



# A tiered texts approach for scaffolding reading comprehension for English learners and struggling readers

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## Abstract

Reading comprehension is an essential skill that all students must master for learning to happen. The complexity of academic texts requires research-based instruction in reading comprehension that goes beyond the basic literacy level. The tiered texts approach is an effective, systematic approach for teaching reading comprehension where a series of progressively challenging texts on the same topic is used with a variety of instructional strategies and activities to scaffold both content instruction and language learning to prepare English learners (ELs) and struggling readers to read a grade-level target text. This paper reports on an action research study that explores whether in-service teachers in a teacher-training program can improve their skills in teaching reading comprehension of complex texts by developing a tiered texts unit and supporting their students in using it. It provides an overview of the tiered texts approach, describes the use of an operational model for designing and planning a tiered texts unit to scaffold the reading of a difficult text, and illustrates the approach with a unit designed for a secondary English language arts class with ELs and struggling readers. It also describes the qualitative analysis of the trainee teachers' reflections on their experience designing and implementing the unit. The results of the action research study supported the usefulness of the tiered texts approach in helping teachers gain knowledge and skills for instruction and revealed potential challenges in implementing this approach in classroom teaching.

**Keywords:** reading comprehension, tiered texts approach, ELs, struggling readers

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## 1. Introduction

Reading is an all-important pathway to learning. Reading comprehension is an essential skill that all students must master for learning to occur. Students need to have a good understanding of what they are reading to learn the content in all subject areas (Nyaboke, Kereri, & Nyabwari, 2021). Competence-based curriculum (CBC) in Kenya and the challenge of vision 2030. *International Journal of Education, Technology and Science* 1(4), 155–169.. Reading comprehension thus needs to be taught beyond the literal meaning for students access the academic content (Dukin, 1978; Fisher & Frey, 2018), but teachers often assume that students comprehend a text if they can read it orally. What is frequently overlooked is that a text is much more than its individual words. This fact is especially pertinent to academic texts, requiring teachers to teach students many different reading comprehension strategies to understand and learn content area material successfully.

Academic texts are complex by nature, and their complexity is multi-faceted. The *Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts and Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects (CCSS)* identifies three factors that measure the complexity of academic texts (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 57):

Qualitative evaluation of the text:	Levels of meaning, structure, language conventionality and clarity, and knowledge demands
Quantitative evaluation of the text:	Readability measures and other scores of text complexity
Matching reader to text and task:	Reader variables (such as motivation, knowledge, and experience) and task variables (such as purpose and the complexity generated by the task assigned and the questions posed)

The qualitative and quantitative factors relate to the academic text itself, which require that a teacher have a thorough understanding of the text; in contrast, the third factor needs the teacher to consider students' characteristics when choosing and creating academic tasks for them to complete (Zhang, 2017). These three factors demonstrate that comprehending complex texts involves more than pronouncing and recognizing the words in a text.

Moreover, instruction in reading comprehension should go beyond language arts classes to occur in all academic disciplines. Students need to be proficient at reading texts in different content areas since each content area uses language differently to convey knowledge (NGA & CCSSO, 2010; Zygouris-Coe, 2015). Reading comprehension and other literacy skills, such as phonics and vocabulary, are “not an end in and of themselves” but

“necessary and important components” for students to “comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines” (NGA & CCSSO, 2010, p. 15). Comprehension is at the core of literacy instruction. It impacts learning directly and should become an integral part of instruction in all content areas at all levels.

The tiered texts approach is an instructional model that unites text complexity with reading and content instruction to develop students' academic language and content knowledge. It benefits all students, especially ELs and struggling readers who typically do better with scaffolded instruction (Lapp, Moss, & Johnson, 2013). This approach achieves the following objectives (p. 5):

- promotes student engagement.
- scaffolds instruction that develops students' language and schema and lays the foundation for successful literacy experiences.
- provides many opportunities to read, write, and speak academic language.
- offers multiple exposures to related vocabulary and content concepts.
- ensures explicit instruction in word meanings and many opportunities to apply those meanings.
- builds the learner's capacity for reading increasingly complex texts.
- builds the learner's capacity to synthesize ideas from multiple related sources.
- builds the understanding of how to support his [or her] own literacy learning.

Tiered texts are a series of three or more texts on the same or related topic with gradually increasing difficulty in reading (Lapp, et al., 2013; Moss et al., 2011). Spreading over three tiers, they are selected with each text targeting different aspects of a grade-level text containing both content knowledge and academic language. Benchmarked against a grade-level or Tier 3 text that students are required to read, the texts are "progressively more challenging and contain similar concepts, topical vocabulary, and academic language" (Moss et al., 2011, Koral & Mirici, 2021). Accordingly, instructional activities and assessments in the lower tiers gradually progress towards activities and assessments in Tier 3. After engaging with scaffolded activities related to two or three tiers of texts that gradually increase in difficulty, ELs, and struggling, readers will be able to read the targeted complex text at grade level to attain content knowledge and academic language mastery.

