

IV.C.5 The Importance of the Sentence

Peters (1981) (in Brown (1994)) challenges the assumption that children when learning a first language proceed from sounds to words to sentences and so on. Peters found a number of **gestalt patterns** that would indicate that children know in advance about such things as intonation patterns of sentences. **Such findings support the fact that “sentence learners” (as opposed to “word learners”) may be more common than researchers assume.** Perhaps we are underestimating the holistic ability of the mind to deal more with wholes than with parts.

Therefore, if children grasp the nature of a sentence quickly, why not tell them what the forms of the sentences are, especially when they can be reduced to ten basic forms? Sooner or later, anybody can remember and learn to write the ten basic forms of sentences at two separate levels of complexity.

As previously pointed out, the main difference between speech and writing is the use of the *clause*. Brown (1994) says that

readers – especially second language readers who may be quite adept in the spoken language – have to retool their cognitive preceptors in order to extract meaning from the written code. The linguistic differences between speech and writing are another major contributing cause to difficulty.

The absence of any system or guide that will assist students in the retooling of their cognitive preceptors and thus help them in their writing has been a major stumbling block in language teaching, especially in teaching students of English as a second language. Grammar analysis does not teach them how to write good sentences; neither does the communicative approach. The reasons they have not worked so far is because people have not reduced the sentence to its real essential components, looked at the ways in which the components are put together, and then found a way to remember those important observations, and practiced them in a challenging yet socially harmonious and enlightening way.

For the Forms section of the book, we draw some of our ideas from Marie Waddell's (1983) *The Art of Styling Sentences: 20 Patterns for Success*. This book shows various patterns, some of which are included in our scheme, but which we designate *forms*. Our scheme, however, is more comprehensive, better organized, and easier to remember. Waddell wanted to show a few popular and effective patterns for aspiring writers; we incorporate these, add more, and put them in a hierarchy and terminology that is easy to remember. We have also designed a much more comprehensive learning system for the study of English. This is not only for writers – it is for all English students worldwide.

The Ten Plus One forms are not mutually exclusive, so that a sentence may combine or include more than one form. One form can be embedded in another; forms can be put side by side or repeated; imaginative ways of mixing the forms is limited only by one's imagination and close attention to the forms as they are being deployed in the sentence. ***The key point is that there are only ten basic forms, which, as already mentioned, can give rise to more than 130 variations.*** All forms are exemplified by abundant examples taken from a wide variety of authentic sources.

All forms are recognizable by their looks and features; they can be easily emulated in writing, and easily noticed in all reading selections.

Let us pause and look briefly at another reason we adopt the sentence as the object of our focus. If we look at a chart of the fundamental units of sentences, we see clearly that it is **the sentence that is the middle level of our list**. In our analysis, therefore, we are treading the middle path. **The sentence is the fulcrum on which our ideas are balanced.** The sentence is *our minimal threshold value, our critical mass, our building block*.

We are not focusing on the deeper linguistic aspects of word usage or grammatical aspects of phrase construction. Our attempt, rather, is to inspire and equip the novice writer with enough expertise to make a solid start at good writing.

Additional points, details, and rules of usage and governance will become clear to the novice writer and the attentive reader over time. We repeat again **that it is the sentence that seems to us to be of noticeable enough substance and weight that it merits our scrutiny and methodical consideration. It is the sentence that minimally conveys a single thought or idea. It is the sentence that is the fundamental unit of all our written communication, as well as all good spoken communication.**

Any progressive system of language instruction must focus on **the forms of the sentence** if it is to be an effective tool of communication.

Each sentence has **coherence, fluidity, an individual and distinct shape**. Cities have skylines; birds have color patterns on their wings; people have iris patterns and fingerprints and DNA profiles; and **sentences have common recognizable forms, characteristic stamps that writers use and that readers can be taught to notice and appreciate.**

SENTENCE CONSTRUCTION UNIT CHART					
	Construction Unit	Has Sound	Expresses Meaning	Expresses One Idea	Expresses Several Ideas
1	letter (grapheme) or phonetic letter (morpheme)	✓	(✓)	x	x
2	syllable	✓	(✓)	x	x
3	word	✓	✓	x	x
4	phrase	✓	✓	x	x
5	clause	dependent	✓	✓	x
		independent			(✓)
6	sentence	✓	✓	✓	(✓)
7	paragraph	✓	✓	✓	✓
8	short essay or short story or anecdote	✓	✓	✓	✓
9	long essay or long story or long talk	✓	✓	✓	✓
10	book or long paper or series of lectures	✓	✓	✓	✓
✓ = yes (✓) = sometimes x = no					

INSTRUCTION FOR TEACHING SENTENCE FORMS IN THE CLASSROOM

Below is a description of how the sentence forms should be taught on a typical day in class.

At this point, we will outline a typical day during the Sentence Forms part of the course.

