How to Integrate Sentence Combining/Decombining Effectively

into the English Language Arts Classroom

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Abstract

For decades, research has shown that traditional grammar instruction taught in isolation in secondary English language arts classrooms is ineffective in both improving student writing and also in grammar recognition. Sentence combining/decombining is the grammar practice of putting together pieces of kernel, or basic, sentences to form syntactically complex sentences. Since the 1960s, research studies have shown that sentence combining/decombining exercises improve student writing significantly, compared to students who solely receive generative grammar lessons in isolation. Teachers can give students an explicit purpose for learning the grammar, therefore making the instruction meaningful to students. By teaching sentence combining/decombining in the context of writing, students can connect the grammar skill to meaningful writing to see the benefits and purpose of learning the skill. Because teachers today are working with digital natives, grammar lessons need to incorporate digital tools to not only enhance instruction but also interest and motivate students to learn.

Introduction

There are many ways to teach grammar that are ineffective, and unfortunately, frequently used in secondary classrooms. Diagramming sentences, while enjoyable for lovers of grammar like myself, "teaches nothing beyond the ability to diagram" (Encyclopedia, 1960). Those who teach the "identification of parts of speech, the parsing or diagraming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar (as many still do)…cannot defend it as a means of improving the quality of writing" (Hillocks, 1986). I firmly believe in teaching students nouns, participles, conjunctions, and the remaining parts of speech; however, research proves that simply teaching the parts of speech out of context is effective. And for most students, the systematic study of grammar skills, including the parts of speech and functions of punctuation marks, is not helpful in editing or correcting sentence errors (Hillocks, 1986).

What the research has shown, however, and continues to show, is that there are several ways to include grammar in the English language arts curriculum while making it meaningful and effective for students. Learning punctuation in the context of writing is significantly more effective than studying punctuation marks in isolation (Calkins, 1980). Similarly, sentence variety and spelling are also much more effectively taught through the context of student writing (DiStefano and Killion, 1984). And finally, "systematic practice in combining and expanding sentences can increase students' repertoire of syntactic structure and can also improve the quality of their sentences, when stylistic effects are discussed as well" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991).

There is little evidence that formal grammar instruction is effective for student writing or grammar recognition; however one proven method of grammar instruction is the practice of sentence combining/decombining. Teachers can integrate grammar instruction into the English

language arts classroom in a meaningful and effective way by teaching sentence

combining/decombining in the context of writing and with the use of digital tools.

History of Grammar

David Mulroy (2003), wrote that "students who have come of age in our nation since the

sixties have very little grasp of grammar…" (p. 1). For the purposes of this paper, I define

grammar as the following: a system of rules that defines the structure of a language and word

functions and relations, including syntax, morphology, phonology, and semantics (Merriam-

Webster and Oxford Dictionaries). There are several times in United States history when

grammar has been widely discredited. Charles Fries, one of the founding fathers of twentieth

century linguistics, was one of the first to speak out against grammar instruction (Mulroy, 2003).

In his 1952 work, *The Structure of English,* Fries compared the "circulation of blood and

traditional grammar to the practice of bleeding" (Mulroy, 2003, p. 5). His implication was that

traditional grammar instruction should be discouraged and eliminated from schools. In 1963,

Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones, and Lowell Schoer were quoted in the National Council

of Teachers of English (NCTE) publications as believing that "the conclusion can be stated in

strong and unqualified terms: the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible…even harmful

effect on the improvement of writing" (Mulroy, 2003, p. 5). Grammar was even further

discredited when Peter Elbow, in his work *Writing with Power,* stated that "[grammar] makes it

almost impossible to achieve that undistracted attention to your thoughts and experiences as you

write that is so crucial for strong writing and sanity" (Mulroy, 2003, p. 7). However, in her 1996

work, *Teaching Grammar in Context*, Constance Weaver found the loophole in the NCTE

statements about grammar instruction: the NCTE did not support the teaching of grammar in

isolation. However, grammar taught in context has been proven to be more effective (Weaver,

1996). (See the Creative Strategies section of this paper for examples and application of teaching

grammar in context.) There has been and still is a major conflict between those who believe in

the power of traditional grammar taught in isolation and those who see that grammar instruction

as useless. Nonetheless, many individuals are researching and studying the benefits of one aspect

of grammar: sentence combining and decombining.

