

SENTENCE COMBINING: A Theory and Two Reviews

by Ron Shook

There is something new under the sun and it is finding its way into ESL classes. The "new" thing is *sentence combining*. Although the concept has been around for some and has been utilized successfully in grade schools and junior highs in the United States, it is only recently that teachers of English to speakers of other languages have become aware of it or that materials have become available to them. I have two such ESL sentence combining texts before me now, the first that I am aware of outside of Allen's *Working Sentences*. The two texts are Rainsbury, *Written English* and Gallin-gane and Byrd, *Write Away*.

These two books represent an interesting blending of theory with practice and are the result of significant turn of thought in language pedagogy. It is this: teaching grammatical theory does not insure that students will be able to produce grammatical sentences, but one can, utilizing grammatical theory, construct exercises that force students to produce grammatical sentences. The sentence combining parts of these texts don't "teach" any grammar. What they do is to put the student in a situation where he or she utilizes the grammar that is already in the mind.

This article is intended to do two things: 1) acquaint the reader with the theory of sentence combining and 2) review the two books mentioned above. If the reader is already familiar with sentence combining or bored with theory she/he is invited to skip the first part and proceed to the reviews.

SENTENCE COMBINING--WHAT IT IS AND WHAT IT IS NOT.

When Chomsky burst on the scene with *Syntactic Structures* in 1957, he brought with him the notion of the "kernel sentence," a basic, no frills SVO sentence which was doctored up by transformations into more intricate patterns. As syntactic

theory become more sophisticated, the notion of the "kernel sentence" was dropped by theorists but picked up on the first bounce by pedagogues. "If," they asked themselves, "we make big sentences out of a number of smaller ones, why can't we teach children this new grammar and see if it helps them?" And so they did. Children were subjected to various versions of transformational generative grammar, to the delight of linguists and the despair of teachers and students. However, it did seem to work. In a landmark study Donald Bateman and Frank Zidonis taught transformational grammar to a group of seventh graders. Sure enough, the ability of the seventh graders to make longer sentences (called "syntactic fluency") increased. Thus it seemed that transformational generative grammar was not only a realistic description of the English language but accurately catalogued what went on in a person's mind.

But others weren't so sure. Mark Lester has suggested, for instance, that teaching transformational grammar and expecting students to write better was much like teaching logic and expecting people to be logical. It didn't necessarily follow. Yet, the evidence seemed strong. Why, if transformational generative grammar didn't work, did the writing students tested by Bateman and Zidonis improve?

In an attempt to improve upon the study of Bateman and Zidonis (which it needed) John Mellon undertook a study which he called *Transformational Sentence Combining*. In this study he did away with the cumbersome theoretical apparatus of Bateman and Zidonis and taught a streamlined grammatical theory. And, as had Bateman and Zidonis, he supplemented his teaching with exercises in combining sentences. The Mellon study confirmed the findings of Bateman and Zidonis: children who are

exposed to transformational generative grammar are able to write longer, more complex sentences.

However, the basic question, as put by Lester and others, had not been answered by Mellon. The problem was that there were really two variables in the study. One was the teaching of a theoretical grammar, and the other was practice in the application of that grammar. Which of the two was making the difference? In order to answer this question Frank O'Hare conducted a study he called *Sentence Combining* (the absence of the word "transformational" is significant). In this study O'Hare simply gave his students exercises in various methods of combining sentences. His students, like the students in the other two studies, were able to write longer, more syntactically mature sentences. But this time it was clear. It was the exercises.

So it appeared that it was not the *teaching* of grammar that helped students write but the doing of exercises that forced students to apply rules of that grammar. Students forced by the circumstances of an exercise to produce grammatical embeddings are able to do so. Subsequent work in California has yielded impressive results in using sentence combining as a tool in developing communicative competence. The Department of Education of the state of Hawaii has created a number of sentence combining texts. And there is at least one text on the market (*Strong Sentence Combining*) that is nothing but a series of sentence combining exercises.

