

Why ~~ELs~~ ALL Students Need Complex Texts



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Why complex texts for ELs?

- A big question for many educators considering the instructional shifts and increased rigor required by the Common Core standards—
- Can English learners and the many other students who are currently languishing in school handle the Common Core's more demanding or complex materials?
- Greater text complexity requires higher levels of language proficiency: can we expect that of ELs?

The goals of this institute

- To convince you that greater text complexity and more demanding curriculum materials are just what ELs and other language minority students need to to make any academic progress at all.
- That, of course, depends on us giving them the help they need to get access to those materials. What help do they need from us, and how can it be provided?
- At this institute, you'll learn what can be done from some people who know what to do and have been at it for some time, and others who are just now starting.

A little background first



What are the genesis &
rationale for this approach?

The CA & NY connection

- How did this work come together?
- It's 2006, a retired Berkeley professor (a pleasant CHW) describes her work with middle & high school students at a literacy conference in Houston.
- The students she's working with are categorized as "LEP" despite having been schooled in English since kindergarten and having lost their L1 as they learned English.
- Analyzing their linguistic and academic problems to figure out how to get the kids on track academically leads their tutor to ask some basic questions:

- Why, after 6 to 10 years in English only schools, had these students not gotten past the intermediate level in English proficiency?
- They do not regard themselves as English learners and resented the need to take the ELD classes they saw as covering the same old thing, year after year.
- They were, in many ways, in the same boat as countless minority background kids—native speakers of English—who have not thrived in school, unable to get beyond the most basic level of proficiency in literacy even, if that.
- Why, despite years of work with “reading resource specialists” are so many kids unskilled readers, unable to make much sense of what they read (if sounding words out is reading at all)?
- Drawing on her work on L2 acquisition and on the education of language minority kids, this mild-mannered retiree discovers that her tutees’ problems with language and literacy are intertwined.

Her research tells her—

- The only way anyone learns the language that figures in complex texts is by getting into complex texts—but kids who are thought not to be ready for such materials never get their hands on anything that would allow them to acquire such language.
- That language is sufficiently different (grammatically, lexically, and in how information and ideas are packaged) that it has to be learned separately—it's what's required to get beyond a basic level in language and in literacy.
- The *simplified texts* many students are given, by virtue of being simplified, provide no clue as to how language really works. And such students get nothing that would inspire them to read more, or on their own.

Our schools and diversity

- Lots of experience dealing with diversity, but few ideas about how to accommodate differences.
- Fact is, our schools work very well for children who come prepared with precisely the language and early experiences that are regarded as necessary for school-readiness.
- It's great when things work out that way.



But—

- In a society as diverse as ours, many kids arrive at school speaking languages other than the variety used at school, and with different experiences than the ones that are expected.
- Question: how do we handle those differences? How much time is allowed for children to learn the language before reading instruction begins? What's believed about how to get them ready for learning in school?



Domino effect

- Although English learners and language minority students are as ready as other children to learn when they begin school, they are not always seen as such.
- What they tend to get are programs and experiences that are supposed to fix them up and get them ready for learning before they can actually do any.
- They're provided hardly any of the experiences that might make kids excited about school and eager to get on with reading and learning.
- And when kids don't learn to read on schedule, they get even more of what they got before that blocks their access to learning.

Thus—

- The conclusion she arrives at is this—the way to restart stalled language learning in LTELs like her tutees is by helping them discover how language works in complex texts.
- This, she argues, can be done by getting students to notice how meaning relates to various forms & structures in the texts the students are working on, and getting them to talk about their observations.
- Listening to these arguments at the Houston conference is an educator from NYC. She decides to see whether such ideas would fly in the Big Apple.

Result: CHW talks to NYC educators

Fact about academic language is that it is **informationally dense**-- tons of stuff tucked into phrases & clauses, etc.

