

# Text Complexity in the New Balance

There is always something worthy of our attention in reading instruction. It seems that text complexity is now having its day.

That's not to say that the previous areas receiving focused attention have been bad or useless. Things are hot for a while, and when they are, new knowledge is generated. At one point, not too long ago, phonics and fluency were hot, but they are less so now (Cassidy & Loveless, 2011). When things are hot, attention is focused, and new insights into readers and the reading process are gained. When things become less hot, it seems that the field has reached some consensus or a new level of understanding for the time being, and therefore attention can be turned to a new area.

Unlike a pendulum, which is often how reading instruction is described, we see this continual research process as a drill, with each subsequent return to a topic resulting in deeper knowledge. In fact, the development of iterative investigations of educational topics was highlighted in a conversation that Diane had with her 80-year-old aunt, a retired teacher. When asked by her aunt what was new in education, Diane replied that she and her colleagues were studying how to support their students in understanding how authors position readers to draw conclusions while reading. Diane's aunt replied, "Well, my heavens, we were teaching that 50 years ago," then paused and added, "But you know, each time some topic in education gets revisited, we learn so much more about how to teach it."

Our renewed attention to text complexity is primarily due to language in the Common Core State Standards. However, like phonics and fluency, this is not the first time that researchers and teachers have paid attention





example, if students understand why the Gettysburg Address was written, they are more likely to comprehend it.

Readability, then, is a balance between the reader's skills and the text itself. How the text acts upon the reader is as important as how the reader acts upon the text. Some texts are more considerate of readers than others. Anderson and Armbruster (1984) identified a number of characteristics of considerate texts, or texts that facilitate comprehension and learning from reading. Their list includes the following:

- *Text structure*: The arrangement system of ideas in the text and the nature of the relationships connecting ideas
- *Coherence*: The extent to which events and concepts are logically and clearly connected and explained
- *Unity*: The extent to which the text retains focus and does not include irrelevant or distracting information
- *Audience appropriateness*: The extent to which the text fits the target readers' probable knowledge base

Readability and considerateness are important aspects of text complexity but are not yet the full picture. It's not as if some pretaught vocabulary, a dab of phonics, and some visualization will help a reader with the assumptions of background knowledge, sophisticated sentence structure, and complex ideas of a text, as in this excerpt:

Anyway, the fascinating thing was that I read in *National Geographic* that there are more people alive now than have died in all of human history. In other words, if everyone wanted to play Hamlet at once, they couldn't, because there aren't enough skulls! (Foer, 2005, p. 3)

The passage is hard for a number of different .017 Tc.affrefreheqofzaf1sp41(i)-31(l)one11(e)-

The deep meaning comes from understanding nuances and inferences. What really makes this text hard is the big idea in the text. The words themselves are not that difficult, but the mathematical computation is mind-boggling and causes most readers to pause and really consider what the author is saying. We ask ourselves, could that really be true? Did

students' current performance. The goal has been for students to read texts that they can read with minimal instruction, but there are several problems with this approach. First, basing the match on a student's oral-reading performance is problematic because such an assessment tells little about the student's comprehension. As Kelly (1916) noted almost 100 years ago, "It is generally agreed, I think, that the ability to reproduce is quite a separate ability from the ability to get meaning" (p. 64). Second, text difficulty is reduced over time when students only read things that they can. A fifth grader reading at the fourth-grade level who only reads fourth-grade books will not be prepared for sixth grade. There is evidence that the texts that students read have become easier and less complex in grades 4–12 (Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996). Third, this approach limits what students can read with instruction. As Adams (2010) noted, "More significantly, failing to provide instruction or experience with 'grown-up' text levels seems a risky course toward preparing students for the reading demands of college and life" (p. 5). Finally, there is evidence that students learn, and perhaps even learn more, when they are taught with challenging texts (Morgan, Wilcox, & Eldredge, 2000; O'Connor, Swanson, & Geraghty, 2010).

