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Elray L. Pedersen

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SENTENCE-COMBINING FOR ESL STUDENTS

Elray L. Pedersen

Brigham Young University

Formal instruction in traditional grammar has not helped students write better in any observable ways. Over twenty years ago, for example, Research in Written Composition studies noted that "In view of the widespread agreement of research studies based on many types of students and teachers, the conclusion can be stated in strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing." (Braddock and others, 1963, pp. 37-38)

How ironic are such findings to the public school teachers who dutifully drill students in grammatical terminology, the eight parts of speech, sentence analysis, and sentence diagramming. How ironic are such reports to English teachers who have faithfully taught the recognition and avoidance of major grammar errors such as errors in modification, reference, and agreement. How ironic are these reports to those of us who have spent untold hours correcting grammatical errors in student writing. How ironic is the failure of traditional grammar instruction to the profession of English teaching whose teachers have for more than a hundred years exercised a mystical faith in the power of grammar to evoke more effective written expression.

Formal instruction in traditional grammar, obviously, has been an important part of traditional as well as English as a Second Language classrooms. Researchers in New York State in 1916, for example, reported that 42 percent of the total time students spent in English classes was devoted to traditional grammar instruction (Hook, 1979), grammar instruction aimed primarily at improving student writing and speaking; grammar instruction based squarely on the assumption that knowledge of grammar improves writing. And the call of educators in the 1970's and 1980's has been, "Let's get back to the basics," meaning that students must be exposed to intensive drill in grammar if they are ever going to write well (Tabbert, 1984).

But all research investigations conducted during the first six decades of the 1900's have failed to justify teacher faith in formal grammar instruction. Thus, in the late 1960's the study of formal grammar was abandoned in many classrooms across the United States. Nevertheless, in the mid 1960's research into the effects of students engaging in applied transformational grammar--generative grammar not traditional--exercises began turning the world of grammar instruction and writing improvement upside down. Bateman and Zidonis (1966) reported at Ohio State University that a knowledge of generative grammar enabled students to increase the number of grammatically correct sentences they wrote and to increase the complexity and effectiveness of their

sentences. For the first time in more than three score years of research, faith in grammar instruction paid off--careful research had actually shown that knowledge of a grammar was accomplished by writing improvement.

Since the pioneering work of Bateman and Zidonis two decades ago important research has led to informative and momentous discoveries, all of them related to using transformational grammar to improve the writing skills of native and non-native student writers. Seven major developments stemming from research of the past twenty years deserve particular attention: (1) A way to scientifically define and measure sentence length has been developed and field tested; (2) Syntactic fluency levels for native American speakers and writers have been established for all public school grades and for skilled, professional adults; (3) Efficient diagnostic tools for measuring norms of and growth in syntactic fluency have been developed and tested; (4) Sentence-combining exercises have been developed that boost student syntactic fluency levels from one to four years of normal maturational growth after only 10 to 20 weeks of practice; (5) Practicing sentence-combining significantly improves the overall quality of student discourse; (6) Practicing sentence-combining improves specific perceived attributes of student discourse, attributes such as use of organization, use of logic, use of concrete details, and presence of meaningful and creative ideas; and (7) sentence-combining practice has been shown to be the most successful teaching strategy currently available to help students improve their writing.

Each of these points merits elaboration. First, not until 1965 was there general agreement among writing and language development scholars on how to define what a sentence is and how to measure sentence length. Although LaBrant (1933) developed a subordination index based on dependent clauses and independent clauses, this measure confused researchers because they could not agree on how to count coordinated verb structures such as "Yesterday he walked to the chemistry building and counted the cracks in the sidewalk." In addition, researchers disagreed among themselves on the use of this index in regards to variables such as composition length, subject matter focus and sampling procedures (O'Donnell, 1976). Moreover, Fries (1952) summarized the confusions by devoting twenty pages of his The Structure of English to discussing more than 200 different definitions of the sentence contained in English grammar textbooks, concretely discussing disagreements characterizing the profession.

Finally in 1965 Kellogg Hunt got teachers and researchers to agree on using the t-unit--the minimal terminal unit, the thought unit--as the scientific measure of sentence length in the English profession. He defined the t-unit as a single independent clause together with any dependent clauses and modifiers accompanying it. "I knew that he was happy" to a single t-unit. "Carlos waited at home and hurried to the door when the door bell rang" is also a single t-unit. "You're happy, but you're not as happy as I am" is a two t-units because of the two complete independent clauses (Pedersen, 1977).

For English as a Second Language teachers, the t-unit is a tool that measures the syntactic fluency levels of the students they work with. So-called "broken English" and "fluent English" can now be defined and measured in terms of native English speaker proficiencies. Moreover, native speaker proficiencies have been normed for students in grades of the public schools and for skilled professional adults, the norms showing a gradual increase in the numbers of words students use in sentences as the students mature in language development.