Sentence Combining and Decombining

What is Sentence Combining/Decombining?

Sentence combining is the practice of "putting together strings of basic kernel sentences into

more complex, syntactically mature and fluent sentences" (John Savage in **Phillips, S**).

According to Haussamen, Benjamin, Kolln, and Wheeler, authors of *Grammar Alive!*, sentence

combining is a "tested method for improving the maturity of student writing" (2003).

According to the aforementioned definition of grammar, syntax is one aspect of grammar.

The strategy of sentence combining/decombining is one way students can improve their syntax.

According to Merriam Webster dictionary, syntax is "the way in which linguistic elements (as

words) are put together to form constituents (as phrases or clauses)". While my focus in this

paper is the improvement of sentence combining/decombining grammar skills, the direct effect

of these improvements is also an improvement in written composition. The primary goal of

exercises in sentence combining is not to produce longer sentences but rather to develop more

effective ones. Sentence combining/decombining involves adjectives and adverbs, prepositions,

conjunctions, appositives, several other parts of speech, and basic punctuation. Therefore, it

helps student writing if students are familiar with these elements of language; to effectively

combine or decombine sentences, students need to use or remove additional words, phrases, or

punctuation marks.

Sentence combining/decombining can appear in dozens of ways in the classroom. Depending on the grade, level, and syntactic maturity of students, there are many different ways to teach the combining and decombining of sentences.

One of the simplest ways to teach sentence combining to secondary students is by giving students several kernel sentences. Strong (1986) provides the following example in Figure 1.

> This was a decrease.
>
> The decrease was very sharp.
>
> The decrease was in a period.
>
> The period was very short.

Figure 1

Students will identify the base clauses- the sentences that the other kernels modify. From there, students will chunk sentences to form fewer sentences that are more complex and descriptive. (See the appendix for more examples of this strategy.)

Figure 2, taken from Strong (1986), shows a sentence combining exercise that could potentially bridge the separation between sentence combining and formal grammar.

> 1. _____ she had a headache, she went to bed.
>
> 2. _____ she had a headache, she went to the concert.
>
> 3. _____ she had a headache, she goes to bed.

Figure 2

This exercise would promote students to consider conjunctions that they have learned and apply them in the context of a scenario (Strong, 1986). Teachers can chose many parts of speech to remove from sentences to do exercises similar to this one.

Another exercise presented below in Figure 3, taken from Strong (1986), uses context clues to connect two thoughts.

School Politician

Directions: Use *who, which,* and *that* as connectors. Then do the exercise a second time without using these connecting words.

1.1 Tirebiter stands up abruptly.
1.2 He is running for class president.

—————— , who ————————————————————— ,

stands ————————————————————————— .

2.1 He makes a speech.
2.2 It argues for longer lunches.

—————————————————————————————

that ————————————————————————— .

3.1 His words are fiery.
3.2 They are applauded by students.

—————— , which ————————————————— ,

————————————————————————————— .

4.1 The teacher quiets the class.
4.2 She is not amused by Tirebiter's speech.

The —————— , ——————————————————— ,

———————————————————————— class.

5.1 She calls him to her desk.
5.2 It is near the windows.

———————————————————————— desk,

————————————————————————— .

6.1 The smile is now a frown.
6.2 She usually wears a smile.

The smile —————————————————————

———————————————————————— frown.

