

**Is children’s literature as hard as  
scholarly articles about children’s literature?  
A comment on Macalister and Webb (2019)**

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Macalister and Webb (2019) claim that “children’s literature” written for native English speakers is too difficult for intermediate English as a Second Language (ESL) students, those who have acquired the first 3,000 to 4,000 most commonly used words in English. The authors analyzed a corpus of short stories written for a classroom magazine published by the New Zealand Ministry of Education. They found that children would need to know 8,000 of the most commonly used English word families in order to read the stories with 98% vocabulary coverage. A previous analysis of a similar corpus (Webb & Macalister, 2013) found that 10,000 word families were needed to obtain 98% coverage.

Note that the 8,000 to 10,000 word family range is also what Nation (2006) found necessary to understand newspapers and classic novels written for adults.

Macalister and Webb (2019) omit any mention of McQuillan (2016a), also published in this journal, in which I analyzed more than a dozen fiction series popular with children and young adults. Several of those series would be comprehensible with 98% vocabulary coverage to intermediate ESL readers with knowledge of 3,000 to 5,000 word families.

As I pointed out in McQuillan (2016a), the classroom magazine corpus Webb and Macalister (2013) used is clearly not typical of the kinds of books children actually read for pleasure. The same is true of their narrative fiction corpus used in the current paper.

I analyzed the vocabulary difficulty of Macalister and Webb’s (2019) own paper. It also requires around 8,000 word families for 98% vocabulary coverage. This means that, if Macalister and Webb (2019) are correct, in term of vocabulary difficulty *children’s literature is as hard as scholarly articles analyzing children’s literature*.

Such a conclusion can only be reached by ignoring most of the books that native-speaking children read.

Mason and Krashen (2017) provide a summary of several case studies of intermediate students who were able to move from graded readers directly into juvenile and adult fiction books, and without explicit vocabulary teaching. One student, Kenta, for example, started with graded readers before moving on to *Harry Potter* books and the young adult novels of Judy Blume

(Mason & Krashen, 2017, Table 2, p. 472). Their other case studies tell a similar story.

Uden, Schmitt, and Schmitt (2014) offer more case studies showing that graduates of graded readers can make the transition to authentic texts. Macalister and Webb (2019), however, attribute the success of Uden et al.'s (2014) subjects to the fact that they were "highly motivated readers" whose experience is therefore "not generalizable to less motivated readers" (p. 65).

This interpretation of the case study data can easily become a self-fulfilling prophecy: Intermediate students are never encouraged to read authentic texts by teachers convinced that such texts require some unusually high levels of motivation.

An alternative explanation for the success of the subjects in Uden et al. (2014) and Mason and Krashen (2017) is that they selected their own books to read. Choosing your own reading material helps ensure that the text will be interesting and comprehensible, and thus more enjoyable and motivating. This is consistent with the finding that adult language students who have been given the chance to select their own reading material prefer free reading to traditional language instruction (McQuillan, 1994).

Macalister and Webb's (2019) solution to the "problem" of difficult children's literature is explicit vocabulary instruction. They identify 245 words to be taught that appear frequently in the corpus they analyzed. But what evidence do we have that being asked to memorize 200+ vocabulary words will be more successful with "less motivated" language students?

In terms of words acquired per minute, vocabulary instruction is an inefficient use of classroom time compared to simply reading (Mason & Krashen, 2004; McQuillan, 2016b, 2019a, 2019b). Free reading is not only more efficient for vocabulary acquisition than explicit instruction, it's more pleasurable for students and a lot less work for the teacher.

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