Based upon the Gradual Release of Responsibility (GRR) model (Pearson & Gallagher, 1983), the tiered texts approach emphasizes the transfer of teacher instruction to student learning. Gradually going from Tier 1 to Tier 3, a teacher moves from assuming "all the responsibility for performing a task ... to a situation in which the students assume all of the responsibility" (Duke & Pearson, 2002, p. 211). The goal of a typical tiered-text design is “Independent Reading of a Text” at Tier 3 for all students, including ELs and struggling readers (Moss et al., 2011, p.59). To help students reach this goal, the teacher designs instructional activities for companion texts on a related topic at two lower levels: Tier 1,

“Building Background,” and Tier 2, “Practicing and Preparing to Read a Difficult Text” (p. 56-57). Each of the three tiers has different functions, but the double foci on content knowledge and academic language development are emphasized at all three tiers.

The tiered-texts approach is also a pathway to content literacy through teaching and learning. While texts for content areas can be defined broadly as any communication related to content knowledge and academic language development, such as expository texts, videos, and podcasts, the grade-level Tier 3 text usually challenges readers. The challenges of the target text’s content and academic language usually drive the material selection and instructional activities when designing the Tier 1 and Tier 2 texts.

Since 2013, the tiered texts approach has been integrated into one of the graduate courses leading toward a Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL) endorsement for in-service teacher participants in a large grant funded by the US Department of Education. It has been assigned to the trainee teachers as a group project in which two or three trainee teachers design a tiered texts unit to teach a difficult academic text in a content area of their choice, and all teachers write a reflection afterward to summarize the tiered text's design and reflect on this experience. Over the years of the grant, the written reflection has been collected and analyzed as an ongoing self-assessment of training efficiency and as part of an action research study to measure the usefulness of the tiered texts approach in teacher training. It is hypothesized that the trainee teachers will transfer their experience designing a tiered texts unit to their classroom instruction to improve their teaching comprehension of academic texts. The transfer of the teachers’ new knowledge to their practice is evidenced by their written reflection on their experiences. The analysis of the written reflection also provides feedback for the course instructor to determine a more effective way for the tiered texts group project to support trainee teachers’ instructional effectiveness.

## **2. Method**

The investigation into the efficacy and effectiveness of using the tiered texts approach in in-service teacher training is an ongoing project in a class taught by the first author of this article with the support by the grant. It is designed based on the following characteristics of action research in education: constructivist, situational, practical, systematic, and cyclical (Efron & Ravid, 2020). It starts with a lecture explaining this assignment with an operational model and a sample tiered texts unit design. As the trainee teachers design their own tiered texts unit in groups, they are required to conference with the first author to discuss the academic text selection, the language and content objectives of the tiered texts unit, the teaching strategies, the instructional activities, the differentiated instruction, and the assessment. Upon completing the project, each group presents their project in a 10 to 12-minute videotaped presentation, and each teacher writes a five-page essay summarizing the tiered texts unit they have designed and

reflecting on this experience individually. Then their written reflection is collected and analyzed for emerging themes.

### 2.1. Participants

Three consecutive cohorts, totaling 65 trainee teachers, were included in the current action research project. The teachers came from four urban and three suburban school districts in northeast Ohio. To meet the priorities set by the grant, they were primarily content teachers and special education teachers teaching in buildings with a high concentration of ELs and struggling readers.

### 2.2. The operational model of the tiered texts design

The trainee teachers were provided with an operational model for tiered texts adapted from Moss, Lapp, and O'Shea (2011) to guide them to develop their own tiered texts units. *The Operational Model of The Tiered Texts Design*, shown by the top and bottom arrows in Figure 1, demonstrates how the design of a tiered texts unit starts with the analysis of the Tier 3 target text and the identification of its content and language objectives. After receiving scaffolding from *Tier 1 Building Background* and *Tier 2 Practice*, the expectation is that all students will be prepared to read and comprehend the grade-level text independently at *Tier 3 Target Text*.

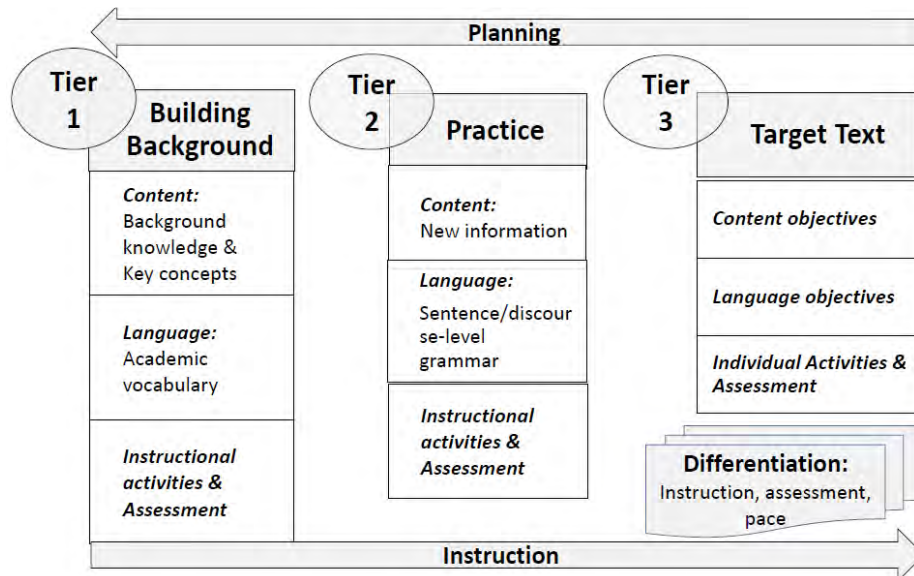


Figure 1. The operational model of the tiered texts design

In a tiered-texts unit, the teacher writes content and language objectives for each tier. The three sets of content and language objectives complement each other to work toward the content and language objectives of Tier 3. To be specific, content instruction planning includes the following:

Tier 1: Building background knowledge and introducing key concepts

Tier 2: Presenting new information found in the grade-level target text

Tier 3: Achieving the identified content objectives of the grade-level target text

Language instruction requires attention to the full array of academic language. Instruction could include but not be limited to teaching key academic vocabulary at Tier 1 and sentence or discourse level grammar at Tier 2, such as sentence patterns found in the Tier 3 text or the text structure of the Tier 3 text. Then at Tier 3, the goal is to enable students to meet the language objectives of the grade-level target text. Note here that the actual inclusion of academic language instruction for each tier depends on the language demand of the Tier 3 text. For instance, if there are many key vocabulary terms to be taught, the words can be spread out throughout all three tiers since no fixed order of instruction is required.

According to the model, Tier 1 and Tier 2 function as scaffolds to prepare students to achieve the language and content objectives of Tier 3. Instruction and materials for Tier 1 focus on building background knowledge and explaining the main concepts for the Tier 3 topic. At this tier, the teacher can use many different materials besides print texts to introduce the concepts and vocabulary, such as pictures, posters, videos, and realia. At Tier 2, the teacher should teach students about the new concepts and explain the sentence level and discourse level grammatical items found in the Tier 3 text using meaningful activities and easy-to-follow instructions. Tier 2 serves as a bridge between Tier 1 and Tier 3 and places more responsibility on students to seek information and engage in instructional activities that require more active participation.

Throughout each of the three tiers, teachers use formative assessments to monitor students' learning of academic language and concepts needed to progress to the next tier. Teachers frequently provide feedback on students' performance while building formative assessments into instructional activities for all three tiers. They may also use formal assessments at Tier 3 to evaluate students' mastery of language and content objectives.

Finally, the tiered texts approach offers ample opportunities for differentiated instruction. In its traditional sense, differentiated instruction means giving students multiple options for taking in information based upon teachers' observation and understanding of the differences and similarities among students (Tomlinson, 1999). When teaching ELs, teachers should also differentiate instruction based on language proficiency. Additionally, they should consider students' traits, such as motivation, stamina, and interests.

Tomlinson (1999) proposed that teachers differentiate instruction in three areas: content, process, and product. In the tiered-texts approach, material selection naturally falls into three different levels in the three tiers. Teachers can differentiate instruction through instructional activities, assessments, and the pace of how quickly students complete the three tiers. Below are examples of possible implementation:

1. Presenting content knowledge using a variety of modes to meet students' different preferences in learning, such as auditory, visual, verbal, and kinesthetic (Gardner, 1993; 1999);
2. Using heterogeneous or homogeneous grouping based on language proficiency levels or linguistic backgrounds;
3. Designing activities and learning tasks based on Bloom's taxonomy *at various cognitive levels*, from memorization and understanding to applying, analyzing, and evaluating (Bloom, Engelhart, Furst, Hill, & Krathwohl, 1956);
4. Allowing students to complete each tier at their own pace; and
5. Giving more advanced ELs and native speakers more challenging critical thinking tasks to complete while offering one-on-one support to less proficient ELs and struggling readers.

### 2.3. Sample tiered texts unit: *Hurricane Maria*

In the sample tiered texts unit, the grade-level text is an original news report entitled “Needs Go Unmet 6 Months After Maria Hit Puerto Rico” (Coto, 2018) found on *Newsela*, an online instructional platform with tiered articles. The article was written six months after Hurricane Maria, a category four hurricane that hit Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and other islands in the Caribbean Sea in 2017. The readability level of this Tier 3 target text is 9<sup>th</sup> grade, with a word count of 860 words (Coto, 2018). The article describes the challenging conditions of communities in Puerto Rico six months after Hurricane Maria struck the island. The article was selected for both its content and language demand: 1) The topic is of high interest to Puerto Ricans, many of whom are ELs in urban schools in many cities in the United States; and 2) The language demand of the text is typical of nonfiction reading materials at the 9<sup>th</sup>-grade level but could be challenging to ELs and struggling readers.

#### 2.3.1. Tier 1: *Building background*

*Content instruction.* An ABC news report, “Island of Puerto Rico ‘destroyed’ by Hurricane Maria,” introduces the topic of Hurricane Maria (ABC News, 2017). To prepare students with more background knowledge about hurricanes, the teacher shows photographs of hurricanes forming, the damage they cause, and recovery efforts from hurricanes. To help students make personal connections to the terror people experience during a hurricane, the teacher shows two short video clips with personal accounts immediately after Hurricane Maria struck, followed up by a guided discussion after each video with such questions as:

- Do you think people were able to stay in their homes when Hurricane Maria hit Puerto Rico? Why? Why not?
- How would you feel if you were in her situation? What would you do?

