
Scaffolding Student Interpretation of Complex Text

Dr. Timothy Shanahan, retrieved from shanahanonliteracy.com, June 17, 2015



I'm a fourth grade special education teacher in NYC. Our school has acquired a new reading/writing program and has discontinued a grammar program we've used for several years. In the new program the grammar component is virtually non-existent. On a gut level I feel that students are struggling with test questions, even math ones, due to lack of practice/knowledge of grammar. They simply don't understand what the questions are asking. I was wondering what your opinion/research shows as far as the relationship between grammar instruction and reading comprehension. Do you have any preference as far as grammar programs/teaching methodologies go?

Great question. There is a lot of evidence showing the importance of grammar in reading comprehension. Studies over the years have shown a clear relationship between syntactic or grammatical sophistication and reading comprehension; that is, as students learn to employ more complex sentences in their oral and written language, their ability to make sense of what they read increases, too.

Also, readability measures are able to predict how well students will comprehend particular texts on the basis of only two variables: vocabulary sophistication and grammatical complexity. At least for the Lexile formula, grammar is much more heavily weighted than vocabulary. This means that the text factor that is most predictive of comprehensibility is how complicated the sentences are grammatically.

There are also experimental studies that show that there are ways that grammar can be taught formally that improve reading comprehension. For example, teaching students to combine sentences seems to improve how well students understand what they read. Clearly, it makes sense to guide students to understand how sentences work.

Studies of metacognition and theories of reading comprehension suggest the importance of students having a language of grammar (knowing the difference between a noun and a verb for

example), and common sense would suggest that it makes sense to help students to unpack sentences that confuse them.

That doesn't necessarily justify a lot of grammar worksheets and the like, but it does argue for teaching students about sentences as they meet them. For example, look at the following sentence from Nikki Giovanni:

"The women of Montgomery, both young and older, would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch—a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive."

It is a long sentence (44 words), and it has lots of embedding (witness the author's use of 2 commas and an em-dash). I surmise many students would struggle to make sense of this sentence primarily because of the complex grammar. How would you deal with this?

First, I would have the students read this page from Giovanni's *Rosa* and one of the questions I would ask would be, "What did the women of Montgomery do?" Perhaps I'd find that the students weren't as perplexed as I assumed in which case I'd move on. But let's imagine that they couldn't answer my question... then I'd show them how to break this sentence down.

For example, I would point out that the phrase between the commas, "both young and older," adds an idea but that I want to set it aside for now. That would simplify the sentence a bit:

"The women of Montgomery would come in with their fancy holiday dresses that needed adjustments or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch – a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive."

Even with such a simple change, I bet more kids would understand it better, but maybe not. Let's go further:

As with the commas, the word "that" (which shows up twice here) signals the inclusion of a separate or additional idea, and as a reader that is another point of attack that I can use in trying to interpret this sentence. And the word "or" is another good place to separate these additional ideas.

Let's slice the sentence at the first "that" and the first "or:"

"The women of Montgomery would come in with their fancy holiday dresses"

“that needed adjustments”

"or their Sunday suits and blouses that needed just a touch—a flower or some velvet trimming or something to make the ladies look festive."

Obviously, we could keep breaking this one down, but again, many kids would get it at this point: The women were bringing in their fancy dresses... Which women? The young and the old. Which fancy dresses? The ones that needed adjustments. What other kinds of outfits did they bring in? Sunday suits and blouses. Which suits and blouses? The ones that needed just a touch—something that would make them look festive.

The point of this kind of exchange would not be to teach grammar per se, but to help students to untangle complex grammar so that they could independently make sense of what they read. Frankly, few of our children know what to do when they confront this kind of text complexity. Kids who know something about sentences and parts of speech will be at an advantage, but they still will not necessarily be able to interpret a sentence from that alone. This kind of scaffolded analysis is aimed at both untangling the meaning of this sentence and in giving students some tools for unpacking such sentences when they are on their own.

Your reading program should provide some instruction in grammar, and it should provide you with some support in providing students with instruction in parts of speech, sentence combining, and/or the kinds of scaffolding demonstrated here. It is pure romanticism that assumes that children will just figure this kind of thing out without any explicit instruction (and it is even more foolish to assume that English language learners will intuit these things without more direct support.

