



Rethinking the 8th grade Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment: Improving Readability and Practical Language Skills through Technology

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges faced by Romanian 8th grade students during the Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment (RLLNA). The current structure of the RLLNA exam poses significant difficulties, particularly in terms of text readability and the highly specialized, theoretical nature of the grammar tasks. The texts often feature complex sentence structures and abstract language, which hinder students' comprehension. Additionally, the grammar tasks emphasize theoretical knowledge rather than practical language skills. An analysis of student performance from 2021 to 2024 reveals that many students struggle with both text readability [1] and grammar tasks, contributing to declining exam scores over the years. The paper advocates for a comprehensive revision of the assessment to better reflect students' reading habits and functional language abilities. It proposes integrating formative assessment and educational technology tools, such as LEMI [1], Microsoft Word's grammar checker, Google Forms for quizzes, and platforms like Kahoot and Quizizz. These technologies can provide personalized feedback, real-time assessments, and continuous monitoring of student progress, thereby helping students improve their language skills more effectively. The study concludes with three key recommendations: (a) simplifying the linguistic complexity of both reading comprehension texts and tasks or adapting their readability according to gradual complexity levels, and (b) focusing on grammar tasks that reflect real-world language use; (c) integrate educational technology tools into formative assessment teaching strategies. These steps are crucial for creating a fairer and more efficient national assessment system. Additionally, aligning the RLLNA with international standards such as PISA, which emphasizes real-world literacy skills and practical language use, will ensure the exam is both relevant to students' lives and internationally comparable.

Keywords: 8th grade Romanian Language National Assessment, text readability in Romanian national exams, LEMI, educational technology tools, Romanian National Assessment versus PISA

1. Introduction

The Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment (henceforth RLLNA) plays a crucial role in shaping the academic future of 8th grade students. The results at RLLNA, together with the assessment for mathematics, form an average mark which allows students to access the high school section they desire, depending on their high school admission options. However, the current structure of the assessment 8th grade National Assessment has raised concerns among educators, researchers and policymakers regarding its fairness and effectiveness. For example, the increasing complexity of the reading comprehension texts in RLLNA, and the highly specialized grammar tasks have become barriers for many students, making it difficult for them to demonstrate their actual language proficiency. This paper seeks to address these issues by exploring the integration of



formative assessment and educational technology tools. This study aims at creating a more effective evaluation system that better aligns with the students' reading habits and functional language skills.

2. The Current Problem

Romanian 8th grade students face significant challenges with the existing National Assessment. One of the primary issues is the complexity of the texts used in the exams, which often include abstract language and complicated literary structures. Furthermore, the grammar tasks in the assessment require students to integrate specific grammatical structures into different types of sentences. For example, students may be asked to write an assertive sentence where "frumoasă" (EN: *beautiful*) functions as a predicative noun. While these tasks are intended to test students' understanding of grammatical rules, they sometimes focus too much on the manipulation of isolated structures, and therefore theoretical grammar, rather than on their practical application in real-life contexts.

From 2021 onwards, there has been a noticeable gap between the students' abilities and their actual performance in the National Assessment. Iancu et al. [2] highlight the need for Romania's education system to become more focused on the needs of the students. This means updating the assessment criteria to better match the students' abilities. Right now, from the language-related task perspective, the exams tend to focus on testing specific grammatical rules rather than investigating how students use language in everyday situations. This leads to artificial lower scores in exams, which is not a realistic reflection of their actual language skills.

This mismatch between what is required by the exam and the usefulness of the required skills in everyday situations is reflected by all types of activities included in the RLLNA; reading, language-related i.e. grammar tasks and writing. In this study, we will focus on the first two components. We hypothesize that both the content of the exam and how students are prepared for it need significant changes and we propose a comprehensive revision of the RLLNA structure and content.

3. Literature Review

Several studies have examined the educational challenges in Romania, highlighting the need for a system that aligns more closely with labor market demands. Iancu et al. [2] emphasize that the current education structure, including tertiary education, does not fully support students' transition to the workforce due to misalignment with labor needs and high dropout rates. Their research points to a decrease in students' pursuit of higher education, influenced by both demographic declines and economic factors.

