Module 3 of 5

What Features Influence Text Complexity for Beginning and Struggling Readers?

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Overview

Read and Learn

Activity 1
Read foundation material*:

• *Core Vocabulary*, Text Matters

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2
Analyze characteristics of core vocabulary words chosen from the 4,000 simple word families

Analyze and Apply

Activity 3
Analyze texts for (a) background knowledge, (b) engagingness, and (c) word recognition

Activity 4 (optional)
Working with struggling older readers using *Talking Points for Kids*

Activity 5 (optional)
Building language for beginning readers using *Exceptional Expressions for Everyday Events* (E4)

Background

An important understanding for teachers is that the Common Core State Standards (2010) document explicitly states that it does not address the needs of either students who fall below the assumed grade levels or students who have already achieved grade level expectations. This has profound implications for teachers in classrooms where there are struggling readers. The CCSS does state explicitly that students in the beginning grade of a two- or three-year band (for example, grades 2–3 form a band) should be given more challenging texts within a band, although this reading may require scaffolding on the part of the teacher. It does state that, by the end of a grade band, students should be able to read the most challenging texts independently. But many American students are failing to achieve profi-

cient reading standards on texts that are considerably below the accelerated levels recommended by the Common Core. Many students will need more structured opportunities to develop a fundamental reading proficiency that is needed to scale the staircase of text complexity.

Struggling readers, for the purpose of this module, are defined as readers who are unable to read at the recommended level of text complexity for their grade level. The CCSS provides complexity bands for two grade levels (except for middle school, which has three grade levels in the complexity band). Struggling readers represent a veritable galaxy of challenges for teachers. Children who struggle with reading may have cognitive processing problems and/or behavioral problems. They may be receiving special education services and have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP). Other children may lack background knowledge, literacy experiences, or be born in poverty. Still others may struggle for no apparent reason. English Language Learners (ELLs) must learn both language and content and may lag behind age mates as reflected by standardized assessments. Struggling readers may be in Tier 2 or Tier 3 of Response to Intervention (RTI) programs.

One strategy used by teachers is to read complex texts, particularly from textbooks, aloud to the class. It must be noted that reading texts aloud to students or having proficient readers in a class read the texts may be a useful strategy for ensuring that all students can be part of a class discussion about a book or topic, but neither activity has proven to increase the independent reading of struggling readers. In fact, providing the support of a teacher read-aloud may benefit students in learning content for the present, but may also result in an ongoing dependency on such support (Hiebert & Martin, 2004). Struggling readers in such contexts may never get the opportunity to read independently.

Beginning readers, for the purposes of this module, are defined as young children who have not yet acquired the underlying skills and knowledge to become literate.

Beginning readers and struggling readers may share some characteristics. In some cases, older students may exhibit the need for the types of instruction that beginning readers do.

The focus of Module 3 is thus formed around the driving question: "What features influence text complexity for beginning and struggling readers?"

In this module, we will discuss the demands that are placed on beginning and struggling readers from three perspectives:

1. Background Knowledge

2. Engagingness

3. Word Recognition

Background knowledge refers to the ideas in texts. Ideas are communicated with particular words such as *constellation* for a group of stars that forms a particular pattern or *constitution* for a set of laws and principles that govern a country or organization. Especially in texts for beginning and struggling readers, the vocabu-

lary of a text may be known or unknown to students. For this reason, vocabulary is linked to background knowledge. When the ideas of a text are new to students, the vocabulary will often be unknown. When the ideas are familiar, the vocabulary will often be known.

Engagingness has to do with the features of text that have the potential to hold students' interest in a text. A text about a soccer game may engage some students in a class, while a text about the search for the perfect dress for a party may engage other students. A group of teacher educators has identified three elements of texts that can support the engagement of young readers: format and illustrations, content, and language (Hoffman, Christian, Corman, Elliott, Matherne, & Stahle, 1994). Some texts may be superior on one element and poor on the other two. It is when all of the elements fail to engage students that teachers need to initiate conversations about the purpose of the text. It is also possible to arouse student interest in topics that may be unknown to them through strategies that engage them (see, e.g., the CAST website http://www.cast.org for a list of ideas).

Word recognition, the reader's capacity to identify words rapidly and accurately, is what distinguishes proficient reading, even for beginning readers. For beginning and struggling readers, the number of words that they have already encountered and can recognize is critical. The core vocabulary which is the focus of this module's foundational reading gives teachers a sense of which words students are likely to have encountered at different points in their reading development.

