**The Importance of Vocabulary and Syntax**

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Recent research on the nature of text complexity addressed two questions: first, to what extent computer-based programs can accurately measure and predict the designated grade level of any text. The study also asked the programs to predict how difficult text might be for students regardless of its designated grade level. The first question was studied by having each program guess the grade level for over twelve hundred retired reading comprehension passages. To determine their ability to predict student difficulty, the programs measured another set of passages that had data on how well over 100,000 students had done on each passage. Six of the computer-based programs used in the study were able to predict student difficulty to a high degree of accuracy. A key finding from the study was to determine that the features of text most strongly predictive of students’ reading difficulty or success are the vocabulary demands of the text and the complexity of the syntax (sentence structure).

Vocabulary has long been correlated with comprehension. Unfortunately, vocabulary does not receive systematic or strong support in ELA curriculum or programs. Close examination of sentences—how they are built and how exactly they convey ideas—is even more of a neglected area. Both of those conditions have to change if students are going to succeed in reading and understanding the more complex text called for by the Standards. It is for this reason that both vocabulary and syntax receive the attention they do throughout these exemplars.

In writing the exemplars, we chose to focus on words essential to understanding the text. But we used additional criteria as well: how likely the word is to appear in future texts, how abstract the word is, and whether the word is part of a word family (teaching “migrate” can also teach or reinforce migration, immigrant, immigration, emigrant). These features of a word help teachers spend their energy on words that will provide maximum payoff in helping students grow their vocabulary.

The words are pointed out to you by the use of bold font throughout all the texts in the collection. You will be reminded in the preface to each exemplar of the importance of vocabulary and syntax and to discuss the role each plays in the text: how a different word might change the meaning, why the author might have chosen just *that* word. You will be asked to hold students accountable for these understandings. If a word can be determined from context, we are asking you to help your students develop the habit of doing so. If we thought a word couldn’t be determined from context, we supplied a brief, student-friendly definition so the student could gain a quick sense and keep reading. Many of those words are worthy of second looks and discussion, as well.

Many questions addressing important aspects of the text double as vocabulary or syntax questions. This can be seen clearly in question nine of the Frederick Douglass exemplar. The homework assignment following question 10 of “My Mother, the Scientist” is a clear example of this in practice, as well. But, every exemplar lesson has questions that focus on syntax or vocabulary.

The attention to vocabulary and syntax we model in these exemplars is just a start. However, it is not enough to focus on this only during close reading opportunities. That by itself won’t fully support students’ vocabulary growth or increase their reading capacity as much as we need to, especially for students not functioning at grade level. Students need to engage in a volume of reading well beyond what can be accomplished in the close work of these exemplars. What close analytic reading can do is develop students’ ability to learn word meanings from context. It can sharpen students’ awareness of the role words play in reading and give them regular supported practice in deciphering complex sentences. That practice will in turn support students’ ability to learn new word meanings and unpack meaning from tough sentences in the texts they read more broadly. We need to get this kind of virtuous cycle going well before the full text complexity demands of the Common Core State Standards come into play.