Once students of English as a second language (ESL) have acquired basic communication skills and academic language and are mainstreamed, they may still encounter difficulty in comprehending language used in the content areas. There are specific features of the English language which cause comprehension problems because of their uniqueness or complexity. This Bulletin examines the grammatical structures causing the greatest comprehension difficulty for ESL learners: reference, conjunctions, sentence connectors, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs.

1. Reference. ESL learners may not recognize the relationship between the reference word and the referent as they are listening to, reading, or writing it. The following examples underscore the comprehension issue: An insect flies into the web. The spider comes running down. It binds the insect with silk. Then it bites it with its fangs and poisons it. Or I’m buying a computer. The old one was too slow and difficult to operate. Or Look at the flowers. These are blooming, while those are wilted. As can be seen in these examples, pronoun and demonstrative adjective (this, that, these, those) references can be confusing and ambiguous to second language users.

2. Conjunction. ESL learners may not understand the meanings behind the coordinate conjunctions that bind together ideas in a sentence such as addition: not only . . . but also; choice: either . . . or, nor; neither . . . nor; contrast: yet; and cause and effect: for, so.

ESL learners may also not recognize the meaning behind specific subordinate conjunctions that introduce adverbial clauses, such as cause: as, because, provided (that), since, unless, whereas; contrast: although, even if, even though, though; purpose or reason: in order that, so that; and time or sequence: after, as, as soon as, before, each/every time (that), once, until, while.

3. Sentence Connectors. ESL learners may be confused by the relationship between ideas that transition words can provide in the beginning, middle, or end of sentences, such as addition: also, besides, furthermore, in addition, moreover, too; choice: at the same time, else, on the other hand, otherwise; comparison: in the same way, likewise, similarly; contrast: however, in contrast, notwithstanding, on the other hand; correction: instead, on the contrary, rather; dismissal: anyhow, at any rate, in any case, nevertheless, regardless, still; effect or result: accordingly, as a result, consequently, hence, in that case, therefore, thus; emphasis or reinforcement: actually, as a matter of fact, indeed, in...
fact; example: for example, e.g., for instance, in particular, specifically; manner or means: in that way, thus; place: farther, further, nearby; purpose or reason: in order to; restatement or summary: in other words, namely, that is, i.e.; and time or sequence: after a while, afterward(s), before, earlier, first (second, third, etc.), later, meanwhile, next, previously, then.

4. Ellipsis. ESL learners may not be able to supply what is not there or may not recognize that anything has been omitted: Some people like anchovies, but many don't [like anchovies]. He went out, [he] looked around, and [he] came back in again. In either case, they may be unable to comprehend the text with the omissions. They may also be unable to use these structures, which may cause their writing to appear unnecessarily 'wordy'.

5. Lexical Cohesion. ESL learners may not have a lot of variety in their vocabulary: Around shaggy-bark hickories and sharp-needled pines, past blue-gray beeches and sturdy black walnuts, I sailed while my laughter resounded through the ancient forest, filling every chink. (Mildred Taylor, Song of the Trees). Descriptive vocabulary is often the last area of development for ESL learners; therefore, vivid descriptions may not be comprehended well due to lack of vocabulary.

6. Idiomatic expressions and phrasal verbs.

Metaphorical and idiomatic language common to conversation such as raining cats and dogs, outskirts of town, barking up the wrong tree, and the test was a breeze are examples of language use which require additional and specialized focus in order to be comprehended. In addition, run over, put out, give in, and take on are examples of what are known as phrasal verbs, verbs whose definitions change when particles or prepositions are added to them.

SUGGESTIONS FOR INSTRUCTION

Language-sensitive instruction should be a concern of all teachers, especially with students who do not possess the depth of oral and written experience with English that native users do. Being sensitive to the above grammatical issues and helping learners to comprehend these structures is therefore important. It is also important to be aware that reference, conjunction, sentence connectors, ellipsis, lexical cohesion, and phrasal and idiomatic expressions may interfere with and confound learners' comprehension of text or of oral questions. The following suggestions are recommended:

1. Frequently monitor comprehension. Provide prepared study sheets and guided outlines; repeat orally, using various ways to say the same thing; do "think alouds" (students verbalizing their understanding of text); and retellings; allow for a "10-2" balance, i.e., for every ten minutes of learning, have two minutes for student review of what has been covered; encourage dictionary use; and provide plenty of practice if these areas in understanding content are problematic for students.

2. Provide ways to elaborate student understanding through graphic modifications to underscore and reinforce grammatical complexity whenever possible. Graphic organizers such as webs, charts, tables, pictures, diagrams, and timelines can be helpful in providing comprehensible input to reinforce the contextually reduced language in listening, speaking, reading, and writing.

3. When alerted to lack of comprehension due to specific grammatical structures, provide consistent and periodic reinforcement. Homework assignments, exercises, oral questioning with specific grammatical cues ("What did Lincoln do besides sign the Emancipation Proclamation?"); "think alouds", and summarizing activities to elicit the desired grammatical structure are ways of assisting ESL students improve their comprehension while studying in the content areas.

In summary, use of English in social studies, math, science, and other content areas requires that all teachers be aware of and help students understand the applications of language in content-obligatory ways unique to each subject. Greater attention to the use of English structures as indicated above will help ensure comprehension and increase academic success for ESL students in mainstream classrooms.

SOURCES: