

SENTENCE STRUCTURE: AN APPROACH TO HELP IMPROVE ESP  
STUDENTS' READING COMPREHENSION

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RESUMO:

*O artigo tenta integrar as sugestões de Taubitz (1980), Levin e Statman (1983) e Thiede-Gonzo (1983) no que se refere ao uso de uma análise detalhada da estrutura frasal do inglês como elemento facilitador da compreensão de leitura. Parte do pressuposto que o conhecimento da estrutura da frase é um dos maiores problemas para os estudantes de inglês. Oferece inúmeros exemplos e recomenda particularmente as técnicas de Levin e Statman e de Thiede-Gonzo como úteis para se estabelecer a relação entre a estrutura e o significado de orações isoladas e a estrutura e o significado de um texto como um todo.*

This paper represents an attempt to integrate the suggestions made by three specialists on how to help ESP students improve their reading comprehension through the close analysis of sentence structure in English.

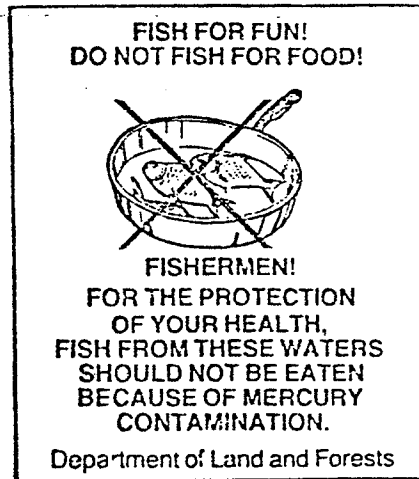
On the basis of the classroom experience of those specialists, it would make sense to state that mastery of SENTENCE STRUCTURE is one of the major problems students face in learning English.

We can identify two main aspects in a sentence:

- 1 - its purpose
- 2 - its grammatical form

In other words, a sentence has a grammatical form (e.g. imperative, for example: "Watch your wallet", "Don't attempt to feed the animals") and a communicative purpose (function). Warnings and orders are examples of communicative functions.

Example:



(From Reading and Thinking in English - Exploring Functions, p. 5).

Therefore, writers use grammar to communicate information.

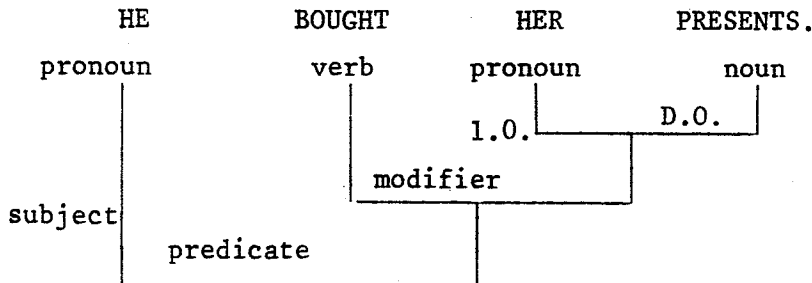
#### SUGGESTIONS

Taubitz (1980) suggests the use of IMMEDIATE-CONSTITUENT ANALYSIS. This technique avoids any possible kind of distortion, leaving normal word order intact. It assumes that most constructions will have two parts which are not necessarily coordinate. In the first example below: HE BOUGHT HER PRESENTS, the objects are subordinated to the verb-plus-objects construction, and the entire predicate is subordinated to the subject-plus-predicate construction.

Example: HE BOUGHT HER PRESENTS.



This same example could also be given the following labels, indicating that the horizontal lines connect constructions, while the vertical lines connect constituents.



This immediate-constituent technique is still widely used in the United States in foreign - as well as native-language textbooks.

The second technique suggested by Levine and Statman (1983) is aimed at training beginning students with a chart containing a basic English sentence which is then expanded into a more complex structure.

SUBJECT (subject group)	VERB	COMPLEMENT (complement group)
Scientists	gather	information
Social scientists	gather	interesting information
Social scientists who are working on university projects	gather	interesting information which is obtained by means of questionnaires from students.
Social scientists who are working on university projects in many different research areas	gather	interesting information which is obtained by means of questionnaires from students who enjoy participating in this kind of work.

