

READING MATERIALS VERSUS GRADE LEVEL: Is there a match?

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Abstract—Reading is a vital foundation of learning since the first levels of a person's education. Thus, in order to achieve mastery, practices are made with the use of reading materials in or out of the classroom.

Reading materials vary according to purpose and target readers. Teachers who utilize reading materials especially textbooks in the classroom and use it as instructional aid need to thoroughly evaluate the materials to be used in order to cover the competencies and required scope. Hence, there must be bases in selecting the materials to be used especially that the learners are also to take national achievement exams in order to assess their academic achievement.

This study then evaluates selected reading materials in the Grades 7, 8 and 9 under the K to 12 program. Readability and ease measurement tests are conducted to determine the mismatches and matches of the texts with the grade level they are taught. Salient features of the materials are also analyzed to improve and suggest strategies for the selection of materials and transcendence of the applied methods in the classroom teaching.

Keywords—reading materials, readability, K to 12, ESL, evaluation

I. Introduction

Teaching literature in the class is not an easy task. Though resources may be given and all materials to be used are easily available, its validity cannot be guaranteed by a single look. People have probably been concerned with readability since symbols were first used and recorded. The first recorded attempt to examine what we have come to call readability was, in fact, made by religious teachers (Klare, 1963).

Most of the literature language teachers teach comprises of short stories. The short story, an American art form, has long been a required component of the secondary English curriculum. Like most art, it requires an appreciative and trained audience for its complete enjoyment.

As Donelson and Nilsen (1989) observe, short stories "fit into today's penchant for hurry-up ideas, condensations, and instant gratification" (p. 301). In general the student should read level appropriate material. Obviously, 'appropriate' is a relative term and the student's reading level will change and advance as the student gets older and as their skills advance.

The level of material also varies depending on how they are read. If the learners are given a story or literary piece that is not specifically appropriate to their developmental level and level of comprehension, learning is hardly to occur. Successful analysis and internalization of the particular lesson will not be achieved. Therefore, making learners unable to be satisfied on the learning requirement

they need. Giving inappropriate literary pieces to the learners will defeat the purpose of the particular stories as well making the teaching time and effort useless.

A readability assessment simply tells teachers and parents where the literary materials are in terms of reading ease and potential, and provides an additional, more specific benefit with the child in the particular grade level it is supposed to be taught and used.

This paper then aims to show the appropriateness of the selected short stories presented in the Grade 7, 8 and 9 learners in accordance to the comprehension capabilities of that their grade level. Through this study, teachers, school administrators, and the students of each grade level be aware of how each of the selected short stories be helpful to them. Most of all, it will assess the appropriateness of the materials used.

Providing students with texts that are accessible and well matched to reader abilities has always been a challenge for educators. This study is focused on the selected short stories from Grade 7, Grade 8 and Grade 9 which are chosen randomly. All are from books found from K to 12 BEC (as indicated in the book.) Readability is an important aspect yet not the only considerations for effectiveness and validity of a text specifically a reading material for learners. It is not the only basis of checking the reading material whether it fit to the purpose upon utilizing it. This study imposes how readability tests may be done, how readability may be calculated and what it really measures. The readability of a text is determined by some other factors.

Low educational performance is the first major issue that the Philippine government should resolve although somehow it is recently improving. The quality of Philippine education has declined few years ago due to poor results from standard entrance tests conducted among elementary and secondary students, as well as the tertiary levels. The results were way below the target mean score. Using readability formulae, texts which in this case are the texts which are used in teaching in the selected grade levels, probable answers to classroom learning problems had arisen. Many English teachers don't get the desired learning outcomes from students and in need to discover the reasons.

This study aimed to evaluate the selected stories based on readability in accordance to the grade levels they are being taught and presented. Specifically, this study aimed to uncover the salient features of the selected short stories from each level; the readability scores of the selected short stories based on the readability formulae used; the readability test results revealing the matching of short stories to the particular grade level.

The results were determined whether there are lapses on the texts being used in the classroom which results to the inability to achieve the goals in learning the topic. With the issues stated above, the results may contribute to the development of the educational system in the country.

