

Thinking about how language works

Thinking about how language works

The purpose of this resource is to provide teachers with additional information about language that will help them to analyse student responses to ARB items. It will be of use when analysing responses from students with English as a first or subsequent language.

Part one: Sentence structure

1. The nature of the information in a sentence
2. The focus of information in a sentence
3. The way language condenses and generalises information

Part two: Connecting and tracking ideas in text

1. The words used to link ideas within a sentence
 2. The words used to link ideas within and between sentences
-

Part one: Sentence structure

1. The nature of the information in a sentence

(a) Types of sentences

A sentence can be an independent clause, or can be formed by combining clauses, usually with the addition of a linking word or phrase. A clause is a grammatical structure in which several components of meaning are brought together to form a message. The verb is the essential element of any clause.

Simple sentences contain a single clause:

- We knew each other well.
- Have you got the time?
- They drove to Hastings.
- I spoke to her mother.

However, many sentences have more than one clause, so are not simple sentences:

- Sam found his teddy bear
- and climbed back into bed
- where he pulled the blankets up around his ears,
- closed his heavy eyes,
- and fell asleep.

Clauses can be combined in different ways to make different kinds of sentences: compound, complex, and compound-complex.

Compound Sentences

Compound sentences consist of two or more independent clauses i.e., each is capable of standing on its own and conveying a message. Each has equal status and provides equally important information. These clauses may be linked with connective words or phrases such as: "and", "but", "or", "yet", "so", "and so", "and then", "either...or",

"neither...nor", "not only...but also".

She ran to school and threw her bag down in the corridor.	Independent clause Independent clause
---	--

* "she" has been omitted due to ellipsis. See ellipsis.

Karl went on camp. but the others stayed at home.	Independent clause Independent clause
---	--

You could ring her at the office. or try her on her cell phone.	Independent clause Independent clause
--	--

Complex sentences

In complex sentences, there is a clause expressing the main message and another clause (or clauses) which elaborates on the main message in some way. While the main message is independent, the other clause cannot stand on its own: it is dependent.

They smiled as if they meant it.	Independent clause Dependent clause
-------------------------------------	--

The plant died because it wasn't watered.	Independent clause Dependent clause
---	--

If the container has a hole in it the raspberries will leak all over the bench.	Dependent clause Independent clause
--	--

Compound-complex sentences

Compound-complex sentences contain a combination of independent and dependent clauses.

The girls walked out of the shop and laughed loudly* as they headed for the car.	Independent clause Independent clause Dependent clause
--	---

* "they" has been omitted due to ellipsis. See ellipsis.

An elderly man was admitted to hospital after suffering a heart attack and falling down his stairs.	Independent clause Dependent clause Dependent clause
---	--

Compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to know the meaning of the conjunctions and other linking words if they are to appreciate the relationship between the ideas.

Research indicates that many students don't fully recognize these relationships and therefore have difficulty in following the meaning of a text. It has been found for example the conditional "if" is understood by only fifty percent of children at age six; that the meaning of "unless" is often not understood well until after the age of nine; and it is generally not until around twelve years of age that many children comprehend the concessive use of "although".
(Deriwianka, 2005, p.95)

(b) Adding information to a sentence

Embedded clauses, e.g., adjectival clauses. Adjectival clauses provide extra information about the noun.

noun	extra information	
Rodents	introduced by settlers	killed the native birds.

The following is an alternative to using an adjectival clause:

Settlers introduced rodents.
These rodents killed the native birds.

noun	extra information	
Native trees	that block people's views or get in the way of property development	are sometimes poisoned.

The following is an alternative to using an adjectival clause:

- Native trees can block people's views.
- Native trees can get in the way of property development.
- Trees like these are sometimes poisoned.

These types of constructions are often found in simplified text, but students need to gradually develop understanding of how to comprehend and produce sentences with embedded clauses.

Adjectival clauses as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to be able to identify what the adjectival clause is referring to. To do this, they need know:

- How pronouns function (adjectival clauses often begin with a pronoun, e.g., "who", "whose", "which", "that", "where"). These identify what is being referred to.

- Which pronoun is omitted, e.g., "the coat [that] I'm wearing".
- That words other than pronouns are sometimes used, e.g., "introduced by settlers".
- How commas function e.g., in "New Zealanders who don't eat fruit and vegetables will have poor health", the adjectival clause defines which particular New Zealanders are being referred to. But in "New Zealanders, who don't eat fruit and vegetables, will have poor health", the adjectival clause is referring to New Zealanders in general.

Modals

Modal verbs convey a range of judgments about the likelihood of events. There are nine modal verbs: "can", "could", "may", "might", "will", "would", "shall", "should", and "must".

- She might be there.
- You could get there by lunchtime if you hurry.
- You'll hit the roof.
- That must have hurt.

