Utilizing the Lexile (Reading Comprehension) Index for Improving English Reading Comprehension Skills

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1. About the Lexile (Reading Comprehension) Index, which can be assessed through the TOEFL Primary® and TOEFL Junior® exams

LEXILE is a numerical value that represents both the reader's "reading comprehension ability" and the "difficulty level" of a book. It was developed by the U.S. company MetaMetrics and is calculated based on "sentence length" and "word difficulty." The "word difficulty" is determined using a proprietary corpus of 5 million words developed by MetaMetrics. When a reader reads a book with the same LEXILE score as their own, they can comprehend about 75% of the content. For every 250L difference, the comprehensible portion changes by about 25%. For example, if your Lexile score is 550L, you can understand nearly 100% of a book rated 300L, while you would comprehend

about 50% of a book rated 700L.

As of January 2023, approximately 600,000 books worldwide have been assigned a Lexile score. Including newspapers and websites, this number exceeds 100 million. You can find a book's Lexile score on the Lexile website by searching by title, author, or ISBN. Lexile scores are also provided on publishers' websites and e-commerce sites like Amazon.

Lexile scores are included in the score reports for TOEFL® tests. For younger students, the TOEFL Primary® measures scores ranging from BR-420L to 750L.

TOEFL Primary®	BR-420L ～ 750L
TOEFL Junior®	570L ～ 1160L
TOEFL iBT®	755L ～ 1640L

*BR (Beginning Reader) is located under 10L

2. Advantages of Using General English Language books (Authentic Readers)

General English Books (Authentic Readers) are English texts that native English speakers actually read. These include books, newspapers, magazines, and other reading materials found in English-speaking countries, covering a wide range of genres and audiences, from academic texts to

comics. In contrast, ELT (English Language Teaching) Readers and Graded Readers are books specifically designed for learners of English as a second language. These books have restrictions on expressions and vocabulary, making them easier for second language learners to read.

2.1 The Importance of Input

In English learning, the amount of input is considered important. Dr. Krashen, who proposed the Input Hypothesis, stated that language learning

requires a large amount of comprehensible input. Hearing the phrase "large amount of input" might sound overwhelming, but it becomes easier to

engage with something if it's something you like. There are various genres of books, and you can choose according to your interests. As you read, you can learn new things and encounter topics you didn't know about, which encourages you to read more and more. However, if the book you choose is too difficult or too easy, it might not fully satisfy your curiosity. By using the Lexile system, you can find out which books are understandable for you and select the appropriate one. If you choose a book with the same Lexile score as your own, you can comprehend about 75% of it. Even when you come across unfamiliar words, you can continue reading without constantly looking them up in a dictionary, allowing you to acquire new vocabulary naturally. Additionally, by choosing books around 100 points above or below your Lexile score, you can read more smoothly or challenge yourself to learn even more words.

2.2 The Lack of Input in Japan's English Education

Japan, being surrounded by the sea, has fewer opportunities to interact with foreigners compared to Western countries where countries are connected by land. Although many foreigners live in or visit large cities, there are still few chances to use English in daily life. In this kind of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) environment, where it is not necessary to use English to get by, opportunities to encounter English are limited, and the amount of English input is very scarce.

For students, the greatest exposure to English likely comes from English classes at school. However, textbooks and similar materials designed for English learning do not provide sufficient input. It is said that in order to see the benefits of reading English books, one needs to read over 100,000 words. Over six years of middle and high school, this would mean reading about 1,400 words per month. However, a middle school textbook contains only about 300 to 400 words per unit. The amount of input for Japanese learners of English is very low, and it has been pointed out that the total reading input by the time they enter university is less than what they would gain from reading a single general English book. For reference, even the shortest Harry Potter book contains about 70,000 words.

2.3 Differences Between Textbooks and General English Books (Authentic Readers)

The government-approved textbooks used in Japan are coursebooks designed for learning grammar. They contain many new words per page, and unfamiliar grammar is always included. In other words, not only is the input limited, but they are also not books that can be easily understood. On the other hand, with general English books, by selecting a book according to age, preferences, and Lexile level, readers can encounter a lot of authentic vocabulary and expressions. These books are not created for English learning, but rather to meet the interests and curiosity of children in English-speaking countries like the U.S. and the U.K.

