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Sentence Stems that Support Reading Comprehension

Teaser Text: How can teachers align sentence stems to their content and language objectives to ensure that students are developing both language and literacy?

Abstract: Sentence stems are widely used by teachers, but what do we know about developing sentence stems and using them effectively? Sentence stems are intended to facilitate students' participation in academic conversations and writing and support students to develop the language expected in school, but sometimes they do not provide the support intended. This article explains how to develop supportive sentence stems.

Introduction

Sentence stems are widely used by teachers, but what do we know about developing sentence stems and using them effectively? Sentence stems are intended to facilitate students' participation in academic conversations and writing and support students to develop the language expected in school, but sometimes they do not provide the support intended. This article explains how to develop supportive sentence stems.

Scaffolding Classroom Talk for ELs Using Sentence Stems

Scaffolding is associated with Vygotsky's (1962) socio-cultural theory and is a process in which a more knowledgeable other creates conditions that make it possible for a learner to take part in a learning activity and expand what she currently knows and can do (Donato, 1994; Parsons, 2012). While "scaffold" is a term commonly used in education, researchers have lamented that the concept has become synonymous with "support" (van de Pol, Volman, & Beishuizen, 2010). Van de Pol and colleagues (2010) reviewed the literature on scaffolds and concluded that scaffolds must (1) be *responsive to* the students' current understanding and needs

and (2) be *gradually released* to allow (3) *transfer of responsibility* of doing the task to the student. Since then, a number of researchers have continued the work on scaffolds to examine the concept and provide guidance to teachers (Athanases & de Oliveira, 2014; de Oliveira & Athanases, 2017; Parsons, 2012).

Sentence stems can serve as instructional scaffolds (Walqui, 2006), as they model the expected language use for the task at hand. We define sentence stems as syntactical language supports. They include *sentence starters*, which begin sentences, such as “I predict,” as well as *sentence frames*, which provide additional support for more complex syntactical structures, such as, “I infer ____ because the text states ____.”

Sentence stems serve as entry points into discussions and writing and alleviate some of the cognitive load of oral and written expression, allowing the students to focus on the content rather than how to phrase their ideas. And, while we tend to think of sentence stems as supports for English Learners (ELs), all students can benefit from exposure to the language structures expected in school. Not all students will need sentence stems; students can decide whether they need the language support or can proceed without it. The goal is for students to assume the language into their own linguistic repertoire and no longer need the support of specific sentence stems. For example, a teacher may want students to produce a prediction after introducing prediction as a comprehension strategy. A kindergarten sentence stem may be simply, “I predict ...”. In this example, the *language function* is a prediction because that is what the teacher wants the students to produce. Soon, the students should use that phrase or similar phrases independently to communicate predictions, no longer needing the stem. For example, once a student produces a prediction without the stem, a teacher may simply prompt with “because...”

to elicit an explanation. Students' need for stems to serve specific language functions should change over time.

When Sentence Stems are not Helpful

Sentence stems may not be helpful in the following two instances. The first is when they are not gradually released and responsibility is not transferred to the student – when they do not serve as scaffolds. In this case, sentence stems have been found to limit ELs' access to and engagement with academic content (Athaneses & de Oliveira, 2014; Daniel, Martin-Beltrán, Peercy, & Silverman, 2015; Kibler, 2011). The second instance is when a teacher does not consider exactly what she wants students to accomplish with language, or the *language function* (Rodriguez-Mojica, 2014). When the expected language function does not match the response sentence stems prompt, stems can confuse rather than support students. An example from a classroom discussion in a fourth-grade class (Rodriguez-Mojica, 2014) illustrates this point.

Ms. Nielson (all names are pseudonyms) and her class are discussing *The Case of the Gasping Garbage* by Michelle Torrey. After a series of questions about noises coming from inside a mysterious garbage can, Ms. Nielson asks a student for a prediction and provides a sentence starter to assist the response. Ms. Nielson directs her questions to Olivia, an EL:

Ms. Nielson What's your prediction?
 I think _____
Olivia I think-
Ms. Nielson I think the garbage can's gasping because _____

By asking for a prediction, Ms. Nielson is asking Olivia to share what she thinks will happen next by using the sentence starter "I think ____". Ms. Nielson interrupts Olivia's response and extends the sentence starter. In extending the sentence starter, Ms. Nielson inadvertently changes the response prompted by the sentence starter from a *prediction* to an *explanation* about why the

garbage can is gasping. The sentence stem required an explanation while the teacher sought a prediction. This mismatch can be confusing to students.