To show a high degree of certainty about the likelihood of events, modal verbs of high modality are used. If we feel tentative about something, we use low modality.

High modality	Medium modality	Low modality
must ought to has to	will should can need to	may might could would

(Derewianka, 2005, p.66)

As well as modal verbs, modality can be expressed through choices of nouns, adjectives, and adverbs.

- Modal nouns: "possibility", "probability", "obligation", "necessity", "requirement"
- Modal adjectives: "possible", "probable", "obligatory", "necessary", "required", "determined"
- Modal adverbs: "possibly", "probably", "perhaps", "maybe", "sometimes", "always", "definitely", "never", "certainly"

Modals as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students will need to understand modals in order to use the appropriate degree of probability or obligation, especially when using text types that involve making judgments, e.g., narrative texts, and persuading people, e.g., arguments, advertisements.

2. The focus of information in a sentence

(a) Grammatical theme (within a sentence)

The sentence theme, which is the information before the main verb in a sentence, usually tells us what the sentence is about, or what the writer wants the reader to focus on. It is a signpost saying to the reader, "This is what I want you to pay attention to". Themes can be:

- The subject, e.g., Mat usually does Rob's car on a Saturday afternoon...
- Conjunctions, e.g., Until the two years is up....
- Elements of an interpersonal nature, e.g., Amazingly, the back wall of the garage is OK....

- Experiential elements such as prepositions, e.g., By the end, he's sweating and puffing....
- Adverbial elements of circumstance, e.g., By 1840, many missionaries had settled....

Theme (within a sentence) as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to understand that a variety of linguistic elements can serve as sentence themes. They also need to understand that a writer will move an element to the front of the clause to give it emphasis, e.g., "The waters around New Zealand are abundant in delicious seafood such as squid. Although not easy to prepare, squid are..."

(b) New and "given" information

There are usually two types of information in a sentence. One part tells us something new. The other part tells us something that we are aware of already (either from a previous sentence or from our general knowledge), in other words, its information is given.

- A: Where did you put your bike?
- B: I left it / at my friend's house.

The first part of B's sentence is "given" (by A); the second part is new. "Given" information tells us what a sentence is about; it usually provides the sentence theme which appears first in a sentence. New information, however, provides the point where we expect people to pay extra attention.

New and given information as sources of difficulty in comprehension

Students will need to understand that, although given information is usually in the theme position, new information is sometimes the theme.

- Electricity makes light by....
- Candles make light by....
- The sun makes light by....

When this is the case, as it sometimes is in texts written for young children, tracking the development of the text is made more difficult. Difficulty in comprehension can also occur when texts are written in ways that inadvertently draw the reader's attention away from new information. In the following example, the theme contains new information, vital to the completion of a task, but the word 'After' draws attention away from the new information.

- After reading the text,
- complete the chart.

Instead, the instruction should read:

- Read the text,
- then complete the chart.

3. The way language condenses and generalises text

(a) Nominalisation

Nominalisation changes verbs and other words into nouns. It makes a text more compact and "written", e.g., instead of saying "When your body reaches an abnormally low temperature, you will need to be taken to hospital", we can use nominalisations: "Hypothermia requires hospitalisation." Instead of saying "How

farmers protected their livestock from the storm was the topic of the article", we can use nominalisation: "Livestock protection was the topic of the article." Changing a verb into a noun requires adding a suffix to the verb:

Verb	+ suffix	Noun (these examples are all abstract)
break	-age	breakage
explore	-	exploration
supervise	(a)tion	supervision
farm	-ion	farming
star	-ing	stardom
refuse	-dom	refusal
amaze	-al	amazement
	-ment	

Nominalisation as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Because nominalisation packs more information into the theme position, students need to process more ideas per clause. It also often makes concrete processes more abstract, or generalises experience, e.g., "Water and wind erode rock" is nominalised as "Erosion occurs when rocks are ground down by water and wind." Students will need to learn how to unpack this kind of condensed language.

(b) Ellipsis

Ellipsis occurs when part of a sentence is left out because it would otherwise repeat what is said elsewhere. The understanding and use of ellipsis increases with maturity and language use. In, "I'd like to eat that biscuit, but I won't", the second clause is elliptical, with "eat that biscuit" being omitted. In "Read the first paragraph, then the questions", the second clause is elliptical, with "read" being omitted. People usually find the full form of such sentences unnecessary or irritating, and use ellipsis to achieve a more acceptable economy of statement.

