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## Sentence combining and the ESL student

Patricia Lynn Golder

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SENTENCE COMBINING AND THE ESL STUDENT

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A Thesis  
Presented to the  
Faculty of  
California State University,  
San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Degree  
Master of Arts  
in  
English Composition

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by  
Patricia Lynn Golder

December 1990

SENTENCE COMBINING AND THE ESL STUDENT

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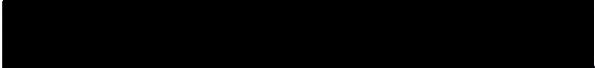
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Patricia Lynn Golder

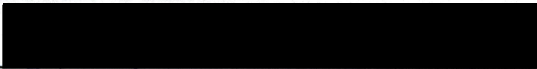
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## ABSTRACT

A study of the syntactic patterns used by native writers can give insight into errors made by ESL writers. Because syntactic errors indicate a lack of internalized knowledge of English, increasing the ability to rearrange, add, or delete information in a sentence reinforces basic sentence patterns. This thesis examines whether sentence combining, as one choice in teaching English as a second language, can be used with college ESL students to reinforce basic sentence patterns.

Such authorities in the field as Strong, Cook, and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg give evidence that sentence combining exercises can be used for college ESL students. This thesis shows that, rather than memorizing a set of rules from a standard grammar, the students learn by doing, by creating new sentences and controlling structures like subordinations, word order, and embeddings. Using sentence combining exercises to manipulate basic sentence patterns helps ESL students see consistent deviations in their own writing. Sentence combining also aids with basic grammatical and structural problems that hinder communication.

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## INTRODUCTION

This thesis will examine some of the choices one has in teaching English as a second language (ESL). Specifically, it examines whether patterning (mapping out types of errors) together with transformational-generative grammar and sentence combining can be used in working with college ESL students. The hypothesis is that a study of syntactic patterns of native language writers can help give insight into errors made by ESL writers. Since diagnosing consistent deep structure problems is useful in helping students who use English as their second language, this thesis suggests some ways to detect and map out consistent deviations from standard English in areas such as determining word order, manipulating embeddings, and subordinating. One technique that can help ESL students recognize and deal with such deviations is sentence combining. Because semantic and syntactic errors indicate a lack of internalized knowledge of English, an increased ability to rearrange, add, or delete information in a sentence, through the use of sentence combining can both reduce ambiguity and reinforces basic sentence patterns. Beyond dealing with grammatical and syntactical errors, the ultimate goal for ESL instructors is to develop unaided, fluent communication skills. After reviewing various theories related to sentence combining, this thesis will

indicate how some of these theories might be applied in teaching sentence combining techniques, in analyzing ESL deviations, and in dealing with those deviations in order to encourage effective communication.



## THEORY AND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

Three of the theories dealing with first and second language acquisition are behaviorism (Skinner), nativism (Chomsky), and Total Physical Response (Asher). They were often used as a basis for approaches to ESL teaching. One of the earliest approaches to linguistic theory followed closely the "operant conditioning" theory of Skinner, which proposes that a production of observable responses to stimuli, if reinforced, becomes habitual.<sup>1</sup> Therefore, reinforcement was important and language learning was looked on as a set of habits that could be acquired by a process of conditioning.

A very different theory followed the process of conditioning idea: Chomsky's idea that acquisition was innate and universal (a neurological language acquisition device). Chomsky's theory proposed that a child is systematic in learning and developing language and that acquisition exists apart from stimulus-response activities such as those which can be observed in scientific, controlled lab experiments. Chomsky, however, agrees with Skinner, saying that children need a rich language environment if they are to acquire language.<sup>2</sup>

A third approach, Total Physical Response (TPR), developed by James Asher is based upon Piaget's thought that although imitation by use of rote patterned language drills works on many surface structures, it does little for

learning the meaning (deep structure) behind the surface structures (the communication).<sup>3</sup> It appears a rich natural language environment is needed, as Chomsky says. Children respond to the meaning, the deep structure, more so than to the surface structure grammar adjustments that their parents make when correcting them. Mary Finocchiaro tells us that "Native speakers of the language are not conscious of each sound or word they say or of the sequence of the sounds or words. Primarily, they are conscious of the ideas or thoughts they are trying to convey."<sup>4</sup>

With the communication of ideas as a focal point, two methods of ESL teaching grew in popularity. One of these communicative methods, Asher's "TPR," developed in 1977, combines physical activity and language; in this method, a teacher gives a command and a student physically carries it out. This drama has appeal, but it seems to be useful only at the beginning levels of language proficiency to learn responses to commands. Richards and Rogers question TPR's use beyond the initial imperative level: "Despite Asher's belief in the central role of comprehension in language learning, he does not elaborate on the relation between comprehension, production, and communication (he has no theory of speech acts or their equivalents, for example)."<sup>5</sup>

Another approach to teaching ESL, Stephen Krashen's "Natural Method," says that if students receive input a bit beyond their competence level, the meanings of sentences

will emerge. For example, perhaps optimal work with sentence combining could strengthen an ESL student's ability to communicate in a second language because it urges students to input information a bit beyond their competence level. Also, in his Monitor Hypothesis, Krashen warns that the overuse of the monitor (learned language that acts like a check or a grammar) can lead to a "block"; whereas underuse can lead to fossilization, and optimal use can occur only if comprehensible input is provided.<sup>6</sup>

However, Barry McLaughlin questions and criticizes Krashen because his methods and assumptions are based upon deduction rather than empirical testing.<sup>7</sup> Other challengers of Krashen's methods, including Brown<sup>8</sup> and McLaughlin<sup>9</sup>, maintain that Krashen's model is oversimplified because conceptualization is too complex. In the "Natural Method," only a small percentage of errors are corrected. Problems do indeed arise with acquisition and the learning process. In addition, there are questions that arise as well, for instance, how does one decide when crucial errors should go unnoticed? Should continued communication always be encouraged? Also, how does one prevent fossilization--that is, the permanent addition of ungrammatical structures into one's second language competence by the reinforcement of these ungrammatical forms from the positive feedback given by a listener? The answers to these questions seem to come from some theorists (Asher,

"TPR", for example) who recommend that local errors (surface structure errors) do not need to be corrected because the message is clear and the correction may interrupt the communication process.

