

## Power of Sentences in Foreign Language Classes

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### ABSTRACT

Memorizing and rote learning are the simplest ways to get mark, but they won't help learners to use what they have memorized. In fact, learners will carry out a huge amount of knowledge but they can't apply them. In this study a powerful and important tool is introduced to solve the problem in Iranian classes. In this article, a flowchart of sentence plan, which is constructed to aid learners in applying what they have learned, is included. The study highlights the importance of sentences in learning a language and introduces playing as an effective procedure to assist learners in learning how to construct correct sentences.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The goal of learning a language is to communicate with native speakers and to convey messages and knowledge. But in most classroom situations, there are not sufficient instruments or appropriate conditions to achieve the goal completely. Sometimes, the only used procedure is utilizing grammar rules and memorizing vocabularies. As a teacher, I know that language classes' conditions are far from those that were studied in famous books in teaching training centers. All of the strategies, methods and reactions in language classes are not covered in teaching books and papers. It is on teachers' hands to control the class and to lead the students in the right way to the target.

In Iran and in my class, the conditions are the same. My students and I confronted to such similar problems. My learners memorized the vocabularies and the grammar rules, but they couldn't use them when I asked them to do. They just carried out a huge amount of inputs without being able to use them. For the lack of time and facilities and because of the limitations in educational system in Iran, I couldn't change the syllabus or the procedures. So the problems imposed me to try out some new ways which don't need much time and facilities or significant changes in syllabus. So, I utilized sentence as an effective tool to assist learners in applying what they've memorized.

## 2. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

There has been a growing expectation for English education in schools to develop students' basic communication skills. Teachers have been expected to shift from traditional grammar and reading comprehension-oriented teaching to more communication-based teaching [1]. Here a brief comparison is given between the communication-based teaching and the traditional way which is used in Iran as a basic procedure to teach language. Then the goal of the study and the selected procedure to solve the problem will be explained fully.

### 2.1. *communication-based teaching*

Expectations for communication declare some discussions. As Ota have stated teachers should incorporate more interactive and creative activities into classroom instruction. Those who are interested in such methodologies believe the negotiation of meaning promotes language acquisition; therefore, interaction among the students or between the students and the teacher is crucial. They argue that most communication in the real world takes place with the aim of conveying messages or exchanging information in interaction [1]. These teachers feel that classroom activities should be related to actual use outside the classroom. So, repetition is not meaningful to them, because in real-world no one prepares a drill for you about what you should say. Those who support interactive and creative activities claim that repetition exercises are boring and not useful for the development of learners' communicative abilities because they believe such drills are teacher-centered and not directly related to the learner's own personal experiences [2].

### 2.2. *Mere memorization in Iranian Classes*

The techniques which were used in the drill sessions are popular in English education in Iranian schools. In fact there is a tendency to utilize Audio Lingual Method (ALM). The audio-lingual method or Army Method is a style of teaching used in teaching foreign languages. It is based on behaviorist theory and it didn't focus on teaching vocabulary. Rather, the teacher drilled students in the use of grammar. This means that the instructor would present the correct model of a sentence and the students would have to repeat it. The teacher would then continue by presenting new words for the students to sample in the same structure. The idea is for the students to practice the particular construct until they can use it spontaneously. In this manner, the lessons are built on static drills in which the students have little or no control on their own output. It is in direct opposition with communicative language teaching.

The main instruction of ALM applied in Iranian schools was Mimicry-Memorization Practice (imitation and memorization of sentences containing syntactic patterns) which was called pattern drills to manipulate structures and vocabulary in a sentence to form unconscious habits in learners' minds. The popularity of ALM, however, came to an end with the appearance of some new theories, but in Iran there wasn't an end for it. The syllabus was constructed based on ALM+GTM (Grammar – Translation Method) and there is no attention to communication and conversation. There are some conversations in the books, but they were taught by the help of repetition and using drills without asking to use the sentences in similar conversations. In fact the dialogues won't help learners to communicate in target language. As Chomsky's Generative Grammar emphasizes, perception and awareness of language rules precede the use of the rules [3]. In addition, there was growing criticism by psycholinguists that mechanical drills do not make the learner engage in form-meaning connections, often students simply repeated sentences in the drill without understanding what they were saying [4].