Manoli and Papadopoulou [3] explore the distinction between reading strategies and reading skills, noting that while students may learn strategies to navigate complex texts, they often lack the automatic skills needed for full comprehension. This distinction highlights why many students struggle with difficult texts in assessments, as the strategies alone may not suffice without a strong foundation of reading skills.

Mirica et al. [4] highlight challenges in the 2023 National Evaluation Exams, revealing how regional disparities and lack of guidance left some students without school placements and demonstrated varying academic readiness across subjects. This outcome underscores the broader issue that reading habits are closely tied to teachers' pedagogical skills and the types of tasks students encounter in textbooks [5]. Given that the 8th-grade evaluation does not account for this variability in teaching approaches, there is a clear need for reform. Such reform should focus on selecting texts that better reflect students' actual reading experiences and on enhancing teaching methods to support diverse learning needs.

4. Methodology

The study analyses the students' performance results from the 2021 8th grade National Assessment onwards, focusing on two key areas: linguistic complexity of text and the nature of grammar tasks. Texts were evaluated based on their readability [1], structure and the extent to which they reflected real-world language use. Grammar tasks were analysed to determine how practical they were in helping students demonstrate their language proficiency.

The paper also explores the potential of integrating formative assessment and educational technology tools into the evaluation process. Formative assessment provides ongoing feedback, enabling students to track their progress and improve throughout the academic year. Educational technology tools, which are increasingly used in educational settings [6], offer personalized learning



experiences by analysing the students' responses and identifying areas for improvement. Both methods have the potential to address the key issues identified in the current assessment framework.

5. Results and Discussion

The results of the study confirm that both text complexity and grammar tasks contribute significantly to the challenges faced by students in the Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment.

5.1. Text Complexity Analysis

Each year, the linguistic complexity of the literary texts presents a significant challenge for students. A closer look at the texts from the assessments between 2021 and 2024 reveals the following patterns:

A. The 2021 text, taken from *Pantera neagră* by Sorin Titel, uses accessible language but includes symbolic references, such as the metaphor of Gicoane as a "black panther." While the sentence structure is simple and straightforward, the symbolism used adds to the overall text complexity for students. This metaphor, alongside Gicoane's role as a resilient and agile goalkeeper, carries deeper meaning about overcoming physical limitations and finding strength within oneself. As a result, students may struggle with interpreting these metaphors, particularly when it comes to connecting Gicoane's persona to the traits of a panther and understanding how this symbolism reflects on his character development throughout the story. In terms of readability, the scores for this text (Figure 1) indicate a higher-than-the-grade reading level. This suggests that, despite the simple sentence structure, the symbolic depth and metaphoric references elevate the complexity of the text, making it more challenging for younger students to fully grasp the underlying themes and meanings. Therefore, while the surface language may seem accessible, the figurative language and symbolism add layers of difficulty for comprehension.

