

# Identifying Key Elements of a Sentence for Key Idea with the Help of Connectives under Constructivism

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## Abstract

Most people want to be able to read their reading materials quicker and remember them effectively. Covering a large quantity of reading materials at a normal speed requires much more time than is usually available. Good readers, however, can cover a lot of materials by identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives when skimming. Constructivism theory emphasizes that students need to actively construct the meaning of their knowledge they have learned, and actively explore and discover knowledge. Syntax is the core of the whole language system with syntactic structure occupying a macroscopic and important position in improving students' language ability and language level in a real sense. This paper introduces and analyzes how to identify key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives under constructivism so as to find a practical and feasible reading strategy when skimming. It is advised that readers glance at secondary sentences by reading the connectives as they are helpful in getting possible additional information while successfully identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea. The method fundamentally helps students improve their reading speed and develop their skimming understanding ability. The research methods of this paper are the ones of experience, literature review, theoretical basis, the main language order and keen analysis. This paper concludes by understanding the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives in skimming practice when reading under constructivism theory and its role is to guide readers to apply the knowledge of subject-predicate-object grammatical rule as the main language order in the skimming practice to help readers to get the general meaning of a sentence, paragraph, passage and a text.

**Keywords:** constructivism, syntax, key elements, key idea, connectives

## 1. Introduction

The College English Curriculum Requirements in China (Steering Committee on Foreign Language Teaching of Ministry of Education, 2020) clearly state that a development goal of reading comprehension is that students can read articles with certain difficulty. Therefore, improving students' syntactic ability has become an important factor in teaching college English reading. In order to effectively carry out college syntax teaching and improve the language ability and language level of college students in a real sense, teachers must pay attention to the achievement of students' emotional goals, stimulate students' interest in English grammar, enable students to actively learn in the classroom, and experience the pleasure and sense of achievement brought by active learning, so the effective way is to cultivate students' skills to actively analyze the syntax improving the students' ability of English syntax analysis

### 1.1 *On English Structure Teaching Method under Constructivism*

#### 1.1.1 Literature Review and Theoretical Basis

Bo Bing, Zhang Bin, Zhang Zhenbang, Zhang Daozhen, Xu Liejiong, Lai Shixiong, Liu Ningsheng, Hu Zhuanglin, and a number of scholars have made a lot of efforts for the research and promotion of English grammar. The research data show that constructivism favors English teaching, especially in English grammar teaching (Li, 2021).

Constructivism theory is regarded as the most promising learning theory at present. It has gradually become a guiding theory for education and teaching reforms in various countries around the world. It emphasizes that students need to actively construct the meaning of their knowledge they have learned, and actively explore and

discover knowledge. Syntax is the core of the whole language system with syntactic structure occupying a macroscopic and important position in improving students' language ability and language level in a real sense (Li, 2021).

In syntactic learning, students must self-construct, rather than have passive input. Constructivists propose that knowledge is an interpretation and hypothesis, not a correct representation of real life. Knowledge cannot exist outside a concrete individual. Although we give knowledge some external form of knowledge by using language symbols, this does not mean that students acquire the same understanding as we expect. Whether students acquire knowledge depends on their own construction practices. We call it a successful attempt to build knowledge, and they must analyze the experience of knowledge effectiveness according to their own experience and the amount of knowledge stored. The students' learning process is not reflected in the simple understanding of new knowledge, but more importantly, they analyze, check and criticize new knowledge according to their own knowledge reserve (Li, 2021).

According to the constructivist learning point of view, the learning process is equivalent to the process of student self-construction, which shows that students must actively participate in the learning process when learning rather than passively and mechanically accept knowledge. They must actively select and process external information sources. Moreover, learning is not a process that we simply interpret as knowledge accumulation, but a two-way interaction process between acquired and newly acquired experiences (Li, 2021).