II. Methodology

Descriptive-mixed method was utilized in this study to get the numerical data and salient features of the texts used. This research required both qualitative and quantitative methods. Since the main variables of this study are the literary texts or reading materials, measuring their readability requires both numerical and content analysis to complete results. Using content analysis in the structure of the literary text, a brief observation from the literary material's structure as it was written in the source books was created. The researchers made a random selection of all the short stories in the source books for Grade 7, Grade 8 and Grade 9. In which for each grade level five stories were chosen.

Flesch Grade Level Readability Formula and Flesch-Kincaid Readability Ease were utilized to measure readability of the selected reading materials. The Flesch Reading Ease Formula is a simple approach to assess the grade-level of the reader. Primarily, the formula was used to assess the difficulty of a reading passage written in English. These formulae shows a result of the readability tests upon showing results of rates that corresponds to the ease based on grade level and age group of learners in a particular grade level. The Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level Score Formula is $(0.39 \times ASL) + (11.8 \times ASW) - 15.59$ where ASL stands for the Average Sentence Length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences), and ASW stands for the Average of Syllables per Word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words).

TABLE I

Corresponding Grade Level of Readability Test Score	
Readability test	Grade Level
0.5 - 1.4	1
1.5 - 2.4	2
2.5 - 3.4	3
3.5 - 4.4	4
4.5 - 5.4	5
5.5 - 6.4	6
6.5 - 7.4	7
7.5 - 8.4	8
8.5 - 9.4	9
9.5 - 10.4	10

a. Each readability test scores has a corresponding grade level

Flesch Reading Ease Formula is $206.835 - (1.015 \times ASL) - (84.6 \times ASW)$ Where ASL is average sentence length (the number of words divided by the number of sentences), and ASW is the average number of syllables per word (the number of syllables divided by the number of words). The tabulated results were interpreted using the table below:

TABLE II

Standardized Value for Reading Ease Results		
Reading	Ease Level	Estimated Reading
0 to 30:	Very Difficult	College level
30 to 40:	Difficult Fairly	13th to 16th grade
50 to 60:	Difficult	10th to 12th grade
60 to 70:	Standard	8th and 9th grade
70 to 80:	Fairly Easy	7th grade
80 to 90:	Easy	6th grade
90 to 100:	Very Easy	5th grade

b. results obtained will be interpreted by this standardized interpretation

III. Results and Discussion

To accomplish the goal of unfolding the intentions of this study, elements like plot, characterization, themes, figurative language used and the most pronounced features such as the theme and the setting were uncovered.

For the Grade 7, which is focused on Philippine Literature all the settings exemplify simplicity and tranquility of the way of life of the characters as depicted in a native provincial set up of the country along with a common theme of romantic young love and familial affinity. The literary materials extracted from this grade level are characterized by the use of Filipino-based names such as; *Ulam* and *Himig* emphasize the overall sense of the story, "A Cost of Smell". Influences of the Spaniards were also evident in the names like "*Maria*" and "*Leon*" of "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife" and "*Carmencita*" of *Maytime*". On the other hand, names of the native Filipinos were used in the selected short stories like "*Kiko*" of "My Brother's Peculiar Chicken", "*Labang*" and "*Baldo*" of "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife". Moreover, significant influences of the Spanish colony are evident in the plot, customs and traditions.

On the other hand, the texts found in this grade are distinct among the two other selected Grade levels. The main characters and the setting were introduced in the first paragraph of the selection. Whereas, Grades 7 and 9 short stories employ different technique of presenting the setting and main character by mentioning them randomly in either the first or in the middle parts of the story.

Grade 8 which is Afro- Asian Literature portrays the concept of goodness. It may be the battle against evil and the victory of goodness or just whole portrayal of doing right things, good deeds and moral values. Themes in grade 8 short stories revolve around the norms, values, and beliefs of the culture the story were taken. It also discusses the issues common countries share like the value of education, determination to achieve goals, courage and trust.

Grade 9, as focused on American Literature shows the concept of life and death and the choices made. Characters tackle deeper human issues like death, happiness and health. The themes in these literary masterpieces generally cater true issues humans experience such as; death, pessimism, hope, family and even the love, sacrifice and revenge.