However, just reading general English books does not necessarily lead to significant improvement in English skills. The way textbooks and general English books are used is different. Textbooks are for intensive reading, meaning they are used to read slowly and thoroughly while learning new

things, such as vocabulary and grammar, and solving exercises. General English books, on the other hand, are chosen based on personal interests and are read at a faster pace, providing rich input at a comprehensible level. Therefore, it's not that one is better than the other; it's important to use both in a balanced way according to your purpose.

2.4 Is Reading General English Books (Authentic Readers) a Learning Method for Students Who Excel in English?

The benefits of reading in English have been extensively researched, and it has been shown to improve reading comprehension, writing skills, and motivation, among other things. General English books range from those for babies who cannot yet speak to scientific journals for adults. Even Japanese students who cannot yet speak English will surely find suitable books. The easiest books include picture books where only one English word appears on a two-page spread. The illustrations on each page and the pictures throughout the book help with comprehension, so this reading method is not limited to students who are already proficient in English.

Below is the result of a survey conducted on junior high school students in Kyoto who participated in three months of reading using the Lexile system. The students were divided into high and low performers based on their English test results, and they were asked about their perceptions of reading in English. More than 80% of the students overall answered that "Reading English books was fun" and "Reading English books was educational." Although many students found "Reading English books" difficult, a similarly high number of students also stated that they generally understood the content of the English books, indicating that they were reading at a level that, while challenging, was still comprehensible. Additionally, among the lower-performing students, there seemed to be more reliance on illustrations to help them visualize and understand the content.

	Upper (44)	Lower (41)	Overall (85)
Reading English books was fun.	84.1%	78.0%	81.0%
Reading English books was educational.	90.1%	90.0%	90.6%
Reading English books was difficult.	90.1%	85.4%	88.2%
I generally understood the content of the English books.	90.1%	90.2%	90.6%
I could understand the approximate content of the book only in English.	47.7%	48.8%	48.2%
The illustrations helped me to understand the contents.	77.3%	90.2%	83.5%
I looked up expressions I didn't understand in a dictionary, etc.	31.8%	22.0%	27.1%

2.5 Why Choose Authentic Readers instead of Leveled Readers/Graded Readers?

In the process of learning English, we encounter various types of books. For example, textbooks, workbooks, and dictionaries. These materials are very effective for learning English systematically and in an orderly fashion. They are carefully designed to focus on specific grammar points, providing example sentences and exercises to help learners use them. It's not easy to teach junior high school students complex expressions that high school students learn, especially when they are not

yet proficient in English. However, considering how simple expressions gradually connect to more complex and detailed English through conjunctions and relative pronouns, there is no better set of learning materials than these books.

However, textbooks and workbooks lack "fun." With new expressions and vocabulary on every page and a limited word count, there are few opportunities to enjoy stories in English or to discover new things. After all, we want to read English using what we've already learned and, through that, feel excited, laugh at funny moments, and experience those heart-pounding thrills. There is nothing more enjoyable than gaining new insights or perspectives you didn't know before. To achieve this, we need reading materials (authentic English books) that are different from textbooks and workbooks.

Moreover, the feeling of being connected to the world can really excite students when they pick up a book. I saw an American ALT (Assistant Language Teacher) look at a book a student was holding and say, "I read that book when I was a kid." Both the ALT and the student excitedly talked about the book for a long time. The book in the student's hands was the same one that elementary and middle school students on the other side of the world were also holding.Authentic readers contain many expressions and words that you won't find in leveled readers or graded readers. These might be things that haven't been taught yet or might not be suitable for study materials, but they are expressions that children overseas use and hear in their daily lives. We want children to continuously

3. Introduction of General English Books (Authentic Readers) in Schools

Reading authentic English books is an effective way to gain a rich amount of comprehensible input, and by adjusting the level of the books according to the learner's stage, it is possible to engage with them regardless of one's strengths or weaknesses in English. Recently, it has become possible to read authentic English books online, and some schools have started purchasing annual licenses to use these books as supplementary materials in their English classes.

