



## Readability scores and content in simplification of authentic text

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### ABSTRACT

The paper explores a more comprehensive approach to assessing text-level difficulty by combining quantitative readability metrics with qualitative analyses of content and context which help in reading comprehension and reading-for-translation. It compares two excerpts using eight readability scores formulas (Automated Readability Index, Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Coleman-Liau Readability Index, Smog Index, Original Linsear Write Formula, Linsear Write Grade Level Formula) to explore how topic, content, and context may be used as indicators of text-level difficulty. Using authentic texts, specifically interviews from *Humans of New York*, the paper aims to demonstrate that other (extra)linguistic features must be considered beyond the numerical scores provided by readability formulas.

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### 1. Introduction

The term *authentic text* used in this paper refers to texts which are not *pre-fabricated* (Ciorni & Dina, 2015) and not intended for learners or classroom exercises as they are not evaluated for a particular level of text difficulty by means of readability scores formulas. In other words, “an *authentic text* has not been produced for the purpose of language learning, but instead has been ‘created to fulfill some social purposes in the language community in which it was produced’” (Nunan, 1989: 54). Furthermore, Blue (2020) adds that the content which may be classified as authentic text in this sense, i.e., “text designed for a native speaker,” is not limited to text only but also includes TV advertisements, films and short films, news items, weather forecasts, announcements,

radio programmes, and podcasts, interviews, and songs. Widdowson (1990) argues that authenticity does not lie in the text but in the way speakers and readers make use of it, namely in their response.

Additionally, links between a language and its speech community are inherently dynamic and constantly changeable because language evolves to reflect and reinforce the changing social, cultural, and political realities of the people who speak it. Therefore, cultural and communicative competence is also relevant, and according to Ciornei and Dina (2015: 275) it means “understanding the social conventions of the target language speech community while preserving one’s own.” They also note that “learners can mimic the behavioral patterns of that community derived from the authentic text to a certain extent” (*ibid*). One view that encompasses the above-presented frameworks and definitions on authentic language can be attributed to van Lier who, in his interview given to Cots and Tusón (1994), refers to authenticity that crosses the boundaries of the classroom:

One of the things that’s always bothered me is that the classroom is regarded as an artificial environment for language. This is very common in the literature. You always read about it. Teacher talk is artificial and the kinds of questions and answers that are given are artificial, and in fact for some years there has been a trend to try and make the classroom look as little like a classroom as possible, to turn it into... not a classroom, and it seems to me that that is counter-intuitive, because people come to the classroom because it is a classroom, and you don’t make it more natural by pretending it is not a classroom. So there is a paradox there of naturalness. The classroom, for most students, is the place where they either become interested in learning or become uninterested in learning. That is the key of it. It is not a question of the naturalness of the language, because it has... it ought to have its own pedagogical naturalness, which does not have to be the same naturalness as the bar down the street, or the discotheque, or the beach, or wherever else people might use language. The classroom should be respected in itself as the place where people go to learn language and, therefore, its authenticity should not be compared to authenticity in other places (...) The classroom should give the students the curiosity and the sort of puzzlement to work with the language in their heads and to notice the language outside the classroom — wherever they see it, wherever they find it — to be busy with the language in some respect, especially in places where you only have 2 or 3 hours a week. It is foolish to hope that that is enough to do the job, that is, that the learning can be limited between the beginning and the end of the lesson. A lot of mental work has to go on outside the lesson. Therefore, it is of crucial importance to use the lesson as motivation, to motivate the students to be busy with the language when they are not in the classroom (Cots & Tusón, 1994: 54).

Authenticity is also defined differently in other fields. For example, forensic linguistics and stylometry examine texts for genuine authorship, sometimes analyzing features such as pronoun use. As an illustration, the presence or absence of the first-person singular pronoun may be studied as a possible marker of authentic authorship, though research is still inconclusive.

In language pedagogy, however, debates continue about the simplification of authentic texts. From a theoretical perspective on text modification, linguists have often raised arguments against use of simplified language features in materials designed for language learners or less-skilled readers, particularly with respect to language comprehension and sentence structure (Reed & Kershaw-Herrera, 2015; Zi, 2021; Long

& Ross, 1993). For instance, Long & Ross (1993: 29) argue that linguistic simplification remains the dominant approach to text modification in commercially published reading materials for second and foreign language (L2) learners. Spoken or written texts originally intended for native speakers are rewritten and redesigned so that they contain fewer idiomatic expressions, less complex syntax and low(er) frequency vocabulary items. A key criticism of this approach is that removing complex linguistic forms deprives readers or learners of the opportunity to acquire authentic language forms in literary and non-literary texts.

