

The Critical Role of Text Complexity in Teaching Children to Read

Introduction

Sometimes what is obvious is also what is most important (Meek 1988, 2011). An obvious truth about reading instruction is that readers learn to read by reading. And they learn to read well by reading with proficiency every day. It seems obvious that learning anything requires engaging in the act with a satisfying and informative degree of success. Learning to read means that every day of every year, children must be significantly engaged in processing a great variety of texts.

Our goal is to teach in such a way that our students build a reading life, one that not only includes highly proficient reading of fiction and nonfiction texts but also one that includes reading voluntarily in great quantity and using reading as a tool for lifelong learning. Readers need a variety of well-written, accessible, highly engaging texts in a variety of genres. Assuring a literate life for all students means making it possible for them to deeply understand genres, authors, illustrators, text formats, text purpose and audience, as well as academic language.

In this paper we examine several factors that, according to research, make a difference in students' literacy learning. Each factor is highly related to the selection and use of texts in classrooms, including books for whole-group instruction, small-group instruction, and individual teaching.

All students need access to complex ideas and content and to high-quality literature. Through engagement with complex texts, they build content knowledge that is important in comprehending both nonfiction and fiction texts (Shanahan 2012). But we need to think about what we mean when we talk about text complexity. Texts may be analyzed quantitatively (using computer software, for example), but researchers suggest that qualitative analyses that only a human reader can offer are also critical to understanding text complexity (Anderson et al. 1985).

Comprehension of nonfiction texts is especially dependent on the reader's background knowledge. The more texts a reader processes, the more he knows and can bring to future reading. According to Hampton and Resnick (2008), background knowledge involves much more than information and facts. It

includes ways of thinking about the content and recognizing and understanding the typical types of organization that nonfiction writers use.

Prior knowledge is an important factor in determining how deeply readers will comprehend nonfiction texts (Pressley et al. 1992). When a reader already knows something about a topic, there is less new content to synthesize. The reader has more attention to give to the new content and to the bigger ideas and themes. Comprehension of fiction is also related to the reader's prior knowledge. Readers with high exposure to texts have developed mental models of the characteristics of each genre—a complicated set of understandings that take years to develop (Fountas & Pinnell 2012). In addition, many fiction genres—historical fiction, for example—require background knowledge to understand the role of the setting and the events that take place.

Recently text complexity has gained more attention (Fisher et al. 2012). The importance of text complexity, along with the suggestion to employ “close reading,” has been recognized in the Common Core State Standards (2010) and in numerous, often conflicting, interpretations. No one disagrees that text complexity is an important consideration in selecting instructional materials; nor is there disagreement on the goal of on-grade-level or above-grade-level reading for all students. There are diverging views, however, about the correct path to grade-level proficiency. Standards must require grade-level or higher performance; that's the definition of a standard. But standards do not usually prescribe that students must spend all their time reading texts that are extremely hard for them, with no access to books that will help them learn. In our view, the Common Core State Standards do not call for such an instructional approach.

Our position is that students should have numerous opportunities to engage with complex, grade-appropriate fiction and nonfiction texts in both whole-class and small-group settings and that students need to comprehend these texts in a deep way. They should read the most complex texts they can process for themselves (with strong teaching support). And we must remember that all students can think, talk, and even write about

texts that are beyond their current abilities. The classroom literacy program can create these opportunities to stretch thinking and expand vocabulary and content knowledge.

If students cannot decode all the words in a text, they need to access the complex language and concepts in other ways—for example, through digital recordings or teacher read-alouds. Often, the texts teachers read aloud to students are too difficult for *most of the students* in the class to read independently (especially in the primary grades); however, students can benefit greatly from the experience of hearing, thinking, talking, and writing about these texts (Elley 1989; Fountas & Pinnell 2012; Teale 1984; Ray 2006). These instructional settings may be whole-class read-aloud lessons, as well as small-group book clubs that include in-depth discussion with peers.

