

What Do Complex Texts Mean for English Learners & Language Minority Students?

California 2012 Accountability Leadership Institute

December 3, 2012

Lily Wong Fillmore

University of California at Berkeley

The answer to the question the title of this talk asks?

iPor fin! A fighting chance to learn what must be learned at school!

In this talk, I'll—

- Explain why the complex texts and the greater rigor in learning across the curriculum required by the Common Core are a real gift for English learners (ELs) and language minority students (LMs), provided they get the instructional support they need;
- Show how a consideration of some key obstacles to language and literacy development for ELs in fact can reveal why so many language minority students have found it so difficult to make academic progress;
- Discuss implications for instructional shifts & planning.

First, let's look at the Common Core's language demands for all students—including ELs & LMs

The Common Core's language demands

- Reading, writing, speaking, and listening across disciplines and not limited to ELA
- Complex texts: comprehension and building knowledge
- Speaking and writing: reasoned discourse about ideas, with reference to text based evidence and reasoning in support of arguments and claims.
- These add up to a critical need for *academic language* and *critical thinking skills* in learning and communication.

Can ELs & LMs handle such demands?

- Language and literacy have been major stumbling blocks, even after a couple of decades of focused instructional attention to English and ELA.
- English has been a big obstacle for ELs, but the kind of English that figures in academic learning has been a barrier for LMs, too.
- Schools have been providing various forms of ESL & ELD for English learners—and in some places LMs have been given the same instructional treatment.

Instructional implications

- For ELs, this requires going way beyond ESL and ELD: What types of daily experiences can support their mastery of the English required for the CCSS?
- What kind of instructional shifts are required to provide access to the Common Core for students with diverse language needs—e.g., Long-term English learners?
- Should they be held back from dealing with the CCSS until they have achieved fluency in English? How long would that take?

I will argue—

- The language ELs and LMs need for dealing with the Common Core is *an outcome of*—not a prerequisite for—*school learning*.
- ELs become long-term English learners because they have not had access to the language they need for full literacy.

- A major obstacle to learning is the use of “leveled” materials—the widely used simplified texts that ELs and struggling learners are thought to need because they lack the language and/or literacy skills for grade level appropriate materials.

What’s wrong with that?

- The super-simplified texts ELs and many LM students get are thin in content (little can be learned by having read them), provide no incentive to read more, and worst of all, provide no clue as to the English that figures in academic discourse.
- Fact is, *the only way anyone can learn the language that figures in advanced literacy is through literacy, and only by noticing, grappling with and thinking about the way forms and structures relate to meaning in the materials one reads.*
- That’s possible if and only if the language one encounters really is representative of academic discourse.

Compare, for example—

A hurricane is a big windy storm.
 The wind blows hard. It is windy.
 The wind can blow down trees.
 It rains very hard. It is rainy.
 The rain can wash away houses.

—with this:

Hurricanes are the most awesome, violent storms on Earth. People call these storms by other names, such as typhoons or cyclones. The scientific term for all these storms is tropical cyclone. Only tropical storms that form over the Atlantic Ocean or eastern Pacific are called “hurricanes.”

Whatever they are called, tropical cyclones all form the same way.

So what is academic language, and how does it figure in complex texts? (Why complex when simple is so much easier? What makes complex texts complex? Why ELs and many other students need instructional support)

Are complex texts necessary?

- Texts can be kept simple only up to a point—e.g., texts used in the early years of school, when children are *learning to read*.
- When children are *reading to learn*, their purpose is to provide access to subject matter and information; they can no longer be kept simple.
- For them to serve that purpose, texts must contain as much information and evidence as necessary to support understanding for readers from various backgrounds and perspectives on the topic or subject matter.

Requirement for learning: access to input

- They provide reliable access to academic language—this puts students in a position to learn it.
- Simplified texts, on the other hand, which may be easier to read, are written in language which make little use of the grammatical structures or expressive devices that figure in complex texts offer no such access or exposure.
- Interacting with complex texts and noticing how language is used in them is the way anyone learns it.
- English learners need help to manage such texts, of course.