If the primary goal in teaching language is competency and fluency in communication, then understanding and using a variety of approaches is necessary to give a student control of the language. For example, grammar study is helpful because it gives a student a system of comparison, a model with which his or her sentences can be compared. Krashen's suggestions are helpful because he says that adults can learn more quickly than children because they can abstract and they have had more experiences.<sup>10</sup>

More recently researchers suggest that language learners should be much more involved in the communicative aspects of language, not merely in repetition but in the creation of new sentences. Sentence combining appears to be a helpful tool in this communicative aspect. For example, techniques such as sentence combining may also help students produce well-formed sentences and meaningful communication. Many theorists today, such as Hillocks<sup>11</sup>, and Strong<sup>12</sup> suggest sentence combining can be used as a method for teaching writing. It is an applied theory that teaches how, when, for what purpose, and under what conditions sentences can be combined. It also teaches ways of writing and of organizing conceptions.

Sentence combining is one of various methods of language learning that can be more or less useful at various levels of language learning. As teachers of language, we can encourage learning within a formal setting, and we can encourage acquisition, communication, and fluency in a second language within a natural setting. As instructors, we can, therefore, practice eclecticism by selecting various approaches and building those into various levels of language learning. Sentence combining, as one approach in combination with other methods to teach ESL students how to write, such as in work done by O'Hare, Mellon, and Strong, can include work in deep and surface structure problems, hierarchy of errors, language acquisition, and learning. In short, sentence combining is learning by doing--manipulating and controlling subordinations, word order, and embeddings.

## DEEP AND SURFACE STRUCTURE PROBLEMS

### IN SECOND LANGUAGE ACQUISITION

In Aspects of the Theory of Syntax, Chomsky

distinguishes between surface and deep structures. The deep structure level contains the elements that form the basic meaning of the sentence. Transformational rules can be applied to, added to, deleted from, or rearranged with morphemes, thereby changing the various structures of the basic sentence and producing surface structures that are grammatical transformations of the basic sentence.<sup>13</sup>

Chomsky identifies these deep structures within the boundaries of a sentence. The formation of the syntactically and semantically grammatical sentence is automatic for the native speaker who habitually follows a set of acquired rules. The basic sentence can be changed into another equally syntactically and semantically grammatical sentence by applying other transformational rules.

Chomsky's concept of deep structure is useful because it can specifically identify an important ESL problem: the inability to give a syntactic shape to a sentence--that is, grammatical word order, embeddings, and subordinations. For example, native speakers can see two basic sentences implied in I know a dog that kills birds. A native speaker intuitively knows that this sentence is a transformation of two sentences containing identical noun phrases: I know a

dog. A dog kills birds. This is somewhat easy for the native speaker. But what about the non-native speaker whose knowledge of English is superficial? Non-native ESL students may not understand the that construction, and they may add a pronoun to combine the sentences: I know a dog that it kills birds.

In addition, a native speaker may be able to add, delete, or rearrange information in that basic sentence. However, the non-native speaker may have much difficulty with the "that, who, whom" transformations; and he may have trouble even identifying the basic sentence.

One point that may help non-native writers is suggested by Ronald Wordhaugh in his article "The Contrastive Analysis Hypothesis." He indicates that the deep structures of two languages can be very much alike.

All natural languages have a great deal in common so that anyone who has learned one language already knows a great deal about any other language he must learn. Not only does he know a great deal about that other language even before he begins to learn it, but the deep structures of both languages are very much alike, so that the actual differences between the two languages are really quite superficial. However, to learn the second language, one must learn the precise way in which that second language relates the deep structures to its surface structures and their phonetic representations.<sup>14</sup>

In other words, Wordhaugh says that it may be easier for a non-native writer to acquire the second language because the deep structures are similar in the native language and the target language. Therefore, the

relationship of the deep structure to the surface structure, linked by the acceptable transformations, is important.

Grammatical structural patterns (deep and surface structure patterns), peculiar to English, can be identified and explained with the use of transformational grammar. Thomas Scovel comments on Chomsky's deep structure and surface structure analysis; and he gives two extended examples that help to illustrate the difference between these two structural forms.<sup>15</sup> The first example compares two sentences: 1) She asked me to be her friend. 2) She considered me to be her friend.

If an ESL grammar class that was based on a classical or structural model was asked whether the two "to be" structures were similar or different, the teacher would probably expect a response that they were identical. According to transformational-generative (TG) grammar, however, at least following what has now been called the "extended standard theory" of Chomsky, the teacher is deluded by surface structure similarities. These verbs [to be] are merely homonyms and actually have very different "deep structures."<sup>16</sup>

Scovel suggests that in the first sentence the to be means to become and that while to become can be substituted for to be in the first sentence, it cannot be substituted in the second sentence; therefore, the deep structures are different. She considered me to become her friend is simply not an acceptable sentence.<sup>17</sup> In the second example Scovel explains Chomsky's deep structure theory:

I think that this insight into the structure of all languages, not just English, can be most easily understood if we talk about two types of



sentences: utterances that differ in obvious ways in their surface structures but share a common, underlying deep structure, and sentences that are just the opposite: They have very similar surface structures but differ demonstrably in their meanings.<sup>18</sup>

The examples he gives are "Life is certain to be difficult"; "Life will certainly be difficult"; "It is certain that life will be difficult"; and, finally, "That life will be difficult is certain."<sup>19</sup> According to traditional grammar rules, these sentences vary demonstrably in tense, for example. But the deep structures are identical because they are paraphrases--they all mean the very same thing.