In terms of access to authentic texts for reading purposes, the digital age has not only expanded the access to content but also accelerated the creation of new words, a phenomenon unprecedented in contemporary language use (Crystal, 2015). Neologisms, blends and memes reflect both individual creativity and broader cultural trends (on *memetic drift* see Attardo & Đuliman, 2024: 13). These word formation processes can also serve as markers of personal style as language continues to evolve and change in the context of electronically produced text. Studying these features is essential for understanding both individual and collective expression, since simplifying language or content can have significant consequences – such as restricting freedom of expression in terms of personal style or usage preferences.

Moreover, according to Keskkä (2012) synonym replacement on a one-to-one word level is very likely to produce errors and automatic lexical simplification should not be regarded a trivial task. Finally, Keskkä concludes that “in order to evaluate the true quality of the texts, it would be valuable to take into account the specific reader” (2012: 1). Another challenge with simplification, especially lexical simplification, is that frequently used English words tend to be highly polysemous. Davies and Widdowson (1974) argue that replacing more precise and difficult words with simpler, more frequent ones can actually increase the difficulty of a text.

In the paper published soon afterwards, when referring to simplification of language and simplification of content, Honeyfield (1977) suggests that simplification may be avoided, as most simplified texts are produced using readability scores formulas that reduce word and sentence length and remove connecting words between sentences to make the texts shorter. However, this process often compromises coherence or a “genuine lack of it” found in authentic texts. This shows that simplifying a text can, at times, make it more difficult to understand than the authentic version. Parker and Chaudron (1987), for instance, highlight that simplified language tends to disrupt the natural redundancy (see Horning, 1979) present in spoken language, which can further affect (readers’ or listeners’) comprehension. They also reflect on dozens of experimental studies conducted on using written or aural monologic texts:

About a dozen experimental studies have been conducted using either written or aural monologic texts, usually of an academic nature, to test the comprehensibility of different modifications. Typically, their designs have involved the presentation of a ‘natural’ or ‘native speaker’ text to one group of L2 learners, and the presentation to comparable groups of equivalent texts that are modified in certain ways. Thus far, the accumulated results of these studies have indicated that linguistic simplifications such as simpler syntax and simpler vocabulary do not have as significant an effect on L2 comprehension as elaborative

modifications. Unfortunately, few of these studies have avoided confounding the categories, and their failure to investigate modifications of conversational interaction leaves many questions unresolved as to the possible origins of appropriate modifications in natural speech (Parker & Chaudron, 1987: 111).

In terms of linguistic data analysis, stylometry employs statistical insights into various features on authorship, including sign-level features, number of words, sentences, punctuation, average word and sentence length, syntax-based features such as passive structures, nominalisations, frequency of syntactic categories, lexical features such as lexical richness and *hapax legomena* (words occurring only once), frequency-based features or frequency of certain lexical items or syntactic patterns (Olsson, 2008). For instance, function words, due to their grammatical rather than lexical role, are frequently used effortlessly by speakers and writers. Their usage patterns can reveal dimensions of authorship and even the emotional and psychological states of and for participants in the discourse (Dale & Chall, 1948). As suggested earlier, the presence or absence of first-person singular pronouns can reflect the psychological state of the subject, with increased use often indicating self-focus or self-awareness (Pennebaker, 2013). The frequency and context of usage can indicate the writer's stance and the level of engagement with the reader or interlocutor whereas changing or simplifying pronouns may affect not only content but also comprehension.

In further text, taking these approaches into account, simplification of language and simplification of content in the reading and the reading-for-translation process will be elaborated using the theoretical frameworks provided by Crossley (2024), Ciorni & Dina (2015), Reed & Kershaw-Herrera (2015) and Honeyfield (1977). For this purpose, two excerpts from *Humans of New York* interviews will be used to illustrate why such texts may be observed as authentic texts.<sup>1</sup> The selection of texts in this study was guided by instructor's judgments with regard to text difficulty and reading-for-translation purposes. These excerpts have been used as exemplary texts and non-AI-generated materials that reflect genuine human experiences in the contemporary world.