7.1 She asks him about promises.
7.2 He won't be able to keep the promises.

8.1 Tirebiter glances at his classmates.
8.2 They are starting to giggle.

9.1 The look makes him uneasy.
9.2 The teacher wears the look.

10.1 He begins to grin.
10.2 This only deepens her frown.

11.1 The teacher asks her question again.
11.2 She now appears even more unamused.

12.1 Then she glares at the class.
12.2 The class immediately becomes quiet.

Figure 3

Eventually, in an activity like this, the prompting would be removed and students would

need to choose an appropriate connecting word. This activity also assists in teaching the

appropriate uses of *that* and *which*. (See Appendix B for the complete activity.)

To introduce participial phrases, sentence combining can be a useful tool (Strong, 1986). The example in Figure 4 gives three sentences with which students can practice.

The teacher gestured wildly.

The teacher stood before the class.

The teacher talked about participial phrases.

1.   Gesturing _____, the teacher

        _____, talking_____.

2.   Talking _____,

        _____   the teacher

        _____.

3.   The teacher _____,

        _____,

        _____.

4.   The teacher

        _____,

        stood before the class.

Figure 4

Given the three initial sentences, the purpose of this exercise is to show students that there are many ways to construct sentences, and that sometimes combining several simple sentences can create a more complex, complex one.

Sentence combining/decombining can look very different depending on the ultimate goal of instruction, and it can be a bridge between boring grammar concepts and application. Strong (1986) states that "memory requires understanding, and understanding requires identifying, sorting, grouping, transforming, and applying" (p. 53). By creating varying ways of interesting grammar and sentence practice, students can apply the concept of combining/decombining sentences, while incorporating their writing and grammar concepts.

A History of Sentence Combining

Erasmus, 14th century rhetorician, showed how one sentence could be expressed in 150 ways by only changing the syntax or diction (Hillocks and Smith, 1991). In the early 1960s, Noam Chomsky developed his theory of transformational grammar. His transformation model, an early version of his generative model, states that language is governed by a finite set of rules for sounds, word formation, and syntax (Hillocks and Smith, 1991). He believed that the brain is wired for language; it has innate universal grammar knowledge. His later generative grammar model depicted a set of rules in a language that correctly can predict which combinations of words form sentences (syntax); those rules also can predict morphology. The purpose of generative grammar is to explain how language users can encode or decode sentences from a few kernel (or basic) sentence patterns (Hillocks and Smith, 1991).

The concept of sentence combining has been studied for centuries. More recently, however, many have experimented with sentence combining/decombining in research studies.

<div align="center">

Quantitative Studies

</div>

Kellogg Hunt, in a 1962 study, found that as children mature in age, their written language also becomes more structurally complex (Hunt, 1965).

Several years later, in 1967, John Mellon became the first to conduct an experiment on sentence combining (Cooper, 1971). His report, *Transformational Sentence Combining: A method for enhancing the development of syntactic fluency in English composition*, was the first study to ask participating students to practice combining kernel sentences together, rather than memorizing the grammar rules (Mellon, 1967). He believed that by teaching transformational/generative grammar in conjunction with practicing combining short kernel sentences into more complex sentences, seventh grade students would achieve "correctness" in written composition (Mellon, 1967). He divided 250 students into three groups: two groups were the control groups, one had normal grammar instruction, the other had sentence diagramming instruction (Mellon, 1967). The experimental group learned both basic grammar instruction, as well as sentence combining skills. His study found that students who received sentence combining and grammar instruction showed two to three times the gain in one year compared to the control groups (Mellon, 1967).

Mellon's study was seminal; however sentence-combining exercises still did not become an important focus of instruction until 1973 when Frank O'Hare found in a research study that seventh grade students had the ability to write at a much higher level given appropriate grammar exercises (O'Hare, 1973). For O'Hare's research study, he gave seventh-grade students sentence combining instruction without teaching any formal rules of grammar. O'Hare's control group only received formal grammar instruction (O'Hare, 1973). The results showed that the group with sentence combining practice improved on syntax, but also writing quality in general (O'Hare, 1973). Because of this study, sentence combining was introduced in the schools.

