



Text Complexity and the Common Core

Elfrieda Hiebert with Sharon Black and Terrell A. Young

Interest generated by her presentation at the UCIRA Conference motivated us to request additional ideas from Freddy Hiebert, who gave us a highly informative electronic interview for this electronic journal. She included references to some of her writing and gave us freedom to edit at will. Taking her at her word, we have included some points from her articles to extend and reinforce her responses to our questions.

Journal: What are your greatest concerns regarding text complexity, and how do you recommend that teachers prepare for these challenges?

Freddy: I've written extensively about potential "consequences" of (mis)interpretations of text complexity. Here are my three biggest fears and potential ways for teachers to respond.

Concern: Teachers will be browbeaten to give students texts which have been identified by third parties to be complex, but which students either can't read facily or can't understand. An example of inappropriateness is children in the middle of second grade reading *Sarah: Plain and Tall* (MacLachlan, 1987). Yes, they may be able to pronounce the words, but the ideas of this book were aimed at older children. After all, *Sarah, Plain and Tall* won the *Newbery* award for the most distinguished contribution to American literature for children,



not the Caldecott for the most distinguished picture book for children.

Solution: Teachers in districts and schools need to identify texts that illustrate the progression and exemplify the growth that is expected of students at particular grade levels.

Freddy's Writings: In "Readability and the Common Core Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d), Hiebert notes that one of the common explanations of this kind of discrepancy is that "the short sentences and high-frequency vocabulary used in the dialogue of narratives can artificially skew the readability formula downward" (p. 4). She illustrates with *Roll of Thunder* (Taylor, 1976), a book with significant themes and characterization, involving racial intolerance and abuse, effective for Grades 6-8, which has a lower text difficulty rating than *Bat Loves the Night* (Davies 2004), a simple, direct informational book intended for Grades 2-3. Hiebert explains, "To increase students' capacity with complex text, teachers want as much information as they can get to understand the features of texts that might 'grow' their students reading *and thinking*" (2012d, p.5, emphasis added).

Concern: Teachers will think that they don't have the expertise to identify which texts are appropriately complex to grow the capacity of their students. They will look for third parties to tell them which books are complex and which aren't.

Solution: Knowing that a text has a guided reading level N or J, a Lexile of 725 or 810, or a classification as "complex" for grades 4-5 does not provide teachers with information on the features of a text that might serve as obstacles for students' comprehension or the features that might increase students' capacity with text. Teachers need to learn to examine texts themselves, attending to features such as prior knowledge, text structure, vocabulary, and purpose *in relation to their own students*. Publishers can give useful guidelines that draw teachers' attention to critical features (e.g., the number of words that are challenging, the demands of prior knowledge), but teachers need to develop skills at identifying the features that require attention.

Freddy's Writings: In "Readability and the Common Core Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d), Freddy makes an important point with a striking analogy: "A doctor wouldn't depend on temperature alone to diagnose an illness, . . .

and a reading teacher should not depend on a readability score alone to measure text complexity. But like temperature readings, Lexile scores [a blend of vocabulary and sentence length] are a good first source of information" (p. 3). To these "quantitative" measures of complexity, she recommends "qualitative" measures: "content and its connection to readers" (p. 5), including "levels of meaning, knowledge demands, and structure" (p. 6). She refers to such issues as requiring "human evaluation." She mentions the need to "determine what it is that readers need to know to be successful with a text or . . . the opportunities that a text provides for guidance" (2012d, p. 6).

Concern: In scrambling to give students complex texts, teachers will forget that proficiency at any complex task comes over time—with involvement and experience in the task.

Solution: Teachers need to attend to the amount that their students are reading across a school day. Many American students simply aren't reading enough across a school day to achieve the foundation needed to grapple with complex text. Part of "time spent reading" inventories need to address the amount that students are reading at any one stretch. Stamina—the ability of students to sustain their attention to a text over an extended period of time—appears to be an obstacle for many students, particularly when faced with the "new generation of assessments" (i.e., not short paragraphs with multiple-choice questions).