The core vocabulary of 4,000 simple words families that is described in the module's professional reading began with a word list (Zeno, Ivens, Millard, & Duvvuri, 1995) that is made up of 154,999 unique words that came from texts that contained 17.25 million words in all. The texts came from school books taken from many content areas and from every grade level, kindergarten through college. Zeno et al. (1995) were able to estimate how often unique words might appear per one million words.

Hiebert (2012), in creating the core vocabulary, began by separating the words into seven zones based on how frequent the words were. The seven word zones and the number of words in each are illustrated in Figure 1 (next page). As seen in Figure 1, the smallest group of words (zone 0) accounts for the largest percentage of the words in texts. A large number of words (zone 6) occur very infrequently. Illustrations of the words in the different zones are given in Table 1. Just because a word is rare (e.g., *butterfly*) does not mean that the idea is unknown to students. It simply means that students will encounter this word infrequently in text.

Hiebert has suggested that students need to move through texts that emphasize word zones 0–2 initially (and words with consistent phonics and syllable patterns) and that, gradually, the percentage of words that come form the rare word zones increase (as well as more complex syllable patterns).

Figure 1
Core and Extended Vocabularies: Words in American Textbooks

% of 17.25 million words

Word Zones™
- 6=135,473
- 5=13,882
- 4=2980
- 3=1676
- 2=620
- 1=203
- 0=107
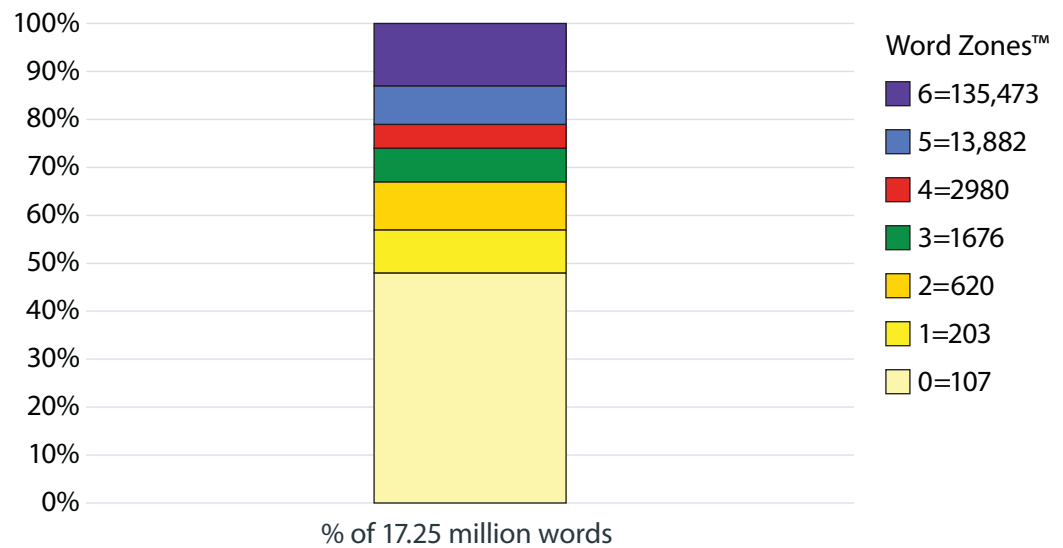
Source: Zeno, et al. (1995)

Hiebert has taken the words in word zones 0–4 and has shown that these words (originally around 5,600 words) can be collapsed into 4,000 simple word families.

These 4,000 simple word families also have numerous members in word zones 5–6. For example, *weather* is a word that is highly frequent (word zone 2) but *weathered* and *weathering* are very rare. By taking all of the members of the 4,000 simple word families from word zones 5–6, the 4,000 simple word families account for 90% of the total words in most texts.

The focus of this module is on this group of 4,000 simple word families—called the **core vocabulary**. Learning these words requires skill with phonics patterns. It also requires skill in extending knowledge of a root word to members of the family—recognizing *horse's* or *horses* once the word *horse* has been learned. Beginning and struggling readers need to develop these skills to read increasingly more complex texts.

