

CASE STUDY:

Lexiles Go Varsity: North Carolina High School Uses The Lexile Framework for Reading to Help Students Build Literacy Skills



Lexile: Matching readers to text

High school educators have long been tireless in their efforts to improve student reading abilities, and now they no longer fight alone. With studies showing that as many as 40 percent of college freshmen require remedial reading/writing instruction, high schools must increase their focus on building literacy skills. At Chatham Central High School in Bear Creek, N.C., The Lexile Framework® for Reading is the basis for a newly designed class for freshman students who need additional instructional support for building reading abilities.

Chatham Central High School is one of four high schools in the Chatham County School District, a predominantly agricultural area in the heart of North Carolina. Although the county is close to Raleigh and Chapel Hill, it is distinctly rural, with only one-fifth of its population residing in the county's four towns. While more than 80 percent of Chatham Central's students meet achievement expectations, school administrators are determined to increase that percentage. They believe that improving students' reading and writing abilities are the keys to reaching 100 percent.

Finding Help for Secondary Students

In searching for a tool for monitoring student improvement, Principal Mitchell Stensland turned to the Lexile Framework. "I was sent to a conference on a fact-finding mission to learn about reading improvement programs for secondary students," Stensland recalled. "The answer was very few programs are available for teaching reading to high school students. Then I learned about Lexiles. The state of North Carolina has been using Lexile measures in middle schools for a number of years, so the kids came to high school with a Lexile score."

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The Lexile Framework provides a common scale for matching reader ability and text difficulty, enabling teachers and parents to choose materials that can help to improve student reading skills and monitor literacy across the curriculum and at home. Recognized as the most widely adopted reading measure in use today, Lexiles® are part of reading and testing programs at the district, state and federal levels. More than 100,000 books and 80 million articles have Lexile measures, and all major norm-referenced tests can report student reading scores in Lexiles.

Chatham Central started the school year armed with Lexile measures collected from three Scholastic Reading Inventory assessments that the students took the previous spring. Based on that information, a special class was created targeting the students with the lowest scores. The goal was to accelerate their reading growth by 25 or more Lexile levels. For those 25 students, a conventional semester of freshman English was divided into two separate semesters. During the first semester, students took a course entitled "Introduction to Literary Studies," which focused on improving reading comprehension. The second semester was devoted to the balance of the freshman English curriculum.

The program is designed to address the needs of the students reading at the lowest levels, providing them with a clear understanding of what reading comprehension is, and with strategies to achieve targeted comprehension levels. It also provides an empowering environment for students who are exceptional and non-mainstreamed, enabling them to read content at their own Lexile level and discuss with the rest of the class.

Reaching Unwilling Teens With Lexiles

"Reading has always been this great mystery; some kids excel and some kids don't," said Stensland. "The students never really understood how to improve except by reading stuff they hate, which they won't do. But when you show a group of 14-year-olds how much a 900-Lexile-level person earns versus a 1500-Lexile person, they want to make that larger salary, and that is a powerful motivator."

Providing reluctant readers with engaging materials is key to motivating them to read so the high school relies on EBSCO databases for articles. Lexile measures are available for all EBSCO articles. "Teachers did an interest survey the first day of school, and then students used their Lexile measures to search for articles of interest. It's student-directed education," he said.

Teachers monitor what the students are reading through a software program that allows access to all the classroom laptops. Inline Reader/Writer, a Web-based software program being piloted at Chatham Central, tracks each student's reading performance using vocabulary questions and other closed items, and reports how long it takes a student to read and comprehend an article. This helps ensure that students are reading at a level that's challenging without being too difficult.

Chatham Central piloted the new freshman English class in 2004 using the work of Cris Tovani, author of "I Read It, but I Don't Get It: Comprehension Strategies for Adolescent Readers," as a model. While many of Tovani's teaching tips proved valuable, Chatham educators wanted the workshop format to include a way to have students at different reading levels learning the same content. "While teachers help one student at a time to decipher text, the rest of the class gets bored, which can lead to discipline problems," said Stensland. "Now everyone's reading, and everyone can discuss."

Students who had been indifferent to reading instruction are making headway in the class. Sachi Denison, team teacher for the class, told of one student in particular who exemplifies the impact of the Lexile-driven curriculum. "Charles isn't a motivated reader and has been generally uninterested in class assignments. However, when we assigned an independent reading article project, he was interested in reading something that was somewhat above his level, and six pages longer than the required three-page minimum. He wanted to read, to do the work, and repeatedly asked if it was 'okay' for him to read an article from a higher Lexile rating."

That enthusiasm paid off when Charles earned a 92 on the project—an unusually high score. "His interest did not flag, and he regularly discussed the topics he was learning with other students and me," she said. "He also turned it in on time, which tells me that he was interested enough to stay on task and concentrate, which had not been one of his strongest points."

Aside from reading scores, the Lexile-based curriculum has given students new enthusiasm for reading. "The students love to see their 'words read' score go up, and they constantly compare who read the most, what their score correct was, and how many articles they read in a day," said Denison. "They like the fact that the articles they are reading are 'just right' for them."

To motivate students to read, the school launched its "Reading Riches" program. Students who read at least one million words from well-targeted text during the school year earn the title of "Reading Millionaire."

Stensland added, "If you visit the class, you'll see students who are reading every day, and they actually like it. Using Lexiles allows students to understand what reading comprehension is. It gives them a measurable goal to work toward and demystifies reading. Ninth-grade students can be really brutal to teach if you don't figure out how to capture their interest. If you do capture their interest, they'll do somersaults for you."

He also said that while a class of lower-level learners is often expected to have a greater proportion of behavioral problems that has not been the case with the new section of freshman English.

Lexiles Ease Student Research Projects

The next step will be for the school to integrate Lexiles into its school library media center. "The greatest advantage of Lexiles in the library is that it narrows the focus for students without research experience. When a student walks into the library, he's looking for a Lexile range instead of a wilderness of books," said Stensland.

When presenting Lexiles to the English instructors and media center staff, Stensland was able to alleviate concerns that an assessment program would supplant the instructors. "One of the media center staff checked the Lexile score for Elie Wiesel's 'Night' and a children's picture book, and they were the same," he said. "It opened up a really good dialogue and showed that we can't take the professional out of the loop. The component that can't be measured by technology is the content. The professional is always the starting point."

With the positive response among students and teachers to the Lexile Framework, Stensland has plans to expand its use throughout the high school. "Our next step, which we're just beginning, is to have a Web blog for students who are reading similar articles so they can have threaded conversations. What we envision is you walk into a classroom and there's no sound except clicking and laughing."

For more information on Lexiles, contact us at 1-888-LEXILES or visit www.Lexile.com.

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Chatham Central High School is a small school of 490 students located in central North Carolina. Part of the Chatham County school district, Chatham Central serves a predominantly agricultural community.

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Benefits of Using Lexiles

- Level-appropriate reading keeps students engaged
- Reading comprehension and enjoyment increased
- Quantifiable goals motivate students
- Student improvement tracked and monitored



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