- Finally, the students write personal responses to some of the questions related to the videos.

*Language instruction.* To prepare students for the challenging vocabulary they will encounter in Tier 3, the teacher provides them with a word bank of essential vocabulary, accompanied by pictures and definitions, as they appear in the target text. The word bank includes the following words related to a hurricane: *hurricane, category 4, category 5, damage, destroy, power.*

**2.3.2. Tier 2: Practice**

The Tier 2 section of the unit focuses on the article, “Many challenges faced by Puerto Ricans long after the hurricane”, (Associated Press, 2018), a more accessible version of the Tier 3 target text adapted by *Newsela* staff with fewer words (653 words) and a lower Lexile readability level at 860. Language instruction precedes content instruction. The teacher pre-teaches the critical vocabulary and sentence patterns students will encounter in the Tier 2 and Tier 3 texts.

*Language instruction.* The teacher begins with a review of the vocabulary introduced in Tier 1 and then teaches the following technical words and phrases related to Hurricane Maria: *recover, restore, repair, inspect, power outage, power distribution system, utility pole, territory, pledge.* The teacher shows each word in its written form with a photo to illustrate it. After the teacher models it, students pronounce the word and work with a partner to read the definition and a sentence illustrating it in context. Then, students complete a Word Graphic Organizer (Figure 2) for each vocabulary word, including the definition, the part of speech, the page where it appears in the Tier 2 text, and a picture from a magazine or the Internet.


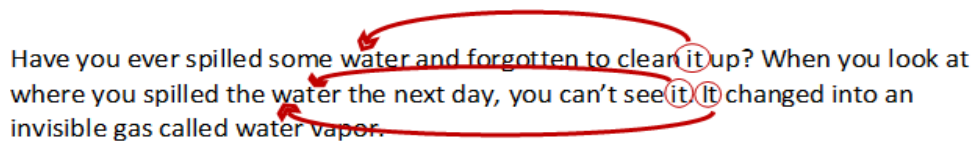
<p><b>Definition:</b></p> <p>one of a series of large, upright poles used to support telephone wires, electric cables, or the like.</p>	<p><b>Part of speech:</b></p> <p>noun</p>
	<p><b>Page:</b></p> <p>2</p>
<p><b>Utility Pole</b></p>	

Figure 2. Word graphic organizer



Instruction focuses on pronouns used throughout the Tier 2 and Tier 3 text. Understanding what pronouns refer to is essential for reading comprehension at the sentence and paragraph levels. Frequently, ELs are confused by pronoun referents and need to be shown which preceding word, phrase, or sentence the pronoun refers to. The teacher introduces Syntactic Synergy (Beers, 2003) to help students understand the connection between and across words, phrases, and sentences. To introduce this strategy, the teacher starts by projecting a simple sentence or group of sentences on the board so the students can watch as the teacher marks up the sentence. As the teacher finds connections between ideas, she says out loud what she is thinking and connects the ideas using circles, lines, or arrows as shown below in Figure 3 before asking students to use the technique to connect the pronouns found in the Tier 2 text to the noun phrases or other parts of sentences previously occurring in the passage. Figure 3 provides an example.



Have you ever spilled some water and forgotten to clean it up? When you look at where you spilled the water the next day, you can't see it. It changed into an invisible gas called water vapor.

Figure 3. Syntactic synergy

*Content instruction.* To introduce the Tier 2 text, the teacher reads the title and asks students to discuss the illustration on the first page with the following questions: *What is happening in the picture? Where do you think this takes place? Why do you think Puerto Ricans are standing in line for food and water six months after a hurricane hit their island?* After that, to help the students comprehend and remember the article, the teacher introduces a reading strategy called SQP2RS (Echevarria, Vogt, & Short, 2017). The teacher explains that the SQP2RS will help them use strategies good readers use. The teacher models the strategy and briefly guides the students through a demonstration of the strategy using a different short text on hurricanes as she explains the following steps of the SQP2RS before asking students to form small groups to use the strategy to read the Tier 2 text:

1. **Survey** – Students get into groups of three and preview the Tier 2 text, looking at the title, headings, subheadings, and photographs.
2. **Questions** – Students work in groups to determine and write down questions they think will be answered by the text on a poster board and present the poster board to the class.
3. **Predict** – Students write the key ideas they believe they will find in the text on the back of the poster board and share their ideas with the class.
4. **Read aloud** – As the teacher reads the text aloud, the students underline the key vocabulary words before discussing in small groups the context in which the vocabulary words are used in the text and the sentence meanings.

5. **Read in groups** - Students read the text to each other, taking turns with the paragraphs. In the second reading, students jot down answers to their questions and then compare and contrast their predictions to the answers presented in the text.
6. **Respond** –Students respond to the questions they created together using a poster board. Students share their responses with two other groups.
7. **Summarize** – The teacher directs students' attention to summarizing the main idea of the short text about hurricanes, selecting appropriate words from the word wall and modelling how to write a summary on the board. Then the students work in their groups to write a well-written summary of the Tier 2 text. Once checked by the teacher, students share their summaries as the whole class observes the strengths and weaknesses of the writing and provides feedback.

