

SENTENCE COMBINING IN AN ESL WRITING PROGRAM

The teaching of English as a Second Language has undergone radical changes in recent years, and nowhere have these changes been more evident than in our colleges and universities. The influx of “new” ESL students—those with limited skills in their native language—has forced traditionally trained instructors to reevaluate their methods and materials; the particular demands of academic work at this level have focussed attention on the need to develop appropriate reading and writing skills; and increased professional contact between instructors of ESL and those engaged in remediation efforts with native speaking and second dialect students has led to recognition of certain common problems and solutions in what has often been regarded as distinct and separate pedagogies.

One technique which has been the subject of much research with native speakers and is now being used in the classroom with both native and ESL students is sentence combining. It has been found particularly valuable in writing programs because it demonstrates the rules of English sentence structure in a concrete way and permits students to generate their own sentences, immediately putting into practice what they have learned.

WHAT SENTENCE COMBINING IS

Sentence combining is based on the premise that all of our sentences are generated from “deep structures” through a process which is intuitive for native speakers of a language. “Kernel sentences”—basic subject-verb constructions—are such deep structures, and two or more of them can be combined through use of certain procedures (transformations) to produce more sophisticated utterances (or writings) in normal communication.

David M. Davidson teaches English as a Second Language in the Special Educational Services Department at Bronx Community College.

For example, the kernel sentences:

A. We saw a film. B. The film was made by Fellini.¹
may be transformed into:

1. We saw a Fellini film. or
2. We saw a film by Fellini. or
3. We saw a film made by Fellini. or
4. We saw a film which was made by Fellini.

In sentence 1 we have combined sentences A and B by taking the noun *Fellini* from sentence B and placing it in the prenominal position where it can serve an adjectival function. In sentence 2 we deleted all of sentence B except the prepositional phrase which we added to sentence A. In sentence 3 we deleted the noun phrase and auxiliary, leaving a participial phrase to be attached to sentence A. And in the last sentence we substituted a relative pronoun to produce a relative clause. Each sentence may have a different shade of meaning and the choice might depend on context or emphasis or personal “style.”

Another possibility for combining sentences A and B is:

5. We saw a film and the film (it) was made by Fellini.

Most native English-speaking adolescents and adults would not produce sentence 5 but many children would (if you substituted *Disney* for *Fellini*) or would make no attempt to combine the sentences. Many ESL students would do the same, even if there are transformations in their native language similar to those used in 1-4.

There have been many studies which demonstrate that the use of subordination (as in sentences 1 through 4) rather than coordination (as in sentence 5) is a characteristic element of “mature” writing. (For a discussion of some of this literature, see “Sentence-Combining as a Curricular Activity: Its Effect on Written Language Development and Reading Comprehension” by Sandra L. Stotsky, in *Research in the Teaching of English*, 9, no. 2 [Spring 1975], 30-71.) Recent studies have pointed out similarities between the processes involved in learning first and second languages.²

¹This sentence has already undergone a “passive voice transformation” from the kernel, *Fellini made the film*.

²For example, see Kellogg Hunt, “Do Sentences in the Second Language Grow Like Those in the First?” *TESOL Quarterly* 4 (September 1970), pp. 195-202; and Susan Ervin Tripp, “Is Second Language Learning Like the First?” *TESOL Quarterly*, 8 (June 1974), pp. 111-127.

John Mellon has defined structures of subordination as grammatical devices by which secondary statements and elaborations, either fully formed or elliptical, are made about the statements in main sentences.³ Recent research, which includes a review of the literature on language development and the assessment of writing ability, an analysis of “competent” freshman writing, and a survey of college composition texts, identifies nine structures which appear to be indicative of writing maturity and appropriate for teaching to college-level ESL students ready for an intensive writing program.⁴ These structures are prenominal adjectives; adverbs; prepositional, participial, gerund, and infinitive phrases; and noun, adverb, and relative clauses. These structures can be effectively taught through sentence combining and can form the basis for a systematic approach to writing development.

