

Grade-Level Text: A Tool for Academic Success

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Decades of research on language and literacy development have shown that in order to succeed in school and beyond, all students, including language learners at all stages of English proficiency, need to work with grade-level text every day, beginning in the earliest years. Content-rich, grade-level texts cultivate knowledge, language, and comprehension skills and provide a platform for engaging tasks and projects that build strong readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.¹ In other words, grade-level text is a cornerstone of students' everyday learning.

But grade-level text isn't just a tool for academic success—it also promotes equity.

Why Grade-Level Text?

Students need content that gives them opportunities to develop strong reading comprehension, reasoning, and critical thinking skills.

And that starts with grade-level text. Students develop their conceptual knowledge and reasoning skills, their knowledge of the world, and their language skills only by working with texts that are filled with complex ideas, words, and concepts. They won't learn new ideas, words, and concepts by reading simplified texts or material they already know. Instead, they need material that builds new understandings and skills; all students need what we call "productive struggle" to learn!

This is especially true for today's language learners around the globe, who have big goals for themselves, fueled by the expectation that they will need to do more in English—in the academic classroom, in the workplace, and in their personal lives.

A Tool for the Future

Though we've known for decades that grade-level reading material is important, it's more essential now than ever as an ingredient in the recipe for academic and personal success. Globalization, along with social and economic development, demands new skills of our next generation. As automation and technology transform the way we study and work, children (and adults) need increasingly sophisticated literacy skills to thrive. In other words, what counts as "literate" is changing for every one of today's students.

As recently as 25 years ago, basic or foundational literacy skills were sufficient for access to the middle-income labor market. But that's no longer the case. For college and career, today's students need advanced literacy and communication skills.² They need to master wide-ranging critical thinking and problem-solving skills that go well beyond basic literacy functions, and they need to communicate new information in diverse ways and for diverse audiences. And getting there depends on learning from rich, engaging texts at grade level.

¹ Lesaux, Phillips Galloway & Marietta, 2016, Shanahan, Fisher, & Frey, 2012

² Dondi, Klier, Panier, & Schubert, 2021

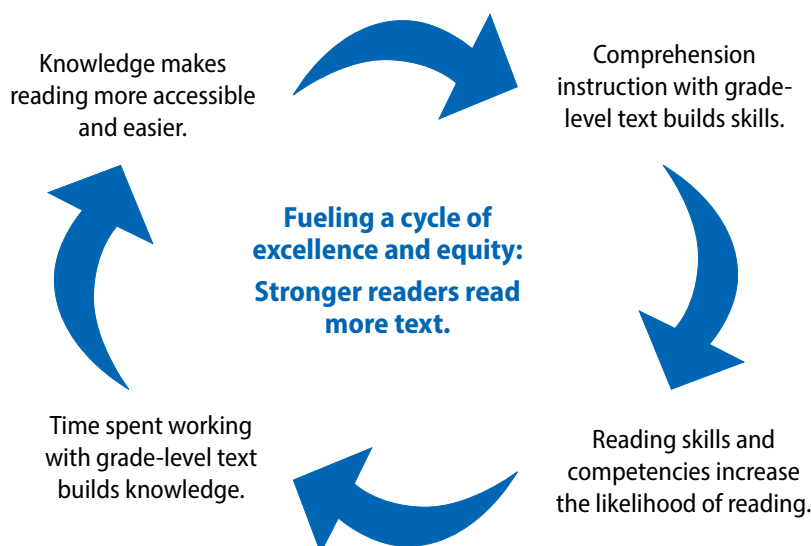
An Excellence and Equity Tool for Language Learners

Why is a learning environment that revolves around grade-level text not just an excellence strategy, but also an equity tool for language learners? Equity is about making sure every student is a powerful learner and reaches their potential. Students' brains are wired to learn—they are learning machines! And they need excitement, curiosity, and complexity to kickstart that machine.³

That starts with learning environments that foster intellectual curiosity and that cultivate skills and competencies for academic success through opportunities to work with rich content and ideas. Yet all too often, language learners' abilities to handle complex content are underestimated—and this underestimation translates to curricular and teaching strategies that actually hold students back because content is overly scaffolded and/or overly simplified. A widespread example of over-scaffolding is using text that is below grade level for students learning English.⁴ This creates a vicious cycle: Language learners who don't get exposed to complex texts never have the chance to grapple with them and develop strategies to learn from them. Then, when they eventually do come across such texts, they don't succeed as readers.

What, then, happens to these language learners? Well, they often become 'stuck' at an intermediate level of English proficiency.⁵ This is sometimes referred to as the 'plateau' of language learning.⁶ Their challenges are most often attributed to their learning abilities and/or to their status as language learners, when in fact they haven't had the learning opportunities and environments necessary to get to advanced levels of English proficiency. Having only basic or intermediate language skills not only compromises students' daily learning and progress, but also their future.

An equity and excellence strategy means making sure that every student, including language learners at all stages of proficiency in every classroom, reaches their potential to work with big ideas, complex text, and new information.



³ Hammond, 2016

⁴ Northrop & Kelly, 2019

⁵ Sahakyan & Ryan, 2019

⁶ Richards, 2008

Using Grade-Level Texts as a Tool for Literacy Learning and Knowledge Building

In the accessible, supportive, and rigorous classroom environment for language learners, learning is organized around units of study with content-rich themes and grade-level texts. Students do not read simplified texts, which dilute their learning. Rather, the instructional tasks that wrap around grade-level texts provide scaffolds that build students' knowledge and literacy skills.