What exactly is “academic language?”

- “Academic language” includes the registers of a language used for extended, reasoned discourse, in spoken or written modes.
- Children are not likely to hear it in its spoken forms (lectures, oratory, debates,* formal oral narratives, etc.), however. They mostly encounter it in written texts—primarily in expository and informational texts.
- The language of such writings make use of vocabulary, grammatical structures, expressions, structural devices and ways of expressing and organizing ideas that are quite different from those used in spoken language.
- There are various genres: e.g., story narratives, news-writing, argumentation, explanatory/expository & informational writing.
- Each exploits a somewhat different set of devices and structures, and has its own distinctive way of packaging up information.
- It all adds up to a form of language that is different enough from spoken language, that when kids first see it in texts, it is as if they are dealing with a foreign language!
- Fact is, all kids learn it in school through literacy. *There are no native speakers of academic language.*
- It’s easier for some kids than it is for others, however.

Let’s look at a couple of informational texts to see what makes the language of academic discourse different from that of ordinary spoken language

E.g., from NOAA’s education website <oar.noaa.gov.k12/>

- Vocabulary, yes, but more than that, this kind of text calls on the reader to figure out what the parts of sentences express, how they are to be construed and what they are saying.

Hurricanes

There are no other storms like hurricanes on earth. Views of hurricanes from satellites located thousands of miles above the earth show that unique these powerful, tightly coiled weather systems are.

- E.g., the first sentence: grammatically simple, semantically complex.
 - ▶ There are other storms on earth.
 - ▶ But none are like hurricanes, at least not on earth.
 - ▶ This doesn’t exclude the possible existence of hurricane-like storms in other places.

The first sentence is semantically interesting. What does it tell us?

- ▶ There are other storms on earth.
- ▶ But none are like hurricanes, at least not on earth.
- ▶ This doesn’t exclude the possible existence of hurricane-like storms in other places.

Some key characteristics of academic language

- Informational density: a lot of information is stuffed into phrases, clauses, and sentences. Consider the information packed into this little text:
 - ▶ Hurricanes are unlike any other storm (i.e., they are unique).
 - ▶ Hurricanes are powerful weather systems.
 - ▶ Hurricanes are tightly coiled systems when seen from above.
 - ▶ There are satellites thousands of miles above the earth.
 - ▶ They show what hurricanes look like from above.

Look at the structure of the 2nd sentence:

Views of hurricanes from satellites located thousands of miles above the earth show how unique these powerful, tightly coiled weather systems are.

Another characteristic of academic language

- Complex, over-stuffed noun phrases as we see in this text.
- Noun phrases are made complex by modification—both before the head noun (italicized), and following the head noun by preposition phrases and relative clauses.
- This is very different from the language of social discourse, where nouns are not usually modified.
- The reason for modification? Specificity of reference, which is essential in academic discourse.

Complex texts are necessary because...

- Such texts provide access to information and ways to gain knowledge of subject matter that can be learned only through close and thoughtful reading of informational texts.
- Consider what kids must get from their K-12 experience: knowledge of the many phenomena we expect people to know about, and the development of complex reasoning and thought.
- Literacy of the type promoted by the CCSS is essential to the development of both. Let's look at another text excerpt to see how literacy figures in that development.

An explanatory text: "How do hurricanes form?" (Source: <http://spaceplace.nasa.gov/hurricanes/>)

Tropical cyclones are like giant engines that use warm, moist air as fuel. That is why they form only over warm ocean waters near the equator. The warm, moist air over the ocean rises upward from near the surface. Because this air moves up and away from the surface, there is less air left near the surface. Another way to say the same thing is that the warm air rises, causing an area of lower air pressure below.

Air from surrounding areas with higher air pressure pushes in to the low pressure area. Then that "new" air becomes warm and moist and rises, too.

As the warm air continues to rise, the surrounding air swirls in to take its place. As the warmed, moist air rises and cools off, the water in the air forms clouds. The whole system of clouds and wind spins and grows, fed by the ocean's heat and water evaporating from the surface.