Teaching sentence combining to native speakers is primarily a process of making conscious for students what they already know intuitively, if somewhat imperfectly, about their language. But for ESL students it usually means learning something entirely new. Even if similar transformations exist in their native language, ESL students apparently do not use their first language habits in learning the syntax of a new language. They tend to develop learning strategies that recapitulate first language acquisition, but proceed more quickly through similar steps.⁵ In my experience, one of the quickest ways to facilitate such development is through demonstration and practice in specific types of sentence combining.

DIAGNOSIS

In the development of any skill, the first step is diagnosis. ESL students who fall into the “intermediate” to “advanced” range will have quite varying abilities in the different language skills. If placement is dependent wholly, or in part, on a multiple choice examination, even one purporting to test structure of “writing ability,” many students who

³John C. Mellon, *Transformational Sentence Combining*, NCTE Research Report, no. 10 (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969), p. 19.

⁴David M. Davidson, “Assessing Writing Ability of ESL College Freshmen,” *Resources in Education*, (July 1977), ED 135247.

⁵Heidi C. Dulay and Marina K. Burt, “Errors and Strategies in Child Second Language Acquisition,” *TESOL Quarterly*, 8 (June 1974), pp. 129-136.

are classified as advanced on the basis of reading comprehension or oral skills may be found to have little writing proficiency. There is no substitute for examination of a student's actual writing.

There are several approaches to the assessment of writing. If the purpose of an initial reading is to place students in different levels or sections, or in groups within a section, one may read either "holistically" or with certain criteria in mind. In readings conducted by the College Entrance Examination Board, when screening high school graduates for college placement, papers are compared with one another, with the best and worst of each particular group given the highest and lowest ratings without regard to external or ideal criteria. This is done through quick reading for overall impression by at least three readers who have previously arrived at some understanding of what constitutes a top- or bottom-of-the-scale paper and the various scores in between.

More commonly, readers of ESL placement essays have specific criteria in mind, e.g., subject-verb agreement, control of tenses, ability to handle negative structures, and general complexity of sentence structure—and from these they arrive at course or level placement. The individual instructor can adapt these methods for an initial reading of compositions to determine if students have been appropriately placed or to break up students into major groups for varying emphasis on skills.

A structural analysis of writing can be done in various ways. The simplest is to look for use of particular structures—relative clauses, for example—or for the absence of them where they might appropriately have been used. Consider these examples taken from ESL placement compositions:

- A. I know other people, they have a lot of choices like I did.
- B. One of my cousins graduated last year from college. He's an accountant for a big insurance company. My cousin name is Jose. Jose is only 27 years old.
- C. I know people that has been in college for two or three years and they waste the times of teachers who try to show them the skills in order to live a better life.... Today, people who has been in college they are not able to get a job.

If example A is a typical sample from a composition, it may indicate that the student does not know the use of the relative clause but has the sense that the two clauses he has written belong in the same sentence. The writer of sample B has a lot of information that he might have condensed into one or two sentences with the help of a relative clause (*who graduated last year* or *who is 27 years old*) and other subordinating

structures but apparently does not know how to use them. Sample C illustrates an imperfect use of the relative clause (verb agreement with the relative and failure to delete the pronoun that was substituted for) but was written by a student whose writing is more sophisticated and who appears to need less concentration on that structure. Through this careful kind of reading one can at least partially diagnose the ability of students to handle certain structures.

To assist in the diagnosis of writing ability with particular regard to students' ability to handle structures of subordination, I have developed an instrument called the *Test of Ability to Subordinate* (New York: Language Innovations, Inc., 1977). The test requires students to combine sentences within a given frame by use of particular structures. Employed by individual instructors at several units of CUNY, it has helped focus on students' ability, or lack of it, to perform specific grammatical transformations. The test can be an integral part of the sentence-combining program described here.

USING GROUPS

With proper diagnosis, the instructor can proceed to group students according to ability, thereby allowing them to concentrate their efforts on those structures they do not control. Beyond the first few "lessons," which may be conducted with the entire class in order to demonstrate sentence-combining methods, set the "tone," and establish "rules," sentence combining is best done with students working in teams: pairs or groups of up to five. This method guarantees maximum student participation (if the groups are appropriately constructed), lets more proficient students move at their own pace, and allows the instructor to spend a maximum amount of time with those needing the most help. When students appear to have mastered a particular structure, as demonstrated by performance on class exercises and objective tests, they can move on, keeping their own records of progress as they go.

