



## Research Article

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# Hanada's Text Leveling System (HTLS) from Text Engagement to Text Engagingness

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### Abstract

*Those who are involved in developing language curriculum in The Arab World face usually a challenging barrier related to texts selection. They are still in need of clear and justifiable criteria that may help them select and organize texts. In this article, I review critically Hanada Taha's Text Leveling System (HTLS), the first Arabic attempt that addresses this issue. Developed by Hanada Taha, the system provides a procedural framework which will help us in selecting and organizing Arabic texts.*

**Keywords:** HTLS, text gradient, readability

## 1. Introduction

As a curriculum specialist, I have to acknowledge that while working on developing Arabic curriculum in various environments, the problem my colleagues and I had faced was the issue of texts' relevance. Rarely did we come to concurrence about the texts that will be included. No wonder if I say that this problem had negative effects on our works. The absence of a clear and consistent vision that orients the process of selecting texts for particular grade levels made organizing language experience a difficult and foggy task.

Based on my long experience in the field of curriculum development of the Arabic language, I claim that there are two major prevailing approaches for selecting reading texts. The first is academic, aiming at preparing educated individuals through the process of reading. Proponents of this approach claim that the main function of reading is to enable individuals to understand classic literary works, regardless of their relevance to lived experiences.

The second approach is a utilitarian one, focuses on making reading a tool that helps individuals respond to societal needs. Reading in this approach is seen as a set of automated skills individuals have to master. In both approaches, readers are looked upon as "things" that could be reshaped to respond, through the process of reading, to academic or societal demands.

We need an alternative approach that considers the nature of both the reading process and the readers. Cognitive development was developed to be a reader-centered approach that considers the importance of interactions between readers and texts. According to proponents of this approach, reading is an intellectual activity through which readers understand, analyze, and critique specific issues. Based on readers' prior knowledge, reading is seen here as an active practice that aims at understanding the world.

What we need, as language curriculum specialists in The Arab World, is two things to be considered: cognitive development approach assumptions, and a texts classifier that meets these assumptions. Hanada Taha's Text Leveling System (HTLS) is a unique tool that may help us achieve this ultimate goal. In the following part, I will describe in some details the nature of HTLS and explain its advantages and limitations as well.

## 2. HTLS: Definition, Purposes, and Features

Reading is a complex activity through which readers construct meanings. The first process of this activity is phonological awareness which refers to the appreciation of sounds as well as the meaning of spoken words (Farris et al, 2004). The second is fluency which refers to how a reader demonstrates three important characteristics: accuracy, automaticity, and prosody. A fluent reader is one who can read words in context quickly and without deliberate attention (McCormack & Pasquarelli, 2010). Understanding the meanings of words and acquiring a large reservoir of words that readers can use to comprehend a text is another essential process through which readers cultivate their curiosity for vocabulary. These three processes will together help readers construct meanings from written texts resulting in a rich, deep, and thoughtful reading experience. This experience is called reading comprehension, it is the most important process and the ultimate goal of reading activity.

It is needless to say that reading comprehension is well achieved when readers interact with texts related to their developmental levels. According to Reader Response Theory, students respond to texts from one of four perspectives (Johnson & Freedman, 2005): textual (text genre is considered), cultural (students' cultural backgrounds, attitudes, and values are the most important factors to respond to), experiential (response depends on students' lived experiences), and psychological (students respond in light of their developmental levels).

It is an established fact that students' response is a matter of engagingness rather than engagement. While engagement is considered as a defining construct in literature, engagingness is concerned with students' interaction with text design, content, and language. Heibert and Martin (2001) explained this well:

*"Most discussions of engagement have been restricted to a consideration of attitudes toward reading and interests in reading...Rarely have features of texts that engage readers been considered" (p. 371).*

Taking into account the abovementioned considerations, HTLS could be seen as a serious attempt that aims at enhancing students' engagingness with texts. Utilizing the work of Fountas & Pinnell (1996), HTLS is built on clear criteria such as text genre, text structure, ideas and themes, sentence complexity, vocabulary, language use that bridges standard Arabic and vernaculars, images and book production in general. The said criteria were applied to (19) levels, from level (ا) to level (ز), showing how texts' content and language are crucial for mastering reading materials.

Levels in HTLS are by design not linked to specific grades, but rather to students' reading abilities (table 1). This provides Arabic curriculum workers with rich alternatives that enable them to select accurately from various texts. In fact, HTLS represents a pioneer Arabic attempt that may put an end to the continuous dispute over text appropriateness and suitability to learners' needs.

**Table 1:** Text gradient in HTLS

Text Level	Suggested Grade Level
ا Beginner (lower)	
ب Beginner (lower)	1
ج Beginner (middle)	1
د Beginner (middle)	1,2
هـ Beginner (upper)	1,2
و Beginner (upper)	1,2
ز Intermediate (lower)	2

Text Level	Suggested Grade Level
ح Intermediate (lower)	2,3
ط Intermediate (middle)	2,3
ي Intermediate (middle)	3
ك Intermediate (upper)	3,4
ل Advanced (lower)	4
م Advanced (middle)	4,5
ن Advanced (upper)	4,5,6
س Perfect (lower)	6,7,8
ع Perfect (middle)	6,7,8
ف Perfect (upper)	7,8
ص Superior	9
ق Distinguished	10,11,12

Among the big advantages of HTLS is its qualitative nature. Many studies (see for example Curto et al (2015) and Sheehan et al (2010)) attempt to provide quantitative systems that may assist in selecting adequate reading materials. Unfortunately, these automated systems, as Sheehan et al (2010) noted, are subject to many limitations, the most important is that they represent inappropriate treatments of genre effect. Considering Eisner (1985) argument that quantitative language doesn't structurally reflect reality, I argue that HTLS represents a practical turn that helps us soundly determine how to select texts.