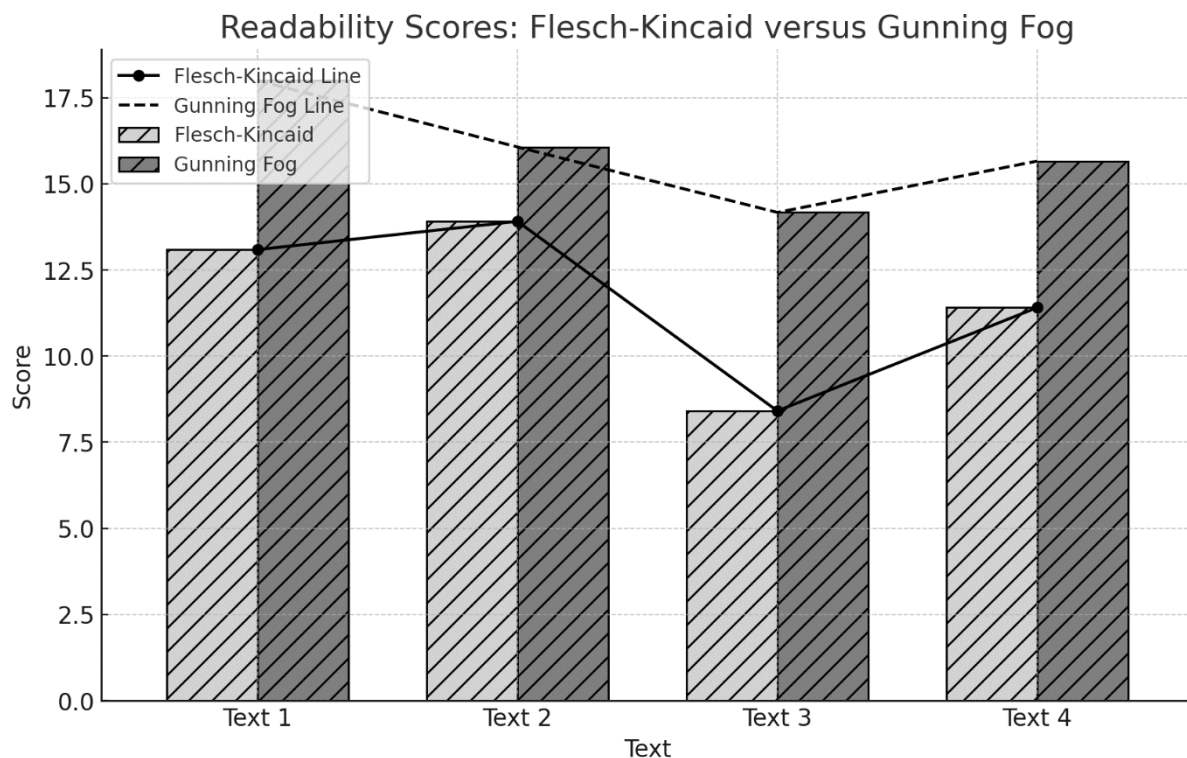


Fig. 1. Text readability scores in RLLNA in National Assessment between 2021-2024

B. The 2022 text, from *Toate pânzele sus!* by Radu Tudoran, is also challenging due to its use of technical maritime terms such as "barcaz" (EN: small barge) and "chei" (EN: quay). The long descriptive sentences, combined with the technical terms, make the reading process more difficult for students who are not familiar with such vocabulary. Furthermore, the readability scores (Figure 1) reflect the complexity of the text, as it is suited for rather advanced readers. The descriptions of the setting, characters and maritime equipment, as well as the detailed narration, add layers of difficulty



for younger students. These elements may cause students to struggle with comprehension, particularly when they lack background knowledge in maritime terminology or are not accustomed to longer, more complex sentence structures.

C. The 2023 text, *Limir-împărat* by Ioan Slavici, adds a different layer of difficulty through its archaic language and folk-tale style. Terms like "păcurar" (EN: shepherd) and "azimă" (EN: unleavened bread), alongside metaphorical expressions, present challenges for students who are not used to this style of storytelling. Additionally, the scores (Figure 1) reflect the complexity of the text, indicating that it is suited for advanced readers (Gunning-FOG index is 14.17). The folk-tale elements, combined with long, descriptive sentences and symbolic language, make it difficult for students to grasp the deeper meanings without prior exposure to this kind of narrative. Furthermore, the rich use of metaphorical expressions and moral lessons embedded in the plot require higher-level interpretative skills, adding to the overall complexity of the reading experience.

D. The 2024 text, from *Cireșarii* by Constantin Chiriță, is moderately accessible, yet it still presents challenges. While it uses contemporary language and straightforward sentence structures, making it easier for students to engage with, the readability scores (Figure 1) indicate that it is still a demanding text. Although the themes of adventure and friendship are more relatable and contribute to improved comprehension, the narrative's emotional depth, descriptive language, and the tension of the plot still require higher-level reading skills. Students may find it easier to follow compared to the other texts, but they will still need to navigate the complex emotions and adventurous scenarios, which add layers of difficulty.

In fact, all four texts seem not to be linguistically adapted for this grade, especially considering that the purpose of the RLLNA is to assess literacy competencies ranging from basic to advanced. The two formulas used, Flesch-Kincaid and Gunning Fog Index, indicate levels above the 8th grade. The difference in their scores arises from the metrics they use. For example, the different scores for Text 2 result from how they handle sentence length and word complexity. The Flesch-Kincaid formula places greater emphasis on syllables and sentence length, meaning that texts with shorter sentences but complex words may result in lower scores. On the other hand, the Gunning Fog Index is more sensitive to long words, particularly those with three or more syllables, and complex sentence structures, which could explain why Text 2 has a higher score under this formula. Since these formulas have been created for the analysis of the English language, their results are relevant in comparative frameworks, but they can also highlight linguistic complexity even if the scores are not indicative of a particular grade level as in the case of the English language. Considering that a readability formula for Romanian is still undergoing testing procedures [1], we have used these available formulas to demonstrate that texts used in RLLNA are not linguistically adapted for the 8th grade students.