Levine and Statman draw teachers' attention to their own experience which has shown that subjects expressed by something other than a noun are a source of confusion for the learner. Those authors therefore suggest one more chart to illustrate the different types of subjects (subject groups). For example:

SUBJECT (subject group)	VERB	COMPLEMENT (complement group)
To study English can be expanded to	requires	concentration.
To study English at university level in order to be able to read professional literature	requires	concentration.
How he reads can be expanded to	interests	me.
How he reads dif- ficult texts in a foreign language without a diction- ary	interests	whoever is doing re- search on the prob- lems of the foreign- language learner.

The student can be helped to see the relationship between the parts of the sentence by working through exercises like the following:

Examples:

Directions: Divide the sentences below into meaningful units. The clues in the diagram will help you.

1-A psychologist who was interested in people's memory of events arranged for the following event to take place during his lecture...

[Empty box]

↓ WHO was interested in WHAT?

[Empty box]

↓ WHO did WHAT for the following event to take place during his lecture?

[Empty box]

WHAT is going to take place? WHEN?  
WHOSE lecture?

2 - ... He (the psychologist) was in the middle of a sentence when a man rushed in, contradicted the lecturer, pulled out a gun and threatened to shoot him.

[Empty box]

↓ WHO was in the middle of WHAT?

[Empty box]

↓ WHEN what?

[Empty box]

↓ WHO contradicted WHOM?

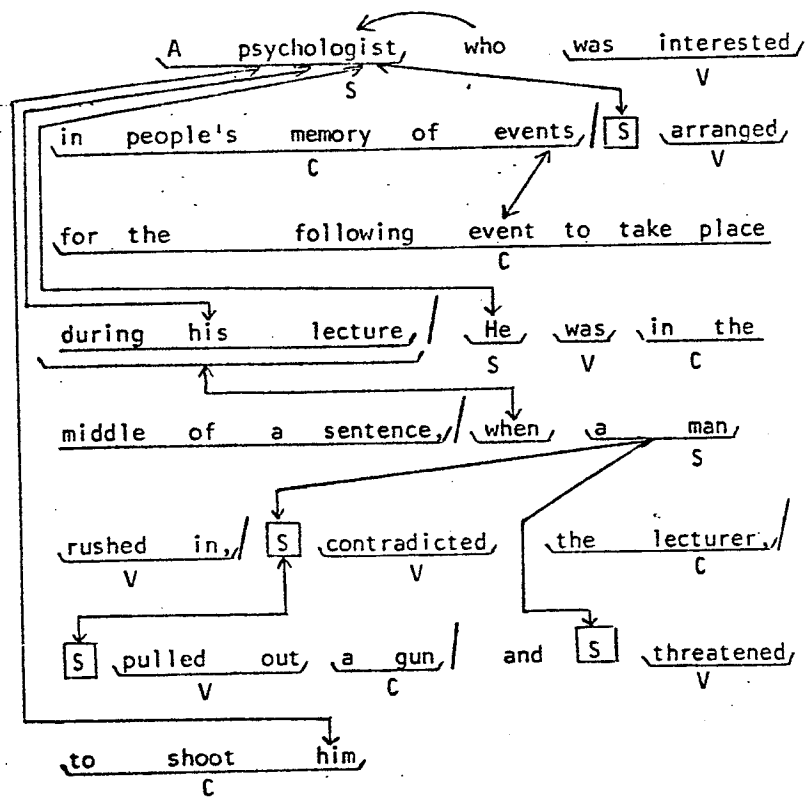
[Empty box]

↓ WHO did WHAT with a gun?

[Empty box]

WHO threatened to shoot WHOM?

The teacher may also show these sentences in a different way like the one below, trying to make the student aware of *not only* the elements which form the sentence but also of the relations between those elements in the sentence (intra-sentential) and their relation within the other sentences that form the paragraph.



Legenda: S = sujeito V = verbo C = complemento

The third technique is SENTENCE COMBINING, suggested by Thiede-Gonzo (1983). The difficulty of sentence combining is determined by the number of sentences to be combined, the nature of the instructions for combining the sentences, and the number of possible solutions.

