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## Complex Syntax and Reading Comprehension

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Many linguistic and nonlinguistic factors may contribute to poor reading comprehension: weak vocabulary, lack of familiarity with the subject, inadequate world knowledge, poor decoding skills, and inattention, to name a few. Another important factor, often overlooked, is a failure to acquire rules for complex sentence structure. Pinpointing the specific rules that students have failed to acquire enables us, as teachers, to plan efficient instruction. Specific features of English grammar that can cause comprehension problems for students include relative clause structure, deletion rules, logical or chronological order of clauses, and pronoun and other anaphoric reference.

Many students who have not acquired these rules, will use simple sentence strategies to try to understand complex sentences. One simple sentence strategy is to consider the noun nearest to a verb the subject of that verb. In relative clause constructions, this is often not the case. Thus, given the sentence, *the lizard Jimmy had got away*, a student might think that Jimmy got away rather than the lizard. Or in the sentence, *The boy who caught the lizard ran away*, a student might conclude that the lizard ran away. In the sentence, *Tony got the rope he hid in a tree by the river*, a student might read this as *Tony go the rope. He hid in a tree by the river*. If sentences like these occur one after another in a paragraph, a student becomes totally confused as to who did what.

Deletions may puzzle students. In a popular text there occurs this passage: *Some lizards have legs. Others do not*. Many students have thought that all lizards have legs, because they do not understand that Other lizards do not have legs. Deletions may occur in coordinated sentences when the subjects of the two underlying simple sentences refer to the same person or thing. So in the sentence, *The dog bit the cat and ran*, a student may think that the cat ran, because it is nearest to the verb. Sentences containing adverbial clauses are easier to understand if the clause conforms to the order of events. Thus, *Before you come to the table, wash your hands*, reverses the order of events, and may pose a problem. This is particularly true with adverbial clauses using *before*, *after*, or *because*.

To make written text cohesive, authors use pronouns or different nouns and phrases to refer back to people or ideas that have already been mentioned. For example, *The movie was thrilling to the kids. It had some of the most amazing effects they had ever seen*. Here, *it* and *they* refer back to the movie and the kids. The next sentence might be, *After the screening, the excited students wrote letters to the director*. Here the *excited students* refer back to the kids. Many children have difficulty finding referents for such substitutions, and think that new characters or ideas are being introduced.

The task of assessing a student's comprehension of complex sentences is a multi-faceted puzzle, which includes the results from standardized tests, clues from reading errors, and informal probes. An example of a test which directly measures sentence comprehension is the *Rhode Island Test of Language Structure*

(Engen and Engen, 1983). This test requires a student to match a spoken sentence to one of three pictures. There are 50 simple sentences and 50 complex sentences, with four examples of each type of sentence. Although the norms are limited, the test is revealing. For example, a student hears the sentence, *The car the man bought is old* and sees pictures of 1) a new car and an old man, 2) an old car and a young man, and 3) a distractor, with a car and man of indeterminate ages. The correct answer is option 2), but a student may choose 1) because man is closer to old. This test is particularly valuable because the vocabulary is very simple. Errors are related to syntax, not vocabulary. The ways in which students misread sentences can provide invaluable insights into the types of sentences which they don't understand. As teachers, when we write reports, we typically describe students' reading errors as omissions, insertions, and substitutions. If, however, we look at what was omitted, what was inserted, and what was substituted, we can get clues to that student's comprehension problems.

One student read the sentence, *Feeding the dog, Jimmy spilled water on the floor, as Feed the dog. Jimmy spilled water on the floor.* This omission gave the clue that this student might not understand participial phrases, which, indeed, turned out to be the case. An informal probe checked this out by presenting similar sentences, such as *Left unlocked, the door swung wildly against the barn*, and asking comprehension questions. Exercises were devised in which the underlying simple sentences were presented and then combined to form the complex sentence. Then the participial phrase was moved around to different places in the sentence to show that the meaning was not changed.

*Forgotten at the carnival, the child wandered around the games, crying for his mother.*  
*The child was forgotten at the games.*  
*The child wandered around the games.*  
*The child cried for his mother.*

A different student read *Dan's spot in the hideout is near the door in an easy chair he made out of two bags of sand* as *Dan's spot in the hideout is near the door in an easy chair. He made it out of two bags of sand.* This student, a 13-year-old dyslexic student, insisted that the original sentence was wrong. He insisted that the author should have put it in. He did not understand this kind of relative clause construction. Sometimes, it is sufficient to put relative pronoun in (an easy chair that he made), but sometimes it is necessary to go farther and show the underlying simple sentences.

*Dan's spot in the hideout is near the door in an easy chair.*  
*Dan made the easy chair out of two bags of sand.*

Another student read, *Now we remembered and were quiet*, as *Now we remembered and we're quiet.* This substitution of we're for were gave a clue that this student didn't understand that in a coordinated sentence, if the subjects of the two simple sentences are the same, the subject of the second sentence may be omitted when the two simple sentences are combined. Again, this proved to be the case, and exercises were devised which put the second subject back in and then took it out.

*The dogs barked and then bit the mailman.*  
*The dogs barked and then the dogs bit the mailman.*  
*The dogs barked and then (the dogs) bit the mailman.*

Students can practice moving adverbial phrases around to see that the meaning of the sentence doesn't change.

*Because Jane was sick, she stayed home from school.  
Jane stayed home from school because she was sick.*

In cases where there are many referents, it may be necessary to go through a paragraph, find all referents and identify them.

*When we were living In India, Grandfather found a baby tiger. He found the tiny beast hiding under the roots of a giant banyan tree. He took the youngster home and showed him the grandmother. She named him Timothy.*

Grandfather = he. Grandmother = she. Tiger= tiny beast = youngster = him = Timothy.

Thus, through testing and error analysis, we can find examples of specific constructions which students may not understand, and then devise exercises which clarify how the sentences were constructed before a student understands the sentence type in question. Examples from a student's current school text are especially valuable.

*\*\*\*This article uses material from Language Sampling, Analysis and Training, Third Edition, by Dorothy Tyack and Gail Venerable, 1999.*