



De-Mystifying Complex Texts: What are “complex” texts and how can we ensure ELLs/MLLs can access them?

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Complex Text and English Language Learners (ELLs)/Multilingual Learners (MLLs)

The New York state P-12 Common Core Learning Standards for English Language Arts (ELA) and Literacy (“the Standards”) state that students graduating from high school should be able to “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.” This challenging goal for learning is not unique to students’ high school years. Rather, it is embedded in the learning standards throughout the K-12 grades so that students develop this ability over time, a skill that ultimately they will need throughout their lives. In addition, the ELA standards require that students engage with complex texts across a variety of disciplines. Comprehending text in different disciplines involves understanding the purposes, concepts, structural organization and language use unique to those disciplines, a consideration about learning in most disciplines that has typically not been explicitly addressed.

Because the idea of complex text permeates all the disciplines and levels of schooling, concern about its implications for teaching goes far beyond the high school English teacher. The new focus on complex texts across the disciplines generalizes these concerns (about not only how to select appropriate text materials but also how to support students in reading and comprehending complex texts) to all teachers. These concerns become particularly heightened when we consider English Language Learners (ELLs)/Multilingual Learners (MLLs) in our classrooms, the students who are simultaneously asked to read *and* comprehend complex texts in a language they are still learning.

What is a “complex text”?

According to the Standards complexity is defined along three dimensions:

- 1) *Quantitative* elements of a text such as word length, word frequency, and sentence length;
- 2) *Qualitative* factors of a text such as text meaning or purpose, text structure, language conventions and clarity; and
- 3) *Reader and task* considerations that reflect characteristics of a specific reader, such as the reader’s background, motivation, and knowledge about the topic, and the specific task, such as the purpose and complexity of the task and the questions asked



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The challenges of a narrow focus on quantitative dimensions of complexity

Although the Standards identify three elements in defining text complexity, emphasis is placed on the quantitative dimension, a dimension that can be easily measured. This narrow focus on the quantitative aspects of text is problematic for numerous reasons and can lead to instructional challenges that are particularly amplified for ELLs/MLLs. Specifically, when the emphasis is on quantitative measures, the focus is shifted away from the reader and the substance of the text and equally if not more important factors are minimized, such as the reader’s interest in and knowledge of the topic, familiarity with the text genre, and understanding of a text’s purpose. As a result, we fail to consider the particular difficulties ELLs/MLLs face in accessing a text and rely on strategies that are less than ideal for them.



Thus, when considering text complexity, it is useful to move beyond examining only quantitative features to consider the following questions:

- 1) What makes a specific text *difficult* for my students?
- 2) How can I, as a teacher, make a text more *accessible* to my students?

What are the particular difficulties of texts for ELLs/MLLs?

Text difficulty refers to challenges a reader experiences with particular texts under specific conditions. For ELLs/MLLs, challenges in accessing a text can arise from a multitude of factors, some of which have to do with their own prior experience (e.g., level of schooling, literacy in their native language) and some have to do with the instructional context (e.g., counterproductive use of simplified texts, learning tasks that discourage engagement in reading, and insufficient support for developing metacognitive reading skills). What follows is a more detailed discussion of these factors that can be controlled by teachers, followed by strategies that teachers can employ to support students' access to, interaction with, and learning from complex text.

Simplified text

Simplified text is text that has been rewritten with the intention of being understood by second language learners.

The counterintuitive effect and challenge of simplification

In order to support ELLs'/MLLs' access to challenging texts, a common strategy used by some publishers and teachers is to revise and "simplify" texts for ELLs/MLLs. This strategy is guided by the mistaken notion that fewer quantitative elements (e.g., word frequency count, sentence length, count) automatically make a text more comprehensible and, conversely, that a text with increased linguistic complexity makes it less comprehensible. In reality, the reverse is true for ELLs/MLLs. With a focus on simplifying the linguistic features of a text, the elements that precisely make written language comprehensible are taken away. For example, while connectors make a sentence longer, they both alert and clearly establish the meaningful connection between the propositions made within a text. Eliminating these important text features leaves the ELL/MLL reader with little syntactic and semantic cohesion to support understanding. The time, effort, and intent of the teacher who has worked so hard to create a comprehensible text for her ELL/MLL students, has unknowingly provided her ELLs/MLLs with a text that has so little natural linguistic material to work with, it is actually more challenging to comprehend. For example, note the lack of cohesion and the inauthentic nature of the following simplified text (Yano, Long, & Ross, 1994, p. 193, as cited in Bunch, Walqui, & Pearson, 2014):

- **Original Text:** Because he had to work at night to support his family, Paco often fell asleep in class.
- **Simplified Text:** Paco had to make money for his family. Paco worked at night. He often went to sleep in class.