### 2.3.3. Tier 3: Target text

At this tier, students read the grade-level target text. After receiving substantial scaffolding in Tier 1 and Tier 2, the students should be prepared to read the more challenging Tier 3 text with the same content as the Tier 2 text but with more complex sentences and more challenging vocabulary. Some students will be able to read it independently, and some will need support but probably less than they would need if they were reading it without previous scaffolding.

*Language instruction.* The teacher first has the students review the vocabulary introduced in the Tier 2 text using a cloze procedure. The cloze procedure takes words and sentences from the Tier 2 text, such as *destroyed, pledged, damage, repaired, territory, power, and inspect*.

To prepare for the language demands of this higher-level passage, the teacher uses the strategy Word Graphic Organizer. The teacher follows the same procedure as in Tier 2 to introduce more vocabulary words: *resources, estimated, power grid, challenge, generator, infrastructure, accounting, restoration, impoverished, haphazardly, disbursed, emergency fund, and financial accounting methods*.

*Content instruction.* The grade-level text for Tier 3, as a news report, has many short paragraphs and quotes that could potentially break up the logical flow of the text. The content instruction at this tier thus is to have students practice finding evidence in the target text to support their inferences with the assumption that most students at this level have had some experience using inference when reading nonfiction texts. The teacher begins by reviewing how to support an inference with evidence from the text by asking students to carefully examine the photograph on the article's first page and think about what people are doing and how they might feel. Then the teacher asks students to read the caption and asks, "*Can you find evidence to support your answer? Support your inference with evidence from the photo or the caption.*" Then the teacher explains that when a person tries to interpret what the author implies but does not state directly, they make an inference; when we make an inference, the person should find evidence from the text to

support it. After that, students receive a selected section with page numbers from the Tier 3 target text to make an inference, then search for evidence from the selected section to support their inference, and write it in the third column, as shown in Table 1 below.

<b>Information from the text</b>	<b>My Inference</b>	<b>Evidence from the Text (to support your inference)</b>
<p>“Some 250 Puerto Ricans formed a line around Ortiz on a recent weekday.” (p. 2)</p>	<p>I think these people are in a line to get food because they don’t have power in their homes.</p>	<p>“However, more than 100,000 of them remain in the dark, and there are frequent power outages.” (p. 2)</p>
<p>“In the six months since the hurricane, more than 135,000 people have fled to the US mainland.” (p. 3)</p>		
<p>Governor Ricardo Rossello needs to come up with a plan on how to rebuild a stronger power grid....” (p. 3)</p>		

Table 1. Supporting inferences from text

To provide students with an opportunity to explore the text structure of the target text, the teacher asks students to complete a graphic organizer based on the recommendations of Vacca, Vacca, & Mraz (2014), which helps students examine language at the discourse level and comprehend and retain information. As shown in Figure 4 below, the target text matches a problem-solution organization. Using a two-step instructional activity, the teacher has the students read sections of the Tier 3 target text to discover the problems specified in the article and then reread it to determine if the author mentions a solution for each of the problems they find. The students then fill in the graphic organizer with the problems and solutions they found.