Another short example that Scovel gives using adverbs shows that although sentences may be ordered differently, they can have the same meaning: "Sometimes, she can jump six feet." "She can sometimes jump six feet."<sup>20</sup> Structurally these two sentences are the same and have the same meaning even though the order is different. Sentence combining could be used to show the difference. Scovel comments upon the importance of Chomsky's TG grammar work: "One of the major contributions of Chomsky's TG grammar was its insistence on the need to distinguish between surface structures and their underlying, abstract representation, or deep structure."<sup>21</sup> Thus, Scovel illustrates that deep and surface structures are two distinct structural forms. If they are distinct, which form is the most important to the meaning of the sentence? By creating an error hierarchy, we

can see that deep structure errors are more serious since they interfere with sentence meaning.

## ERROR HIERARCHY

Error hierarchy--identifying, categorizing, and ranking errors on the basis of their frequency--is a part of explaining how a person acquires or learns a language. It deals with 1) knowing that the basic meaning of a grammatical sentence lies in the deep syntactic structures (word order, embeddings, and subordinations); and 2) regarding errors as essential clues which are necessary to the learning process because errors indicate a lack of internalization of English. It seems reasonable to assume that errors in surface structure (prepositions, pronoun agreement, and subject/verb agreement), when compared to errors in deep structure (word order, embeddings, subordinations, and verb auxiliary), show that deep structure errors more grievously interfere with the basic meaning of the sentence than surface structure errors.

Surface structure errors deal with stylistic forms rather than with basic sentence content, unless, however, we consider confusion with prepositions such as "in," "under," "over," "behind," or conjunctions, or other function words. "John is in the car," "John is under the car," "John is over the car," and "John is behind the car" all have different meanings; and when the prepositions are used incorrectly, they interfere with the meaning of the sentence.

In "Error Gravity: A Study of Faculty Opinion of ESL Errors," Roberta J. Vann, Daisy E. Meyer, and Frederick O.

Lorena provide an appendix that lists a hierarchy of language learner errors that begins with surface as the least serious error and progresses to the deep structure errors in the order of spelling (differences in British and American English), articles, comma splices, spelling (involving deletion and substitution), prepositions, pronoun agreement, subject/verb agreement, word choice, relative clauses, tense, it-deletion, and word order.<sup>22</sup> As we can see from the hierarchy of errors listed by Vann, Meyer, and Lorena, a deviance in word order is a serious error for the student learning English as a second language because, unlike many other languages, English has a word order system where the meaning is context specific--the order of words signals the meaning; for example, "Joe hit Mary/Mary hit Joe" shows that Joe is performing the action in the first sentence and Mary is doing the action in the second. By concentrating on such serious errors first, language instructors can help ESL students develop grammatical English structures.

In Error Analysis and Interlanguage, S. P. Corder gives another definition of learner errors: "In the course of learning a second language, learners will produce utterances which are ungrammatical or otherwise ill-formed, when judged by the generally accepted rules of the language they are learning."<sup>23</sup> Two types of errors are common: 1) Deep structure errors which hinder communication; errors where


meaning is incomprehensible; one example of such an error can be seen in the following sentence: "I ever saw it." 2)

Surface structure errors which are considered less significant errors; for example, the most common surface structure errors occur with 3rd person singular "s", "-ed" endings, article usage, verb and tense agreement, prepositional usage, spelling, and idiom usage. One reason for these surface structure errors may be differences and similarities in deep structure among languages. However, Krashen suggests that rather than interference, second language learners rely on their first language to fill in the gaps of inadequate mastery of the second language.<sup>24</sup> For example, the ESL students' native language may be the basis for the rules of application that the student is using to form expressions in the target language.

When writing in the target language, ESL students can be encouraged to revise and become more confident with revisions to correct both deep and surface structure errors. Native speakers enter school having already internalized most of the patterns they will use. However, ESL students must learn what English structures are grammatical, and they must learn how to use them without a basic internalized structure as a model or code to begin with. It is hard for them to build grammatical structures and make value judgments on proper syntactic formations in a second language because structures are not often internalized.

However, ESL students can make the knowledge of deep and surface structure errors a part of their own schemata for future reference of grammatical patterns. In turn, instructors can help ESL students with revisions by diagnosing and dealing with patterns of errors.

### Diagnosing and Dealing with Patterns of Errors

Diagnosing patterns of errors--consistent deviations from semantic and syntactical standard English sentence patterns--is fundamental to helping ESL students understand sentence meaning because the production of these in their language errors is not random; they are systematic. Detecting which system learners are using instead of the appropriate one can help them learn the more appropriate one. 

Work done by Mina P. Shaughnessy<sup>25</sup> actually suggests that studies of patterns of consistent errors can help instructors detect deviations in language learner's work. Errors and Expectations (1977) is a guidebook that can be used for examining basic writers' errors and ESL errors, which will help categorize and pattern the errors according to frequency. Shaughnessy suggests, whether surface or deep structure errors, accepting and understanding mistakes as patterns of error from which inferences are drawn needs to be considered.<sup>26</sup> She further suggests that a study of patterns and deviations of non-native speakers is important; and, although Shaughnessy was writing basically for native

speakers, it seems logical that we can apply her approach to ESL errors as well because all language instructors need a means of identifying deep structure errors as important interference in sentence meaning. However, it is important to note that overuse of patterning and categorizing can lead to error witchhunts and overgeneralizations in error analysis.

On the other hand, by studying patterns of ESL errors, language instructors can find similarities in ways that ESL students have difficulty in adding, deleting, rearranging, or combining information in a sentence without disturbing the basic meaning of the sentence. How can these students develop standard patterns for using English? If the goal is to help these students become more self-reliant when writing and revising, and standard patterns are constant, then the methods that we use as instructors must allow for student growth into levels of language learning and stages of growth. What is important is that we recognize that written errors of non-native students of English are sometimes similar to written errors of native students. Janet Black, in "Those 'Mistakes' Tell Us a Lot," informs us that we need to look at those people who make mistakes "not as deficient, but emerging over a period of time as competent in their communicative attempts."<sup>27</sup> We need to look at native and non-native learners' mistakes in the same way--not as deficiencies, but as clues to patterns of problem areas

that, when defined, lead to competence in target language rules.