As this example demonstrates, a text that has been pared down can often be more complex and difficult for ELLs/MLLs as it challenges them to make sense of themes and concepts with minimal linguistic clues to do so. Contrary to what we might expect, simplifying a text becomes a case not of "less is more" but rather "less is more complex"!

The challenge of engagement

Engagement refers both to a student's direct interaction with the text as well as pedagogically guided activity through specified reading tasks. For ELLs/MLLs, challenges in accessing a text can lead to disengagement if they have inadequate support, struggle excessively to process it, or if they cannot relate to the text. Similarly, ELLs/MLLs may disengage if the tasks related to the text are not an appropriate match for the text and/or goals of the lesson, are not well-scaffolded or fail to pique their interest. Initial learning cannot take place without the active engagement of the learner. Challenges of engagement reside mainly within the lack of activating background knowledge, inadequate scaffolding, including the development of metacognitive skills.

Lack of background knowledge activation

Background knowledge - knowledge students have which was learned through formal and informal learning experiences - is essential for reading comprehension, task engagement, and content learning. When a teacher assigns either a text or a task that does little to draw on ELLs'/MLLs' prior experiences and understandings, they are likely to struggle with comprehension of the text and with successful engagement in the task.

Lack of metacognitive development

Metacognition, having awareness of what is and is not understood in a text, and what one may do to enhance understanding, is a critical skill used by efficient readers throughout the reading process. Metacognition helps students become autonomous readers and is developed through activities undertaken prior to, during, and after engagement with a text. ELLs'/MLLs who have not been taught metacognitive development skills are less likely to approach reading in a strategic manner, have fewer reading comprehension strategies to draw on, and are less likely to monitor and evaluate their own reading processes and understanding. In fact, we could say that metacognition is part of the road to autonomy in learning. Conversely, the lack of metacognitive skills not only has a negative impact on reading efficiency, but also comprehension, and engagement in reading in general. A learner who is not aware of what he does not understand, and what he may apply to repair this lack of understanding, is lost.

Lack of metalinguistic development

Metalinguistic awareness, a type of metacognition, refers to an awareness of how language is used in different types of texts. It alerts students to the purposes, organization of language, and the realization that language structures can be manipulated. Good readers have developed an understanding of text organization and structure across genres and disciplines which they apply as they read a text. For example, they understand that in a non-fiction recount, such as a biography, the purpose is to recount episodes from another person's life. Furthermore, they learn that in this type of text events are typically presented in chronological order beginning with when the person was born. For ELLs'/MLLs, a lack of metalinguistic knowledge of text structure can lead to less than efficient reading, lack of comprehension, and frustration.

How can we make complex text more *accessible* to ELLs'/MLLs?

Here we present two ways of making texts more accessible to ELLs'/MLLs: pedagogical scaffolding and text engineering. Together, these strategies can address the difficulties ELLs'/MLLs face in accessing challenging texts.

Pedagogical Scaffolding

Pedagogical scaffolding occurs when the teacher invites students to engage in activities before, during, and after reading a text which provide them with opportunities to make sense of, analyze, connect and finally apply their newly gained understanding in novel situations. Pedagogical scaffolding supports students in developing essential skills to tackle difficult text both now and in the future. Important pedagogical scaffolds for ELLs'/MLLs include thoughtful selection of engaging texts and tasks in which we activate or build on students' background knowledge, support the development of students' metacognitive skills and their metalinguistic awareness.

