

A Warm wELLcome for Language Learners

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About This Column

What can we do to help our students better understand the written language they encounter in texts used at school? According to linguist Stephen Pinker (2015), it's our hunger for coherence that drives the process of understanding language. Get your appetites ready! This column presents three savory scaffolds that you can use to support ELLs in finding the links and seeing the connections between the phrases, sentences, and paragraphs of the texts they read.

Scaffolds to Support Reading Comprehension for English Language Learners

Every day at school, students engage in the highly complex task of making meaning from written language. For English Language Learners (ELLs), any number of challenges can encumber text comprehension. As educators, specialists, or coaches, we play an integral role in teaching students to use scaffolds that will support their comprehension of written language.

Cohesion Cuisine

Cohesion refers to the quality of being closely connected. When this concept is applied to written language, cohesion is what allows readers to be able to predict what will happen next in the passage they are reading. An essay that lacks cohesion might contain several interesting facts or ideas, but each appears as an island or a disconnected unit. Try it out. See if you can figure out the idea that connects the following five sentences:

1. It takes practice but is fun to learn.
2. Stand tall and hold each handle.
3. Put your feet in front and try to land softly.
4. Carry it with you.
5. Enjoy it anywhere you go.

Each sentence is crisp, and the vocabulary is basic. These two factors often afford an advantage to ELLs who are beginning to read texts in English. However, even skilled readers would struggle to ascertain the main message of this brief, five-sentence passage. The lack of coherence serves as an impediment to comprehension. Perhaps it would help if the writer were to telegraph the point—learning how to jump rope—at the outset. Luckily, there are several conventions that skilled writers use to establish cohesion within the passages they publish. We can make these markers explicit and introduce related scaffolds that aid comprehension and satisfy our students' appetites for cohesion.

Appetizing Appositives

Appositives serve as one mechanism that writers use to help readers avoid confusion. An appositive is a noun, noun phrase, or noun clause that renames the noun and provides more information about it. Set off by commas and immediately following a noun, an example of an appositive is contained in the sentence, “Mr. Langston, P. E. teacher, wears athletic shoes every day.” The explanation of Mr. Langston’s role is set aside by the commas and serves to aid the reader in making sense of the named choice in footwear. A second example features em dashes: “Gary can fix your car—if that is what you want.” The phrasing “if that is what you want” amplifies or builds upon the preceding statement, “Gary can fix your car.”

Content creator, Kerry Sensei (2020), of the *Get Grammarous* series, offers a 4-minute and 27 second video that can be used to introduce students to the concept of appositives. The video is freely available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nNIQ3qt-76I>. The information in this video can be complemented by the modeling and practice you provide while using passages from content area curriculum. This explicit instruction, then, will help ELLs learn to navigate the punctuation and decipher the meaning of the essential and non-essential appositives that they encounter in the passages they read at school or at home. Indeed, instruction on how to recognize and reckon with appositives is one way to help readers satisfy their need for cohesion. An added benefit of this instructional focus is that ELLs will be poised to use appositives in their own writing.

Scaffold One

Throughout the course of their learning, one scaffold is to highlight the appeal of appositives. Teach students to use digital or actual highlighters to capture the information contained within commas or set aside by em dashes. The

act of embellishing the text through a highlighting annotation slows readers down and creates space for them to ponder and interpret the information given by an appositive word or phrase.

Saporous Subjects

Not every writer is careful with nouns. Some writers will make odd selections with the words they use to refer to subjects they previously introduced. These strange selections happen when the writer views varied word choice as the way to hold readers’ interest. An unintended consequence, however, is that swapping out subjects can stymie an ELL’s reading comprehension.

Let’s consider a recent *Newsweek* article titled “‘Splooting’ Squirrels Seen Around San Francisco During California Heat Wave” (Thompson, 2022). In this article, Jess Thompson used the word “squirrels” six times within the first four sentences. Some writers might worry that readers would become fatigued by repetitive wording. These writers might replace the word “squirrel” with a general phrase like “small mammal”; or they might use a more esoteric reference like “member of the Sciuridae family.” Perhaps they would even use a plausible, but not immediately transparent, phrase like “bushy-tailed rodent” or “nimble nut collector” to stand in place of a repeated use of “squirrel.” Thus, the sentence, “On hot days, squirrels keep cool by stretching out on cool surfaces to reduce body heat,” would be written as “On hot days, nimble nut collectors keep cool by stretching out on cool surfaces to reduce body heat.” The noun replacement for squirrel (nimble nut collector) could certainly lead astray an otherwise apt meaning maker. As teachers, coaches, and specialists, we bear the onus of making subject signals clearer to our ELLs.

Scaffold Two

The knowledge that nouns can go awry gives us an additional scaffold that we can use to help us support our ELLs as they engage in the meaning-making process of reading. Use passages from news articles (including Newsela), and have students practice underlining the subjects of sentences so they can make guided comparisons between the word choices that appear at the beginning, middle, and end of an article. As students are guided to notice the nuance of noun choices, they can continue to use underlining to savor the subjects and extract meaning from the texts they read.

Piquant Pronouns

Reading is an ongoing process in which readers who are actively engaged in meaning making rely on cohesive markers to establish text connections (Septiyana & Aminatun, 2021). One way to establish cohesion (beyond the attention to appositives or the noticing of noun phrases) is to resolve the author's use of anaphora. Anaphora is when one word or group of words replaces another word used earlier within a sentence. For example, in the sentence, "Nick spits when he talks," the pronoun "he" refers the reader back to the agent, "Nick." The pronoun referent carries meaning for most readers of stories or essays written in English. However, ELLs often benefit from direct instruction in anaphoric resolution as they learn how to make meaning from an author's use of pronoun referents (Nowbakht, 2019). Ultimately, resolving pronoun referents while reading maintains textual coherence (Hirst & Brill, 1980), while difficulty with identifying pronoun referents is linked to poor comprehension (Yuill & Oakhill, 1988).

Figure 1. Scaffolds for Accentuating Appositives, Noting Noun Referents, and Resolving Anaphora

Jada likes to jump rope. At recess, she does double Dutch with her besties – Maya and Jen. The trio doesn't like kickball, but they say, "Jumping rope is the best way to have fun together!"

Scaffold Three

To support students in constructing meaning by forming cohesive inferences, a strategy called anaphoric cueing has been shown to increase passage comprehension for students with significant reading comprehension difficulties, including ELLs (O'Connor & Klein, 2004; Zein et al., 2014). Anaphoric cueing entails signaling the presence of a pronoun to the reader by underlining and guiding the student to draw an arrow back to specify its antecedent. When anaphoric cueing is combined with explicit instruction, gains in accuracy with responding to wh-questions as well as statistically significant gains on standardized measures of reading comprehension have been reported for students with language-related needs, including autism and speech/language impairments (Roux et al., 2015).

In Figure 1, a simple passage is provided to illustrate how the three recommended scaffolds can combine to reinforce text cohesion and aid in the process of reading comprehension for ELLs.

Wrap-up on Reading Comprehension

Content area classes often offer a rich menu of texts written in academic English. Teachers who include these academic texts into their classes can introduce techniques that satiate students' appetites for meaning making. The scaffolds presented in this article use highlighting, underlining, and circling to reinforce markers of cohesion that make the connections between phrases, sentences, and paragraphs more accessible to ELLs and ultimately aid in reading comprehension.

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