

Clauses and Phrases

Background

A clause is a group of words within a sentence that includes a subject and a verb. A phrase is a group of related words within a sentence that does not have both a subject and a verb. Embedding is when a phrase or sentence becomes part of another sentence, serving key grammatical functions (Owens, pg 329).

Clauses and phrases are the most advanced method of language sophistication known to man. With them, a sentence can theoretically be made to communicate anything that can be thought (Pinker, 1995). The existence of clauses and phrases manages to both greatly enrich our communication possibilities while often making effective communication more difficult. Expanded sentences are commonly understood as those which include additional information, such as modifiers or negation, but are not as sophisticated as sentences with clauses or phrases.

Because complexity is increased by adding words within and near clauses and phrases, and because of the difficulty in comparing order of acquisition across categories (e.g. negatives, pronouns, etc.), clause and phrase hierarchies should be manipulated based on the individual needs of the student. A student with difficulty understanding negatives should work on clauses and phrases that include negatives.

We call clauses that are missing words elliptical clauses. For example, “*The boy I met was named Fred.*” instead of “*The boy **that** I met was named Fred.*” Elliptical clauses are common, and especially in oral speech, are often easier to understand.

Compound and complex sentences occur when sentences combine independent and/or dependent clauses. Complex sentences are often used to show that one idea takes precedence over another. Compound sentences are often used to show that two ideas are of equal importance. While nearly all assessments contain directions with at least some clauses and phrases, the PLS, CASL, CELF, and OWLS are among the assessments that directly assess production of these structures.

Prerequisites: relative pronouns (that, which, who, what) for relative clauses; specific structures for others (nouns for noun phrases, infinitives for infinitive phrases, prepositions for prepositional phrases, etc.)

Hierarchy

Two Word
Three Word
Four Word
Five Word
Complex
Advanced-
Complex

Relative Clause Example

He picked up the book that fell.

He picked up the book that just fell.

He picked up the book that just fell again.

He picked up the book that kept falling yesterday morning.

He picked up the book that fell yesterday under the table.

He picked up the book that had fallen under the table after his teacher complained.

Dependent (Adverb) Clause Example

She opened her backpack after school.

She opened her backpack after school began.

She opened her backpack after the bell rang.

She opened her backpack after the first bell rang.

She opened her backpack after the first bell rang loudly enough to wake her.

She opened her backpack after the first bell rang loudly enough to wake her from her morning ritual.

Two Word
Three Word
Four Word
Five Word
Complex
Advanced-
Complex