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Bert is an average fourth grade student in most ways but reads slowly and with low comprehension. Although he tries, he has considerable difficulty understanding and remembering information from longer sentences and from paragraphs. His ability to store information breaks down beyond the level of short simple sentences. Bert is one of many students experiencing this difficulty in the middle grades. What is needed are activities that encourage an active involvement of students while reading.

The primary objective of this article is to describe an instructional technique called sentence building as a means of developing the ability to read more complex sentences with understanding and to write more complex sentences. The process may be viewed as a preliminary step to reading and writing paragraphs. A secondary objective is to develop an awareness that instruction in reading and composition should be based on oral language skills and may be taught concomitantly.

The relationship between reading and writing behavior has been extensively described in the literature (Gutknecht and Keenan 1978; Sticht *et al*, 1974). Some researchers have reported that certain students have vocabulary knowledge but do not have the ability to comprehend sentences, especially those with complex syntactic structures (Cromer, 1970) while others deny that such conditions truly exist. In cases such as Bert's students can speak and understand complex sentences. Therefore, the problem occurs in storing meaning from written messages with complex construction or unfamiliar construction. The teacher's task is to develop a sequence of instructional activities based on oral abilities to improve the processing skills of memory storage and retrieval.

How can Bert and others who share his problem best be taught to comprehend and compose longer, more complex sentences? He is able to identify the agent and action elements in simple sentences but he has difficulty when he encounters connectives and signal words. For example, Bert can read and understand sentences such as these:

(1) Ellen became interested in running.
(2) She began running in school.
(3) She attended school with her husband.
(4) Her husband was a member of the track team.

However, he cannot comprehend this sentence:

(5) Ellen first became interested in running while attending school with her husband who was a member of the track team.

The concept of sentence building focuses on the students' oral language ability as a key to unlocking literacy. The initial step is to demonstrate the relationship between complex and imbedded simple sentences. For instance, the student might hear sentence (5) and be asked to relate what he/she "knows" from the sentence. We could expect that some form of the information found in sentences one through four would be produced. Working from an oral presentation of complex sentences, students will generate the embedded sentences and will experience the storage and retrieval challenges of longer sentences.

Special emphasis should be placed on the language cue system reflected in signal words (then, next, while, etc.) and connectives (and, but, nor, etc.). The function of logical connectives frequently poses difficulties for even the more proficient readers (Robertson, 1968). Signal words and connectives represent a prompting system in language which is important when reading sentence construction of compound, complex and compound-complex nature. It is not essential that students study such a classification scheme before working on the process of sentence building.

After discussing the meaning of sentences presented orally, students are ready to build sentences in their own writing. This may be accomplished individually or in small groups. Sentence building requires students to generate possible sentence extenders (phrases or clauses) to basic core elements. The teacher distributes 10 to 15 core sentences and uses the first to demonstrate what will be expected from the student. Each core element should be expanded by the addition of two phrases or clauses. The better extenders are those which alter the expected meaning. For example, consider the following core sentence.

The wheels continued to spin . . .

The students are challenged to predict what might be added through a series of questions, each drawing on the oral language knowledge of students. Why were they spinning? What image is evoked by this sentence? Do you feel that the meaning of this sentence is now vague or precise?

The wheels continued to spin as the men worked feverishly . . .

What is so urgent? An accident? What would students predict for the next phrase?

The wheels continued to spin as the men worked feverishly to get the racer ready . . .

Now the answer to what is so urgent is apparent. However, a "racer with spinning wheels" is still puzzling. What are they getting ready for? The completed sentence provides the explanation.

The wheels continued to spin as the men worked feverishly to get the racer ready for the soap box derby finals.

The string of added units now represents quite a different image from those most students would generate by looking at the core unit. The aspect of surprise challenges and motivates students. However, other examples should be used to demonstrate that many complex sentences *can be* predicted, a fact used as an aid to comprehension. It must also be remembered that this exercise uses a linear model of sentence development and other methods may also be used by adding words, phrases or clauses throughout the core structure.

Following the work with one or two samples, students pursue sentence building individually or in small groups. For added motivation, a game simulation may be developed by having groups compete in predicting the complete sentence after two additions have been made to the core.

A third step in the instructional sequence addresses the technique of combining simple sentences (Stoodt, 1970). Here, the use of signal words, connectives and conjunctives becomes more important. The first two sentences (1 and 2) might be combined by using signal words —

When Ellen became interested in running, she *then* began to run *while* in school.

or

Only if Ellen became interested in running would she *then* begin to run.

The students might generate a large number of combined sentences using a list of directional, time, conditional and logical signal words supplied by the teacher.

Bert may now be capable of handling complex sentences because he can identify smaller meaningful units in complex structures. The instructional process of sentence building is no panacea for comprehension problems but it will provide an instructional program that begins at the oral language level, usually a student's strength, and builds systematically. Sentence building actively engages the student in a positive approach to comprehension and composition instruction.

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