

AN INSIDE VIEW OF LEXILE MEASURES:

AN INTERVIEW WITH MALBERT SMITH III

Interview conducted by

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Malbert Smith III (msmith@lexile.com) is president of MetaMetrics, Inc., an educational measurement and research organization in Durham, North Carolina. Together with cofounder and CEO A. Jackson Stenner, Dr. Smith created the Lexile Framework for Reading; El Sistema Lexile para Leer, the Spanish-language version of the widely used reading framework; the Lexile Framework for Writing; and the Quantile Framework for Mathematics. At events he frequently speaks on educational research and measurement.

Has this ever happened to you? A teacher, parent, or central-office administrator comes to you and says, “I think we should rearrange the library so that all the books are grouped by Lexile level (or Guided Reading level, Accelerated Reader level, etc.).”

Of course, your initial gut response would be to exclaim, “Are you crazy?”

Ideally, you would keep that response to yourself and instead explain why leveling the library might not make the most sense.

Many text-leveling systems are available, and each has its own process for determining how to best match a reader with appropriate reading materials. While these systems can support educators in helping students become better readers, a disconnect often arises when implementation shifts from using the system to help guide instruction, to completely taking over everything, including leveling the library collection. These extreme measures typically are not how the creators of the systems intended them to be used.

As librarians, we need to research and understand the leveling system in play—what is its purpose and how should it be implemented?

With this baseline understanding, we can then start to think in

terms of how the library can support a leveling system without compromising the basic foundations of our field.

Based on this premise, I talked with Dr. Malbert Smith III, president of MetaMetrics and part of the team that created the widely adopted Lexile Framework for Reading. I asked him about some of the concerns librarians might have about leveling systems and the extreme measures that have sometimes negatively impacted school libraries. While we focused on Lexile measures, it is important to note that many of the questions and issues could apply to any leveling system. What’s important is how these issues and questions are addressed in support of students as they develop their reading skills.

CARL A. HARVEY: What’s the history of the Lexile Framework for Reading? Why was the system created?

MALBERT SMITH: MetaMetrics created The Lexile Framework for Reading to provide a common scale and metric for measuring reading ability. The Lexile Framework allows for students to be matched with “targeted” texts at the right level of complexity to encourage reading growth, and to compare reading achievement levels across the content areas, grade levels, and states. The National Institutes of Health initially funded our work

through a series of grants. These grants supported the research on reading and psychometric theory that fueled the development of the Lexile Framework. The Lexile Framework is based on more than twenty years of ongoing research by MetaMetrics cofounder Dr. A. Jackson Stenner; Dr. Donald Burdick, MetaMetrics senior scientist and professor emeritus of statistics, Duke University; and faculty from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and the University of Chicago.

CAH: How is a Lexile measure determined?

MS: There are two types of Lexile measures: a Lexile reader measure and a Lexile text measure. A Lexile reader measure indicates a student’s reading ability on the Lexile scale and is determined by having the student take a reading comprehension test that has been linked with the Lexile Framework. A complete list of assessments and programs that report students’ reading scores as Lexile measures is available on the Lexile website <www.lexile.com/about-lexile/How-to-get-lexile-measures>. Each year, about 35 million U.S. K–12 students receive a Lexile measure from one of these reading assessments and programs. Similarly, a Lexile text measure indicates the complexity of a text, such as a book or article, on the same Lexile scale. A Lexile text



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measure is calculated using the Lexile Analyzer, a program that evaluates the reading demand of a text based on its semantic (word frequency) and syntactic (sentence length) components. Currently, tens of thousands of books and hundreds of millions of articles have Lexile measures, and these numbers continue to grow. A very useful feature of a Lexile reader measure and a Lexile text measure is that they can be used together to forecast how well a student will likely comprehend a text at a specific Lexile level.

CAH: What are the appropriate ways for Lexile measures to be used with students in a school?

MS: A Lexile measure has many valuable uses. Perhaps the most valuable is its ability to accurately match a student with ability-appropriate text—whether that be in school, at the library, or at home—and forecast expected comprehension. Unlike other test scores, Lexile measures are “actionable”—educators, librarians, and parents can use them to help students find materials that will provide the right level of challenge for their reading abilities and goals, while still maintaining interest and learning.

In the classroom educators can use Lexile measures to differentiate instruction. Within any classroom or grade, there will be a range of

readers and a range of materials to be read. Lexile measures help educators supplement instruction with materials on the same lesson topic but at a text-complexity level that matches a student’s specific reading ability.

Educators can also use Lexile measures to monitor student growth in relation to state and national proficiency levels, as well as college- and career-readiness standards. Lexile measures were cited in the Common Core State Standards’ Appendix A as a reliable means to gauge text complexity. The Standards offer recommended Lexile bands by grade to guide educators (and librarians and parents) in helping students choose reading materials at the right complexity level to ensure learners are on track to meet the reading demands of their academic and professional pursuits.

CAH: Some school librarians have been asked to abandon the standard organization of their school libraries in favor of arrangement by Lexile levels. What are your thoughts about schools that use Lexile levels to rearrange and organize the school library collection?