Some approaches to grouping suggest that students of varying ability be placed together, and this appears to be appropriate in many language-learning activities, where both the more- and less-proficient student can benefit from interacting with each other. In my experience, however, sentence-combining activities do not work as well when people of unequal ability are joined. The less-proficient student tends to remain silent and merely copy what the others have produced while the other students, unless they are unusually generous, quickly grow impatient at being delayed in their progress.

One other point to keep in mind when grouping students for sentence-combining activities is that much of the benefit, as in most language-learning activities, comes through the willingness to take risks—to explore different possibilities and then make choices. It is important that students feel comfortable enough with their teammates—and one way to help ensure this is to group outgoing (not *argumentative*) people separately from those who may have similar abilities but are more reticent.

It is also well to recognize individual learning styles. While group practice with sentence combining works for most students, some prefer to be on their own, having their major interaction with the instructor (or with a computer, as will be discussed later).

MATERIALS

It will come as no surprise to most ESL teachers, especially those working with “new” ESL students, that there are few appropriate sentence-combining materials currently available. As usual, instructors will find it necessary to develop most of their own materials or to adapt what has been published— primarily for native speakers.

Currently, the most accessible and usable text available is *Sentence Combining* by William Strong (Random House, 1973). Designed for native speakers, it presents numerous difficulties for ESL students, especially with its vocabulary, which is highly idiomatic. And although the first half dozen or so selections are relatively easy and concentrate on only a few transformations, the passages quickly become longer and more complicated with no systematic introduction or limitation of structure. The book is a series of passages—descriptive, narrative, and expository—each presented in the form of kernel sentences which students are asked to combine any way they can to form new sentences which make up the complete passage. The book has many strengths: the subject matter is interesting and can often lead to fruitful discussion and further writing; the language is colorful; many of the passages are complete, or near-complete, expository essays that can serve as models for original writing; and it engages students not only in sentence-combining exercises but in extended written discourse, which ultimately is what a writing program is all about. To use the book effectively and methodically, an instructor would have to prepare a considerable amount of introductory material illustrating various structures and then introduce selections as appropriate. Among the better expository pieces in *Sentence Combining* that have worked well

with ESL students are:

In Touch	Television
Consumption	Operation Breadbasket
Things	How Whites Look to Blacks
Pace	Automobiles and Personality
Body Defenses	Air Pollution
Stereotypes	Alcohol and Marijuana
Magic Words	The Black Death

Sentence combining is by no means a new idea, and exercises employing this technique can be found in a number of grammar and composition texts. It is used extensively in Marcella Frank's *Modern English—Exercises for Non-Native Speakers*, Part II (Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1972), a workbook companion to her useful grammar reference book. The author uses sentence-combining exercises for practice with adverbial, relative, and noun clauses as well as participial, gerund, and infinitive phrases. Part I of Frank's workbook pair—"Parts of Speech"—offers a variety of exercises other than sentence-combining for practice with adjectives, adverbs, and prepositions. The ESL instructor should find these workbooks useful as *supplementary* texts for students or for reference purposes. The caution to be noted here is that the exercises do not strive for connected discourse but merely offer isolated sentences. Students who use this type of material must be given immediate and continuing opportunity to use the structures in actual writing situations.

A series of workbooks for ESL students by Eugene Hall, published by Simon and Schuster, uses sentence combining for practice in constructing participial, infinitive, and prepositional phrases and adverbial clauses (*Building English Sentences With Verbals*, 1969); participial and infinitive phrases and comparative adjectives and adverbs (*Building English Sentences With Adverbs*, 1971); noun, relative, and adverbial clauses and prenominal adjectives (*Building English Sentences With Two Verbs*, 1969); and noun, relative, and adverbial clauses and participial phrases (*Building Complex English Sentences*, 1971). *Constructing Sentences* by Earl Rand (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969) is made up entirely of sentence-combining exercises from simple coordination through some of the more advanced subordinating structures such as infinitives and gerunds, making it another potentially useful supplementary workbook.

