

Teaching Skills for **Complex Text**

Deepening
Close Reading
in the Classroom

Heidi Anne E. Mesmer

Foreword by Michael C. McKenna

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Introduction

AS A FORMER 3rd-grade teacher and text researcher, I was thrilled to be involved in a small part of the Common Core development and had such high hopes for the impact that this initiative would have in K–12 classrooms. As with many initiatives, the Common Core, especially the text components—complex text, close reading, text-based questions—have produced some troubling translations into practice. Talking to Vera, a 3rd-grade teacher, brought a few of these to light. “I just can’t get a kid who is reading at a 2nd-grade level to successfully handle 4th-grade materials. It won’t help. And I can push the close reading all you want, but if the kids don’t have a basic understanding of the sentences, I might as well be teaching Greek!” I could not help but agree with Vera. Somehow the most exciting text aspects of the Common Core have gone awry and have resulted in teachers being asked to do things that they know are simply not best practice. Vera and the many teachers like her are the motivation for this book. What students and teachers really need are concrete, actionable tools to develop the foundational skills that help students to engage with challenging text or to closely read, not pushy messages about challenge and rigor. This book addresses the needs of the intermediate-grade student in ways that other resources do not.

PARADIGM OF TEXT CHALLENGE

For years, paradigms for reader-text matching have so frequently focused on avoiding reader frustration that they have rarely given equal attention to making sure that readers are challenged. The current focus on text challenge is a welcome relief and an important course correction. However, current rhetoric around text complexity has suggested that paying attention to text levels is an antiquated practice perpetuated by teachers with low expectations. It’s as if teachers across the country have been inadvertently limiting the true potential of students by not pressing them to read harder books. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, the suggested increases in text levels in the intermediate grades are not supported by evidence (Chall, 1977; Gamson, Lu, & Eckert, 2013; Hayes, Wolfer, & Wolfe, 1996; Hiebert & Mesmer, 2013).

Untangling Anaphora

Replacing Words

EARLY IN THE YEAR Carol was giving her students a practice test to prepare them for their 4th-grade state test. After reviewing the results, Carol noticed that all of her students were having trouble with several questions. Carol began rereading the passage to try to understand what was going on. As she reread, she could immediately see what the difficulty was. There were many places in which one word or set of words was being used to replace another. Some of these replacements were really quite simple, but others were not. Below is the passage.

Samantha loved to sew more than anything and she began immediately to design items that she could sell at the County Fair. She purchased fabric, cut patterns for aprons and napkins, and carefully stitched the items on her machine. Doing so brought her pride and satisfaction. Samantha even encouraged her friend, Amy, to join in the project and together the two shared many hours stitching items and chatting.

Carol saw that the words “doing so,” “items,” and “the project” were all referring to previously mentioned activities or nouns. She could see that these references might be challenging to her students. This chapter focuses on teaching intermediate-grade students some anaphoric relationships. Anaphora is a device used in writing in which one word (either a pronoun or another word) replaces another word. The simplest types of anaphora are those in which a noun is being replaced by a pronoun (e.g., “She” for “Samantha”).

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND

Types of Anaphoric Relationships

Anaphoric relationships can be classified based on the type of word or words being replaced (i.e., nouns, verbs, or clauses) and the word doing the replacing (i.e., pronouns or other words) (Irwin, 2007; see Figure 1.1 [note that all

In the next section, the teacher leads whole-group guided practice with five examples in Passage 1 and seven examples in Passage 2 [*note*: there are two additional “hidden” noun replacements that can be discussed if students notice them]. These passages include different types of pronouns and the pronoun *it*, which can be tricky. Students are asked to talk with their partners as they listen to the passage and identify replacements. The teacher will ask the group to identify each replacement and write it over the pronoun using an overhead projector or chart. The passage is shown below with specific notes for each of the items.

1. Marcus, Jennifer

The science fair projects required them to research a question, set up an experiment, gather materials, conduct the experiment, and report the

2. process 3. Marcus, Jennifer

results. The process had been hard and it had taken them many weeks to complete. Marcus was studying the effects of different cleaners because

4. Marcus

he liked chemistry and Jennifer was testing different types of rewards

5. Jennifer's

with her pet mouse. Both students wanted to win the prize at the fair.