### 2.3. *Mechanical V.S Meaningful Drills*

First of all, repetition drills can be very meaningful activities if the learners' attention is paid both to form and meaning rather than on cues alone [5]. Tao (2009) stated that repetition drills were exposed to a lot of criticism, because it is highly possible for learners to neglect meaning while focusing only on the targeted form during the task. Furthermore, some believe that the sentences or phrases learned through these drills will not transfer to communicative competence [6]. Learners will pay little attention to meaning if the only goal is simply changing the tense, for example, as quickly as possible. There is no need to respond to the cue. They can do the activity successfully just by focusing on form. McDade et al. (1982) report that their pre-school age subjects accurately imitated sentences that they had actually understood even if the repetition was postponed [7]. So, learners should pay attention to both form and meaning (maybe subconsciously) to be able to remember what they've repeated.

Although in situations where learners have limited exposure to the target language, it seems unreasonable to expect implicit learning to occur. Practice in repetition also may be effective to compensate the lack of such environment. But there are some differences here. When we speak to someone, we do not have a clue (except in special situations such as lecturing). Thus, we cannot predict what the other speakers would choose to say in daily communications. In such cases there is a need for quick reactions and choosing appropriate words and phrases to maintain the conversation.

If the classroom is the only learning environment for Iranian learners, teachers should provide as many opportunities as possible for them to compensate the deficiencies. In order to narrow the gap between productive and receptive skills, it is necessary for learners to use the same expression repeatedly until it has become fully internalized [6]. So drills can be effective in learning a foreign language, if they are meaningful not just a mere memorization of words and structures.

#### 2.4. Sentences and its Significance in Learning

Performances on sentence tasks play a role in learning [8]. Ramses explained his own experience in learning a language and stated that "my vocabulary was just dramatic and I just felt depressed at sometimes. But now I can discuss a lot of subjects with a high level of confidence after five months or so. Still, my vocabulary isn't even near that of a native speaker. What helped me to get this was adding new sentences every day, saying them out loud and deciphering the meaning of the words [9].

As children develop, they begin to use their language to discuss more complex thoughts and ideas. As they enter school, they are required to use language for many purposes such as talking about unfamiliar objects and events, predicting, persuading, and reporting. Furthermore, they become literate and are required to use concise syntax in written language [10]. These tasks will be accomplished with sentence structure only. To develop foreign language, it is effective too. Students should be familiar enough to making accurate sentences [11]. When ELL students produce sentences, the errors they tend to make fall into one or more categories.

\* *Sentence structure* errors occur when students omit a subject, a verb, or both from the sentence or misuse the subject- verb order.

\* *Subject-verb agreement* errors are common and occur when a verb does not match the subject in number.

\* *Verb tense* problems happen when the verb does not match the time during which the action takes place.

So in making sentences, teachers should pay attention to these errors to guide the learners as possible as he can. Since learning extends beyond the walls of the school, encouraging students to discover things on their own will be a helpful tool (SRA Vocabulary Picture Pack). So motivating should be utilized as a significant step in every discipline.

### 3. METHOD

#### 3.1. My Students and Learning

I am the EFL teacher in Iran in junior high schools (in Iran it is called guidance schools). As I entered my class in second grade on first sessions, I found a serious problem which prevented my learners from promoting their intakes. As I realized, the problem was focusing on mere memorization and repetition without considerable attention to meaning. It was not limited to the procedures that learners/teachers used to learn/teach. It was extended to the syllabus and the learning plan in their books. Their books contained high amount of items (vocabularies, grammatical points, etc.), higher than their level. My students in this class were in 2<sup>nd</sup> grade as beginners but they should memorize a lot of lexicon and grammatical items without considering how to use them based on their syllabus. Since I applied it, I got that it wasn't effective in assisting learners to use what they've learned. In the beginning sessions, my learners had a lot of difficulties in saying or writing even simple sentences or phrases. They knew a huge number of words and grammar points but they couldn't convey what they want to say in English simply. For example, one of my students explained me where a verb should be placed in English sentences correctly, but when she wanted to make a sentence with a given word, she utilized the verb in an inappropriate way. It was the problem of whole class as it is shown in Figure 1.

