



# Placing Text at the Center of the Standards-Aligned ELA Classroom

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## Introduction

Reading instruction in America is broken. Only slightly more than a third of our students are reading at proficient levels as measured by the NAEP, and scores have been stubbornly flat for over two decades<sup>1</sup>. What is the reason for the utter lack of progress in reading scores despite new, challenging standards and the fact that teachers are working harder than ever? While there is current research that points at effective instruction to develop literacy, many teachers have not been made aware of it and, therefore, do not know how to focus on the right approaches. Only rarely have teachers been provided with a chance to develop a solid understanding of the key ingredients of reading comprehension, all of which require placing text at the center of the standards-aligned classroom. These include:

- Securing solid foundational reading skills (so students are fluent readers at every grade level);
- Building students' vocabulary (both to be acquired through context and in word study);
- Growing students' general knowledge of the world from reading (so they have a trove of knowledge to reference when they read); and
- Parsing complex text by helping all students develop a standard of coherence (the expectation that what they read should make sense) through regular, close reading of rich text.

Many educators have embraced placing texts at the center of instruction while working to raise expectations for their students, but others have continued to engage comprehension strategies and skills as a list to teach and check off in isolation, which has cost children dearly. Even more costly has been a disregard for systematic attention to foundational skills by too many voices in the field. The resultant lack of understanding of its critical importance has further eroded literacy instruction.

In ELA beyond Foundational Skills, interim assessments that report out by isolated skills have cemented the focus of instruction on isolated standards or strategies that have been counterproductive to the success of far too many students.

Teachers who then lead with comprehension strategies and skills often wrestle with why their students do not make expected gains. Without knowledge of better ways to promote literacy success, teachers and administrators continue with instructional methods with which they are familiar, despite those methods' failure to boost student achievement demonstrably. When educators first encounter the research base and the logic that undergirds more effective practices, it can be dislocating. It is tough for any one of us to confront the idea that we may not have been working in optimal ways for our students to become competent and literate young adults.

This paper intends to articulate the vision for what an evidence-based model for text-centered instruction could look like (that includes strategies instruction in the way that research suggests is productive), and to make the case for interim assessment reporting categories that would help drive that instruction. The breakdown in knowledge regarding the building blocks fostering strong readers is ultimately a problem that needs to be addressed in the longer term via overhauled teacher preparation programming and better interim assessment analysis. But we cannot wait for the long term. There is much we can and should do immediately to advance current classroom practices so texts are at the center of classroom instruction and assessment.

1. U.S. Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2017. Retrieved from [https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading\\_2017/#?grade=4](https://www.nationsreportcard.gov/reading_2017/#?grade=4)

There is a significant hearts and minds aspect to setting these ways of instructing students aside so that the field can move forward together to make real progress for students. The plan is to disseminate models through partners working directly with schools, districts, states, and teacher training organizations to build momentum. This paper is also designed to prompt the development of free digital tools to help accomplish this change in classrooms, tools that can be distributed through open source portals such as *achievethecore.org* and made freely available for modification by partners. Along with directly pushing interim assessment vendors to explore innovations and to reform reporting on interim assessments, these efforts should gradually start to cause recalibration. Though not an easy set of issues to address, nor quick to repair, this multi-pronged approach should start to disrupt existing practices and, in their place, lodge practices that reflect the key ingredients of improved reading comprehension.

## The Design and Proper Use of College- and Career-Readiness Standards in ELA/Literacy

It is useful to take a minute to examine the structure of the ELA/Literacy Common Core State Standards—or their near equivalent<sup>2</sup> college- and career-ready (CCR) standards in states.

In ELA/literacy, the new college- and career-ready standards collectively illustrate what a competent English language user should be able to do at the end of each grade. That competency is collected and described through four interrelated strands that form the Language Arts tapestry: speaking and listening, language use, writing, and reading. Together they place the text at the center of the standards-aligned classroom.

