French Levelled Readers Under the Microscope: A Look at French Levelled Readers and Their Efficacy in Measuring Literacy

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Context

The use of levelled readers as well as levelling procedures have been replaced by more authentic literary works (Hoffman et al., 2006) since the 1980's. Recently, levelled books were implemented in French and French immersion school boards to better respond to the literary criteria and to properly equip students in the reading process. The present study focuses on the validation of levelled readers from the GB+ assessment toolkit. This toolkit is comprised of 30 narrative or informative readers levelled according to text complexity.

Research hypothesis : Readers from the beginner levels should contain more frequent and transparent words as compared to more advanced levelled readers. Conversely, more advanced books should contain more infrequent words and opaque graphemes than books ranked within lower levels. This study will answer the following questions:

(1) Do readers within beginner levels contain syllables that are more accessible to the beginner readers?
(2) Do readers within advanced levels contain more complex syllables, thus requiring more advanced decoding and comprehension skills than books associated to beginner levels?
(3) Do readers belonging to lower levels contain more simple and common words as compared to the higher levelled readers?
(4) Do readers belonging to advanced levels contain more complex and less frequent words as compared to lower levelled readers?

Method

Syllabic complexity was measured by identifying the different syllabic structures present in each book while considering the number of syllables in each word. Each word was segmented into syllables as it would be pronounced orally by Franco-Ontarian speakers. "C" represents consonants and "V" represents vowels. For example, the word " table " would be divided as such : " ta " and " ble " = CV and CCV. The number of syllables in each word was quantified for each book. All data was entered in a matrix created for analysis in the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences software (SPSS) .

Other indicators used as criteria to measure linguistic complexity include: the number of pages per book, the average number of words per page and the number of words per book.

The frequency of occurrence of different word classes was also observed. All words were divided into 4 categories: articles and pronouns, verbs, nouns and adjectives. The percentage of occurrence was calculated in relation to the total number of words found in each book.

The type-token ratio (number of different words employed in each book) was calculated, as was the percentage of specific vocabulary in each book. The program 'Système Portable Pour l'Analyse des Données' (SPAD) was used to calculate these ratios. The percentage was then calculated on the basis of the specific vocabulary (SV) in relation to the total number of words (TNW) contained in books (VS ÷ TNW x 100).

References

Irene C. Fountas, and G. S. Pinnell, *The Critical Role of Text Complexity in Teaching Children to Read*, (Heinemann-Assessment Teaching Intervention Monitoring Professional Development, 2012), 1-5.

Irene C. Fountas, and G. S. Pinnell, *Instructional Level Expectations for Reading* (Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment, 2009), .268-284, Accessed February 9th, http://www.heinemann.com/fountasandpinnell/supportingMaterials/FountasPinnell_revdReadingTeacherArticle12_2012.pdf.

Irene C. Fountas, and G. S. Pinnell, *The FetP Text Level Gradient*, (Heinemann : Dedicated to Teachers, 2011), Accessed February 9 2014, http://www.fountasandpinnellleveledbooks.com/aboutLeveledTexts.aspx.

Data and Results: Number of Syllables per Word

Number of Syllables per Word
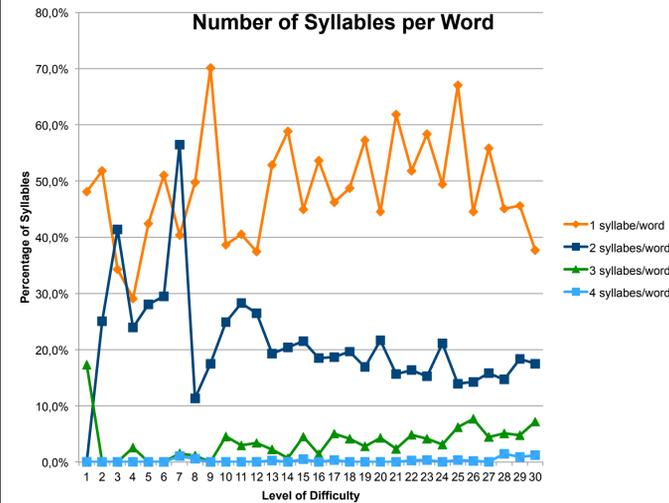
Data and Results: Most Frequently Used Syllable Types

Most Frequently Used Syllable Types
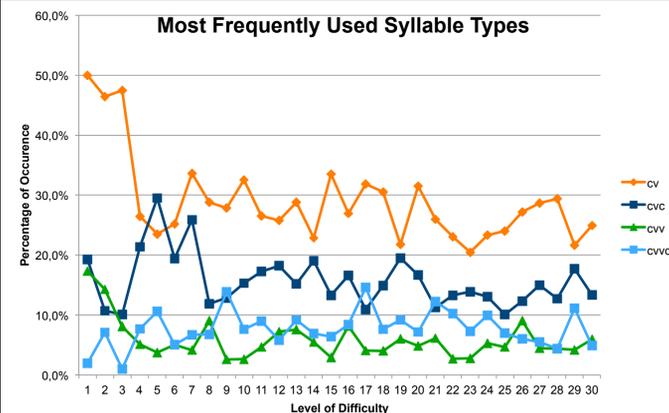
Data and Results: Number of Words per Book