Table 1
Word Zones for 160,000 Unique Words

Word Zone	Label for Zone or Group of Zones	Number of Unique Words	Percentage of Total Words (Cumulative)	Examples of Words
0	Highly frequent	107	48	*the, of*
1		203	57	*away, between*
2		610	67	*day, different*
3	Moderately frequent	1676	74	*tree, travel*
4		2980	79	*invited, blanket*
5	Rare	13882	87	*butterfly, frosting*
6		135473	100	*jeered, parasol*

Based on Zeno et al. (1995)

Key Terms

Engagingness: The way that a text is structured, designed, or illustrated that provides an appeal to students.

Polysemy: Words that may be used in multiple ways (*can*: ability to do; a receptacle for goods; a verb that means to preserve fruits or vegetables; colloquial to stop [*Can it!*], etc.

Word Zones: Words in the 4,000 simple word families are divided into zones that indicate the frequency of their use in most texts encountered by students in their reading.

Word recognition: the ability to recognize and/or easily decode words in a text so that reading proceeds without interruption of meaning.

Core vocabulary: The most-frequent root words and associated words that have inflected endings (e.g., *-s, -ed, -ing*) of the root word. This group appears in the 4,000 simple word families and accounts for 90% or more of the words in most texts.

Unique vocabulary: The unique words in a text are those that are not within the 4,000 simple word families (i.e., the core vocabulary). These words appear less frequently in text but often are the words that convey the critical concepts of a text.

The Activities

Read and Learn

Activity 1

First, read the Text Matters article entitled *Core Vocabulary* (Hiebert, 2012a), which is included in the resources for this module. After reading the article, discuss the implications of some students' lack of vocabulary and word recognition knowledge that may prevent them from reading independently at the appropriate complexity band for their grade level. Participants should read to formulate a response to these purpose-setting questions:

▶ Why is the core vocabulary so critical in the development of proficient reading?

▶ Why is rote memorization of the core vocabulary inadequate for ensuring that students can read proficiently?

Reflect and Respond

Activity 2

In this activity, you will analyze the characteristics of core vocabulary words. Following the reading in Activity 1, examine the *Word Zones™ for 4,000 Simple Word*

Families ("Word Zones list") provided with the resources for this module. The steps in creating this list are described in the Background above and also in the reading from Activity 1 (the Text Matters *Core Vocabulary* article).

Note: The Word Zones list includes only those words that make up the core vocabulary (word zones 0–4). Word zones 0 and 1 have been combined in the Word Zones list into a single zone—1.

Many of the core vocabulary words are frequent because they take on different meanings, different parts of speech, and are used in compound words and in phrases. In this activity, you will study the "flexibility" of at least 10 words with the numbers "1" or "2" beside them in the Word Zones list.

The aim is to establish the following features of the words: (a) how many distinct meanings does each word have? (b) what are unique uses of the words in subject areas, especially science, social studies, and mathematics (e.g., think of a word such as *equal* and its use in mathematics versus social studies); and (c) the use of the words in compound words and in phrases.

To analyze core vocabulary words, find at least 10 words from zones 1 or 2 in the Word Zones list. Quickly define the words. How many words have multiple definitions and uses that are specific to a content area? Look at these examples:

Word (and Word Zone)	Inflected Endings or Suffixes	Polysemy (multiple meanings) and Parts of Speech	Compound Words and Phrases
border (4)	*borders, bordered, bordering*	official line that separates two countries, states *(noun)* band along edge of something (e.g., a picture) *(noun)* to share a border with another country, state, etc. *(verb)* *border on*: to bevery close to reaching a feeling or quality *(verb phrase)*	*border-line*: very close to being unacceptable *(adjective)* *borderline*: point at which one quality/condition ends and another begins *(noun)* *brush border*: a chemical barrier through which food must pass to be absorbed *(noun phrase)*
down (1)	*downs, downing, downed, downy*	toward a lower place or position *(adjective)* sad *(adjective)* losing to an opponent *(adjective)* toward the ground or a lower point *(preposition)* drink something very quickly *(verb)* thin, soft feathers or hair *(noun)*	*downcast, downfall, downgrade, downhearted, downhill, download, down payment, downplay, downpour, downright, downriver, downshift, downside, downsize, downstairs, downstate, downstream, downtime, downtown, downtrodden, downturn, downwind, down-and-out, down-to-earth*

Complete the investigation independently or in small groups, discussing each word, finding various meanings and related words. Your instructor might show the completed products on an interactive white board and encourage further discussion to ensure participants understand the value of the 4,000 simple word families and word zones as an aid to understanding the core vocabulary as seen in complex texts across disciplinary areas.