On the first day a sentence form is taught, the teacher should give the name of the new form and explain how it is used. Several easy as well as a few literary examples should be given for the student to scrutinize and discern the exact features of each sentence form. The students are then given some time to write a few samples of their own, and then told to put them on the board. These examples are then reviewed by the teacher and students, with the teacher making comments on and checking the accuracy of each example as is appropriate.

By this method, right away the students are involved personally in the creative process in the classroom. Students are next told to write several examples for homework, which will be put on the board and looked at by the whole class the next day. Students may talk over questions they may have or discuss their concerns about their sentences with some fellow students while other classmates write their sentence on the board. The atmosphere should be relaxed, and the students should feel comfortable comparing notes and observing what others are doing.

The teacher can move around the classroom talking to students at their seats, helping the students at the board, or commenting about the final sentences placed on the board. The teacher is a combination coach, facilitator, encourager, and monitor of the ongoing efforts at sentence construction.

Although the atmosphere is relaxed, students realize that they must eventually put their sentences on the board. No one likes to appear foolish and incompetent in public, so students will naturally want to perfect the sentences that they want to display to others on the board.

Furthermore, we see that the content of this system is not confined to a single printed book, but instead will grow each time the course is given. From new additions by new classes of students, better samples of writing can be saved by the teacher and shared with subsequent classes. Posting better sentences on the internet also provides a unique enriching resource for teachers and students practicing this method.

Grammar is explained “on the go”. Praise is given more often than criticism. Corrections are made with little or no fanfare or derogatory comments. **More attention is paid when the sentence forms are rendered correctly, rather than incorrectly.**

Students will, of course, make mistakes on the board, but that is also one of the purposes of the exercise. The primary purpose is to furnish the students with excellent examples of sentence forms and to inspire students with confidence that they can write such excellent sentences.

A secondary purpose of the exercise, however, is for students to discover by themselves, with some correction and assistance from the teacher, the typical kinds of errors and mistakes that everyone makes when they first try to develop their skill at writing these sentence forms.

“The mistakes of others are good teachers.” says an Estonian proverb (Lynberg 1996). Letting students experience in public their mistakes and errors in writing these sentence forms will enable them to acquire mastery over those mistakes and take full control of the form. Students learn best by sharing their own writing publicly before others. They automatically pay greater attention to corrections of their errors when their classmates are watching them. Public sharing of sentences is a form of real-world accountability where one shines or realizes painfully but constructively that one needs to improve.

Rivers (1987), talking about students keeping *dialogue journals*, recommends that teachers *“rephrase awkward expressions while commenting on the content.”* Rivers notes:

*Learning grammar, however, is not listening to exposition of rules but rather inductively developing rules from **living language material** and then [the] **performing** [of the] **rules**.* [bold emphasis added]

Teachers should correct students, and students should correct one another in these exercises, in a kind way. The first half of a Scottish proverb rings true for this situation: **“Wink at small faults...”** (Lynberg 1996). Students, however, should be tolerant and supportive when others make mistakes, and should not deride their classmates. The real focus of every student should be on themselves, their own here-and-now, their own sentences. Students should pay close attention, understand the form, then emulate them many times to master them – not once, not twice, but maybe a dozen times.

Students should not let up until they understand the forms and can replicate them in their writing.

SOURCES OF EXAMPLES FOR STUDENTS TO EMULATE

The teacher usually does not draw on examples from a single book, but instead includes any or all examples from the five sources that follow.

This is not an exhaustive chart, but it might help acquaint the students with various styles of English by exhibiting to them examples taken from the following five sources:

FIVE RELIABLE SOURCES FOR GOOD EXAMPLES	
1	Examples of sentences by students themselves (most important by far);
2	Examples of sentences by the teacher ;
3	Examples of sentences by published writers whose first language was/is only English i.e. Shakespeare, Emerson, Twain; Stowe; Austen; Atwood;
4	Examples of sentences from sources of wisdom : (a) <u>Divinely-inspired examples</u> , i.e. the Beatitudes, some Psalms, the Hidden Words, the Bhagavad Gita, liturgical and devotional scriptures and writings; (b) <u>proverbs</u> of various nations Note: most of these were not originally written in English, but they still do contain many of the sentence forms in the translated work
5	Examples of sentences by published writers whose first language was/is a language other than English i.e. Chinua Achebe, ChangRae Lee, Rabindranath Tagore, Lin Yutang, Amos Tutuola, Paolo Soleri, Amy Lee, etc;

Once the students catch on to the system, they too may become sources of excellent examples of the Ten Plus One Sentence Forms. They too will want to show off their latest flashy examples of each particular form.

The teacher functions as a *coach*, insisting on *moderate discipline*, *conscientious effort*, and *diligent practice* - coordinating, delegating, reviewing completed work, and giving student new relevant assignments.

Charts should be displayed around the room, helping to inspire and reinforce in the minds of the students the key components of the language. The various components of all the charts can be repeated, memorized, and recited individually or together at various times when called upon by the teacher. In this way, the teacher has available a repertoire of both written work and oral recitation that can be used in an interactive and integral function according to the needs of the students and the disposition of the teacher on any given day. The teacher can vary at will the content of the classroom in an interesting, varied, and non-repetitive manner.