Sentence Combining in ESL

It seems that there is great promise for sentence combining as a device for teaching young people to write. A person may develop a greater productive capability by simply tapping the grammar that he has in his head. To date, however, sentence combining has mainly been used with people that are a) young, and b) native speakers of English. The question for ESL teachers is whether sentence combining has any worth at all, has limited worth, or great worth for ESL. Can it be used in the same way it is with native speakers? The problem boils down to this: does sentence combining operate off an already acquired competence

or does it help to develop competence? If, for instance, a person must already have an internalized grammar to work from, then sentence combining will be of limited value to the second language speaker. It could be used only as an accessory to consciously acquired grammatical structures. If, on the other hand, sentence combining can actually build that underlying system of rules we call grammar, then it might be one of the most significant techniques to emerge in the past quarter century.

On the basis of the evidence to date, my feeling is that sentence combining will serve best as an adjunct to formal instruction in grammatical principles. I feel it is an advance that will help students enormously. I feel that if it is used correctly, it is a creative, eye-opening exercise for students of English as a second language. It can be used for a number of different things—to teach the rhetoric of the sentence, for instance. And sentence combining can be used effectively to show different ways of relating thought to thought in language. I predict a great future for sentence combining in ESL classes.

REVIEWS

Rainsbury, Robert. *Written English: An Introduction for Beginning Students of English as a Second Language*. Prentice-Hall, 1978. Paperback, workbook format, detachable pages, and holes for three-ring binder.

Rainsbury's *Written English* is a fairly low level program in teaching writing. A number of grammatical structures are taught, starting with very, very basic things such as beginning a sentence with a capital and ending with a period. By the time the student is finished with the book he has not progressed into complicated structures (the last four lessons deal with phrases and clauses). I'm not going to discuss the grammatical structures and the way they are presented. In this review I will simply discuss the sentence combining exercises that Rainsbury uses. The format of the book is as follows: four or five or six lessons are set up presenting certain grammatical structures and then sentence combining exercises are given to elicit these particular structures from the student. So we start out with possessive pronouns, noun plurals, the ING forms of the verbs, prepositional phrases, and so on.

Chapter Seven is the first contact the student has with sentence combining.

Lessons Seven and Eight are the exercises in sentence combining, which never go beyond the range of the simple sentence in English. All that is done is to take a very basic subject-verb-object simple sentence and make it into a longer, but still basic subject-verb-object sentence. An example is the following:

The boy is tall.

The boy is handsome.

The boy is tall and handsome.

The boy is young.

The boy is a student.

The boy is a young student.

Tom is a student.

John is a student.

Tom and John are students.

And that's all there is to it. The exercises are designed to give students practice in understanding the relationship of adjectives to the rest of the sentence.

The next set of sentence combining exercises is found in Chapter Fourteen. Sentences are combined using *because*, *so*, and noun phrases. In other words, the sentence combining exercises now involve what in traditional grammar would be complex sentences. An example is as follows:

I'm washing the dishes.

They're dirty.

I'm washing the dishes because they're dirty.

At this point the student should be learning that a person can combine two propositions to form a single idea with one proposition subordinate to the other. Here one of the weaknesses of the book becomes evident. The second sentence of this exercise is "They're dirty." The pronoun *they* and the contraction are supplied by the text, not produced by the student. This is a mistake. I see no reason the student shouldn't be producing as much as he can in constructing sentences. For example, I would like to see this difference made in the exercise:

I'm washing the dishes.

The dishes are dirty.

I'm washing the dishes because they're dirty.

Note that the student in this exercise must not only combine two complete thoughts but must change the subject of the second

sentence from the noun phrase *the dishes* to the pronoun *they* plus also make the contraction from *they are* to *they're*. The student is asked not merely to do some simple substitution exercises, but to understand the relationship within the sentence between noun phrases and pronouns. He must produce some grammatical English on his own.

In the same chapter the student is asked to make noun phrases out of sentences. That is, he will take a sentence like:

The dishes are dirty.

and change it into

The dirty dishes.