There is intentional redundancy baked into those strands even *within* each grade: standards that name proficiency in listening are frequently paralleled in reading. Standards that name desired levels of literacy in written expression have parallels in the speaking standards. Word awareness and vocabulary attributes show up in all four strands to indicate the central place words have in literacy. Using evidence to support inferences, claims, and conclusions shows up in the reading, writing, and speaking and listening strands. Moreover, the *exact* same competencies, the *exact* same focuses—all derived from the design of the anchor standards— show up in every grade from kindergarten through the end of high school, albeit at different levels of sophistication. For *thirteen* years! Reading Standard 4 is always word awareness and vocabulary. Reading Standard 1 and Writing Standard 9 are always about providing evidence from texts. Each standard gets progressively more challenging and nuanced annually, but they all echo each other in thirteen grade sets that collectively are the ELA/literacy standards. Ultimately, as in all highly complex activities, proficiency comes through deliberate practice. Practice means doing lots and lots of reading, combined with judicious instruction to assist in understanding those texts, while also learning to express their meaning and import through speaking and writing along the way.

While there is a dearth of research on the ideal sequence or progression for student expectations in ELA, there are models demonstrating the importance of reading tasks growing in rigor as students advance through the grades to be prepared to meet the demands of college and the workplace. These tie in to the

2. Fordham Report: The State of State Standards. 8/22/2018. <https://edexcellence.net/publications/the-state-of-state-standards-post-common-core>

research presented by the ACT in its landmark study. That study, *Reading Between the Lines*<sup>3</sup>, showed clearly that a reader's ability to handle the demands of complex text by wielding evidence was *the* distinguishing characteristic separating someone who was prepared to meet the demands of higher education, a range of careers, and civic engagement upon departing high school and someone who was not. *This* is why there is an emphasis on text complexity through Reading Standard 10 at every grade level. It raises the stakes radically on what a competent student should be able to demonstrate and do because it demands that all the other standards be utilized while reading progressively more complex text. A disproportionate majority of students who graduate with this capacity underdeveloped come from economically poor circumstances or are students of color, so this is a matter of both excellence and equity.

Foundational reading standards are a notable exception to this unified design of the ELA CCR standards that otherwise demand a focus on the text as the central organizing unit for instruction and learning. Foundational reading standards operate more like the math standards. They provide specifics that are translatable into day-to-day instructional guidance, and suggest, in macro fashion, the sequence by which reading should be taught to students. The foundational skills standards map onto each other year after year. They are progressive—much like the math standards—with Major Work of each grade obvious, and that work shifts in developmental patterns that slowly build (in this case) proficiency and fluency in reading. While students are being taught to read, the foundational standards, and the phonetic sequence they point to, reign supreme.

Foundational skills need to be systematically taught and robustly practiced, skill after skill in a research-grounded sequence. Teachers must therefore focus on each foundational reading standard. Each names a slice of the skills and knowledge (print concepts, phonological awareness, phonics, word recognition, and fluency) that together constitute what the brain needs to learn and do to read. They all not only have to be taught, but also to be *learned*. The decodable texts students practice with should be in service to those learned standards to enable students to practice their newly acquired reading abilities. Such texts are central to providing students enough exposures to new phonics patterns to lock them in forever. Once fully mastered, these standards form the foundation from which readers can comprehend the words and sentences they read, and students can thereafter make sense of reading for themselves.

The remaining ELA standards in reading, writing, speaking and listening, and language need to be approached holistically, with the text itself pointing to which distinct standards arise from its particular demands. Standards are designed to be annual targets and reference points. They hold us to a common set of expectations for what well-educated students should be able to know and do by the end of each grade to be on track for success by the time their public school careers end and students move out into careers or more study, and into active engagement in civic affairs. The standards in the four strands should be referenced in instructional planning and kept top of mind while teaching students to plumb at the appropriate challenge, the particular structure(s), concepts, vocabulary, ideas, and details of the texts they are reading. But the standards themselves are not the goal of daily instruction; understanding the texts encountered and being able to express that understanding is.

