.

TABLE 1. STRUCTURE AND FORMAT COMPARISON

	YLAI, Let’s Read, MoEC	Read at Home (Oxford Reading Tree) and Read it Yourself (Ladybird)
1	Front cover	Front cover
2	Inside cover	Inside cover
3	No guideline of how to use the book	Guideline of how to use the book (in some cases, basic competence is mentioned)
4	Publisher’s information	Publisher’s information
5	Story	Story
7	No exercises	Question (think about the story), game and activities (fun activity, matching, etc)
8	Back cover	Back cover

One big difference in terms of the structure and format of graded readers in Indonesia and the UK is the absence of guidelines that inform users how to use the book. In graded readers published in the UK, guidelines may comprise various uses of the book, such as shared reading, independent reading, guides for parents, guides for teachers, reading tips, creative ideas to use the book, etc.

Exercises or games that accompany graded readers are important to increase children’s engagement to books. These components are also useful to measure children’s reading comprehension. Unfortunately, Indonesian graded readers do not provide exercises that can actually be beneficial for teachers and parents to carry out follow-up activities.

**B. Comparison of Levels**

Book leveling system often employs the use of certain colours. The following table compares the reading levels used in MoEC’s Guidelines and Oxford Reading Tree and Ladybird.

TABLE 2. COMPARISON OF LEVELS

MoEC	Oxford Reading Tree	Ladybird
A (red): pre-readers	Purple: getting ready to read (can recognize their own name, match some words, some letter sounds)	Red: children who are ready to read
B (orange): early readers	Tosca: starting to read (can recognize a few common words by sight, etc.)	Green: novice reader who can read simple short sentences with help
C (yellow): beginning readers	Blue: becoming a reader (can recognize 10—20 common words by sight, etc.)	x
D (green): Intermediate readers	Red: building confidence in reading (can recognize 30—50 common words by sight, etc.)	Blue: children who are developing confidence in reading (can read simple stories with help)

E (blue): advanced readers	Yellow: reading with confidence (can recognize 50+ word by sight and use a range of strategic to workout unknown words, etc.).	Violet: children who are ready to read the story fluently with a broader vocabulary and are eager to become independent readers.
F (indigo): fluent readers	x	x
G (purple): critical readers	x	x

While it does not really matter what colours are used to label book levels, the comparison in Table 2 indicates that colours in MoEC’s book leveling system provides information regarding readers’ level of competence, ranging from pre-readers to critical readers. However, there is no detailed information regarding how these levels of readers are defined. This is different from the graded readers in Oxford Reading Tree and Ladybird series, in which both provide a clearer description of the targeted readers. For instance, for the lowest level, MoEC’s system uses the term ‘pre-readers’ with no clear definition, while Oxford Reading Tree provides a detailed description, ‘getting ready to read,’ which is further defined in terms of the ability to ‘recognize their own names.’ Meanwhile, Ladybird uses an equally clear description for the lowest level, ‘children who are ready to read.’

*C. Content Indicators*

In terms of contents, levels A – C are used as guidelines for fiction and nonfiction. Meanwhile, level D is richer in that it also included folktales, poems, and plays. Levels E, F, and G contain history, current stories, and futuristic fiction. Level E is particularly targeted to teenagers, with various national and global issues.

Based on the analysis, MoEC’s guidelines are not specific enough to direct how the goals of each level can be achieved. For example, the statement ‘to develop critical thinking, sensitivity, and intention’ is unclear and too general. Wahyuni’s [9] graded readers were unable to identify those goals.

*D. Language Indicators*

MoEC’s guidelines did not specifically address punctuation, especially for levels A and B. Level C is used to introduce punctuation on as needed basis. Ideally, children at level B should already be familiar with small and capital letters. Therefore, punctuation that is introduced at level C should be accompanied by introduction of small and capital letters

Graded readers in the Oxford Reading Tree series, ‘level 1: Getting ready to read’ are clearer in setting the indicator, such as “can recognize some letter sounds.” The books at this level have also included capital initial letters and periods at the end of each sentence. Names are also written by using capital letters. Meanwhile, level 2: Starting to Read mentions this indicator “can recognize some letter sound at the beginning of words”. A similar finding was identified in the graded readers published in Ladybird series by Oxford. Level 1 uses upper and lower case letters in sentences, and there are punctuation marks.

Meanwhile, it is encouraging to find out that MoEC’s book leveling guidelines set the number of words as one indicator.

For instance, Level A (red, pre-readers) sets one word consisting of two or three syllables, maximum three words per page; level B (orange, early readers) consists of one sentence per line and one to three lines of text per page; level C (yellow, beginning readers) has sentences consisting of two to eight words that form a paragraph; level D (green, intermediate readers) provides space for sentence development of more than ten words). A similar indicator on the basis of number of words is used in the Oxford Reading Tree, which contains the number of vocabulary for each level.

Meanwhile, the more advanced levels in Puslitbang’s guidelines, level E (blue, advance readers) already uses “sophisticated vocabulary that is rarely used in daily life. At this level, new words are introduced through glossary lists and sentence contexts that help readers understand the text; Level E: Nonfiction text has specific technical / field-specific words. E, F, G: various forms and styles of language (new emerging at this level); figurative and literary words; F and G: Difficult and archaic vocabulary (in classic literary works/canons) and technical words can be understood using a glossary or dictionary.

*E. Graphic Indicators*

In terms of letters, Wahyuni’s graded readers were used in trial to 3rd-grade students without any problems [9]. The study conducted trials on three children to check the correct letter size. Trials were conducted at three levels, namely: Pre-reading (A) was tested to two-year old children, Early reading (B) was tested on four-year old children for Early reading (C) was tested on seven-year old children (minimum 12 pt).

In the trial, children were asked to choose the right letter for them. The letters were in the form of loose letters (a and r) and words (eyes, flowers). The children in the trial were asked to choose the same letters and words that are presented with a specific size, both in the form of letters or in the form of words. Based on the trial, the children’s choice of font size turned out to be higher than what was in the guidelines.

TABLE 3. COMPARISON OF LETTER SIZE

Age	I	II	III	Balibang
2 year	40pt	38pt	40pt	Pre-readers (minimal 20pt)
4 year	36pt	34pt	34pt	Early readers (minimal 18pt)
7 year	20pt	20pt	20pt	Beginning readers (min 12 pt)

Children in the trial did not like the minimum choice presented by MoEC due to the very small font size. “minimal ...”, but it seems that it is too small for children. This finding indicates that the letter size set in the guidelines were not suitable for child’s growth and development.

In addition, graphics were also indicated by the number of pages as follows: Level A: 8-12 pages, B: 8-16 pages; C: at least 16 pages; D: at least 24 pages; E, F, G: at least 48 pages. This is dissimilar from Oxford books that do not specify the number of pages, and use the amount of vocabulary instead. Level Two books in Usborne young reading series (blue) consists of 62 pages with a lot of pictures on average. Meanwhile, Level Three consists of about 62 pages with fewer images and smaller font sizes and denser spaces.

### III. CONCLUSION

Indonesia needs to produce more graded readers to provide more options and access to various kinds of reading selection. Based on the comparison, pilot study, implementation, and evaluation of book bands used in Indonesia and other countries, it can be concluded that the regulation stated in the Book Leveling Guidelines published by MoEC needs revisions to better address readers' needs. The guidelines should provide more detailed regulations regarding book contents. The language aspect also needs to consider spelling recognition and the number of words as early as possible. The graphic aspect needs to consider font size and number of pages.

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