#### 1.1.2 Method of English Syntax Teaching under Constructivism

One of the teaching methods of English syntax under constructivism is mind mapping and knowledge visualization has the advantage that knowledge is presented in the most streamlined and core way, making complex knowledge concise, changing students' cognitive form, and making learning simpler (Chen, 2017).

English sentences are long and complex. Many English sentences are complex ones. From the perspective of composition, any complex sentence is formed by several clauses through complex combinations on the basis of simple sentences (Wang, 2021). In the teaching process of English reading class, the understanding of long English sentences is a difficult point for students. For this problem, the usual solution is the hierarchical analysis method, that is to say, a relatively complex sentence is decomposed into several simple clauses to handle it, thus guiding the students to improve their ability to read long English sentences. This paper proposes the solution by identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea which can help students break down long and complex sentences into simple sentences through the subject-predicate-object grammar so as to learn and think about them, improve students' skimming efficiency of reading and students' comprehension ability.

#### 1.1.3 Feasibility of Syntactic Teaching Method under Constructivist Learning Theory

Constructivism believes that learning is the process of students constructing knowledge by themselves. Teaching of constructivism is based on the belief that learning occurs with students' active participation in construction, rather than simply passive, mechanical acceptance. Constructivist teaching can make students develop the ability to think actively, so that they can transform the theoretical knowledge in books into their own knowledge reserve, and apply them (Li, 2021).

Syntactic analysis is the method of analyzing the function of sentence components based from the relationship significance of syntactic structure, that is, labeling the basic components (subject, predicate, object) and secondary components (adverbial, complement, etc.) with various methods. It helps to grasp and remember parts of speech of words and know their function in a sentence as an English word has a polysemy and more than a function; One can easily grasp the complex sentences accurately distinguishing between principal clause and subordinate clause(s) of a sentence for understanding its constituent form by splitting the sentence so as to understand its true meaning continually improving skimming ability; It helps to use nonfinite verbs correctly, to distinguish between predicate verb and nonpredicate verb and to well understand the role and mutual relationship between the two in a sentence; It helps to improve comprehension and skimming ability for understanding long and complex sentences and skimming difficult articles in college textbooks.

## 2. Identify Key Elements of a Sentence for Key Idea

### 2.1 Rationale and Definition

A sentence may provide a lot of information, but it usually provides a key idea. The reader must find the key idea of a sentence to clearly understand the sentence. Accurate, concise understanding at the sentence level is essential to all other comprehension skills as well as to the effective study of a paragraph, passage, and text.

Grammatical rules, the habits that people must abide by when speaking, exist objectively, not stipulated by linguists. A sentence is composed of words grouped together and consists of a subject and verb (sometimes with an object) and expresses a complete thought. The subject represents either the actor or the affected person or thing in relation to the process. It tells what the sentence is about. The verb describes the process that is a kind of action that happens in relation to a person or the subject. The subject and verb (and sometimes object) are grammatically essential. They contain information relating to the key elements of a sentence, and are referred to as the core part of a sentence. Sentences contain many other grammatical elements, such as modifiers, which make them complex. Core sentence expresses something that is central or basic. The structure of other types of clauses can then be described in terms of differences from the core sentence. Other types of clauses belong to the secondary parts of the sentence although they originate from basic core sentence. Therefore, identifying the subject-predicate (-object) structure of the core sentence helps to determine the core meaning or key idea of the sentence.

English is Germanic and is a typical structure language. English sentences are usually based on the subject and predicate (and sometimes object) at the core with conjunctions, phrases and clauses and other additional components to modify and expand, to make the sentence vivid. But no matter how complex the additional components are, the additional components always maintain a clear logical relationship with the central components, and this logical relationship is clear and orderly. Therefore, Knowledge of the structure of basic core sentence will help the reader in determining the overall meaning of the sentence and understanding the basic structure of English sentences is the key to learning English well (Chen, 2010).

