

A SENTENCE INSTRUCTION STUDY

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Students struggle with grammar. Teachers struggle with grammar. It's complex. However, integrating linguistic research in the secondary classroom is useful to demonstrate a writer's awareness of her writing decisions. In this process, grammar books can be valuable resources, but alone they will not help students utilize their internal grammar when writing. Valerie Krishna has noted that "[c]lear cut and predictable errors that are most precisely described and categorized in the grammar books . . . dwindle in significance next to problems of incoherence, illogicality, lack of conventional idiom or clear syntax—amorphous and unpredictable errors involving the structure of the whole sentence" (qtd. in Murdick 41). It is not important that students recite grammatical rules, but rather that they create sophisticated and meaningful sentences in their writing. With applied linguistics, teachers help students with grammar by establishing the language strengths within each student, recognizing students as expert speakers in a native language.

To further study the role of linguistics in learning sentence constructions, I conducted a formal study in my classroom while student teaching in an American Literature and Composition course. My supervising teacher assigned the 11th and 12th grade students to write a four- to six-page opposing viewpoint or biography research paper, and we met in a computer lab classroom. For the study, I selected one class as a control group of twenty students and another class as an experimental group of twenty-four students. I supplemented the experimental group's curriculum with a unit of instruction in which students worked toward conceptualizing the parts of a sentence and achieving writing clarity and style by manipulating sentence components. The unit included five lessons which were introduced throughout the month long project. The control group received no supplemental instruction and worked on their writing independently on the days I provided the additional instruction to the experimental group students. It is important to note that the class included mainstreamed students, including ELL (English Language Learners) and special needs learners, and that two students in my control group and three students in my experimental group stated that English is not their first language.

Linguistics, Grammar, and the Objectives of My Study

By studying linguistics, one discovers the inner workings and intricacies within the language system. Ignoring prescriptive rules, linguists describe language, which is comprised of signs, sounds and gestures, and rules for combination. Linguists study the components of language, including syntax (phrases and clauses), morphology (words parts), and phonology (sounds). They then show how these parts interact as a system. Educational linguistics "is the process of formulating possible solutions to specific (in this case pedagogical) problems using linguistic theory" (Brown 5). Although "[m]ost of linguistics is not classroom stuff . . . it is there behind the lines, underlying our classroom practices, and our ideas about children, and about learning and reality" (Halliday 15). The study of

educational linguistics formulates methods and functions as a framework guiding the way teachers instruct students.

While spoken language depends upon effective communication between the listener and the speaker, written language requires a teacher to help students become writers of “Good English.” A teacher can confidently justify grammar instruction using a linguistic definition: “‘Good English’ is marked by success in making language choices so that the fewest number of persons will be distracted by the choices” (Andrews 92). Consequently, a teacher’s expectations of Standard English provide communicative clarity in the classroom and elsewhere. Furthermore, with this explanation a teacher acknowledges that dialects, such as Black English Vernacular, are languages. Some argue that linguistics allow for the standards of English to decline, but linguists reply that speakers of nonstandard English use language “congruent with all factors in the domain in which the speaker finds himself” (Riddle 39). Because all languages are systems with rules, no language or language user is inherently better than another.

My first objective was to improve students’ syntactic sophistication by embedding a unit of sentence instruction within my students’ research paper project. Traditional grammar lessons isolate grammatical rules and often use direct instruction, which may be supplemented with drill and practice worksheets from textbooks. Conversely, the whole language approach embeds grammar instruction within student writing projects. Working within these two educational approaches, teachers must always respond to the particular needs of their students. However, research suggests that “the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing” (Waner 76). Current research supports the philosophy that writing instruction is most effective when integrated with student writing.

While the cognitive objectives centered on sentence instruction were important, the unit also included affective objectives intended to help students take accountability for their writing. While “[t]he ultimate aim is to make learners aware of, and empathetic to, the way a language works,” students under traditional grammar instruction cannot see how to use their internal linguistic knowledge when writing (Olsen 412). By introducing some basic linguistic concepts, I intended to empower students to play with language and to make writing decisions, knowing that writing is not fixed on the page.

In this unit, I created an environment where beginning writers reworked sentences for coherence and experienced writers reexamined their sentences for style. Warner suggests that “[w]hen students are confused by in-depth grammar study, when they don’t ‘get it,’ they sometimes begin to doubt their competence in language use in general” (78). As a result, students need a classroom where they can make and learn from errors. Furthermore, teachers should model language as complex and grammar as “an inquiry and . . . a craft” (Ehrenworth 93). As students craft their work, they make and defend their writing choices.

Conducting the Experiment

To meet my cognitive and affective objectives, I created a series of five lessons. I based these lessons, some of which I highlight below, on the research of linguists and educators. I used linguistic

research in the first and final lessons to establish the environment outlined in my objectives. Educational research informed my sentence instruction techniques in the middle lessons.