3. ACT. (2006). *Reading between the lines: what the ACT reveals about college readiness in reading*. Iowa City, IA.

## What is Common Instructional Practice (Despite Adoption of New Standards)?

Comprehension strategies are the habits and internalized practices of successful readers. Individuals who enjoy reading expect to understand what they read and do something about it when they do not. They should be activated when the text stops making sense to a reader. Strategies that have scads of evidence supporting their value when confronting difficult text<sup>4</sup> can and should be employed strategically, as the research and their name suggest, and always in service to students' understanding of the text. *But* most educators have been taught—and therefore teach—that reading better is a matter of assembling a quiver of reading comprehension strategies to aim at any reading task. Too often, reading strategies are made to be the very objective of a lesson, rather than a means to a larger goal: understanding all that a rich text has to teach and say to us. Because of that, educators often *directly teach* comprehension strategies and have students practice and focus on them to the exclusion of gaining a fuller understanding of the texts. The strategies become the central focus when reading—the opposite of how the complex, interconnected work of reading comprehension operates.

Making matters even worse for students, many teachers and instructional materials have children practice those strategies with texts that are restricted, based on students' established reading "levels," resulting in only the already strong readers being given the opportunity to practice strategies with grade-level text. Relegated to below-grade-level texts, the rest of students (far too many!) have no authentic reason to exercise strategies. Their texts are too simple. Students are limited in their opportunity to confront and work to understand text features and demands that are new to them or with which they are not yet proficient. As noted literacy specialist Tim Shanahan wrote: "They [students] are limited in their opportunity to deal with complicated concepts, syntax, or subtle cohesive links, etc. Simpler texts, by their very nature, lack the features that make text complex, forcing students to artificially practice using strategies where there is no real need. They learn two things about strategies from such an approach: how to implement them and that they have no real value."<sup>5</sup>

There are also drawbacks when teachers or instructional materials misapply standards that embody comprehension skills and make these skills the preeminent driver of daily lessons, rather than centering daily lessons on the complexity, features, and qualities of texts they are asking students to grapple with.

Comprehension skills refer to the abilities required to answer particular kinds of questions about texts. Commonly, they are things like: finding main idea, drawing conclusions, deciphering vocabulary, comparing and contrasting, finding supporting details, inferencing, and sequencing. Comprehension skills of this sort map handily onto CCR reading standards. They are the stuff of questions, central components to be asked to discover how well a reader is making sense of that text and to assist a reader in comprehending it. But there is no research that shows such skills transfer from text to text—with the single exception of focusing

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4. The strategies with the strongest research base are summarization, self-questioning, re-reading when confused, and monitoring comprehension. See Adler, C. R. "Seven strategies to teach students text comprehension." *Reading Rockets* 3479 (2004): 1-5.

5. T. Shanahan. Private correspondence April 2018.



on the meaning of various vocabulary words. For example, being able to sequence ideas in one text does not make you better at sequencing them in the next. The same is true for finding the main idea. There is no carryover payoff for focusing on these discrete skills. Studying the sequence of events or finding the main idea in Text A will not necessarily get students better at sequencing or finding the main idea in Text B. Standards mastery will not arrive via that path, nor will reading enjoyment grow or comprehension of grade level text improve. Yet it is commonplace for teachers and instructional materials to do just this. They organize day-to-day learning goals around discrete activities: “let’s practice finding the main character’s point of view on *these* texts this week and then next week, let’s focus on discerning the text structure,” rather than the richer, text-centered probing: “what is the information this author is presenting to us, how do they present it, and how does that expand or alter my thinking?”

The skills-based approach *seemed* to work fairly well for some students before the advent of new CCR standards, when reading passages were not very complex and questions mapped precisely onto one skill or another. Many students could “game” their way through reading tests fairly successfully by applying strategies to question types. But once assessments were designed to align to CCR levels of text complexity, all bets were off. With grade-level, complex passages now the norm, success depends on a reader’s proficiency with comprehension. That ability grows through reading, in volumes that allow banks of knowledge and vocabulary to accumulate. Students taught to overly rely on a strategies approach have failed to demonstrate proficiency. Reading scores have flat-lined, and strategies instruction and practice have displaced opportunities to read rich text and to learn about words and the world.<sup>6</sup>