Sentence combining lends itself well to computer assisted instruction. Working within the limitations of whatever computer system is

available, a teacher can construct exercises which students can work on individually, or in pairs, to supplement classroom activities. The computer can be programmed to give instant feedback in the form of clues, suggestions, and examples, or a verbal pat on the head, depending on the student's responses. At Bronx Community College we have three terminals plugged into the College's own DPL-11 computer system and approximately 40 hours of availability to students each week. We have a dozen sentence-combining lessons, focusing on three structures—relative clauses, adverbial clauses, and prepositional phrases. The computer prints out two kernel sentences on a viewing screen and asks the student to combine them by typing in missing words within a given sentence frame. There is a simultaneous paper print-out which students can take with them for review and for discussion with the instructor. (There are more sophisticated computer systems currently in use, among them Control Data's PLATO, which offer exciting possibilities for the teaching of structure.⁶) Since terminal time is limited, we assign a selected group of students to work on sentence-combining exercises, generally those who seem to be less motivated or who don't appear to function well in groups. Students respond positively to this technique. They find the exercises enjoyable and the use of the typewriter keyboard a quickly passing difficulty. As with all other exercises, there is a built-in opportunity to transfer learning into practical use within an extended writing situation. Several of the CAI exercises are composed of 15 or so pairs of sentences which, when combined, form a complete essay. The computer gives the students the homework assignment of writing out the sentences (which they can copy from their print-out) and suggests that they add some ideas of their own to form a complete essay of 150-200 words which they submit to their instructor. (Anyone interested in seeing a demonstration of these materials may contact the author.)

SEQUENCING STRUCTURES

As was pointed out earlier, there are nine major subordinating structures that merit direct attention in an ESL writing program, all lending themselves to a greater or lesser extent to sentence combining. A logical approach to the sequencing of these structures would be their evident ease or sequence of acquisition by ESL students, which apparently reflects the degree of exposure to them in reading materials, as well as inherent qualities of the structures. We may also consider their

⁶William C. Norris, "Via Technology to a New Era in Education," *Phi Delta Kappan*, 58 (February 1977), pp. 451-453.

frequency of use by native speakers at the “competent” freshman level as a guide to their utility in common expository writing as well as to the ease with which they are handled.

With these guideposts in mind, a logical starting point is the pronominal adjective. In its various forms (primarily descriptive) it appears to be more widely used by native writers than any of the other structures we are considering. It is so commonly found in texts and other material as to be familiar to intermediate and above students, and experience shows it to be relatively easy to grasp, although not without some complicating factors, which will be described below.

Because the adverb usually requires limited manipulation, as in adding *ly* to an adjective and appropriate placement in relation to the verb, it should be considered next. Most difficulty for ESL students is in the use of the derivational suffix and proper placement of adverbs of frequency and manner.

As the second most widely used, and therefore functional, structure, the prepositional phrase might be introduced next. Following mastery of adjective and adverb forms, there would be greater recognition of this structure’s function, since it appears primarily as an adverbial of time, place, or manner, or as an adjectival (most commonly descriptive, locative, and generative). Most difficulty here will be encountered with the preposition itself—when it should be used and, especially, which one to use.

Adverbial clauses may be considered next—primarily those of time, cause, and real condition. The main focus for ESL students should be on the use of appropriate conjunctions to combine sentences.

At the college freshman level, the noun clause is used almost exclusively as a verb object, and in this form may be considered for introduction to ESL students at this point in the sequence. Students will have most difficulty with sequence of tenses and transformations from questions.

The relative clause, which should be considered in the latter part of the sequence, presents a number of problems for ESL students as it does for native speakers, most centering around correct use of the relative pronoun and when to delete the original object. This structure will be discussed in more detail later on.

Participial phrases are among the most difficult structures to be considered in our program, and their use might best be limited to adjectival function. Useful comparisons can be drawn between use of

this structure and the relative clause. ESL students will have most difficulty in learning how to use the participial form in place of past and present tenses.

The gerund phrase will be the most difficult structure for ESL students of all those we are considering, and consideration should be limited to its most common use as object of a preposition. The difficulty arises because it requires use of a special form and is specific-verb related; and since it is among the least-used of our structures, ESL students have had little exposure to it.