Norms for average number of words per t-unit as established by Hunt (1965), O'Donnell and others (1967), and Hunt (1970) for native American students and adults are as follows:

Grade Level	Words Per T-Unit	Grade Level	Words Per T-Unit
3	7.67	8	11.34
4	8.51	9	12.22
5	9.34	10	12.99
6	9.64	11	13.76
7	9.99	12	14.40

Skilled Adults and Professional Writers 20.30

These norms serve as excellent reference points for determining syntactic fluency levels of native or non-native writers of English. Objective measures that can be used to place students in specific curricular programs, these norms can also be used as a basis for prescribing specific curricular materials for students.

In addition, over a period of years several simplifications have taken place in the computation of t-units. When Mellon (1969) began computing t-unit length statistics for the students he worked with at Harvard, for example, he used 90 different t-units to determine the average numbers of words a student wrote per written sentence. O'Hare (1973) used just 50 t-units to compute the syntactic fluency norms of the students in his study, the 50 t-units approximating 500 words of student discourse. Combs (1975) and Pedersen (1979), however, showed that only 30 t-units are necessary to compute words per sentence totals for students.

A further refinement and simplification of the process of determining words per t-unit is the development and testing of diagnostic tools such as Hunt's (1970) Aluminum Passage. Through administering a simple rewrite exercise of 32 short sentences, a teacher can determine the general syntactic fluency and grade level of any native or non-native writer. The Aluminum Passage is fast, descriptive, and efficient. For diagnostic testing of students and counter-balancing of assignments, the Bee Passage and the Chicken Passage are also available (Pedersen, 1977). All of these diagnostic tools save much time over previous procedures of counting from 30 to 90 t-units in a student's free writing.

Once sentence-combining researchers established a way of measuring syntactic development and syntactic maturity, they set forth to hasten its growth. They constructed sentence-combining exercises and materials aimed at boosting the normal syntactic growth levels of students. They reasoned that if it is possible to get a tenth grade writer to write with the syntactic fluency of a college student, then researchers should try to bring about such a world. A fourth innovation, therefore, is the sentence-combining curricular materials that have been developed by sentence-combining researchers. Working with seventh graders exclusively, Mellon (1969), O'Hare (1973), Combs (1975) and Pedersen (1979) have experimented with sentence-combining exercises that have boosted syntactic fluency levels of students from one to four years in ten to twenty weeks of practice, the practice varying from one hour to one and one half hours a week. Having English as a Second Language students use lessons practiced in the O'Hare (1973) and Combs (1975) studies, Pedersen's English as a Second Language students at Weber State College achieved gains up to four years above normal maturational growth levels.

Today many texts on grammar and writing include tested materials on sentence-combining. The texts involve four basic types of language processing: Addition (She is happy. She is not happy); Deletion (She is as tall as I am tall. She is as tall as I); Rearrangement (You are going. Are you going?); and Substitution (The man fell down. The man broke his leg. The man who fell down broke his leg). Exercises usually proceed from simple processing to complex processes. Some exercises as in O'Hare (1973) and O'Hare (1974) are signalled, forcing students to combine sentences that result in predictable answers. Other exercises are open, as in Strong (1983), allowing students to write sentences with much variety in them.

Firm evidence from more than a score of research studies documents the fact that students who combine sentences make growth at significant levels in the overall quality of their discourse. In addition to the studies of seventh grade writers cited above is the major study conducted at Miami University at Oxford, Ohio in conjunction with the freshman English program. Students in this as well as all other major studies of the effects of sentence-combining achieved gains significant at the .001 level of significance (Morenberg and others, 1978).

The Morenberg (1978) and Pedersen (1979) studies also document the finding that specific qualities of student discourse are improved at significant levels, qualities such as maturity and originality of content and perceived attributes such as the presence of sharp details and logic. Indeed, sentence-combining practice seems to stimulate in writers a better general overall cognitive performance, a performance that is viewed as being superior to that of comparable writers who have not engaged in sentence-combining practice.

Finally, in 1979 in the Research Roundup section of the English Journal, Charles Cooper proclaimed that sentence-combining practice has resulted in more positive gains for student writers than has any other single pedagogical practice in the English classroom.

The wheels of progress turn slowly. The computer age and all of the innovations of the 1980's have yet to experience what can be accomplished in the classrooms of the 80's with sentence-combining, especially in the classrooms of the English as a Second Language student. Sentence-combining research firmly establishes continuous sentence-combining practice as one of the hopes for better communication in our international world. An eight decades long search for a grammar and a strategy that really work in the classroom and the writing of our students should not be, must not be, overlooked. It is time for us to discover which kinds of sentence-combining exercises are needed most by specific non-native speakers of English such as the Japanese, the Chinese and the Spanish. It is time to determine which perceived attributes of writing can be enhanced most by specific sentence-combining exercises. It is time to put sentence-combining practice to the test. It is time to demonstrate the degrees to which sentence-combining practice can enhance the writing performances of students who are learning English as a Second Language.

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