The Lexile Framework: Unnecessary and Potentially Harmful

Stephen Krashen

The Lexile Framework attempts to solve a problem that doesn't exist. It is a readability formula that "stands firmly in the tradition of classic readability formulas" (Stenner, 1996, p. 23) that assigns reading levels to texts based on word frequency and sentence length. The Lexile Framework is intended to help teachers and librarians recommend supplementary reading that is at the right reading level:

"For example, an eighth-grade girl who is interested in sports but is not reading at grade level might be able to handle a biography of a famous athlete. The teacher may not know, however, whether that biography is too difficult or too easy for the student. " All the teacher has to do is use the Lexile Framework on the text and the student and select a book at the right level. Then, "as the reader improves, new titles with higher text measures can be chosen to match the growing person (sic) measure, thus keeping the comprehension rate at the chosen level." (Stenner, 1996, p. 22).

Not Necessary

None of this is necessary, and it is probably harmful. There is a much easier way for readers to select texts: Are they comprehensible and interesting? It doesn't take long for a reader to determine this: All it takes is sampling a little of the text (reading it). Our eighth grader simply needs to have a look at a few biographies.

Teachers and librarians can certainly help in text selection and they do this all the time, with great success. A teacher or librarian who knows children's literature (and most do, it is part of the job), and knows the child (and most know the children they deal with quite well, it is also part of the job) can most likely recommend several biographies without too much trouble. If they can't, a quick glance at several usually leads to a reasonable recommendation.

We need not be concerned with carefully matching the student's level for free reading, and need not be concerned with accurately monitoring the increasing difficulty level as the child reads more and improves. Childrens' own experiences with texts does a much better job than any formula can.

Potentially Harmful: Restriction of Reading

A narrow application of the Lexile Framework will needlessly limit readers' choices, keeping readers in a narrow range of texts (Carter, 2000). While children may select easy books for free reading, they often select books that are considered too hard (Southgate, Arnold and Johnson, 1981; Bader, Veatch, and Eldrige, 1987). These "hard" texts might be very meaningful for readers with special interests and who are willing (and eager) to focus on the parts that are relevant to them.

Also, reading "easy" books is not a waste of time; It may be that the "lighter" reading we are denying readers contains text that could be meaningful and important to the reader. Kathleen Sespaukas has pointed out to me that "easy" books may contain sections well above their indicated level, i.e. a book considered to be at the fourth grade level may contain quite a bit of material at the fifth and sixth grade level. Reading level is an average and this average does not apply to every sentence. In addition, easy reading may help readers to get started in an unfamiliar topic or genre. Carter (2000) points out that librarians frequently suggest that adults read books written for younger readers when dealing with unfamiliar material. This builds background knowledge that makes subsequent reading more comprehensible.

We don't have to worry that readers will languish at lower levels of reading material: students who do plenty of self-selected reading gradually expand their reading interests as they get older (LaBrant, 1937) and there is evidence that light reading, such as comic book reading, serves as a conduit to heavier reading. Ujiee and Krashen (1996) reported that seventh grade boys who reported more comic book reading also reported more pleasure reading in general, greater reading enjoyment and tended to do more book reading (see Krashen, 1993, for case histories).

The Lexile Framework claims other goals, such as helping teachers select the right texts for read alouds, recommending that teachers select books slightly harder than the students' lexile levels. Such precision is completely unnecessary. Students' interest and attention will tell teachers when a book is at the right level, and not every book need be precisely at the edge of the students' competence.

Potentially Harmful: A Waste of Money

The real problem in the "literacy crisis" remains access to reading material (Krashen, 1993; McQuillan, 1998). Many children simply have little or no access to reading material (Feitelson and Goldstein, 1986; Smith, Constantino and Krashen, 1997; Di Loreto and Tse, 1999). When books are supplied to school and classroom libraries in areas where they were not plentiful, the increase in reading test scores is dramatic

(Elley, 1998).

We seem willing to devote time and money to nearly any other "solution" than simply supplying good books and a comfortable place to read them. The research cost of the Lexile Framework was approximately two million dollars and the research was supported by the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (Metametrics, no date). This money would have been much better invested in our school and classroom libraries. While prices are not mentioned in the literature I have seen, the full kit comes with the Lexile Framework Map, "with examples of books, magazines, tests, and educational levels," software (the Lexile Analyzer), and "an item bank for measuring reading performance, conversion formulas for commonly used reading texts, and a technology for linking existing reading tests to the Lexile Framework." In addition to the cost of this material, one must also consider the time invested in making sure all texts have a lexile rating and making sure that we know at every moment each student's lexile rating!

As Carter (2000) points out, readability formulae may be of some use when dealing with assigned group reading (textbooks), but they are out of place when dealing with individual pleasure reading. Using the Lexile Framework to select supplemental reading is like using an elaborate device to precisely measure the calories and vitamins in foods, and the specific nutritional state of each child, and recommending that children eat those foods that meet their current biological needs, rather than making sure the children have enough good food to eat, and a reasonable variety to choose from.

Postscript

This year, every student in California in grades 2 through 11 will receive a California Reading List number, based on STAR test results (Lexile Framework, no date). This number is derived from the Lexile Framework, and will "provide a way for students and their parents to obtain a list of California State approved books that are at their reading level." The approved reading list will be available on the internet. The State of California has paid for this effort, at a time when California's libraries are still vastly underfunded. In addition, it is based on the results of one test, a test that many consider to be flawed. California is spending valuable money in an effort that may restrict students' choice of reading.

References

Bader, L., Veatch, J, and Eldridge, J. (1987). Trade books or basal readers? Reading Improvement 24: 62-67.

Carter, B. (2000). Formula for failure. School Library Journal, July 1, 2000.

Di Loreto, C. and Tse, L. (1999). Seeing is believing: Disparity in books in two Los Angeles area public libraries. School Library Quarterly, 17(3): 31-36.

Elley, W. (1998). Raising Literacy Levels in Third World Countries: A Method that Works. Culver City, CA: Language Education Associates.

Feitelson, D. and Goldstein, Z. (1986). Patterns of book ownership and reading to young children in Israeli school-oriented and nonschool-oriented families. Reading Teacher, 39(9): 924-930.

Krashen, S. (1993). The Power of Reading. Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited.

LaBrant, L. (1937). The contents of a free reading program. Educational Research Bulletin,16: 29-34.

The Lexile Framework (no date)
http://www.lexile.com/DesktopDefault.aspx?view=ed&tabindex=1&tabid=49&tabpageid=74

Metametrics. The 3 R's: Using the Lexile Framework. Durham, NC: Metametrics, Inc. (no date)

McQuillan, J. (1998). The Literacy Crisis: False Claims and Real Solutions. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Smith, C., Constantino, R., and Krashen, S. (1997). Differences in print environment for children in Beverly Hills, Compton and Watts. Emergency Librarian, 24(4): 8-9.

Southgate, V., Arnold, H., and Johnson, S. (1981). Extending Beginning Reading. London: Heinemann Educational Books.

Stenner, A.J. (1996). Measuring reading comprehension with the Lexile Framework. Durham, NC: Metametrics, Inc.

Ujiie, J. and Krashen, S. (1996). Comic book reading, reading enjoyment, and pleasure reading among middle class and chapter I middle school students. Reading Improvement, 33,1: 51-54.