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The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and The Lexile® Framework for Reading

Bringing More Precision to Language Learning

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About MetaMetrics®

MetaMetrics, founded in 1984, is an educational measurement and technology company whose mission is to connect assessment with instruction. The company's distinctive frameworks for reading and mathematics bring meaning to measurement and are used by millions to differentiate instruction, individualise practice, improve learning and measure growth across all levels of education.

Countries around the world are striving to ensure that their citizens are educated well enough to compete globally and locally for the careers of the future. As Thomas Friedman rightly argued in *The World is Flat*, students graduating in today's digital age are competing with students all over the world. In addition to this goal of university and career readiness within each country, there is a growing concentration on the importance of students being proficient not only in their native language, but also in English, which is commonly referred as the "**Lingua franca**" of business, science and technology.

Through the years educators, publishers, researchers and policy makers have relied on two frameworks to help guide literacy and language instruction from the initial stages of reading (emergent or beginning reading) to the goal of university and career readiness. These two frameworks are the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and The Lexile® Framework for Reading, and both allow educators to gauge a learner's reading ability and thus target the learner at the right reading level. Research has shown a positive correlation between reading proficiency and the amount of time reading that students engage in throughout their instructional years (Cain, Oakhill & Lemmon, 2004; Cunningham & Stanovich, 1998; Jenkins, Stein & Wysocki, 1984; Krashen, 2003; O'Connor, Bell, Harty, Larkin, Sackor & Zigmond, 2002; O'Connor, Swanson & Geraghty, 2010). When learners are provided with texts that are appropriate for their reading proficiency levels, they exhibit higher levels of understanding of what they read. When learners comprehend what they read, they may learn more. Thus, the more time learners read targeted English texts, the more likely they will sharpen their English reading skills. Similarly, universities and business recruiters often utilise the frameworks to establish an applicant's reading and language ability, and thus predict if the applicant is capable of completing university work or performing well in a select occupation.

While the CEFR was designed to provide guidelines for the classification of achievement levels of learners of any foreign language, the Lexile Framework was designed as a measurement system specifically for English in such a way that learners and reading materials could be placed on the same scale—the Lexile scale. The CEFR provides a six level classification system in which language learner ability falls into: A1,

A2 (Beginner), B1, B2 (Intermediate) and C1, C2 (Advanced). CEFR levels describe "in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively" (Council of Europe (COE), 2001).

TABLE 1. CEFR LEVELS

A	Basic User	A1	Breakthrough or beginner
		A2	Way stage or elementary
B	Independent User	B1	Threshold or intermediate
		B2	Vantage or upper intermediate
C	Proficient User	C1	Effective operational proficiency or advanced
		C2	Mastery or proficiency

The goal behind the creation of the CEFR was to produce a common framework for evaluating the language proficiency of users of any language. As the popularity of the CEFR levels has spread throughout Europe and beyond (COE, 2014), publishers (particularly ELT publishers) have started to apply the levels to their graded readers. However, CEFR levels do not describe the level of text that these learners should interact with to grow their reading abilities. The creators of the CEFR maintain that the framework is just that—a descriptive framework for educators and practitioners to meaningfully build programs and materials upon and use to evaluate proficiency (COE, 2001). In other words, the CEFR levels are primarily meant to indicate what a language learner or applicant *is able to do* vis-à-vis the performance standards listed in Table 1.

Unfortunately, this leaves publishers in a position of being forced to make educated guesses about the level of text appropriate for their audience; they must rely on their own interpretations of the "can do" proficiency statements when applying CEFR levels to their texts. As a result, interpretations of the framework are often subjective and lead to inconsistent application of the levels across publisher series. In turn, educators and learners who rely on these graded readers for their language growth may

be confused when trying to compare graded readers with the same CEFR designation from different publishers.

By contrast, the Lexile Framework for Reading is a psychometric system specifically developed for matching learners with texts. With the Lexile Framework, both learners and texts are placed on the same measurement scale, allowing for inferences to be made regarding reading level, targeting, learning and benchmarking.

Whereas the CEFR is based on a subjective evaluation of a text, the Lexile Framework is an objective, quantitative system. Like Fahrenheit or Celsius, the Lexile scale is a vertical, empirical measurement scale. The Lexile scale measures both the learner's reading ability and the text complexity of a book on the same scale. As with temperature, people may interpret the same measure subjectively. For example, one can imagine that a temperature of 15 degrees Celsius would be viewed as hot in Iceland and the same temperature of 15 degrees Celsius in Nigeria would be reported as cold. The person reporting that they feel cool or cold is not subjectively wrong compared to the person who reports feeling warm at the same temperature. Both subjects in this example are merely reporting on the quality of sensation or the feeling, not the objective measure of the temperature construct.