Then in 1978, Donald Daiker, Andrew Kerek, Max Morenberg at the University of Miami of Ohio wanted to know if their first year college students would produce improved

writing with sentence combining exercises. They found that their college students moved from twelfth grade syntactic maturity to sophomore and junior college levels after less than a year of sentence combining practice (Daiker, 1979).

Why Sentence Combining and Decombining?

Not only does the practice of sentence combining/decombining assist students with syntax, but improvements in syntax directly affect written composition. Hillocks (1986) states that "sentence combining practice provides writers with systematic knowledge of syntactic possibilities, the access to which allows them to sort through alternatives in their heads as well as on paper and to choose those which are most apt" (150).

In her first year as an English composition teacher at the University of Northern Colorado, Karen Heise was mortified after reading her students' first essays.

"What I saw horrified me: sentence fragments, gross spelling errors, punctuation misuse, jumbled thinking, and even sometimes no thinking at all…I wondered how it was that students couldn't communicate in complete sentences, much less logical paragraphs, could be admitted to any university. Nevertheless, here they were" (Mulroy, 2003, 13).

The ability to write cohesive, advanced sentences directly benefits students in twenty-first century society. The knowledge and understanding of grammar concepts, like sentence combining/decombining, contribute to effectively written sentences, paragraphs, and longer written compositions.

Not only does the ability to improve syntax via sentence combining/decombining benefit students in daily life, but grammatical concepts appear in both Common Core Standards and NCTE/IRA English Language Arts Standards. The Common Core State Standards Initiative's College and Career Readiness Anchor Standards for Language state the following:

- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

- Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

The National Council of Teachers of English and International Reading Association paired to form NCTE/IRA Standards for English language arts:

- Students adjust their use of spoken, written, and visual language (e.g., conventions, style, vocabulary) to communicate effectively with a variety of audiences and for different purposes.

- Students apply knowledge of language structure, language conventions (e.g., spelling and punctuation), media techniques, figurative language, and genre to create, critique, and discuss print and non-print texts.

Students should learn grammar skills like sentence combining/decombining to simply better themselves as writers and productive, educated citizens of today's society. If the intrinsic motivation is not present, Common Core and NCTE/IRA standards mandate that teachers provide sufficient grammar instruction to ensure that students have grammar training in school.

Creative Strategies to Teach Sentence Combining/Decombining

"It is not the grammar that is the problem but rather the way that grammar is taught" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 731). Like with most content areas of education in 2012, teachers need to make grammar in the English language arts classroom relevant and interesting for students. Several ways to do this are through using purposeful texts, teaching grammar in context with writing, and using digital tools to enhance grammar learning.

Purpose

"Writers learn to write by paying a certain sort of attention to the works of their great predecessors in the medium of written language, as well as by merely reading them." —John Barth

To make grammar instruction relevant and meaningful, teachers can incorporate texts, both print and digital, that students are reading in class.

Every author in literature has a different style of writing. Some authors write with long lengthy sentences and others write short and simple ones. Posing the question "why" to students could be the introductory discussion for purpose and syntax. Every author has a purpose for using specific syntax and language. Teachers can have students write with similar purposes to imitate the great authors or create their own purpose that follows the syntax. Students can also write for a variety of purposes using different text forms. The following are some ideas for writing prompts: a letter about your day to a parent, an email about your day to a grandparent, a journal entry to a teacher about your day, an instant message or text to your best friend about your day, etc. In each form, the syntax of the writing would change, and the student would have a reason or purpose for changing the syntax in each situation.

Strong (1986) suggests that teachers select a poem, or section or a poem, like "Dover Beach" by Matthew Arnold. Separate each phrase of the poem onto separate lines. Strong (1986) provides the poem in Figure 5 that students can use (p. 67).

It is night.

The sea is calm.

The tide is full.