Ellipsis is particularly common in conversation:

- A: Where are you going?
 - B: To the shops. (i.e., I'm going to the shops)
 - A: Why? (i.e., Why are you going to the shops?)
 - B: To get some bread. (i.e., I'm going to the shops to get some bread)
 - A: Is John going with you? (i.e., Is John going with you to the shops to get some bread?)
- (Crystal, 2003, p.228)

Ellipsis as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students will need to know that they will be able to find out what has been omitted by referring back to the words in the first clause. However, successfully doing this is dependent on the student having at least an intuitive understanding of English grammar.

Part two: Connecting and tracking ideas in text

1. The words used to link ideas within a sentence

Conjunctions

Conjunctions are the words used to link clauses, in this case, independent and

dependent. Conjunctions only operate within a sentence, not between sentences and other longer pieces of text. Conjunctions are placed at the beginning of a clause.

Different types of conjunctions are used to express different types of relationships between ideas.

Conjunctions (not a complete list)		Example
Place	Where, wherever	Wherever I go, I bump into my relatives. She left it where she found it.
Time	After, before, when, just as, as, while	He realized he had lost it when he arrived home. Before I decide, I want to talk to you.
Manner	The way that, as, by	The way that she spends money, you'd think she'd won lotto. By working overtime, she managed to finish the project.
Cause	As, because, since	I came because he saw me. Since you obviously aren't interested, let's leave it.
Condition	As long as, if, unless	If she wants to come, she'll have to hurry up. Never sit on an ants' nest unless you're wearing cast-iron pants.
Concession	Although, while, even though	Even though they weren't hungry, they ate a full meal. While recognizing his skill, I don't think he's right for the job.

(Derewianka, 2005, p.96)

Conjunctions as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Sometimes the conjunction is omitted, and the relationship between the clauses has to be inferred, e.g., Andrew felt tremendous relief. He had got the marks he needed for uni. He slumped down into the chair, and breathed a long, slow sigh. In this case, students will have to infer the relationship i.e., Andrew felt tremendous relief because he had got the marks he needed for uni, so he slumped down into the chair, and breathed a long, slow sigh. Also see "Compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences as a source of difficulty in comprehension".

2. The words used to link ideas within and between sentences

(a) Cohesion

Cohesive devices (grammatical and lexical) make links between various items in the text so that the reader is able to track how meaning is being developed.

Referring words (grammatical cohesion)

Referring words set up links by referring to something that has already been mentioned. The most commonly used referring words are pronouns. Others are the definite article (the), pointing words, and words that replace verb and noun groups and even whole clauses

Pronouns

In the following example the pronouns keep referring back to the main characters:

- Hansel and Gretel lived in a small thatched cottage at the edge of a large forest. Their father had recently married a greedy and selfish woman...they...them....

In the following example, the pronoun makes a reference link to Hansel's pockets:

- Hansel stuffed his pockets with as much bread as they would hold.

The definite article (the)

In the following example, "the" is used to refer back to something which has been introduced previously and which we can now take for granted:

- A small house at the edge of the forest... the house....

Pointing words ("this", "that", "these", "those")

In the following example "This" refers back to the verb group "Yoghurt can be strained through muslin."

- Yoghurt can be strained through muslin. This produces thicker yoghurt and a by-product called whey.

In the following example "These" refers back to the noun group "three stigmas".

- The saffron crocus produces three stigmas. These are used in cooking.

In the following example "These" refers to the noun group "hard outer shells".

- The nuts are encased in hard outer shells. These are inedible.

Words which replace verb and noun groups and even whole clauses:

In the following example "did" refers to the verb group "to stick a chicken bone through the bars of the cage."

- Gretel told Hansel to stick a chicken bone through the bars of the cage. And he did.

In the following example "one" replaces the noun group "pieces of bread."

- I've got two pieces of bread. Do you want one?

In the following example "so" replaces the clause, "She was sick of feeding them."

- She was sick of feeding them. They heard her say so.

Referring words as a source of difficulty in comprehension

In order to appreciate how ideas are linked between sentences, students will need to:

- Know which words are being referred to, i.e., a verb group, a noun group, or a whole clause, e.g.,
- Gretel told Hansel to stick a chicken bone through the bars of the cage. And he did. (verb group)
- I've got two pieces of bread. Do you want one? (noun group)
- She was sick of feeding them. They heard her say so. (whole clause)
- Know that pronouns and definite articles always refer to the noun group, and that pointing words usually do but can also refer to the verb group.
- Know which word the pointing word refers to when there are two possible plural referents, e.g., "nuts" and "hard outer shells". The nuts are encased in hard outer shells. These are inedible.

Text connectives (grammatical cohesion)

Text connectives provide signposts indicating how the text is developing. Unlike conjunctions, they can be placed at various positions in the sentence. Also unlike conjunctions, which form links within a sentence, they form links between sentences and other longer pieces of text.

