

Best Practices for Using Lexiles



Barbara R. Blackburn

In today's educational climate, cries for quick fixes and immediate solutions are endless. Lists of "best practices" abound, and reform often means jumping on the latest bandwagon and expecting major changes immediately. This approach results in what has been described as "Teflon education" - guaranteed not to stick. As educators, the ineffectiveness of this approach calls for a different design. Therefore, when looking at "best practice" using the Lexile Framework®, it is critical to set specific parameters. The strength of the Lexile Framework® is its flexibility in terms of use, but the Framework can be misused because of a lack of understanding of its purpose.

The Lexile Framework® is a tool for looking at reader ability relative to the difficulty of text. It allows a parent, student, teacher, or media coordinator to understand the performance of a reader (whether on a standardized test or informal assessment) through examples of text materials (books, newspapers, or magazines) the reader can understand, rather than through a number such as a stanine or percentile. While the ability to link student performance on a test or other assessment tool with text materials is a powerful tool, the major misconception regarding the Lexile Framework® is that the framework is a program or method for teaching students to read. Rather, the Lexile Framework® is a tool that can be used with existing programs, methods, and strategies to enhance reading growth. Using the framework in the most effective manner means starting with the realization that it does not replace any program a school may be currently using nor is it a way to actually teach reading. It is a tool — a knowledge base — that can enhance reading methods and sharpen the focus of instructional programs currently in use in a school or district.



Barbara Blackburn
Blackburn Consulting Group

The Lexile Framework® provides:

1. A way to define (with books and other text materials) what is above grade level, on grade level, and below grade level, according to the standardized test used.
2. A way to understand a student's location on the reading spectrum, based on their performance on a standardized test or informal assessment.
3. A way to match classroom libraries, resource materials, textbooks, and library materials to standardized tests.

Several districts in North Carolina have been using the Lexile Framework® to enhance their current programs and to more sharply align their instruction with the state assessment, or End-of-Grade Tests (EOG). A foundational use of the framework begins with using it to understand the EOG. What must a student be able to do to score "on grade level" on the EOG? For math, the answer was simple. Clear-cut, concrete objectives were provided and teachers had stable benchmarks for achievement. Reading, on the other hand, was not simple. Clearly, students must be able to answer certain types and levels of questions and they should be able to read "on grade level", but what does that mean? If, as a fourth grade teacher, my students can read the state approved fourth grade textbook and answer questions, is that enough?

The Lexile Framework®, when introduced in North Carolina, answered that question. Students' scores on the EOG are converted into lexiles. In addition to providing diagnostic information for each student, teachers could now take the students who scored at level 3 (state designation for grade level), see the Lexile range for that level, and have an estimated idea of "grade level" text materials. Benchmarking books and other text materials at "grade level" provided a starting point for structure for the reading portion of the test.

The application of this information is immediate. Simply by knowing where specific book titles fall in relation to the EOG, teachers have a way to evaluate the appropriateness of those books used in the classroom. For example, many fourth grade teachers use the novel "Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing", (490 lexiles). 490 lexiles is well below the level 3 (on grade level) range of 625-880 lexiles at fourth grade on the EOG. Although this text is an age-appropriate selection, it is not a book that appropriately challenges students on grade level in light of the EOG. While this does not mean that "Tales of a Fourth Grade Nothing" is an inappropriate book for fluent, easy, pleasure reading, it does indicate that the text should not be used for a significant portion of instructional time. For a teacher, with all the pressing needs and curriculum objectives to cover, it is critical to focus and align instructional materials appropriately, particularly in regard to state and national standards and accountability tools.

How are schools and school districts using the Lexile Framework® effectively? Evaluating current resources and aligning their use to match accountability measures is one of the strongest instructional uses of the Lexile Framework®. Craven County, North Carolina, is a case that illustrates the problems in assuming accountability measures. Each individual school had a variety of books and other text materials from a large range of publishers. Publishers provided recommended grade levels for each book, but there seemed to be a lack of consistency in the levels. Some books even had different levels, depending on the publisher or book list referred to. Several years ago a great deal of emphasis, time, and money, had been placed on a commercial, computerized program that most schools in the county implemented to provide a base leveling system and some consistency. However, reading test scores in the district were not improving at the rate desired. The vendor's marketing materials claimed the program appropriately targeted readers for growth, but this was not happening. Growth was shown on the commercially-provided test bank, but it wasn't transferring to the EOG. A portion of the problem was the leveling system used. Based on a combination of readability formulas, the computer system relied on grade equivalents. The underlying assumption was that since everyone defines a grade level the same way, a simple grade equivalency can be used. However, there was no way to know if the grade equivalents matched the state testing definitions of "on grade level". Enter the Lexile Framework®.