At the end of the exchange, Olivia was unable to formulate a complete response. It is important to note that Olivia was not given the opportunity to produce a prediction without the sentence stem and was interrupted before she expanded her prediction. Could Olivia have communicated a thoughtful prediction without the stem? While there is no way of knowing, it is important to remember that stems can interfere with student talk when the stems do not support the language function requested. So how do we use sentence stems that support students?

Identifying Language Functions to Develop Language Objectives and Sentence Stems

Sentence stems can be developed thoughtfully in just a few simple steps. First, identify a standard and the lesson objective connected to that standard. For example, Common Core State Standard 4.1, Reading Literature states, “Refer to details and examples in a text when explaining what the text says explicitly and when drawing inferences from the text” (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2014). A content objective addressing this standard might be, “Students will refer to examples from the text when making inferences.”

Second, identify the language function, or exactly what you are asking students to do with language. What purpose is the language intended to serve? For the standard and content objective above, the purpose is that students *explain* the reasoning behind their inferences using examples from the text.

Third, consider what language students will need to meet that objective. This will be your language objective, and should “specifically outline the type of language that students will need to learn and use in order to accomplish the goals of the lesson” (Himmel, n.d.). For example,

“Students will be able to explain inferences they make using examples from the text, orally and in writing.”

Fourth, determine sentence stems that would help students achieve the content and related language objective. We describe this process in the section below. Language functions and objectives help clarify what is expected of students. Clearly linking the sentence stems to the language functions will help teachers ensure that the stems scaffold the language and content objectives.

Making Sentence Stems Helpful for Literacy and Language Development

Possible sentence stems become clear when a language objective is identified. A relatively simple stem for explaining inferences might be, “I think ____ because the text states ____.” A second option reverses the order in which the ideas are communicated, for example, “Since the text states _____, I think _____.” A stem that increases the language complexity further might be, “Since the author decided to _____, I infer _____.”

Applying the content objective, language objective and sentence stems to a discussion of chapter seven of Francisco Jiménez’s *The Circuit*, we might expect students to make comments such as, “*I think* Francisco was scared when he was asked to read aloud in class *because the text* said that his eyes teared up, so he probably wanted to cry.” Another comment that would meet the lesson and language objectives might be, “*Since the text said* that Mr. Lema had an indecisive tone when he asked Francisco to read, *I think* he may have been unsure of Francisco’s reading ability in English.” Over time, as students appropriate the language expected in the classroom, the teacher implements “responsive instruction” (Many, 2002, p. 399) by intentionally fading out sentence stems, and possibly introducing increasingly complex sentence stems to advance

students' linguistic flexibility. Students' language should become increasingly complex as the school year progresses (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000).

Would the following student comment meet the content and language objectives for explaining an inference? "Maybe ummm, the teacher didn't think Francisco could read? Because the book said that he asked Francisco to read and his voice was weird." We argue that it would. The student is using examples from the text to explain an inference. Using the sentence stem is not necessary to meet the lesson objectives and there are many different ways students can explain an inference. If the objective had been that the students use specific vocabulary to explain their inference, then the comment may have missed the mark. But, as it stands, the comment performs the language function of *explaining* the reasoning behind an inference using an example from the text.

In this example, a single content objective was deciphered from a complex standard. Then, by analyzing the language function, a language objective was developed that supported both content and language learning directly related to the content objective. Having a clear understanding of what students should be able to do in a lesson and how they are expected to communicate that knowledge enables the teacher to develop sentence stems that can serve as scaffolds and enable the teacher to determine whether or not the students met the content objectives. Table 1 shows common reading comprehension strategies, the different language functions they require, and sentence stems that support their production.

