

# *Same Song, Different Verse: Consistent Content Vocabulary Across Grade Levels in the New ELAR TEKS*

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## **Abstract**

*The new ELAR TEKS include consistent content vocabulary across grade levels that represent an opportunity for teachers to build a strong foundation for efficient growth and development. In this article, the author looks at consistent content vocabulary, shifting content vocabulary, and content vocabulary spread in the new ELAR TEKS and then ends with recommendations for capitalizing on the repetition in the new standards.*

**Keywords:** *ELAR TEKS, Content Vocabulary, Standards, Emergent Bilinguals, Literacy Instruction, Text Complexity*

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## **Introduction**

At the beginning of the 2020-21 school year, the final installment of the English Language Arts (ELAR) Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), will go into effect, concluding a five-year process of revision, review, and implementation of the new standards. For elementary, middle school, and high school teachers, an opportunity stands out in the new standards, the consistent use of content vocabulary. For this article, content vocabulary is the ELAR terminology found in the ELAR TEKS that can be used by teachers during instruction. When students are exposed to these terms early and often, they can build on their understandings efficiently, so by high school, the advanced and complex engagements with the ELAR content connect to their well-developed schema (Piaget, 1936). Thus, the title: “Same Song, Different Verse,” because the better the students know the early “verses,” recognize the

patterns and rhythms in language, the easier they will learn the new “verses” (content) as they progress through the academic grades.

In this article, we review the shared content vocabulary found in the TEKS from the primary grades through high school in order to assure the continual use of these terms across grades. Then we address problem areas where the language of the TEKS shift across grades requiring a transition for learners as they encounter new terms for previous learning. Finally, we connect this understanding to the needs of emergent bilingual students (Garcia, Ibarra-Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016).

## **Shared Content Vocabulary**

The new ELAR TEKS were designed to include extensive opportunities to capitalize on consistent content language. These terms were pulled from the vertical alignment document (19

TAC Chapter 110, 2017). Table 1 provides an overview of shared content vocabulary.

Content Vocabulary Alignment Chart (19 TAC Chapter 110, 2017)		
Strand	Grade Levels	Consistent Language
Foundational Language Skills	K-10 K-5 / 8-12 2-12 K-12	<i>Listen actively</i> <i>Work/participate collaboratively</i> <i>Use/analyze context</i> <i>Self-select text, read independently for a sustained period of time</i>
Comprehension	K-1 (adult assistance) 2-12 (Identical) K-1 (adult assistance) 2-12 (verb levels vary)	<i>Reading purpose, generate questions (before, during, &amp; after reading), predict (make, correct, or confirm), text features, genre characteristics, mental images, connections (personal, other texts, and society), inferences (using evidence), evaluate details for key ideas</i> <i>Synthesize information, monitor comprehension</i>
Response Skills	K-12	<i>Personal connections, text evidence</i>
Multiple Genres	K-12 3-12 3-10	<i>Theme, character, plot, setting</i> <i>Poems, drama, informational, multimodal and digital texts</i> <i>Argumentative</i> <i>Claim</i>
Author's Purpose	K-12	<i>Author's purpose, text structure, graphic features</i>
Composition	2-12	<i>Literary Texts, genre characteristics and craft</i> <i>Informational texts</i>

3-12	<i>Argumentative texts</i>
1-12	<i>Correspondence</i>

Shared content vocabulary can be defined as ELAR TEKS terminology that is used consistently across grade levels. An example can be found in the genre selections. All grade levels, K-12, include poems, drama, informational, multimodal, and digital texts in their genre selections. Someone not familiar with teaching literacy might wonder about redundancies such as the independent reading student expectation (SE) and the comprehension strand. However, these repetitions are intentional. Students improve their skills with increasingly more complex texts from elementary through high school. With the implementation of the new ELAR TEKS, Texas students now participate in independent reading at all grade levels, and with consistent standards for developing comprehension skills. Students can internalize these strategies after years of practice and apply them as they encounter difficult texts (Hiebert & Pearson, 2014).

An important feature of the new standards is the explicit effort made to make the content vocabulary more uniform. For example, the use of the term expository, has been removed, and students are now asked to read and write using the characteristics of the informational genre. This term is not only consistent from K-12 but also across the Multiple Genre Strand and the Composition Strand. Additionally, the use of the term informational now matches standards found in other states making the search for strategies and best practices more fruitful for teachers. Another example is the term argumentative, used in grades 3-12 which replaces persuasive in the previous state standards. This updated language will clarify expectations and align with the terminology found across the field of ELAR instruction.