3.1 Choosing Books of Interest

Rather than reading the same book as everyone else, like in a textbook, students choose books that match their individual interests. Some students may read books about science because they like the subject, even if they struggle with English, while others may choose books on their favorite sports or athletes. Some may simply choose a book because the illustrations are cute or because the text is large and minimal. For various reasons, they start reading based on their own choices. By selecting books on topics they enjoy, learners' autonomy is enhanced.

Additionally, choosing books that match their level leads to personalized learning. If they choose a book with the same Lexile score as theirs, they can understand about 75% of the content. Students who want to read more fluently might choose a book with a Lexile score 50 to 100 points lower than their own, which would be easier to read. On the other hand, if they want to learn more vocabulary in an area they are interested in, they can choose a book with a slightly higher Lexile score to learn

many new expressions.

In the learning process, it can also be effective at times to read books assigned by the instructor or to have the whole class read the same book together.

With online digital books, it's possible for everyone to read the same book without having to purchase individual copies.

3.2 Time Spent on Reading

It might be a good idea to incorporate this as a regular activity at the beginning of class. By dedicating the first 5 to 10 minutes to reading, students can engage quietly, helping to start the lesson in a calm manner. When the lesson content is packed, shortening the reading time is a way to maintain the practice without overburdening the schedule. During reading time, you can check students' materials or homework, but it would be ideal if the instructor also participated by quietly reading a book along with the students or asking students who have finished a book for their impressions. This way, the instructor can also engage in the reading of authentic English books. Additionally, in cases where students finish tasks like writing assignments at different times, those who finish early can start reading.

3.3 Sharing the Reading Experience

It would be even better to share what you've read with others. By having the instructor ask questions about the content of the book and their impressions, they can gauge how much the student understood. Writing and submitting book reviews, or displaying them, allows for interaction with other students as well. Introducing books from the perspective of "recommended books" or "easy-to-read books" could influence other students' reading choices. Additionally, having students give speeches to introduce books or engage in discussions with peers who have read the same book could also be beneficial.

4. On Assessment

4.1 Writing Book Reviews, Presentations, and Engaging Attitudes Toward Reading

How can we assess reading authentic English books (authentic readers)? With the internet, we can find out the difficulty level, number of pages, and word count of each book. It's possible to evaluate based on the number of words or books read over a certain period, or by having students read a specified number of books from a set difficulty level.

However, since each student reads different books and their reading styles vary—some students read slowly, aiming to fully understand everything, while others skim to grasp the general content—it's difficult to establish a uniform evaluation standard to assess knowledge and skills for the reading activity itself.

If reading is done solely for evaluation, some students might not find it enjoyable. So, one idea is not to make reading the sole objective. For example, by writing book reviews or presenting about the books they've read, students can share

and communicate what they've learned with their peers, giving more meaning to the act of reading. These activities can also be used for assessment. We also want to actively evaluate students who engage enthusiastically in these activities or in reading itself to motivate them further.

4.2 Data Analysis: Reading General English Books (Authentic Readers) and TOEFL Primary® Reading Scores Growth

We compared the input from reading authentic English books with the growth in TOEFL Primary® reading scores. The subjects were 84 second-year junior high school students, and throughout the year, we provided 5–10 minutes of reading time at the start of almost every English lesson. The students chose books freely, without any restrictions based on Lexile levels, though we did explain what Lexile levels are. We divided all 84 students into groups based on how much their reading scores improved after one year: those with an improvement of 3 points or more, those with an improvement of 1 or 2 points, and those with less than 1 point. We also showed the number of books and words read by each group. Additionally, we divided the students into upper, middle, and lower groups based on their reading scores before the reading initiative, and then further divided them into three groups based on their score improvements after one year.

