

## TURNING STUDENTS' ISOLATED SENTENCE-BASED TEXTS INTO COHERENT COMPOSITIONS

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### ÖZET

Dilbilgisinin cümleleri analiz etme ve sınıflandırma sistemi olarak öğretilmesinin en yaygın sebebinin değişik amaçlardan kaynaklandığı bilinmektedir. Bu amaçlar özellikle Yazma ve konuşma gibi becerilerin geliştirilmesi ve daha fonksiyonel kullanılması içindir. Yıllardır, bu alanda yapılan araştırmalar (Celce-Murcia, 1992; Larsen-Freeman, 1991; ve Özoğlu, 1994) göstermektedir ki dilbilgisi öğretimi bu tür amaçları zorlukla karşılamaktadır. Birçok öğrencinin dilbilgisi kurallarını iyi öğreniyor gibi görünmesine rağmen, aslında oldukça az sayıdaki öğrencinin bunları bilinçli olarak kullanabildikleri bilinmektedir. Hatta, çok az sayıda öğrenci, öğrendikleri dilbilgisi kurallarını kendi yazma becerilerine transfer edebilmekte ya da bilgilerini bu alanda düzenleyebilmektedirler. Bunun ana nedeni, dilbilgisi öğretimindeki eğilimin dilin yapısının cümle bazında diyagramlar yoluyla öğretilmesi veya öğrenilen bu yapıların ezbere dayanmasıdır. Bu yüzden de, bu konuda yapılan araştırmaların sonuçları genelde olumsuz olmaktadır. Dilbilgisi kuralları şüphesiz öğrencilere verilmelidir. Ancak bu kurallar öğrencilere tek tek bağımsız cümleler halinde değil bunun yerine, cümlelerin oluşturduğu cümle gruplarıyla kazandırılırsa o zaman öğrenciler öğrendikleri kuralları kolayca yazma becerilerine aktarabilecek ve okuyucularıyla daha rahat bir iletişim kuracakları için fazla zorlanmayacaklardır. Bu amaçla, bu çalışmada dilbilgisi kurallarının analitik yapı becerileri üzerine etkileri sunulacaktır.

**Anahtar kelimeler:** Dilbilgisi, dilbilgisi kuralları, yazma

### ABSTRACT

The most common reason for teaching grammar as a system for analyzing and diagramming sentences has been to accomplish some practical aims, especially the improvement of writing. For a few decades, however, research has demonstrated that the teaching of grammar rarely accomplishes such practical goals, and grammar is taught as if it were the same as the language skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing— and as if the language were only grammar (Chen, 1999; and Rosen, 1987). According to the studies carried out in this field, it is seen that even though several

learners seem to learn grammatical rules well, some seem to retain them, and still very few seem to transfer the language rules they have learned to improving or editing their writing. The main reason is considered as resulting from the fact that the tendency in teaching grammar is to diagram the structure of the language in sentence forms and to practice all the forms by heart; however, diagramming sentences is generally thought to teach nothing beyond the ability to diagram the structure of the language they are learning. The impressive fact is that in all these studies the results have been consistently negative so far as the value of grammar in the improvement of language expression is concerned. Surely, there is no justification in the available evidence for the great expenditure of time and effort. Therefore, in this study, the impact of using grammatical rules in the form of analytical content abilities—in writing—will be presented.

**Key words:** Grammar, grammatical rules, writing.

## **INTRODUCTION**

There have been several practices for facilitating syntactic aspects of language instruction in English Language Teaching (ELT) Departments. Instructional strategies for facilitating syntactic aspects of grammar in teaching a foreign language have been the focus of studies in this field for a few decades. There have been many different attitudes and reasons toward teaching grammar, and the most common reason for teaching grammar as a system for analyzing and comprehending sentences has been important, especially, for the improvement of productive language skills such as writing and speaking.

For several decades, any learning activity that focused the learner's attention on the form of a message has constituted formal grammar instruction (Celce-Murcia, 1992; Ozoglu, 1994; and Weaver, 1996). However, research in ELT demonstrated that teaching of grammar is unlikely to accomplish practical goals such as acquiring the rules and practicing mechanical drills in both grammar and language skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In many studies carried out, as a consequence of applying these drills, it is observed that learners who learn grammar apply its rules mechanically, but they have difficulty with transferring the grammatical rules they have learned to their written structure--semi- or free writing. The main reason for not being able to transfer this ability may primarily result from two attitudes;

1. Language learning is a kind of habit for students in order to produce statements to convey messages. Sometimes they are observed to pay attention to the surface structure and not to be aware of the meaning. Thus, syntactic forms and memorization of certain sentence patterns are used extensively to present rules inductively. In this manner, a variety of drill types is practiced with the aim of producing familiar sentences to minimize learners' errors, which are viewed as the result of interference from the first language. Nevertheless, the focus of instruction rarely moves beyond the sentence level (Chen, 1999; and Larsen-Freeman, 1991). Consequently, students produce structurally well-established sentences rather than meaningful, relevant, and coherent sentences in a context. This attitude, briefly, is unlikely to be noticed by their teachers either because of their overloaded schedule or

their appreciation of correct sentences in the written texts. However, this undesired situation is likely to be turned to a positive attitude for learners by the help of language teachers.