5.2. Grammar Tasks Analysis

In addition to text complexity, the grammar tasks in the RLLNA present another challenge. These tasks often focus on specialized grammatical rules that students rarely use in everyday language. The grammar tasks are often too abstract, requiring students to manipulate grammatical structures without clearly demonstrating how these rules apply in everyday communication. The focus on isolated rules, such as writing assertive sentences with specific grammatical structures (e.g., using "frumoasă" as a predicative noun), adds to the overall difficulty and leads to lower performance in grammar sections.

A critical issue is that some grammar tasks focus on theoretical aspects that do not contribute significantly to practical language competence. For example, exercises asking students to identify diphthongs and hiatus are overly theoretical for this age group. According to Lightbown and Spada [7], grammar tasks, such as the ones focusing on abstract phonetic phenomena, are not effective for younger learners because they do not significantly contribute to communication skills, which should be the primary goal of language education. Grammar tasks focused on isolated rules do little to help students develop communicative competence. Instead, tasks that apply grammar in meaningful contexts would be more effective for students at this stage. Moreover, research indicates that focusing on isolated grammatical phenomena tends to be ineffective for younger learners who benefit more from communicative and contextualized grammar instruction. Exercises such as identifying diminutive suffixes or recognizing homonyms are also limited in practical application, making it difficult for students to see how such tasks relate to their everyday language use.

To further illustrate this, we can categorize the types of grammar tasks in RLLNA and evaluate their relevance:



Grammar task category	Description	Relevance for students (14 years old)	Practical application in everyday language
Identifying diphthongs and hiatus	Students must recognize and differentiate between diphthongs and hiatus in words.	Abstract and difficult to apply at their age level.	Very little applicability in everyday communication; adults never use these concepts in real life.
Identifying homonyms	Students must recognize homonyms from context.	Moderately relevant but can be challenging for students who do not frequently encounter homonyms.	Very little applicability in everyday communication; rather theoretical concept.
Identifying diminutive suffixes	Students are asked to identify words derived with diminutive suffixes.	Low relevance, focusing on minor linguistic details.	Little applicability in everyday communication; this linguistic competence lacks connection to active language development.
Constructing assertive sentences with predicative nouns	Students must construct assertive sentences using nouns as predicative elements.	Complex, requiring advanced understanding of sentence structure.	Little applicability in everyday communication; rarely used in everyday speech, more of a technical skill.
Verb moods	Students must identify verbs and their mood (indicative, conditional, subjunctive etc.).	Moderately relevant, since tasks may seem overly technical for students.	Limited applicability in everyday communication; useful for constructing correct sentences but requires more contextualization.
Correct word forms	Students must choose the correct form of a word from context.	Highly relevant, requiring the application of grammar rules.	High applicability in everyday communication; the task needs to be constructed carefully to reflect actual language use and not focus on rarely used items.

Table 1. Evaluation of grammar tasks in the Romanian National Assessment. Relevance and Practical Application

The inclusion of tasks such as identifying diphthongs and hiatus could be considered too advanced for the students' developmental stage, focusing more on theoretical knowledge than practical language use. Lightbown and Spada [7] argue that language assessments should prioritize real-world communication, emphasizing grammar that directly impacts students' ability to express themselves effectively in everyday situations.

5.3. Performance Evolution: Analysis of Students' Results (2020-2024)

The figure below illustrates the distribution of grades in the RLLNA from 2020 to 2024 [8]. The data reveal a significant shift downwards in student performance over the years, with a noticeable increase in the percentage of students scoring below 5 in 2024 (22.37%). This marks a serious decrease of RLLNA marks compared to previous years, which highlights the growing challenges faced by students in comprehending complex texts and completing specialized grammar tasks. In 2020, 16.09% of students scored below 5, while in 2024 this figure jumped to 22.37%. This trend suggests that an increasing number of students struggle to meet the basic proficiency standards required for passing the assessment.