Overall, we found that the more students' scores improved, the more books and words they read throughout the year. The number of words read by students who showed strong score improvement was nearly four times that of students who showed little improvement. Looking at the data broken down by initial reading scores, we can see that in every group, students who read more words experienced greater score improvement after one year. This suggests that students who improve their English abilities are those who engage in a lot of reading. If we look only at the upper group, we see that students with more significant score improvement actually read fewer books but more words. This suggests that for students whose reading scores are improving, books with a higher word count may be more effective. Notably, the students in the lower group who improved their reading scores by 3 points or more read an average number of words higher than any other group. It's astonishing that students who were still struggling with English found enjoyment in freely chosen authentic English books. Perhaps they discovered a charm in these books that textbooks don't offer.

	Score growth	Number of people	Number of books	Number of words
Overall (84) Average 106.39	3 or more	24	15.7	81146.5
	1 or 2	32	15.2	55086.8
	less than 1	28	14.8	26075.7
Top (24) 108 and above Average 108.8	3 or more	8	14.5	88053.9
	1 or 2	9	15.2	49654.2
	less than 1	7	15.4	36149.6
Median (34) 106〜107 Average 106.56	3 or more	6	17.2	56214.7
	1 or 2	11	14.6	50824.2
	less than 1	17	15.6	26535.4
Lower (26) Less than 106 Average 103.92	3 or more	10	15.8	90579.6
	1 or 2	12	15.8	63068.6
	less than 1	4	9.8	6493.0

5. Practical Examples

5.1 Enjoyable and Sustained Reading of General English Books (Authentic Readers)

・The Goal is Harry Potter !

With the motto "Let's read Harry Potter in the original," we provide plenty of opportunities to engage with English without feeling overwhelmed. Harry Potter has a Lexile level of 700L and contains about 70,000 words. In the TOEFL Primary® test for second and third-year junior high school students, some students even reach a Lexile level of 750L.
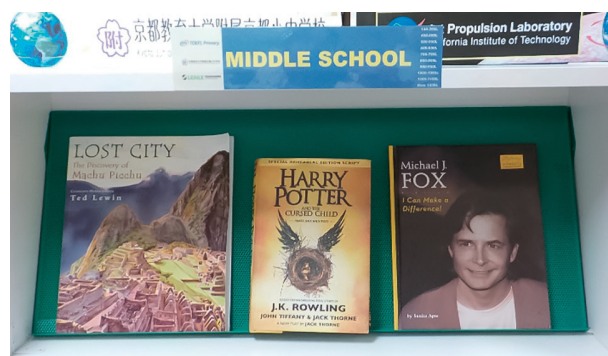
• Enhancing Autonomy by Choosing Books Yourself

Even if students are in the same class or grade, their English abilities may vary.

While textbooks are good for learning new expressions and vocabulary, it's important for each student to choose a book that suits them in order to enjoy reading in English. Students are encouraged to pick books from different levels that they find interesting and challenge themselves to read them.

• Introduction in the English Newsletter

In the English department's newsletter, we occasionally feature articles about

reading authentic English books, introduce students' book reviews, and highlight the number of books read by students who have read many.

• Setting Up a "Recommendation Corner" with Teachers' and ALT's Suggestions and Themes

In the English classroom's library corner, we hold book fairs featuring books related to seasonal or current topics, as well as recommended books from English teachers and ALTs. For example, when the Mars Rover was in the news, we displayed books about space and a biography of Neil Armstrong, and we also showcased books that the ALT loved when they were in elementary school. (The photo shows the ALT's recommendation, the Junie B. Jones series.)

5.2 Creating a Reading Environment

- Approximately 2,000 authentic English books (authentic readers) from Scholastic are placed in the English classroom.
- Books are available for loan to students from grades 5 through 9 during recess and after school.
- Some grades participate in extensive reading depending on the time of year and students' abilities and interests.
- Scholastic's online books are available as supplementary readers, with licenses purchased for students to read on their school computers or home devices.

5.3 Approaches to Reading

- The first 5–10 minutes of class are dedicated to reading time.
- When selecting books, students are free to choose according to their interests while checking Lexile levels.
- Teachers also read alongside the students during reading time.
- If necessary, teachers respond to questions and inquiries.
- According to a survey, over 80% found reading "fun," and over 90% felt it was "educational."

