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# HELPING STUDENTS UNDERSTAND COMPLICATED SENTENCES

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## Introduction

Teachers at all grade levels are often faced with students whose word analysis and vocabulary skills are adequate, yet who have a problem reading and understanding connected text in sentence form. Problems in sentence comprehension become particularly marked when students are asked to deal with the complicated sentence structures typical of more advanced reading material. Such sentences may have multiple subjects and predicates, embedded clauses and phrases, passive voice, and/or unusual word orders. The following examples illustrate sentences with which students may be confronted in their school reading assignments:

If I held it up for a while by myself, then surely you, with your great strength, can hold it up for the short time it will take me to run and bring help, and chickens and tortillas. (Ginn basal reader, Grade 3: A Lizard to Start With, p. 298)

In some villages, like Orasac, parents and children usually still share their homes with grandparents and grandchildren, but the strict rules of the old zadruga (clan) are no longer followed. (Holt, Inquiring About Technology, grade 6, p.118)

The great pullman was whirling onward with such dignity of motion that a glance from the window seemed simply to prove that the plains of Texas were pouring eastward. (Stephen Crane, "The Bride Comes to Yellow Sky," p. 1)

It (web) expresses the intricacy and precision of the spider's adaptation—its ability to live from and within its environment; an aspect of that adaptation—and of all adaptations whatever—is the ability to reproduce, and hence to maintain the population of spiders through the ages, a population that endures although the individuals in it perish. (Simpson and Beck, Life: An Introduction to Biology, p. 1)

Strauss aides also reportedly told newsmen on his plane trip home from the Middle East that Brezinski has drafted the rigidly phrased Presidential instructions that forced him to argue for the American resolution until he was "shot down" by both Israel and Egypt. (Newsweek, Sept. 3, 1979)

Disorders in Nicaragua, perilously close to the Panama Canal jugular vein, had jeopardized American lives and property, and in 1927 President Coolidge felt compelled to dispatch over 5000 troops to this troubled banana land. (Bailey, The American Pageant, p. 308)

Sentences such as the above may present difficulty for readers, even if they know all the individual words in the sentence. The difficulty with the sentences resides in their complex organization. Written sentences tend to be syntactically complex, containing many subordinated and conjoined clauses. These patterns are more complex than those encountered in oral language (Strickland, 1962; Horowitz and Berkowitz, 1967; Wilkinson, 1971; Schallert, Kleiman and Rubin, 1977). Thus, students have difficulty interpreting the message of the sentence because they are unfamiliar with the syntactic structure in which the ideas are embedded. This is especially true for students who have not read widely, and thus have not come across a variety of written sentence structures.

#### Research Regarding Complicated Syntax

Various studies have found that grammatical complexity presents a reading problem for students. Schlesinger (1966), Borrmuth et al (1970), Pearson (1974) and Richek (1976) all provide evidence that complex sentences pose reading problems for students. Complex sentences are often characterized by the use of anaphora, since referencing is required in order to embed ideas in sentences. Studies by Chomsky (1969), Lesgold (1974), Richek (1977), and Barnitz (1979) indicate that children have difficulty dealing with anaphora. Complicated sentence structure is thus known to cause reading difficulties for students.

#### Attempts to Deal with Complex Sentence Structures

Publishers of school texts are aware of the difficulty which complicated sentence structures pose for children. The publishing industry is attempting to deal with this problem by "rewriting" texts in the simplest form possible, modifying syntax to reduce complicated sentence structures (Laya, 1979). In doing this, the industry is conforming to the suggestions of several reading researchers. Pearson (1974), Ruddell (1974), Wanat (1976), and Singer and Dreher (1978) have all recommended that syntax be modified to increase readers' understanding of text.

While the suggestion of text modification is valid as a beginning step in reading instruction, teaching students to deal with complex sentence patterns must remain a reading goal. If schools are to produce mature readers who can deal with the wealth of printed material in our language, they must concentrate on teaching students to cope with sentence structures. Research exists which demonstrates that basal reading systems do not offer sufficient reading instruction in written language patterns (Durkin, 1979). This article presents some suggestions to assist students in understanding complex sentences. Rather than "water down" all children's reading material, educators must help their charges deal with the complexities of written language so that children can read and appreciate the richness of our written heritage.

#### Instructional Implications

Reading is the process of interpreting a writer's message (Goodman, 1967). Successful readers can do this because they share with writers a common language, with common syntax and common conventions of written English. Thus, in order to teach children to interpret a writer's message, we must examine the form in which writers place

their ideas. Thus, we must examine the syntax of sentences so that children can learn to read complicated sentences.