The simplest and most basic type of exercise is one in which the student is given two sentences with specific directions on how to combine them into one sentence. An example of this type of exercise is given below:

Directions: Combine the sentences in each group into *only* one sentence, using the word in parentheses ( ) to join them:

- (1) (a) David went to school. ( AND )  
(b) Pamela went to the library.
- (2) (a) The students were happy. ( BECAUSE )  
(b) The students passed the test.
- (3) (a) The girl bought a new camera ( WHO )  
(b) The girl took a vacation.

For each of the examples above, there are *only* two correct answers, depending on the order in which the student uses the two sentences. Thus, the following are possible correct answers:

- (1) David went to school and Pamela went to the library.

O R

Pamela went to the library and David went to school.

- (2) The students were happy because they passed the test

O R

Because they passed the test, the students were happy.

- (3) The girl who took a vacation bought a new camera

O R

The girl who bought a new camera took a vacation.

The exercises used for teaching a given structure could range from easy to difficult, depending on the level of the students being taught. For example, students who have just been introduced to relative clauses would first be given fairly controlled sentence-combining exercises with only one possible solution, as in the example below. Exercises of this type can also be used for students of more advanced proficiency in order to familiarize them with the methods and goals of sentence-combining exercises as well as to review structures they have already been taught.

Directions: Combine each pair of sentences into a single sentence. Make the second sentence into a relative clause using the word in parentheses ( ):

- (1) (a) The boy is my brother. (WHO)  
(b) The boy is sitting near the window

(Answer: The boy who is sitting near the window is my brother).

- (2) (a) The hat belonged to my mother. (WHICH)  
(b) I am wearing the hat.

(Answer: The hat which I am wearing belonged to my mother).

Once the students have mastered the fairly controlled exercises they can move on to some openended, creative exercises that practice the same grammatical structures, as in the example below. The students are then allowed to choose from a wider range of stylistic variants in arriving at a correct solution. Exercises



of this type could be classified as meaningful because they come much closer to real communication.

Directions: Combine each sequence of sentences into a single sentence with at least one relative clause:

- (1) (a) The secretary speaks English fluently.  
(b) The secretary got a job as a translator.

(Answer: The secretary WHO speaks English fluently got a job as a translator.

*O R*

The secretary WHO got a job as a translator speaks English fluently).

- (2) (a) The Basques live in the mountains.  
(b) The mountains separate Spain from France.  
(c) The Basques were never conquered by the Romans.

(Answer: The Basques, WHO live in the mountains WHICH separate Spain from France, were never conquered by the Romans.

*O R*

The Basques, WHO were never conquered by the Romans, live in the mountains WHICH separate Spain from France)

Since the level of difficulty of sentence combining exercises can vary greatly, this approach can be adapted to suit students of varying degrees of English proficiency, ranging from basic intermediate to advanced

Sentence combining can be an especially useful adjunct to an ESP (English for Special Purposes) program. Researchers and teachers of English have long been aware that there are great differences between the vocabulary and grammatical structures used in one field of study, for example, engineering, and those of an-

other, for example, economics or sociology. An ESP program designed for students with a particular vocational goal could base its sentence-combining exercises on the syntactic structures and vocabulary the student needs to know in that field. In the absence of a formal program, an individual teacher could look at some of the textbooks that the students are expected to read and "decompose" sentences into the simple sentences from which they are made, thus creating an appropriate set of sentence-combining exercises.

In addition, sentence-combining emphasis on constructions (phrases, clauses and sentences) makes it one of the best approaches for teaching students how a sentence works by taking them from mere recognition of syntactic units to the combining of these units into complex sentences. Sentence-combining practice not only gives students practice in using a range of syntactic structures, but also leads to overall improvement in terms of such things as grammatical correctness, sentence variety, and even organization and cohesion. A program in sentence combining can be flexible, with exercises ranging from fairly controlled to relatively free, from predominantly mechanical to relatively creative, from combining two sentences to combining groups of three to six into sentences which then make up a coherent paragraph in a broader context.

In short, I recommend the techniques here presented with special emphasis to the second and third ones. I think that by breaking down sentences into meaningful, manageable units learners acquire a useful technique for building the bridge between the structure and meaning of separate sentences and the structure and meaning of the text as a whole.

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