The Lexile Framework: The Controversy Continues

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California School Library Journal 25(2): 29-31. 2002

The Lexile Framework is based on a readability formula that utilizes word frequency and sentence length. In Krashen (2001a) I commented on the use of the Lexile Framework for selecting texts for recreational reading. Stenner (2001) responded to my comments. In this paper, I briefly review my original statements, Stenner's objections, and present my responses.

There is an easier way to select texts

There is an easy way to select texts that does not involve the use of readability formulae: try reading them. Recreational readers will not continue reading texts if they are not comprehensible or if they are dull.

Stenner (2001) writes that "children are not very good forecasters of their expected comprehension rate with any given text" (p. 42). If Stenner is claiming that children aren't very good at selecting their own recreational reading, this cannot be right. It amounts to the claim that children, left to their own resources, will plod through books that are incomprehensible or boring and are not aware of when they are understanding or when a text is interesting.

Teachers and librarians are competent to recommend books for recreational reading

I also noted that teachers and librarians can recommend books.[1] They are professionals in the area of children's literature, and also know the children they deal with quite well.

Stenner claims that because of the many new titles that appear each year, new teachers and librarians may not be up to the task of recommending books. For these groups, at least, the Lexile Framework might just be useful" (p. 42).

But a knowledge of children's literature is at the core of the education of all teachers of language arts and librarians. Also, getting a reasonable grasp of what is currently

available and interesting is not overwhelming.

Of course, teachers and librarians don't have to know every book out there, but they should be able to pick up a book and get a feel for it quickly, and they have numerous resources, including reviews in professional journals, the advice of colleagues, and of course the reactions of children to help them. I value these resources far more than the results of any readability formula.

Why students don't read more: lack of access to books, not "inattention to targeting"

I claimed that the major barrier to reading is lack of access to books. Stenner agrees that this is a problem, but claims that many educators feel that "inattention to targeting is the single best explanation for why students don't read more than they do" (p. 42). As I understand it, this is the hypothesis that students do not read more because they are unable to find books at their reading level.

I disagree. There is overwhelming evidence for the "access hypothesis" and none at all for the "targeting hypothesis" as a cause of non-reading. The evidence for the access hypothesis consists of the following:

1. Many studies have shown a strong relationship between poverty and reading scores. Consistent with the access hypothesis are studies showing that children from low income families have very little access to books.

Duke (2000) reported that the first grade children she studied from high income families attended schools that had better classroom libraries, with more books on display and more time for interacting with books. She concluded that "schools themselves may contribute to relatively lower levels of literacy and other kinds of achievement among low-SES classrooms" (p. 464).

Neuman and Celano (2001) reported that children who lived in middle income neighborhoods had more places to buy books and a much wider variety of books to choose from in stores, had access to better school libraries with more books and with better staffing, and had access to better public libraries. The public libraries in the middle income areas they studied were open in the evening; those in the low income areas were not. Neuman and Celano concluded that " ... children in middle-

income neighborhoods were likely to be deluged with a wide variety of reading materials. However, children from poor neighborhoods would have to aggressively and persistently seek them out" (p. 15).

2. Given access to interesting reading material, nearly all children will read.

Those with more access to books read more. Children who live closer to public libraries read more over the summer (Heyns, 1978), school libraries with better collections and more hours open to students show higher circulation (House and Montmarquette, 1984), and kindergarten children with access to better library corners make more use of books during free time (Morrow and Weinstein, 1982). In addition, increasing access to books results in more interest in reading: Ramos (Ramos and Krashen, 1998) noted a profound increase in books and reading after only one trip to a public library among second graders who previously had little exposure to books.

More access is related to superior performance on tests of reading comprehension (Krashen, 1993). This result confirms that the kind of reading that results from access to books, free voluntary reading, really counts; it has an effect on literacy competence. Of special interest are studiies showing consistent positive relationships between school library quality (in terms of quantity of books and staffing) and performance on tests of reading comprehension (see the work of Lance, McQuillan, and others, summarized in Krashen, 2001b). Better libraries mean more access to books, and more help from librarians in finding books, which means more reading, which in turn results in better reading.

3. Better reading level formulae will not help resistant readers.

Providing access to books is necessary but of course it is not sufficient. A few students will resist reading even when books are available. But not many. Von Sprecken and Krashen (1998) demonstrated that during SSR time, about 90% of children observed in the middle of the school year were engaged in reading and surveys indicate that most children and adolescents enjoy reading (Krashen and Von Sprecken, 2002).

It has not been established that the few who resist reading are simply having a problem finding a book at their level. In fact, what little data there is on this issue

suggests that matching for reading level is not the problem. Kim and Krashen (2001) reported that only 16 of 103 sixth graders they interviewed did not like to read. When asked why, ten said that books were "boring" and only one said that books were too hard. The problem appears to be one of finding books of interest, not one of matching reader to reading level. It should also be noted that these children were from low income families and attended school in a district with very poor school libraries. These print-deprived children need more access to books, not more precise readability formulae.

Limiting Choices

The use of systems such as the Lexile Framework can limit choices. Studies show that children often select books both above and below their current reading level, and this is a good thing. Children can often understand large sections of books that are "too hard" because of their interest in and knowledge of the topic,[2] and "easy" books often provide valuable background in a new genre that encourages subsequent reading and makes it more comprehensible (Carter, 2000). Left on their own, children engage in a "back and forth movement" between easy and hard books, reading both below and above their current reading levels (Fresch, 1995). In addition, children gradually read books that are more challenging, without the use of reading levels (Krashen, 2001a). The back and forth movement is actually a sine wave that gradually moves upward.

Stenner appears to agree. in one Metametrics brochure ("The 3 Rs': Using the Lexile Framework"), it states that "one strategy that works well is to have students read an easier text on the same subject in order to provide some background knowledge and vocabulary" (p. 3). And Stenner, Burdick, Sanford and Burdick (2001) advise that "the Lexile Framework should never be the only factor considered when selecting a book" (p. 49).

Stenner feels, however, that the lexile measure of a book, "should be the first step in the book selection process" (Stenner et. al. 2001, p. 48). This suggests that the reader can only make a choice within a certain lexile level or range. Elsewhere, Stenner takes a position that appears to be opposed to readers reading above and below their level: "As the reader improves, new titles with higher text measures can be chosen to match the growing person measure, thus keeping the comprehension rate at the chosen level. In essence, we need to locate a reader's 'edge' and then systematically expose the reader to text that plays on that edge..." (Stenner, 1996, p. 20).

In fact, statements such as "As a reader grows, he or she can be matched with more demanding texts" (Stenner et. al., 2001, p. 52), give the impression that the reader is a passive participant in the matching process. I hope this impression is incorrect.

Notes

1. Children do most of their book selection on their own, however, getting only a small percentage of book recommendations from friends, teachers, librarians, parents and siblings (Lamme, 1974):

2. The lexile formula is based on word frequency and sentence length only, and is not sensitive to interest or background knowledge: "Under lexile theory, no special consideration is given to prior or special subject matter knowledge" (Stenner, 1996, p. 21). Prior knowledge of a topic strongly influences comprehensibility (e.g. Bransford and Johnson, 1972).

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