

Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences: A Review

by Jeffrey Butler

Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences has been the primary grammar textbook/workbook used in the advanced ESL writing classes at BYU-HC over the past two years. This review, therefore, will evaluate the text as a classroom tool from an experiential, rather than a hypothetical, perspective.

The grammatical approach for much of this text is sector analysis, a grammar which is construction, rather than word, oriented. Such an approach rests on the assumption that constructions (phrases and clauses) of syntactic units must be recognized and formed correctly before they can be combined into sophisticated sentences and paragraphs. Therefore, the first half of the book shows how to write simple sentences, while the second half offers numerous combining and transforming techniques designed to produce complexity and variety in sentence structure.

For teachers and students, *Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences* has four primary strengths:

First, the choice of grammatical labels has been descriptive rather than traditional. The authors have selected their grammatical terms according to how they best characterize the concepts being explained. Such terms reinforce learning by fusing the label to the concept it represents.

Second, the presentation of English verbs is particularly effective. Using the tense-aspect verb system (earlier-same-later times in both present and past tenses), the authors have presented an understandable method through which English verbs can be learned.

Third, grammatical explanations are brief and clear. Consequently, learning takes place primarily through exercises and experiences with the concepts rather than through explanations of them.

Fourth, the exercises which comprise the majority of the books are imaginative

and contextual. That is, they provide a variety of learning experiences within the limits of the principles being taught. The order of these exercises leads students along the familiar linguistic path from recognition to hesitant command to fluent command.

A couple of qualifications about the use of this text seem necessary at this point.

The complexity of some exercises in *Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences* may be a little uneven. Within a few pages, assignments may range in difficulty from simple to extremely complex. This unevenness, however, is partially a result of the generous number of exercises presented in the book.

Another concern relates to the brevity of language characterizing some of the instructional explanations. Such clipped language sometimes results in a chart or diagram being only partially clarified through examples and illustrations. That is, the visual aid is assumed to be self-evident when, occasionally, further clarification would be helpful.

On balance, *Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences* has proven a most successful tool for teaching writing to advanced ESL students. Last year, in spite of the problems invariably associated with using a new text, ten percent more students were evaluated at the end of their ESL courses as being ready for freshman English than the year before. In short, the book worked.

Although previously published by the BYU-HC press, this text has been sufficiently successful that the authors have agreed to make it available internationally. Consequently, *Writing and Combining Standard English Sentences*, in two volumes, will be published by Newbury House in the fall.