Notes:

1. In the first sentence the word *them* is replacing *Jennifer* and *Marcus*. Point out that the words *Jennifer* and *Marcus* are from the two earlier sentences. Explain to students that the farther the substitute word is from its replacement, the harder the word is to find. List this on a chart, “When are replacements hard?”
2. This sentence has the word *it* replacing *process*. Point out to the students that this can be a little confusing, and let them know to play close attention to the word *it* because there are some other ways that it can be tricky.

Extra Items: The words *the process* and *both students* are underlined. Before *it* replaced *the process*, the words *the process* replaced *research a question, set up an experiment, gather materials, conduct the experiment, and report the results*. These are not pronominal substitutions but noun substitutions to be taught in the next section. If students notice them, discuss them and explain that they will be taught in the next section.

The second set of guided practice passages is a little more difficult. These passages include the pronouns *their* and *there*, which provide an opportunity to clarify the meanings of these homophones. In this passage there are two indefinite “*it*”s.

Connectives in Sentences

“Sometimes I don’t know where Hunter is coming from,” explained Donna, a 4th-grade teacher. “I will be reading his writing and I will come to a sentence and think, ‘That doesn’t make sense. That sentence just doesn’t work. Can’t he tell?’”

The sentences below, taken from Hunter’s story about a special gift, illustrate Donna’s point:

I bolted downstairs. I was so excited and I hoped that the skateboard would be under the tree. Although I knew it was expensive, I thought my parents couldn’t afford it.

The final sentence, with the word “although” is off because Hunter has misused “although.” When a sentence begins with the word “although” then the beginning part should have a meaning that is **opposite** to the ending part of the sentence. The ending of the sentence should contain a surprising outcome given information in the beginning. In this case, the skateboard being expensive should suggest that Hunter would **not** get the skateboard or that his parents would **not** be able to buy it. The issue here is a lack of understanding of connectives, a major gap in U.S. instruction in grades 3–5.

IMPORTANT BACKGROUND

AS A FORMER 3rd-grade teacher, I frequently had Donna’s experience with my students—they would show a gap in understanding the grammatical functions of words, and I would have very little knowledge about how to remedy the situation. It is little wonder. Very few, if any, professional resource materials for intermediate-grade teachers address how to teach connectives, and yet evidence suggests that about one-third of all sentences that students encounter in complex text will contain them (Robertson, 1968). Most research focuses on adolescents and is decades old. In fact, Smith (1963) wrote something that appears to be true even today: “One wonders whether over-emphasis upon subject and predicate, which appear in both the clause and the sentences as a whole, and too little attention to the meaning signaled by the connective may cause difficulty” (p. 8).

A successful DRTA is dependent on teacher preparation and modeling (read the text ahead of time!). The text should have several points of tension where a prediction can be made, and it must be divided into stopping points ahead of time. Students will often get bogged down in their prediction being “right,” when the point of the DRTA is to make a prediction, track the prediction, and find text support. It is the process and focus that are important. Sometimes students will be able to state that their prediction was or was not supported but will not be able to find text evidence. Teacher modeling makes clear the connection between what the text says and the inference about the prediction.

Look Backs. Many students do not know that they need to go back to the text in order to answer some questions. Donte, a 5th-grader, explained, “I am smart. I got it. I just keep it all up here,” he said, pointing to his head. Donte was indeed smart, but he had yet to learn that in some circumstances, you can’t keep it all in your head. Donte and other students need to understand *when* they need to go back to the text and *why*. In fact, researchers found that good comprehenders spontaneously went back into the text when they were unable to answer questions, but poor comprehenders never did (Garner & Reis, 1981). They identified three types of look-back behaviors (Reis & Leone, 1985):

- **Undifferentiated rereading:** This is rereading the entire passage, chapter, or book when you do not know how to answer a question. This is a first step, an awareness, but often this is not strategic and can waste time.
- **Text sampling and question differentiation:** This is when students evaluate the question and think about whether or not they need to look back and then sample parts of the text to answer questions that require it.
- **Text manipulation:** This is when a reader puts together information from a series of paragraphs in order to answer questions.

The look-back strategy (Garner & Reis, 1981; Reis & Leone, 1985) is guided by three questions: (1) Why should I look back? (2) When should I look back (which questions)?; and (3) Where should I look back? (See Figure 4.5.)

Step 1 (Day 1): Why should I look back? (Figure 4.5, Passages for Teaching Look Backs, Part I)

During this part of the lesson the teacher and students read Part I of the passage. The goal is to simply alert readers to the fact that they must look back at the text, to answer the question. Below is a scripted example of questions being answered: