

The Impact of the Common Core State Standards: The Top Five Shifts in Literacy Instruction

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Abstract

The Common Core State Standards Initiative adopted a goal of having every student in the United States college and career ready by the end of high school. As a result, the CCSS English/Language Arts have influenced the way teachers approach literacy instruction. Since the implementation of the CCSS (or standards similar to the actual CCSS but that vary slightly), there have been five main shifts in literacy instruction. Regardless of grade level, content area, or student characteristics (struggling, gifted, etc.), all instruction is impacted by these five shifts.

Introduction

The Common Core State Standards Initiative adopted a goal of having every student in the United States college and career ready by the end of high school. College and career readiness is defined by the CCSS as the “acquisition of the knowledge and skills a student needs to enroll and success in credit-bearing, first-year courses at a postsecondary institution, such as a two-or four-year college, trade school, or technical school...not needing to take remedial courses in college.”

The CCSS are based on the College and Career Readiness (CCR) Anchor Standards, which describe what students should know and be able to do by the time they enter college or the workplace after graduating from high school. These Anchor Standards are the foundation of the CCSS Initiative. In fact, the CCSS are organized according to the CCR Anchor Standards. The CCSS K-12 English/Language Arts are organized into 10 reading standards, 10 writing standards, 6 speaking and listening standards, and 6 language standards with the Anchor Standards as a foundation for their organization.

There is much debate about the CCSS, including their development, implementation, etc. Regardless, the CCSS English/Language Arts have influenced the way teachers approach literacy instruction. Since the implementation of the CCSS (or standards similar to the actual CCSS but that vary slightly), there have been five main shifts in literacy instruction. Regardless of grade level, content area, or student characteristics (struggling, gifted, etc.), all instruction is impacted by these five shifts.

Shift #1: Balancing Informational and Literary Texts.

Much of our knowledge base comes from informational text. Almost 80% of what is read in college/workplace is informational (non-fiction), but 80% of what students read in school is literary (fiction). While informational texts are harder for students to comprehend, they are critical for knowledge. As a result of the CCSS, not only will students be expected to read non-fiction texts beginning in kindergarten, students will be expected to read more non-fiction texts as they progress through the grade levels. While the expectation for 4th graders is a 50/50 split between fiction and non-fiction texts, by the time students reach 12th grade, 70% of the texts they read should be non-fiction. (See Table 1.)

Shift #2: Building Knowledge in the Disciplines (grades 6-12)

Literacy is an essential component of content area classrooms. While this idea is not new, there is a renewed emphasis on literacy being a main focus (rather than a supplement) to instruction in the content area classrooms. Content area teachers are the best qualified to help students master texts in each course by helping them develop critical strategies and skills for reading texts in each subject. As a result of the CCSS, students should be given tasks that require them to read more content area texts to gain more information. Content area teachers should facilitate student use of text as a key part of their instruction.

Shift #3: Text-Dependent Questions, Text-Based Answers, and Writing from Sources.

Research indicates that 80% of the questions students were asked did not require them to read the text to answer the questions. As a result, there is a stronger emphasis on text-dependent questions that require students to answer questions based on the text...not prior knowledge, experience, or opinion. These questions can only be answered correctly by close reading of the text. They

require an understanding that extends beyond recalling facts. Further, as a result of the CCSS, students should be engaged in writing using evidence to inform or make an argument. As a result, less narrative writing should occur. (See Table 2.)

Shift #4: Staircase of Text Complexity

Text complexity is one of the most important factors in developing skilled readers. The gap between complexity of high school and college texts is huge. Less than 50% of high school graduates can effectively read complex texts. The level of complexity of texts read by students is the greatest predictor of success in college. The CCSS requires an incremental step of growth for reading of complex texts.

The CCSS measures text complexity in three ways:

1. **Qualitative dimensions of text complexity:** aspects measured by a human reader, such as levels of meaning or purpose, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands.
2. **Quantitative dimensions of text complexity:** aspects such as word length or frequency, sentence length, and text cohesion, that are difficult for a human reader to evaluate efficiently, so are typically measured by computer software. (Note: The grade bands have shifted as a result of the CCSS. For example, a text with a Lexile level of 980 used to be in the 9-10 grade level band...now that text is in the 4-5 grade level band.) (See Figure 1.)
3. **Reader and task considerations.** Variables related to the specific reader (such as motivation, knowledge, and experiences) and to the specific task (such as purpose and complexity of the task assigned). This is measured by the professional judgment, knowledge, and experience of the teacher.

Increasing text complexity forces students to think about and respond to complex ideas. This can be done through “close reading” where the student reads the piece multiple times and critically examines what the author has written.

Shift #5: Academic Vocabulary

One of the major shifts in the CCSS is the renewed focus on the importance of academic vocabulary. Vocabulary is divided into three tiers (See Figure 2):

Tier 1: Common, Known Words: Basic, concrete, encountered in conversation/ oral vocabulary; also known as “already known” words). Examples: big, small, house, table, family, clock, baby.

Tier 2: High-Frequency Words: Abstract, general academic (across content areas); encountered in written language; high utility across instructional areas; also known as “must know” words. Examples: justify, explain, expand, predict, summarize, maintain, vary, relative, innovation, accumulate, surface, layer. Tier 2 words include frequently occurring words that appear in various contexts and topics and play an important role in verbal functioning across a variety of content areas. These are general academic words and have high utility across a wide range of topics and contexts. Another way to think of Tier 2 vocabulary is as cross-curricular terms. For example, the term “justify” and “predict” frequently appear in Science, Social Studies, and English texts.

Tier 3: Low-Frequency, Domain-Specific Words: Highly specialized, subject-specific; low occurrences in texts; lacking generalization also known as “should know” words). Examples: isotope, tectonic plates, carcinogens, mitosis, lithosphere, lava, aorta, legislature

Academic words are important because they are critical to understanding academic texts, they appear in all sorts of texts, they require deliberate effort to learn, unlike Tier 1 words, they are far more likely to appear in written texts than in speech, they are seldom heavily scaffolded by authors or teachers, unlike Tier 3 words.

Therefore, teachers should teach fewer words, focus on important Tier 2 (high utility, cross-domain words) to know & remember, and simply provide Tier 3 (domain-specific, technical) words with a definition. (See Figure 3.)

Summary

The majority of schools have adopted some form of the CCSS. While some aspects may vary, these five shifts will most likely be seen regardless of a formal adoption of the CCSS or a similar set of standards. These shifts impact instruction for all students at all levels, so teachers must be aware of these shifts and the potential need for change in their approach to teaching.

References

National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, Council of Chief State School Officers. (2010). Common core state standards. Retrieved from <http://www.corestandards.org/the-standards>.

Table 1: Distribution of Informational and Literary Texts:

Grade	Literary (Fiction)	Informational (Non-fiction)
4	50%	50%
8	45%	55%
12	30%	70%

Table 2: Distribution of Types of Writing:

Grade	Narrative	Informational/ Explanatory	Argument/ Opinion
4	35%	35%	30%
8	30%	35%	35%
12	20%	40%	40%

Figure 1: Lexile Grade Bands

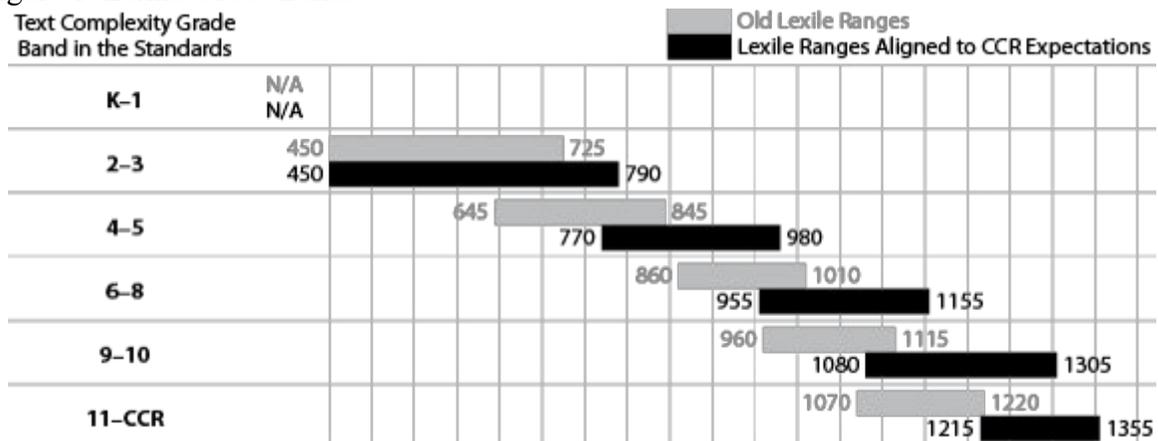


Figure 2: Tiered Vocabulary

Figure 3: Tier 2 Vocabulary