Differentiated Classroom Instruction and Intervention: The Importance of Leveled Texts

While all students need access to age-appropriate, grade-appropriate reading materials every day, we also have to recognize that not all students are the same in their ability to read and understand texts. Struggling through a text that is too difficult, working on a large percentage of words to the extent that comprehension is minimal, and reading without fluency will not help a reader build the systems of strategic actions that mark a good reader at a particular grade level. Struggling readers need access to texts that allow them to perform like good, proficient readers. They need differentiated instruction during a part of their day, every day.

The purpose of differentiated instruction is to *move readers forward* so that they increase their reading ability daily. Students do need to take on more texts that are more difficult than those they can presently read independently. But the gap cannot be so great that the reader has no access to most of the words and the meaning of the text. It is the combination of well-selected texts and strong small-group teaching that allows a reader’s reading ability to rise. The key to effective differentiated teaching is a gradient of text.

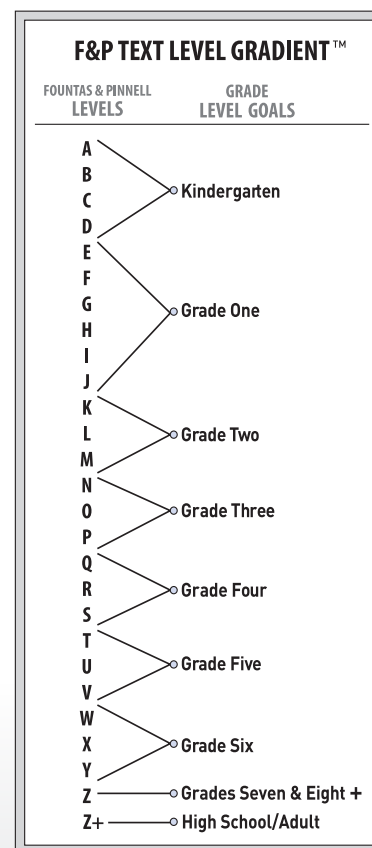
Text selection for differentiated reading instruction is a challenging task for teachers. They need to find texts that give students opportunities to grow. Most students cannot improve their reading ability independently—they need to be taught. Through guided reading lessons and conferences, you interact with them in ways that support efficient processing. But you cannot provide good teaching if the text you use is inappropriate. If the text is too easy, students do not face enough challenges to learn; if it is too hard, no amount of good teaching will help. (Fountas & Pinnell 2001, 225)

A Gradient of Text

A gradient of text consists of a set of categories into which texts are organized from easiest to hardest. The gradient that we have created and tested for years is shown in Figure 1. Detailed descriptions of the texts at each level make it possible to judge the “level” of a book using a reliable process (see fountasandpinnell-leveledbooks.com).

Many researchers and educators have found it useful to analyze texts in order to determine a precise way to match texts to readers’ abilities. We use a system that incorporates both quantitative and qualitative features of texts, for example, sentence length and complexity, as well as the length and difficulty of words to be decoded. For beginning readers, the number of lines on the page and the layout are extremely important. Also, the level of vocabulary is considered; the more tier 2 words (not usually encountered in everyday oral language) and tier 3 words (technical terms related to a discipline) a text contains, the more difficult it will be for readers (Beck & McKeown 1991).

We also consider book and print features, such as font, length of text, layout, and the many graphic features, that offer challenge to readers. The structure of a text—the way it is organized and



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Figure 1.

presented—is a key factor in the level of difficulty a text presents readers. The structure may be *narrative*, as in most fiction and biographical texts, and those narratives may range from very simple to highly complex. Informational texts are organized categorically or topically and may have sections with headings and subheadings. The more complex the divisions and subdivisions of text, the more challenge that text offers the reader (although headings help make it accessible). Another aspect of text structure is that within nonfiction texts, there are underlying structures such as compare and contrast and cause and effect that are important factors to consider in judging the difficulty of the text.