MS: We do not find it necessary to reorganize a library by Lexile range or level. Today, a number of computer catalog providers offer Lexile measures to help guide students to the right reading materials—without having to actually rearrange those materials by Lexile level. Follett and Alexandria, for example, have options where Lexile measures can be added to the MARC record, so that students can search for books in the library collection that best match their ability levels. The task of determining interest level, topic, or age-appropriateness

is still the responsibility of the teacher, parent, or student.

Many schools also have rooms filled with leveled text. Teachers can borrow books and other materials for instruction based on their students’ ability levels. What’s important is that the librarian is part of this process. Items are cataloged in the automated system, and the librarian becomes a source for ordering and organizing the leveled materials. It may be added work, but librarians can demonstrate that they are providing leveled resources and, at the same time, protect the main library collection from being rearranged.

CAH: What do you think about students having free choice in selecting their reading materials? Should they always remain in their Lexile range?

MS: A student should be able to choose what he or she wants to read, regardless of whether that book or article is in his or her recommended Lexile range. The Lexile range (100L below and 50L above a student’s Lexile measure) should be considered as a guide to help students select books that offer an appropriate level of challenge for their reading abilities. In no way should a Lexile measure or Lexile range be used to dictate what a student can and cannot read. Students certainly can read books that are above or below their Lexile range. However, books that are below a student’s Lexile range may offer little challenge in terms of new vocabulary and advanced grammar. Likewise, books that are above the student’s Lexile range may be too challenging and discourage the student from reading. The best way for students to strengthen their skills is reading practice. Lexile measures (and Lexile ranges) help to make that practice more meaningful by guiding students to books they should be able to comprehend independently.

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While a Lexile measure is a valuable piece of information in the book-selection process, it's important to note that the Lexile measure is only one piece of information to consider when selecting a book for a specific student. Other factors, such as the content and quality of the text, and the student's interests and reading goals, should also be considered. A Lexile measure is a great starting point, but it is not intended to replace the role of an educator, librarian, or parent in helping students pick books that will support growth toward the reading demands of their future endeavors.

In short, we believe that students should be matched with targeted text to reduce frustration and foster a love of reading. In certain instructional contexts, it is best to target students within their Lexile range. But in other contexts—as factors like background knowledge and motivation dictate—students should be allowed to read outside of their Lexile range. We have found that most students prefer to read targeted text, especially for independent reading. After all, we all have had the experience of selecting a book that was too difficult to understand and enjoy. We certainly do not want students to experience that same frustration.

CAH: Often librarians are asked to recommend to students only titles that are within their Lexile ranges. This can be difficult when a student's Lexile range is high, but the content is not developmentally or age-appropriate. What do you suggest for students who have a high Lexile measure, but the majority of books written in their Lexile range are not topic- or age-appropriate?

MS: There are two particularly challenging scenarios: 1) a student is either overage for his or her grade, or is reading at a Lexile level that

is lower than grade expectations; and 2) a student has a Lexile measure that far exceeds grade-level expectations. A successful strategy for the first scenario involves locating high-low books with age-appropriate jacket art. MetaMetrics' staff is constantly assessing high-low texts, which receive a Lexile code of "HL" (for high-low).

The second scenario requires a different strategy. There are now more than 400 million periodical articles with Lexile measures that can be accessed through school library resources like EBSCO, ProQuest, and NewsBank. These resources allow advanced readers to search on topics of interest and Lexile range, thus promoting targeted reading for advanced readers.

Of course, we should never discourage pleasure reading, even when those books are well below the student's Lexile measure. Many years ago an elementary school librarian instilled in me a passion for reading, and the value of this gift in my life cannot be overestimated.

CAH: What role do you think school librarians could support using Lexile measures in their schools?

MS: Lexile measures help to strengthen the connection between the classroom and the library. When librarians know students' Lexile measures and the instructional resources that are available to teachers, librarians can help teachers match students with reading materials at their ability level across the content areas. MetaMetrics has partnered with all of the major periodical database providers, including EBSCO, ProQuest, and NewsBank, to provide Lexile measures for newspaper and magazine articles, as well as for encyclopedia and

reference content. This range of materials with Lexile measures enables librarians to extend the school library collection and support teachers in differentiating instruction. Furthermore, librarians can support summer reading by helping students use "Find a Book" <www.lexile.com/fab> to build reading lists prior to the end of the school year, encouraging students to participate in community reading programs, and even allowing them to check out books from the school library over summer break. This support may be especially helpful for high-poverty students who live in low-literacy environments and are at a loss for ability-appropriate reading materials at home.

Concluding Thoughts from Carl

The success of any reading-level system or program ultimately depends on how a school implements it. After all, we've all witnessed initiatives where either no one followed through or someone went too far. As librarians, we must be proactive, and that means being part of the literacy conversations happening at our schools so that we can avoid the "leveling" discussion at the beginning of this article. As school library leaders, we will be at the forefront of the conversations that affect our libraries and can better position them as resources to support school programs—without sacrificing the core beliefs of our field.

RECOMMENDED READING

Harvey II, Carl A. 2006. "Leveling for Leverage." *Library Media Connection* 24, no.4, 42-43.