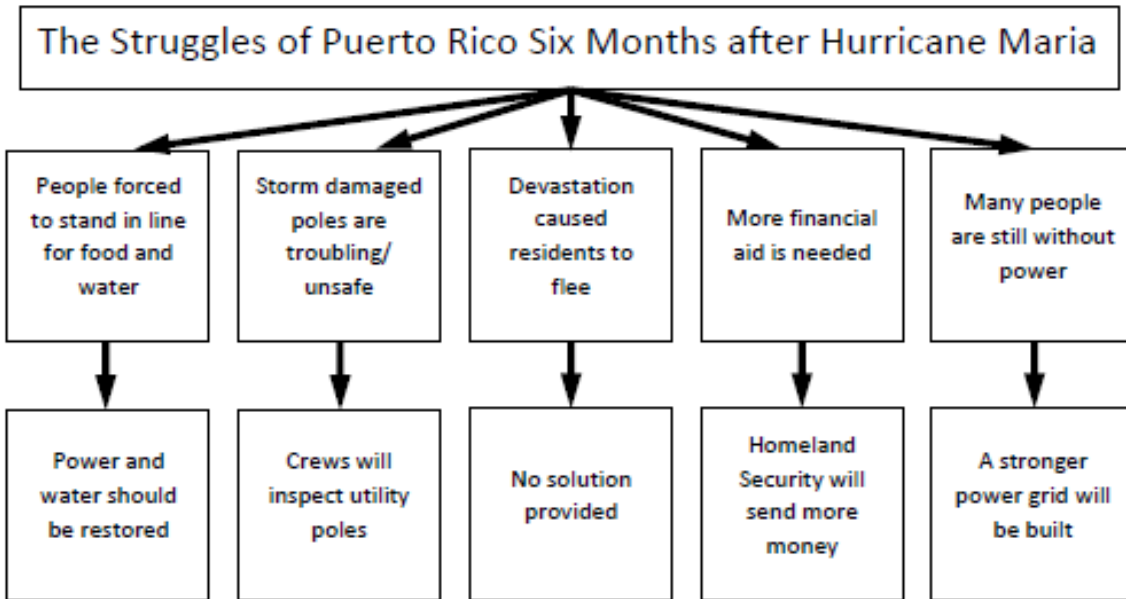


Figure 4. Problem-solution graphic organizer

To differentiate, high beginning and intermediate ELs have an audio version of the text to listen to as they read the passage. The teacher closely monitors less proficient students and provides them with individual assistance when necessary. The teacher encourages high intermediate and advanced students to work on their own to find answers independently before seeking assistance from the teacher.

For an enrichment or extension activity, small, heterogeneous groups of students can build a survival kit for hurricane disasters. The teacher tells them to choose ten items to include in their survival kit, then to decide how they will use the items based on what they learned in the unit. When they complete their survival kit, they can present it to the class, explaining why they chose certain items for their kit.

In sum, a tiered texts unit is a unified, step-by-step instructional design to close the language and knowledge gap among all students. As summarized in Figure 5 below, each tier of the unit design promotes language learning and knowledge learned for the next tier with related activities. Teachers can use a blank version of this summary form with only the bold-faced headings left in place to guide them through the unit design. This summary form ensures that the lower tiers provide scaffolding for learners to perform successfully on the Tier 3 Target text. It also assures that each tier focuses on both content and language instruction.

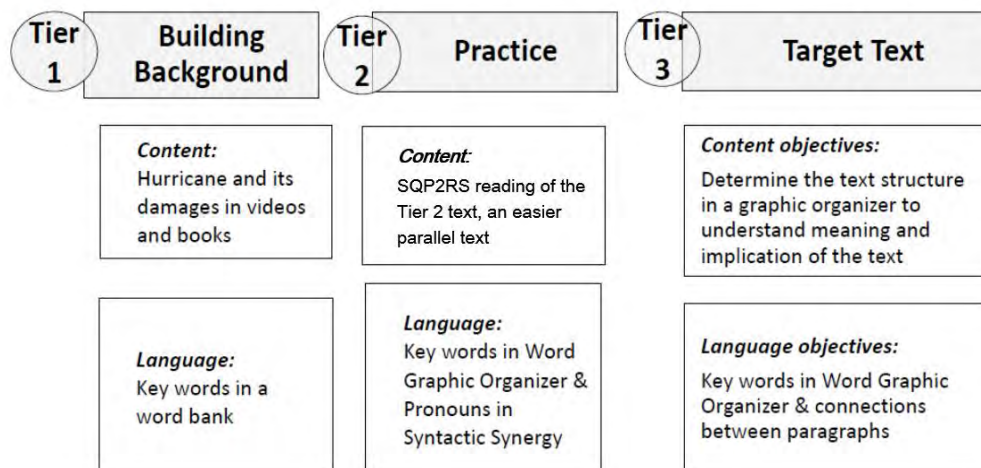


Figure 5. Summary of the tiered texts design

#### 2.4. Data Analysis

All 65 trainee teachers gave permission to have their written reflections analyzed for this action research study. The 65 written reflections were read by both authors three times, first on their own and then after reaching agreement by comparing notes using the following steps:

1. Read each written reflection to select the parts where the teacher reflected on their experience completing the tiered texts project and commented on the usefulness of the tiered texts approach in their own teaching;
2. Read the reflections for emerging themes based on five of the relevant guiding questions (see subheadings below);
3. Reread the reflections to tally each theme and arrange them in descending order by percentage calculated by the number of teachers wrote about the theme divided by the total number of teachers.

### 3. Results

The results below provide the themes that emerged in the data analysis of the teachers' reflections on their experiences completing the tiered texts project and on their thoughts about the usefulness of the tiered texts approach in their own teaching, the percentage of teachers who wrote a response related to each theme, and sample quotes from teachers who made comments related specific themes.

### 3.1. What have you learned in completing your own tiered texts unit design?

*Theme 1: Scaffolding.* Twenty-seven percent of the teachers gave a response related to scaffolding. The teachers found that the tiered-texts approach effectively scaffolds academic language and content, enabling ELs to read challenging texts. The quotes below from two teachers illustrate how many teachers felt about the tiered-text design:

“...the current experience of creating an activity implementing the tiered-text method...helped us realize the importance of scaffolding the development of academic and content-specific language to create a deeper learning experience for our students.”

“All of the students were given the background knowledge and vocabulary essential to reading and understanding the tier three text. The activities were able to be differentiated so that all students could feel successful and receive the scaffolding needed to complete the activities.”

*Theme 2: Building Background Knowledge.* Twenty-two percent of the teachers gave a response related to background knowledge. The teachers said they learned the importance of building background knowledge to prepare students to read a rigorous text. Here are quotes from three teachers:

**“The tiered-texts approach is an effective way to introduce difficult material and develop** the background knowledge needed for difficult topics for my diverse group of students. I believe that I can help my students by using more tiered texts in my own classroom.”