So, where does the idea of matching readers with texts at their independent reading level come from? The most common formula for selecting these texts consists of three levels (e.g., Betts, 1946). The first, independent level, is considered to be a text that is accurately read at a rate of 95% or higher with a comprehension level of 90–100% as measured by questions. Traditionally, these are the texts that students are asked to read on their own, at home or at school. Students who read a text with 89% or less accuracy and less than 75% comprehension are considered to be at their frustration level because the number of errors interferes too greatly with meaning. In most cases, teachers avoid assigning students frustration-level texts. Text read accurately at a rate of 90–94% and a comprehension rate of 75–89% is called instructional level. Teachers use instructional-level texts because they provide students with enough challenges to focus their attention on their problem-solving skills without being so difficult that all meaning is lost. However, these percentages have been challenged. For example, Powell (1970) recommends 85% as a better predictor of student learning, which would result in students reading harder texts. However, the 95% rate persists in most classrooms despite

Although it has become a commonly accepted practice to strictly adhere to these levels when matching students to texts for reading instruction, concerns about this reader-text match have proliferated in educational literature for decades (Chall & Conard, 1991; Killgallon, 1942; O'Connor, Bell, et al., 2002; Weber, 1968). Teachers know that when students are asked to read complex texts by themselves, they struggle and often do not succeed because they do not have the appropriate bank of related language, knowledge, skills, or metacognition to be able to comprehend the information. Teachers also realize that when they provide the needed instructional supports, students have greater success with reading materials that could be initially identified as being at their frustrational levels. The text difficulty level is not the real issue. Instruction is. Teachers can scaffold and support students, which will determine the amount of their learning and literacy independence.

## **Text Complexity and the Common Core State Standards**

The Common Core State Standards challenge teachers to provide scaffolded instructional supports for every learner and to do so with complex and difficult texts. When first hearing this, teachers may be concerned because they have always attempted to assess how well each student reads a text to determine appropriate instructional levels, believing that without a text level/student level placement match, a student will have little success. As realized from a careful reading of the history of educational assessment (Johnston, 1984), there is little research supporting this text placement practice, and what research there is seems to be





2010a, p. 10). This anchor standard calls for students to be able to read independently, and the text exemplars cited in Appendix B of the standards are hard. However, these should not be misconstrued as a reading list, with teachers simply ordering lots of hard books and then



diverse texts. In doing so, readers will generalize their skills and become proficient readers who can read widely. This requires readers to struggle a bit as they apply their skills in new situations.

Perhaps one of the mistakes in the past efforts to improve reading achievement has been the removal of struggle. As a profession, we may have made reading tasks too easy. We do not suggest that we should plan students' failure but rather that students should be provided with

Again, the individual words are not that hard (seventh-grade level), but the ideas are complex and tragic. Given that the text is a picture book, some teachers and students initially believe that it is too easy. However, the content is tough, and the ideas are complex. More than one adult has burst into tears while reading this book.

As students talked about what the character in the book says and considered the time at which this was written, they struggled to figure out why the animals were killed. The students struggled with the moral and ethical dilemmas that the text poses. Using evidence from the text to justify his response, Justin said, “This is a memory from the guy at the memorial. He’s remembering this. I think so because of how sad he was at the end and how he was taking care of the marker at the beginning.” Marla, also using evidence from the text, responded, “I agree with you. The title says that it’s true, and I think that this was a time when they were worried about war and tried to protect people.” The students’ conversation continued, and they struggled to understand a text written at a different time for a different audience. Yet, through that struggle, they came to an understanding. As one member of the group said, “Sometimes wars are necessary, but there are always bystanders hurt along the way. I never thought about the animals, but I guess that they are innocent bystanders of human wars, too.”