For years, almost all teacher preparation programs, traditional ELA instructional materials, and generally accepted practices have sustained the use of both methods (isolated strategies and skills approaches to instruction) unsupported by research. Those in the field have been taught these approaches and then had them reinforced in materials. Unsurprisingly, many educators are resistant—or unaware—of a need to change. On the other hand, a text-centered instructional approach, where the text is carefully analyzed by the teacher when preparing so students will be able, in turn, to explore the text fully and learn from it, has not been a mainstay approach taught in teacher preparation programs, nor has it been the approach embodied in most instructional materials. Even teachers using excellent newly aligned programs are sometimes reverting to a strategies/skills-first use of those materials; they are struggling to implement the lessons as designed because it requires them to unlearn what they have learned over the years—thus ignoring research that clearly points to methods to help students achieve superior comprehension gains.

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6. For much more on this topic, including a discussion of the research findings on comprehension strategies vs. skills, see Tim Shanahan’s blog of May 28, 2018, <http://www.shanahanonline.com/blog/where-questioning-fits-in-comprehension-instruction-skills-and-strategies-part-ii#sthash.X1ilPcEA.dpbs> Retrieved on May 29, 2018

## What is Optimal Practice in Classroom Instruction?

Time is a scarce commodity in classrooms. Students need to spend lots of that time actively reading. They need to be supported while reading content-rich, complex text so they discover how to learn from reading (and grow their knowledge, vocabulary, and understanding of syntax). When reading grade-level complex text, most students need careful instruction and support from their teacher while they engage in a close and thorough exploration of the text. This attention allows them the opportunity to unpack the text's complexity until they have an essential understanding. This "close reading" is an invaluable tool for building up students' reading ability overall. It also bolsters their sense of efficacy and standard of coherence, the expectation that texts should make sense.<sup>7</sup>

Therefore, the text itself is where teachers should spend their planning time. That is how teachers will notice the challenging and crucial parts of texts where understanding is critical or where understanding might break down for students. They can gear instruction around the particulars of the text and discern which grade-level standards the text directs them to focus on. Teachers can plan discussions, activities, questions, and tasks guided by students' needs and strengths, as well as the grade-level ELA standards. This work will enable their students to access those particulars for themselves. This focus on text needs to become the norm when preparing to teach complex text to students.

Close reading is concentrated, demanding work, and is one key ingredient of a text-centered, rich ELA classroom experience for children. Making sure students have a *volume of reading* is another. That volume of reading needs to be at a range of complexity levels, including below grade level, so all the students can read with very limited or no teacher support. Much of this volume of reading should be with information-rich text, either full-length books or conceptually connected shorter texts (groups of texts that together create a picture of a topic). These readings give students a chance to build knowledge and be exposed to academic language with a new topic. In the early years, the more students get to read or be read to, the more they will learn. That learning will yield accelerating returns from then on; this potential for accelerating return is one of the many reasons teaching students how to read by grade 2 is so crucial. Reading should be wrapped frequently in plenty of conversation and be as active as possible. As students learn more, they will have greater access to more and richer texts. They will learn about the world around them and about themselves and their role in that world, and they will also learn more and more words, many of them wrapped in complex sentences. The more words students recognize and the more they see those words in a variety of sentences, the more comfortable they will become and the more learning they will accomplish. The contrast between the purpose of this kind of reading—to understand and learn from what is read—and leveled reading programs, where the primary purpose is to practice a target strategy, is enormous. This core difference sets apart the text-centered approach argued for here versus a strategies-based approach.

As noted, while standards alignment must be considered to ensure students are developing grade-level ELA proficiencies over the course of each year, standards should be in service of understanding the texts students are reading. Reading strategies, too, should be in service of understanding what students are reading. Employing reading strategies is one of a variety of means for students to build that understanding and should be called in when understanding breaks down.<sup>8</sup> Following the research, some strategies should be taught

7. There are many resources available to do the sort of [qualitative text analysis](#) this work requires, and on how to support all students in [accessing complex text through close reading](#).

