



Improving Sentences via Sentence Combining Instruction

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ABSTRACT

In this article a method to improve sentence writing ability called sentence combining is explained. The potential effects of sentence combining are related and relevant research summarized. In addition, how to introduce sentence combining practice to a class, key instructional components including oral practice and peer assistance, sources of material and creation of exercises, and grading criteria are discussed.

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When I first began teaching writing in middle school my temptation was to believe that any sentence level writing instruction was a waste of time. “Surely by eighth grade” I thought, “my students must have mastered the ability to create interesting sentences.” However I vividly recall my surprise when I began to examine one of their initial writing assignments of the year – which was a reflective retelling of a recently read short story.

Not only were many of the students writing sentences that were short, simply constructed, and lacking in descriptive words, many used a very repetitive subject-verb-object pattern that gave the impression of immature writing and made their reflections choppy and difficult to read. Others produced massive run-on sentences connected by a long series of “ands” while a few more sprinkled their compositions with a frustrating number of fragments.

I faced a tough decision at that point: how to successfully and efficiently help my students create better sentences. My decision as to how to help my students was compounded by my district’s lack of an adopted writing curriculum and my own thin veneer of ability and knowledge of how to teach writing.

Although I knew how to help writers generate content and correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization, I honestly lacked the ability to help them improve their sentences. Fortunately I came across a book in our professional library by William Strong titled *Creative Approaches to Sentence Combining* (1986). Strong presented such a compelling case for this method that I was convinced to give it a try.

Why sentence combining?

In Strong’s book I read that sentence combining provides controlled practice in re-writing simple or “kernel” sentences into more complex and varied forms. For example, if a student overuses simple



kernel sentences such as “My dog is short. My dog is brown,” in their writing they can learn through sentence combining practice to change these sentences into more syntactically complex and mature sentences, such as “my dog is short and brown” or “the short brown dog is mine,” depending on what part of the sentence they want to emphasize. Likewise if a student produces sentences that are overly complex or ambiguous, they could reduce (or “decombine”) the sentences back into their basic kernels and then recombine them into a more cohesive and understandable whole.

Sentence combining exercises were also suggested as a way to prompt students to use syntactic options in their writing through practice in consciously controlling and manipulating syntax. Instead of longer sentences, the reported value of sentence combining was in making sentences and whole discourse better through employing a variety of syntactic forms with the end goal being clarity of thought instead of complexity.

Recent research added support for Strong’s ideas.

Saddler and Graham (2005) assessed the effects of a sentence combining procedure involving peer-assisted practice with more and less skilled young writers. Forty-two students in the fourth grade received either sentence combining instruction or grammar instruction. Students were paired for instruction and received 30 lessons, 25-minutes in duration, three times a week for ten weeks outside of their regular classrooms. The results indicated that in comparison to peers receiving grammar instruction, students in the experimental treatment condition became more adept at combining simpler sentences together to create more complex sentences. In addition, for the experimental students, the sentence combining skills they learned transferred to a story writing task, resulting in improvements in writing quality as well as revising ability.

Starting off

I launched into sentence combining practice the following week with the first of my three classes. I introduced sentence combining exercises by explaining that this activity will help them write more interesting sentences that sound better to readers. I suggested that skilled writers often re-work their sentences to help convey their message more effectively and explained that even in my own writing I would often change my sentences around to decide if I could say my ideas in a better way. I showed that when I combined the sentences, I moved words or parts around, deleted or changed words or parts, or added words or parts to the sentences to make them sound better and convey my ideas more clearly.

I then began with a whole class discussion by showing them a simple pair of kernels and modeling how to combine them. I suggested that for these exercises there would usually be more than one combination possible and to not worry about making mistakes because mistakes are really opportunities for learning. Then I explained my reasoning in combining the sentences in the way I chose and why I thought the new combination sounded better.

I then performed several additional combinations while increasing the amount of discussion and quality judgments the students provided and decreasing my own input. My goal was to prompt the students to rely on their own linguistic knowledge they developed from years of hearing and reading our language to decide on the correctness and sound of a combination; which is exactly what I wanted them to do during the composition and revision of their own work.

