CCSS-ELA

Suggestions and Cautions for Addressing Text Complexity

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The majority of states have adopted the Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS-ELA), and assessments aligned with the Standards are scheduled to come online in 2014–2015. As we indicated in a previous column for *The Reading Teacher* (Valencia & Wixson, 2013), it's no surprise then that classroom teachers and school district personnel are focusing enormous attention on understanding the standards and learning how to implement them. The emphasis in this column is on issues related to text complexity.

The CCSS-ELA highlights the complexity of the texts students experience in K–12 instruction as one of the key features of the Reading Standards. Specifically, it states, "The Reading standards place equal emphasis on the sophistication of what students read and the skill with which they read" (p. 8). In addition, Standard 10 in the Reading strand is titled "Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity" and specifies that students should "Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently" (p. 10). Moreover, it is important to note that both of the preceding CCSS-ELA statements also attend to how well students are reading and comprehending these complex texts. One way to remind ourselves and others of this dual focus is to adopt the phrase "comprehension of complex texts" (Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, in press) as we engage in discussions about text complexity.

This column addresses our concern that the focus on text complexity is being narrowly interpreted to mean one or more of the following: (a) complexity should be determined primarily by a quantitative measure, (b) all students should read *only* texts in the standards-based, grade-level Lexile band provided in the CCSS-ELA documents, (c) the goals of the Standards can be attained by simply including more complex texts in the curriculum. Our purpose here is to help teachers avoid such misconceptions by offering some suggestions and cautions we believe will support effective implementation of the CCSS-ELA with regard to text complexity.

Measuring Text Complexity: Interpreting Appendices A and B

Suggestions

The Standards documents attend to text complexity most notably in Appendix A, which provides a description of the CCSS-ELA three-part model for measuring text complexity, i.e., quantitative factors such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion measured by computer software programs (e.g. Lexiles, ATOS); qualitative factors such as levels of meaning, structure, language, and knowledge demands "measured by an attentive human reader"; and reader/task factors such as motivation, knowledge, purpose, and the complexity of the task determined by "educators employing their professional judgment" (see Figure).

Our first suggestion for implementing the three-part model in Appendix A is to *begin* rather than end the evaluation of a given text with reader and task

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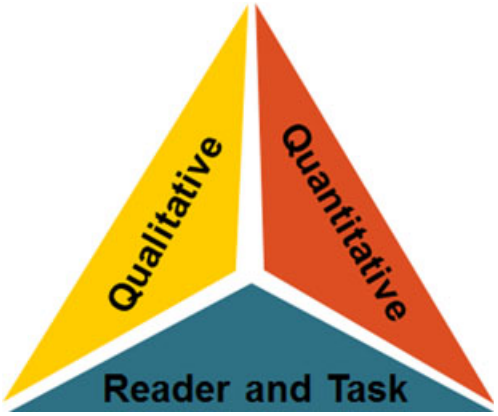
Figure The CCSS-ELA Three-Part Model for Measuring Text Complexity



factors. The majority of "systems" that have emerged to facilitate the implementation of the three-part model (e.g., Kansas, Georgia, Rhode Island, New York, North Dakota, Ohio, Council of Chief State School Officers) approach the three parts of the model in a linear fashion—first, quantitative; second, qualitative; and third, reader/task factors. In addition, some systems address reader/task factors through a set of generic questions that may or may not pertain to a particular reading situation. Even the examples in Appendix A that illustrate the use of the three parts of the model to judge the complexity of a text offer only boilerplate comments about the reader and the task: "These [reader and task factors] are to be determined locally with reference to such variables as a student's motivation, knowledge, and experiences as well as purpose and the complexity of the task assigned and the questions posed" (p. 12, 14, 16).

We suggest that reader and task factors be among the first considerations in measuring text complexity because they are likely to be the most important factors in determining the comprehension of complex text in a specific instructional context. When reader and task factors are emphasized, it becomes clear that complexity is not an inherent property of the text. Rather it is a function of the interaction among reader, text, and task factors within a particular situation (RAND, 2002). For example, consider the text of *The Little Prince* (Saint-Exupéry & Woods, 1943), which falls within the second- to third-grade complexity band provided by the CCSS-ELA (Nelson, Perfetti, Liben, & Liben, 2012). Although students instructed at a third-grade level who have encountered fairy tales and fantasy stories (a reader factor) could probably read and understand the story plot (a simple task) of *The Little Prince*, they would be unlikely to be able to analyze the text for its sophisticated themes of human relationships (a more complex task). Conversely, if teachers use this simple text for instruction with older children who have developed more sophisticated understandings of literary themes and allegory, the students are more likely to be able to engage in the close, interpretive, analytic reading called for by the Standards.

We suggest that teachers pay particular attention to the nature of the tasks in which they engage students because they have the most control over this factor. In the context of instruction, teachers can identify tasks in relation to specific texts that accommodate students with a range of comprehension abilities, and they can provide instruction and scaffolding to promote students' comprehension of these complex texts.

