A comparative analytic study of graded readers

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Introduction

We frequently encounter statistical analyses that emphasize the effectiveness of extensive reading such as Huffman's study of extensive reading (2014). Extensive reading is often treated as panacea in such papers. We also think that extensive reading is an effective method of instruction, but only under certain conditions, i.e. it works when students read a lot of books. Reading a limited number of books will never give students the strength to step up to the next level of English proficiency. How is it possible for teachers to convince them to read a lot more books? One idea to improve the situation is to consider the teacher's own reading habits. As teachers we should constantly read books if we are serious about changing our student's attitudes. In Day & Bamford (1998, 2002), the authors advocate the following as one of the most important principles for a successful extensive reading program: "The teacher is a role model of a reader for students." (7-8) Teachers can acclimatize themselves to GR if they take it upon themselves to analyze GR (e.g. Kuribayashi, 2015; Coulson & Li, 2017). If teachers read graded readers, they can elucidate the patterns found in the texts.

Teachers will then be in a position to provide the necessary information for changing students' perspectives; for raising their awareness when choosing books; and for increasing their enjoyment of the stories they read. The dual aims of this paper are ⑴ to provide a method for classifying GR to promote extensive reading among teachers and ⑵ to display the results of an analysis of two major Graded Reader series. We will present the results of our inquiry as a chart of Plot-driven versus Character-driven stories on a continuum, and compare the two most popular GR series of books.

Materials

Since 2012, the authors have read a large number of Graded Readers, both in the Oxford Bookworms Library (OBW) and Penguin Readers (PR). Note: Even though Penguin Readers became Pearson English Readers, we shall continue to refer to them as Penguin Readers because that was their name when we started this longitudinal analysis. The GR we read do not include nonfiction, short stories, and plays. We read only full novels. We analyzed all the GR from Level 1 through Level 6, but we did not include data from the Starter Level because of the difference in style. The

Starter Level GR include books with speech balloons, so they are more like comic books than regular stories.

Methodology

After reading each book, we rated it on a seven-part Likert scale. The rubric for our classification was as follows:

Plot-driven novels:
1. The novel has many action scenes.
2. The protagonist fights against external enemies.
3. Action verbs are more common. (e.g. fight, swim, see, go, etc.)
4. Conflict with external Enemies moves the plot forward.

Character-driven novels:
1. The novel's antagonists are outstandingly evil.
2. The novel has a protagonist who exhibits spiritual growth within their character arc or transformation.
3. The novel is full of human weaknesses and follies.

Following these rubrics, we ranked each graded reader on a 1 to 7 Likert Scale, with 1 denoting an extremely plot-driven book, and 7 denoting an extremely character-driven novel. After collecting the raw data, we entered our findings into the MacOS application called Numbers and generated graphs.

Results

Figures 1 - 8 present visual bar graphs of the raw data collected from our research. Along the X-axis, 1 indicates plot-driven tendency and 7 indicates character-driven tendency. Y-axis gives the number of books.
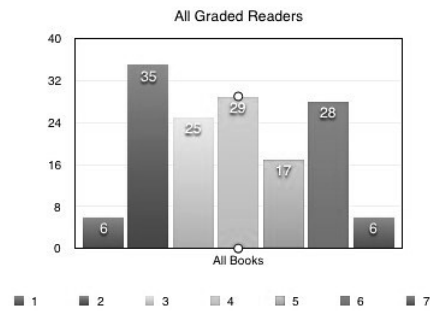

Figure 1. Oxford Bookworms - All Graded
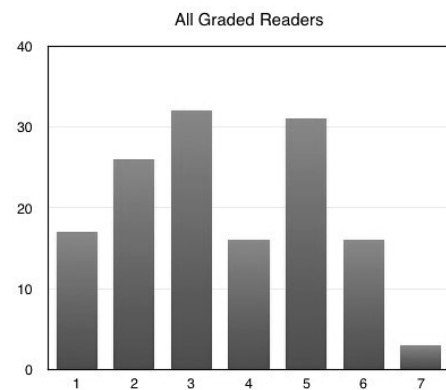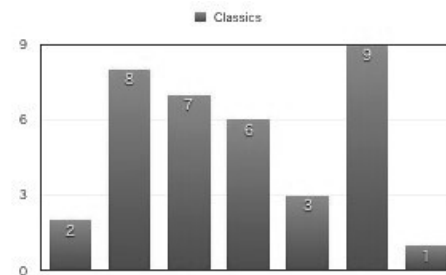