The infinitive phrase, by contrast, is commonly used and is one of the easiest structures to handle. It is worth considering at this point along with the gerund because it is often used inappropriately in place of that structure, and a comparison of the two structures is helpful for ESL students. The infinitive phrase may be shown in its three functions as verb object, adverbial, and adjectival.

INTRODUCING SENTENCE COMBINING

Generally, working with advanced students, one will find some who have already internalized a few of the transformations under consideration. This means that they will be able to produce them in normal writing situations with little conscious effort. Others will be able to recognize an appropriate structure or form as opposed to a non-English one when they are presented side by side. In introducing sentence combining to a class it is well to use those resources the students bring with them. Formal grammar presentations often do not work well, and unless carefully handled, sentence combining lessons will do no better. An approach more likely to succeed is an inductive one whereby students are led to discover for themselves the way the English language functions.

To begin an introductory lesson, the instructor might take a compound sentence written by one of the students in an earlier composition, break it into its two kernels, and write them on the board. For example:

I called the hotel. They reserved a room for me.

When asked if these sentences can be combined into one, most students will recognize that it can be done with the insertion of the word *and*. Give them two more related kernels:

I'm looking for a job. I can't find one.

all of the students now recognize that the sentences can be joined, and a few may offer the word *but* as an appropriate joiner. Moving on to more advanced structures, the teacher might offer:

Crimes are increasing. The crimes are violent.

Smoking should be illegal. Smoking causes cancer.

I have an uncle. He lives in Puerto Rico.

One may get several answers for each item and in response might ask: “Is this sentence English?” and “Does it have about the same meaning as the two original sentences?” If there is more than one acceptable answer remaining after eliminating the unacceptable responses, the teacher can then ask the students which they prefer and why. In most cases students will be able to determine the answers to the first two questions without help from you, although if there is disagreement the teacher should certainly serve as the authority. It is better to remain non-judgmental about the third question, at this point, encouraging students to make their own “stylistic” choices among acceptable possibilities. Note that students will have quickly learned the general principle of sentence combining without having been given any rules or technical terminology. A few more simple examples done individually will help establish consciously for the students the principle involved. From this point, one can move on to consideration of individual structures as outlined above, grouping students according to their diagnosed needs.

When instructing ESL students in the use of these structures, the teacher must keep in mind that, unlike native speakers, they cannot always rely on their intuitive good sense as to what sounds “right” or “best.” But neither should one expect memorization of rules. Rules are important to the ESL student but are internalized better when arrived at inductively and put immediately into practice.

The following are suggestions for instructing students in the use of the prenominal adjective and relative clause which incorporate these principles.

PRENOMINAL ADJECTIVES

Transformational grammarians have identified the prenominal adjective as the product of several possible transformational processes:

- (a) Where the adjective has been taken from a post-nominal structure as in the reduction of a relative clause, e.g.,

He looked for the treasure *which had been stolen*.

He looked for the *stolen* treasure.

- (b) Where there is the deletion of a related independent clause, or sentence, with a predicate adjective, e.g.,
 The rug was stolen. *The rug was Persian.*
 The *Persian* rug was stolen.
- (c) Where there is the reduction of certain adjectival prepositional phrases, e.g.,
 They rented a boat. The boat was *for fishing.*
 They rented a *fishing* boat.
- (d) Where there is the reduction of certain noun phrases, e.g.,
 The doctor looked at the leg. The leg had *an infection.*
 The doctor looked at the *infected* leg.

This is a structure that generally presents few problems for native speakers but can offer a number of difficulties for ESL students such as the prenominal positioning of the adjective, the proper sequencing of two adjectives, and the use of correct adjectival and possessive forms.

The first task for the instructor is establishing for the student that in English, adjectives (or “one-word describers”) commonly appear before the noun (or “word that they describe”). Students can be helped to arrive at this awareness, and to formulate a “rule” about English grammar, through several methods. A teacher might present them with a number of sentences containing one prenominal descriptive adjective, ask them to identify the “descriptive word” and “word being described,” elicit the terms “noun” and “adjective,” and help the students come to a conclusion about the relative positioning of the two. One can also offer several pairs of sentences to be combined by a shift of the adjective to prenominal position and then ask them to formulate the rule. If a teacher’s philosophy of teaching permits him to offer incorrect structures to students, he might give them sentences with the adjective misplaced and ask, “Which of these sentences are English and which are not?” For an additional means of contrast one might ask students to write similar sentences in their native language and have them point out the differences in word order. All of this is calculated to make the prenominal adjective positioning a conscious one for students.