Capitalizing on linguistic exercises and videos, I showed my students that everyone possesses language capabilities and that they have a stake in studying language. To begin our study, students worked on an activity I completed on the first day of my college linguistics class. The worksheet illustrates our internal grammar by requiring the students to transform sentences and words:

- Turn the following declarative statement into a yes/no question.
“You saw a great movie last week.”
- Consider these words to be “regular” English nouns and make each one plural.
balg, skronđ

As I anticipated, the students responded correctly to the prompts. At the same time, they could not explain how they determined the correct answers. I provided further examples to help the students realize that they possess innate language skills. Many students responded when I asked if we could form a question by writing the words from a declarative sentence backwards. Everyone agreed such a construction is not possible, and I asked students how and when they learned this rule. As the students were left speechless, they recognized they use language rules that they did not learn explicitly.

Wanting the students to begin thinking about the purpose of the English classroom, I prompted them to define “good” English usage in writing. Many definitions included elements such as good spelling and punctuation. A few students responded that good English is something that others can easily understand. Following a period of discussion, I provided Larry Andrews’s definition of good English, which states that people should make language choices so the fewest number of people are distracted. Encouraging my students to think of writing as making language choices, I defined editing as a negotiation between the writer and the audience.

From this premise, I challenged students to acknowledge their capabilities and work toward a higher syntactical sophistication in their writing. Because “[s]eeing things is always a selective activity—a matter of not seeing some things in order to see others,” the lessons directed students to look at their individual sentences and then change them by adding, deleting, substituting, or moving sentence components (Shaughnessy 85). Linguists recognize that this knowledge of generative-transformational grammar apparently reduces students’ errors in writing (Malmstrom 51). When students recognize how parts of speech move within the sentence, they can identify and correct their grammatical errors.

Additionally, generative linguists have determined that we do not construct sentences in word chains but rather in noun and verb phrases. Therefore, identifying the phrases within a sentence is the first step toward understanding any sentence. As Mina Shaughnessy suggests, students need to see these sentence seams because at times, students write the way they speak (78-79). Consequently, I instructed students to divide sentences into noun and verb phrases. Then, students spent time looking for these phrases within their research paper sentences.

When students felt comfortable with locating the actor and the action in sentences, I asked students to look at sentences with dual meanings, such as “We will sell gasoline to anyone in a glass container” from Steven Pinker’s *The Language Instinct*. Students identified the two meanings, located the noun and verb phrase, and rewrote the sentence for clarity. The students laughed when they discovered the two meanings but also realized they sometimes needed to completely change the sentence for

clarity.

These activities introduced students to some of the challenges writers face when writing sophisticated sentences. Subsequent to these activities, I thought it important to help students see their role in the writing process as they composed sophisticated sentences. Building off our definition of good English, I wrote the motto for the writing unit as “Effectiveness = Awareness” on the board. The motto let them know that like playing a sport or instrument, writing takes practice. As a result, we discussed the reasons why writing is worth the practice, citing examples such as job applications and college admission essays.

I also used sentence combining instruction to give students strategies for expanding their sentences. Many educators comment that sentence combining “has proven to be far more effective in improving the complexity of student sentences than the study of traditional grammar” (Warner 80). Nancy Joseph has noted that sentence combining encourages students to take risks with language (29). Sentence combining shows students how to transform their kernel or simple sentences into complex sentences with initial, medial, and final modifiers.

In a lesson focused on sentence combining, I used a PowerPoint presentation so students could literally see the initial, medial, and final modifiers added to the sentence. Additionally, students completed a corresponding activity guide to remain engaged. On the guide, students first located the noun and verb phrases in each example sentence. I then modeled how to add new descriptors as initial, medial, and final modifiers. In further examples, I demonstrated how to combine a series of simple sentences into one sophisticated sentence. Following each example, the students transformed one of the sentences or string of simple sentences in their papers. One student transformed the sentence “Audrey won a scholarship to pay her tuition to the ballet” into “Through her elegant way of dancing and capturing stage presence, Audrey won a scholarship to pay her tuition to the ballet school.” Students shared examples like this to begin learning from each other in our writing community.

While the above example illustrates students’ success with sentence combining techniques, educators have also noted that

[t]horough analysis accomplishes in depth what sentence combining only touches upon, for sentence combining succeeds in drawing attention to some structures that can be used for expanding a sentence, but it provides neither method nor rationale for choosing one structure over others. Nor does it instill an understanding of the language system as a whole that gives students the control over structures they need. (Sams 61)

Thus, my lessons used sentence combining instruction in conjunction with linguistic discussions centered on the premise that effective writers are aware of their writing choices. In each writing exercise, students wrote a sentence about whether their new sentences better supported their thesis. Throughout the unit, I used these discussions and peer editing to illustrate that writers ultimately choose one sentence structure over another through reading, practice, and interactions with peers.