Post-nominal & prenominal modification makes for blah blah blah

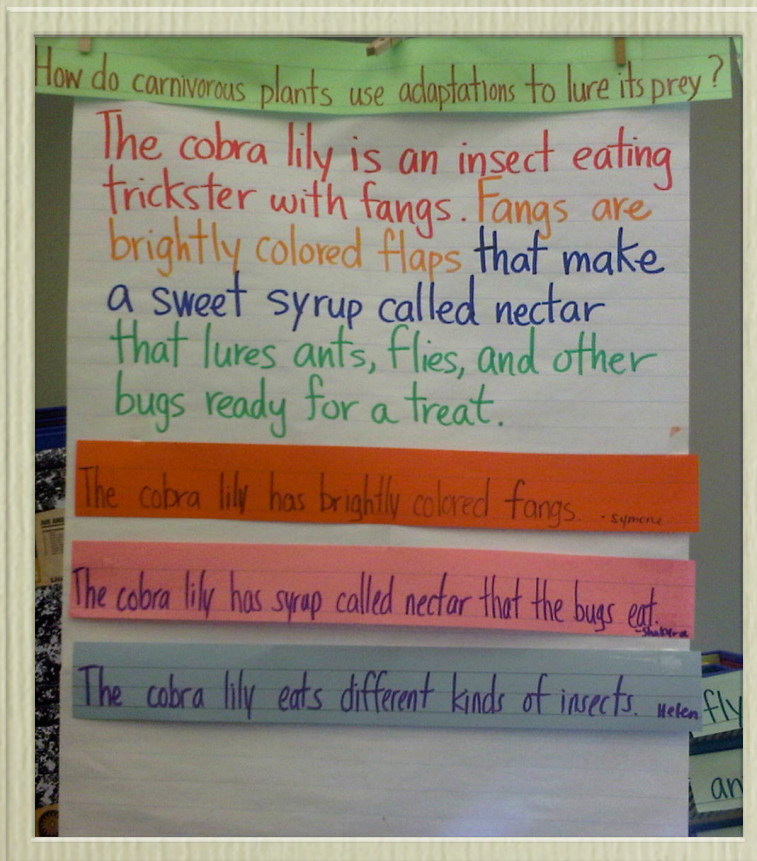
Subordination
y'know what I'm saying?
counter-factual conditionals blah
blah blah etc. etc.

- A one day seminar in NYC for a roomful (50-60?) of hard-core school district administrators (CAOs, superintendent types, etc.) on how to restart language learning and move literacy into overdrive in LTELs.
- The speaker blathers fearlessly on about how language works in academic texts, how it can and does get mighty complex.

She argues—

- Teachers help students discover how meaning is encoded in texts by engaging them in a process of deconstruction—calling their attention to phrases and clauses in sentences, and asking them to consider how each part contributes to the meaning and shape of the whole. It is equally important for them to be able to see how to put everything back together again—to reconstruct what they have deconstructed.
- She's asked: Wouldn't it be easier to just teach students the forms and structures that figure in academic writing? Her answer: There is no way. It is far too varied and pervasive to be taught.

Reality—



- She wants to suggest that teachers should do even more than she has been doing with her tutees— but she notices the glazed look on people’s faces.
- Scaling back a few notches, she says: “Look, if teachers would work on at least one truly juicy sentence a day, it would make a difference.”

That was how it began

- It took a lot of work, thought, and planning (not to mention trust) to turn an “interesting idea” into an instructional approach and plan.
- And it took a lot of incredibly astute work in districts and in schools, with C&I types, with site administrators and teacher leaders to set up the necessary infrastructure to support the instructional changes to support the work, and to scale it up.
- That, of course, was Maryann Cucchiara’s role, together with her professional development team in a big Learning Support Organization serving hundreds of K-12 schools in Queens, Brooklyn, the Bronx & Manhattan.

This afternoon

- Maryann Cucchiara will take you on the journey she has been on these past 5 years, with the help of administrators and teachers from 2 NYC schools.
- They will discuss the decisions they made, the essential instructional shifts it took to move from old thinking about what ELs and language minority students could handle to the more demanding materials and greater rigor expected on the part of teachers and students, and the many steps they took to make it work—and that was way before the Common Core standards were unveiled.

My role over the 5+ years

- Thinking through next steps—what about writing? How to get kids to think about text structure and argumentation, and so on.
- Talking and convincing new groups of NYC administrators that the approach was worth considering and showing how it works, not only for English learners but also for many other students for whom the language of complex and demanding texts constituted a huge barrier to learning.
- Most importantly, documenting the efforts in the schools that served as lab sites for our efforts with my trusty video camera. Videos for training purposes.

Amazing educators

- What made this effort work—the ideas that teachers and site administrators have contributed, creative tweaks they have made to the approach have enriched it enormously.
- My advice: Look for powerful, beautifully written texts that teach big ideas well, that build the curricular themes you are developing. If they don't do that, they are not worth working on—easy or complex.
- Teachers took that advice and ran with it. Our work focused on science and social studies initially because people were a bit nervous about messing with ELA and math, what with AYP issues and all.