Learning to write by imitation and emulation is not a new concept. When we are young readers, we always are attracted to certain writers or genres,

because of the special style that we find featured in such books. We should extend and refine this natural practice by asking students to find examples of the sentence forms in their favorite books. ***We should teach our children to read and to look for the recognizable features buried in the sentence. Those features are there, students should become aware of them, and recognize their force, function, and nuance.***

Lewis Mumford once wrote: ***“The imitation of other artists is one of the means by which a person enriches and finally establishes his own individuality.”***

THE CENTRALITY AND IMPORTANCE OF ORAL RECITATION IN THE METHOD OF INSTRUCTION

There is another practice that is important in the instruction of this approach. **Students must read their sentences when their turn comes.** Only by doing so will they have sufficient practice in oral recitation to understand how to take apart and properly read what we will later describe as the units of meaning in a sentence. Only by reciting out loud will they learn to emphasize by sound the adverbs and to emphasize the adjectives by driving them into the nouns.

Effective punctuation is as much a matter of sound as of sight, and only oral recitation enables students to really understand the power and potency of the three power punctuation marks: the colon, the semi-colon, and the dash. It is hardly any accident that most students after sometimes 16 years in public schools and colleges seem unacquainted with any punctuation marks except the comma and the period. Extensive oral recitation will remedy this lapse forever.

The Two Hands Approach thus incorporates public performance in front of the class, and enables the teacher to quickly publicly grade them based on their language as well as participation or leadership in the class and in their group activities and recitals.

STUDENTS LEARN TO WRITE DURING CLASS TIME EVEN WITHOUT HOMEWORK

The students are required to participate by writing fresh, original examples of every new form. They must then place their sentences on the board in class as already discussed. Social peer pressure induces them to participate. Students must learn in class, and will learn the forms even if they don't do the homework.

Inevitably, they will practice the forms so frequently in the classroom that they will master the forms even if they don't do all the homework. This fact is of major importance, because it is common knowledge that in innumerable

American high schools, students do little or no homework. They must be taught to write during class time, but few present methods succeed in doing that.

METHOD OF ASSIGNING COMPOSITIONS

Once several forms have been studied, the teacher should then assign a composition that must include a specified set of sentence forms, anywhere from 3 to 15 sentence forms, in whatever combination or frequency the teacher specifies. Obviously, the teacher should begin by assigning 1 or 2 paragraphs with 2 to 5 specified forms, then, gradually, increasing the number of paragraphs until they become essays, then varying the types of essays assigned. The students can mix in their own sentences written without attention to or without following the specified forms of the current assignment, but they must include at least those specified forms.

Whenever the student uses one of the assigned forms in their composition, that student ***must specify by a footnote or endnote which sentence forms they used. In the footnote or endnote, they should designate the sentence form that was used by giving the form's abbreviated code.*** Thus, by just glancing at the footnotes or endnotes, the teacher can tell which forms were used and which ones were not used, and it is an easy task to see whether or not the student has done the assignment correctly. **The forms are a control on the student to pay attention to what they write, and the teacher can look below at the footnote or endnote to see the various forms used in the composition.** The teacher has manageable control over the output.

There are many advantages of this system. First, the student is given clear and concrete directions on how to vary their sentences; for another reason, the teacher has a running record of the sentence forms that a student has mastered or not mastered, and can make assignments to correct any shortcomings. Still another advantage of this system is that it eliminates the increasing problem of plagiarism.

SENTENCE COMBINING AS AN AID TO WRITING, AND ESPECIALLY A GREAT AID TO TEACHING STUDENTS RE-WRITING

Students can then go on to practice sentence combining. After they have learned the ten basic forms, the **practice of sentence combining is especially effective in teaching the importance of re-writing the original drafts. They learn that re-writing involves selection of not just the first and only thing they think of writing, but that they must choose the best among many options.**

Sentence combining, moreover, provides students with kernels of sentences written by someone else which they must then combine, selecting various stylistic options. Students are less embarrassed when they have to manipulate and rewrite other people's initial thoughts and words, rather than their own. They are forced to think about how to combine kernel sentences and re-write their compositions effectively.

Students do not have to spend undue time creating initial drafts, but can spend time on rewriting itself and working at a higher level of complexity, sentence structure, and style.

Two books by William Strong (1973, 1981) provide plenty of examples and exercises. Students will learn to write sentences with greater variety. Within the class, sentence kernels will be transformed into a wide array of interesting sentences – all done by the students.

CLUSTERING AND SENTENCE COMBINING

Clustering followed by the construction of simple kernel sentences is a good way to start a composition. Students should then be asked to combine the kernel sentences into longer and more varied sentences. Finally, they should link the sentences into paragraphs and the paragraphs into essays.