5.4 Lending System and Cards

- Students are encouraged to choose books they can read without frequently using a dictionary, using Lexile levels as a guide.
- A specialized lending card system is used for borrowing books.
- Students record the content of the book, the number of words, and the Lexile level on a feedback card.
- Upon returning a book, teachers ask about interesting scenes or difficult parts in an interview.
- Instead of using the library system, students use paper lending cards to get a sense of how many books they've read.
- Teachers review the lending cards to check book choices and progress, offering advice as needed.

5.5 Observations of Students

- Autonomous Attitude By choosing books themselves, students are highly motivated to engage in reading. They select books based on their interests or adjust the level depending on the difficulty they experienced with previous books. Some also pick books their classmates seemed to enjoy. While they sometimes relax and read during recess, during reading time, each student reads with high concentration.
- Opportunities to Encounter Real English
  The characters' dialogue includes expressions not found in English textbooks. However, these are phrases commonly used in everyday conversation in the U.S. and U.K., and frequently

spoken by children and teenagers of the same age. Students sometimes puzzle over the meanings or ask teachers, learning practical, usable English in the process.

- Connections with What They've Learned in Science and Social Studies

When students read books on science or plants, they link this knowledge to what they've learned in other subjects or everyday life. They also seem to be reading specialized terms used in science by guessing their meanings. Graphic novels (GNs) are also popular among students.
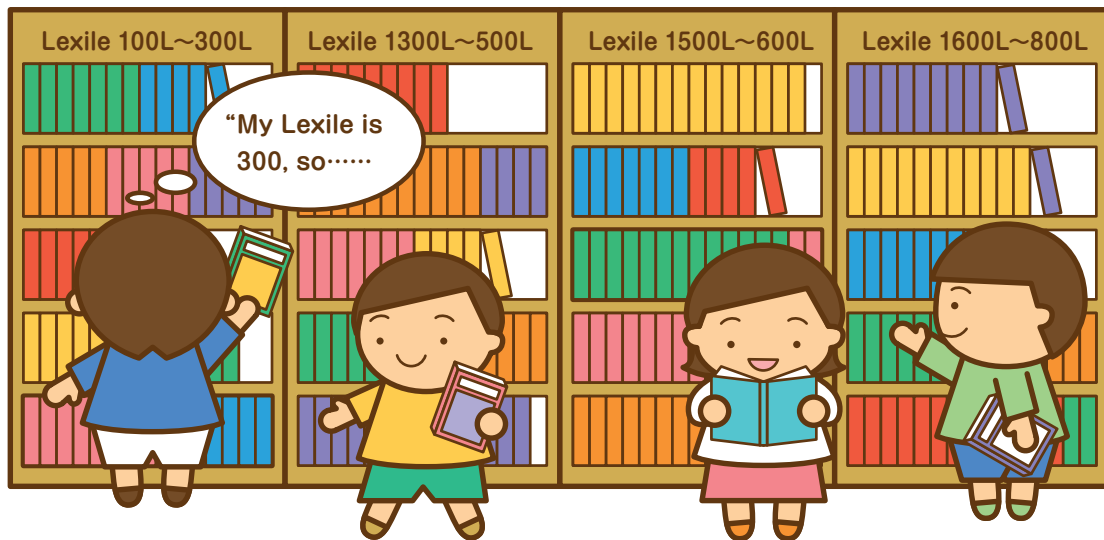
6. Conclusion

The greatest motivation for learning English seems to be the feeling of truly gaining the ability to use it. If students spend hours studying English every week without feeling any improvement, they may lose heart. It's similar to practicing baseball or guitar—when you can do something you couldn't before or do it faster, you can feel your growth and are inspired to keep going. So, when does one experience this feeling in English learning? I don't think it happens just from getting a good test score. I believe it's when, for example, you understand a conversation with a foreigner, you can read the

English on a box of foreign sweets, or you sing an English song well. When you achieve something using English, you feel happy and realize that your everyday English study is paying off. Reading "Authentic English Books" is one way to experience this sense of usefulness. Isn't it exciting to know that your daily English studies connect you to books read by people in the United States, the UK, and Australia? I hope many people will come to see picking up an English book as a door to connecting with the world.

memo

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