When the CCSS came along

- Many people wondered whether ELs and other low performing students could handle the changes.
- I knew they could, and could thrive academically but only if educators realized how crucial it was to believe that kids can handle demanding materials as long as they got the help they needed.



So far, so good, but is it good enough?

- We have made progress enabling students to deal with complex texts and positioning them to learn the language in which such texts are written.
- But if you study the new standards closely, you find that they call for the integrated development of reading, writing, speaking, listening, *and powerful thinking and reasoning skills.*
- I think our work has gotten into that, but how do we focus greater attention on what kids must learn, and how to do that across the curriculum as required?

Needed augmentation

- A crucial missing element from instruction in far too many classrooms is what Sarah Michaels and Cathy O'Connor refer to as *deliberative discourse*.
- How do students learn to think, to argue, to use evidence, and to defend their positions when there is so little of it to be found in school?
- How do they learn to listen to one another, to evaluate the validity of arguments and to critique or build on them without such experiences at school?

Talk is essential to our goals

- How else can we support students' development of powerful speaking and listening skills except by creating many opportunities for dialogue in school?
- How do students develop powerful thinking and reasoning skills without having to think through problems or to argue and defend their thinking?
- How can students learn to find their way into complex texts if we don't show them how to gain access by working their way through the language used in such texts?

Teacher guidance is crucial

- Talk is *just talk* unless it is guided by someone who can exploit the developmental potential of discussion—a teacher helps students learn to use language as a tool for reasoning and understanding.
- Some children can develop such skills on their own; many, however, do not gain these skills without help.
- This approach is supported by the Vygotskian theory of language as a cognitive tool for processing information, a social & cultural tool for sharing and gaining knowledge, and a pedagogical tool for supporting learning by another.


Instructional conversations

- Our instructional conversations focused on language structures in complex texts have benefitted from Sarah's research in science learning, and Cathy's on math.
- Their approach has been variously described as “accountable talk,” “academically productive” or “deliberative discourse” in which, guided by a teacher who is practiced in the approach, leads students—
 - to think aloud as they grapple with problems, concepts, and ideas,
 - to listen respectfully to classmates' ideas & and to critique, build on, and respond to their contributions.
 - to argue for or against proposals or ideas.

Relevance to complex texts

- Cathy O'Connor and Sarah Michaels, will show us how instructional conversations focused on language can become an even more powerful tool for achieving some of the crucial instructional shifts required by the new standards.
- Their take on talk works across the curriculum, and provides both a strategy for developing powerful thinking, speaking and listening skills, and as I have argued, the language and literacy skills students must acquire for learning across the curriculum.

How much do teachers need to know about language?

- Fact is, many educators do not feel especially confident talking about grammar, which is hardly surprising since grammar has not been big on the list of “teaching competencies” for teacher licensure. Do they need training on grammar? 
- They do need to know how to look at sentences, to see how they communicate what they do. They also need to know how to break a complex sentence up into meaningful chunks, and to design questions that get their students to delve into the relationship of form, structure and meaning.

Professional development

- Professional development is required for big changes such as those we are discussing—but ideally it is conducted by training specialists in districts.
- But the training specialists need to support, and most of all, they need to guidance on how language figures in text, literacy and learning, to help teachers gain such knowledge. Trainers need training, too.
- Rebecca Blum Martinez from UNM has been providing Albuquerque School District's PD staff just such guidance and support, not only for English, but Spanish too, for APS's bilingual and dual language programs. You will be hearing from her tomorrow AM.

The CGCS connection

- There seems to be a real need for materials from which teachers can learn more about how language works in texts—and that’s something Charles Fillmore and I are trying to develop.
- What we are planning focuses on language in texts, a plain talk version that hard-core linguists wouldn’t love, but— ¡no le hace!
- Our plan is to create some training modules that demystify the grammar of complex texts, in as teacher-friendly a manner as possible. We hope to put such materials on the CGCS website for districts to use.

Making this work for all kids

- So—in this institute you hear Educators will share their thinking about what it takes to engage in such work. You will hear not only from Maryann Cucchiara and some NYC educators who have been at this work the longest, but also from educators from Boston, Albuquerque, and Sacramento who are just getting started.
- They are at different places in the process and their initial focus is different: Boston's emphasis is with ELLs; Albuquerque and Sacramento are concerned with ELLs, but also the many English-speaking minority background kids in their districts—American Indian kids in Albuquerque, African-American kids and Latino kids in Sacramento and Albuquerque.



So—!?