(Not a complete list)

Clarifying	Showing cause/result	Indicating time
in other words for example that is namely in fact	so therefore consequently due to..., owing to because of this	then next finally meanwhile previously
Sequencing ideas	Adding information	Condition/concession
firstly, first, second, third... at this point to conclude given the above points to get back to the point	too in addition also again similarly	in that case however despite this even so if not

(Derewianka, 2005, p.110-111)

Text connectives as a source of difficulty in comprehension

In order to appreciate how ideas are linked between sentences, students will need to:

- Know the meaning of the connective.
- Know that while connectives and conjunctions often form very similar functions, unlike conjunctions, connectives operate across sentences, and can be placed at various positions

within the sentence.

Word associations (lexical cohesion)

Like cohesive devices, word associations form links within texts.

Repetition

This is the most simple kind of lexical cohesion. Text participants can easily be tracked because they are referred to using the same words throughout the text. Synonyms; antonyms; hyponyms; hypernyms. Using synonyms, antonyms, hyponyms, and hypernyms forms less direct links in the text than repetition, but adds interest and subtlety to the text. In the sentence "My dad bought a new car",

- "bought" can be replaced by "purchased" (synonym—similar meaning)
- "bought" can be replaced by "sold" (antonym—contrasting meaning)
- "car" can be replaced by "Ford" (hyponym—more specific meaning)
- "car" can be replaced by "vehicle" (hypernym—more general meaning)

Collocation

Collocation is a term used for words which typically occur together, making a text predictable. In fairy tales the words "Once upon a time", "wicked stepmother", "wicked witch", and "lived happily ever after" collocate. Collocations cannot be predicted from a knowledge of the world. For example, "heavy" collocates with "loss", "wear", "traffic", "burden", "defeat" etc. but not with "war", "win", "stress", or "mistake". All that is required for a sequence of words to be described as a collocation, is for one word to "call up" another, to some extent, in the mind of a native or fluent speaker of English.

Collocational norms are intentionally broken when the writer wants to be inventive. Poets in particular, are likely to break collocational conventions, sometimes to a point where coherent meaning is difficult to find. The following gives examples where a poet has deliberately broken collocational norms. The examples range in difficulty from reasonably easy to very difficult to understand.

Examples where collocational norms are broken (Metaphors taken from Dylan Thomas's After the Funeral).

Some degree of expectancy	Unusual	Well beyond expectations. We are forced to search for meanings
Humble hands Mourning house	Skyward statue	Crooked year threadbare whisper damp word round pain

(Crystal, 2003, p.163)

Word associations as a source of difficulty in comprehension:

- Students will need to work particularly hard to comprehend when words do not seem to collocate.
- Word associations add interest and subtlety to the text, but can make tracking meaning difficult.

(b) Theme (between sentences)

The clause theme tells us what the clause is about. It is a signpost saying to the reader: "this is what I want you to pay attention to." Because the theme appears first

in a clause, and so first in a sentence, it focuses our attention on how the topic is being developed. The theme helps to make the text coherent and enables the reader to predict how the text is unfolding. The following is an example of student writing from School Journal Part 4, Number 3, 2005 p.30, To Spray or Not to Spray? The highlighted sections show the themes.

Our school was in the spray zone, and the first spray day was pretty scary. Our principal told us that if they saw the spray plane, there would be a special bell. When we heard the bell, we were to go inside, or if we heard a plane, we were to tell everybody and get inside quickly and shut the windows and doors. The big kids were to help the little kids.

We didn't hear the big plane until it flew over. Then the bell went. The plane flew over heaps. It was really low and really loud. The smell was pretty yuck - sort of like cat wee. The plane sprayed at playtime. Some of us were playing in the bush away from the classrooms, so it was pretty scary. We had to go running inside.

That was the only spray day like that. The four others so far have been different. After that, MAF stopped spraying between 8 and 9 a.m. so that we could get to school. They also stopped spraying between 12.15 and 1.00 p.m. and between 3 and 4 p.m., which was good.

Theme (between sentences) as a source of difficulty in comprehension

Students need to understand how to track the development of the text through identifying themes. To do this, they will need to know that:

- Paragraphs begin with a general thematic point, with later sentences elaborating from it.
- New information at the end of a sentence is often picked up as the theme for the next. (The above example is typical of children's writing in that the sentences tend to jump from one to the next without building on previous information).
- The relationship between sentences is made explicit through the use of connectives e.g., "Then" and "After that".
- Various items in the text are linked by referring words. (The above example is again typical of children's writing in that it is not entirely clear what "That" and "After that" in paragraph three are referring to.)

References

Crystal, D. (2003). The Cambridge encyclopedia of the English language. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Derewianka, B. (2005). A grammar companion. Newtown, NSW: PETA.

Published on <https://newzealandcurriculum.tahurangi.education.govt.nz>