Analyze and Apply

Next, we will examine one of two examples of texts regarded as high-quality lieterature and texts that have been written to support beginning and struggling readers. The authentic texts are two selections from the CCSS: *My Father's Dragon* (grades 2–3) and *The Secret Garden* (grades 4–5). These two trade books possess captivating if somewhat archaic language, and thus may contain many rare or unique words. The texts for beginning and struggling readers include a selection entitled *Staying Warm* and *Winter is Here!* from TextProject's BeginningReads (Hiebert & Folkins, 2012) program for grades 2–3. This text is written to support beginning readers in building literacy knowledge. For grades 4–5, the second text in the set is *Fruit Trees*, from TextProject's SummerReads (Folkins & Fisher, 2010). This text was written to support struggling readers and give them extra practice with the core vocabulary as they transition from grades four to grade five. The texts are provided in the resources for this module. You will read either the beginning or intermediate texts and analyze them using three indicators.

Activity 3

Using the Activity Frame shown below, first read either *My Father's Dragon* (grades 2–3) or *The Secret Garden* (grades 4–5). Analyze the text on the three levels indicated. For vocabulary, find the core words that students should recognize and the unique words that you think may cause students to stumble in reading.

Activity Frame	Text 1	Text 2
Background Knowledge: What kind of background knowledge is needed?		
"Engagingness": How interested do you think students will be in the text?		
Word Recognition: What words must students recognize that are likely to give them difficulty as they read the text independently?		

Next, read either *Staying Warm* and *Winter is Here!* (BeginningReads) or *Fruit Trees* (SummerReads) and conduct the same analysis. Record the findings in the Activity Frame. Be prepared to share and discuss your findings in class.

Activity 4 *(optional)*

TextProject's *Talking Points For Kids* (TP4K) is a program (currently under development) that applies lessons learned from the analysis of texts in Activity 3 to create texts suitable for older struggling readers. Texts in the TP4K series have a higher than usual percentage of core vocabulary and decodable words, intended to make them readable for most struggling readers in 4th or 5th grades. When words fall outside the core group, they are repeated. TP4K is designed to be accessible so that it can be used to stimulate discussion among students on topics that relate to them.

For this activity, you will analyze the texts for core vocabulary and repetition of unique words, as well as background knowledge and engagingness. The first selection in the series is titled *School Time* (Hiebert, 2010), and is provided in the resources section of this module. Your instructor may suggest you use an activity frame similar to the one for Activity 3.

Activity 5 *(optional)*

This activity explores building vocabulary for beginning readers. TextProject's *Exceptional Expressions for Everyday Events* (E4) (Folkins & Hiebert, 2011) is a series of 32 flexible vocabulary development lessons that each focus on an everyday concept and brainstorms other words associated with the concept. Each activity can be used for a few minutes a day over the course of a week. The heart of each E4 vocabulary lesson is the word web, which describes in detail various meanings of the target word and shows other words with similar meanings, common idioms, common phrases and a unique E4 feature called the Spanish Connection that shows English-Spanish cognates relating to each word.

Plan and conduct a lesson in your field placement using E4 with the first word, "Listen." After teaching the lesson, provide a substantive (300–500 word) reflection on how the lesson went, what you learned about vocabulary instruction, and specific details on how your student(s) learned the vocabulary. Please read the *Introduction to the E4* series on the TextProject website (http://www.textproject.org/e4/) before teaching the lesson. Your instructor will provide the lesson format.

Summary

Samples of all of the instructional products for beginning and struggling readers—*BeginningReads*, *SummerReads*, *Everyday Expressions For Everyday Events* (E4), and *Talking Points for Kids* (TP4K)—are included in the resources for this module and each complete series is available for free download on the TextProject website. If part of a teacher preparation program involves teacher candidates in working with either beginning or struggling readers, an excellent extension of this activity would be to try these texts out with students in a classroom or tutoring context.

Looking Ahead

In Module 4, you will explore how vocabulary relates to text complexity with an emphasis on how different types of texts, narrative or informational, make use of vocabulary in different ways that influence student's comprehension.

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