

Complex Sentences: Independent Access for Your ELLs

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The Situation

Imagine you are pressed for time and looking for a place to park. Will you stop and decipher this confluence of information (See Figure 1) or ignore it and drive on in search of a simple “Visitor Parking” sign?

This visual represents the way compound and/or complex sentences appear to many English language learners (ELLs) and leads to the same “shut down” reaction most of us had. Many adolescent ELLs will accept this experience as one more example of their lack of ability with academic English. The following dialogue provides a window into the mind of a long-term ELL (LTELL) upon reading a passage containing compound and complex sentences:

Researcher: Tell me what went through your mind when you began to read this paragraph.

LTELL: I got most of the words but together it didn’t mean nothing. You know, it was just like a really long sentence with a bunch of commas and I didn’t think it would get any better so I skipped the rest and went to the next paragraph.

Researcher: How was that going to help?

LTELL: I don’t know, I guess I thought it might clear up what was going on in this paragraph.

Progress reports stated this student was “in danger of failing the class” and “unmotivated.”

Current Strategies

In many language development materials, students learn about various sentence structures by labeling sample sentences as simple, compound, or complex. In another exercise, students practice combining simple sentences. Many students, especially those literate in their first language or those in well-articulated English language development programs, benefit from these tasks. Unfortunately, these practices do not always transfer to improved academic literacy skills, especially for the growing number of adolescent LTELLs who have become “failure-accepting” (Zakrzewski, 2013).

Sentence Dissecting Strategy



Figure 1. Street signs (Rand, 2014)

Audience

The following strategy gives secondary ELLs the confidence to “read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently” (National Governors Association & Council of Chief State School Officers, 2010, p. 10); such texts are composed largely of sentences with multiple clauses. This technique can benefit ELLs who are progressing but specifically targets LTELLs mired at the intermediate stage of academic English language development.

Materials: Chart paper, markers (including red), multiple copies of a complex sentence containing key information on the topic being studied.

Strategy Implementation

Note: implement only after the teacher has demonstrated the procedure and students have had time for ample guided practice.

1. Divide students into groups spread apart from each other.
2. Give each group a piece of chart paper and markers (except red).
3. Give each group a copy in large print of the same syntactically complex sentence which contains key information on the topic being studied.
4. Specify the amount of time for groups to “dissect” the sentence. This means they write down as many simple sentences as possible based solely on the information in the given sentence. Each student in the group must rotate writing and initializing their own sentences, while the others are responsible for checking for valid responses (no fragments, correct spelling and grammar, and only information from the text).
5. At the end of the allotted time, groups post their charts of the dissected sentence around the room.
6. Each group is given a red marker, visits one of the other group’s charts, and circles any sentence they think is invalid. The entire class then discusses why the circled sentence is or is not a valid sentence.
7. The group with the most valid dissected sentences wins.

Extension Activity

After the students have become proficient with dissecting sentences, try this extension activity:

1. Follow Steps 1 through 4 from above, except be sure to create an even number of groups. Half of the groups receive one syntactically complex sentence (sentence A) and the other half receive a different syntactically complex sentence (sentence B), both containing key information on the topic being studied.
2. At the end of the allotted time, the groups that have dissected sentence A meet briefly with a group that has dissected sentence B to exchange their charts of simple sentences *without showing the original syntactically complex sentence*.
3. The groups separate again and use the other group’s dissected sentences to re-create the original syntactically complex sentence on chart paper.

4. Each group who has reconstructed sentence A presents their product to the class. Then their responses are compared to the original sentence. There may be multiple ways to reconstruct the sentence, and this can promote class discussion. All grammatically accurate variations that include all the original information are acceptable. Finally, the process is repeated with groups who reconstructed sentence B.

Benefits

- Targets close reading of key information.
- Can be used across content areas.
- Promotes student talk using academic vocabulary and structures.
- Improves student confidence in their independent ability to unpack and understand sentences with multiple clauses.
- Is especially effective in promoting the academic progress of LTELLs.

Student Sample of Sentence Dissecting

Sentence to Dissect: In an event leading to the outbreak of World War I, Archduke Franz Ferdinand, nephew of Emperor Franz Josef and heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary, was assassinated with his wife by a Serbian nationalist in Sarajevo, the capital of Bosnia, in 1914.

One Group's Valid Responses

1. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was the heir to the throne of Austria-Hungary.
2. Archduke Franz Ferdinand was assassinated.
3. Archduke Franz Ferdinand's wife was assassinated.
4. They were killed by a Serbian nationalist.
5. They were killed in Sarajevo.
6. Sarajevo is the capital of Bosnia.
7. They were killed in 1914.
8. This assassination led to the outbreak of World War I.
9. Archduke Ferdinand's first name was Franz.
10. Emperor Josef's first name was Franz.
11. Austria-Hungary had a throne.
12. Franz Ferdinand was an archduke.
13. Franz Josef was an emperor.
14. Emperor Franz Josef was Archduke Franz Ferdinand's uncle.

Summary of Results

I implemented this sentence dissecting strategy with a sample of 267 high school LTELLs over a 4-month period. The quantitative data showed significant improvement in comprehending a nonfiction academic passage with sentences containing multiple clauses. It also confirmed that “by taking the time to zoom in on an essential passage of a larger work, students gain insight into the entire text” (Fisher & Frey, 2015, p. 35).

Yet the most powerful results were the students' written responses to a prompt asking them to describe if and how dissecting sentences helped them with their English. The most poignant statements were the following:

Student A: Yeah, you do better if you actually read it.

Student B: I don't give up so much when I see a long sentence. I know how to tear it apart to make some kind of sense.

References

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