

Holding Up a Mirror to the ELAR Comprehension TEKS: Growth and Potential in the Texas Revision Cycle

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Abstract

This article focuses on the development of the Texas comprehension standards as found in the comprehension strand of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). The standards are described in relation to effective comprehension strategies.

Key Words: comprehension, TEKS, standards, comprehension strategies

Introduction

Now in year five, the ELAR TEKS are no longer the “new” standards. With a ten-year cycle, the revision for the next decade will likely begin in 2025. In this continuous cycle, the impact and effective use of the standards require ongoing attention. This article will focus on the comprehension strand with attention given to the history and possible future of this collection of standards at the center of the TEKS. This article will also demonstrate the connection between the comprehension strand and research on teaching comprehension including the purpose of the consistent language and strategies across grade levels. Using a metaphor of a mirror, this article will look back at the research that supports the strand, describe its current form, and try to project the potential of future revisions of this strand that may improve comprehension instruction through the vehicle of high-quality state standards.

The Rearview Mirror: Reflecting for Context

In hindsight, we can see the remarkable work of literacy researchers whose shoulders we stand on today. Specifically, the work of P. David Pearson and his colleagues has had an outsized influence on the development of the comprehension strategies used in the ELAR strand of the current TEKS. Before Pearson’s research and publications in the early 1980’s, successful reading was most often measured with recall and summarization. Yet the question has remained in approaches to texts. Who’s understanding of the text is correct? Though across the country, transactional theory developed by Louise Rosenblatt (1993) honored the unique experiences of individuals as they interacted with text, Texas state standards and standardized assessments took on a New Criticism lens instead.

New Criticism, an approach for analyzing texts, limits the meaning drawn from the text to the four corners of the text itself while personal connections, background knowledge, and experience are limited giving preference to the literal meaning of the texts (Pearson & Gallagher 1983). Often described as “close reading,” Pearson and Gallagher’s research challenged this

limited approach when they identified eight things that good readers do as comprehension strategies and approaches. They argued that mature readers...

“(a) are more effective at engaging background knowledge, (b) have better general and specific vocabularies, (c) are better at drawing inferences, (d) have better summarization skills, (e) can use text structure more effectively to produce more complete recall protocols, (f) are better at drawing inferences [sic], (g) know more about the strategies they employ to answer questions, and (h) in general, are better at monitoring and adjusting... strategies” (1983, pg. 340).

This introduced a major shift in comprehension instruction and assessment as these characteristics became embedded in the strategies that teachers adopted into their classrooms to improve students’ comprehension of texts. The state of Texas included forms of these strategies in the 2007 TEKS located in Figure 19 (see Table 1) which included variations of the following strategies:

- Establish purposes
- Ask questions
- Monitor and adjust
- Make inferences and use text evidence
- Summarize, paraphrase and synthesize text, and
- Make connections (Figure 19 TAC Chapter 110, 2007)

Texas standardized assessments also shifted to include these comprehension approaches, though, as is often the nature of standardized tests, they limited the possible responses to those that could be supported by the evidence found exclusively in the text itself.

Table 1

Comparison of TEKS Figure 19 (2007) and Pearson and Gallagher’s List of What Good Readers Do (1983)

FIGURE 19 from the 2019 TEKS	What Good Readers Do (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983)
	Engage background knowledge
*	Vocabulary
Establish purposes	
Ask questions	Employ strategies to answer questions
Monitor and adjust	Monitor and adjust
Make inferences and use text evidence	Draw inferences
Summarize, paraphrase and synthesize text	Summarize
Make connections	
	Can use text structure

*Vocabulary is addressed within 2007 TEKS but not in Figure 19

Checking the Hand Mirror: Describing the Current Comprehension Strand of the TEKS *Good Reading Approaches and Purposes.*

The value of good comprehension instruction has been supported by research and is one of the most effective approaches for improving student learning. With an effect size of .60, teaching comprehension strategies explicitly leads to students reading well (Fisher, Frey, & Hattie, 2016).

The comprehension strand of the current TEKS (adopted in 2017) are remarkable because not only do they closely align with research that supports good reading instruction (Pearson & Gallagher 1983, Pearson 1985), they also honor the consistent nature of readers as they approach difficult texts across ages and grade levels. To achieve this, the current comprehension standards are nearly the same from kindergarten through high school, and they were revised to more closely align with research on the characteristics of good comprehension (Table 3).

To guide readers in their selection of the strategy that meets their purpose, these standards can be classified into three purposes. These purposes include 1) disciplinary approaches (Lent & Voight, 2018), that are situated in the structures of the texts themselves, 2) schema theory (Tierney & Pearson, 1983), which depends on the experiences and connections brought by the readers, and 3) metacognitive processes (Baker & Brown, 1984), where strategies and approaches are strategically used to extract meaning. Table 2 demonstrates how the standards from the current comprehension strand fit into these three categories.

Table 2

Strategies from the Comprehension Strand Classified into Three Approaches

Approach	Comprehension Strategies
Disciplinary Approaches	Find key issues Synthesize
Schema Theory	Visualize Make Connections
Metacognitive Processes	Establish a purpose Generate questions Make and check predictions Infer (support with evidence) Monitor comprehension

Though students both interact with different kinds of texts and use their experiences to connect with texts, the current standards rely heavily instead on metacognitive processes and minimize the connections made with previous experiences that often support our diverse learners. Additionally, these strategies have limited potential to cross content areas to meet the needs of academic reading in other disciplines.

