

Readability in ESL¹

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This article reviews the literature critical of readability formulas from the perspective of their use in second language reading contexts. Relevant empirical research (Davison & Kantor 1982; Johnson 1981; Blau 1982; Floyd and Carrell 1987) which casts doubt on the efficacy of syntactic simplification/adaptation is also reviewed. The paper argues against using readability formulas not only as guides to text production or adaptation/simplification, but also as measures of the difficulty of naturally occurring texts. The paper argues that valid measures of a text's comprehensibility require consideration of textual phenomena at the level of discourse, of syntactic and lexical choices other than those which affect length, of logical/rhetorical ordering of ideas and progression of topics and comments, as well as — most importantly — background knowledge presumed of the reader.

INTRODUCTION

ESL reading teachers and materials developers need reliable ways of matching the difficulty of second language reading materials to second language readers. If materials are too easy, students are unchallenged and bored, and no learning occurs; if materials are too difficult, students are frustrated and withdrawn, and again no learning occurs. Optimal learning occurs when the difficulty levels of instructional reading materials are appropriately matched to the capabilities of the readers. The problem lies in how to achieve this ideal.

To those who have looked to, or are contemplating looking to, readability formulas and other text-based criteria (e.g. T-unit measures and other syntactic and/or lexical criteria) as a way of measuring the difficulty or comprehensibility of reading materials, the purpose of this article is to sound a cautionary note and to suggest other factors which can and should be considered. Readability in the narrow sense of readability formulas will be considered first, followed by consideration of readability in a broader sense. The paper will conclude with some recommendations of things that ESL reading teachers and materials developers can do to better match the reading difficulty of materials to the abilities of ESL readers.

READABILITY FORMULAS IN ENGLISH AS A MOTHER TONGUE

Readability formulas, which have been used more widely in first language

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¹Paper presented at the Twenty-first Annual TESOL Convention, Miami, Florida, April 22—25, 1987.