The ensuing discussion led to some remarkable opinions as to why a certain combination was more effective in relating the author’s message or why adding a word here or there improved the clarity of the message. Even students who seldom spoke before added their ideas to the mix. I was experiencing



what I had hoped, a genuine class discussion of how to be a more effective writer that emanated from the students themselves. I repeated this process with my second and third classes with similar results. I was pleasantly surprised with how rapidly the students were able to comprehend both the mechanism of performing combinations and the rationale for why and how these activities would help them as writers.

Instructional framework

After this introductory session I began all of the subsequent practice sessions with oral practice. I had two reasons for this. First, Strong (1986) suggested that when combining sentences the ear must hear alternatives to be able to choose the sentence that sounds best. I realized that in my own writing I often reread a passage of text out loud to “hear” the sound, so oral practice seemed very natural to me. Secondly, many of my students had very poor handwriting that hindered their ability to write quickly. Practicing orally circumvented this difficulty, saved precious class time, and allowed for additional practice opportunities.

I found that oral practice could be simply and efficiently included through presentation of kernel sentence clusters on an overhead and asking student pairs to discuss the kernels and provide examples of combinations orally only. Suggestions provided by several student pairs were written down by me, read aloud, and then discussed for which more effectively conveyed the authors’ ideas.

Although writing is sometimes viewed as a solitary activity, I believed that much of the potential power of sentence combining exercises resided in playing with language within a group environment of open exploration. I felt that when many students approached an identical writing task, they became aware of the solutions available from other writers close to their level of maturity and experience. So during these oral exercises, I always encouraged group discussions, feedback, evaluation, reflection, and praise.

Following the oral practice, I would pair writers together for a brief partner practice session where they worked together to write out combinations for several additional kernel sentence clusters. The students wrote their responses on a transparency and then presented their versions on the overhead. I would ask for several possible solutions for each problem and thoroughly discuss each.

Sources of material

Although my district did not possess a curriculum for sentence combining, finding sources for the content of the exercises was actually easier than I had envisioned. Initially, I created exercises from the novel we were reading by simply reducing a passage into kernel sentences. Then the kernels were re-written by students working in pairs. The new versions were then read to the class by each pair followed by discussion of the rhetorical effect each version created.

I also found that classroom activities or school happenings could be sources of inspiration, along with the lives and interests of the students themselves. I discovered that newspapers and magazines also furnished suitable content for sentence combining exercises. Many of these sources offered a bonus by providing my students with information on a new concept or reinforcing a lesson from another content area class while practicing writing in mine.

Types of exercises

When developing the exercises I started with two types of clues to facilitate combinations. The first clue was an underlined word, for example:



The wizard possessed many powers.
The wizard was crafty.

This problem resulted in the combination:

The crafty wizard possessed many powers.

The second type of clue I used was a “connecting” word enclosed in parenthesis at the end of the sentence to be combined. For example:

Sam fell over the cannon’s muzzle.

He lost his balance. (because)

These exercises helped my students consider one particular method of combining by prompting them to think about language in a very precise way.

After the students were comfortable with these exercises, I eliminated the clues. Without the clues, the students had to decide what important material in the second sentence to include within the first when the two are combined.

Once I saw that my students were comfortable with combining two sentences, I began to ask them to combine longer sequences of sentences without clues. For example:

The wind rattled the grass.

The grass was dry.

It was on top of the wall.

It made a low, soft, mournful noise.

This group of sentences elicited many interesting combinations and provided a meaningful conversation concerning which of the versions sounded better. For example:

The dry grass on top of the wall made a low, soft, mournful noise as it was rattled by the wind.

or...

Rattled by the wind, the dry grass on top of the wall made a low, soft, mournful noise.

A natural source

Initially, to help sequence the skills I relied on suggestions by Cooper (1973), however I soon turned to my students writing for exercise content by asking them to work and rework their own prose from an under-construction writing piece. I would put a paragraph from one of my students’ writings on the overhead and then as a class discuss ways it could be improved. I teamed my students into pairs and would provide a paper copy of the paragraph to each pair. Then I challenged them to talk together to discover how the paragraph could be changed. After they had written their ideas we would read various versions out loud and discuss how each was different than the original text.