### Fostering New Habits for Dealing with Errors

Fostering new habits is no easy task for the ESL student who consistently demonstrates ungrammatical use of English in speech or writing. This is not to say that the mechanical process of habit formation is accomplished merely by repeating a syntactically and structurally correct model by using pattern practice. Transformational grammarians say that a writer acquires competence in a second language by internalizing rules that coincide with rules that the first language, the native language, uses. Is there a distinction between what can be acquired (unconsciously in a natural setting) and what needs to be learned (consciously in a formal setting)? In language acquisition, the student is internalizing the English language, without paying attention to the rules at the conscious level. Thereby, attention is given to the meaning behind the language used.

Eventually, in a Freshman Composition class integrated with natives and non-natives, the ESL student can practice standard language. Communication approaches fluency when rules dissolve into habit and attention is paid to the meaning behind the text itself. Through this process, the writing and speaking become a vehicle for expression, not a stumbling block that hinders fluent communication. But, long before instructors notice fluency in ESL students, they



must deal with specific ESL errors that hinder communication. It is the deep structure errors that hinder communication which need to be identified as being more grievous than surface structure errors.

In "The Study of Learner English," Jack C. Richards and Gloria P. Sampson deal with this universal hierarchy of difficulty by stating that "the concept of difficulty may be presumed to affect the learner's organization of what he produces."<sup>28</sup> They also suggest that some material is "very hard to distinguish, not only for non-native speakers but for native speakers as well."<sup>29</sup> Krashen also suggests a hierarchy of difficulty for structures that proceed from a simple to a complex order. He prefaces his list by saying that the data which he presents in his study, which deals with the auxiliary, "strongly confirm the reality of a natural order, a reliably occurring order in longitudinal and cross-sectional, individual and grouped studies of second language performers."<sup>30</sup> Krashen shows us that some learners handle the auxiliary--from a simpler to somewhat more complex structure, defined by the order in which it is acquired. Krashen suggests that the best way to teach these structures is from the latest acquired to the earliest because it is more difficult to teach the structures that are easiest to acquire in a native language. But, Krashen acknowledges that there are objections to this "natural order" idea:

Merely dealing with morphemes in obligatory occasions may fail to reveal at least some aspects of language acquisition, the overgeneralizations, and the transitional forms that acquirers go through. This is, I think perfectly true, but does not detract at all from the validity of the results of the morpheme studies. The observed morpheme order is the result of the interplay of the underlying process of acquisition; they only show the product, the surface order of acquisition.<sup>31</sup>

Others besides Krashen also support a theory of natural order of acquisition of ESL grammatical morphemes. For instance, Patsy M. Lightbown summarizes and supports it nicely in "Classroom Oriented Research in Second Language Acquisition":

Many empirical studies in recent second language acquisition research have focused on the accuracy with which ESL learners use certain grammatical morphemes. In most of these studies, results have been reported in terms of rank order correlations between accuracy orders for the different morphemes in the speech of different groups of learners. The similarity of these accuracy orders has led a number of researchers to hypothesize that there is a "natural sequence" in ESL morpheme acquisition. That is, they believe there is evidence that learners of different ages (children and adults), from different kinds and amounts of ESL instruction and exposure to English, will acquire this group of grammatical morphemes in essentially the same order.<sup>32</sup>

(She, in turn, referenced material from Dulay and Burt, 1974; Baily, Madden, and Krashen, 1974; Larsen-Freeman, 1976.) Besides knowing that a natural order of morpheme acquisition exists, instructors know learning one code and using it successfully may offer ESL students safety and security. For example, repetition of simple sentence patterns and a progression to advanced syntactic patterns

may not occur because learners may avoid structures that they find difficult. By using simple structures, the students may stick to safe formulas; in addition, they may feel rushed by their instructors to learn and adopt a new process or code.

Instructors can help their ESL students learn new structures, but it would benefit the students if instructors set realistic goals. For example, in Error Analysis and Interlanguage, S. P. Corder warns instructors not to rush their students to learn: "Allow the learner to seek his own data rather than impose some arbitrary sequence of presentation upon him."<sup>33</sup>

One means available for explaining the difference between the surface and deep structures that occur in native and target languages is sentence combining, an adaptation of transformational grammar. Its direct application for ESL students might result in helping them develop more mature syntactic patterns by increasing the number of well-formed sentences and by decreasing syntactical errors in the ESL student's writing.

As stated earlier, deviance in word order is a serious problem for the student learning English as a second language because, unlike other languages that rely on morphological endings, English relies more on word order where the meaning is context specific--the order of words signals the meaning. Word order, word addition, or word

deletion is extremely important in English. However, ESL students might not be able to acquire grammatical English sentences as do native speakers. Theorists argue over whether ESL students can actually acquire a second language or whether they must learn it.

### Understanding First and Second Language Acquisition

Researchers have debated about the boundary separating language learning from language acquisition. Some researchers believe that children acquire language as they learn to walk, unconsciously using preprogrammed neurological and physical means to understand and produce sentences in much the same way that they learn how to walk. Whatever abstractions they make, such as the rule for forming noun plurals, they arrive at abstractions through interacting with other speakers; no one teaches the rule. Researchers originally believed that children lost this facility of acquisition by the onset of puberty, the critical age for learning. Recent work by Krashen The Natural Approach and others indicates that some language acquisition can continue long past this critical period;<sup>34</sup> as we have seen earlier, there is a common belief that language acquisition occurs in a natural environment, and learning language structures occurs in a classroom or structured environment.