According to what I observed, it means that the learners memorized the meaning of the words but they cannot use them in real or quasi-real communication. So I concluded that there should be some effective instruments which will be able to help my students to use the language not memorize it.

#### 3.2. Sentences and Playing Games

Starting my plan, I wrote some words on the whiteboard and asked the learners to consult and make a correct sentence concluding the given words. They could consult everyone or everything that they wanted. When they were ready, they could say the sentence loudly. As I observed, my learners were motivated highly, even those ones who were really asleep during teaching in previous sessions. Then the learners, who could teach what they've learned, will instruct the other ones to solve the problems. During the activity, they could ask their questions referring to the teacher as "learning assistance". After practicing, I designed a game. Competition would help them to learn better, because there is a powerful desire to win in all of the human beings. The groups compete with each other (there was a leader for each one). The leaders should help the other members to gain the aims of the game. The learners played and enjoyed the time and they learned unconsciously while playing. During the game, they could shout and say sentences aloud, clap the other learners and laugh for gaining a point. It was a competition in which learners learned without being aware.

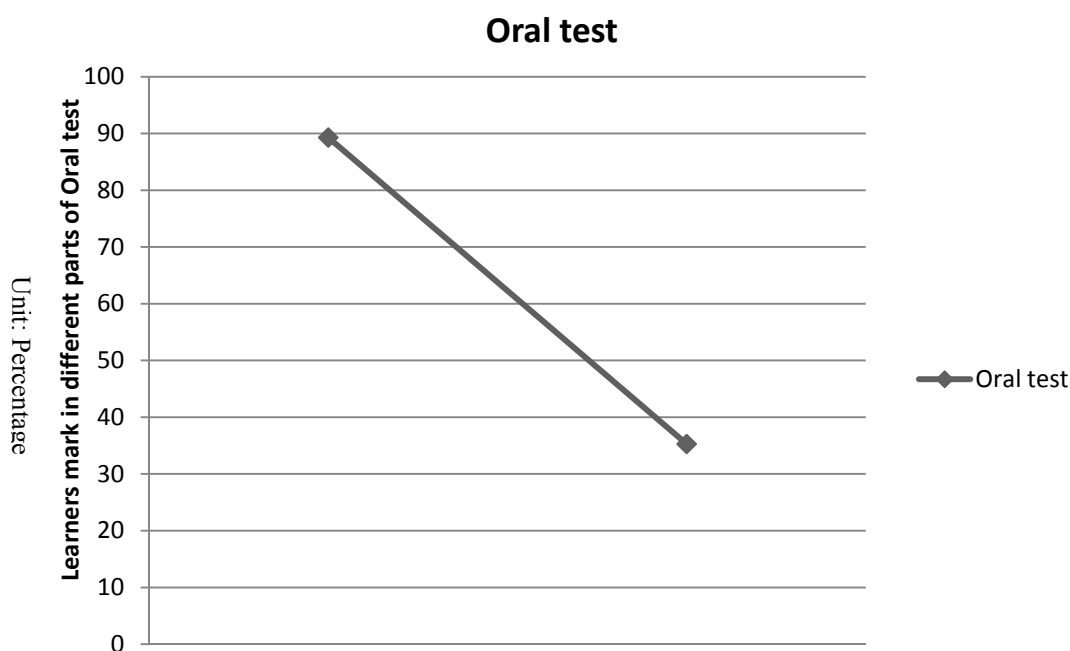


Figure 1. The comparison between realizing meaning and the ability to use the words