While a sentence may provide plenty of information, there is usually only one key information. The reader needs to understand the key information of a sentence to better understand the sentence. Therefore, reading texts quickly entails the activity of identifying the key elements in a sentence—the subject and verb (and object) in the main or core sentence to understand the key information or idea of a sentence, ignoring the modifiers or clauses or secondary parts, or just taking a glance over them. This method of reading is called the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives, which is based on the main structure of the core sentence in the grammar, that is, the key elements in a sentence—the subject and verb (and object) in the core sentence. This is an effective way to quickly browse texts to get a general meaning, which belongs to a fast way of reading. See below for details.

### *2.2 Identify the Key Elements of a Sentence to Find Out the Key Idea of a Sentence*

(1) Find the subject and verb of the main or core sentence for the key idea, sometimes with an object. (See example 1)

(2) A reader must figure out what is the key idea of a sentence, and what is the secondary information of a sentence. Many words in a sentence describe the subject of the sentence, which is primary, and others are restrictive modifications to the subject which belong to secondary information. The key idea in a sentence is primary, and others are additions to the key idea belonging to secondary information of a sentence.

By using the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives, the reader can identify the key components of the main or core sentence for the key idea of a sentence, ignoring other modifiers or clauses or secondary parts, which is a fast reading strategy. It is noteworthy that ignoring other modifiers or clauses or secondary parts means sometimes ignoring completely, sometimes taking a glance to judge the necessity of reading or not reading. (See example 3)

(3) For story-based sentences, if the reader asks when, what, where, or why, how, etc., it is easy for the reader to find what the key idea of a sentence is, and what the secondary information of a sentence is. (See example 2)

(4) The method here is about reading comprehension at the sentence level, which can also be used for a paragraph, passage and even text reading comprehension as sentences are their basis. (See example 3). It is important for reading comprehension that students are aware of sentence-level information (MacKay et al., 2021).

Example 1 (a sentence): Macroeconomics has an elegant and remarkably powerful set of tools that come together in an orderly fashion that may be described as the “macroeconomic model”.

(Source: Peng Yang, 2001. GRE & GMAT English reading comprehension of difficult sentences, World Book Publishing Company)

key idea: Macroeconomics has a set of tools.

additional information:

- 1) The tools are elegant and remarkably powerful.
- 2) Tools come together in an orderly fashion.
- 3) The tools in an orderly fashion are described as the macroeconomic model.

Example 2 (a story-based sentence): On one occasion a fight broke out at a beach party, with every punching and shoving.

(Source: Shutang Zheng, New Horizon College English (the second edition) Reading and Writing 1, Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press, 2016)

key idea: A fight broke out.

additional information: on one occasion (when); at a beach party (where); with every punching and shoving (how)

Example 3 (a paragraph): Black font is partially extracted from the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea. Read the black fonts to get the general meaning of the passage and glance at the underlined words for the possible details. Then answer the following 5 questions:

- 1) What is the author's main purpose in this article?
  - A) to criticize Pearl Buck's works.
  - B) to expound Pearl Buck's views on Chinese literature
  - C) to explain the background and different interests of Pearl Buck
  - D) to talk about Pearl Buck's influence on Eastern and Western cultures
- 2) According to this article, Pearl Buck is considered a writer in all the following aspects except——
  - A) novels
  - B) children's books
  - C) poetry
  - D) short stories
- 3) Which of the following is not the award of Pearl Buck mentioned by the author?
  - A) the Nobel Prize
  - B) the Newberry Medal
  - C) the William Dean Howell Medal
  - D) the Pulitzer Prize
- 4) According to this article, Pearl Buck was a special figure in American literature because she——
  - A) reported widely on a very diverse culture
  - B) brought out half of her books overseas
  - C) obtained more prizes than any woman of her time
  - D) came to the top for the first time in her later years
- 5) According to the article, Pearl Buck called herself as "mentally bifocal", suggesting that she was——
  - A) able to solve the differences between two different language systems
  - B) perceptively conscious of how the past will affect the future
  - C) able to create literary works of interest to adults as well as children
  - D) capable of knowing two different cultural environments very well

Questions 1 and 4 were questions of general meanings; questions 2 and 3 and 5 were questions of details.