A variety of tasks and supports are used in instruction as a means of fostering students' comprehension. For example, students might be engaged in answering questions, writing book reports, doing research projects, keeping a journal, creating multimedia projects, or participating in book club discussions. There is also variability within a particular type of task as a function of the mode of response (e.g., oral or written response), the amount of text students need to read (e.g., short selections, full texts, multiple texts), and the depth of processing required (e.g., locating information, analyzing, constructing abstract generalizations). Probably most important to consider with respect to the task is the type of instruction and support students receive as they engage with both the text and the task (e.g., explicit instruction, guided reading and discussion, collaborative work, independent work).

Identifying appropriate tasks is less a question of which tasks are "best" than of determining which are most appropriate for which students in the context of specific texts. The fact that the difficulty of a particular text can vary as a function of its interaction with task

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factors means that it is possible to "change" the difficulty of a text and students' ability to deeply comprehend and learn by altering the task. When viewed in this way, it is clear that it is futile to attempt to evaluate text complexity without taking into consideration the reader and task factors associated with a particular reading event. This is especially important to keep in mind in light of the CCSS-ELA mandate that all students should engage with significant amounts of grade-level texts.

Cautions

We are concerned that some systems used to implement Standard 10 (text complexity) and the three-part model for measuring text complexity in Appendix A might simply result in the use of different, more complex texts, with no discernible effect on expanding the focus and improving the quality of instruction. For students who are struggling with reading, such an approach will lead to frustration, wasted time, and lack of progress. Educators must go beyond using the three-part model to place texts in particular bands or verify that students are encountering texts of sufficient complexity to using it for the purpose of planning instruction and fostering comprehension of complex text. A greater emphasis on reader and task factors in measuring text complexity has the potential to help us refine and differentiate instruction, which will ultimately lead to improved student performance.

We also caution teachers and district personnel to bring these text–task–reader considerations to their interpretation of the exemplar texts and sample performance tasks provided in Appendix B of the Standards. These tasks are intended to illustrate the application of specific standards to texts of "sufficient complexity, quality, and range" (p. 2). Unfortunately, all the tasks are treated equally, and there is no analysis of the complexity of the task as it relates to a specific text. For example, the following sample performance tasks are suggested for a fourth- to fifth-grade band for literary texts (p. 70):

- Students make connections between the visual presentation of John Tenniel's illustration in Lewis Carol's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and the text of the story to identify how the pictures of Alice reflect specific descriptions of her in the text [RL 4.7][1] (860L).[2]
- Students compare and contrast coming-of-age stories by Christopher Paul Curtis (*Bud, Not Buddy*) and Louise Erdrich (*The Birchbark House*) by identifying similar themes and examining the stories' approach to the topic of growing up. [RL5.9] (*Bud, Not Buddy*, 950L; *The Birchmark House*, 930–970L).

Overall, the performance tasks privilege the text complexity, as measured in Lexiles, as the major consideration in determining both the nature of comprehension for each text as well as the likely difficulties students will experience in comprehending and learning from text. The Lexile levels for the texts at each grade level are fairly similar, yet the tasks clearly present different levels of challenge and *comprehension complexity* when they are analyzed alongside the texts. We urge teachers to consider the task complexity as well as the text complexity and the readers' needs as they develop performance tasks for their students.

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Beyond Measuring Text Complexity: Learning Content and Building Knowledge

Suggestions

The content of the texts that students read is a dimension that is highlighted in the CCSS-ELA, but not addressed directly in the three-part model for measuring text complexity described in Appendix A. The "portrait" of students who meet the Standards provided in the introductory sections of the CCSS-ELA includes the expectation that students will build strong content knowledge through reading purposefully. This means that text complexity analyses need to go beyond just ensuring that texts are complex as defined by measures such as those described in Appendix A. They need to ensure that the actual content of the texts (and, by implication, the accompanying instruction) is adequate to learn new ideas and concepts, and to build knowledge. As CCSS-ELA points out, this new content knowledge is not just a desired outcome of close reading, it becomes the foundation, or the background knowledge (of the world and the words), students need to comprehend increasingly substantive, "meaty" content texts as they move from grade to grade.

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Teachers need to develop strategies for examining a text, not just to identify a grade-band level, but as a means of understanding the relations among (a) its content; (b) what they want students to learn, understand, and grapple with from reading; and (c) the features of the text that are likely to make it more or less difficult for a specific reader or group of readers to learn that content. Identifying the reader and task features most relevant for an analysis of text complexity will, at least in part, be determined by the purposes, Standards, and knowledge the teacher wants the students to engage.

For example, we recently observed a fifth-grade lesson using a text on the Loch Ness Monster. Because the teacher wanted students to build an understanding of how the scientists developed theories about Nessie based on evidence, rather than simply understand the information that has been reported about Nessie, she had to analyze the text for how it used the language and text features related to theory building. Once she did that review, she structured her lesson to help students read closely to build their own theories based on evidence in the text.