“By completing this project, I learned and became more conscious about the importance for teachers to take the time to plan...how to build background knowledge where there is none, and slowly take students to where they have to be academically in order to be able to be successful at comprehending a difficult text.”

“The tier text project has taught me how to set up a series of text to provide my EL's necessary background knowledge and exposure to the vocabulary to be successful with the independent grade-level text reading they must accomplish at a high level.”

*Theme 3: Vocabulary.* Sixteen percent of the teachers gave a response related to vocabulary. Teachers said they learned the importance of teaching vocabulary to help ELs comprehend a complex text. The teachers said they learned the importance of teaching vocabulary to help ELs comprehend a complex text. Here are quotes from two teachers:

“Although it took more planning from my part that I would usually do for choosing a text to use, I noticed the difference in my students' engagement and comprehension during the lessons. I feel that my ELL students were able to understand more because of the background building and teaching of the content vocabulary at each tier. They were participating more in discussions, most likely because they knew what was being talked about.”

“I also learned the importance of vocabulary embedded within content and how as a teacher I must reinforce this before, during, and after all lessons.”

*3.2. What did you personally experience as successful in designing the tiered texts unit? Theme 1: Knowledge Attainment and Skill Improvement.* Thirty-two percent of the teachers stated that they gained knowledge and improved skills by implementing the tiered texts project. Here are quotes from three teachers:

*“My district does not provide science or social studies books for teachers and students to use, and the value of knowing how to use and find tiered texts is huge and much needed. This knowledge will help me to plan units in both science and social studies.”*

“Overall, I feel that I learned a lot of valuable information and skills in working on this project and it is one that I will continue to use in my teaching practice as it is an excellent way to help language learners succeed in reading the complex texts of today's classrooms.”

“The tier text project has taught me how to set up a series of text(s) to provide my EL's necessary background knowledge and exposure to the vocabulary to be successful with the independent grade-level text reading they must accomplish at a high level. I learned that you have to analyze each text and activity to ensure that ELs are receiving the comprehensible input to be successful at the tier three text. The project provided me with experience to create and design effective tiered text assignments in the future.”

*Theme 2: Successful Experience.* Twenty percent of the teachers said they experienced success in finding useful materials, creating activities, and finding appropriate assessments for their tiered texts project. Two of them said the following:

“...I was able to find an excellent tier one text with pictures and grade-level vocabulary. The middle-level text was not as difficult to find, and I was able to find excellent resources to supplement the levels online.”

“Once we understood the tier text approach, we were successful in obtaining appropriate reading materials, activities, and assessments for each of the tier text levels.”

*Theme 3: Scaffolding Skills.* Eight percent of the teachers said that they learned how to scaffold students' acquisition of vocabulary and reading of challenging text with the tiered texts. Here are quotes from two teachers:

“I learned to implement and to effectively use these tiers to develop and provide more academic assistance to my students to enhance their abilities to learn and engage using language to reach and be able to read grade-level text.”

“I have found out that through careful scaffolding of text and activities, students are able to achieve a higher level of academic vocabulary.”

### 3.3. *What did you find to be challenging in designing the tiered texts unit?*

*Theme 1: Materials.* Thirty-nine percent of the teachers found it challenging to locate relevant and adequate materials in some subjects for the tiered texts project. Here are quotes from two teachers:

“The one challenge in designing this project was finding math text for each tier and deciding which tier each text that was selected belonged in.”

“One challenge could be finding the texts, especially multiple copies of the same text since the district doesn't provide science and social studies textbooks for us.”

*Theme 2: Time Consuming.* Thirty-four percent of the teachers commented on the time spent on planning for the tiered texts projects. Here are two responses related to time and planning:

“The one problem I have is the amount of time it takes to develop differentiation for all learning levels within one class. The other problem I face is the amount of time it would take to cover one topic using this technique compared to the number of topics we have to touch on according to state and common core standards.”

“One challenge is that it [the tiered texts approach] requires a tremendous amount of preparation on the part of the teacher. I imagine that as materials are selected, developed, and repeated over years, this burden of lessons [sic], but it requires an intense amount of planning and thoughtfulness from the teaching side to deliver this quality of education.”

*Theme 3: Scaffolding Needed.* Nine percent of the teachers said that they were challenged with the amount of scaffolding needed to give students for them to be able to read the target text independently. Here are comments from two teachers:

“What I found most difficult about the tiered texts project was how to gradually release the responsibility to the students as I felt that the target text, tier 3 text, will present much difficulty for students to complete alone.”

“I also anticipate for tier 3 to be of difficulty for my students because although they are all intermediate English language learners, their disabilities require constant reinforcement and varied accommodations. I believe that when teaching the tiered texts assignment to my students tiered 3 would need to be shorted/modified and or changed to a simpler text.”