Fortunately, genre choices are not limited to informational and argumentative essays. Every grade level includes standards to consume and create poetry, drama, and correspondence. These traditional texts are sometimes neglected in favor of more tested essay structures. However, the much of the joy of literacy is found in these interactive and creative genres. Additionally, and new for these standards, is the recognition of multimodal texts where multiple organizational patterns, genres, or text features may come together to create new understanding, especially true in digital texts (Morrell, 2012). Students must both analyze and craft multimodal and digital texts. This skill will strengthen students' abilities to communicate to a variety of audiences and represent ideas in a variety of digital platforms.

### Text Complexity

Though repetition supports student learning in ELAR, some policy leaders are mistakenly concerned that it does not support a rigorous learning environment, or the standards set low expectations when they are not totally different from one grade level to the next. However, this argument does not account for increased text complexity. Assuming that the complexity of texts is more than a quantitative measure, we look at the comprehension of texts and the tasks required in response to a text as a measure of its complexity (Valencia, Wixson, & Pearson, 2014). As students move across grades, the complexity of the texts they read, analyze, and craft increases (Hiebert & Pearson, 2014). This complexity allows teacher to manipulate texts to provide differentiation for our students. For example, for independent reading, students will “self-select and read independently...” (19 TAC

Chapter 110, 2017). Teachers must work with students to teach them how to self-select a text and read independently, so each student reads a book at an independent level thus helping students develop a love of reading while improving fluency and comprehension (ILA, 2018).

### Inconsistencies across Grade Levels

Consistent language across grade levels was intentionally regulated, yet there are places where the content language is inconsistent, and this too needs to be a focus to assure long-term success. This article considers two types of content language changes. The first is different

terms across grades, and the second is content-language-spread. Content language spread occurs when elements are separated, so different elements are scheduled to be taught at different grade levels in an effort to make the naturally spiraling development of English Language Arts appear linear in the standards. For example, figurative language such as personification, onomatopoeia, metaphors, similes, imagery, and hyperbole occur in picture books in pre-k, but to provide a sense of vertical articulation, these elements have been parsed out, a couple to each grade level to give the appearance of developmental rigor from grade to grade. Table 2 shows the first of these, the content language used to describe *thesis*.

Table 2

Content Vocabulary Changes across Grades Alignment Chart (19 TAC Chapter 110, 2017)

<b>Strand</b>	<b>Grade Levels</b>	<b>Consistent Language</b>
Multiple Genres	K-5	<i>Central idea</i>
	6-8	<i>Controlling idea or thesis</i>
	9-12	<i>Thesis</i>
Multiple Genres	K-2	<i>Persuasive</i>
Composition	3-12	<i>Argumentative</i>
Author's Purpose	3-8	<i>Author's Use of Language</i>
	9-12	<i>Author's Diction</i>

Students learn to identify and create a central idea in the lower grades. In middle school they learn *controlling idea*, and then in high school, *thesis*. Each of these content terms represent the same concept. These terms, and others including

main idea, could be consolidated for instructional clarity. Some districts might streamline these terms for their students, but that is problematic because the STAAR test follows the direction of the ELAR TEKS. For example,

on the 7<sup>th</sup> grade ELAR STAAR test, the student should be prepared to answer questions with either *controlling idea* or *thesis* in the question or answer choices. These changes across grade levels cause confusion for students, and teachers can help students be successful by making these changes explicit during instruction.

### Content Language Spread

ELAR teachers create lessons with repetitive content language in response to class reading selections. For example, students in first grade discuss alliteration in poetry. Clearly, a first grade discussion would not have the complexity of the *alliteration* found in a senior class studying *Beowulf*, so, the senior teacher may recognize the need for an additional mini lesson on *alliteration*. Content language spread appears in several sections of the new TEKS, and where

the consistent terms feel like a familiar tune, these spreads often feel like the forgotten lyrics to a favorite song. We must bring them back again and again as the text complexity increases, so students are competent with these elements with advanced texts. Table 3 shows some examples of spread in the new ELAR TEKS. This table demonstrates how four concepts, identified across the top, follows vertical alignment from kindergarten through 12<sup>th</sup> grade. The spread is evident when elementary teachers see elements present in their picture books appearing in the high school TEKS. Meanwhile, high school teachers find elements that accompany their literature in the elementary TEKS. If the TEKS are strictly followed, students will not study humorous poetry until eighth grade, and extended metaphors would not be emphasized in complex texts in high school.