Storms that form north of the equator spin counterclockwise. Storms south of the equator spin clockwise. The difference is because of Earth's rotation on its axis.

"Whatever they are called, tropical cyclones all form the same way."

- An explanatory or expository text—not easy to understand because hurricane formation involves difficult concepts and processes.
- This is, however, the clearest and best explanation of this phenomenon around for kids—but it is a difficult text (even with illustrations and charts).

- To make any sense of it requires that the relationships and conditions described be sorted out and understood.
- The first sentence of this excerpt reads *“Tropical cyclones are like giant engines that use warm, moist air as fuel.”*
- The next sentences begins, *“That is why...”* telling the reader that what came before is an explanation for something that needs explaining, i.e., what follows.
- In logical philosophy, that’s called an *explanandum*.
- Notice the informational density of this text, and the many complex, bloated noun phrases in the text, which are italicized.

Many other academic language features in this text, including....

- Many phrases and clauses here that tell where things happened (e.g., *over warm waters, near the equator, over the ocean, near the surface, up and away from the surface, etc.*)
- These are called “circumstantial adverbials,” devices that allow details that locate the processes to be included in the sentence.
- Notice too the use of various constructions that explain what things mean or clarifies by para-phrase (*“Another way to say the same thing is...”*)

Instructional implications: Giving ELs access to the CCSS

ESL/ELD provide ELs a critical grounding in English, but the Common Core calls for some major shifts in how ELs are instructed, a hard look at grouping for instruction, and in materials used.

What instructional support is needed?

- More work on vocabulary? More time spent learning grammar points? A course covering academic English?
- Answer to all of that is—YES and NO. There is no way in which academic language can be “taught” in bits and pieces, or in a language course as one might teach French.
- It is much too pervasive and varied to be taught as a subject. Academic language can be learned only through literacy, and through discussions focused on the relationship between forms, structures and meaning.
- The only way to learn the kind of language used to carry out academic work is through literacy, and that’s only if students actually work with complex texts in which it figures.
- Such texts, however, are not easy to interpret because they are, as we have seen, often stuffed with information. Many students need help unpacking the information from such texts.
- It is often assumed that students must struggle through materials on their own, otherwise they will not gain independence in reading.
- Question—if they can’t get to the meaning of the text on their own, what does this mean?

Instructional strategy: Academically productive conversations. Focus on developing academic language & literacy skills

Conversations focused on language

- Daily, teacher-led instructional conversations focused on the language of complex texts are part of a strategy that has evolved from work I’ve been doing over the past 6 years in NYC schools (many Networks, K-12).

- The materials worked on have been related to science, social studies, and math (ELA only after administrators were convinced there would be no negative consequences on test scores and AYPs!).
- Just 1 or 2 “juicy sentence(s)” per day from texts that the classes were working on—the antithesis of the simplified texts that had held students back.