### 3.4. *What would work well or has worked well in implementing the tiered texts unit?*

*Theme 1: Activities.* Forty-one percent of the teachers who implemented or were yet to implement the tiered- texts project in their classroom reported that their students would find or had found the activities in the tired-texts unit were engaging and motivating. Here is what one teacher who implemented the project said:



“The other success was that the texts and the activities allowed students to be fully engaged each day. My students enjoyed the activities that we created in tier one. They especially enjoyed moving around the classroom, finding vocabulary words. In tier two, ... the students loved exploring real maps in our classroom.”

*Theme 2: Successful Learning Outcome.* Sixty-seven percent of the teachers reported that their students would experience successful learning or had experienced successful learning with the tiered texts project. Here is what one teacher commented after implementing the project:

“I feel that my EL students were able to understand more because of the background building and teaching of the content vocabulary at each tier. They were participating more in discussions, most likely because they knew what was being said.”

*Theme 3: Differentiated Instruction.* Five percent of the teachers reported that the tiered-texts project helped differentiate learning experiences for their students. One teacher said the following:

“The activities were able to be differentiated so that all students could feel successful and receive the scaffolding needed to complete the activities.”

### 3.5. *What would be the challenge or challenges in using the tiered texts approach?*

*Theme 1: Inadequate Instructional Time.* Forty-six percent of the teachers felt the tiered texts approach could be challenging to implement because students will need enough time to learn the new concepts and vocabulary. Here is one of the quotes:

“Some challenges I anticipate is that I will not have enough time to complete all the activities and that the activities may require additional scaffolds and direct instruction to be successful.”

*Theme 2: Student Performance Levels.* Seventeen percent of the teachers felt that the tiered texts approach could be challenging to implement because of the wide variability in the performance level of students in their classrooms. One of them commented as follows:

“A challenge for implementing tiered texts is the high variance in ability and cognitive levels of students found in my class. High achieving students may become unmotivated because of the slow pace or redundancy of the material. I think this is the case because I have experienced this with other intervention strategies.”

## 4. Discussion

The results of this action research study supported the hypothesis stated earlier in this article that teachers would be able to transfer their experience designing tiered texts to their teaching of reading comprehension, as evidenced in their written reflections. The

teachers' reflections also provided empirical evidence that aligns with the objectives of the tiered texts approach stated in Lapp, Moss, and Johnson (2013). Specifically, reading through the teachers' reflections, it is evident that they felt the tiered texts approach, when used appropriately, leads to successful student learning outcomes for the following reasons:

- It scaffolds instruction for students' language development and knowledge attainment.
- It provides the necessary background information for students to approach the academic content.
- It builds up students' vocabulary and a better understanding of the content texts and knowledge.
- It engages students with motivating and varied activities to support meaningful learning.
- It offers opportunities for differentiated instruction to meet students' individual needs.

The results also indicated that the teachers benefited from completing the tiered texts project. After planning and designing a tiered texts unit, the teachers believed that they had gained more skills in delivering scaffolded and differentiated instruction to meet the needs of their ELs and other students. They also found that they became more adept at finding relevant and meaningful teaching materials to enrich the academic content they were teaching.

Finally, the results revealed the teachers' challenges when using and implementing the tiered texts approach in classroom practice. The challenges included limited time for lesson planning and classroom instruction, the lack of support for obtaining teaching resources, and students' different language proficiency and knowledge levels.

After the action research was completed, some of these challenges were addressed in the teacher training program. First, the lecture explaining this assignment reiterated the primary purpose of using the tiered texts approach with complex content texts. Second, later cohorts of teachers were required to use the operational model throughout the project because it helps organize ideas and materials while planning a unit and monitor progress while teaching a unit. Third, suggestions were made for the teachers to consider developing a tiered texts unit for a challenging text one tier at a time to create the next tier based on the formative assessment of students. Further research will be conducted to assess whether these measures promote more acceptance of the tiered texts approach by trainee teachers.

While reading the reflections, it became evident that the small portion of teachers who used the tiered texts units in their classrooms had a deeper understanding of the project's usefulness, the challenges in implementing it, and how to address those challenges. In future delivery of the tiered texts project in the grant, teacher trainees will be encouraged to implement the units they design. By using the tiered texts approach with their students,

the trainee teachers may appreciate the full potential of this approach for developing reading comprehension of complex text. Additionally, practical use of tiered text units is more likely to allow a more comprehensive evaluation of the benefits of this project in teacher preparation.

## **5. Conclusions**

This paper describes the tiered texts approach, an instructional design built on the GRR model that builds learners' capacity to comprehend and learn from more challenging texts by having them read three or more texts on the same or a related topic that gradually increase in difficulty. The instructional design incorporates strategies and activities to scaffold content, language learning, and reading comprehension as the texts gradually become more challenging. This approach is particularly appropriate for ELs and struggling readers because these students need opportunities to read and discuss complex texts.

Assisted with an operational model adapted from Moss, Lapp, and O'Shea (2011), in-service teachers participating in a federal grant have used the tiered-texts approach to design instructional activities to teach the reading of complex academic texts and reflect on the experience. Their reflection supports the usefulness of the tiered texts approach in helping them gain knowledge and skills for instruction and revealed potential challenges in implementing this approach in classroom teaching with limited time for lesson planning and delivery of instruction and wide variability in students' reading skills.

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