Genre, content, and themes and ideas must also be considered. At each level of the text gradient, the content load becomes heavier, the themes and ideas are more mature, and greater knowledge of genre is required. A text may have simple sentences and words but deal with complex content and ideas or mature themes. The amount of background knowledge—*what readers already know*—is a critical factor in determining how much they will comprehend (Anderson & Pearson 1984; Hampton & Resnick 2008; Pressley et al. 1992). Therefore, while content cannot be quantitatively (mathematically) assessed, it must be considered in calculating text difficulty. Prior knowledge does not refer to the reader’s knowledge of a topic alone; readers also learn ways of thinking within a discipline and the forms and structures typically used to organize information. They build mental models of how knowledge is connected within a subject and to other subjects (Hampton & Resnick 2008).

Looking *only* at features that are easy to quantify can be misleading when it comes to understanding what it takes to comprehend a text. Accurate reading, although extremely important, is not the same as deep understanding. Even literal understanding is not sufficient evidence that a reader comprehends a text. Today’s standards (see the CCCS) require that readers be able to think *within* (literal understanding), *beyond* (using inference, making predictions, synthesizing new knowledge, and applying personal and world knowledge), and *about* (analyzing and critiquing) a text.

Both decoding and comprehension must be considered when matching books to readers. A text is not *easy* for a student simply because he or she can read it with high accuracy. Many students can decode their way through a text without understanding key ideas. (There are different perspectives on what “high accuracy” means. Our position is that students need to solve new words and think in complex ways against a background of *sufficient* accuracy.) We analyze a text across ten text factors that make a difference in text difficulty (see Figure 2).

This system recognizes text complexity as it intersects with the reading process.

When we consider this range of factors, all of which are important, we realize that text complexity is far more than a “number”, a “level”, or a “score”. Each level of our F&P Text Level Gradient™ stands for a constellation of cognitive behaviors and understandings that the reader must acquire and apply to meet the demands of a text. We have detailed the text characteristics, as well as the required behaviors and understandings for decoding and deep comprehension, at each level in *The Continuum of Literacy Learning, K–8* (Pinnell & Fountas 2008). This rigorous instructional tool supports teachers in analyzing reading behavior and making the instructional moves necessary to move students forward in the development of reading abilities. Teachers use *The Continuum* in whole-group, small-group, and individual instructional settings.

Structured Small-Group Instruction

Creating access to texts requires that teachers have detailed information about readers at regular points in time and can provide strong teaching. When making decisions about small-group instruction, teachers usually conduct an individual assessment that not only measures accuracy and fluency but gathers behavioral evidence of strategic actions. The teacher knows what the student can do independently, what the student can do with teacher help, and what the student needs to learn next.

Small-group reading instruction, commonly called *guided reading*, provides a structure within which teachers can support students in reading texts that challenge them because they are at a level that makes effective processing *possible* with teacher support. The same is true for the texts used in small-group reading interventions.

Students are not brought together in a group simply to read “easy” texts; any statement to that effect reflects a misunderstanding of guided reading or small-group intervention. Instead, the texts are—must be—challenging because reading is a “self-extending” process (Clay 1991). As readers apply strategic actions to meet challenges (word solving, fluency, decoding), they extend and refine their ability to read. A principle of learning is that teaching brings learners beyond their boundaries; that is, it leads them to do more than they can do independently (Vygotsky 1962). As they engage in effective actions, they are soon able to do independently what they needed teacher support for yesterday, but the teaching moves on to push the boundaries further.