To explore how the Lexile Framework could be utilised to enhance the CEFR in the promotion and development of English reading skills, a series of studies were conducted. To test whether the CEFR levels were consistent with increasing levels of text complexity, the text complexity of over 332 books, from four different publishers' graded reader series, were measured to see if, in fact, the Lexile levels were higher as you advance from A1 to C1.

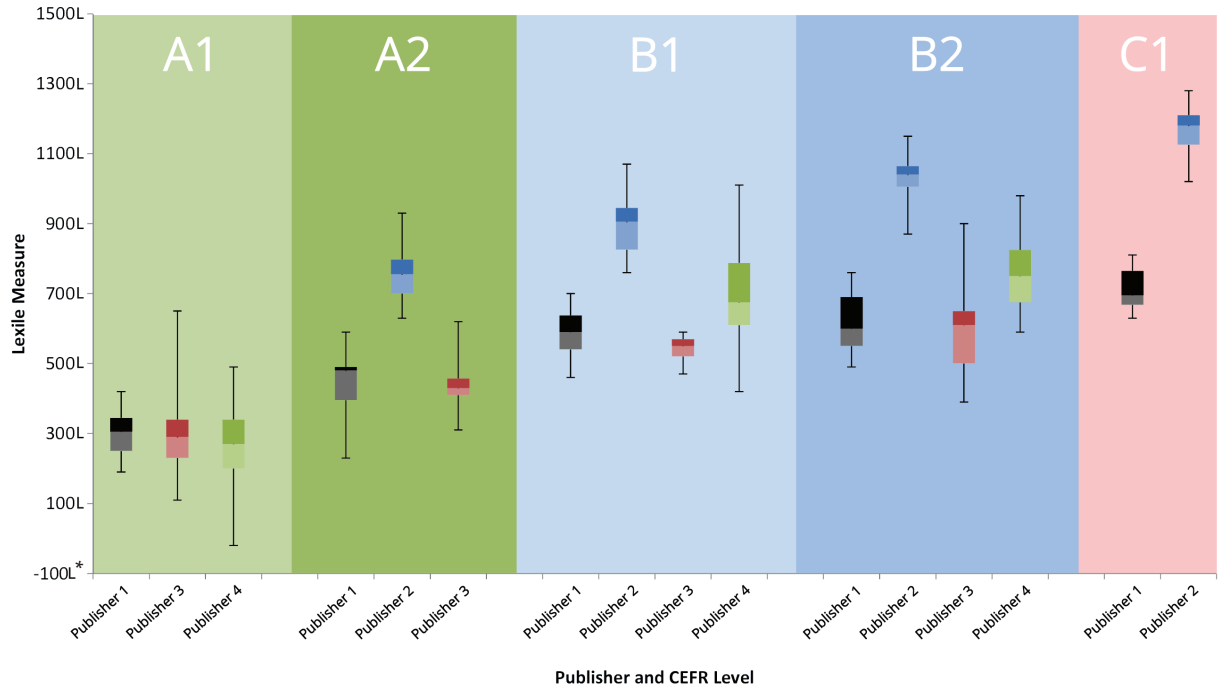
Table 2 displays the text complexity profile of each series, including the average Lexile measure and range of Lexile measures within the series, organised by publisher-assigned CEFR level. Within each publisher series, the mean and median Lexile measures increase monotonically across the CEFR levels. In other

words, the books developed by the publishers increase in text complexity as the corresponding CEFR level rises. However, it is important to note that, within and across the four series, graded readers at the same CEFR level have a rather large range of Lexile measures. At the CEFR A1 level, books ranged from below 0L to a high of 650L. While at the C1 level, the range extended from a low of 630L to a high of 1280L. As the data clearly demonstrates, the range of text complexity within a given CEFR level is quite large and creates a less than ideal situation for matching individuals to appropriate texts. The text complexity of what one publisher labels as A1 (650L) is just as difficult as what another publisher labels as C1 (630L). The box-and-whisker plots in Figure 1 visually displays the variability within and across publishers.