8. We know that instruction of reading strategies, if done in a certain way (in context, not one at a time), can get a small *one time* bump in reading proficiency. But we also know this bump can be achieved in as little as 5 to 10 sessions of 20 minutes each. (<http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/collateral-damage-of-reading-comprehension-strategy-instruction>). For a stunning study of content focused reading instruction vs. strategies based instruction, see McKeown, M. G., Beck, I. L., & Blake, R. G. (2009). Rethinking reading comprehension instruction: A comparison of instruction for strategies and content approaches. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 44(3), 218-253. [https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Research%20Supporting%20Shift%20-%20Using%20Evidence%20from%20Text\[1\].pdf](https://achievethecore.org/content/upload/Research%20Supporting%20Shift%20-%20Using%20Evidence%20from%20Text[1].pdf)

once or twice<sup>9</sup> and then dropped from focus once they enter students' repertoire; others, with a more robust research base, should be rotated through instructional routines so students integrate them thoroughly into their own reading habits.<sup>10</sup> Thereafter, comprehension strategies are what students should enlist when they do not understand what they are reading. At all other times, reading strategies are running in the background, on auto-pilot. Our brains are hard-wired to think in these ways. Briefly teaching strategies early in readers' careers, and then occasionally having the class notice when a reader in the class has used such a strategy to problem solve their way to understanding, is an effective approach and follows the research. Disengaging readers from sustained, focused reading for any longer is not only disruptive and debilitating, it does not follow the research on cognition and successful comprehending.<sup>11</sup>

Teachers need to be provided with resources and materials that support them in laying out a research-aligned plan for what to do when students do not understand what they have read (or do poorly on an assessment). Teachers should go from highest leverage work to the more refined, i.e., start with reading fluency and free access to books that interest students, then move to analyzing text. There students will learn text-based nuance with support in such areas as uncovering vocabulary demands that might be causing overloads, gaining access to missing knowledge or word meanings. Then students can move on to work with syntax, start to better understand referents in the text, and expand their capacities over time. The following is a rundown of the key ingredients of improved reading comprehension in priority order:

### **Securing solid foundational reading skills (so students are fluent readers at every grade level).**

Elementary educators must address the foundational skills needs of their students so that students can access grade-level text. As mentioned earlier, where teachers *should* execute the direct teaching and reinforcement of foundational reading standards, with practice both in and out of context, is when children are learning how spoken language is represented in print, with foundational reading skills. The bulk of this work rightly belongs in kindergarten through grade 2 so students can access grade-level text by the time it is demanded by CCR standards, starting in the grade 2-3 band. Teaching foundational skills, no matter the grade, goes on in parallel with attending to the rest of English Language Arts. The two are corresponding, not sequential activities. They work in tandem until the act of reading is automatic; fully fluent and foundational reading can disappear into the background to grease the wheels of comprehension forevermore. Teachers of older elementary students (grade 3 and beyond) must learn what to do to support students who did not learn the foundational skills to mastery in K-2. Addressing reading fluency with grade-level text is particularly crucial with older students.<sup>12</sup>

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9. Willingham, Daniel. "Collateral damage of excessive reading comprehension strategy instruction." Daniel Willingham--Science and Education, 30 April 2012, <http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/collateral-damage-of-reading-comprehension-strategy-instruction>

10. National Reading Panel. 2000. ch 4 pp.39-40 (introduction). "The idea behind explicit instruction of text comprehension is that comprehension can be improved by teaching students to use specific cognitive strategies or to reason strategically when they encounter barriers to comprehension when reading. The goal of such training was the achievement of competent and self-regulated reading. *Readers normally acquire strategies for active comprehension informally.*" [emphasis added]

11. Daniel Willingham summarizes the research on the payoff from direct teaching of Comprehension Strategies <http://www.danielwillingham.com/daniel-willingham-science-and-education-blog/collateral-damage-of-reading-comprehension-strategy-instruction>

12. Wexler, Jade, et al. "A synthesis of fluency interventions for secondary struggling readers." *Reading and Writing* 21.4 (2008): 317-347.