Insert Table 1

Sentence stems can be used across the content areas and can serve as an optional starting point for students who struggle getting started with writing. For example, a teacher may ask students to write an explanation of how they solved a math problem and provide an optional

sentence stem to support the explanation. In this way sentence stems help students to self-scaffold; students learn to use stems if and when needed. Teachers should note and track students' oral and written language to ensure that, over time, students rely less on sentence stems.

Conclusion

Knowing what language you want students to produce orally or in writing at the end of a lesson can help teachers consider the language they want students to use in a lesson. Sentence stems can provide entry points into classroom conversations, enabling students to further engage in learning and to engage in the social space of the classroom. Since learning is a social process (Vygotsky, 1962), student talk can enhance the development of reading strategies (Wilkinson & Silliman, 2000). Thinking further about the language function, or purpose, can clarify the language objective and help teachers develop sentence stems that support, rather than hinder, language development and content learning.

Take Action!

Sentence stems can be helpful when considering how to scaffold language. Here are steps to help you think about how to use sentence stems effectively:

1. Identify what the **standard** is really asking students to do.
2. Based on what you know about your students, develop a **content objective** that will be appropriate as they move toward mastery of the standard.
3. Consider the purpose or **language function**. What language will students need to produce or understand to achieve the content objective? This will be your **language objective**.
4. Use the language objective to guide you toward a sentence stem that will help students produce the expected language.

As this process becomes more familiar you may choose to have different language objectives and sentence stems for students at different English proficiencies.

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Table 1

Reading Comprehension Strategies and Sample Related Language Functions and Sentence Stems for Fourth Graders

Selected Reading Comprehension Strategies for Literature	Sample Language Function / Language Objective	Possible Related Sentence Stems for Beginning ELs	Possible Related Sentence Stems for Intermediate ELs	Possible Related Sentence Stems for Advanced ELs
Summarize a story or sequence of events (e.g., beginning-middle-end). Addresses CCSS ELA anchor standards 1, 2, 3, 9, 10	Description / <i>Describe</i> the sequence of events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First _____. Then _____. Ex: First <u>the boy go school</u> . Then <u>he no want read</u> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First, next, then, last Ex: First, <u>the boy went to school</u> , next <u>he read</u> , then <u>he went to the bathroom</u> . Last, <u>Mr. Lema help him read</u> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In the beginning _____. Then _____. Finally _____. Ex: In the beginning, <u>Francisco went to a new school</u> . Then, <u>Mr. Lema asked him to read but the book was too hard so he was embarrassed</u> . Finally, <u>Mr. Lema gave him extra help in reading</u> .
Infer , or draw conclusions. Addresses CCSS ELA anchor standards 1, 3, 4, 10	Explanation / <i>Explain</i> thinking, usually by citing textual evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I think _____. Ex: I think <u>boy want be good reading</u> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I infer ___ because _____. • When the text said, _____, it made me think _____. Ex: When the text said that Mr. <u>Lema</u> teach Francisco the trumpet, I think Francisco be happy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I infer that [character name] felt ... because the text says ... • When [character name] said X, it made me think ... Ex: I infer that <u>Francisco</u> felt <u>sad</u> to leave Mr. <u>Lema's school</u> because the text says, " <u>I could hardly wait to get home to tell Papá and Mamá the good news</u> ."
Analyze , or examine critically. Addresses CCSS ELA anchor standards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10	Identification & Explanation / <i>Identify</i> and <i>explain</i> symbols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this story, _____ represents _____ Ex: In this story, <u>trumpet</u> represent <u>opportunity</u> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • In this story, _____ might represent _____ because _____. Ex: In this story, <u>the trumpet</u> might represent <u>opportunities to learn new things</u> because <u>he can't learn the trumpet because the family move again</u> .	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • _____ symbolizes _____ since _____. • In this story, _____ might signify _____ because _____. Ex: <u>The trumpet</u> symbolizes <u>lost opportunities</u> since <u>Francisco was not able to get trumpet lessons because the family had to move again</u> .

Note: Stems and students' responses will vary by grade level. The underlined text identifies what the students might add to complete the sentence stem. Students' language tends to increase in both quantity and complexity as they become more proficient in English. In order to enable students at different levels of EL proficiencies to share their ideas in classroom conversations, non-standard English, as in the above examples, is accepted to demonstrate the importance of expression of ideas over accuracy of language.