From here one can offer students sentence-combining exercises fashioned after the transformations illustrated above. Some students will ask for rules governing the sequence of adjectives. Many will need to learn the derivational endings as well as possessive forms. Marcella Frank’s workbook (Part I) treats these matters intelligibly and offers excellent exercises. In Strong’s *Sentence Combining*, students are given the opportunity to practice the transformation in many of its various forms in some of the earlier (and simpler) selections. In the following

list, * indicates passages that require the transformation from a prepositional phrase and ** indicates selection that require sequencing of two or more prenominal adjectives:

“French Fries”	“In Touch”
“Hamburgers”**	“Wave”* **
“Coffee”	“Main Drag, Saturday Night”* **
“Table”* **	“Just Before the Rain Falls,”**
“Ashtray”**	“Making a Stew”*
“Matchstick”**	

Additional opportunities to use this transformation are provided in many of the more advanced selections (see footnote 6). The prenominal adjective is most easily incorporated into descriptive passages, and students might be asked to write such paragraphs, incorporating as much description as they can before nouns. With this kind of constant practice, students can be helped to use prenominal adjectives appropriately and with excellent effect in more advanced expository pieces.

RELATIVE CLAUSES

Accurate use of the relative clause appears to be among the more sophisticated grammatical processes for native speakers; it is therefore understandable that ESL students will have difficulty with the structure, at least in certain forms. Consider what students must contend with: the relative pronoun changes according to its referent while *that* can be used in most cases; there is a tendency to drop the pronoun when it is an object; the relative has a dual function as connector as well as clause subject or object; and there are complications in the use of *who* and *whom* and in restrictive vs. non-restrictive clauses.

In presenting this structure to ESL students it is better to concentrate on the “basics,” starting with appropriate uses of *who*, *which* and *that* with a minimum of terminology. Once again, an inductive approach is beneficial. Present the students with pairs of sentences to combine. The relative pronouns are so commonly used that at least some students will be able to accomplish this. One can begin with subject (or delayed subject) modification. For example:

This is the building. It had a fire last week.

That’s the man. He robbed me.

The man is coming today. He painted the house last month.

Abraham Lincoln became one of our greatest presidents. He started as a simple country lawyer.

Racquetball is played indoors. It is becoming very popular.

Also give examples where the pronoun is an object (or can be omitted):

The magazine finally arrived. He subscribed to the magazine.

The man is a specialist. I am going to see him.

There may be acceptable variant responses such as use of a participial phrase or adverbial clause instead of the relative clause, and they should be acknowledged and used for comparison when studying those structures. There will be a number of possible answers to the last item, of which all should be accepted: *who*, *whom*, *that*, and omitted pronoun. To quibble with *who* as an object in the pre-verbal position or with *that* in reference to people is to place an unnecessary burden on ESL students.

Based on a number of examples like those illustrated above, one can ask students to generalize about the appropriate use of particular pronouns and when a pronoun can be omitted. Follow up with exercises where the relative modifies an object so that students come to see the variety of possibilities. For more advanced students, one can introduce relatives of time and place as well as the possessive form.

There are useful sentence exercises in Frank's workbook (Part II) and in Hall's *Building Complex English Sentences* and one can then follow up with selections from Strong. Among the earlier passages which employ this structure are: "Hair," "Working Girl," "Pawnbroker," "Things," "Most of Us Remember," "Just Before the Rain Falls," and "American Unfreeway." The structure can be used frequently in many of the expository selections in Strong listed earlier.

If sentence combining is to be an effective way of helping students to improve their control of grammatical structures in writing, the teacher must use the inherent strength of the method: the direct experience of writing good sentences, preferably in extended discourse, and with minimal time lag between insight and application. Sentence combining is not an end in itself, nor is it a method that excludes all others. It is *one* very effective tool to be used within a larger writing program.