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# Text Complexity

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## Overview

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Originally, readability measures expressed text levels in terms of school grade levels. For instance, the readability of a text might be stated as being at a third-grade or fifth-grade level. These days most measures use other those mysterious numbers into grade levels. What that means is that these graded readability scores can be interpreted as a prediction that the average student in that grade level would be able to read the text with understanding; saying that a book is at the fourth-grade level means, not that all fourth-graders could read such a book, but that the average ones should be able to.

The first such readability formulas improved our ability to predict text difficulty, but not by very



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The few experimental studies that do exist (for instance, Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000) have found that students do better, that is they learn more, when working with texts somewhat harder than Betts claimed. Past efforts to place students in texts have striven to protect them from confronting too much difficulty, and yet, such protections place an important limitation on opportunity to learn. “Just as it’s impossible to build muscle without weight or resistance, it’s impossible to build robust reading skills without reading challenging text.” (Shanahan, Fisher, & Fry, 2000, p. 58).

That suggests that schools should be striving to place students in more complex texts than in the recent past. There certainly is justification for such an approach, but it would be wise to be cautious in this regard. First, it is important to remember that there is a difference between beginning reading and later reading. Initially, children have to figure out the decoding system. Part of this is learned from explicit teaching in phonological awareness and phonics, but part is learned from abstracting, from what we read, the alphabetic principle and how it works (Venezky & Johnson, 1973). If early reading texts are complicated—particularly in terms of the simplicity of the spelling patterns, then it is likely that student progress in beginning reading will be slowed down. Readability measures used with beginning reading materials are not especially accurate either. None of the arguments for ramping up text difficulty hold much water when selecting beginning reading materials (though by the time student reach an early second-grade reading level, it is certainly reasonable to start shifting to harder texts).

Second, these theories of how text complexity affects learning are somewhat simplistic. They assume that the relative difficulty of the text will determine what the student can learn from the text. But there are other factors that need to be considered. At its extremes, the theory makes sense, there likely are some texts that are too easy to learn much from and likewise some that are so hard they would not be worth using for instruction. But what of the vast expanse of text levels that lay in between those extremes?

Students probably could learn from any and all of those in between texts, but how much they learn will depend on the amount of scaffolding, support, explanation, rereading, and motivation that the teacher provides. If texts pose few challenges, then students may be able to learn something from them on their own, albeit something relatively small and limited (since the challenges would be small and limited). If the reading material posed greater challenge, then learning would be determined by how much instructional support was there to guide students to successfully figure out the text.

Just shifting students into reading complex texts will not be sufficient to advance their learning. Shifting to the use of more complex text is a necessary, but insufficient, step for making it possible for students to learn more. Teachers will need to become proficient in recognizing text complexity (both by learning to estimate text levels using readability measurement tools, and then by recognizing which features might be contributing to the difficulty of these particular texts). They also must know the kinds of instructional supports that can be provided if students are to make maximum gains from materials that they struggle with

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## References

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