K-12 Consistency.

The consistency of the same academic vocabulary and standards across grade levels has long term benefits. An analysis of research on reading comprehension reported by the National Reading Panel supports the consistent instruction of reading strategies (NRP, 2000). Students are more successful at using these strategies when they have internalized them, so by keeping these standards the same across grade levels, students will become increasingly more effective at using them when their reading breaks down.

The current comprehension strand both incorporates strategies and the consistency required to support students struggling to comprehend text. However, new research has emerged that should guide the next revision of these standards. In 2011, Pearson’s question was revisited, “what do good readers do?” With new data, a new list emerged. Good readers

1. Are active readers
2. Have clear goals
3. Preview the text
4. Make Predictions
5. Selectively speed up and slow down
6. Construct, revise, and question
7. Use context clues for vocabulary
8. Integrate prior knowledge
9. Think about the author’s point of view
10. Monitor understanding
11. Evaluate the quality of the text
12. Read different kinds of texts differently
13. Process text during and after reading, and
14. Have satisfaction and productive experiences (Duke et al 2011).

When compared to the current comprehension strand (see Table 3) some weaknesses are revealed in the current comprehension strand.

Table 3

What “good readers do” and the 2017 TEKS Comprehension Strand Comparison

(Duke et al, 2011, 2017 TEKS)

What Good Readers Do (Duke et al., 2011)	2017 TEKS Comprehension Strand
Active Readers	D. Visualize
Clear Goals	A. Establish a Purpose
Preview Text	
Make Predictions	C. Make and Check Predictions
Speed Up and Slow Down	
Construct, Revise, and Question	B. Generate Questions (before, during, after)
Use Context Clues for Vocabulary	
Integrate Prior Knowledge	E. Make Connections
Think About the Author’s Point of View	F. Infer

Monitor Understanding	I. Monitor Comprehension (reread and use strategies)
Evaluate the Quality of the Text	
Reading Different Kinds of Texts Differently	
Process During and After Reading	B. Generate Questions (before, during, after) G. Find Key Ideas H. Synthesize
Satisfying and Productive Experiences	

As table three demonstrates, current standards include most of the characteristics identified, but there are a couple of gaps that should be addressed in the next revision.

Looking through the Spyglass: Projecting Possibilities for Improvement

Based on the comparison (Table 3) of what research says good readers do when they read and the comprehension strand from the 2017 TEKS, there is room to improve in the next revision cycle. The most significant place that the strand needs to improve is in disciplinary literacy. New state reading assessments include more content area texts (STAAR Redesign, 2022) and strategies that support disciplinary reading such as previewing a text, speeding up and slowing down, and reading different kinds of texts differently are not included in the current ELAR comprehension strand of the TEKS. The recognition of the structure of texts in different content areas is a skill students need to be successful. Additionally, the awareness that reading slowly through expository texts, charts, graphs, and images is increasingly necessary to gain a full understanding of expository and informational texts that students engage with outside the classroom.

Another possible area of improvement for the next comprehension standards would be to bring the vocabulary standards found in the foundational skills strand into the comprehension strand where the focus could be on using context clues to improve comprehension. Currently, the vocabulary standards are isolated and located away from the comprehension strand though vocabulary remains one of the strongest predictors of how well a student will be able to comprehend a text (NRP, 2000), and vocabulary support is the most important for comprehension with Emergent Bilingual Learners (Milton, Wade, & Hopkins, 2010).

In addition, an effort can be made to create environments and experiences for reading that makes it a “satisfying and productive experience.” To address this, considerations of the texts used to teach reading comprehension strategies could be examined at the district and campus level.

One possible approach to increasing reading satisfaction could be to set authentic goals and purposes for reading. In this list of “10 Elements of Fostering and Teaching Reading Comprehension,” comprehension strategies are embedded with other authentic elements that increase the impact of the strategies and engages the reader in meaningful ways.

10 Elements of Fostering and Teaching Reading Comprehension

1. Build disciplinary and world knowledge
2. Provide exposure to a volume and range of texts

3. Provide motivating texts and contexts for reading
4. Teach strategies for comprehending
5. Teach text structures
6. Engage students in discussions
7. Build vocabulary and language knowledge
8. Integrate Reading and Writing
9. Observe and assess
10. Differentiate instruction

(Duke, Pearson, Strachan, & Billman, 2011)

Finally, paired with the next comprehension strand, a revised assessment approach could move away from close reading, a product of New Criticism that disconnects the readers and their lived experiences from the meaning of the texts. A transactional approach (Rosenblatt, 1993) would better differentiate and provide support for diverse learners and open more entry points for readers to access the text. The short new answer responses on the content exams are a response to the need to make space for students to express their comprehension in their own terms while providing evidence for their responses (STAAR Redesign 2022). Expanding on this idea could improve reader satisfaction and make the reading assessment more responsive to the authentic responses of Texas students.

Implications for Practice/Teaching

Improving comprehension is a goal shared by educators across the state. The 2017 TEKS have made large strides toward improving the instruction of students by providing consistent standards across grade levels that are grounded in research. Our students will have greater success by returning to these same strategies as they struggle with challenging texts across their K-12 schooling. However, there is room for improvement in the areas of addressing vocabulary in the comprehension strand, providing strategies a bridge to disciplinary texts, and providing students opportunities to make connections to their unique experiences with engaging texts. The next revision of the comprehension strand for the ELAR TEKS should address these three areas.

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