Table 3

Content Language Spread Alignment Chart (19 TAC Chapter 110, 2017)

Grade Level	Multiple Genre / Poetry / Figurative Language	Author's Purpose / Literal & Figurative Language	Author's Purpose / Perspective / Literary Devices	Composition / Punctuation
K	Rhyme and rhythm	How an author uses words	1 <sup>st</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person texts	End of declarative
1	Rhyme, rhythm, repetition, alliteration	How an author uses words	1 <sup>st</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person texts	End of declarative, exclamatory, & interrogative
2	Visual patterns and structures	Descriptive, language	1 <sup>st</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person point-of-view	End punctuation, apostrophes in contractions & commas in a series & dates
3	Rhyme scheme, sound devices, structural elements (stanzas)	Imagery, sound devices, onomatopoeia	1 <sup>st</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person point-of-view	Apostrophes in contractions, possessives & commas in compounds, & in a series
4	Simile, metaphor, personification	Imagery, simile, metaphor. Sound	1 & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person point-of-view	Apostrophes in possessives, commas in

		devices, alliteration and assonance		compounds, quotation marks, and commas in compound & complex Italics and underlining for titles and emphasis, quotation marks, commas in compound and complex Commas in complex, transitions, and introductory elements
5	Sound devices, poet vs. speaker	Imagery, simile, metaphor, and sound devices	1 & 3 <sup>rd</sup> person point- of-view	Commas to set off words, phrases & clauses, & semicolons Commas in nonrestrictive phrases and clauses, semicolons, colons, & parentheses Commas, semicolons, colons, & dashes
6	Meter, line breaks,	Metaphor, personification	Omniscient and limited point of view	Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, & parentheses
7	Punctuation, capitalization	Metaphor and personification	Subjective and objective point of view	Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, & parentheses
8	Punctuation, line length, epic lyric, & humorous poetry	Extended metaphor	Multiple points of view & irony	Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, & parentheses
9	Line length, word position		Irony, oxymoron	Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, & parentheses
10	Metrics, rhyme schemes, rhyme types (end, internal, slant, eye)		Irony, sarcasm, and motif	Commas, semicolons, colons, dashes, & parentheses
11	Stanzas, line breaks, sound devices		Paradox, satire, and allegory	
12	Figurative language, graphics, and dramatic structures		Paradox, satire, and allegory	

The concern about spread is not limited to upper grades. Parenthesis are prevalent in children's literature but are not included for direct

instruction until eighth grade. Most students know how to use parenthesis in elementary, so an argument can be made that this skill appears

too late. In general, content language spread, where new content vocabulary and the skills associated with the terms are spread out over grade levels to create a sense of development over grade levels, sets an expectation of mastery without review. However, teachers will need to make connections across grade levels and bring these spread-out terms together to work with texts in class and to craft writing assignments.

### **Other Beneficiaries of Consistent Content Language – Emergent Bilinguals**

Emergent bilinguals, that is, students in the process of learning a second language but who have a solid grasp of their first language and who continue to function in that language (Garcia, Kleifgen, & Falchi, 2008), benefit from teachers using the same content vocabulary from one grade level to the next. Like reading a series of books, once we read the first one, we know the characters and the setting, so there is less work as new plots run over the memory of previous experiences, much like learning new verses to an old song. By being consistent from grade to grade, we build on what students know and their strengths to teach new material (Garcia, Ibarra-Johnson, & Seltzer, 2016). We provide frameworks that can be used by students to represent their own experiences and learning as the vocabulary moves beyond a single in-class text offered for a specific unit to a more conceptual understanding as a full consumer of

English Language Arts. As teachers, when we offer consistent terms across grade levels, we support our learners academically to free their minds to make the big connections between the texts and their own lives. We give them the vocabulary to demonstrate their comprehension of the text and the author's purpose, and we provide the framing for models of genres that students can internalize and create following the patterns of language and characteristics present in each genre.

### **Recommendations**

By consolidating our content vocabulary to terms that we use across grade levels, we can create a strong language arts foundation for our students that will lead to continued success as they matriculate through grade levels (Hiebert & Pearson, 2014). When we use familiar terms, we connect our students' learning from their early years to more advanced work with more complex texts and use brain power to think deeper, make better inferences, evaluate readings, and create thoughtful pieces of writing. Teachers should see this alignment as an opportunity to build on previous learning, and make explicit the shifts of language for students, so they are able to make connections across grades. As we implement these new standards explicit attention to the language in professional development can set up our students for years of well-developed literacy skills.

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