Factors Related to Text Difficulty	
FACTOR	DEFINITION
Genre	The <i>genre</i> is the type of text and refers to a system by which fiction and nonfiction texts are classified. Each genre has characteristic features.
Text Structure	The structure is the way the text is organized and presented. It may be <i>narrative</i> , as in most fiction and biographical texts. Factual texts are organized categorically or topically and may have sections with headings. Writers of factual texts use several underlying structural patterns to provide information to readers: <i>enumeration, chronological sequence, comparison/contrast, cause/effect, and problem/solution</i> . The presence of these structures, especially in combination, can increase the challenge for readers.
Content	The content refers to the subject matter of the text—the concepts that are important to understand. In fiction, content may be related to the setting or to the kinds of problems characters encounter. In factual texts, content refers to the topic being focused on. Content is considered in relation to the prior experience of readers.
Themes and Ideas	The themes and ideas are the big ideas that are communicated by the text. A text may have multiple themes or a main theme and several supporting themes or ideas.
Language and Literary Features	Written language is qualitatively different from spoken language. Fiction writers use dialogue, figurative language, and other kinds of literary structures. Factual writers use description and technical language. In hybrid texts you may find a wide range of literary language.
Sentence Complexity	Meaning is mapped onto the syntax of language. Texts with simpler, more natural sentences are easier to process. Sentences with embedded and conjoined clauses make a text more difficult.
Vocabulary	Vocabulary refers to the meaning of words and is part of our oral language. The more the words are accessible to readers in terms of meaning, the easier a text will be. An individual's <i>reading and writing vocabularies</i> are words that they understand and can also read or write.
Words	A text contains printed words that must be recognized and solved. The challenge in a text partly depends on the number and difficulty of the words that the reader must solve by recognizing them or decoding them. A text that contains a great many of the same common words makes a text more accessible to readers.
Illustrations	The illustrations are the drawings, paintings, or photographs that accompany the text and add meaning and enjoyment. In factual texts, illustrations also include graphic representations that provide a great deal of information readers must integrate with the text. Illustrations are an integral part of a high-quality text. Increasingly, fiction texts include a range of graphics.
Book and Print Features	The book and print features are the physical aspects of the text—what readers cope with in terms of length, size, and layout. Book and print features also include tools like the table of contents, glossary, pronunciation guide, index, and sidebars.

Figure 2.

Motivation and Self-Efficacy

When considering text complexity, motivation and self-efficacy are also essential. Students need a sense of agency, a feeling that they are behaving competently; this, in turn, increases their motivation for engaging with a text. Motivation has long been considered a very important factor in learning to read (Guthrie et al. 1999). When students struggle through books that are much too difficult, not only does the process break down into word calling with little comprehension, but also the student loses the sense of agency. She becomes dependent on the teacher, often needing to read the selection or text many times. Meanwhile, interest and motivation flag. Agency is created when students read a new, more challenging text with competence every day. Agency is created when students have the opportunity to talk with others about the complex ideas in texts that they have read and also in those that they have heard read aloud and thought about.

Conclusion: Navigating Literacy Education

For at least the last five decades, literacy education has been bombarded by loud and competing voices. There are multiple views on almost every aspect of teaching reading, and often, studies have conflicting findings (or at least conflicting interpretations of the findings). It is the nature of the researcher to focus on one area of study—sometimes taking a very narrow view in order to tease out some detailed information. Educators struggle between the desire to expose students to rich text complexity—which is indeed students’ right—while at the same time remaining consistent with enduring theories of learning (Vygotsky 1962) that suggest learners need challenge with scaffolding but not struggle. Through this discussion, the art and power of teaching shines brightly (Clay 1991). In this paper we have examined views of text complexity as well as the role of the teacher in helping students grow. Students need multiple ways to access complex, age-appropriate texts. Some they may hear and

talk about, stretching their ability to think and comprehend. Others they may read in a small-group instructional situation, stretching their ability to process the most complex texts they can with teacher support. These instructional contexts have important implications for helping readers grow.

If we are serious about high literacy achievement, then we must be certain that our classroom materials offer the richest learning opportunities possible, and our teachers are provided the opportunity to cultivate professional growth that supports them in delivering highly effective instruction. The combination of these two elements is the single most important factor in students' literacy success.

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