Quiz A: RI.8.8

Read the passage. Then answer the question.

"Can Parrots Learn Language?"

1   In 2004, an African gray parrot named Einstein from the Knoxville Zoo appeared on the Animal Planet show
    Pet Star. In a few minutes' time, Einstein made the sounds of a cat, a dog, an owl, a rooster, a pig, a wolf,
    a chimpanzee, a penguin, a car, a spaceship, an evil laugh, a pirate, and a roller coaster. Then she sang the
    song "Happy Birthday." Obviously, parrots are excellent mimics. Equally obviously, parrots can use sound to
    communicate, saying, for example, "Polly want a cracker" when they want a cracker. So, parrots can imitate
    sounds, and they can use mimicked sounds to communicate what they want. However, can what parrots do
    really be considered language?

2   Some people don't think so. The philosopher Daniel Dennett wrote, in 2003, "I think it is quite obvious
    that language is what sets us apart from all other animals." Professor Noam Chomsky of the Massachusetts
    Institute of Technology, an expert on language, agrees. He says that comparing the sounds nonhuman
    animals make to language is like comparing pole vaulting to flying. Steve Hartman, founder of the Hartman
    Aviary, disagrees. "Parrots are one of only six known groups of animals that must develop a verbal language
    to be able to socially interact," he says.

3   So, who's right? Is what parrots do really language? To begin to answer this question, we need to think about
    what creatures that clearly can use language are able to do. What abilities do people who can use language
    have? Here's a list:

Using Arbitrary Names: People can learn names of things, qualities, and actions. If a child has never seen a swan, you
can point to a swan and say the word, and he or she will learn the name. Importantly, the names can be, and often are,
completely arbitrary or random. Suppose that your friend draws a crazy squiggle on a piece of paper. Your friend could
say that this shape is called a "keezle" or a "jakka". It doesn't matter what name your friend comes up with. Because you
both use language, you can connect the randomly chosen word to what it names.

Connecting Word Parts to Make New Words: People can connect individual sounds, word parts, and whole words to
make new words. Even if you have never heard the word water-tower, you can connect the words "water" and "tower"
to make the word water-tower.

Combining Words to Say Completely New Things: People can use language to understand or say things they've never
heard before. You may have never heard the sentence "The chimpanzees watched the space shuttle", but you can easily
decipher or produce this sentence on your own.

Connecting Words in the Right Order to Make Complete Statements: People put words together in the right order
to make sentences. For example, "they say", "I walk", or "She sang". They don't accidentally say, sometimes, Walk I or
Sang she.

Communicating about Concepts: People can think of concepts and communicate about them. A concept is an abstract
idea like happiness, roundness, size (big or small), similarity, difference, or number.