Using a comparison database of the grade levels and Lexile levels, over 6,000 books could be evaluated to see if the grade levels actually matched the state levels. Although many did, a large number of title levels did not match the test (see Table A on page 24). In fact, many books that were leveled at a particular grade level were actually considered level two (or below grade level) according to the EOG Lexile score data.

The result was that many students were reading books considered "on grade level", but these books were actually easier than the appropriate level of difficulty for the state assessment. This explained part of the lack of growth on the EOG. However, the district was not forced to choose between their computer program and Lexiles. Because the Lexile Framework® is a tool, they simply began to use the Lexile Framework® to adjust and customize the computer program to meet their needs. Teachers, parents, and media specialists could simply direct students to other choices, that are more challenging. The issue is not that a student shouldn't be allowed to read easy books. But for growth, there must be a balance of easy, fluent reading, and reading that is appropriately challenging. In this case, everyone assumed the books were challenging (based on the levels provided), when they weren't. As a librarian in Gaston County, NC noted, "No wonder our brightest students aren't

growing. They are reading books we thought were harder, but in reality, they're not!" And as one principal said, "We don't need any help picking easy books. Students do that on their own." In several of the districts in North Carolina, teachers and media specialists are using the computerized comparison to better target appropriately challenging books that match the state ranges of performance.

Best practice, however, moves past simply aligning curricular resources with assessment. It also uses assessment to inform instruction. A special education teacher in Wilkes County, NC used the comparison of the popular software program in a different way. One of her students was desperate to read a book that was "on grade level" and had "the right number of points." Unfortunately, he was performing well below grade level, and was struggling to find a book he could read that was also popular with his peer group. The teacher used the computerized comparison to find titles that were "grade level" but were actually much easier (such as "Fourth Grade Rates" in Table A). She directed the student to selected books at his Lexile range that also were leveled (and labeled in this case) at a higher grade level. In effect, she turned a negative (books leveled incorrectly in light of the EOG) into a positive for her student.

Another way the Lexile Framework® can allow a teacher to customize instruction is to modify the traditional class novel. In a typical classroom, if all students read one novel, it is probably easy for some students, hard for a portion of the class, and right on target for the middle group. Depending on the ability range of students in the class, one novel probably is appropriate for 30-50% of the class. An alternative to this is using several novels, tied together by theme or genre. For example, in a fifth grade class, instead of everyone reading "Hatchet" by Gary Paulsen, students could be placed into literature circles of four to six students, based on Lexile levels. Then, each literature circle could choose a book by Gary Paulsen that falls within 50-100 Lexiles of their range. The teacher moves around the class to facilitate the small group discussions, but then pulls the entire class back together for an author study, which includes a comparison of different Gary Paulsen books. By using flexible grouping and a variety of titles, the teacher provides reading materials for each student at his or her ability level, but balances the instruction (and avoids tracking students) with the whole class activities. Similarly, if assigning book reports to a class, providing a range of titles within a genre, such as biographies, insures that students are provided opportunities to read material that is appropriately challenging to each individual. Unfortunately, far too often, students are left to pick books on their own, with no direction. Many students pick the easiest book they can find, and others are left hopelessly overwhelmed by books far above their level. Providing lists of books to students (and parents)

that are linked to their Lexile level strengthens the chances of choosing books that are appropriate for growth.

The Lexile Framework® provides endless possibilities for use in schools, and this review only begins the discussion. Links between the media center and the classroom, between the public library and the school, between parents and teachers are easily forged using the framework. However, the most effective "best practice" instructionally with the Lexile Framework® is to evaluate one's current instructional practices, disaggregate available student data, and work with a curriculum consultant to determine the best way to use Lexiles in a particular situation.

Table A: Sample Comparison of Commercial Software Program and EOG Grade Four: EOG Level 3 (on grade level)-625-880L		
Title	Program Level	Lexile Level
"Fourth Grade Rates"	4.0	340
"Trumpet of the Swan"	4.1	860
"Jip: His Story"	4.2	860
"George Washington"	4.2	510
"Who Stole the Wizard of Oz?"	4.3	520
"Soup"	4.5	740
"Cherokee Indians"	4.6	390
"Tuck Triumphant"	4.8	850
Wayside School is Falling Down	4.9	440
"The Civil War"	4.9	730