## 2. Readability scores and reading-for-translation

When reading for translation in a language classroom, it is important to consider how the richness of a text's vocabulary influences students' translation, negotiation, and decision-making—both individually and collaboratively—as well as the significance of teaching grammar and facilitating adaptation. Reading-for-translation, defined as a preliminary reading process, is important for verifying comprehension of the source text and its references (Neveu, 2019). Moreover, the translation process enables instructors to assess students' general knowledge, their understanding of both shared and unique connotations, as well as their attitudes and values, regardless of the fact that the resulting translations might differ depending on the context or the historical period discussed (Kalajdžisalihović & Kovačević, 2019). What also needs to be taken into consideration is

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<sup>1</sup> Copyright granted by Brandon Stanton to cite examples from the HONY corpus for the purpose of this paper.

that more vocabulary-related knowledge is required to read authentic texts than previously thought. Whereas earlier research suggested that around 3,000-word families provided the lexical resources to read authentic materials independently (Laufer, 1992), Nation argues that 8,000-9,000-word families are necessary (Nation, 2006 as cited in Schmitt et al., 2011: 26).

The above observations show that simplification may assist in reading comprehension, depending on the purpose, but also that more vocabulary-related knowledge is required to read and translate authentic texts. On the other hand, simplified texts may affect reading comprehension due to unnatural syntactic patterns or unnatural redundancy (e.g., repeated antecedent) as opposed to natural redundancy found in authentic (spoken) language production (e.g., fillers, pauses, repetition of personal pronouns, conjunctions, etc.).

In terms of content creation, authors of simplified texts “depend on pre-defined word and structure lists” (Crossley et al., 2014). According to these authors, another approach is text simplification using traditional readability scores formulas which are based on word and sentence length algorithms. Readability testing has been used in assisting educators in selecting suitable books and texts for their students. By evaluating the readability levels of various texts, teachers, for instance, should be able to ensure that the materials they assign match their students’ reading skills (Reed & Kershaw-Herrera, 2015; Crossley, 2024). Existing studies primarily discuss authentic texts in relation to materials simplified and adapted for the FL classroom. However, they have largely ignored the challenges posed by older, content-based textbooks – written by native speakers – that are still used in modern content-and-language integrated (CLIL) classes globally. These particular textbooks require updating to ensure the language used aligns with contemporary standards of political correctness.

However, due to the increasing demands for a broader lexical coverage and knowledge of the (contemporary) world, a question arises if one should apply the same approach to artificially-generated texts, simplified texts and authentic texts with identical readability scores. Another important link with previous work is to extend the framework provided by Cummings (1981; 1989) on context and cognitive demand and the distinction between conversational proficiency and academic proficiency (Goodman & Freeman, 1983). Furthermore, authentic texts which have scored as *easy* or *very easy* to read by readability scores formulas may be classified as *easy* or *very easy* in terms of their applicability and integration in textbooks, while, at the same time, they may not be appropriate for a certain age and since readability formulas focus on a relatively limited number of [linguistic] features (Crossley, 2024: 139).

### 3. Applicability of the HONY corpus: language or content

This paper argues that authentic short texts, such as those found in *Humans of New York* (HONY), demonstrate that conventional readability score formulas are not inherently reliable indicators of a text’s comprehensibility. This is particularly evident when considering the complexity of a text’s vocabulary and content. The analysis shows that texts

already classified as simple and easy to read by these formulas (as results will demonstrate) cannot always be linguistically simplified further. Attempting to simplify the content, on the other hand, would change the text type and the intended message would not be conveyed. Furthermore, these texts challenge the common expectation that they would be unsuitable for advanced readers in a reading-for-translation exercise, whereas our findings suggest the opposite.

The two excerpts below (Text 1 and Text 2) serve as examples of authentic texts which can be effectively used for the purposes of reading-for-translation, reading comprehension, assessing vocabulary and knowledge of the world. The language content in the excerpts below is based on the topics such as: donating organs, race, gender, disposing of items, selling and buying in the digital age, ageing, health, cost of medical treatment, the role of the media and inter-generational trauma – the topics found in *Humans of New York* narratives, whereas the readability scores may not be a solid indicator of text difficulty and age appropriateness as can be seen from the examples below:

#### Text 1

I'd never given it any thought. But when my boss's husband got a kidney from a newscaster in town, it sorta became a local story. And I began to learn more about it. I found out that a kidney from a living donor can give someone more than twenty years of life. And there were 2500 people in Ohio on the waiting list. So after confirming that I'd still be able to drink, I signed up for the registry. Two months later I got an email saying that they'd found a match. They'd only say that it was a local man. But I was excited. I think I needed a little purpose in my life. I didn't have any children. I didn't have anyone to carry on my whatever. And I loved thinking that I could help someone in such a major way. Not everyone meets their donor. But since both of us agreed, a meeting was arranged for after the surgery. They sat me in a conference room at the hospital. I had no idea who was going to walk in the door. And when Tom walked in, I could only think one thing: 'Oh my God. I've given my kidney to Wesley Snipes.' He was really quiet, so I did most of the talking. But at the end he said: 'I only have one question. Why would you do this for someone you didn't know?' And I said: 'Why not?' After that it was like a light switched on. We were going to be friends forever. That's just how it was going to be. Tom became like a brother to me. He makes fun of me a lot, but he's also extremely protective. Not that I'd ever need someone killed, but if I did, I'd know who to call. Three years after the transplant I was diagnosed with breast cancer. It was a nasty kind. And I didn't have any family around. But Tom called my sister in Florida and said: 'Don't worry. I've got this. It's my turn to take care of her.' He took me to every single one of my chemo appointments. He kept me company the entire time. A few weeks after my treatment ended, I threw myself a 50th birthday party. At the end I gave a little speech. I was looking out at all the people I loved. All the people who'd helped me. And I couldn't even speak. I turned into a big sobbing mess. Tom got up from his chair and walked to the side of the stage, and grabbed my hand. And he held it until I could speak again. (*Humans of New York*, July 16, 2020)

## Text 2

My grandparents had a tiny house, but it was full of love. And there was structure. Breakfast was always at 8. Dinner at 5:30. And there was an expectation that this would happen every day. It created a buffer from the chaos in my home. It was never an official adoption, but I stayed over there as much as I could. My grandfather was an entertainer. He'd sit for hours on a bench outside the grocery store, and strike up conversations with strangers. He'd tell them how he served in the Navy for thirty years. And how he survived Pearl Harbor. He'd even been reported dead in the local paper. As I grew older, these stories became more detailed and more emotional. On the holidays he'd have a couple beers, and he'd sit with me, and he'd start crying. He'd talk about the things he'd seen and the friends he'd lost. He told me that when his ship was bombed at Pearl Harbor, one of his best friends was stuck in a stairwell, and he had to make a choice to leave him behind. I'd already moved away for college by the time my grandfather died. And my grandmother passed away soon afterward. It felt like I'd lost my two lifelines in the world. My mother cleaned out their house and took all their possessions, so I had little to remember them by. Then a few years ago I started researching my grandfather on the internet. It was coming up on his birthday, so I was searching for a little bit of connection. Maybe just an old crew member that he'd served with. But what I found made my whole world stop. An old Ebay listing came up. My grandfather's military jacket had been auctioned to the highest bidder. For \$62. It was like a punch to the gut. I felt betrayed. So much childhood trauma came swirling to the surface. I was scared to reach out. I didn't want to overstep or seem vulnerable. But I emailed the highest bidder – a woman named Deborah in California. We arranged to speak on the phone. And after a few minutes, both of us were crying. Her grandfather's uniform had been lost too. And she'd only bought the jacket as a way to feel close to him. Not only did she agree to return it, but she arranged for a group of local veterans to escort the package to the post office. It arrived on my grandfather's birthday. When I got married the next year, we set aside two empty seats for my grandparents. And I was able to wrap his jacket around one of the chairs. (*Humans of New York*, July 19, 2020)

When it comes to the content, the reader needs to be familiar with the references provided (e.g., Wesley Snipes, Ebay, Pearl Harbor) but also take into consideration that the translation of individual lexical items may depend on: (1) the context, (2) fact-checking (as in the case of Text 2 from which it is not clear from the content provided whether the narrator is a grandson or a granddaughter (who "wraps jackets around chairs"? "drinks beer"?, etc.), (3) being familiar with the author's tone ("Not that I'd ever need someone killed, but if I did, I'd know who to call"), i.e., syntactic, semantic, and context-bound categories unrelated to high word frequency. In line with van Lier's interview, authentic language use happens outside the classroom but the classroom should guide the learner, the reader, or the translator to think about language outside the classroom as well. At the same time, extralinguistic features should not be overlooked in the reading process although attempts have been made to develop different algorithms of reading comprehension related even to individual features such

as word age of acquisition, frequency, imageability, lexical overlap, etc. (Crossley, 2024: 139).

#### 4. Corpus analysis—Readability scores for Text 1 and Text 2

In the subsequent analysis, Text 1 and Text 2 will be observed as linguistic content only. Their text difficulty level will be evaluated using eight established readability formulas (Automated Readability Index, Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Coleman-Liau Readability Index, Smog Index, Original Linsear Write Formula, Linsear Write Grade Level Formula). For the purpose of understanding relevance of authentic text and content, automatically generated individual results are presented and compared in Table 1 below.