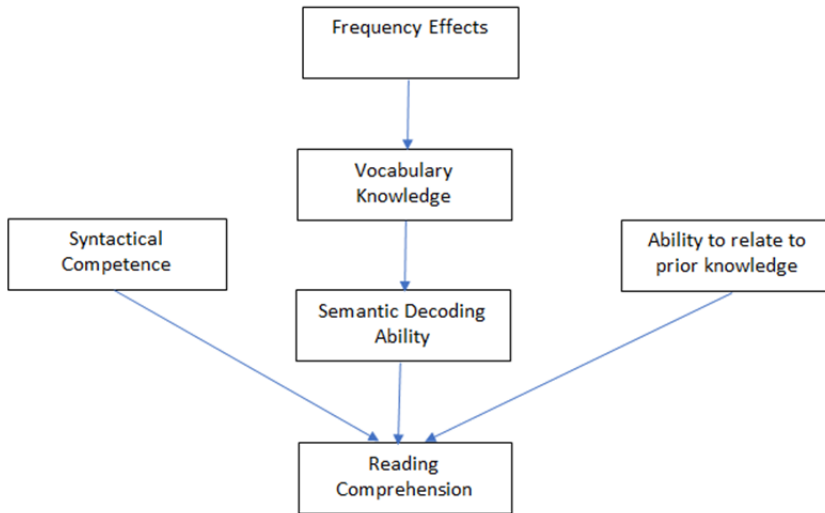
An additional advantage of HTLS is comprehensiveness. It is assumed that texts leveling is highly concerned with parts of speech, syntax, semantic and lexical features (Islam et al, 2012). Each of HTLS levels takes into account all of these features with rich details explaining how these features are essential for the leveling procedures.

A closer look at HTLS indicates that the leveling system used serves two kinds of outcomes: traditional and transitional. In his remarkable work "Outcome-based Education", Spady (1994) distinguished three kinds of outcomes: traditional, transitional, and transformative. Traditional outcomes are usually limited to a particular discipline or knowledge domain, whilst transitional ones refer to high-order cognitive abilities. Although the first two kinds are served in HTLS, however, transformative outcomes which refer to moving from academic into authentic life contexts are completely missed. Transformative outcomes in the field of language are concerned with preparing students to occupy leading roles in the future (poets, writers, novelists, literary critics, ...). Thus, it seems that the most appropriate level to be related to transformative outcomes in the HTLS is level (ق).

On the other hand, HTLS could be critiqued on several levels. For those who give students' developmental levels great attention, HTLS seems to be confusing as many levels (for example (ج) and (ح)) are exactly the same. Some levels are not differentiated except in the number of text words. In fact, I see this criticism is built on a weak argument as the number of words could be a distinctive factor especially as we advance up the readability gradient. Curto et al (2015) state that:

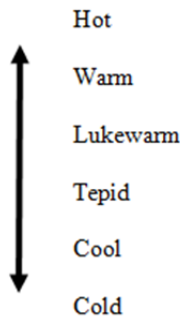
*"The length of text is related with its readability, i.e. typically longer texts have much more details or content which can make them more difficult to understand".*

HTLS emphasizes the significance of word frequency in making reading easier. Word frequencies mean provide texts with more familiar vocabulary. Chen and Meurers (2016) investigated the relation between text difficulty and word frequencies, stating that word frequency can be linked to reading comprehension and lexical frequencies can inform text-level analysis (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** The frequency effect on reading comprehension (Chen and Meurers,2016).

However, what is missed in HTLS is the concept of “gradable antonyms”. According to McCormack and Pasquarelli (2010), gradable antonyms (see figure 2) involve students in figuring out what a word exactly means and enhance them to internalize it in their spoken and written language.



**Figure 2.** Gradable antonyms.

Furthermore, HTLS doesn't give two important points their due consideration. The first is concerned with the meaning and types of text structure and features that distinguish expository and narrative texts. The second is concerned with the use of figurative language and its effect on reading comprehension in particular in upper levels. Although HTLS talks briefly about simile and metaphor, it disregards alliteration, hyperbole, and onomatopoeia.

From my point of view, the most serious criticism that we can give against HTLS is that it is built on some assumptions of structuralism. Insisting on putting everything in universal objective frames and considering reality as homogenous causal networks, structuralism undermines individual's subjectivity and neglects the changing sociocultural contexts. Piaget' developmental stages and Bloom's taxonomy are seen as absolute and constant systems which are applicable in every educational environment, but this not true as there are always critical variables that distinguish an environment from another. HTLS, I believe, fails to get rid of this structural tendency and that makes it a "decontextualized" classifier.

### 3. Reflections and Final Thought

Remarkable works are subject to criticism. There is a general agreement that criticizing a work doesn't diminish its importance. In spite of the said limitations, HTLS provides unprecedented procedural steps for leveling Arabic texts. It successfully helps us move from text engagement to text engagingness, from quantitative classification to qualitative one, from traditional outcomes to transitional ones, and from foggy and confused vision to a clear and more stable one.

As mentioned in its introduction, HTLS is now used by more than (80) publishers around The Arab World and internationally, with more than 5000 leveled based on it, in addition to many schools that adopted it already for leveling their collections of children's literature. I believe that the main audience HTLS speaks to is curriculum developers, Arabic teachers, publishers, librarians, and reading programs specialists. So, to maximize the benefits of HTLS, it is recommended that professional workshops and seminars be conducted to clarify its vision and procedures. To sum up, HTLS is very helpful when aligned with supportive efforts that explain how to level Arabic texts using it.

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