### **Building students' vocabulary (both to be acquired through context and in word study) through a volume of reading.**

Knowledge of words and knowledge about the world are tightly connected. The things we know have to be named and described by words when encountered in print. The most efficient way to learn vocabulary is to acquire it while reading. Recent research demonstrates that students learn up to four times as many words when they are reading texts about conceptually coherent topics for a period of time.<sup>13</sup> This is data too powerful to ignore. As noted earlier, texts available for independent reading and learning more independently should be at a variety of complexity levels so students can read without always relying on teacher support.

### **Growing students' general knowledge of the world from reading a volume of texts at a variety of complexity levels (so students have a trove of knowledge to reference when they read).**

Reading ability and knowledge about the world are equally tightly connected. Authors assume their readers know some things, so readers knowing things is a crucial component of those readers' success and continued comprehension gains. Again, classroom time should be centered on texts—both comprehension of grade-level text and the opportunity for volume of reading on conceptually coherent topics and free choice selection.

### **Parsing complex text by helping all students develop a standard of coherence through regular, close reading of rich, complex text.**

Text complexity has lots of ingredients, and the two primary causes of reader challenge are unfamiliar vocabulary and/or lack of knowledge on the topic. But these challenges don't exist in isolation. Many of those words and ideas are housed in intricate sentences made of a wide variety of structures. To build solid reading habits and stamina, students must regularly parse complex syntax or trace references that will result in the text making sense. Giving students the opportunity to practice reading complex text carefully on a regular basis builds their standard of coherence. The standard of coherence is the expectation that what one reads should make sense, and it is critical to learning to stick with reading when reading gets tough. Such practice helps students notice and know what to do to solve those comprehension breakdowns when they occur.

## **What is Common Practice Guiding Assessment and Classroom Responses to Assessment Results?**

What do we commonly do? We assess frequently, study the error patterns in data meetings, map those errors onto discrete skills or standards to which the items best match, isolate those skills, and then instruct teachers to repurpose reading into a relentless loop of practicing those skills—wherever they appear in whatever texts are in front of students until the next interim assessment—rather than focusing on the real causes of breakdowns in comprehension. This is a pernicious problem that has plagued reading instruction since the 1980s when strategies (along with skills) became a focus of reading instruction and became widespread and ubiquitous with the advent of No Child Left Behind. To this day, district stakeholders continue to demand that assessment providers report this way. This loop of “unpacking” the standards and teaching/assessing them as a series of discrete skills, coupled with “data-driven” instructional practices, cements a cycle that does not focus on the actual factors that improve students' reading comprehension abilities.

At the worst, many ELA classrooms are set up to practice skills and standards in isolation *all the time*, rotating among and between them, focusing on them to the exclusion of making meaning. This is done instead of reading content-rich texts for all they have to yield up to a reader who is looking to build knowledge of the

13. Landauer, Thomas K., and Susan T. Dumais. “A solution to Plato's problem: The latent semantic analysis theory of acquisition, induction, and representation of knowledge.” *Psychological review* 104.2 (1997): 211.

world and vocabulary, and to understand varied and complex syntax. ELA time becomes essentially yearlong test prep in an effort to pour strategic reading into kids' brains directly, rather than indirectly, in context, and driven by the text.

When we focus too much on *any* one subset of the universe of reading comprehension—standards, strategies, features of texts, chief among them—we lose the ability to survey the universe of experiences that will allow for the growth of comprehension in students. The failure to understand, consider, and diagnose the myriad causes that may be triggering students' difficulty by instead focusing on the one or two subsets of ingredients we have grown accustomed to, poses particular dangers to students who are not yet strong readers. We are likely to ignore the full range of evidence students are presenting to us and instead focus on a single, often wrong cause. Stronger students will withstand this approach, often by politely satisfying instructional demands while continuing to read for meaning. They can provide a quick answer to an overly focused question on demand, since they understand the whole. Fragile readers *will* likely focus willingly with the teacher since focusing on a single thing is a lot easier than attempting the full sweep of cognitive moves ("Oh! All I have to do is look for author's purpose, and she'll be happy with me."), but this provides yet another barrier that impacts their deep understanding of the text itself.