Cautions

Text complexity analyses outside the context of instructional planning are not likely to achieve the CCSS-ELA goals of improving comprehension and increasing knowledge. This may seem fairly obvious and easily accomplished. However, professional educators with years of experience are constantly surprised at how difficult it is for many prospective and practicing teachers to grasp the importance of taking time, before initiating instruction, to examine the texts they are asking students to read and consider the most appropriate instructional goals for a given text and the best means of accomplishing those goals. A recent survey confirms this point, finding that the majority of teachers still say their lessons are dominated by skills; they are more likely to fit texts to skills than to ground their skills instruction in what is appropriate to the content of the texts they are teaching (Shanahan, 2013).

We caution that if teachers and districts engage in analysis of texts and determine grade-level bands without considering the goal of learning new content, text selection, and appropriate grade-level placement may fall short. On the one hand, the texts chosen for instruction may be too "thin" from a content perspective to engage students in building new knowledge. On the other hand, teachers may not be sensitized to the challenges students face in their effort to learn and build knowledge from text, and as a result, they may not adequately plan instruction. Both situations would leave students less able to achieve the CCSS-ELA vision of literacy.

A second caution related to learning content and building knowledge from text is to be aware of and to address the role of prior knowledge. Here we caution teachers to find a balance between providing sufficient background knowledge to enable students to learn from a text but not enough that it becomes unnecessary for students to read or engage in the thinking work that we want students to do while reading. If students are reading about Martin Luther King and the March on Washington, for example, but they are unaware of the history of slavery or fight for civil rights, then their ability to learn from the text will be hindered. So, some background building to get students ready to engage with the text could support their learning. Then, they could be supported to learn from the text what happened in Washington and to build their understanding of the developing fight for civil rights. The type of content analysis of text paired with identifying content outcomes we describe previously should help teachers find the proper balance of providing background and supporting students to learn content from text.

What Students Should Read

Suggestions

As we noted at the beginning of this column, Standard 10 addresses both the range and complexity of texts students should read and experience. Students need to engage with both fiction and nonfiction and various forms of each (e.g., historical fiction, fantasy, mystery; articles, textbooks, essays). What makes texts complex to comprehend and,

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consequently, determining the nature of instruction students need, will be different within and across text types and forms. Furthermore, the types of tasks that are appropriate and authentic for some types of texts are not appropriate for others. The emphasis on building knowledge from texts also requires a special effort to assure that students are engaged with a range of substantive content-oriented texts in addition to textbooks.

We also suggest that most elementary students will benefit from interactions with texts at multiple levels of difficulty. For example, students who can read grade-level texts independently should have the freedom and access to read across levels as long as a substantial portion of their reading is at or above grade level. It seems to make sense to open all avenues of reading to students, especially as we consider the importance of reading volume, interest, and choice in fostering students' reading development (Allington, 2012; Guthrie & Humenick, 2004).

In contrast, students who cannot yet read grade-level texts independently will need instruction and practice with material at their specific instructional levels, especially as they develop foundational skills. Nevertheless, engagement with grade-level materials is essential for *all* students to support development in sentence structure, text organization, vocabulary, concepts, and content knowledge. If students are unable to read grade-level materials independently, additional scaffolds will be required for them to benefit from interacting with grade-level texts. Without scaffolds, students are unlikely to engage with the texts in ways that will achieve the desired goals (Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012).

Cautions

In selecting texts, we caution classroom teachers and district administrators not to use the exemplar texts and lists in Appendix B as mandates. These were intended to provide examples of the types of texts and nature of the writing that may fall within specific quantitative and qualitative measures of text complexity. They were not intended to be a prescribed list of "core texts." Several scholars have raised concerns about the exemplars including a lack of multicultural literature and authors of color, focus on older canonical texts, lack of contemporary work, and a fear that the exemplars will be interpreted as "the new canon" (Boyd, 2012/2013; Moss, 2013). Teachers and district personnel should heed these concerns and be careful not to use the exemplar lists as a shortcut to making decisions about text choices.

We also caution teachers working with beginning readers to use their expert judgment when applying grade-level Lexile bands for the primary grades. Several scholars suggest that early-grade Lexile bands may be set too high, resulting in texts that are too difficult for beginner readers and possibly leading to decreased levels of automaticity, fluency, engagement, and motivation (Hiebert, 2011/2012; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013).

In closing, we conclude that the issues associated with the emphasis on text complexity in the CCSS-ELA are themselves quite complex. We urge everyone involved in the enactment of the new Standards to give the issues we raise their most serious consideration as they move forward with implementation.

Notes

1. Notations in the sample tasks are in the form R = reading standard, L = literary; 4 = grade, 7 = Standard number
2. Lexile scores are not provided in CCSS document; they are provided by the authors.

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