2. The syntactic patterns are generally introduced in the form of isolated sentences and/or the structure of the language is diagrammed in sentence forms. Thus, pattern learning is observed as a conditioning through repetition, paraphrasing, and reinforcement. Also, diagramming sentences is unlikely to teach nothing beyond the ability to diagram the structure of the language they are learning. Learners are usually involved in diagramming many types of sentences like simple and multiple (e.g. compound, compound-complex, and complex) ones and performing many textbook-exercises on grammar. These exercises help them develop their analytical meta-linguistic abilities for the study of linguistic features, and also practice filling out forms within the same manner. However, students may have difficulty with transferring their linguistic knowledge to their actual language learning in productive skills such as speaking and writing.

If foreign language teachers, nevertheless, insisted upon teaching what is important in an actual writing is the meaning rather than the identification of parts of language, the parsing diagramming of sentences, or other concepts of traditional grammar in their current curriculum, it would be easier for students to be aware of the coherence and unity. Thus, the students would appreciate these concepts as a means of improving the quality of writing (Hillocks, 1986). Most teachers should be aware of the fact that the systematic study of grammar is not even particularly helpful in avoiding or correcting errors (Elley et al., 1976; Hillocks, 1986; Marzano, 2003; and Ozoglu, 1994). The teaching of formal grammar is believed as a negligible or, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing since it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition (Braddock, Lloyd-Jones, & Schoer, 1963). As known, writing is a thinking process and a highly complex act that demands the analysis and synthesis of many levels of thinking (Graves, cited in Cotton, 2000). At this level of writing composition, writing is undeniably based on thought and organizing it into a coherent and logical form. At this point, learners are observed not to apply their grammatical knowledge into practice. For instance, even though learners usually think, they do not know how to organize and express their thoughts in written form or in sentences, especially, in an analytical piece of writing. As a consequence of not being able to attempt to produce well-established paragraphs, their compositions generally seem illogical, long, unfocused, and insufficient (Paulston & Bruder, cited in Tüm, 2003). Under these circumstances, learners' written products do not meet the desired requirement. Therefore, in order to find out better solutions in teaching not only writing but also any skill of a foreign language or even giving the instruction of grammar, the following statements should be taken into consideration:

- Studying formal grammar in an isolated sentence form is likely to be less supportive to learners than discussing their grammatical constructions and usage in the context, which means to present many sentences in a unity in the form of a paragraph (Harris, 1962; Morenberg, 1999; Pearson, 1974; and Strong, 1994). Through this way, while producing sentences, learners become aware of the link between the sentences

constituting a text. This strategy draws students' attention to the meaning rather than the rules applied through writing.

- Learning specific items like punctuation in the context of writing such as news, reports, or journals is much more effective than mechanical studying on punctuation marks and rules for punctuation in isolated sentences (Calkins, 1980). Thus, students transfer their meaning while constituting their paragraphs since they focus on the content rather than mechanics in writing.

- Usage, sentence variety, form, punctuation, and spelling are applied more effectively in writing when studied and discussed in the context rather than through isolated sentence skills instruction given by grammar courses (Morenberg et al., 1999). Students, critically thinking on the content, have a chance to illustrate their performance in their written texts to their readers.

- Systematic practice in combining and expanding sentences can increase learners' repertoire of syntactic structures and can improve their syntactic fluency, maturity, and overall writing quality as well (Tüm, 2003). However, these structures should be given in a context in order to embolden learners more meaning (deep structure) rather than structure given individually (surface structure).

As mentioned by the statements given above, learners are likely to produce meaningful sentences since they learn much more about language by using real language and developing their own intuitions about grammar within contexts. In the ELT Department, for example, these learners are observed to acquire much sentence structure awareness through reading different texts either intensively or extensively, writing journals, reports, or diaries, and even editing their own or their peers' written products. Especially, at the learning process, learners' linguistic abilities are observed to accelerate somehow. Situated interactions, supported by direct or indirect instruction of teachers, help them acquire syntactic aspects of language. In other words, awareness of syntax is best learned in a context as the context itself facilitates their language performance (Weaver, 1996). Learners use syntactic information to predict and construct meaning if they possess the appropriate syntactic knowledge and linguistic awareness (Richgels, 1986). Syntactic knowledge, for instance, is crucial to comprehend as it overrides many potential difficulties associated with syntactically compound and complex sentences (Barnitz & Morgan, 1983; and Pearson, 1974). It is true that linguistic, cognitive, and diagram contextual factors are interacted in comprehending and composing cohesion structures. Meanwhile, it is also pragmatics and semantics that are related to how syntax is constructed and how it is used in literacy. Nevertheless, syntax instruction must be integrated with contextual instruction to help learners encounter any structure in a context and put it into action in a comprehensible manner rather than repetitious isolated sentence patterns.