TABLE 2. LEXILE PROFILE FOR GRADED READER TEXTS BY PUBLISHER-ASSIGNED CEFR LEVEL

CEFR	Publisher	*n*	Mean	Median	Min	Max
A1	1	14	300L	305L	190L	420L
	3	43	299L	290L	110L	650L
	4	25	255L	270L	-20L*	490L
A2	1	15	447L	480L	230L	590L
	2	26	754L	755L	630L	930L
	3	26	437L	430L	310L	620L
B1	1	28	588L	590L	460L	700L
	2	30	893L	905L	760L	1070L
	3	8	540L	550L	470L	590L
	4	26	701L	675L	420L	1010L
B2	1	14	616L	600L	490L	760L
	2	19	1031L	1040L	870L	1150L
	3	16	597L	610L	390L	900L
	4	11	763L	750L	590L	980L
C1	1	12	712L	695L	630L	810L
	2	19	1165L	1180L	1020L	1280L

FIGURE 1. BOX-AND-WHISKER PLOT OF LEXILE MEASURE DISTRIBUTION BY SERIES AND CEFR LEVEL



** For research purposes, Lexile measures are reported as negatives.*

Table 2 and Figure 1 focus strictly on the text complexity measures of graded readers with their associated CEFR levels. However, as noted earlier, the CEFR levels were originally developed to express what the learner was capable of demonstrating. Also previously noted, the Lexile Framework was built on a conjoint measurement model, which measured not only the text complexity of materials, but how well the learner could read. By measuring both reading ability and text complexity on the same scale, differences in how well learners can read and the reading demand of texts they are expected to read can be identified. To determine if the CEFR designations for books aligned with the CEFR designations for learner performance, analyses were done to examine student (learner) performance on actual tests that evaluate reading comprehension.

Among the international assessments that are linked to the Lexile scale, there are four assessments that have been mapped to CEFR levels. Table 3 displays the student performance across these tests in terms of CEFR levels and the associated Lexile measures. Like graded readers in a publisher series, student performance rises across CEFR levels. For example, examine the aggregate range and one sees that A1 goes from below 0L to 620L, A2 rises from 180L to 910L and at the upper end of C2 the range is from 1405L to 1595L. In terms of student performance, these ranges are well aligned to the reading demands of university and career readiness documented across a number of different countries. Whether in Seoul or Durham (England or North Carolina, USA), the threshold for university and career readiness tends to be 1200L and above. A CEFR learner range for B2 from our linking studies would be around 1000L to 1370L.

TABLE 3. STUDENT (LEARNER) PERFORMANCE BY CEFR LEVEL

CEFR Level	*TOEFL® Primary™* Test Reading Scale Score	*TOEFL® Junior™* Test Reading Scale Score	*TOEFL iBT®* Test Reading Scale Score	*TOEIC®* Test Reading Scale Score	Aggregate Range
A1	Below 0L to 175L	510L to 585L		510L to 620L	Below 0L to 620L
A2	180L to 700L	590L to 790L		625L to 910L	180L to 910L
B1	705L and Above	795L to 995L	945L to 1210L	915L to 1090L	705L to 1210L
B2		1000L to 1160L	1215L to 1370L	1095L to 1285L	1000L to 1370L
C1			1375L to 1400L	1290L to 1400L	1290L to 1400L
C2			1405L to 1595L		1405L to 1595L

Conclusion

In Table 4, student and text ranges have been combined. As one can see, student performance is higher than its associated text aggregate range (IQR) and aligns well with the reading demands of university and career readiness (1200L and above). However, the graded readers in general are too low and not demanding enough for the CEFR levels assigned to them. While the CEFR levels applied to instructional resources such as graded readers are intended to help and guide the learner through progressively more challenging text are on average meeting this need, they are not quite rigorous enough. The data indicates that this disconnect between test performance and text complexity does not prepare a person who is reading B2 graded readers (588L to 993L) and then expected to perform on tests and classes with reading demands in the 1100L to 1400L.

TABLE 4. COMPARISON OF STUDENT (LEARNER) AND TEXT RANGES

CEFR Level	Student Aggregate Range	Graded Reader Text Aggregate Range (IQR)
A1	Below 0L to 620L	230L to 340L
A2	180L to 910L	425L to 715L
B1	705L to 1210L	588L to 860L
B2	1000L to 1370L	598L to 993L
C1	1290L to 1400L	760L to 1200L
C2	1405L to 1595L	

To address and remedy this disconnect, it is imperative that publishers report a quantitative metric, like Lexile measures, in addition to the CEFR levels of their books and instructional materials. Simply knowing the CEFR level that a publisher has placed on a book is insufficient for determining the reading demand of a book. Lexile measures will ensure transparency within and across the CEFR levels and provide learners, teachers, researchers and policy makers with a tool that bridges texts and learners.

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