I have two objections to this: 1) students should not produce units smaller than a sentence: 2) whenever possible linguistic relationships should be illustrated. In this case, the relationship between the noun phrase and the relative clause. The two principles on which I base my objections are interrelated. If noun phrases are taught in isolation and only noun phrases are taught, the lessons fail in two ways. First, the relationship of the noun phrase to the whole sentence is not shown. The NP is simply an isolated bit. Secondly, the relationship of noun phrases to other structures which serve the same purpose is not shown. Let me illustrate. Suppose we have a sentence such as:

The dishes are in the sink.

which we collapse to the noun phrase the dishes in the sink.

in the context of an exercise we would then make a sentence such as:

I'm washing the dishes in the sink.

This does provide experience in using NPs. However, much more could be done. Suppose that the exercise were structured a little bit differently. Imagine, if you will, the following sentences:

I'm washing the dishes.

The dishes are in the sink.

Now, there are two ways that one can create one sentence out of those two. The first way would be to make, "The dishes are in the sink" into a relative clause and combine them thusly:

I'm washing the dishes which are in the sink.

A second way would be to make the sentence "The dishes are in the sink" into a

noun phrase "the dishes in the sink," and to combine them into the sentence:

I'm washing the dishes in the sink.

It should be apparent that there is a very close semantic relationship between the sentences, "I'm washing the dishes which are in the sink." and "I'm washing the dishes in the sink." They are, in fact, the same sentence, and the noun phrase "The dishes in the sink," is no more than a reduced relative clause. The knowledge, conscious or unconscious, of this relationship should be a part of every student's linguistic repertory. The exercises in *Written English*, however, give the student no insights into such linguistic relationships and are therefore incomplete, and I think, inadequate.

The final section of sentence combining exercises is in Lesson Seventeen. Combining sentences with *and*, *so*, *both*, and *neither*. So exercises appear such as:

John is a student.

Tom is a student.

John is a student and so is Tom.

These exercises are fairly straightforward, giving the student a chance to try out a variety of sentence types, and the only objection that I have to the chapter is that it's too short. It's only about a page and a half long.

Things I Like

1. The book has a good format. It's the same size as a piece of regular writing paper, 8-1/2 by 11. There's room to work in it, room to write in it. It has tear-out pages with holes for ringbinders so that the student can build a workbook, the teacher can build a file on the student, or the teacher can have access to what the student is doing without having to pass the whole book back and forth.
2. It is good practice in the actual writing of English. The student does produce structures. It's all writing; it isn't a mixture of oral/written English, but presupposes that there is a difference between the two. Further, it presupposes the actual mechanical aspects of writing such things as handwriting and punctuation—are important enough to be taught and not

simply picked up.

3. The lesson sequence, although not very extensive, is appropriate to the materials being taught. That is, the sentence combining exercises start out with simple sentences and move on to more complex structures.

Things I Don't Like

1. The exercises don't allow for different ways of saying the same thing. The text only allows two sentences to be combined in one way. (This *could* be viewed as a strength because it leaves the beginning student with less options to worry his mind with. But at the same time a student cannot help but be aware that there are a number of ways of saying the same thing in English.) The richness of the language is totally ignored in this book.
2. There is not enough sentence combining in the text and not enough kinds of sentence combining. The text makes a few exercises in creating sentences with *and* and *so*. But there is not nearly enough work for the student to become proficient.
3. The text does not show the relationship of thought and structure. I touched on this earlier when I talked about the relationship of noun phrase to reduced relative clause. The relationship in English between a one-word adjective, a noun-phrase, an absolute construction, a relative clause, is intricate to be sure, but vital to native speaker proficiency. Sentence combining may be the best way to illustrate this. The Rainsbury text could have exploited this richness, but didn't.

Gallingane, Glory, and Donald Byrd. *Write Away: A Course for Writing English as a Second Language, Book 1*. Collier-McMillan English Program, 1978, paperback.