This format allowed practice controlling and manipulating the syntactic options available to them within their actual writing. I believed that using my students’ own work was the most naturalistic way to engage them at their level of need and also provided direct resolution of problems associated with a current piece of writing. In addition, since in any written piece sentences build on one another to create a unified whole, my students could explore the effect a change in rhythm of one sentence may have had on others. Also, since the answer to what makes a good sentence is mostly dependent upon the purpose of that sentence within the context of a composition, allowing them practice selecting options within their own writing just made sense.



What is right or wrong?

During all of the practice sessions the issue that was always the most problematic was gauging “correctness”. My students wanted to establish some objective criteria to help them test the “correctness.” They were more used to being told something was right or wrong rather than being told, “that’s right, but there might be a more effective to say it.”

Although our language does indeed have rules that govern syntax, I believed that belaboring complex grammatical terminology to judge correctness would have been counterproductive. I advocated “effectiveness” as a much better indicator of merit than “correctness”. I felt that gauging effectiveness encouraged risk taking by welcoming “mistakes” as opportunities for discussion and problem solving. Within this context, “mistakes” became sentences that could be formed in better ways than the writer originally attempted. This was especially beneficial for my less-skilled writers who were often unwilling to take risks within their writing. In addition, emphasizing effectiveness helped my students understand that often in writing, there is indeed not one right answer; rather there may be multiple solutions that require introspection to decide the best option.

I found it helpful to aid my students in gauging the effectiveness of responses, through the application of three standards recommended by Nemans (1995): clarity and directness of meaning, rhythmic appeal, and intended audience. Initially, I modeled and discussed the standards then directed student pairs to use the standards to rate each other’s writings.

But are they improving?

Although I felt that my students were improving, I recall one of my colleagues asking me, “What you are doing sounds great, but are they improving?” “Of course,” I replied, but then was left reaching for my evidence to prove my claim. So I began to look for evidence that sentence combining was making a difference and further, exactly what difference it was making. In what ways were my students’ writing changing? Was the time I was taking away from “real” writing activities justified?

Two areas that I noticed immediate quantitative improvements were in the reduction of punctuation errors and the number of revisions. As I had often taught, punctuation helps organize sentence elements. What I did not anticipate was that through the combining-decombining-recombining process my students would have hands on practice using punctuation elements. As they increased the complexity of they’re sentences they learned, for example, that commas were needed to set elements off from one another and the rhythmic appeal commas could create within a sentence. They talked about when and where punctuation was needed and where it was not. Overall, their compositions became much cleaner in terms of less missing punctuation, more correct usage and decreasing number of fragments and run-on sentences.

In addition to the improvements in punctuation, I also noticed an increase in the number of revisions attempted from the first to the final drafts of writing pieces. Before I initiated sentence combining practice my students mainly saw the revision process as one of editing. They seemed to operate under a least effort strategy, meaning, they changed what was easiest to change. So they conducted “housekeeping” by fixing spelling, capitalization, formatting, and perhaps punctuation rather than engaging in what revising should have been, namely molding the sound of text to make a message clearer or providing an audience with what they need to know.

But after sentence combining practice the number of revisions climbed. My students were changing words, adding phrases and clauses, re-working entire sentences – all of the behaviors we had



been practicing. Clearly, in my mind, this meant that they were thinking about how to say things in a different way.

Aside from the quantitative improvements, I also noticed qualitative benefits. Their writing became more enjoyable for me to read. They had far fewer repetitive subject-verb-object sentences and run-ons. Their rhythm improved. The pieces simply sounded better. They now considered how their work sounded to others. They had begun to see that writers do not write for themselves, but for an audience.

Conclusions

These improvements did not occur overnight. Sentence combining was not a quick fix; it took time and effort. I had to dedicate instructional time, but I did not allow the practice to detract from my more authentic writing tasks. I mainly kept the sessions short - no more than 10 to 15 minutes, several times per week. And I kept the practice lively, believing that if the sessions become drudgery to teach, likely they would be even more so to learn.

For me the payoff of sentence combining instruction was finding an efficient method that could be easily interwoven into my regular instruction. For my students the payoff was an activity that helped their writing and was enjoyable at the same time. As one of my students told me, "Man I like this stuff. It don't have no rules, all we do is write!"

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