Shifts and Implications for Disciplinary Literacy

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The Common Core State Standards and standards reforms in other states present 3 key shifts for ELA instruction. The key shifts for English language arts in the CCSS ELA are (1) regular practice with complex texts and their academic language, (2) reading, writing, and speaking grounded in evidence from texts, both literary and informational, and (3) building knowledge through content-rich nonfiction.

1) Regular Practice with Complex Texts and their Academic Language

This first shift expands the scope of the types of text typically read in school. Providing students with texts that steadily increase in complexity prepares them to work with texts typically found in college and the workplace. The CCSS present grade level bands with corresponding Lexile levels (found in Appendix A). This scaffolding provides students with the academic vocabulary required to understand and communicate their understanding. Although the standards leave the decisions of what texts to use largely up to states, districts, schools, and teachers, they do provide exemplar texts as a way of demonstrating what text complexity looks like at each grade level.

2) Reading, Writing, and Speaking Grounded in Evidence from Texts, both Literary and Informational

The second shift, communication grounded in evidence from text, requires students to demonstrate that their knowledge comes from the texts, serving the twofold purpose of ensuring that students are not just relying on prior knowledge and that they actually read the texts carefully. Students are also expected to be able to clearly identify structural components of texts, including central ideas and arguments.

3) Building Knowledge through Content-Rich Nonfiction

The third shift, the use of content-rich nonfiction, reflects the nature of texts that graduates are expected to consume and understand in the “real-world.” By grade four students are expected to engage with texts evenly split between informational and literary. Starting in grade six, 70% of texts students encounter should be informational. (This refers to texts read across the entire academic course load for students; it is not suggested that secondary ELA teachers use literary texts only 30% of the time). Perhaps one of the most major shifts in the standards is the expectation that responsibility for student proficiency in reading, writing, speaking, and listening is shared with other academic disciplines including history/social studies and science. The
standards for literacy in history/social studies, science, and technical subjects. In grades 6 through 12 elucidate the essential role of content area teachers in preparing students to read and write in the academic disciplines. This helps ensure that students are given the opportunity to practice these skills throughout the day as well as underscoring the importance of these skills in understanding other subjects.

The CCSS ELA shifts (2010) are supported by an overview of the field by Adams (2009). In her overview, Adams highlights the work of Chall et al. (1977) and Hayes, Wolf, and Wolfe (1996) discovering that the difficulty and complexity of popular reading textbook series had declined over time, particularly in grades four and up, and that this reduction in complexity aligned temporally with an SAT score decline. The disparity between what was being utilized in schools and what students were expected to demonstrate at the college level was leaving students unprepared for these assessments and the demands of college and career. In order to help understand how we might better meet these demands, Adams draws upon research in expanding student vocabulary (Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986) as well as computational models of vocabulary acquisition, including Latent Semantic Analysis which uses computer analysis associative learning to determine text complexity (Landauer, 1998). To help illuminate this shift about how our understanding of the complexity of vocabulary has developed, Adams offers the following explanation:

Words are not just words. They are the nexus—the interface—between communication and thought. When we read, it is through words that we build, refine, and modify our knowledge. What makes reading valuable and important is not the words themselves so much as the understandings they afford. The reason we need to know the meanings of words is that they point to the knowledge from which we are to construct, interpret, and reflect on the meaning of the text. (Adams, 2009, p. 23)

This understanding provides classrooms two paths when working with texts, “materials must be sufficiently accessible in language and concept for the students to read and understand on their own, or the students must be given help as they read” (Adams, 2009, p. 26). Given the time and resource demands of providing each student individual help with everything they read, the texts students are currently reading must prepare them with the vocabulary and reading skills required to understand and utilize increasingly complex texts (O'Reilly & McNamara, 2007; Shapiro, 2004). This understanding underpins the CCSS ELA’s regular practice with complex texts and their academic language conceptual shift so that students can obtain the greatest cognitive and literacy benefits by reading deeply in multiple domains and about multiple topics.

As outlined in shift three, shared responsibility for student literacy requires all teachers to understand how they can help their students read, write, speak, and listen as appropriate for their discipline. Disciplinary literacy refers to the specialized ways of knowing and communicating in
the different disciplines to make meaning (Jetton & Shanahan, 2012). The four major areas of disciplinary literacy are English, history, science, and mathematics, aligning with the bulk of curriculum in US schools. Many of the same strategies for literacy can be used across these four domains to engage with complex texts, but the texts, claims and evidence process, disciplinary practices, and meanings differ (Shanahan, 2015).

References