Modeling a writing community, I included partner work and discussion in each lesson. When students are taught “that words, phrases, and sentences bear specific relationships to one another . . . [they] develop an enhanced ability to recognize weak links in their own and other’s writings” (Sams 63). The group work was reciprocal because students developed as critical evaluators of sentences and then used this knowledge as they composed their own papers. Although offering suggestions, I did not

provide a final approval or rejection of their revisions because I wanted students to rely on their writing community. Educators have noted that writing may suffer if students rely exclusively on teacher comment (Murdick 43). Instead of relying on a teacher's infamous red marks, students practiced selecting sentences to edit. To support growth, the group work provided the forum for students to test their internal assumptions against their audience.

Because our classroom was only one of many audiences, it was important for my students to reflect on United States dialects as well as the positives and negatives of Standard Written English (SWE). We discussed the research paper audience throughout the unit, but in one specific lesson, I asked students to think about occasions when audience varies. Students watched a segment from the video *American Tongues*, hearing dialects from throughout the United States. One section in my activity guide required students to list the positive and negative reasons for SWE. They also discussed the social implications and power language holds. One student shared her experience moving from the East to the Midwest, while many other students shared their experiences traveling throughout the United States and abroad. It was in this final lesson that we summarized the purpose of writing to an audience, and students defined their classmates as the audience. Now more attuned with the objective of making language choices, students expressed that Standard English would be an appropriate way to communicate with their peers. Students may have felt the rhetorical need to use the grammatical conventions instead of the pressure to use them for a grade.

Evaluating the Student Writing

During the project, I collected a first draft of one to two pages and final draft of four to six pages from each student in the control and experimental groups. I analyzed every first and final draft pair to discover if the experimental group students wrote more sophisticated sentences. I analyzed each sentence and placed them into one of five categories: simple, compound, complex, fragment, and run-on. In the experimental class, we defined sentences in terms of noun and verb phrases, and I counted independent and dependent clauses in the first and final drafts of both class periods. Fragment, run-on, and simple sentences were considered a low degree of sophistication, while compound and complex sentences were considered a high degree of sophistication.

I then counted the number of simple, compound, complex, fragment, and run-on sentences in each first and final draft. I calculated the percentages of simple, compound, complex, fragment, and run-on sentences that each student wrote in his/her first and final draft. With these percentages, I ran a statistical analysis (SPSS, Version 13.0) of two Independent T-Tests and two Paired T-Tests, searching for significance (a value less than 0.05) or a marginal significance (a value less than 0.1). The values in each test answered a specific research question.

Findings

Prior to collecting the student writing and introducing the lessons, I asked my students in both the control and experimental classes to rate themselves as writers and proofreaders. The majority of the control group participants rated themselves as average to confident writers. The average writers stated "[their] final drafts show that [they] understand how to write, but the assignments make [them] nervous." The confident writers said "[their] final drafts have a few spelling or grammatical errors, but

overall [their] papers are clear.” Likewise, the majority of the experimental group identified themselves as confident writers.

The majority of the control group identified themselves as average to confident as proofreaders. The average proofreaders said “[they] find some errors in [their] drafts, but sometimes [they] do not know what [they] should be looking for when [they] edit.” The confident proofreaders said “[they] find and correct the majority of [their] grammatical errors on [their] own before turning in a paper.” As with the writing responses, the majority of the experimental group rated themselves as confident proofreaders. As a beginning teacher, I then anticipated that the first drafts from my experimental group would be more sophisticated than the control group drafts.

To establish baseline data and determine if the control and experimental groups wrote at the same level of sentence sophistication prior to instruction, I used an Independent T-Test to compare the first drafts of the control group and experimental group. This test indicated the control class wrote a significantly higher percentage of complex sentences than the experimental class. While the control group wrote 31% complex sentences, the experimental group wrote 18%. Also, the experimental group wrote 4% fragment sentences compared to 2% in the control group, a marginal value. This suggests that the experimental group had more room for improvement.

After determining my students’ starting point, I compared the final drafts, searching for my desired result that the experimental group would write more sophisticated sentences than the control group in final drafts. Another Independent T-Test comparing the final drafts of the control and experimental groups revealed that while the control group initially wrote at a higher level of sophistication, the final papers were not significantly different. However, the statistics showed a marginal significance in fragment sentences because the experimental students were still writing more fragments than the control students. I can account for this result because my lessons focused on expanding simple sentences and did not address correcting fragments. Ideally, the experimental group would have composed more sophisticated sentences than the control group, but I was pleased to find that the experimental group bridged the complex sentence gap from the first drafts.