The percentage of students scoring between 9.50 and 9.99 has dropped significantly, with only 5.46% of students achieving these scores in 2024, compared to 10.85% in 2020. This decline indicates that the upper range of performance is also shrinking, suggesting that even high-achieving students are finding it more difficult to excel. The data also show that the number of students achieving a perfect score of 10 has decreased from 0.48% in 2020 to only 0.27% in 2024, reflecting the increasing difficulty of the exam. This trend suggests that both text complexity and the overly specialized grammar tasks are contributing factors to the overall decline in student performance.

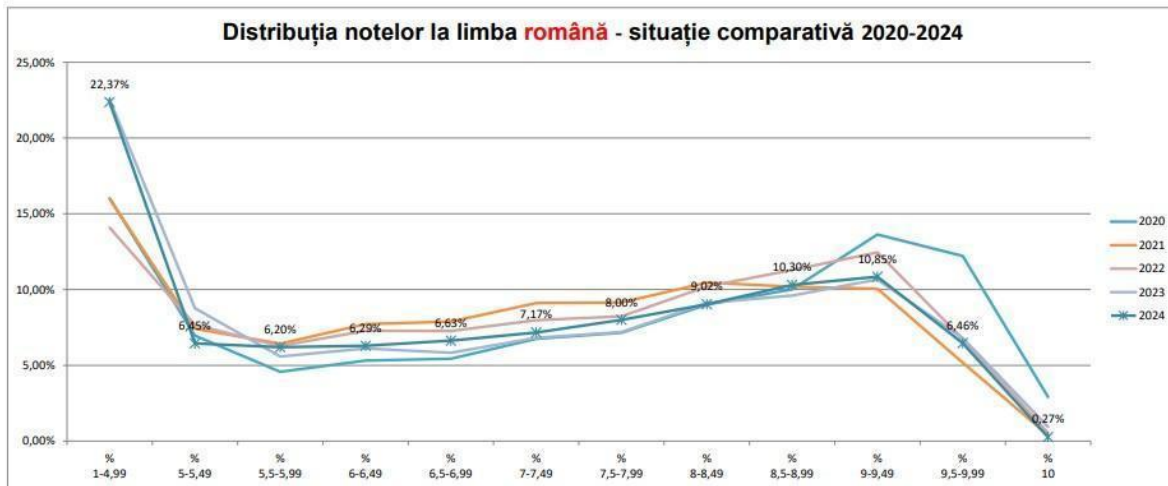


Fig. 2. Comparative distribution of Romanian Language Assessment grades (2020-2024)

6. Proposed Solutions

To address these challenges, the integration of formative assessment and educational technology tools into the evaluation process provides viable, realistic solutions for the Romanian education system.

6.1. Educational Technology Tools in Romania

a. Tools for text readability:

The only existing educational technology instrument in Romania which can assist teachers in the process of evaluating the linguistic complexity of texts is LEMI [1][5]. The LEMI tool (freely accessible at www.lemi.ro) is a digital tool designed to assess and improve the readability of Romanian-language texts, particularly in educational settings. It uses a corpus-based readability formula tailored specifically for the Romanian language, allowing educators to evaluate the linguistic complexity of teaching materials. By analysing factors such as sentence length and word complexity, LEMI helps ensure that texts are appropriate for students' age and comprehension levels. This tool can be instrumental in calibrating the difficulty of reading materials, making them more accessible and aligned with students' cognitive abilities, which is crucial for improving overall learning outcomes.

b. Tools for language related tasks:

Educational technology tools can offer significant benefits in language education by providing personalized feedback and support for both students and teachers. In Romania, several digital technologies are already accessible and can be integrated into classrooms. One such platform is Microsoft Word's spell checker, which includes Romanian language support. It can be used in schools to help students identify grammatical errors such as agreement issues, diacritics misuse and improper sentence structure. This tool is already available and does not require additional resources, making it an accessible solution. For instance, students can draft essays in Microsoft Word and use the built-in tool to check for errors. After correcting the automated feedback, teachers can offer more detailed guidance, focusing on style and content improvement.

