Identifying Necessary Words for Understanding Academic Articles in English as a Second or a Foreign Language

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Abstract : This paper identifies three common structures in English sentences that are important for understanding academic texts, regardless of the characteristics or background of the readers or whether they are reading English as a second or a foreign language. Adapting a model from the Humanities, the explication of texts used in literary studies, the paper analyses sample sentences to reveal structures that enable the reader not only to decide which words are necessary for understanding the main ideas but to make the decision without knowing the meaning of the words. By their very syntax noun structures point to the key word for understanding them. As a rule, the key noun is followed by easily identifiable prepositions, relative pronouns, or verbs and preceded by single adjectives. With few exceptions, the modifiers are unnecessary for understanding the idea of the sentence. In addition, sentences are often structured by lists in which the items frequently consist of parallel groups of words. The principle of a list is that all the items are similar in meaning and it is not necessary to understand all of the items to understand the point of the list. This principle is especially important when the items are long or there is more than one list in the same sentence. The similarity in meaning of these items enables readers to reduce sentences that are hard to grasp to an understandable core without excessive use of a dictionary. Finally, the idea of subordination and the identification of the subordinate parts of sentences through connecting words makes it possible for readers to focus on main ideas without having to sift through the less important and more numerous secondary structures. Sometimes a main idea requires a subordinate one to complete its meaning, but usually, subordinate ideas are unnecessary for understanding the main point of the sentence and its part in the development of the argument from sentence to sentence. Moreover, the connecting words themselves indicate the functions of the subordinate structures. These most frequently show similarity and difference or reasons and results. Recognition of all of these structures can not only enable students to read more efficiently but to focus their attention on the development of the argument and this rather than a multitude of unknown vocabulary items, the repetition in lists, or the subordination in sentences are the one necessary element for comprehension of academic articles.

Keywords : development of the argument, lists, noun structures, subordination