The selected literary materials repeatedly used figurative languages such as personification, simile, hyperbole, allusion, imagery, and the like in all grade levels. Figurative languages in any literary form add up to the beauty and overall impact of the material. Figurative languages use words or expressions with meanings different from the literal interpretation. When writers use literal language, they state facts as they are. In comparison, figurative languages use exaggerations or alterations to make a particular linguistic point. It is very common in poetry, but is also used in prose and nonfiction writing as well. Writers of these texts employed the use of figures of speeches in the material. According to Naeem (2010) figures of speech are poetic devices which consist in the use of words and phrases in such a manner as to make the meaning pointed and clear and the language more graphic and vivid.

Short stories typically are short and are usually be read at a single sitting. Unnecessary words are simply omitted- they are luxury that short story writers cannot afford. In fact, in terms of its length, a short story should only consist of words ranging from 1000 to 4000. In contemporary usage, the terms short story most often refers to a work of fiction no shorter than 1000 and no longer than 20,000 words.

The calculations revealed that among the five short stories of Grade 7, the longest in terms of word count is "How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife" by Manuel E. Arguilla with total word count of 2, 723 words and 190 sentences. The second longest short story based on the word count is My Brother's Peculiar Chicken by Alejandro Roces with 2,038 words and 172 sentences. Furthermore, "Maytime" by Condrado V. Pedroche has 1,585 words with 106 sentences which makes it the third longest short story of Grade 7. On the other hand, "The Monkey and the Turtle" by Jose P. Rizal with the total word count of 1,258 words with 126 sentences makes it the second to the last in terms of length in words and lastly, "A Cost of a Smell" retold by Josefina P. Gabriel consists of 479 words ad 32 sentences is the shortest among the five selected short stories.

Moreover, Grade 8 short stories reveal that, "The Donkey Cart" by S.T. Hwang is the longest with 2,053 words and 139 sentences. The second longest short story is "The Happiest Boy in the World" by NVM Gonzales with 1,268 words and 66 sentences. Thirdly is "Why Tortoises' Shell is not Smooth" by Chinua Achebe with the total word count of 1,096 and 75 sentences. Among the five selected short stories from the Grade 8 textbook, the fourth in terms of word count is "The Peasant's Bell" retold by Kim So-Un with 914 words and 86 sentences and the shortest among them all is "Serungal" (A Malaysian Folktale) by Jeannette Faurot with only 489 words and 13 sentences.

Grade 9 short stories revealed that "The Happy Prince" by Oscar Wilde is the longest among the five selected short stories with the total word count of 3,313 and 170 sentences. "The Cask of Amontillado" by Edgar Allan Poe is the second longest story with the totalof 2,319 words with 234 sentences. "Discovery of a Father" by Sherwood Anderson on the other hand is the third longest short story with the total of 2,114 words and 169 sentences. "The Beautiful

Horse" by D. Paulo Dizon with 1,959 words and 189 sentences and is the second least in terms of word count and lastly, "The Last Leaf" by O'Henry with 1,585 words and 141 sentences revealed to be the shortest in terms of word count among the five selected short story of Grade 9.

According to the released K to 12 curriculum of the Department of Education, Philippine educational system must adhere to specified standards which aim to refine its pedagogy and craft competent students. It highlighted that in English subjects, students at the end of a particular grade level must meet the standards set by the standard specification.

The readability Grade Level of the selected short stories of grade 7, 8, and 9 were calculated based on Flesch Kinkaid. It was found that not even one of the selected Grade 7 short stories had reached its readability level; 'The Monkey and the Turtle' is for Grade 3; My Brother's Peculiar Chicken' is for Grade 4; 'How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife' is for Grade 5; 'Maytime' is for Grade 6; 'A Cost of a Smell' is also for Grade 6. On the other hand, only one from the selected short stories from Grade 8 leveled its readability for Grade 8 which is 'The Happiest Boy in the World'; while the others, not: 'The Pheasant's Bell' is for Grade 3; 'The Donkey Cart' is for Grade 4; 'Why Tortoises Shell is not Smooth' is intended for Grade 5; 'Serungal' is for Grade 15 or equivalent to 3rd Year College. The results show that all the Grade 9 short stories did not match appropriate Readability Level, i.e. for Grade 9; 'Discovery of a Father' is for Grade 4. The Last Leaf' is for Grade 4; 'The Beautiful Horse' is also for Grade 4; 'The Happy Prince' is for Grade 5; 'The Cask of Amontillado' is also for Grade 5. This shows that the readability level of the selected short stories are either below or above the average readability level of the intended grade level of the learners.