### 3.3. Development of Sentences and learning a language

As children continue to develop, they add more embedded sentences to their language by using (a) infinitives with different subjects (I want you to go to sleep) and (b) relative clauses (He is the man that I saw) [12]. As children become effective narrators, they use complex sentences to show the temporal and causal relationships between elements of an episode and development of the story theme [13]. School-aged children develop further use of conjoining sentences by using words such as *therefore*, *or*, and *before* [12]. Development of complex sentences continues into the adolescent years [14],[15],[16] and plays a vital role in a person's writing abilities, oral and written narrative production, and expository text.

To be near-native speakers, foreign language learners should do the steps as L1 learners do. So, constructing sentences should be followed from simple to more complex ones. Sentences aid learners in sequencing events [17], improving the cohesiveness of narratives [18], and increasing the sophistication of written language [19]. Students who were not prepared to use the sentences would be less ready to discuss abstract information and understand and use the language. Increasing learners' ability to use complex sentences has been found to improve reading and writing in regular education [20],[21],[22],[23].

So, my learners should be able to make sentences with the words which they've memorized. To gain the goal, playing can be an effective tool to add the factor of creativity to the learning situation and to increase the power of sentences in learning a language.

### 3.4. Using the Flowchart to identify the process of using sentences in the class

The teacher will deliver the words to the leaders and the leaders will distribute them in their groups (each group has 5 members). After constructing the sentences, the leaders should say loudly "we are ready". The first group will get a point. The winner is the group that will achieve the highest mark. As it was shown in Figure 2, the teacher is directly linked to the leaders and indirectly to other learners of the groups. This is used to control the situation and help all of the learners to cooperate with each other and to learn. The leaders should help the members of their groups to achieve the goal of the plan and they have the responsibility of stating their readiness to answer to the teacher.

#### 3.4.1. The process

Firstly I wrote some of the words which are more useful for using in daily life from their syllabus on a piece of paper and distributed the copies in the class. Then I asked them to try to make sentences with them at home. It wasn't an obligatory assessment, but the person who did it will be encouraged and may be selected as the leaders for the game in next sessions. Approximately one week later, a game was conducted. They were organized in groups based on figure 1. Then I wrote a word on the board and they should consult in the groups and provide the answer. In next sessions, the game developed and some sentences in Persian

were given. The learners should provide the English forms. The leaders would raise her hands, if they were ready and I would choose a member of their groups to provide the answer. In more developed levels, some questions were asked in English and the answers should be given by the groups. The game developed to the point that the learners could answer the questions individually without the help of the leaders. Also some assessments were given to them that were constructed based on the power of sentences in learning and their syllabus. Some of them are presented in Appendix A.

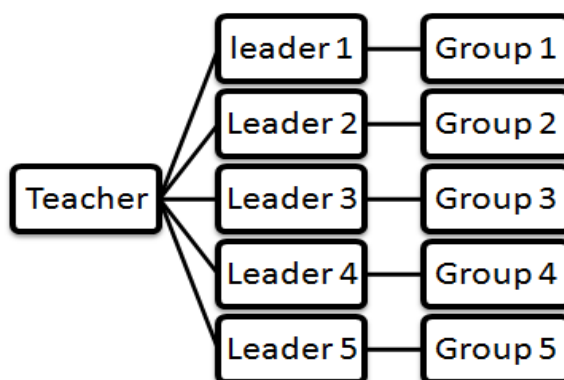


Figure 2. The relationship between the groups, teacher and leaders

#### 4. RESULTS

As I observed in my class, the motivation which was produced by the help of using games was effective in achieving the goal. Based on the table 1, the changes of the marks in oral tests are observable.

Table 1. The percent of my learners' marks in each part before and after constructing the plan

After the plan			Before the plan		
Total mark of oral test	The ability to make sentences	Understanding the meaning	Total mark of oral test	The ability to make sentences	Understanding the meaning
83.3	75.3	91.3	62.3	35.3	89.3

Although this study is just a qualitative study which concentrates just on one case (my own class) and it is obvious that the results of the charts and the tests cannot use to generalize the conclusion, but it can be utilized as an experienced-based study to help teachers in solving common difficulties in language classes that is concentrating on mere memorization mere than needed.