Language learning is the process of learning language consciously in the same way that we learn how to write or to

solve mathematical problems. Students are taught the rules and then attempt to apply them. It seems that young children have an advantage over adults in their ability to acquire a second language because they seem to "pick up" a language quicker than adults; but, adults seem to have an advantage over children in their ability to apply learned abstract rules in solving language problems. Any language learner must be exposed to the language to begin a language process. For ESL students, this must begin at a later stage than that of the native language user. In developing proficiency, second language students progress through stages of language learning, but they produce more frequent errors.

In The Natural Approach, Krashen suggests that a study of patterns and deviations helps with a "natural approach" to "language acquisition." He believes that "comprehension precedes production";<sup>35</sup> he resembles Piaget in his suggestions of "production" stages--stages of language acquisition: single word, combinations, sentences, and more complex discourse. Both Piaget and Krashen stress that progress in producing appropriate English constructions takes time, and that students develop at a pace where errors will commonly interfere with language acquisition; however, errors are a necessary step in the stages of development of proficiency.

Native speakers, who are proficient in standard language structures, recognize and habitually use appropriate word order. Non-natives, however, must learn it. They must also learn when deletions are acceptable. For example, ESL students can learn that when elements of a sentence are present elsewhere in a sentence, they can be deleted; for example, the subject in the following sentences does not have to be repeated: He smiled. He breathed. He felt wonderful. The sentences can be combined to form a new sentence: He smiled, breathed, and felt wonderful. Other transformational grammar operations a student can learn are additions, embeddings, and subordinations, which can be demonstrated with sentence combining.

## SENTENCE COMBINING

Sentence combining demonstrates operations of deletions, additions, embeddings, and subordinations. Paraphrasing, a skill which utilizes all four of these operations, can be used to demonstrate acceptable word order. For example, "It is hard to see the house." is the same as "The house is hard to see," but transforming this kind of basic word order may be hard for the ESL student.

### Basic Word Order and Transformational Grammar:

What is grammatical word order? In Foundations for Teaching English as a Second Language, Muriel Saville-Troike defines word order sequences as consistent structural patterns, stating:

A speaker of any language will already know that words are seldom independent entities but occur in a grammatical framework. Two of the most important aspects of this framework in English are the relative order of words and their agreement with one another.<sup>36</sup>

She adds that "although a number of different sequences or word orders are found in English, they normally follow consistent structural patterns which have either grammatical or stylistic significance."<sup>37</sup> Some examples she gives are the following: "Bill hit John; John hit Bill. Naturally he answered; he answered naturally."<sup>38</sup> These examples show us that the order of words is important in a sentence and that there is a natural order, a consistent structural pattern, that a sentence follows in order to make the meaning clear.

She goes on to suggest that native speakers rarely have difficulty putting numerous adjectives or adverbs in proper word order. We know this is true, but Saville-Troike says that a non-native speaker or writer must also be taught word order and agreement between these sequences.<sup>39</sup> We, as instructors, can teach word order by using sentence combining, but instructors can best understand how to use sentence combining with either natives or ESL students by first realizing how closely sentence combining resembles transformational grammar.

As previously indicated, applying transformational grammar when analyzing sentence structure can be an aid to the language instructor because it helps label the deep structure of the sentence. A theory shared by a few, including Noam Chomsky and Wordhaugh, is that little diversity exists in underlying deep structures, but that diversity in the surface structures of languages exists because transformations operating on the basic sentence create one sentence out of many. If that is the case, then TG can be used to show similar deep structures and dissimilar surface structures. At least by using this method, we can show that the relationship between deep and surface structures is shown, and word order is grammatically regular.

However, in "Re-evaluating Sentence-Combining Practice," Vivian Zamel warns us about sentence combining--



that "there are doubts about its appropriateness as a total course instruction, especially in the ESL classroom."<sup>40</sup> She stresses that "ESL students may not possess the linguistic ability that sentence combining proponents assume students to have and may therefore need focused work on key grammatical concepts."<sup>41</sup> If, according to Zamel, students do not have the linguistic ability that proponents of sentence combining imply that the students need, and they need work on key grammatical concepts, which writing experiences cannot teach them, then in addition to sentence combining, students will need work on grammar.<sup>42</sup> For example, introducing clause connectors (the fact that, that, who, what, where, why, and how), or connecting words (but, and, however, since, etc.) provides practice and instruction in proper sentence structure.

Zamel also adds "sentence-combining exercises . . . provided in conjunction with informal instruction that focuses on the grammar of the sentence not only serve as puzzles for which students must find solutions, but as reinforcement of something already learned."<sup>43</sup> For example, deletion exercises serve as models which reinforce an acceptable structural pattern, like a deletion of a subject.

Perhaps SC could work at a stage where ESL students have trouble with syntactic structures, and a patterned drill like SC could help with syntactic structures, such as

the deletion of a subject. However, a drill and practice exercise is only one approach used in dealing with sentence-level errors. It appears that diagnosing structure problems and using sentence combining, in particular, are also fundamental to helping not only native speakers, but ESL students as well learn a language structure.

One way to check a non-native writer's use of syntactical structures is by reviewing habitual syntactical patterns for the native speaker which display an ascending order of complexity to the non-native speaker. For example, even basic sentence structures may be difficult for non-native writers because they have difficulty with word order of direct and indirect objects and with inversions. One of the most common errors involves Wh-questions: What does Mary write? The following common inversional error often occurs: What Mary writes? The Wh-question above has an inversion: NP aux V becomes Wh aux NP V. Dealing with inconsistencies in sentence patterns may be the first step in encouraging acceptable writing skills.

However, according to Harold Whitehall, there are problems with basic word order in sentences. Whitehall refers to the disadvantage of fixed word orders in English: "They limit the opportunity to shift emphasis from one part of the sentence to the other by merely changing the order of the words."<sup>44</sup> We can change word order by using passive formations, but shifts in fixed word order pose a particular

problem for ESL students who may be used to different word orders in their native languages.