Freddy's Writings: In "The Text Complexity Multi-Index" (2012e) Hiebert reminds teachers that "their expertise also matters." She explains that "they are the ones who know their students . . . The ultimate goal is the matching of students to texts" (p. 3).

Freddy's Further Reading Suggestion: To learn more about my cautions related to text complexity and an alternative that I've proposed—the Text Complexity Multi-Index—see Hiebert, E.H., "Readability and the Common Core's Staircase of Text Complexity" (2012d)

and “The Text Complexity Multi-Index” (2012e). These can be retrieved from <http://textproject.org/professional-development/text-matters/> [We took her advice. Both of these are quoted above.]



Journal: In your presentation at the UCIRA Conference, you spoke about the differences in vocabulary found in narrative and informational text. You described new vocabulary in stories as typically being synonyms of words the students already know. You also explained that new words in informational texts often represent new concepts that students do not know but need to know to understand the texts. What suggestions do you have for teaching these words and related concepts so students understand and are able to use them?

Freddy: Narrative and informational texts share a *core* vocabulary (about 90% of the total words), while the remaining 10% (*extended* vocabulary) typically are unique in narrative and informational texts. I call this vocabulary *extended* because it is huge (as much as 300,000 unique words), whereas the *core* vocabulary consists of 4,000 simple word families.

The extended vocabulary of informational texts consists of conceptually related words such as *magnetic field*, *pole*, *attract*, and *repel* in a primary-level unit on magnetism. These concepts are complex and interconnected and are developed through extended activities (e.g., inquiry, discussions, writing, reading). Content-area specialists have identified the critical concepts, and teachers aren't left guessing about what they should be teaching.

The extended vocabulary of narrative texts, on the other hand, is much less well defined, and it is also more likely to vary from text to text. Authors of narratives draw liberally from the 300,000 words. If a character is shaking with fear, an author of a narrative might use *quiver*, *tremble*, or *shudder*. Students are likely to have the concept of *shaking*, but they may not have encountered *shudder* previously. Just teaching a single word such as *shudder* is insufficient: Teachers also need to guide students in recognizing other members of the semantic cluster of which the target word is a member. Instruction includes studying groups of words for their nuanced meanings. Instruction on making nuanced choices also extends to students' own writing.

Freddy's Writing: The relationship of *core* and *extended* vocabulary is developed further in Hiebert's "Core Vocabulary: The Foundation for Successful Reading of Complex Text" (2012a). She explains, "In complex texts, the extended vocabulary typically accounts for 7-10% of the words. These words give texts precision and specificity but they are infrequent" (p. 2). Because of this proportion, she advises, "A big step in becoming a reader is to become proficient with the core vocabulary. High percentages of rare words from the extended vocabulary can divert developing reader's attention away from the core vocabulary" (p. 2). Acquiring core vocabulary is not easy. Hiebert specifies, "To recognize these words depends on foundational skills in generalizing letter-sound knowledge and knowledge of morphemes (i.e., affixes, inflected endings, and roots in compound words) and recognizing the multiple meanings of the core vocabulary. Developing this foundation is the task of the primary grades"

(p. 3). “Unless students have scaled the core vocabulary staircase, they are likely to fall into the ‘fourth-grade slump’ and do poorly with complex texts” (p. 4).

“Unique Words Require Unique Instruction” (Hiebert, 2012f) is concerned with the differences in the *unique words* of narrative and informational texts. “In narrative texts, these low-frequency words typically represent new ways of representing a known concept.” This is because “Narratives, even fantasy-based, are rooted in familiar concepts . . . [and] have recognizable personality traits.” Thus new words “provide specificity and texture to a world that is based on the known world” (pp. 3-4). She contrasts purpose and thus vocabulary in informational texts: “The purpose of informational texts is to introduce new essential concepts to students’ understanding of the world. The new concepts are carried by unique technical vocabulary. . . . They are singular terms that encapsulate specific concepts.”