(1) **One of the most popular literary figures in American literature is a woman** who spent almost half of her long life in China, a country on a continent thousands of miles from the United States. (2) In her lifetime **she** **earned** this country's most highly acclaimed **literary award**, the Pulitzer Prize, **and also the most prestigious form of literary recognition** in the world, the Noble Prize for Literature. (3) **Pearl S. Buck was almost a household word** throughout much of her lifetime because of her prolific literary output, which consisted of

some eighty-five published works, including several dozen novels, six collections of short stories, fourteen books for children, and more than a dozen works of nonfiction. (4) When she was eighty years old, **some twenty-five volumes were awaiting publication**. (5) **Many of those books were set in China**, the land in which she spent so much of her life. (6) **Her books and her life served as a bridge** between the cultures of the East and the West. (7) As the product of these two cultures, **she became**, as she described herself, "**mentally bifocal**". (8) **Her unique background made her into an unusually interesting and versatile human being**. (9) As we examine the life of Pearl Buck, **we cannot help but be aware that we are in fact meeting three separate people**: a wife and mother, a motivationally famous writer and a humanitarian and philanthropist. (10) **One cannot really get to know Pearl Buck without learning about each of the three**. (11) Though honored in her lifetime with the William Dean Howell Medal of the American Academy of Arts and Letters in addition to the Nobel and Pulitzer prizes, **Pearl Buck** as a total human being, not only a famous author, **is a captivating subject of study**.

Source: Peter Conn, 1998. Pearl S. Buck (A Cultural Biography). Cambridge University Press.

(1) Using the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives, readers can browse through this passage to get its general meaning by reading the black fonts of the passage. Questions 1 and 4 are questions of general meanings. So, readers can answer the first question: What is the author's main purpose in this article? The main purpose of the article is to explain the background and different interests of Pearl Buck.

Readers can also answer the fourth question: According to this article, why was she a special figure in American literature? The reason was that she came to the top for the first time in her later years.

(2) The second question is about her works belonging to the question of details. Identifying the subject and predicative and complement of the third main or core sentence, readers can glance at two secondary sentences (because of and which), knowing that they (two secondary sentences) include the literary output and published works of Pearl S. Buck. So, in answering the question: According to this article, Pearl Buck is considered a writer in all the following aspects except—, the reader can go to two secondary sentences of the third sentence to look for the answer. According to two secondary sentences of the third sentence, her works comprise novels, short stories and children's books except for poetry. Thus, "poetry" is not her works.

(3) The third question is about the awards belonging to the matter of details. Identifying the subject, verb and object of the second sentence, readers can find that there are two objects in the sentence and they are literary award and literary recognition. After glancing at the specific details of awards, readers can see the second sentence includes two awards: the Pulitzer Prize and the Noble Prize for Literature.

Likewise, identifying the subject, predicative and complement of the eleventh main or core sentence, readers can glance at the secondary sentence (though honored.....), especially at the word "honored" and see the author mentions the William Dean Howell Medal in the secondary sentence in the 11<sup>th</sup> sentence. So, readers can answer the third question of details: Which of the following is not the award of Pearl Buck mentioned by the author? The answer is B.

It is worth reminding that about awards, readers can look for award cue words: literary award, medal, prize, honored, etc. They are key words expressing the theme of the award.

(4) Identifying the subject, predicative and complement of the 7th sentence, readers can identify the key words "mentally bifocal" and get the answer to the fifth question from the seventh sentence. Now readers can answer the fifth question: According to the article, Pearl Buck called herself as "mentally bifocal", suggesting that she was —. The answer is D.