We have to stop emphasizing the wrong things, evaluating and measuring the wrong things, and instead commit to spending student time on activities that will pay off in deepening comprehension and all the

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expressive competencies we want for our students. If interim or benchmark assessments continue to report out based on strategies or standards, very few schools (or the teachers in them) are going to abandon this form of instruction. Continuing to report under these discrete categories has the capacity to do more harm than good. Unfortunately, "doing lots and lots of reading" does not map neatly onto reports of progress toward annual ELA standards of competency, nor is how much a student has learned from reading easy to assess. Even though both of these activities are truer representations of the ultimate goals of

reading, they are challenging to measure. In a world where we measure growth at regular intervals and then intervene in the things that are most straightforward to measure, this is a problem.

## **What Approaches to Interim Assessment Could Be Explored?**

As noted, reporting out test results by standards, strategies, or any one construct reflects a confusion between cause and effect. Failure to master any one of these can cause weak reading proficiency, but to a *far* greater extent, failure to master one of these is much more likely an *effect* of weak reading proficiency. This following section has been excerpted and modified from a longer working paper on this topic by David Liben.

Take this example of what it takes to achieve the following grade 4 Reading Standard 3 for literature:

*Describe in depth a character, setting, or event in a story or drama, drawing on specific details in the text (e.g., a character's thoughts, words, or actions).*

Students would need to be able to do the following:

- Decode the vast majority of words in the text with sufficient automaticity and accuracy in order to be able to read the text with enough fluency to comprehend it as a whole (*fluency*).
- Do the same in those portions of the text most relevant to the standard, e.g., those describing or explaining the character, setting, or events the question might be probing (*fluency*).
- Know the meaning of enough words in the text in order to comprehend the text as a whole and therefore avoid the general confusion or disengagement that would mar comprehension, even in those sections of text not at all complex or not having particularly difficult vocabulary (*word knowledge*).
- Possess deep enough word knowledge to be able to discern subtle word differences that would alter understanding of the parts of the text most relevant to the standard or question, e.g., knowing that a character described as “eager” sends a very different message than one who is “willing” to do something or even “happy” to do it (*word knowledge*).
- Have enough background knowledge so as not to be confused by the setting, events, references, or personality types of characters that would make general comprehension more difficult, e.g., old people, young children, conservative people, hippies, characters who are reserved, gregarious, shy, loud, vulgar, etc. (*general knowledge*).
- Have enough background knowledge to comprehend the section of the text most relevant to the standard, e.g., knowing enough about the difficulty of raising puppies in a text and using this to paint a picture of a character’s resilience or patience; having enough background knowledge of deserts in a text to focus on the challenges of coming of age in this environment (*general knowledge*).
- Be able to adjust if a literary text includes parts that are more informational in nature, e.g., a text about someone who learns about gardening to deal with the loss of a parent; a text using letters home from a parent in the military that describes day to day life in the military or a foreign country. Such sections often require reading more slowly and being sure the greater density of information is absorbed (*general knowledge, ability to adjust to text demands*).
- Be able to parse the syntax used throughout the text in order to gain general comprehension and, as with vocabulary, avoid the confusion and disengagement that would reduce comprehension of any part of the text including those with the least complex syntax (*complex syntax*).
- Be able to parse the syntax in the sections of text most relevant to the standard or question and especially if this syntax is particularly complex, unusual, or varies from syntax in other parts of the text (*complex syntax*).
- Be able to follow any of the transitions a text makes especially when these are more subtle, frequent, or both, and again especially in sections most relevant to the standard or question (*experience with and knowledge of complex text*).
- Maintain the thread of a text when information is dense throughout or in those sections of text most relevant to the standard or question (*complex syntax, flexibility or ability to adjust to text demands, general knowledge, reading stamina*).
- Maintain the thread of a text that includes many longer paragraphs, not focusing on very short and especially one-line paragraphs that are nearly always so short for a purpose (*reading stamina, knowledge of authors’ techniques, standard of coherence*).