Number of Words per Book
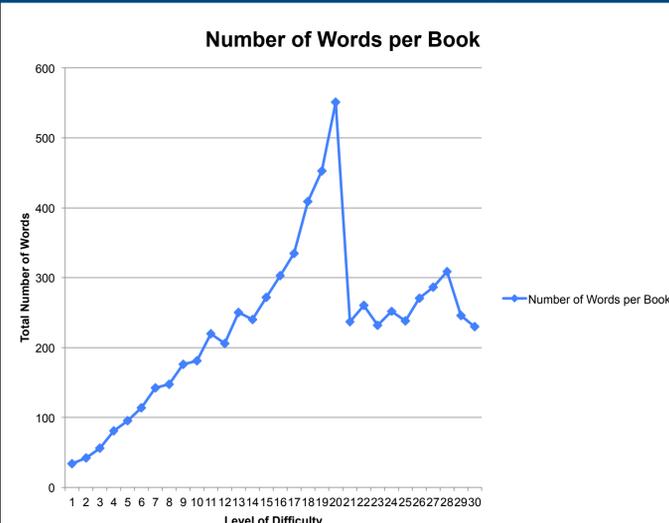
Data and Results: Average Words per Page

Average Words per Page
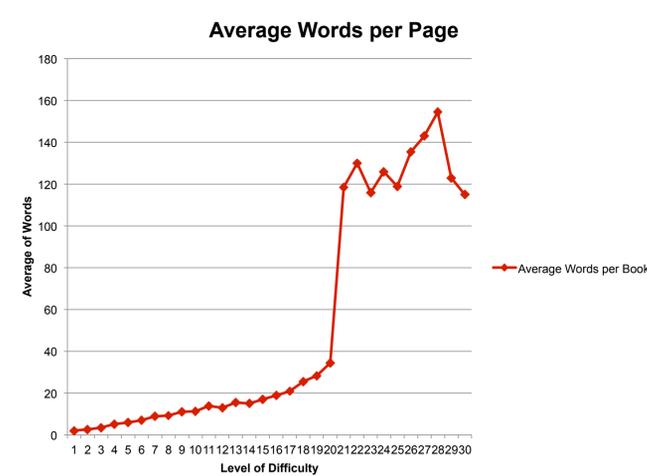
Data and Results: Percent Word Classes

Word Classes
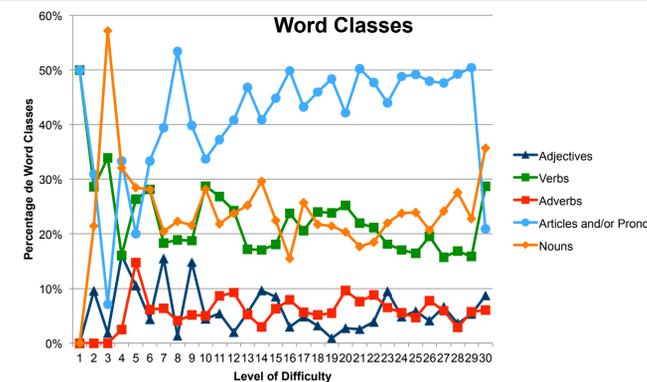
Data and Results: Specific Vocabulary

The higher the percentage of specific vocabulary in a book, the more diverse it tends to be. Books belonging to the more advanced levels should have a higher specific word count than books belonging to less complex levels, thus having a higher number of different words employed. A higher percentage of specific vocabulary indicates a higher level of complexity, as it is the student who must decode and understand many new words. Uncommon words and words which include a more complex spelling both intensify the level of complexity.

Niveau	Nombre de mots	Nombre de formes distinctes de mots	Pourcentage de formes distinctes de mots
1	34	10	29.4%
2	42	12	28.6%
3	56	14	25.0%
4	81	30	37.0%
5	95	35	36.8%
6	114	48	42.1%
7	142	50	35.2%
8	148	62	41.9%
9	176	64	36.4%
10	181	91	50.3%
11	220	101	45.9%
12	206	101	49.0%
13	250	122	48.8%
14	240	116	48.3%
15	272	126	46.3%
16	303	155	51.2%
17	335	174	51.9%
18	409	201	49.1%
19	453	171	37.7%
20	551	249	45.2%
21	237	123	51.9%
22	260	141	54.2%
23	232	137	59.1%
24	252	160	63.5%
25	260	131	55.0%
26	271	162	60.9%
27	286	156	54.5%
28	309	175	56.6%
29	246	140	56.9%
30	230	184	80.0%

Conclusion

- The results of this study confirm that monosyllabic words are the most commonly employed monomatic structure at all levels. Following, in respective order are disyllabic, trisyllabic and quadrisyllabic words.
- CV and CVC syllables are most abundant at all levels, followed by CVV and CVVC syllables.
- An increase in the number of words per book from level 1 to level 21 was observed. After level 21, the number of words per book decreased by approximately 300 words. This sudden drop can be explained by the fact that the books from level 21 to 30 contain only 2 pages, whilst the other levels contain an average of 16 pages. Books contained in levels 21-30 are informative in nature and report specific historical facts while books from levels 1-20 are narratives.
- Books belonging to advanced levels contain more words per page than beginner level books. Contrary to what is expected, levels 29 and 30 manifest a drop of about 32 words per page. The books contained in the more advanced levels of the GB+ assessment toolkit contain a large amount of factual information. This being said, there are fewer words, but the words utilized appear to be more complex.
- Results indicate that there is a higher percentage of occurrence of articles and pronouns (40 to 50% of the words in books). This finding is not surprising seeing as determinants and pronouns are usually the class of words that are the most frequently used in the French language, both oral and written.
- Results indicate that books from the higher levels are more complex seeing as they have a higher percentage of distinct word forms, thus allowing a better assessment of phonological decoding skills in children.

Limitations of the Study and Future Directions

This study did not take into account the spelling transparency, that is to say, the degree of correspondence between spelling and pronunciation of the language (written versus oral).

In future studies, it would be beneficial to consider the transparency of spelling words. A parallel study with the intervention GB+ toolkit is currently under progress. In this study, particular attention to the specific vocabulary used in addition to the consistency between the levels of the intervention kit and assessment GB+ toolkits is being analyzed.

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