The moon is fair.

The moon lies upon the straits.

A light gleams.

The light is on the French coast.

The light is gone.

Figure 5

For this activity, teachers can ask students to imagine themselves at sea, listening to the

rhythm of the waves. Students will have previously learned that this poem was written in the mid

1800s. Playing the sounds of a beach or waves in an ocean may help students visualize the

setting of the poem. Students would need to interpret the purpose of the poem and what the

author's purpose was in initially writing it. Then students would attempt to combine sentences,

as Arnold visually represented his poem differently than the version students see. Figure 6 shows

the original form of the poem (Strong, 1986).

The sea is calm tonight.

The tide is full, the moon lies fair

Upon the straits; on the French coast the light

Gleams and is gone.

Figure 6

Ultimately, students will have produced a poem with similar formatting to the original

Arnold poem (Strong, 1986). This activity could take place in the curriculum in a poetry unit and proves that a sentence combining/decombining grammar lesson can be incorporated into any context in the classroom.

In Context with Writing

There are many ways to incorporate sentence combining/decombining into authentic contexts in the classroom. To be authentic and meaningful, grammar instruction is most naturally integrated into the writing process (Strong, 1986). After students have written their first drafts of a writing piece, teachers can incorporate mini-lessons of grammatical concepts that will enhance the students' written pieces.

Another strategy is to give students an in-class workshop to find passages in students' own writing that could use improvement. Similar to one of Strong's combining activities mentioned earlier, students can edit their own writing by taking simple sentences, that may have the same or similar base clauses, to expanded and improved sentences (Strong, 1986).

Teachers can hold student conferences to discuss with students individually about their struggles, strengths, or questions about the grammar concept or their writing (Weaver, 1996). Conferencing is also a good time for remediation if necessary.

Perhaps one of the simplest strategies to incorporate sentence combining/decombining into the English Language Arts classroom is giving students the opportunity to write. Students can write for a variety of purposes, to a variety of audiences (including real ones), in a variety of styles. This provides students plenty of time to practice manipulating sentence length in regular writing experiences.

Constance Weaver recognized that her college-level students did not proofread their papers before submitting them to her. She would correct student papers and hand them back to

her students. However, she had success returning papers and telling students those were the "not-quite-final" drafts. From there, she would distribute handouts, using student examples from their submitted papers, and have students work in groups to "play around with correcting" the sentences. Along with the handout, she would give students a grammar book. When they found the "error" in the paper and corrected it, they had to directly cite the technical term for the error (Weaver, 1996). This activity can apply to sentence combining/decombining

Using Digital Tools

By using digital tools and technology, which are familiar areas for students, students are likely to be more engaged, therefore making the learning more effective. Incorporating popular and familiar technologies into the classroom, including Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, videos, podcasts, SMART boards, Internet tools, and other technologies, students connect to the lesson.

One way to decombine lengthy sentences written by Shakespeare or Hemingway, is to turn passages into 140 character Twitter tweets. This activity could also assist in teaching purpose. Why did Hemingway write such long sentences? Teachers could ask students what happens to Hemingway or Shakespeare's meaning when it is decombined and condensed into only 140 characters. Similarly, teachers could also give students several detailed, complex sentences and have students decombine those sentences into a tweet using only 140 characters. Allowing students to use cell phones to do this activity in class makes a boring grammar exercise fun and engaging for students. If the teacher has a Twitter account, students can even watch as the tweets appear on a projector screen in the classroom.

Similar to using Twitter, students can use their knowledge of text messaging to decombine sentences that form a conversation, as well. Using an online text-messaging poll,

rather than doing combining practice on paper, teachers can provide a sentence to combine and students can text-in their responses. As students text their new sentences, by having the poll projected in the classroom, students can see all the different ways sentences can be combined.

If the teacher has access to a SMART board, students can literally combine and decombine sentences by moving words or phrases around. Having this activity in an interactive format is significantly more entertaining than simply doing this exercise on paper.

To incorporate both technology and a text into grammar learning, students can write obituaries, wedding announcements, or other news stories about main characters. Certain pieces in newspapers have character or spatial limits. Students can create pieces individually or in groups, and at the end of the process, the class will have created a mini-newspaper or newsletter about the characters in the text. There are websites that create digital newspapers that can be printed, saved, or emailed, as well as websites that specifically create certain kinds of articles, such as an obituary.

One genre of text that has to be cognizant of the amount of text or characters is graphic novels. Students can illustrate and write a class, group, or individual graphic novel. There are online websites that are free and will create a graphic novel/comic book to print or to save. Every sentence written in a graphic novel is integral to the plotline (McCloud, 2006). Combining sentences to create concise thoughts is an essential element for an effective graphic novel.

A popular website, Grammar Girl, provides podcasts to explain a variety of grammar concepts. In one particular podcast, the narrator, Grammar Girl, goes in search of the perfect length of a sentence. She gives an example of a sentence that is on a poster of her father's: "Their honor precarious, their liberty provisional, lasting only until the discovery of their crime; their position unstable...." Blah, blah, blah." (Grammar girl, 2008) She provides suggestions about

how to have sentences be a good length using strategies like combining and decombining

sentences, avoiding sentence fragments, adding conjunctions, commas, colons, and semi-colons

to have appropriate lengthed sentences. "If you read your sentence but can't remember what

happened at the beginning, the sentence is too long…After your tummy is full, you can chop up

your sentence into manageable bits" (Grammar girl, 2008).

The video website, YouTube, offers an abundant supply of humorous and educational

videos about most topics. Simply showing a video about any grammar topic before beginning the

lesson would hook students immediately. The narrator produces videos where he discusses an

issue. In one particular video, entitled, Things We Say Wrong, he jokes about the many

grammatical mistakes Americans make (WhatYouOughtToKnow, 2008).

Using podcasts or entertaining videos are a simple way to entice and engage students in a

concept that they otherwise may find boring.

Using these technological tools, the grammar lessons can be more relevant, meaningful,

and in 21st century student language. By making this connection with students, hopefully

students can grasp the concept of combining/decombining sentences and use this concept

actively in their writing.

Conclusion

"…it is not the grammar that is the problem but rather the way that grammar is taught"

(Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 731). Unfortunately, "teachers cling to traditional grammar

because they have not developed alternative approaches" (Hillocks and Smith, 1991, p. 731).

Educators need to supplement the textbooks that teach traditional/generative grammar with

sentence combining/decombining lessons and activities.

Out of my research, further questions arise: what other grammar concepts contribute to the improvement of student written composition? Do English language arts textbooks incorporate effective grammar lessons that support the research? Why do some texts and teachers continue to use traditional grammar techniques when teaching grammar concepts? If the benefits of sentence combining/decombining are proven, why is it not incorporated into every curricula and textbook?

By integrating sentence combining/decombining strategies into the classroom in the context of writing and with the use of digital tools, teachers can incorporate grammar instruction into the English language arts classroom in an effective way. Hillocks and Smith (1991) quote Cooper as saying that "no other single teaching approach has ever consistently been shown to have a beneficial effect on syntactic maturity and writing quality" (p. 731).

Appendix

Our Lunchroom

1.1 Our lunchroom has a problem.
1.2 The problem needs to be solved.

2.1 Some kids crowd into line.
2.2 They shove other kids.

3.1 Others shout.
3.2 They make lots of noise.

4.1 Some groups start fights.
4.2 The fights are with food.

5.1 Others make messes.
5.2 They don't clean them up.

6.1 A few kids cause the problem.
6.2 Everybody gets blamed.

7.1 We have a good school.
7.2 We should have a nice lunchroom.

8.1 We need to get together.
8.2 We need to solve this problem.

Assignment: Write up your ideas for solving the problem in our school lunchroom.

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