#### 5. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATION

As stated previously, learners' speaking, reading and writing abilities improve when they are trained to construct sentences. Beyond the importance of sentence identification and development for language, researchers have found that published therapy materials are available for targeting the use of complex sentences. Realizing sentence as a powerful material in learning a language, teachers should teach learners to learn constructing correct sentences. In this study, the teacher/researcher tried to utilize some instruments such as game and sentences to help the learners to use what they have memorized. In fact the study may be used as a procedure for assisting learners in moving from rote-memorization to understanding and using language. It can be beneficial for language teachers and learners or even those who are interested in learning language to consider the power of sentences in learning and its magic effect on achieving the goal, i.e. learning to use language as a tool for making association and contacting the other people all over the world. To complete this study some further research is recommended. New and interesting plans and strategies to teach learners constructing correct sentences can be investigated as a research for future studies.

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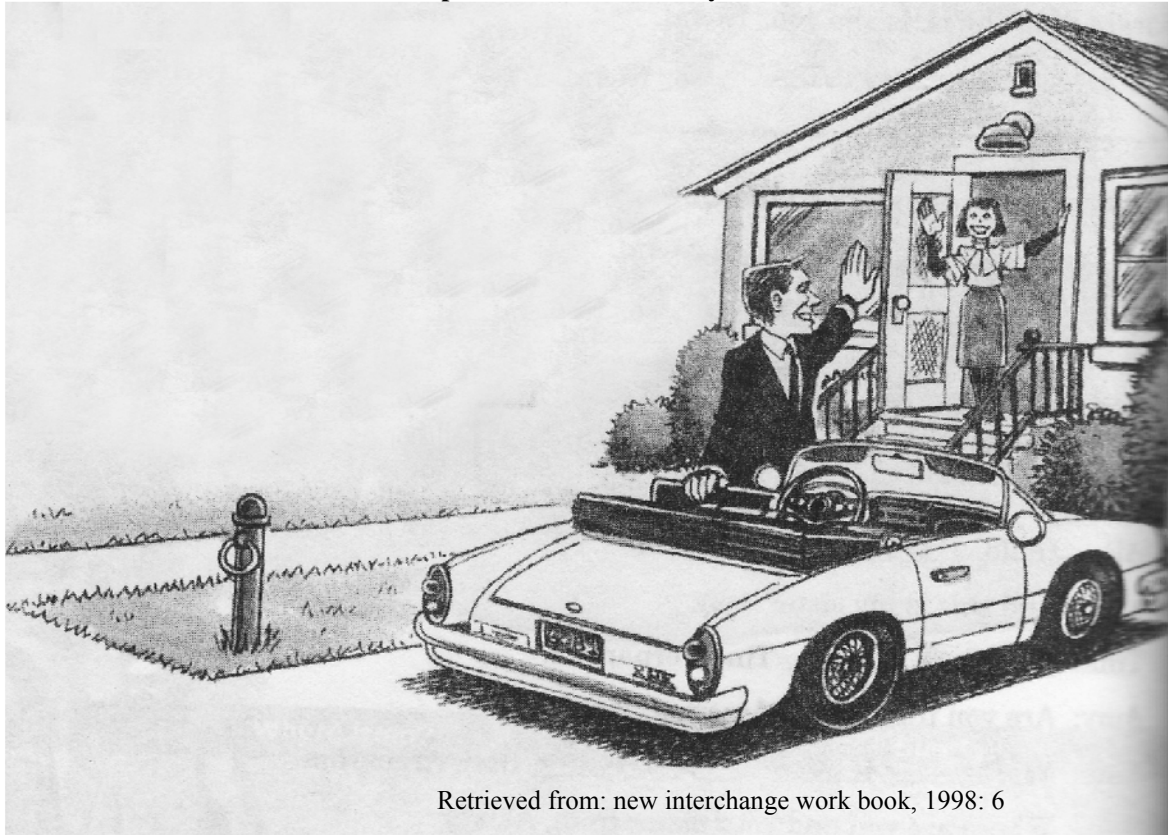
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**Mozhgan Alsadat Ghaffarzadeh Hassankiadeh** graduated with MA degree in Teaching language in September 2012. She has done some researches which were published or are under publication or review. Her research interests lie in teaching & testing a foreign language to promote teaching/learning processes. She is a teacher in university as well as high school & enjoys teaching. In her idea, teaching is firstly an art then a job.