All readers should be given opportunities to analyze complex texts. In a first-grade classroom, students read *The Sun* by Justin McCory Martin (2007) to become familiar with the Sun’s structure and role in our solar system. However, this is only the first step in deeply comprehending concepts about the Sun. Mr. Connolly realizes that students must next

text to make a contrastive analysis. Even young students can be taught to take notes about what they are learning. A chart such as Figure 1.2 enables students to compile information for a closer understanding of a topic as understood through analysis of several texts.

By analyzing these texts with their teacher, Mr. Connolly, the students were able to understand the topical knowledge and language because he provided instruction that involved modeling, guiding, and observing recursively through continual assessment of the students' performance as related to the lesson purpose. He considers the task, as well as the

included in anthologies, can be revisited for a deeper level of analysis of character development. Ms. Chin and her fifth-grade students returned to a text several times to accomplish the lesson purpose. In the following discussion, notice how she scaffolded the instruction to ensure that they gained the identified insights.

Ms. Chin began this lesson sequence by telling students that the purpose was to discover how characters' lives could be changed by chance encounters or fate. She shared that while reading, the students

woman. I bet the boy wished he hadn't messed with her. He sounds scared since his teeth rattled.

"The woman asked the boy if she was bothering him, and the boy said no. It also says that 'you put yourself in contact with me...[and] if you think that that contact is not going to last awhile, you got another thought coming.' This tells me that their encounter, their meeting, will have a big impact on this boy's life. Perhaps he will be changed forever. I wonder if there are more clues about how this boy's life is changing.

"Yes, I know he is changing because it says that after he looked at her, 'there was a long pause. A very long pause. After he had dried his face and not knowing what else to do, dried it again, the boy turned around, wondering what next.' Later, it says, 'The boy's mouth opened. Then he frowned, not knowing he frowned.' I think he is very touched that this woman is helping him, and maybe nobody has ever helped him before, so he doesn't know what to do or say.

Here at the end, it says that 'the boy wanted to say something other than, 'Thank you, m'am,'...but although his lips moved, he couldn't even say that.' I'm imagining his lips opening, but the words of gratitude couldn't come out. I really think no one had treated the boy like this, and he was used to being mistreated or neglected, so I think his life had been changed by this woman's kindness."

After thinking aloud, Ms. Chin and the students engaged in a discussion using a series of text-dependent questions to help them uncover more evidence regarding the main character's transformation. The following are some of the questions discussed:

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to write, assuming that the characters would meet again. The students each wrote a dialogue between the boy and the woman, describing their second encounter—a week, a month, or a year later.

By analyzing these dialogues, Ms. Chin was able to assess whether her students had gained an understanding of the developing characters and also an understanding that characters change over time as a result of their experiences. Based on this information, she was able to plan subsequent instruction. As this example illustrates, to fully comprehend and analyze a text, and regardless of their instructional reading levels, students can read, discuss, and scrutinize a text multiple times to conduct a deep analysis and comprehension, with their teacher acting as a guide. Each revisit strengthens the readers' base of knowledge, language, concrete reasoning, evaluative judgment, and text analysis skills.

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It's difficult to create a simple lesson to teach students to understand a complex text. It takes time to develop the thinking skills necessary to read complex texts. It also takes really good instruction. We think it is possible to teach students to read complex texts, but that teaching requires more than assigning students hard books and hoping that they get better at reading. Teaching starts with a deep understanding about what makes text complex. In the chapters that follow, we explore quantitative and qualitative factors of text complexity, as well as tasks that increase or decrease that complexity. We also focus on instruction and assessment of complex texts through close readings and extensive discussions. With this understanding, lessons can be developed that ensure that students are prepared for the wide range of reading and writing that they will do throughout their lives.

As we discuss and illustrate with examples shared throughout this book, close reading requires a revisiting of how texts are both read and taught. With appropriate instructional supports, texts can be reread and analyzed to unearth complex structures, themes, and insights. Revisiting a text offers the possibility that all readers will be challenged to think more deeply about texts that they are already able to comfortably and fluently decode and understand at a surface level. The emphasis can then be on





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