Freddy’s Further Reading Suggestion: A resource at TextProject.org which can be especially helpful is “Exceptional Expressions for Everyday Events” (Hiebert 2012b)—lessons on 32 semantic clusters, one for each week of a school year.

Journal: Finally, the CCSS do not directly address students’ reading engagement. Given the new focus required by these standards, what suggestions do you have for teachers in planning instruction and creating conditions to help their students develop a love for reading?

Freddy: Attention to engagement is absolutely essential if the goals of the Common Core are to be achieved.

At its core, the goal of the Common Core is to ensure that graduates of American high schools are equipped to participate fully in the communities of the digital-global age. The commodity of the 21st century is knowledge. Those with knowledge (and ways of gaining knowledge) have opportunities; those without are limited in their prospects.

Yet if one adjective were to be used to describe the perspective of American high school students toward school learning experiences, it would be *disengaged*. A recent Gallup Poll reported that 4/10 of high school students described themselves as engaged in school, in contrast to 8/10 at elementary school and 6/10 in middle school (Busteed, 2013).

There is the possibility that misinterpretations and over-extensions of the standards could lead to even greater dis-engagement on the part of American students. And levels of engagement are already low. If the challenge is always so great that they’re failing, they will not be engaged. Don’t be browbeaten into giving your students texts that they absolutely can’t read. At the same time, don’t give them dumbed-down text (e.g., most decodable texts—especially for middle graders and higher).

Solutions: Ensure that there are accessible texts and that students are becoming better readers from these texts. What I mean by increasing capacity is that the texts of instruction need to have features that develop new skills, strategies, and understandings. For example, for second-graders *Tops and Bottoms* (Stevens, 1995) is a genre that can challenge background knowledge. Unlike most tales and fables young children are given, this text is a trickster tale. Even the second graders who can easily recognize most of the vocabulary in this text can benefit from discussion about how this kind of tale differs from a fable (e.g., *The Boy Who Cried Wolf*, Aesop) or a parable (e.g., *The Treasure*, Shulevitz, 1978).

Give students opportunities to develop areas of expertise with text: Engaged reading depends on knowing the power of print. Until students have seen what they can learn from texts, they won’t be engaged readers. Developing areas of expertise does not mean simply letting students loose to pick any topic. To initiate students into research, they might be given choices in selecting from dimensions of a shared classroom theme. For example, in a unit on medieval life, choices might include construction of castles, modes of travel, and training for knighthood, as well as aspects children might personally relate

to such as games and festivals, fashion, and typical diets.

Freddy's Presentation: We could not find an article on engagement, but a few relevant comments were included in a presentation from a webinar, "Growing Students' Capacity with Complex Texts: Information, Exposure, Engagement" (2012c). In this presentation Freddie concludes, "Student engagement is influenced by the diets of school tasks. A steady diet of certain tasks leads to disengagement; a steady diet of other tasks fosters engagement." "Even small changes in school tasks," she notes, "can support engagement" (slide 32). She recommends that homework can include reading "topic-related magazine articles and/or popular literature." For a unit on Greek mythology she mentions the series *Percy Jackson & Olympians* by Rick Riordan (2005-2010) or graphic myths and legends on Olympians by George O'Connor (slide 34). For more moderate changes, she includes constructing a castle of leggos for a medieval unit and growing a garden or raising a classroom pet for science reading (Slide 35). She closes the presentation with this warning: "Ultimately the degree to which students are engaged with reading will influence their involvement in reading."

Freddy closed her conversation with us with a request for input from *Utah Journal of Literacy* readers:

I'm eager to hear from Utah teachers as to ways in which they support students in the pursuit of knowledge (email me suggestions at info@textproject.org).

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