The results for text-level reading difficulty are identical across the Flesch Reading Ease, Linsear Write Grade Level Formula, and the SMOG Index, though the SMOG Index also indicates a difference in vocabulary load: Text 1 contains 22 “hard words,” while Text 2 contains 35. In terms of other results (Original Linsear Write Formula), Text 1 was assigned to Grade Level 5 due to the greater number of one-syllable words (336) when compared to Text 2 (328). The results obtained from *Readability Formulas* (May 2025) did not take *Forcast Readability Formula* into account as it is used for non-narrative texts. From the results presented below, it can be generally concluded that the two excerpts analysed were classified as *fairly easy* or *easy* to read by automatically generated results using a range of readability scores formulas.

Table 1: Readability scores for Text 1 and Text 2

Readability score formula	Text 1	Text 2
Automated Readability Index	Score: 2.81 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>very easy</b> , grade level: <b>3rd grade</b> , age range: 8-9	Score: 4.45 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>easy</b> , grade level: <b>4th grade</b> , age range: 9-10
Flesch Reading Ease	Score: 88.00 [=reading scale], reading difficulty: <b>easy</b> , grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , Age Range: 11-12 years old	Score: 82.00 [=reading scale], reading difficulty: <b>easy</b> , grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , age range: 11-12 years old
Gunning Fog Index	Score: 5.60 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , age range: 11-12	Score: 6.60 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>average</b> , grade level: <b>7th grade</b> , age range: 12-13
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	Score: 3.85 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>easy</b> , grade level: <b>4th grade</b> , age range: 9-10	Score: 4.61 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>5th grade</b> , age range: 10-11

Coleman-Liau Readability Index	Score: 3.76 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>easy</b> , grade level: <b>4th grade</b> , age range: 9-10	Score: 5.94 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , age range: 11-12
Smog Index	Score: 4.62 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>5th grade</b> , age range: 10-11	Score: 5.65 [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , age range: 11-12
Original Linsear Write Formula	Score: 98.00 [=reading scale], grade level: <b>5th grade</b> , age range: 10-11 years old	Score: 93.00 [=reading scale], grade level: <b>6th grade</b> , age range: 11-12 years old
Linsear Write Grade Level Formula	Score: <b>4.76</b> [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>5th grade</b> , age range: <b>10-11</b>	Score: <b>5.01</b> [=grade level], reading difficulty: <b>fairly easy</b> , grade level: <b>5th grade</b> , age range: <b>10-11</b>

However, the results obtained do not suggest that readability formulas scores should be discarded in practice. Rather, they may suggest that in certain contexts readability formulas are not a reliable indicator of text reading difficulty level and age appropriateness for the purposes of reading comprehension or reading-for-translation. At the same time, simplifying authentic texts is not always possible as is the case with the present corpus. Furthermore, the preceding examples suggest that more reliable and accurate accounts of text reading difficulty and processing are obtainable through during-the-translation think-aloud protocols rather than conventional readability scores. This methodology allows for a more informed judgment regarding text processing and reading difficulty levels (see Bradley & Terry, 1952; Crossley, 2024).

## 5. Concluding remarks and suggestions for further research

This paper reflects on the output of eight readability formulas – the Automated Readability Index, Flesch Reading Ease, Gunning Fog Index, Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level, Coleman-Liau Index, SMOG Index, and two Linsear Write variations – by analyzing two excerpts from *Humans of New York* interviews. It specifically addresses the formulas' performance in assessing text-level reading difficulty, the terminology they use, and the implications for defining authentic text in situations where neither linguistic nor content simplification is possible. In theory, if authentic texts were to be used in the classroom for reading comprehension or translation purposes based on these results, the levels of text difficulty as provided by readability formulas would not necessarily assign texts to appropriate levels of difficulty when it comes to critical reading, critical thinking, (inter)cultural competence, communicative function and age appropriateness.

The processing of the text itself and the topics raised in this documentary series of authentic, naturally-produced narratives will depend on other factors such as general knowledge, linguistic knowledge, knowledge of the world, as well as a genuine interest

in and empathy for the stories narrated by humans, which is part of qualitative analysis and requires more attention to individual style of an author rather than objectifying language, thus suggesting that the whole corpus may be observed as a valuable source of authentic texts. The selected authentic *Humans of New York* interviews as model texts highlighted authenticity of non-AI-generated texts that depict real human experiences. This ensures that both translators and readers engage with material related to actual individuals and their narratives.

Additionally, by incorporating contemporary themes and contemporary concerns common in global metropolitan areas and cities, these texts may keep readers informed about current societal issues, enriching the learning process beyond language acquisition.

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