Teacher to Teacher

Looking at Readability for Adult Literacy Learners

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Here's a nursery rhyme. What would you estimate its difficulty level to be?

Hickory dickory dock.
The mouse ran up the clock.
The clock struck one,
and the mouse ran down.
Hickory dickory dock.

The words are either very familiar or easily decodable. Sentences are short. Content is easy. These are the factors we want to use to judge readability. Logically, the easier the words and concepts and the shorter the sentences, the easier something is to read. Right? Well….

Readability formulas are touted as simple ways to judge readability, or the level of difficulty of a text. Unfortunately, they don't always work. Here are readability results, expressed as grade levels, from three well known formulas for "Hickory Dickory Dock":

Spache: 3.62
Flesch Kincaid: 5.5
Dale-Chall: 7-8

The differences among the results are interesting, aren't they? Moreover, did you guess that the nursery rhyme was this difficult? It's not, of course. This example points to flaws in readability formulas. They're not perfect. Although they can be a helpful tool for teachers, we must also remember the value of teacher judgment—good old common sense—when it comes to matching students with books. This article provides an overview of readability issues, resources for determining readability, and a few more comments about good old common sense.

Readability Issues

The concept of readability is complex. Consider, for a moment, what factors can influence text difficulty. Here are a few:

- Reader's interest or background knowledge. It's easier to read something we are interested in. It's easier to read something that we already know a lot about. The reverse is also true, in both cases.

- Words. Unfamiliar, abstract, and difficult-to-decode words tend to make for difficult reading.

- Syntax or language patterns. Repeated sentences or phrases make for easy reading, as do rhyming patterns and other predictable features. Long, complex sentences and sentences written in passive voice are more difficult to read.

- Internal organization. The clarity (or lack) of presentation of ideas affects readability. Well organized expository texts with clear statements of purpose followed by complete discussions of key points are easier to read than texts organized in some other way. For fiction, a straightforward timeline that adheres to the way stories are typically written or told is easier to read than a piece with flashbacks or other disruptions to the narrative. In fact, each genre has one or more typical formats, which, if followed, will enhance readability.

- Contextual support. Textbook-like texts may have (or lack) features such as headings, graphics, illustrations, etc. that can affect readability.

- Format. Font size, length, and even the appearance of the text on a page can cause a text to "look" more or less difficult to read.

- Despite the complexity of the concept, readability is important. Think about the last time you began to read something

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that was too challenging or unfamiliar. What did you do? How did you feel? Would doing these things and feeling these ways help your students achieve as readers? We need to look for texts that are at the appropriate level of difficulty for students.

Resources for Determining Readability

Texts can be measured for difficulty using readability formulas. These formulas are generally based on two text-based factors: word difficulty and sentence difficulty. With regard to the former, some formulas compare words in the text to a list of familiar words, on the assumption that easier texts have more familiar words. Other formulas are based on syllable counts, on the assumption that easier texts tend to have fewer syllables per word. Sentence difficulty is always determined by length; the assumption here is that shorter sentences are easier to read than longer ones. The result of applying a readability formula is usually a grade-level determination of the text difficulty.

In the pre-computer age, determining readability was tedious since all the counts and comparisons needed to be done by hand. This process is easier now:

You can determine the readability of a Word document using the Flesch-Kincaid readability formula. This is found in the "Tools" section of Word, under Spelling and Grammar.

At www.interventioncentral.org you will find a Reading Probe Generator that allows you to enter a text segment by typing it in or cutting and pasting from another document. You can then have one of two readability formulas run: Spache (best for text written at and below grade 3) or Dale-Chall (best for text written at or above grade 4).

At www.lexile.com you can search for readability scores for more than 100,000 books written in both English and Spanish. You can search by title, author, or "key word" (searches both the title and description fields). Lexiles are related to grade levels, but represented by different numbers. Like other readability formulas, lexile calculation is based on word familiarity and sentence length. The chart located at http://www.lexile.com/DesktopDefault.aspx?view=ed&tabindex=6&tabid=18#18 will show you how to translate lexiles into grade equivalents.

Readability Analysis from the University of Texas is located at http://www.cs.utexas.edu/users/s2s/latest/readability1/src/index.cgi?lang=English&content=home. Here you will find readability formulas for Dutch, French, Japanese, and Spanish as well as English. To run the formulas, you need to type or cut and paste text.

Less technology-enhanced but nonetheless useful are two other ways to determine readability:

- Ask an individual student to read a page of the text aloud. You should mark his or her errors. The reader should make no more than 5-7 uncorrected errors per hundred words. If 8% or more of the words are read incorrectly, the text is too difficult. Most likely, the reader will find trying to read the text drudgery, and his or her comprehension will suffer.

- Teach students the "five-finger rule": Open a new book to a page about in the middle. Begin reading silently. Each time you encounter an unknown word, put one finger down on the table. If all five fingers from one hand are on the table before you finish the page, the book will be hard for you to read. Put it back and find another.

Good Old Common Sense

Books used for instruction should be "comfortable" reads for students—no more than 3-7% of the words should pose problems. If you need to select easier or more challenging books, go with the easier ones. No more than 1-2% of the words should pose problems in books students read independently.

Be sure to talk with students about the general principles underlying readability—that certain factors make texts difficult for certain people. Help them understand that this is not a sign of reading weakness. Even the most proficient reader encounters material that is too difficult.

Students should also understand the importance of plenty of easy reading. Reading a lot of easy material is an excellent way to increase one's reading ability. And they should understand that interest sometimes "trumps" readability, so they should feel free to give interesting books a try.