This book starts out with a number of strikes against it as far as I am concerned. First, there is the cutesy title *Write Away*. Second, there's the fact that most of the credits—authors and the title of the book are in lower case. Third, there is the size of
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the book: it's 5-1/2 inches tall by 8-1/4 inches wide and looks like a checkbook with glandular problems. Fourth, there is the language that is inside (The first exercise talks about two rock singers, L. T. John and Dick Hagger). The overall impression one gets is that the authors and the publishers are trying to be very witty. It doesn't quite come off, and grates on the nerves, but then that may be my own particular prejudices and I can always tell myself that the authors of the book are after all not responsible for what the publisher wishes to do about format. I'm almost certain, though, that foreign students are not going to understand the cleverness of the title of the book.

However, in reading the book I find it has strengths which allow it to overcome the initial bad impression I got of it. The book consists of two types of activities rewriting and sentence combining. The rewriting activities are similar to those that would be found in the Dykstra series. I will be writing only about the second part, the sentence combining, because that is after all what this article is all about.

The introduction to the book has an explanation to the student that is quite nice because it takes the student through a mock lesson. The sentence combining portion looks like the following:

- 1a. Mr. Denis is a clerk.
- b. He works in a post office.
- 2a. He always eats dinner.
- b. He eats it when he gets home.
- 3a. One day he came home.
- b. He was tired.
- c. He was hungry.
- d. His dinner was not ready.
- 4a. Mrs. Denis was reading a book.
- b. The book was about women.
- c. It was about their liberation.

and so on. The student is asked to combine sentences in any way that makes sense and is told explicitly that there is no one right way of doing it. The authors say, "In a sentence combining activity like the one above, you can often combine the sentences

in more than one way." And then some examples are given.

Write Away recognizes that the structure and movement of thought often condition the syntax of a sentence. For example, sentence number 3 has a movement that might be realized as something like the following:

One day he came home tired and hungry,
but his dinner was not ready.

It is evident that the last proposition, "his dinner was not ready" is different from the others and the syntactic *but* is the expression of a semantic fact. *Write Away* applies this principle.

Another interesting and worthwhile part of this particular exercise is that it forces the students to produce different word forms in line with different meanings. The last combination in the sequence is as follows:

- 8a. She smiled.
- b. Her smile was sweet.
- c. She said, "I'm ready dear. Where are we going to eat?"

To combine "she smiled" and "her smile was sweet" one needs to change the adjectival form to its adverbial form, giving us:

She smiled sweetly.

which is one thing that foreign students really need to learn.

The students start out with simple phrase conjunction sentences such as:

Annie is lucky.
Rose is lucky.

which will give a compound subject with a plural verb *are*. By the end of the fifty lessons, students are combining up to four small sentences into one large one. Moreover, the possible relationships between propositions continues to be more or less free for the student. Occasionally some direction will be given, but for the most part the *meaning* of the final sentence suggests how the sentences should be combined. This gives the teacher a basis for discussing the relationships of ideas to each other within the sentence. It also helps the student relate such things as idea content, functions, and word classes.

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Things I Like

1. The structure of the exercises. They are creative and give insight into linguistic processes and relationships.
2. The progression of the exercises. What I like is that there isn't really much progression. Sentential noun phrases, for instance, aren't touched. This gives the students lots of practice in a few forms.
3. An index in the end linking each exercise to specific grammatical forms.

Things I Don't Like

1. The format and size of the book, and its humor. The humor of the book is built around a number of jokes that are typically western, e.g. The old chestnut about the woman who is stopped for going the wrong way on a one-way street and says to the officer, "But officer, I was only going one way." This might be a little too much for our readers.
2. The answer key in the back of the book. All of the answers to the sentence combining exercises are there. I do not mind at all that they are there in case any teacher should not be able to think of the answers on his own hook. (Variant structures are given if there are more ways of saying a sentence). But I would prefer them to be detached so that if I wish to use the text as a means of forcing my students to do it all on their own, I can.

Whatever its faults *Write Away* is a strong piece of work. It combines two of the best techniques currently in use—guided writing and sentence combining. Furthermore, it gives enough exercises in each one that the student will really get some practice in creating and producing sentences. It is a book which covers a limited field but covers that field quite well. I recommend it.