Appendix A

Practice: 1. Look at the picture and write what you see with "there is " and "there are".



Retrieved from: new interchange work book, 1998: 6

1. There is **a man** in the picture.
2. ....
3. ....
4. ....
5. ....
6. ....

2. Make sentences by the help of given pictures.

1. ....



Retrieved from: موسسه وسایل آموزشی کیهان

2. ....



Retrieved from: موسسه وسایل آموزشی کیهان

3. ....



Retrieved from: <http://www.hessekhoob/>



4. ....

Retrieved from:  
[http://olive-drab.com/od\\_clipart\\_graphics\\_gallery.php](http://olive-drab.com/od_clipart_graphics_gallery.php)



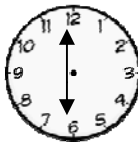
5. ....

Retrieved from:  
<http://www.militaryfactory.com/ships/imgs/carrack-ship.jpg>

**This is Tom.**

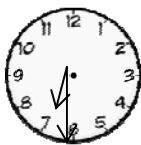


**3. Complete his sentences about his own daily works.**



Retrieved from: [http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/63600/63665/63665\\_waking\\_up.htm](http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/63600/63665/63665_waking_up.htm)

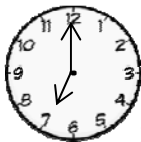
I ..... at ..... o'clock every day.



I ..... my breakfast at ..... every day.



Retrieved from:  
<http://www.supercoloring.com/pages/eating-breakfast-before-school/>



My friend and I go to ..... at ..... o'clock every day.



Retrieved from:  
<http://www.coloringpages365.com/coloring/little-boy-coloring-pages-1.jpg>



I eat ..... at ..... every day .



Retrieved from:  
[http://www.hellokids.com/uploads/tiny\\_galerie/200901/go-to-school-coloring-page-source\\_oq0.jpg](http://www.hellokids.com/uploads/tiny_galerie/200901/go-to-school-coloring-page-source_oq0.jpg)





I ..... at ..... every day.



Retrieved from: <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/clipart/clip/homewrk.html>



My mother and I ..... TV at ..... every day.



Retrieved from: [http://www.infobarrel.com/how\\_to\\_speak\\_in\\_an\\_american\\_accent](http://www.infobarrel.com/how_to_speak_in_an_american_accent)



My friends and I ..... Football at ..... every day .



Retrieved from: <http://www.kidprintables.com/coloring/kidstuff/kidseating.shtml>



I go to ..... at ..... every night.



Retrieved from: [http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/63600/63663/63663\\_going\\_bed.htm](http://etc.usf.edu/clipart/63600/63663/63663_going_bed.htm)

Now write about your own daily works.

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5. Answer the questions about john and his family.

Retrieved from <http://school.discoveryeducation.com/clipart/images/answer-boy.gif>



He is John. He is a **student**.

Retrieved from: [http://www.hellokids.com/\\_uploads/\\_tiny\\_galerie/200811/farmers-to-color-source\\_jjz.jpg](http://www.hellokids.com/_uploads/_tiny_galerie/200811/farmers-to-color-source_jjz.jpg)



These are his mother and father. They are **farmers**.



1. Who is he? .....
2. What is he? .....
3. What are his mother and father? .....
4. How many hens do they have? .....