### 2.3 With the Help of Connectives

**Researches on English connectives:** Scholars have done a lot of researches on English connectives. When reading the textbooks, students may make a coherent representation of the text psychologically including coherent relationships between the text fragments. It is an essential precondition for learning from texts to construct such a representation (Van Silfhout et al., 2014). Van Silfhout, et al. emphasize the importance of connectives based on eye-tracking data: connectives accelerate the processing of students, especially when texts have a consecutive overall arrangement. The results show that the continuous layout of explicit text has low processing requirements for the processing of students' working memory.

Connectives (e.g., but, on the other hand, etc.) have abstractive meanings and often indicate key relationships between text thoughts. The research of Crosson & Lesaux (2013) discussed whether understanding of connectives is a unique field of lexical knowledge that provides special lever for reading comprehension, and

whether students from different language backgrounds have different contribution of knowledge of connectives to reading comprehension. The results show that although the strength of influence of connectives varies according to the language background of readers, connectives play a significant role in understanding texts.

The study by Zarcone & Demberg (2021) examines the expected gaze in the visual world and supports the view that literal knowledge, time order signal words, and the verb selection preferences together contribute to forming rapid prediction of event participants.

**With the help of connectives:** Getting the key ideas of sentences through syntactic analysis should be with the help of connectives. When you use the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives, the key is for you to identify the key components of the (main or core) sentence for the key idea of a sentence, in the meanwhile to glance at the clauses or secondary information for additional information of a sentence. For example, when reading the black fonts of the passage above, you get the general meaning of the passage. At the same time, you glance at secondary sentences by reading their connectives such as “who, because of, which, when, as, though”, etc. for possible additional information. One reason is that a glance at these connectives reveals that they are secondary sentences, not the focus; the second reason is that when you glance at these connectives, you know very well in your heart these places have some “dry goods” and you will come back for a look when needed. The third reason is that a glance at these connectives will help you to choose or decide if you read them, ignore them or just glance at them with no focus. Therefore, connectives are important in students' processing and predicting event participants.

The author has an English reading concept: The highest level of English reading is having read, but as if not having completely read; although not having completely read, as if having read already.

### 3. Analyzing More Complicated Sentences to Look for Additional Information

#### 3.1 Additional Information Added to the Simple Sentence or the Key Idea of a Sentence

For students, complex sentences are the most confusing types of sentences (Koçak, 2019). Sentence complexity can create comprehension problems for struggling readers. In Toyama's study (2021), an investigation was done to explore the concurrent effects of the reader, the text, and the task factors, and their interactions, on reading comprehension, using explanatory item response models. Among the characteristics of the article, long and short sentences, lexical frequency, simplicity of syntactic structure and time sequence have a significant impact on the difficulty of understanding articles, and understanding the complex interactions will be the key to supporting the development of students' understanding ability to read texts. So, the ability to understand sentences, especially complex sentences will contribute to students' reading comprehension.

As the sentence becomes longer and more complex, your task as a reader becomes more difficult. Textbooks often contain sentences that include several ideas critical to understanding material. Textbook writers frequently combine and relate information within a single sentence. Advancing knowledge in a specific field, academic works tend to use complex sentences to ensure precision of expression (Xu, 2020). The research results of Sun (2020) show that university texts are generally more complex in language and content complexity than high school texts, especially in long and difficult sentences and the use of complex nominals. In addition to this emerging model, variability also reflects the size of difference in complexity and the way of difference of texts. If you are reading too quickly or reading without attention to detail, you may miss important information contained in these sentences. Instead, if you are reading too slowly or reading with attention given to every detail, you may lose interest in reading and even are interfered in your understanding because you are too concerned with individual details that you become less aware of comprehension. It also results in slow and inefficient reading.

As mentioned earlier, the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives can be used to identify the key components in a sentence, that is, the subject, verb and sometime object in a sentence for its key idea. After identifying the key idea in a sentence, readers may analyze the more complicated sentences by reading for the additional information added to the simple sentence that contains the key idea and detect ideas within the complex sentence. Sometimes it is not so easy to decide which information is key idea and which details are added to the key idea. But often the subject and verb (sometimes with the object) of the main or core sentence determines the key idea of a sentence. The details attached to the key idea usually belong to the additional ideas or information.