An examination of complex sentences reveals that they are composed of a "main core" (the primary subject, predicate and object) with various ideas embedded in the sentences which add information concerning the "main core". For example, in the sentence:

Largely as a result of Young's unauthorized July 26 meeting with the P.L.O.'s U.N. observer, Zehdi Labib Terzi, the U.S. succeeded in delaying the debate until last week. (*Newsweek*, September 3, 1979)

the main core is "U.S./succeeded/delaying debate". The added ideas are why this was done (because of Young's meeting) and how long the delay lasted (until last week). In addition, we are given more information about Young's meeting (the time and the participants). We also see an example of anaphora (last week).

The instructional implications of this examination are obvious. Students must be taught to look for the "main core" of the sentence. Grammatically correct terminology is not important; rather, it is important that students know what the main idea of the sentence is. Only by knowing the primary import of the sentence can students attach the proper weights to added ideas.

Teachers are urged to "work through" sentences such as the above with their classes. Ask students to find the main core, then ask what ideas are added to this basic information. Students should discuss the anaphoric references found in such sentences. By starting with fairly basic complex sentences and progressing to ones with many embedded ideas, students can add to their knowledge of sentence structures, and become competent in reading them.

#### Teaching Specific Sentence Structures

In addition to exposing students to, and querying students on, complex sentence structures, several specific written language patterns should be taught. The following paragraphs detail some of these specific written structures.

#### Multiple Subjects or Multiple Verbs

Many sentences contain more than one subject or more than one verb:

Pointed arches and vaulted ceilings characterize Gothic architecture.

The council met at one and adjourned at two o'clock.

Present sentences such as the above to students and ask them to identify "what characterizes this type of architecture?" or "what did the council do?" Discuss the concept that more than one idea can be presented in one sentence. Students should realize the existence of multiple subjects or multiple verbs, and be able to deal with them in print.

#### Passive Voice

Passive voice is fairly unfamiliar in oral language and poses problems for readers (Wanat, 1976). Students can be taught to deal with the passive voice by examining sentences like the following:

John was drenched by the rain and frozen by the icy wind.

By asking such questions as "what drenched whom?" and "what froze whom?" the teacher can help students recognize the use of passive voice. They should also be taught that the passive voice often disguises the "doer" of action ("The door had been closed.")

### Coordination

Compound sentences contain coordinate clauses, which show a relationship between the parts of the sentence. These clauses are conjoined by connectives; the clauses add ideas, contrast ideas, express choices between ideas, or express results (Warriner and Griffith, 1963).

Students should be shown sentences of each type, and exposed to the connective words which signal these relationships. Since many of these connectives are used with semicolons, instruction should be given regarding the semicolon. The following chart indicates the clue words to coordination:

#### Connectives which add ideas

also	both . . . and	moreover
and	furthermore	then
besides	likewise	

#### Connectives which contrast ideas

but	nevertheless	yet
however	still	

#### Connectives which express choice

either . . . or	nor, or
neither . . . nor	otherwise

#### Connective which express result

accordingly	hence
consequently	therefore

Students should discuss examples of sentences with the above connectives, noting how the ideas are juxtaposed using the connective words. Two examples of such sentences are:

The U.S. delayed the U.N. debate, since Young had met Terzi without sanction.

Howard Baker is said to be running for president; consequently, he will turn over his Minority Leadership duties to Senator Ted Stevens in November.

### Subordination

Subordination is common in complex sentences. Subordinate ideas are those which are added to give more information regarding the "main core" of the sentence. Again, certain "clue words" indicate the presence of subordinate ideas in sentences. These are:

Words which express time—	after	until
	whenever	before
	while	since
		when

Words which express cause or reason—	as
since	because
whereas	
Words which express purpose or result—	that
in order that	so that
Words which express condition—	although
unless	provided
if	

Students should be exposed to a wide variety of sentences containing subordination so that they can see the various forms and purposes of it. Always, students should find the "main core" and discuss how other embedded ideas add to the main core.

#### Apposition

A common form of embedding ideas is the appositive phrase:

The Yukon Delta, fifty thousand square miles of tundra,  
is located in Alaska.

Students should be shown that the appositive phrase tells us something more about its antecedent. By discussing various examples, and being aware of the punctuation clues, students can realize the function of the appositive phrase.

#### Conclusion

Other syntactic devices can be explicated in order to aid students' reading comprehension, such as anaphora and placement of modifiers. As with the other syntactic forms discussed, students need first to be shown many examples of the form, with each example discussed and "thought through". Students should be urged to reconstruct the writer's ideas, first retrieving the core idea, and then seeing which ideas are conjoined or subordinated.

Through this method, used in the writer's college reading classes, students can be taught to deal with complex written sentence patterns. Intelligent experience with the patterns is required. However, this is preferable to "writing down" children's reading material. By paying particular attention to these and other conventions of written English, we can expose students to the wide variety and richness of our language. Teachers of reading should become cognizant of the need to help students explicate complex sentence patterns.

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