INCORPORATING SENTENCE COMBINING INTO THE ADVANCED COMPOSITION CLASS

Gary A. Olson

Perhaps at no other time has theoretical linguistics—specifically, the transformational generative model—been applied on such a universally practical level as in the case of sentence combining. Researchers over the past decade and a half have established convincingly the pedagogical efficacy of sentence combining (Miller and Ney in 1968; Mellon in 1969; Hunt and O'Donnell in 1970; Obenchain in 1971; Vitale, et al. in 1971; O'Hare in 1973; Fischer in 1973; Perron in 1974; Combs in 1975, 1976; Pedersen in 1977; Morenberg, et al. in 1978). It is clear that practice in combining sentences can lead to sustained qualitative increases in syntactic fluency. Unfortunately, however, sentence combining has acquired the reputation of being principally a lower level phenomenon: rarely do we ever hear of sentence combining in connection with courses more advanced than freshman English; and Ney’s study (in 1976) concluding that there is not even any convincing evidence that sentence combining helps college freshman is well known, despite the cogent refutation by Morenberg, Daiker, and Kerek (in 1978). Although sentence combining was developed originally for the high school grades and now is used widely on the freshman level, it is not logical to presume that it cannot be an effective tool in the advanced composition class as well.

Actually, sentence combining is pedagogically viable regardless of the students’ level of syntactic proficiency. Perhaps the greatest virtue of sentence combining is that it alerts writers to the variety of linguistic options available to them, and makes the pursuit of options and variant transformations a conscious endeavor. In “Applications of Transformational Grammar,” Diane Bornstein writes, “A transformational grammar . . . provides knowledge about how language functions and can raise intuitive knowledge of a language to a conscious level. Moreover, it can make people more aware of the stylistic options that are available in their language” (An Introduction to Transformational Grammar [Cambridge: Winthrop, 1977], p. 209). This consciousness-raising is important to all writers, even the most sophisticated. Obviously, advanced writers will possess more of a variety of possible sentence patterns to choose from than beginning writers will. But I believe it is probably natural for even
advanced writers to rely for long periods of time on the particular patterns they have learned, before they begin to incorporate new patterns into their repertoires. Practice in sentence combining, even at the more advanced levels, exposes writers to variant structures and reaffirms the value of continually examining options while writing.

In addition, sentence combining helps students attain *semantic* as well as syntactic sophistication. In combining sentences, students in my advanced class seem to seek words that are more contextually accurate, which compress the meaning of several words into one. For example, instead of saying "a medicine that kills bacteria," the student is likely to seek out the word *antibiotic*. Similarly, the simple and common transformation of a deep structure sentence into a single adjective is another example of this process. In other words, practice in effecting transformations is linked with lexical selection. Semantic accuracy is a fundamental element of good writing, and it is especially important that the advanced student learn to be alert for the most precise words. I am convinced that practice in sentence combining helps students acquire this habit. Another benefit of sentence combining in the advanced class is that students learn to manipulate punctuation creatively. Since its inception, sentence combining has been credited with helping beginning students learn the basics of punctuation. However, it also helps advanced students already knowledgeable in the rudiments of mechanics to perceive punctuation as a malleable rather than rigid phenomenon—something which *they* can manipulate to increase the accuracy and originality of self-expression. When working with sentence combining in class, we consciously sought transformations involving various methods of punctuation. In fact, on a purely quantitative basis, the students exhibited an increase in the use of internal punctuation from papers 1 to 14. I counted the number of internal punctuation marks (commas, semicolons, colons, dashes) in both sets of papers and discovered that the average amount of punctuation per paragraph increased 55%. Obviously, this item of information is not necessarily significant, but it does illustrate that each student used more punctuation at the end of the semester, perhaps an indication that some syntactic growth did occur.

In addition, I have observed that sentence combining helps transform *linguistic competence* into *linguistic performance*. That is, writers begin to take intuitive linguistic "knowledge" and apply it on a practical level in their prose; passively held knowledge of the language becomes actively employed rhetoric. For example, in the beginning of this last
semester, most of my advanced students knew of left-branching structures and were able to produce them upon request, but rarely used them in their own writing; however, after a semester of sentence combining, almost all of these pupils (one exception) produce left-branch structures spontaneously in their prose. These results are significant. Students were able to take structures that they as native speakers (and readers) of English were familiar with but did not normally use, and, through sentence combining, were able to internalize them so well that they now employ them regularly and successfully. Of course, I am not saying anything new; sentence combining is supposed to cause intuitive knowledge to surface, but usually we speak about this in relation to beginning writers. Nevertheless, I am convinced that sentence combining is just as effective in the advanced composition class.