Other constructions may also cause difficulties because of the shift from a fixed word order. For example, errors may result when combining sentences using relative clauses: Mary played the piano. Mary went home. may become Mary, who played the piano, went home.; however, it may become an incorrect sentence: Mary went home who played the piano.

In Research on Written Composition: Directions for Teaching, George Hillocks, Jr. defines sentence combining as combining simple sentences into more complex sentences.<sup>45</sup> In his analysis of available research, he discusses the teaching of transformational grammar to non-native students of English. For instance, he says that using transformational grammar to teach ESL students poses a problem because of language barriers, possible lack of interest, and the inability to comprehend phrase structure and transformational rules. His study of control groups who were taught transformational grammar showed that those people represented in the groups viewed English taught this way as "more difficult," "more repetitive," and "not popular."<sup>46</sup> Of course, an understanding of grammatical concepts is important (sentence structure, for example) if correct basic sentence patterns are to be used and if more complex structures are to be used in the future. For an ESL instructor, sentences can be mapped out with

transformational grammar, showing their distinct deep and surface structures. These constructions can then be shown, through sentence combining, as an extension of TG. Hillocks also reports on sentence combining exercises:

In Mellon's study (1969) they were used to help students better understand the various transformations and embeddings taught in a transformational grammar curriculum. Mellon hypothesized that the knowledge of transformational grammar in conversation with its concrete application to sentence combining problems would result in more "mature" syntax in student writing.<sup>47</sup>

In addition to Hillock's and Mellon's earlier work in sentence combining, research done by A. Kerek, D. A. Daiker, and M. Morenberg<sup>48</sup> concludes that "[sentence combining] is now considered a successful classroom technique primarily because it has been proven again and again to be an effective means of fostering growth in syntactic maturity."<sup>49</sup>

In "Down from the Haymow: One Hundred Years of Sentence Combining," Shirley K. Rose also tells us that a great benefit in sentence combining is that "[it] has been subjected to empirically based research."<sup>50</sup> She also very nicely summarizes the connection between transformational grammar and sentence combining:

Mellon's exercises and those of O'Hare, Strong, and Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg are all supported by the paradigm of generative-transformational grammar in two important ways: the competence/performance relationship in language skill and use; and the concept of transformations, which allow the embedding of one sentence within another.<sup>51</sup>

She goes on to say that "[t]his competence/performance distinction can justify the use of sentence-combining exercises to increase syntactic fluency."<sup>52</sup> Very importantly, she adds:

The second Chomskian concept, the transformation, can explain why one sentence can be combined with another. Chomsky's Standard Theory, or generative-transformational grammar, offers a model of the way sentence-combining works. In syntactic or structural terms, the idea of a transformation can account for the disappearance of parts of the original kernel sentences in the process of their combining with or becoming embedded within one another. The theory that a sentence undergoes structural changes or transforms between its original form (deep structure) and final form (surface structure) allows for all the parts of the two or more original sentences to exist in deep structure while some of these parts do not appear in surface structure. Because transformational grammar so neatly explains how sentence-combining works and why the exercises appear to enhance the development of syntactic fluency, it is predictable that we would begin to think that without transformational grammar we would never have had sentence-combining.<sup>53</sup>

Other research that she found reports that sentence combining fosters fluency and quality: "[it] results in significant advances . . . on measures of syntactic maturity."<sup>54</sup> But Hillocks tells us that sentence combining both reduces and increases errors in student writing.<sup>55</sup> Therefore, errors with new patterns or overgeneralizations will occur and should be expected to occur as a result of learning a new code.

## Sentence Combining: Uses and Usefulness

Marion Crowhurst, in "Sentence Combining: Mainstreaming Realistic Expectations," says that "[i]t is not expected that a few months' sentence combining will automatically produce a general improvement in writing quality."<sup>56</sup> These results are basically for native writers. In short, Vivian Zamel warns us, as mentioned before, that she doubts whether sentence combining can be used successfully as an overall approach in an ESL classroom; however, she does not completely dismiss the usefulness of sentence combining as a teaching tool for the ESL student; for instance, she feels it can be used to teach grammar and to explain certain syntactic problems peculiar to ESL students. Zamel also suggests that "sentence-combining practices surely have a place in the ESL writing classroom, for it is one of the best ways to help students learn about the grammar of the sentence."<sup>57</sup> For instance, it may not be an overall approach, but it can be used to teach grammaticality. Sentence combining can also be used to explain and demonstrate acceptable basic sentence structures; that is, which errors, such as those with word order, most affect the overall meaning of a sentence or words out of sequence due to awkward constructions.

Sentence combining can reinforce patterns the non-native writers or speakers have learned or even introduce students to new syntactical patterns. It can also show

different ways of rearranging a basic sentence, deleting information, and/or adding information in the form of additional choices to increase the T-unit length of a sentence, thereby increasing the syntactic maturity of the writer. Vivian Zamel gives examples of sentence combining uses of conjunctions, for example, but she warns that "exercises that have already been constructed and are available may not be appropriate for ESL composition."<sup>58</sup> Thus, as Zamel suggests, sentence combining can be used, not as a general antidote but for specific purposes such as those mentioned previously.

There are many texts designed specifically for the native language learner that can also be adopted for the ESL student; these texts often apply the techniques of sentence combining. The following section demonstrates how a sentence combining text was used in a particular instructional situation.

#### Applying Techniques of Sentence Combining

As ESL students manipulate word order in a sentence, awkwardly constructed sentences or unusual word order may occur. This is the situation that occurred during the months of April and May 1988, when I worked with a group of five Japanese businessmen from the Mitsubishi Corporation, Japan, for extensive training in English, or more specifically with business communication. Using techniques adapted from a knowledge of business writing for native

speakers, a knowledge of ESL learners, a knowledge of English grammar and structure, and a knowledge of sentence combining, I established a curriculum that included these areas into five one-hour class periods each week for a span of six weeks.