- Deal with any sort of references that allude to an earlier section of the text (*standard of coherence, language knowledge, working memory, complex syntax*).
- Have enough motivation to put the effort required into comprehending (*student interest and confidence, standard of coherence*).

These challenges increase at an *accelerating* rate as the complexity of texts increase. Learning to read is the most challenging demand we ask of all our students. The biologist Richard Dawkins compares the genome to a “Cat’s Cradle” where pulling on any one string sends ripples of activity throughout. Reading works much the same. Focusing on just one construct in the face of all this complexity is the antithesis of what reading and learning to read are all about. In any text, all of the constructs named above (and more) interact with each other and the particulars of the text to determine complexity. Vocabulary demands are greater when syntax is more complex, lesser when syntax or knowledge demands are low; an unfamiliar text structure presents less of an obstacle when topic and vocabulary are familiar. Some constructs (text structures, for example) are present throughout. In addition, we still have much to learn about the interplay between fluent reading and a high standard of coherence— its inverse: dysfluency and a low standard of coherence—and how those factors interface with all the features that are embedded in the text itself.

Students can go astray on an assessment for a variety of reasons. The best way to know the path they followed or where comprehension broke down is to ask them what they were thinking along the way. These error patterns will not vary *too* widely, as many students experience similar problems. Doing this identifying and sorting of responses with a group of students will reveal a set of misunderstandings which could then be discussed directly with them. Particularly challenging passages and questions can be fully re-analyzed socially. Teachers who teach classes in the same grade using the same assessments could conceivably compare notes and keep a record of the patterns of breakdown and improvements as the central work of PLCs. There is a learning curve to such work for teachers, and this takes time to do well, but it is hard to imagine any more powerful way to learn about texts, comprehension, student thinking, common problems, and the suite of constructs known as literacy.

Once the assessment field is motivated to explore alternatives with vigor, there could be fruitful exploration of technological alternatives to this painstaking analysis that could drive classroom practice toward healthier patterns at scale. Advances in digital assessments, the incorporation of both speech recognition and latent semantic analysis tools into this realm, the analysis of such indicators of student thinking as key strokes, eye movements, and even decision-making around distractors and other ways of tracing thinking automatically, show promise. They can be used to discern where (and why) students are experiencing difficulty, or at least to scale-analyze clusters of problems with specific features of complex text such as missed conjunctions or untraced references. The most frequent performance breakdowns for students who are struggling with reading in general stem from inadequate practice with

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The other reasons students cannot follow complex text through to its meaning are because they do not know the meaning of too many words in the passage or they have not been exposed to the knowledge the author assumed readers would possess. The “cure” for both issues is providing students with more opportunities to read broadly on a range of conceptually coherent topics, ideally self-selected by the readers, at least in part. That kind of meaning-making is harder to measure, and it takes precious classroom time, as discussed earlier, but it is a *much* more satisfactory and effective way to approach text, to learn, and to teach.

## What Can We Do Now To Produce Strong Readers?

- Get the message out to instructional leaders and educational stakeholders about the necessity to have text occupy the center of standards-aligned classrooms.
- Support and challenge teachers and developers of instructional materials to organize classroom instruction around the practices grounded in research.
- Challenge assessment developers to create new approaches for assessing reading progress/literacy standards mastery that help teachers more effectively guide their instruction in alignment with the research (perhaps in ways yet to exist or be fully envisioned).
- Challenge the education reform community to develop the mindset, resources, and materials required to catalyze and support this significant shift in instructional practice.

Reading, writing, speaking, listening, and language standards are *designed* to be woven into one interconnected tapestry to demonstrate what a literate, capable user and consumer of English should be able to do at each grade level. On the other hand, students exposed exclusively to a diet year after year of dissected standards or isolated skills—in instruction or assessment—will risk becoming graduates who are not very literate, individuals who are not able to deploy and understand English in integrated, holistic, and flexible ways. Perhaps worst of all, they will likely never come to love reading or learning.

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