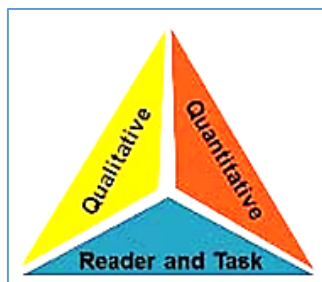


Complex Text – Part 3: Reader and Task

In parts 1 and 2 of this series, we looked at what is meant by “complex” text and why it matters in student learning. We recognized that text complexity is comprised of three interdependent components: **quantitative**, **qualitative** and **reader/task** considerations. In this installment, we will look more closely at how reader and task impact a text’s complexity.



While quantitative measures and qualitative considerations both describe aspects of the text itself, **the qualities the reader brings to the text and the nature of the task being undertaken** also contribute to a text’s level of complexity.

Reader and task considerations include:

1. The reader’s –

- **Mental processing** – Does the reader have the attention, short term working memory, and critical/analytic skills to understand this material? Note that these capabilities can vary in a student from day to day, and even depend on the surroundings, time of day, the student’s fatigue or hunger level, and the distraction of personal concerns.
- **Reading skills** – Beyond decoding, how skillful is the reader at inferring, predicting, visualizing and other comprehension skills?
- **Engagement and motivation** – Is the topic or writing style engaging? Does the student have a purpose for reading beyond simply answering comprehension questions?
- **Prior knowledge and experience** – Does full understanding of the material depend on prior knowledge of the topic or genre? Can connections be made to other learning or experiences? Does the student’s cultural background impact interpretation? For ELL students, also consider first language interference and exposure to English vocabulary.
- **Maturity and sensitivity** – Does the material contain themes or details that are or beyond the understanding of or unsuitable for a reader of that age?

2. Expectations of the given task –

What is the student being asked to do with the reading assignment? Is he or she to learn the content, analyze it, apply it, or simply to skim for specific information? At what level of complexity are the associated questions? For example, the challenge of reading a story to list the main characters differs greatly from reading the same story for the purpose of analyzing how the author conveys mood through his or her use of figurative language.

Together, quantitative measures, qualitative considerations and the characteristics of the reader and task all contribute to the complexity of a given text.

Resources

- This webpage lists a number of resources for understanding text complexity. http://www.ccsso.org/Navigating_Text_Complexity/Chart_Your_Course.html
- This CPALMS interactive presentation gives an excellent overview of the three aspects of text complexity. Exploring Text Complexity: <http://www.cpalms.org/uploads/pd/stemlearn/150081/story.html>