Snapshot: Recent research on literacy teaching anchored in rich content

For many years, literacy instruction and language learning were considered in the “language arts” domain, and the texts and instruction revolved around narrative text and literature, as well as everyday vocabulary. But today, a growing body of research shows that building students' academic content knowledge is a key tool for their reading success beginning in the earliest years—and that this is especially important for language learners.

- A study with middle school students learning English found that literacy lessons, anchored in scientific content, and taking an approach that involved inquiry-based learning, direct and explicit vocabulary instruction, and integration of reading and writing resulted in higher performance not just on state-mandated district tests of science and reading, but also on oral reading fluency. (Lara-Alecio et al.)
- A study in eighth-grade social studies classrooms demonstrated that compared to standard teaching, an approach that focused explicitly on academic content vocabulary; text as a source for reading and discussion; and team-based learning improved students' general reading comprehension as well as their content acquisition and content reading comprehension. This study highlights the role of improving knowledge and reading comprehension through a content-based literacy approach. (Vaughn et al.)
- A line of research in middle and high school classrooms focused on getting students to grade-level comprehension demonstrates the importance of an instructional approach that combines the goals of knowledge building and providing reading support rather than treating them as distinct instructional goals and activities. At the core of this combined approach are content-rich text sets, at grade level and on the same topic, to provide multiple opportunities to both build knowledge and work with diverse texts. (Lupo et al.)

Grade-Level Texts for all Language Learners

Although exposing all students, including language learners at all stages of proficiency, to complex text is appealing as a concept, in practice this shift often feels daunting and sometimes even counterintuitive. This is especially the case for educators teaching learners at the early and intermediate stages of English proficiency; these educators often raise two specific concerns about planning and organizing for curriculum and daily instruction that revolves around complex, grade-level text. Here, we outline and respond to each of those concerns.

CONCERN #1: My students are still learning English, so the grade-level text will be too challenging.

RESPONSE: Challenge is at the core of meaningful learning! With the right curricular and teaching approach, students can read grade-level text. Our students will face grade-level text in college and in their careers, and so they need to build strategies to approach it, beginning in the earliest years and stages of English learning. Lift therefore takes an approach that drives academic language skills and academic content knowledge by giving students varied learning opportunities with grade level text in a well-scaffolded context. Most importantly, in Lift the objective is not to understand every word of every text, but to learn and apply the strategies to work through grade-level texts while developing English proficiency and academic content knowledge. All student work is embedded in learning cycles and is supported by predictable routines that make the sometimes-challenging learning process feel natural and familiar for students.

To get to advanced literacy skills and English proficiency, think rigor and challenge in a supportive context!

Curricular Rigor, Challenge, and Support for Language Learners

Research has surfaced four key elements to supporting students in accessing rigorous, challenging content.⁷ These translate into classroom goals as outlined in the chart below. The Lift program is specifically designed to address each of these goals.

Goals for Language Learners	How does Lift's curriculum design support the goals?
Increase volume of text learners engage with	Units are built around text sets connected to the theme, rather than relying largely on a single text over an extended period to build content knowledge and skills.
Embrace complexity of text and content	Scaffolded instruction, rather than simplified texts, help students to access challenging texts.
Build background knowledge	Visual texts (photos, illustrations and graphics) support reading comprehension by building background knowledge.
Foster curiosity and motivation	Units are organized around an engaging essential question, and open with a text that is a "hook" for student learning.

⁷ See Hall et al., 2017; Lesaux & Harris, 2015; Lupo et al., 2018; Shanahan, Fisher & Frey, 2012

MYTH #2: Simplified texts help my students.

RESPONSE: Students need scaffolded, supportive instruction rather than simplified text. Yet often, for language learners at the beginning and intermediate stages, grade-level text is replaced with strategies that compromise their language and literacy development. These students often read lower-level texts, are read aloud to, and/or complete low-level worksheets⁸ —strategies that might appear supportive because they don't tax students' literacy skills, but that actually hold students back. These students are not gaining practice with the very content and material that will develop their ability to read independently and cultivate their knowledge and skills over time. Plus, every student deserves to be engaged with learning at their cognitive level! For these reasons, Lift offers a variety of instructional strategies to scaffold students (at all stages of English proficiency) into grade-level text.⁹ Scaffolding strategies in Lift include:

- building background knowledge before reading
- pre-reading vocabulary instruction
- point-of-use glossary words
- close reading and comprehension activities, including specific questions about complex portions of the texts
- direct grammar instruction tied to the selection (in the Language Companion)
- “Key Points Reading” selection summaries that are designed to “unlock” complex concepts, text structures, or language that might be unfamiliar to English language learners.

Conclusion

The large, growing, and diverse population of language learners have big goals for themselves, fueled by the well-founded understanding that they will need to use English extensively in the classroom, in the workplace, and in their personal lives. The critical task, therefore, is to equip learners with the skills and competencies they need to succeed in school and at work. Grade-level text is paramount to this task; content-rich, grade-level texts build knowledge, language, and comprehension skills and provide a platform for engaging tasks and projects that build strong readers, writers, listeners, and speakers.

⁸ e.g., Northrop & Kelly, 2019

⁹ e.g., Baker et al., 2014; Echevarria et al. 2017

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