Background knowledge

When a teacher carefully selects a text and prepares students with tasks which activate or build needed background knowledge (e.g., inviting them to read in a jigsaw format about life during the times of Shakespeare before they begin to read Macbeth), engagement in both text and task is optimized and learning new information becomes easier. Therefore, it is critical that we as educators get to know our students, including their interests, strengths, and prior learning and use this information as we select texts and design learning tasks.

Metacognitive skill development

Time taken to explicitly model and teach ELLs/MLLs metacognitive skills can lead to increased development of strategies and resources. These are further amplified when the student draws on both L1 and L2 metacognitive resources to successfully engage in strategic reading. The idea is to support students with critical skill development so that challenges in reading can be handled in the moment, to then build on students' ability to handle challenges in the future. In this way, a teacher supports students' growth of autonomy in the reading process and their agency as learners.

Metalinguistic awareness

It is critical that we explicitly, and in interactive and powerful ways, teach ELLs/MLLs text structures, along with their accompanying discourse signals, and how to apply this knowledge while reading. Furthermore, given that many English words are derived from Greek and Latin, ELLs/MLLs who speak a romance language can be additionally supported to recognize the many cognates, words that are similar in spelling and meaning, that exist between the languages. Cognates then become an additional metalinguistic resource ELLs/MLLs can use as they tackle challenging texts.

Text engineering

Text engineering involves 1) strategic amplification (not simplification) of the language of a text through additional linguistic clues and redundancy and 2) adaptation of key structural elements such as chunking the text into meaningful units, adding headings and subheadings between the chunks that alert the student as to what is coming next, and incorporating focus questions to guide the student as s/he reads. ELLs/MLLs need as many opportunities as possible to latch onto a concept or theme as well as access to good language models that demonstrate important language qualities.

In contrast to simplified text, a carefully engineered text contains richer linguistic features (e.g., higher word counts, multisyllabic words, and complex sentences) and thus can provide more clues to its meaning leading to increased opportunities to support comprehension. Text engineering serves to make reading a difficult text more manageable and supports the eventual autonomy of the learner who begins to expect these structures and eventually internalizes them, thus creating a habit of mind as s/he approaches future texts.

Addressing text difficulty in action: Text engineering

The visual above is an example of text engineering in which the text has been "chunked" into units. Above each chunk, subtitles and focus questions have been inserted so as to alert the student to the most important information without revealing everything. Also included are pictures to help students visualize what they are reading, captions which elaborate on terminology that is new for learners, as well as a space in the margin for taking notes.

We hope you found the ideas in this brief informative and useful. Please see our other briefs for additional information on pedagogical issues related to the effective instruction of ELLs/MLLs.

module ten CLASSROOM EXEMPLAR

UNIT: Informational Texts
LESSON: Reading and Writing Informational Text

Group 1
Cheyenne Emerick:
A Dream Turned Nightmare

notes

Cheyenne Emerick used to be a happy, carefree snowboarder. Now he never knows when an epileptic seizure will send him crashing and thrashing to the ground. As the uncontrollable fits take over his body, he jerks, roars, and screeches. Saliva foams out of his mouth. He is not aware of a fit when it is going on. But when it is over, he says that he can tell how intense a seizure was by the look on the faces of the people around him. "They're always, always scared out of their minds," he says.

Cheyenne was interviewed by Michael Paul Mason, who wrote about him, and other people with brain injuries, in a book called *Head Cases*. This is Cheyenne's story.

An Accident on the Mountain
How did Cheyenne's accident happen? How did he get injured?

When Cheyenne Emerick and his friends started snowboarding, they rode the icy slopes of Sugarloaf Mountain in Maine — as fast as they could. Like many young people, they thought they were invincible, that no harm could come to them even as they flew down the mountain at sixty miles per hour or soared through the air.

A snowboarding magazine took photographs and wrote about Cheyenne and his friends. After that, they thought they were special, that they could do anything. They decided to tackle the mountain that is every snowboarder's dream, the dramatic Snowbird Mountain in Utah.

The boys said goodbye to their families and headed west.

On Cheyenne's first day at Snowbird, he looked down from the chairlift that was taking him to the top of the mountain. He was excited to see that the trail down would take him over a thirty-foot cliff.

Chairlifts carry snowboarders to the top of mountain trails.

A snowboarder's dream is to soar through the air, flying high above the snow.

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