The research by Huang (2019) was designed to probe into the possible application of “sentence tree-structure” in college English grammar teaching (pp. 178-190). After combining Schema Theory and Lexical Chunk Theory, she put forward “the sentence tree-structure tool” and attempted to use it in one of her college grammar classes. In the

teaching process, students were required to study long and difficult complex sentences from IELTS reading texts. Her study showed that most students have improved their ability to analyze long and difficult complex sentences after using the tool to learn difficult grammar.

Alqahtani (2019) studied “the effect of the internal structure of the subject slot on its recognition by students learning English as a foreign language (EFL)” (pp. 77-82). However, the surprising finding of the study is that a compound subject, whether simple or complex, is more easily recognized by students than a non-compound complex one. The results of the study are aimed at making a positive contribution to the language teaching process. According to the results of the study, EFL teachers can make students pay attention to the different structures of a sentence. Students need to know that some parts of a sentence are intended to expand the sentence or add information to it, not to change it, which is called “the slots of the sentence”. Sentence comprehension tasks not only need understanding sentences, but also need storing verbal information temporarily (Muto, 2021).

The following example demonstrates how additional information can be added to a simple sentence (the main or core sentence) and how many ideas you can detect within the complex sentence.

Example: simple sentence: This simplest kind of black hole is called a Schwarzschild black hole.

Complex sentence: This simplest kind of black hole—one formed by the contraction of nonrotating, collisionless matter with spherical symmetry—is called a Schwarzschild black hole, after the astronomer and mathematician Karl Schwarzschild, who devised the first known solution to Einstein's equations of general relativity.

key idea: This simplest kind of black hole is called a Schwarzschild black hole.

additional information or ideas:

- (1) one formed by the contraction of nonrotating, collisionless matter with spherical symmetry
- (2) after the astronomer and mathematician Karl Schwarzschild
- (3) who devised the first known solution to Einstein's equations of general relativity

Comprehending material may be both challenging and time consuming. The process of analyzing complex sentences takes time and practice, but developing a strategy to tackle sentences will greatly add to the reader's overall comprehension of material.

### 3.2 Think How to Read

Some readers read by skimming steps, others by using the method of identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives to get the general meaning of a text. But still others read through a combination of a variety of approaches. Readers can find out what works best for themselves to read particular material.

Readers must practice using strategies and turn various strategies into own strategies so that they can use strategies independently and read easily and calmly, and finally become a master in reading. English textbooks have been widely used in every field of study in most colleges and universities in China. In order to prepare university students for their jobs of tomorrow, it is essential to systematically train and practice them and let them read these books. The survey results of Cheng's study (2015) showed that it was necessary that students should be trained in reading strategies, the complex sentence structure analysis and the accurate terminology pronunciation. It is recommended that readers buy a book of difficult sentence analysis and practice the above strategies. For economic students, they can buy economics English books and practice the above strategies. Relatively speaking, both professional or academic books are relatively difficult and suitable for the practice of the above strategies. Students need to be trained in reading strategies, complex sentence structure analysis and accurate terminology pronunciation.

## 4. Conclusion

In conclusion, under constructivism, knowledge is presented in the most streamlined and core way, making complex knowledge concise, changing students' cognitive form, and making learning simpler. Identifying key elements of a sentence for key idea with the help of connectives can help students to split long and complex sentences into simple sentences so as to well construct their meanings, improve students' skimming reading efficiency and students' understanding ability; glancing at secondary sentences by reading the connectives such as “who, because of, which, when, as, though”, etc. helps them considerably in identifying the key idea in a sentence, which is important in students' processing and predicting event participants. After identifying the key idea in a sentence, readers can analyze the more complicated sentences by reading for the additional ideas, which

are the additional information attached to the key idea. Whatever strategies, readers must practice using them and eventually become efficient readers.

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