Also, there are many assessment platforms like Kahoot and Quizizz that are already used in Romanian schools and can be customized to assess knowledge of Romanian grammar, vocabulary and reading comprehension. These platforms adapt to different proficiency levels, allowing teachers to track individual student progress. For example, a teacher creates a Romanian grammar quiz in



Kahoot, focusing on noun cases and verb tenses. After completing the quiz, students receive feedback in real-time, and the teacher can analyse class-wide performance to adjust future lessons based on the results.

6.2. Formative Assessment in Romania

Formative assessment, already used in some Romanian classrooms, can be expanded to provide more structured, continuous feedback. This approach allows students, teachers and parents to track progress and adjust instruction accordingly. One method teachers can use to integrate formative assessment is by preparing regular quizzes via Google Forms, a widely accessible tool in Romanian schools. These quizzes should focus on practical language use rather than isolated grammatical rules, providing students with instant feedback. For example, after a lesson on Romanian conjunctions, the teacher can create a short Google Forms quiz where students apply conjunctions in context. This immediate feedback helps students identify mistakes. Another effective strategy is peer review sessions, where students evaluate each other's work based on criteria set by the teacher. This method encourages collaboration and critical thinking, while also enhancing grammatical and stylistic knowledge. For example, after completing a creative writing task, students exchange drafts and assess their colleagues' work in terms of grammar, clarity and coherence. The teacher supervises the session to ensure feedback remains constructive and focused.

A third approach is portfolio-based assessment, which tracks student progress over time by compiling multiple drafts of written work. Teachers offer formative feedback on each draft, targeting areas like grammatical accuracy and language development. For example, throughout the semester, a student might submit drafts of an argumentative essay, receiving feedback on sentence structure and vocabulary with each iteration. The final version demonstrates the overall progress made.

7. Conclusion and Recommendations

7.1 Study Recommendations

The Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment requires a complex shift in both its structure and content. To address the challenges faced by the students, the texts used in the RLLNA exam should be simpler and more reflective of the reading materials students encounter in their daily lives. The grammar tasks should focus on practical language skills that students can apply in real-world situations, rather than on specialized grammatical rules.

The integration of formative assessment and educational technology tools may be considered a promising solution. By providing continuous feedback and personalized learning experiences, these tools can help students develop the skills they need to succeed, while also creating a more fair and effective evaluation system. Teachers can use available tools such as Google Forms for quizzes and Microsoft Word for grammar checking.

Although this study focuses on the Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment, the findings and recommendations are applicable to other areas of language instruction, including foreign languages like English. Romanian teachers can integrate formative assessment and existing educational technology tools to provide continuous, personalized feedback, helping students improve their practical language skills across multiple languages.

7.2 Beyond this Study: RLLNA versus PISA Tests

The excess in linguistic complexity of both the reading texts and language-related tasks is also reflected in the overall task load of the entire RLLNA. The amount of tasks in Romanian Language and Literature National Assessment for 8th-grade students is excessive given the 2-hour time limit, making it unrealistic for students to complete effectively. Research shows that excessive task demands under time constraints can lead to cognitive overload, reducing students' ability to perform tasks efficiently [9]. In contrast, PISA allocates one hour to test just one specific competence, like reading comprehension, focusing on practical tasks without adding complex essay writing or detailed grammatical analysis. RLLNA, however, expects students to handle a wide range of tasks (e.g. literary analysis, grammar corrections, and composition writing), further increasing the cognitive load and making it difficult to manage the test within the allotted time. Studies confirm that excessive cognitive strain under time pressure can cause stress and hinder information processing [10].

Additionally, the tasks in RLLNA focus heavily on academic, literary, and grammatical content that lacks real-world applicability. In PISA reading tests, on the other hand, emphasis is laid on



practical reading and problem-solving skills that are useful for everyday life. Incorporating more functional literacy tasks, such as reading comprehension of non-literary texts [11], would not only make the exam more feasible but also ensure that the skills being tested are relevant beyond the classroom. It is also essential to reduce the number of tasks to ensure that students are exposed to a realistic cognitive load during the 2-hour exam. The RLLNA is overloaded in all possible aspects: the number and type of tasks, text complexity, and language-related demands. This indicates that a recalibration of the RLLNA should be based on the following principles: simplification, applicability, and a fair balance of tasks. This is crucial not only to align the RLLNA with international tests like PISA but also to make it more relevant to students' lives.

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