Because the control and experimental group students wrote similar final drafts, I wanted to observe how the groups’ drafts changed throughout the unit. A Paired T-Test comparing the first and the final drafts of the control group showed significance in simple, compound, and complex sentences. Control group students on average wrote 45% simple sentences in the first drafts and 56% in the final drafts. The analysis also revealed that the control group wrote on average 13% compound sentences in the first drafts and 20% in the final drafts. While increasing in the simple and compound categories, control group students wrote fewer complex sentences, shifting from 31% in the first drafts to 16% in the final drafts. These numbers illustrate that students reverted to simple sentences in many situations. From this evidence, I deduce that without instruction, many students may not see the need to expand their simple sentences.

After examining the control group, I ran tests to determine how the experimental group changed throughout the unit. A Paired T-Test comparing the first and final drafts of the experimental group showed significance in one area, fragment sentences. The experimental group wrote 4% fragment sentences in the first draft and 2% in the final drafts. Run-on sentences also decreased by a marginal amount, dropping from 14% in the first drafts to 10% in the final drafts. Similar to the control group,

the percentage of simple sentences increased to 56%, however the actual increase was only marginal. The experimental students wrote 50% simple sentences in the first drafts and 56% in the final drafts. While still a high percentage, these numbers are marginal, unlike the significant values of the control group. That the experimental group did not increase by a significant amount indicates that the control group students relied more on simple sentences. Therefore, it is possible that my instruction gave students a strategy to reduce their reliance on the simple sentence form.

While I expected sentence sophistication to increase with page length, the drafts showed that students relied heavily on the simple sentence form. In this study, students apparently focused on the content more than the construction of their sentences. However, the marginal significance of simple sentences indicates that even with the limited time of five instructional days, the context-based instruction likely impacted students' thinking when composing. I saw this cognitive shift when categorizing the sentences because in both the control and experimental groups, a majority of students did not revise the first two pages of the first draft. Instead, students turned in an additional four pages. While this provided a helpful comparison for my study, it was also an awakening for me as a first-time teacher to see that students often do not revise previous text beyond the required amount.

Beyond the Study

In this study, it was my goal to help students expand their repertoire of sentence structures (cognitive goals), while also creating a supportive classroom community, a place to gain an appreciation for the writing process and language (affective goals). While control and experimental group students relied on the simple sentence structure, tests comparing the final drafts showed that the experimental group students relied slightly less on the simple construction. These results support the philosophy that students learn best when they use their own writing to practice grammatical concepts. Although the statistics do not measure the affective goals, I observed a shift in the writing of experimental group students; they wrote significantly more sophisticated sentences in the latter sections of their papers. With time, students gained the confidence to try new sentence structures, and I expect they gained this confidence from the in-class exercises.

In the future, I will expand this study, making adjustments that are possible outside of the student teaching experience. In my own classroom, I will continue reaching for the cognitive goals by providing additional lessons and practice over a longer period of time. For example, in a longer unit, students will have time to review the parts of speech. Although the phrase "parts of speech" may sound like one ripped from the pages of a traditional grammar lesson, my lessons will require students to use their own writing for the review. The review will not be a focal part of the unit, but it will provide the vocabulary needed to discuss sentences during writing groups and student-teacher conferences. Within a longer unit, I also plan to tie the in-class exercises to assessment. My students responsibly participated in the lessons, but it remains important for students to see the instruction as an integral part of a writing process.

As students develop their writing, I will continue challenging them to make and defend textual choices in a writing community environment. When structuring part of the study around students developing an independent attitude toward writing, I learned students need leadership when selecting and editing sentences. In the future, I will pick sentences from the drafts, giving students an example

before requiring them to pick their own sentences. I will also ask students to identify sentence patterns in their own writing and research. On occasion, it may be useful for students to share good or even bad examples of sentences from their research sources and explain why the sentences fall into each category.

We also need further research in the field of grammar instruction. The research should be geared toward discovering instructional strategies that students readily apply in future assignments. For those considering such research, it will be useful to incorporate technology. Students appreciated working with computers because the sentence exercises were less labor-intensive.

Although computers increased classroom productivity, peer work invited classroom management issues. For novice teachers, I suggest embracing the chaos; peer work built our classroom dynamics and my relationships with students. Additionally, new and experienced teachers can benefit from studying basic linguistic principles that influence how one approaches writers who struggle with Standard English. Many believe linguistic theory does not have a place in the secondary classroom, but I used my basic knowledge of linguistics to establish that students have an innate stake in language. Formal textbook grammar is difficult to learn and teach, but when teachers use basic linguistic principles to begin discussions about the complexity of language in formal study, students gain a real picture of language and the purpose of the English classroom.

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"I SUPPOSE I AM MY OWN GIRL NOW"