Therefore, all the selected short stories being presented to Grade 7 students were all below the readability of the Grade 7 and were highly suggested to be reviewed by the administration, including the teachers who use it, the curriculum makers and the publishers of the textbooks.

Similarly, the results obtained by Flesch Kincaid Readability Ease show that not even one of the selected Grade 7 short stories had reached the readability ease required for Grade 7; 'The Monkey and the Turtle' is 89% easy; My Brother's Peculiar Chicken' is 87% easy; 'How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife' is also 87% easy; 'Maytime' is 82% easy; 'A Cost of a Smell' is 81% easy. On the other hand, only one from the selected short stories from Grade 8 has made its readability level through the Readability Ease Range for Grade 8 that is 'The Happiest Boy in the World' with 69% easy; while the rest did not qualify the readability level. 'The Pheasant's Bell' is 93% easy; 'The Donkey Cart' is 87% easy; 'Why Tortoises Shell is not Smooth' was 88% easy; 'Serungal' is 59% easy. The result indicates that all the Grade 9 short stories were not within the range of the Readability ease that i.e. for Grade 9; 'Discover of a Father' is 91%; 'The Last Leaf' is 88%; 'The

Beautiful Horse’ is 80% easy; ‘The Happy Prince’ is also 80% easy; ‘The Cask of Amontillado is 70% easy.

Results also reveal that the readability of the literary materials are opposite to the expected score in the grade levels from which they are assigned to be taught. All fifteen (15) short stories did not meet the readability standard per grade level except the “The Happiest Boy in the World”. The readability score obtained were mostly lower; One was higher than the supposed level. This shows that the short stories selected for each grade level did not meet the readability requirement of the supposed grade level they are expected. The table below shows the summary of the findings.

TABLE III

Summary of Readability Results				
Assigned Grade Level	Title of Short Story	Grade Readability Level Score	Readability Ease Level	Remark
Grade 7	My Brother’s Peculiar Chicken	Grade 4	Easy	Mismatched
	How My Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife	Grade 5	Easy	Mismatched but still Readable
	A Cost of a Smell	Grade 6	Fairly Easy	Mismatched but still Readable
	The Turtle and The Monkey	Grade 3	Easy	Mismatched
	Maytime	Grade 6	Easy	Mismatched But still Readable
Grade 8	Why Tortoise’s Shell Is Not Smooth	Grade 5	Easy	Mismatched
	The Donkey Cart	Grade 4	Easy	Mismatched
	The Pheasant’s Bell	Grade 3	Very easy	Mismatched
	The Happiest Boy in the World	Grade 8	Fairly easy	Matched
	Serungal	Grade 15	Standard	Mismatched
Grade 9	The Happy Prince	Grade 5	Easy	Mismatched
	The Cask of Amontillado	Grade 5	Fairly Easy	Mismatched
	The Last Leaf	Grade 4	Easy	Mismatched
	The Beautiful Horse	Grade 4	Easy	Mismatched
	Discovery of a Father	Grade 4	Very easy	Mismatched

The table reveals that the materials are too easy for the learners if not too difficult that desired learning outcome will never be achieved. Too easy text leads to lack of challenge that leads to boredom while too difficult ones create frustration causing unwillingness to learn. In reality, this will only mislead the students of what they learn from what they should learn. Therefore most of the selected

reading materials from Grades 7, 8, and 9 provides low competency and knowledge to the students.

Of all the selected short stories from Grades 7, 8, and 9, only one matched its Readability Level while the rest were either above or below the average readability level and this is called Readability Mismatch. The mismatches make the students uneasy and perform below their competency level.

Klare (1963) has shown that students who read below their reading level would progress slower and will most likely retain on that level. However, he recommended that the reading level of the texts should be two years below the students’ reading level so that the texts are more comprehensible to the students. Furthermore, easier readability will more likely be appealing and understandable to the students than the harder ones. When the reading materials used by the students are advanced, majority of them will likely not be able to comfortably read and easily understand the texts, thus, gain little benefit from it.