Crucial for language development

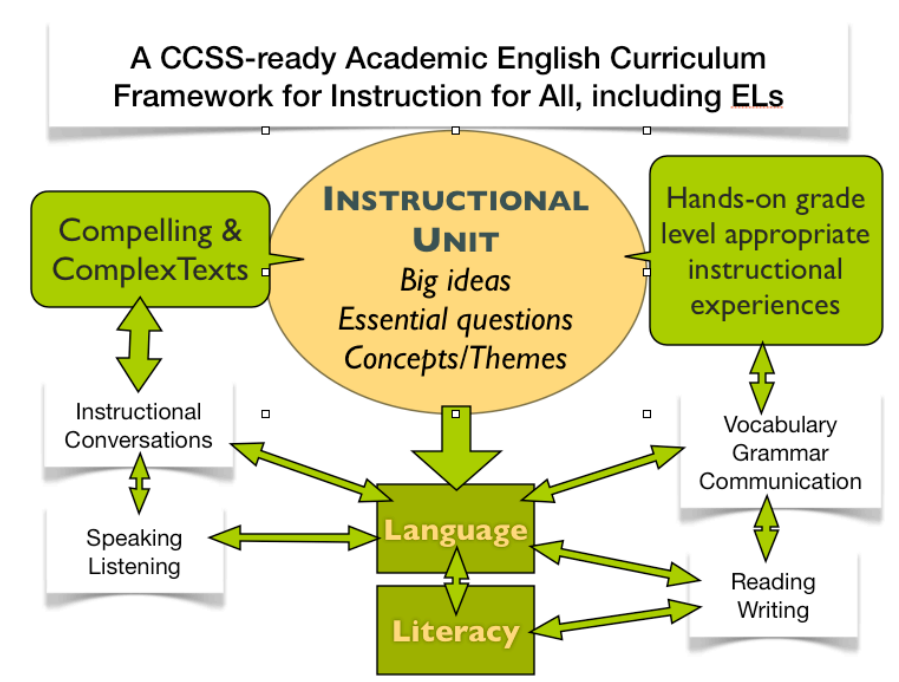
- Earlier, I mentioned that ELs must have evidence (input) on how language works to learn it.
- That input data must be true to the target—i.e., if the target is academic language, then the input data must represent it well. Simplified texts do not, and that’s why such materials do nothing to advance either language or literacy development.
- Learners must also have instructional support: they require cooperation and support from more competent others in noticing the relationship between form and meaning, and help in gaining access to meaning in linguistic data.

Why instructional support required

- Children do not ordinarily pay much attention to the language used in texts—it is just so much background, like the paper the text is printed on.
- They want access to meaning, but what they need is to discover how meaning relates to form, and they need help to do that.
- That’s where teachers come in. This cannot be automated, nor handed off to peers or volunteers. Peers do not know enough about this kind of language to provide the support needed by learners. They can help solidify learning by talking, but—
- It takes the maturity and the professional training and skill of teachers to provide support for language development.

These language focused conversations are embedded in larger instructional events

- *They work only if the conversations really are conversations.*
- *They do not work if teachers just tell students how language works, or try to teach the words and grammar out of context.*



An early elementary unit

- The teachers (push-in ESL & classroom teacher) have designed a 2 month long unit on butterflies.
- The bigger theme: “transformations”—the changes over the life cycles of amphibians and some insects. Earlier in the school year, the class studied the growth of tadpoles to frogs.
- There have been many rich, hands-on activities, as necessary for early elementary: there’s a cage in the classroom where the children have observed the changes taking place over the complete life cycle of the butterfly.

Compelling & complex texts

- Instructional objectives rather than language goals drive the choice of materials and activities as typically happens in ESL.
- A lot of attention to the fine use of language in texts by authors, and the sentences teachers chose for discussion are always interesting and complex.

Integrated learning

- In addition to the usual language arts curriculum the class is following, reading and writing is infused in this integrated science unit.
- The children have kept written notes of the changes taking place in the butterfly cage in their observational notebooks.
- The teachers have been reading relevant passages from Sara Nelson’s *Butterflies*, a Nature Watch publication, as the children observe the changes taking place in the cage.

Words in phrases more meaningful than isolated words

- In this chart, the teachers have listed phrases using verbs the children have learned to describe what happens during metamorphosis.
- These words have been used and practiced for days as the children act out the activities described in these phrases.
- This is much more effective than teaching verb forms in isolation, and hoping the children will figure out how to use them in sentences.

A juicy sentence each day

- Each day, teachers select a sentence from the passage they read to the children as the focus of an instructional conversation.
- They decide in advance how to break the sentence up for discussion, copy it onto chart paper.
- They prepare conversational starters to focus the children’s attention on each part in turn.

Deconstructing & reconstructing texts

- In the course of the instructional conversation on the sentence, teachers invite the students to think of the meanings of each of its parts.
- The children’s sentences are transcribed on color strips that match the color-coded part of the sentence, along with their names.
- These become reading materials too, as we shall see.
- Color coding aided the children in mapping the ideas back to the text.