To begin with, the TOEFL level of these students was well over 500, and the students could compose independently of the instructor. They were skilled in Japanese report writing, letters, memos, proposal writing, and formal writing for college-level compositions. All five men had received B.A. or M.A. degrees from Japanese universities. They had no trouble with any composing skill taught in an English 101 classroom. However, these men all differed from a native writer in their use of English; in particular, their word order deviated from a native's, and they performed sentence combining exercises to rearrange words and phrases.

These Japanese men successfully used sentence combining exercises that were adapted from O'Hare's book Sentencecraft<sup>59</sup> and from Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining<sup>60</sup> by William Strong. Sentence combining exercises mentioned in the books were useful at a certain level of learning. At an abstract level of composing and writing and independent of the instructor, the learned drills served as a grammar guide--a reference tool for composing correct target language sentences. The linguistic



competence of the Japanese students was sufficient to allow them to produce many acceptable sentences. However, when they used sentence combining techniques, they were not always successful in producing semantically and syntactically correct target language sentences. Although when asked to look at the sentences, The man had an accident and rolled his car over. or The man had an accident and rolled over his car. the students could see that the word order was important and that these two sentences differed in meaning; after this realization, the Japanese students could produce an acceptable sentence.

The theory behind the sentence combining exercises that were used with these Japanese businessmen can be easily explained by looking at Mary Jane Cook's book, Trouble Spots of English Grammar: A Text-Workbook for ESL. Cook explains:

Word order is the most important feature of English grammar. The order in which parts of a sentence occur conveys their meanings and functions. Often only one order is possible in a sentence. When word order can vary, there are usually rules for acceptable usage."<sup>61</sup>

Cook lists examples of basic sentence patterns as the following: subject + intransitive verb (for example, "I laughed"); subject + linking verb + noun/pronoun/verbal (for example, "I am Patty"); subject + linking verb + adjectival (for example, "I am tired"); subject + transitive verb + direct object (for example, "I ate sushi"); subject + transitive verb + indirect object + direct object (for

example, "I gave him a letter"); subject + transitive verb + direct object + noun/pronoun/verbal (for example, "I killed Luis, my husband"); subject + verb + direct object + adjectival (for example, "It makes me happy.")<sup>62</sup>

Cook adds that adverbials affect word order: "[a] basic position of adverbials is final position after subject + verb + complement."<sup>63</sup> She sums up her discussion with two rules. The first is "[do] not put anything between a subject and a verb except for 'always' words and adverbs that can pattern like them, and some absolutes."<sup>64</sup> As examples of absolutes, she gives words and phrases such as "in fact," which can assume "initial," "medial," or "final" positions in a sentence, or "oh," "yes," and "no," which must come before a sentence pattern.<sup>65</sup> The second rule that Cook mentions regarding word order is that writers should "not put any kind of adverbial between a verb and a direct or indirect object. Generally [the writer should] . . . not put anything between a verb and a direct object except an indirect object."<sup>66</sup>

Cook also gives examples of other word order rules for acceptable use; she labels this category wh-N, meaning "relative, interrogative, and indefinite relative pronouns and noun phrases consisting of a relative, an interrogative, or an indefinite relative adjective + a noun."<sup>67</sup> Some uses of wh-N phrases include wh-N forms as subjects: relative

clauses, dependent interrogative clauses, and indefinite relative clauses.

In The Writer's Options: Combining to Composing, Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg illustrate the acceptable word order patterns, explained by Mary Jane Cook, by giving sentence combining exercises that a student can manipulate. The student builds sentences that include, among other elements, structures like relative clauses and noun substitutes. The exercises deal with word order and involve rearrangement, addition, and deletion. For example, Daiker, Kerek and Morenberg explain that to construct a relative clause, a noun or noun phrase should be replaced with a relative pronoun: "Irving Berlin has written 1500 songs in his lifetime." "Berlin became a recluse after his last musical failed on Broadway in 1962." These two sentences when combined become: "Irving Berlin, who has written 1500 songs in his lifetime, became a recluse after his last musical failed on Broadway in 1962."<sup>68</sup>

Another example Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg demonstrate is noun substitutes with sentence combining exercises that involve infinitives, gerunds, "that" clauses, and wh-N clauses:

1. gerunds--"The dog howled and whined." "This kept the whole neighborhood awake." These sentences combine to become: "The dog's howling and whining kept the whole neighborhood awake."

2. infinitives--"Over-the-hill ballplayers can play for a Japanese team." "It is a sensible way for over-the-hill ballplayers to extend their careers." These sentences combine to become: "To play for a Japanese team is a sensible way for over-the-hill ballplayers to extend their careers."
3. "that" clauses--"The earth's climate changes." "The earth's climate even now may be changing rapidly." "This is widely recognized." These sentences combine to become: "It is widely recognized that the earth's climate changes, and even now may be changing rapidly." Or, as another example: "That the earth's climate changes, and even now may be changing rapidly, is widely recognized."
4. wh-clauses--"Should a state university invest in stocks sold by companies?" "The companies do business with racist governments like South Africa." "This has become a matter of controversy on several campuses." These sentences combine to become: "It has become a matter of controversy on several campuses whether a state university should invest in stocks sold by companies that do business with racist governments like South Africa."<sup>69</sup>

The importance of the work of Mary Jane Cook and Daiker et al. is that meanings in English sentences are based on word order. Daiker et al. demonstrate acceptable word order with sentence combining exercises and suggest that using sentence combining exercises improves the overall quality of students' writings: "Research suggests that sentence combining practiced within a rhetorical context significantly improves the quality of student writing."<sup>70</sup>

These sentence combining exercises are valuable for teaching word order because the exercises teach a student to add, delete, and rearrange information. The student has a range of options and makes choices based on the options, creating new sentences and not merely repeating memorized forms.