Figure 2. Penguin Readers - All Graded Reader

Figure 3. Oxford Bookworms - Classic

Figure 4. Penguin Readers - Classic

Figure 5. Oxford Bookworms - Mystery

Figure 6. Penguin Readers - Mystery
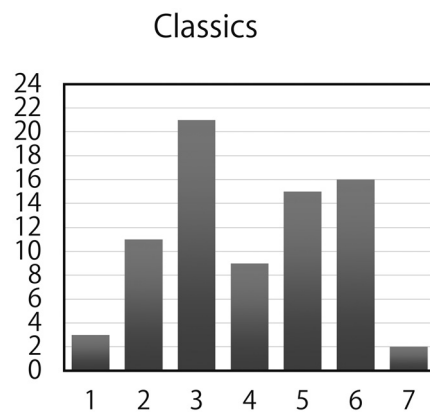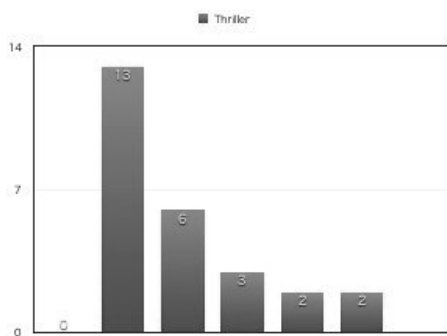

Figure 7. Oxford Bookworms - Thriller

Figure 8. Penguin Readers - Thriller

Discussion

There were several key features identified in this research. First, the stories were almost evenly distributed along the plot-driven versus character-driven continuum. In the Figure 1, 35 books (24%) were #2 and 25 books (17%) were #3 on the Likert scale while 17 books (12%) were #4 and 28 books (19%) are #5 on the Likert scale. The total books of #2 and #3 are 60 books (41%) while those of #3 and #4 are 45 books (31%). The result shows that there are slightly more plot-driven stories than character-driven stories in OBW.

When evaluating the Penguin readers (PR) we found almost the same results. Considering that both companies provide Graded Readers for students with the same level of proficiency, that would only be logical. A few more patterns became discernable when we evaluated the books according to their genre.

When all levels were included in the calculation, Classic books showed an unexpected result. Figure 3 shows that there were slightly more plot-driven stories in OBW. This can be explained by the fact that classic books are not always character-driven stories.

With regard to the Penguin Readers, the classic genre also tends to fall more on the plot-driven side of the spectrum. In their natural, unabridged state, novels that are considered to be classics will, by their very nature, deal most often with the internal struggles of the protagonists. But when this form of literature is converted into a Graded Reader, then the lower the level and more reduced the vocabulary and grammar becomes, the less complex the interior life of the characters, until, at the
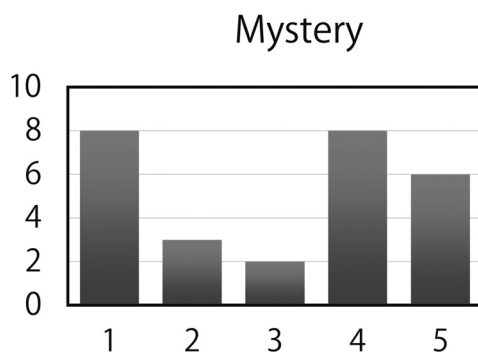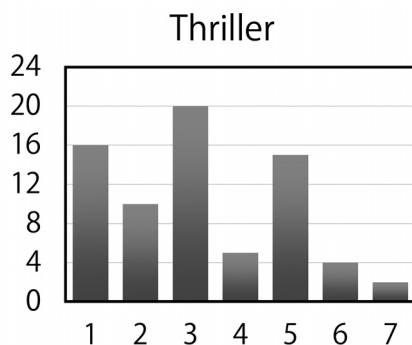
lowest common denominator, even a novel like Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment* becomes more focused on Raskolnikov's crime and the eventual punishment and less focused on the mental anguish and moral dilemma which motivated him to take such a drastic action.

Mysteries and thrillers were more plot-driven. In Figure 5, 49% was the total percentage of #1, #2, and #3 while 17 % was #3, and 41% was the total percentage of #4, #5, and #6 among the Mystery books in OBW. The result shows that there are slightly more plot-driven stories than character-driven stories among Mystery books in OBW.

Even in their unabridged state, Mysteries and Thrillers have a tendency to be full of plot-driven chases and shoot-outs and explosions as the protagonist follows a 'McGuffin' around the world. Thus the majority of the Mystery and Thriller graded readers tended to be much more plot-driven than average. The one exception to that generalization occurred when evaluating Agatha Christie mysteries. Due to their structure, these mysteries require that multiple characters have a well-developed motivation to have committed the crime, and that necessitated a more character-driven novel that usual.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the authors have finally reached the end of a five-year ongoing project to evaluate almost the entirety of the graded readers being offered by the two biggest publishing houses — Penguin and Oxford. During that time the authors read over three hundred graded readers ranging from Level 1 all the way to Level 6 and we evaluated them on the same Plot-driven versus Character-driven continuum.

The results of this five year project seem to prove our original hypothesis that in re-writing well-known novels as well as when creating original content, graded readers tend to removed more of the character-driven aspects of the novels than the plot-driven aspects, with the statistical outcome as we suspected. Thus, the relatively underrated mechanical precision in statistics amplifies major organizational risks or nuances. A future undertaking can knowingly include numerous graphs making other relationships ontologically noticeable.

Finally, this study should be of use to any Extensive Reading instructor seeking to enhance their student's motivation. By suggesting the most appropriate books and genres the teacher can facilitate their students quest for fluency, and give them a more informed choice when selecting those books that might conceivably spark a life-long interest in reading.

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