The Complexities of Text Complexity

By Staci Shaw

Between Common Core requirements and Reading Program expectations (e.g., Accelerated Reader), finding books appropriate for a student's reading level can be challenging. For older students reading to learn, there is acceptance of using text within a wider ability-range. For instance, a 10th grade student could read text written on a lower or higher level and still gain the knowledge to meet learning objectives. However, for students learning to read, we commonly accept that only books within a pre-determined range should be used to meet those objectives. It makes sense for classroom instruction where a specific learning objective is identified. But what about reading for pleasure, or reading to become a better reader? For younger students, especially beginning readers, choosing books to read during "out of school" time is critical to becoming a proficient reader. Here are some points to keep in mind:

Determining text complexity.

There are 3 factors that work *together* to determine text complexity:

1. Quantitative: Typically calculated by computer software, it measures word and sentence length, word frequency, and text cohesion (i.e., Lexile, AR, Flesch-Kincaid).

2. Qualitative: Includes levels of meaning, text structure, clarity of language, and demands for background knowledge. This is best determined by an attentive human reader.

3. Reader and Task: Looks at the individual reader and the task or purpose for reading. This should take into account the student's interest, knowledge, the complexity of the task, and the professional judgment of the teacher or librarian.

A book labeled as a "2.5" by AR, or with a "300" Lexile or ATOS level, is only one factor. It should be combined with the other factors to determine complexity, especially student interest.

Determining student reading ability.

The Accelerated Reader "STAR" test developed by Reading Renaissance is designed for teachers to use to plan instruction. It measures several components of reading and language. It is not meant to identify a student's concrete reading level or dictate which level of books a student can read. Here are what the scores really mean:

- IRL (Instructional Reading Level)—the highest reading level at which a student is at least 80% proficient at comprehending materials *with assistance*. In other words, the student got at least 80% of the test items correct. Teachers should consider this when planning lessons. Students should not be limited to only books that match this level.

- ZPD (Zone of Proximal Development) – an individualized *range* of readability levels, wherein books are neither too difficult nor too easy, and allows students to experience *optimal* growth. Reading Renaissance itself cautions teachers from limiting students to only their ZPD, and to use "professional judgement to adjust the level of books to match the individual student's needs and interests."

No matter which test is used in your school, remember that a score is just that—one number achieved on one given day on one test. It is a good indicator for teachers to use to plan instruction, and it's a starting point to help students choose books they are interested in reading.

LINKS TO MORE LEARNING

Reading Renaissance: Zone of Proximal Development:
http://support.renlearn.com/techkb/techkb/1883599e.asp
Reading Renaissance: Independent Reading Level:
http://support.renlearn.com/techkb/techkb/1751480e.asp
Reading Renaissance: The Science of the STAR test:
http://doc.renlearn.com/KMNet/R001480701GCFBB9.pdf
Lexile Measures: Defining Text Complexity:
https://www.lexile.com/using-lexile/lexile-measures-and-the-ccssi/defining-text-complexity/
Common Core Standards and Text Complexity:
http://www.corestandards.org/assets/E0813_Appendix_A_New_Research_on_Text_Complexity.pdf
Pearson School: What is Text Complexity?
http://assets.pearsonschool.com/asset_mgr/current/201217/Text_Complexity_G1.pdf

PRACTICAL APPLICATIONS

Advanced Reading Recommendations

To get recommendations for students that include text complexity along with a student's interests and the learning topic at hand, try NoveList Plus or NoveList Plus K-8. Both tools have advanced search functions to identify books — both fiction and non fiction — by age, grade level, Lexile, plot, characters, book length, and more. Plus, a recent announcement indicates that AR levels will soon be an added facet for finding titles with NoveList tools.

DIGITAL TOOLS

LiLI Reading Resources
http://lili.org/dbs/category/26

NoveList Plus
Find reading recommendations for all ages. Search by book title, author, reading level, or key plot points. Find information about a book series.

NoveList Plus K-8
Just like NoveList Plus, the K-8 edition, but limited to content appropriate for readers in 8th grade or lower.