Creating new sentences and not repeating memorized forms helped to increase the syntactic maturity of the five Japanese students during their six-week session. They used more grammatical sentences, as well as a wider variety of sentence structures, at the end of the six weeks than they did in the beginning. For example, at the end of the course, the ESL students wrote more compound, complex, and compound-complex sentences than they did at the beginning of the course. They also varied their sentence structures and would use embedding techniques. The following are examples of sentence combining techniques, among other constructions, that these ESL students practiced:

Rearranging--Examples:

1. It is difficult to learn English.

To learn English is difficult.

2. John sees Paul.

Paul is seen by John.

3. John learns English.

What John learns is English.

Addition--Examples:

1. John is learning English. He is intelligent.

John, an intelligent man, is learning English.

2. John knows something.

John knows that he is intelligent.

Deletion--Examples:

John likes to learn English. Paul likes to learn English.

John and Paul like to learn English.

It would be difficult for anyone to eliminate all word order errors in the short time that these men worked with sentence combining. These businessmen had not only had the deep structure problems of word order but also surface structure errors peculiar to Japanese ESL students as well. For example, they had the usual ESL problems with prepositions, articles, 3rd Person singular "s," and "s" plural. However, the surface structure errors did not hinder the fluent communication of their sentences, as the more deeply-embedded problems of word order did, for

example. In short, it was found that the SC exercises helped increase their ability to produce syntactically correct basic sentences.

When instructing these ESL students, the following method was used: to first set a goal, then to determine performance standards, and finally to provide a system of measurement. The following rearranging error is used as an example to demonstrate this method.

Example: John sees Paul.

Correct--Paul was seen by John.

Incorrect--John was seen by Paul.

The instructional method is as follows:

--set goal: to produce a semantically, syntactically grammatical target language sentence, independent of the instructor, using arrangement, deletion, substitution, or addition. For example, the student is asked to rearrange John sees Paul.

--performance standard: expect native writer competence in rearranging the words of a sentence without rearranging the meaning of the sentence. For example, the student should be able to rearrange the sentence John sees Paul. and form the sentence Paul was seen by John.

--system of measurement: correct word order using rearrangements (as in the above example).

In order to diagnose rearrangement errors with the Japanese businessmen, I mapped out similarities in errors taken from the writing task by first mapping out the errors, then listing them by type, and next by arranging them in an error hierarchy. For example, the grade level and ability to handle syntax is directly related to the production of acceptable sentences. If students have low competence in linguistic ability, they begin at a low level with patterned practice drills to reinforce vocabulary, idioms, and grammatical problems. If students have high competence in linguistic ability, they use the composing process and discussion of grammar as a tool for recognition and correction of their own errors.

The method to teach can be applied as follows:

1. Transformational grammar--for instructor. Map out difficulties using error hierarchy. In the above example, use passive transformations.
2. sentence combining--for students. Give explanation and practice in building and varying sentence structures:
  - progress made by the student; some correct responses when rearranging word order.
  - more support and encouragement given to the student.
  - less direction given to the student.
  - attain goal: semantically and syntactically



correct sentences are produced frequently. In this case, rearrangement was used successfully to produce a passive construction.

Through my experience with the Japanese businessmen I found the above sentence combining strategy could help ESL students to increase their production of syntactically grammatical basic sentences. In short, the students were finally able to correct word order by using a specific method.

## CONCLUSIONS: FUTURE EXPECTATIONS

This thesis gives evidence that sentence combining is one of the choices an instructor has in teaching English as a second language. Instructors can diagnose consistent deep structure problems and suggest ways of correcting consistent deviations in word order, embeddings, and subordinations. It appears that certain methods are appropriate to certain levels of learning, and transformational grammar may have some significance and relevance for ESL instructors. Sentence combining provides one means for teaching an ESL student to write a sentence that conforms to various English sentence patterns.

An ESL student's ability to add, delete, and rearrange information will help that student form a grammatical sentence that conforms to basic sentence patterns and the quality of his writing. Furthermore, sentence combining creates exercises that show the student a wide range of options, and the student can then make choices based on these options. The result is not merely repetition of a set of exercises, but freedom to create, to experiment, perhaps even to learn by making inappropriate choices on the road to choosing standard forms. Rather than memorizing a traditional set of rules from a standard grammar, the student is learning by creating new sentences and controlling structures like subordinations, word order, and embeddings. The student can choose from among these

options, and boredom is minimized. In addition, the student learns by doing, just as a bicyclist learns to ride by riding, not by watching someone else ride, but by hands-on experience.

Even though many studies deal with error hierarchies and the patterning and structuring of sentences for native speakers, diagnosing deep structure problems and using sentence combining, in particular, are fundamental to helping not only native speakers but ESL students as well. Krashen's Natural Method works best at the acquisition level, and grammar and structure work best for an adult monitor user; sentence combining, an extension of transformational grammar, can be used to aid ESL students with sentence structure.

As part of the learning process, sentence combining exercises help students see a pattern of consistent deviations in their own writing--inconsistencies in the use of acceptable sentence structures. While instructors can identify these consistent patterns of deviations in a student's writing by using transformational grammar, a student can identify appropriate basic sentence patterns with sentence combining. The student learns the patterns by manipulating sentences, just as a child learns that a round peg must fit in a round hole. The student generates, selects, organizes, makes mistakes, reselects, reorganizes, succeeds, and learns.

Sentence combining exercises give students the ability to select and organize material beyond the sentence and lead them to project the knowledge to broader areas--the paragraph or essay. They learn to rearrange, delete, or add a variety of material. Ultimately, the writing is disciplined, developed, and confident, as is the writer.

This thesis, in presenting an account of the relationship of deep structure, surface structure, and ESL errors, makes clear that drilling on surface structure errors alone is not enough. The prerequisite for dealing with these surface structures is dealing with the deep structure of the sentence, that part of the sentence wherein lies the true meaning and interpretation. Sentence combining is one useful tool that can help us deal with basic grammatical and structural problems that hinder communication because manipulation can provide a tool for teaching the use of verb auxiliaries, word order, embeddings, and subordinations--all of which present major problems for ESL students.

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