Therefore, Grade 5 and 6 Readability Level could still be readable to Grade 7 students, Grade 6 and 7 Readability Level could still be readable to Grade 8 students, and Grade 7 and 8 could still be readable to Grade 9 students based on Klare’s study (1963). By applying these considerations, three of the five Grade 7 short stories were still readable by Grade 7 students including ‘How Brother Leon Brought Home a Wife’ with a Readability Grade Level and was readable of Grade 5 students, and the ‘Maytime’ and ‘A Cost of a Smell’ which both had a Readability Grade Level of 6 would still be readable to a Grade 7 student but, may still lack some important factors for Grade 7 students and the other two-‘The Turtle and The Monkey’ and ‘My Brother’s Peculiar Chicken’ are too easy for Grade 7’s readability.

Too difficult reading materials would make the readers be confused and frustrated, while too easy ones would make the learners unchallenged in understanding it. Difficult text would not be helpful because the lesson presented in the context is too difficult to understand(Gearson, D. K. & Harrolds, D. J., 2004). On the other hand, when a text is too easy, the quality of the comprehension would be at risk. Instead of helping the target reader to systematically be competent and level the readability, it would be too easy, and might keep the reader from improving(Friste, 1982).

If a text material is inappropriate and too easy to the target learners, the learners will acquire knowledge that is below their level. Therefore, the learning process will be behind the target learners need and should acquire.

Giving inappropriate literary pieces to the learners will defeat the purpose as well as making the teaching time and effort useless. Anonymous (2015) stated that “if a reading material is too difficult, the child becomes frustrated and discouraged; a reading material that’s too easy can be quite uninteresting. Knowing the learners reading level is key to matching him or her to the most appropriate yet, challenging reading material. The best way to grow as a reader is by reading text that is not too hard and not too easy, or what

teachers call the independent reading level.”Being aware that there is a wide range of reading ability within any grade or age group is very important to help teachers and parents select appropriate literary texts for their students and/or children according to its benefits.

Therefore, from the 15 selected short stories which consists of 5 short stories from Grades 7, 8, and 9, from Grade 7 has also found readable by the target reader (i.e. the Grade 7), were found to be incongruent in the Readability Level of their target reader-learners. The twelve (12) short stories did not meet the average readability level of the target Grade Level Learners were highly suggested to undergo reviews and revisions from the administration and/or those that have the power to do so. While the three other short stories were found to match the readability level.

iv. Conclusion

The Philippines’ current educational system pursues to increase the level of productivity and excellence particularly to potential undergraduates that can compete with the increasing demands of local and global matters. The Department of Education implemented the added two years in the basic education resulting to the nationwide implementation of the K to 12 curriculum.

Reading is a vital yet crucial macro skill taught in school. Through constant reading practices, the learners develop this macro skill. Texts that don’t match the readability level of learners will result in insufficient learning outcomes. More than the actual skill, it is also necessary that the texts are comprehensible to the readers. Aside from traditional paper and pencil exams and other types of assessment, the concept of precise and accurate measurement of the level of comprehension is moot.

Findings revealed that the salient features include the use of figurative languages to enhance the beauty of the reading material. Themes which incorporate young love and familial affinity are evident in Grade 7. Universal ideas like value of morals or good and evil for Grade 8. While Grade 9 short stories includes themes about life and death. Grade 7 short stories are characterized by the use of Filipino-based names and the significant influences of the Spanish colony customs and traditions are incorporated in the short stories. Grade 8 short stories presented the main characters and the setting in the first paragraph. Whereas Grades 7 and 9 short stories employ different technique of presenting the setting and main character by mentioning them randomly in either the first or in the middle parts of the story.

After several process of verifications and calculations of the short stories using the different formulae, the results were surprisingly negative. Majority of the materials did not match the readability level. The readability score obtained were mostly lower while one was higher than the supposed level. This shows that the short stories selected for each grade level did not match the readability requirement of the supposed grade level they are assigned to.

The results show that the materials are too easy for the learners if not too difficult that desired learning outcome will never be achieved. Thus, the study discloses that most of the selected reading materials from Grades 7, 8, and 9 provide low competency level to the learners.

Therefore, it is important for educators to devise methods and approaches to resolve the impediments relative to material selection. Instructional materials to be utilized should be adequate to achieve academic achievement of the learners.

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