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# FOCUS ON SYNTAX

## Supporting young children's development of language and comprehension

By **Beth M. Phillips & Karli B. Willis**

*W*ell before and while children master decoding, the foundations of later reading comprehension are being built as they develop oral language. Much attention has, rightfully, been given to the need for young children to develop breadth and depth of vocabulary knowledge. Yet vocabulary is only one element of oral language. Another element, which typically gets less attention, is syntax.

### What is syntax?

Researchers and educators who focus on language development traditionally consider there to be five core elements of oral language: phonology (related

to speech production), semantics (vocabulary), syntax, morphology (related to units of meaning such as prefixes and suffixes), and pragmatics (interpersonal communication norms and behaviors).

Together, syntax and morphology make up what we consider grammar—the elements of language that generate its form. Specifically, syntax is the system for organizing words into *meaningful* phrases, clauses, and sentences according to a language’s particular rules.

## The development of syntax

Typically, children acquire an implicit familiarity with the syntactic and broader grammatical rules of their own language as they learn to understand what they hear and to speak their language. For example, children learn the dominant sequence of word order within sentences, such as how in English we usually use subject-verb-object order. Later, children learn to pair adjectives with nouns and adverbs with verbs to elaborate phrases; such combinations, when they follow syntactic and grammatical rules, give us virtually infinite creativity in forming sentences while still ensuring that others will comprehend our intended meaning.

In addition to elaborated noun and verb phrases, other key aspects of English syntax include using coordinating conjunctions (e.g., *and*, *or*, *but*, and *yet*) to combine independent clauses and subordinating conjunctions (e.g., *because*, *unless*, and *while*) to add a dependent clause. These combinations of clauses allow us to create compound and complex sentences. By rearranging words, we create passive sentences (e.g., “The mouse was chased by the cat.”). All these rule-governed elaborations and combinations—and others—form the adult-like syntax that typically developing children acquire by age 5.

However, mastery of basic comprehension and production of syntactical features does not mean that young children are fluent or advanced in their comprehension and production of all syntax features. Children continue

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to develop and expand their facility with syntax in oral and eventually written language for years.

## Connections of syntax to reading comprehension

Decades of research indicate that oral language skills, including semantic and grammatical knowledge, relate significantly and substantially to reading comprehension. Similar research indicates that just being in school does not remediate language weaknesses in skills without children being provided robust opportunities to grow these skills. Children who do not master complex aspects of syntax face a major roadblock to how readily they comprehend texts, especially as texts become increasingly lengthy and complicated.

Along with rare vocabulary, intricate syntax is a central feature of the *literate language* found in academic texts. In casual oral communication, we do not typically speak in complicated sentence structures. Furthermore, in-person dialogue affords both the speaker and listener opportunities to reference physical contexts and to correct misunderstandings. In contrast, texts children read in school, especially as they encounter science, social studies, and other content-area materials, include many examples of complex sentence structure and extended phrases (e.g., elaborated verb phrases, relative clauses, and conjunctions) that pose a challenge to comprehension. When interpreting these texts, there are fewer opportunities to use context and dialogue to clarify meaning; children must instead rely on their comprehension of the nuances of sentence structures to draw

appropriate inferences and establish understanding of the author’s intended message.

Given these challenges, children with even modest weaknesses in syntax can struggle with reading comprehension when they encounter such texts. Poor mastery of syntax also means children may have difficulties writing more detailed texts themselves.

## How can educators support syntactic development?

Most children do not experience systematic instruction in syntax. For many, implicit exposure in oral and written language suffices, as they have mastered implicit understanding of the grammatical conventions of their language(s). Children with diagnosed disabilities and delays do receive grammar-focused instruction from speech-language pathologists; however, often these lessons focus on word-level features such as how to inflect nouns and verbs to form plurals and the past tense, rather than on sentence-level features. Whereas these more morphologically focused interventions are quite important for many children, these and other children who do not receive individualized therapy would benefit from more explicit, intentional instruction in broader aspects of syntax.

Over the past 15-plus years, we have been developing, refining, and evaluating the impact of syntax instruction designed for the children without diagnoses but whose language weaknesses are enough to increase their risk of struggling with reading comprehension (e.g., children in the low average to moderately below average range). Based on numerous successful efficacy trials with small-group

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syntax interventions for children in prekindergarten through third grade, we have reached some conclusions about the likely important features of this instruction.

First, instruction should be explicit; children need to be aware of the instructional targets (i.e., syntax features), provided repeated models of the syntactic features, and given individualized feedback. Importantly, because even children in the same grade level may have highly variable skills, feedback needs to provide scaffolding to make tasks easier for some children while simultaneously adjusting activities to increase the challenge for other children.

Second, instruction should be highly interactive. Our effective lessons provide children with extensive opportunities to respond to prompts

both receptively and expressively. Educators can take full advantage of small-group settings by encouraging children to listen to and speak to one another, and to respond individually and chorally numerous times within fast-paced lessons. Third, we also ensure that children are exposed to the target syntactic features in highly contextualized contexts (e.g., while manipulating two- and three-dimensional props) and in decontextualized contexts (e.g., while listening to specially crafted narratives that embed target features). Finally, we suggest selection of frequently encountered syntactic targets that are present in texts (written and read aloud) of varied genres; these are the equivalent of selecting “tier 2” vocabulary words for their usefulness and generalizability.

Whereas our evidence-based intervention is designed for tier 2, small-group implementation, we have, for preschool and kindergarten contexts especially, begun exploring ways to generalize the instructional design principles embedded in our lessons to the tier 1 context. For example, we have created interactive chants and call-and-response songs that embed learning about and manipulating affixes (e.g., prefixes such as “un”) and -ly adverbs. We have created brief (i.e., three minutes) targeted instructional minilessons designed for implementation in art, blocks, dramatic play, and science centers, as well as during gross motor activities, each targeting a specific syntax feature (such as elaborating noun phrases, prepositional phrases, and conjunctions). For children in older grades, these can be readily adapted into transition activities or student-centered independent and paired activities with less teacher support.

## Keep it going

Although we have successfully improved children’s syntax with our small-group interventions, we recognize that children’s language skills will not advance sufficiently without ongoing and intensive efforts in both tier 1 and tier 2 contexts, likely sustained across multiple years. We view our interventions as just one component of a comprehensive language remediation and acceleration program that also could include brief whole-group lessons connected to passages from books read aloud, incidental teacher modeling of advanced syntactic features, writing-related activities, and robust multi-faceted vocabulary instruction.

Considerable evidence suggests that children’s language skills, relative to their peers, become less malleable as they get older. This reinforces how it is never too early to focus explicit attention on how well children can comprehend and construct elaborated sentences orally—which will then set them up for success in understanding and producing such sentences in written texts. ■