II

Before examining some writing samples, I wish to describe briefly how I incorporated sentence combining into the syllabus of my advanced composition class here at the University of Alabama. During the semester, we spent ten full hours engaged in combining activities; this was 23% of our total semester time. This may seem excessive for an advanced class, but I wanted to emphasize syntactic growth, and I did not wish to duplicate Ross and Ney's (reported in 1971 and 1976 respectively) poor results by investing insufficient class time into the combining exercises. Usually, we spent entire fifty-minute class periods on sentence combining, rather than, say, ten minutes during every class.

My methodology was simple. We used only "open" exercises, with no cues or predetermined structures that students were asked to imitate. Since the students were all seniors, most of whom were already writing at relatively high levels, I felt that it was important to allow them maximum opportunity for creativity and originality. In fact, not only did we use open exercises, but the pupils were entirely free to replace words in the exercises with ones they deemed more appropriate, or to alter the structures in any manner.

We alternated between two simple formats: class discussion of exercises on overhead transparencies, and group competition over mimeographed exercises. I did not construct my own exercises; the transparencies and worksheets were derived directly from several of the available textbooks, usually Strong's Sentence Combining: A Composing
Book or Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg's The Writer's Options. Although these texts are directed at lower level students, they are nonetheless useful in the advanced class. It seems to me that it is practice in the process of combining sentences that is important; the level of combining exercise is not as essential as one might assume. When we utilize sentence combining we are helping students learn a process—the process of embedding information into sentences while attaining effectiveness, clarity, and stylistic variety—and I believe we can help students accomplish this using the available texts. This is not to suggest that a text directed specifically at the advanced level would not be useful, only that it is not essential.

Before introducing sentence combining to the class, I provided students with a relatively detailed synopsis of the "theory" of linguistic transformations and how sentence combining derived from it. This theoretical base stimulated the students' intellects, causing them, I believe, to respond more readily and enthusiastically than they might have otherwise; they began to perceive the method as something more sophisticated than a simple game. Usually, we engaged in sentence combining on days in which papers were due, creating some relaxation of tension after the anxiety of writing each paper. When discussing transformations on overhead transparencies, we tried to exhaust every possible variation, using the full range of punctuation and syntactic structures. Everyone was asked to participate in the discussion. When using mimeographed exercises, groups of three students decided which combinations were the "most effective" given a particular purpose and audience. The groups then voted which group's renditions were most effective. This procedure introduced an element of competition and challenge which in turn made the tasks intellectually stimulating to the students—a factor of special importance when dealing with graduating seniors who inevitably have things other than composition on their minds.

Whenever we engaged in combining activities, we discussed stylistic options: use of absolutes, appositives, participles, semicolons, dashes, and so on. Unless we were voting on structures that were "most effective" given a particular purpose and audience, we always kept in mind that there is no "best" structure. I heavily emphasized "revision" in this course and encouraged students repeatedly to experiment with various options in the revision stage. Similarly, I encouraged students who kept an optional journal to experiment with the combining process in their daily writing. In fact, experimentation with sentence combining in journals seemed to be an effective way for students to achieve syntactic growth. Evidently, writers
especially learn to *internalize* the embedding process when they experiment with optional structures in their daily personal writing.

III

By the semester’s end, I had a strongly intuitive sense that our emphasis on sentence combining had had a positive effect on the students’ writing abilities, but I had no actual “evidence.” In order to obtain a more dependable estimation of whether the students’ prose did exhibit syntactic growth, and if so how much, I examined papers 1, 8, and 14 of each of the 10 students in the class. I applied to these papers two of the criteria—t-units and words per clause—established by Hunt (in 1965) and others as dependable indicators of possible syntactic development. In no way do I present this information as empirical or conclusive evidence that sentence combining worked in the advanced class; rather, I am presenting it as data which seem to support my intuitive impression that the advanced students all made *some* gains in syntactic proficiency and that sentence combining, since we had emphasized it so strongly throughout the semester, may have been a contributing factor. It is important to note that the students had no knowledge that their writing would be the subject of a study; in fact, neither did I until the semester’s end.

Reprinted below are the second paragraphs of a student’s papers 1, 8, and 14. I chose this student’s papers randomly, without any previous considerations.

**Paper 1**

If you talk to one of the true horse lovers, you’ll find he is very dedicated to the animals. He has a great pride in what his horse can do. He works long hours caring for his big pet. And you can see this fierce dedication and pride in the owner of a seven foot Puissance Wall jumper, and in the owner of a Texas cowpony, to the owner of a backyard pleasure horse. Why do these people have such a strong love for these animals? Where do they get this interest in the sport?

**Paper 8**

A Feminist Movement existed for several centuries in the form of isolated groups of women rebelling against the subservient role of housewife which men and society forced upon women. Some of these groups of women banded together and acquired the right to vote for all American women, accomplishing a major victory for the Feminist
Movement at that time. As technology improved over the years in areas of mass media and communication, knowledge of the Feminist Movement grew, enabling women to organize into large, powerful groups. By the 1960's and 1970's, the Feminist Movement exploded with action and support leading to the drafting of the Equal Rights Amendment, which states, "Equality of rights under the law shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of sex." With continued support, the ERA or similar legislation may yet obtain legal equality for women.

