

Introduction

STAAR Techniques to Engage Learners in Literacy and Academic Rigor (STELLAR) was developed as a resource for classroom teachers to use in preparing their students for the English III College and Career Readiness Exam. Through the course of four units, it incorporates multigenre reading selections that are thematically linked and creatively crafted to encourage inquiry, discussion, and ongoing reflection. Every unit offers value-added enrichments through technology, research, and listening and speaking, while providing relevant scaffolding options for diverse learners and gifted and talented students. Also included are suggestions for big ideas, skills-based vocabulary, literary extensions, and benchmark and summative assessment options to support authentic literacy experiences.

Value-Added Components

STELLAR is carefully crafted to provide big-picture ideas in the form of essential unit questions, themed passages, and assessments based on these passages. In addition to the basics, each unit contains applications for listening and speaking, research, skills-based vocabulary, technology, and project ideas. To aid in planning for unit instruction, *STELLAR* offers ideas for differentiation for diverse learners, adaptation for gifted learners, and lesson-planning tools. The text also contains several appendices for research-based study-skills practice, product options, grouping strategies and activities, and discussion formats and models, all of which can be utilized within each unit. Finally, in order to allow extensions with the selected themes beyond the materials provided within each unit, additional appendices on choosing themed passages and integrating instruction with technology are included.

Thematic Instruction

STELLAR puts forth the best practice of thematic instruction in integrated language arts. It utilizes the English Language Arts and Reading (ELAR) Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) as its foundational documents. There are five strands of instructional skills outlined in the TEKS: Reading (including Figure 19), Writing, Oral and Written Conventions, Research, and Listening and Speaking. These skills are meant to be taught in conjunction with one another in order to help students make connections between the different literacy strands. The CCRS consist of a multilevel framework of content skills and knowledge that motivates students to transition from basic

levels of cognitive processing into deeper, more complex thinking. In any unit of study, therefore, educators are encouraged to integrate the literacy strands so that students must synthesize skills and concepts from each to gain meaning and insight.

The study of themes is a naturally recurring element within the TEKS; students are expected to make thematic connections within and between the many different genres:

(2) Reading/Comprehension of Literary Text/**Theme** and Genre. Students analyze, make inferences and draw conclusions about **theme** and genre in different cultural, historical, and contemporary contexts and provide evidence from the text to support their understanding. Students are expected to:

(A) analyze how the genre of texts with similar **themes** shapes meaning

This component of the *STELLAR* series is based on the design requirements for the English III College and Career Readiness Exam, the CCRS, and the TEKS; therefore, it requires students to demonstrate understanding of theme through themed passages, complex reasoning, crossover multiple-choice and short-answer questions for reading, and thematically linked writing tasks.

Assessments

The assessments contained in *STELLAR* are custom designed for Texas students. The assessments measure a student's level of performance on clearly defined standards, objectives, and skills. Student scores will be based on test questions that have been developed and aligned to the most current version of the ELAR TEKS and the Reading/Language Arts and Cross-Disciplinary CCRS.

The chosen selections meet the criteria for high-interest, 21st-century context and age-appropriate content. The Lexile score, which considers word frequency and sentence length, of each selection was used to determine ability-level applicability. Selections were then linked by theme, which allowed assessment questions to be written to a higher cognitive level for an

upward cognitive spiral. Each test comprises a set of themed selections with unique questions and an additional set of questions that draw upon the theme.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB) requires that state assessments be aligned and “measure the depth and breadth of the state academic content standards for a given grade level” (US Department of Education, 2003, p. 12). Alignment is the match between the expectations of student learning described in the TEKS, CCRS, and questions on the English III College and Career Readiness Exam. Depth of Knowledge (DOK) was formulated in 1997 by Dr. Norman Webb in response to a need generated by states to objectively and accurately align assessment questions to standards for compliance with federal guidelines. DOK, which measures the cognitive complexity of a task, is the alignment tool used for state summative assessments. It is a federally approved method of alignment for state summative assessments that is currently used by the majority of the states, including Texas.