**Paper 14**

The Indians at first reacted in fear of the mounted Conquistadors; perhaps the Indians thought they were seeing one animal in the mounted conquistador and his horse. The Indians soon overcame their fear, however. After a momentary panic, the Indians' fear changed to hatred of the horses. Because of this hatred, the Indians slew vast numbers of the Spanish horses. Later, the Indians discovered the use of horses for food, barter, and labor. Roe refers to the extreme terror the Indians of Spanish America experienced when they first encountered horses, and then the phenomenal speed in which they overcame their fears to control the horses with equestrian mastery rivaling the best in the world.

The increase in syntactic sophistication is reflected in these three writing samples. Number 1 is composed of short subject-verb-complement sentences. One sentence is a left-branching structure. The author does not use punctuation imaginatively. A comma is used in the first sentence to separate the prepositional phrase from the main clause, and commas are used to separate the series in the fourth sentence; but the writer uses no other internal punctuation. In addition, the paragraph shows incidents of wordiness and awkwardness. For example, the fourth sentence can be made clearer if we eliminate the third and, and replace to with or even in.

In contrast, there is more of a variety of structures in paper 8. The author employs left- and right-branching structures; in fact, the third sentence contains both. The paragraph, sentences, and clauses all are longer than those of paper 1. The sentences contain a greater density of information than those in paper 1, and the level of specificity is also greater.

Similarly, paper 14 exhibits continued syntactic growth. The level of
complexity of the sentences is greater than that of 8 or 1, and the sentences also contain a density of information at least equal to that of 8, if not more. The author employs a variety of structures, in one instance using a semicolon to join independent clauses. Even the semantic component of paper 14 illustrates a sense of growth.

These samples are meant to illustrate the type of growth I have observed in student writing throughout the semester. When applied to the papers, Hunt's well-known criteria give further insight into the class' general syntactic development. In every case, the words per clause increased from the first to the fourteenth paper. (It is important to note that since I am dealing with a limited number of students, I was actually able to count the words per clause; Hunt derived the "average" words per clause of his samples by dividing the total number of words by the total number of clauses.) The mean average of growth in words per clause for the class as a whole was 5.5 words, with individual students achieving increases of as high as 8.6 and as low as 1.2 words. Eighty percent of the class showed increases of higher than 3.3 words (see Table). These data are certainly encouraging; they indicate that some growth has occurred, measured by a usually dependable indicator. Since we have no control group, we cannot assert necessarily that sentence combining is responsible for the increases; but we can presume the sentence combining had some influence on the growth, especially since the very objective of sentence combining is to promote syntactic development and since we had spent a full 23% of our semester on combining activities.

In addition, syntactic development is reflected in the ratio of T-units per sentence, though not as impressively as in the words per clause category. The data indicate that 70% of the writers registered some improvement (a lower ratio of T-units per sentence on paper 14 than paper 1). The class as a whole improved .03 T-units per sentence over the semester; however, if we exclude the two students who registered negative improvement, the result is a bit higher: .09 less T-units per sentence (see Table). This latter number is closer to the development ratio we should expect to find judging from Hunt's study: around .10 to .15. Nevertheless, the fact that 70% of the class made such improvement is encouraging. Another factor to consider is that each of the students is writing at about the level, judging from T-units per sentence, that Hunt established as "superior adult": around 1.24. It is possible, and even likely, that writers do not usually progress much beyond Hunt's "superior adult" (now "skilled adult") range, that the T-units per sentence category does not
measure growth beyond this particular level.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Net Increase of Words Per Clause (Papers 1 to 14)</th>
<th>Variation of T-Units Per Sentence</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>-.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>+.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>8.6</td>
<td>+.12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>-.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>-.01</td>
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<tr>
<td>G</td>
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<tr>
<td>H</td>
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<tr>
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<tr>
<td>J</td>
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<tr>
<td>Class</td>
<td>5.5</td>
<td>-.03</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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IV

This study does not set out to prove that sentence combining was successful in the advanced composition class; it does attempt to establish that sentence combining should not be "written off" as a method restricted to developmental composition or freshman English. My professional judgment as well as some usually reliable indicators show that some syntactic growth occurred in each student's writing throughout the semester. Since we strongly emphasized sentence combining throughout the semester, it is reasonable to assume that it played some role in the writers' development. The next step is to conduct a controlled experiment, involving several advanced composition classes, to determine more clearly exactly what effect sentence combining does have on the senior level. But before we can take this step, we must reexamine our preconceptions; we must be willing to accept that sentence combining might be a viable pedagogical method on the senior level.

University of Alabama
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