Learners will especially benefit from syntactic awareness instruction if treated as those who study structures and meanings intensively. This can be achieved through a variety of texts presented to the learners in reading courses. However, if they are not aware of specific syntactic structures challenging texts or various genres required, they cannot comprehend whatever is studied. In other words, as long as there is a relationship between functional use and syntactic maturity, grammar textbooks and

workbooks have their place as reference materials or for practice in using a particular pattern that a teacher helps learners to acquire. While achieving this goal, there appears a question of how teachers can develop learners' syntactic abilities while maintaining the integrity of language. In order to find an answer to this question, for learners, the following is some of instructional strategies for facilitating syntactic aspects of writing and reading:

- *Learners learn to utilize different texts for the syntactic fluency in a context*
- *Learners learn to manipulate sentence structures in contexts*
- *Learners learn to produce their own sentence structures in contexts*
- *Learners learn to utilize different texts for the syntactic fluency in a context*

One strategy is *Syntactic Ability* to be acquired through interaction with different texts as they encounter a variety of discourse through reading. In other words, language learners need to exposure to the language and literature for their thinking to develop. By the help of the different materials—novels, stories, magazines, etc., these learners acquire the language they are studying in a natural way (Allen, 1989; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; and Purcell-Gates, 1988). This means when learners get involved within reading more books or having more experience, they start developing structures associated with linguistic features, which positively enhance their reading and writing performance (Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Phillips, 1996; and Williams, 1984). Literature exposure also facilitates their acquisition of English. For instance, using literary texts provides them with a diverse range of challenging syntax found in various styles, and genres. For example, when learners are assigned to write on their own, they are observed to be inspired of using the same sentence patterns they are sure to use. Whereas, when they encounter different literate texts through either extensive or intensive reading and they comprehend and compose these texts, they are observed to use and acquire different structures such as adverbial, adjective, and noun clauses in their sentences. In other words, learners can find many models of language in the richness of literature. Hence, syntactic abilities are enhanced by learners through reading any text (novels, or stories that naturally present real language patterns), and adapting it from other authentic materials (e.g., newspapers, magazines, booklets, or timetables, all of which have the syntax and texture of their own sign systems) (Booth, & Gregory, 1987; Connor, 2000; and Cotton, 2000).

Another strategy is "*Sentence Collecting*" or "*Sentence Transferring*" (Speaker & Speaker, 1991), in which learners read different texts outside classroom and transfer the sentences interesting to them in meaning, function, or structure to their writing. At first glance, this idea can be perceived as imitating, copying, or even memorizing language structures and rewriting them down. However, when teachers display these models as guidance throughout the classroom for discussions, the outcomes of learners can be surprisingly motivating in the usage of the language; additionally, situating authentic syntax in social contexts is likely to be remembered more in their schema (in a long term memory). Learners can consider these models as inspired reflections. It is believed that sentence structure "skills" are best learned in the context of the writing and reading process, especially through revising and editing drafts, supported by either in

the classroom or outside the classroom (Weaver, 1996). In the former, during lessons teachers can ask questions about selected sentence meanings and structures in the context of natural literacy activities. Thus, it will be easier for learners to grasp both the meaning in a variety and richness and the structure of the target language. In the latter, teachers can ask learners to bring the different sentence patterns they encounter outside the classroom to the class for discussions in their syntactic features. This strategy not only increases their critical thinking but also discussing their ideas with their peers by broadening their horizons in the terms of practicing the target language.

Wherever the patterns are provided with, questioning of these by the teacher or even learners helps them reconstruct meanings for the texts and sentences within the texts they comprehend or compose. That is, teachers and learners can ask questions that direct attention to meanings contained in particular sentences or lead learners to draw inferences across sentences embedded within text contexts (Pearson & Johnson, 1978). Not only should learners learn to recognize syntactic cues to meaning, but they should also acquire facility in using syntactic processing strategies.

➤ ***Learners learn to manipulate sentence structures in contexts***

By this instructional strategy, learners can manipulate syntax and become aware of the range of patterns and transformational processes that any language contains since it facilitates acquisition of syntactic aspects. For example, sentence building or sentence expansion allows learners to increase sentence length and sentence complexity by adding words, phrases, and clauses to simple sentences. Through questioning, teachers can help learners to elaborate on sentences in a paragraph, a model text or even a learner-produced text. As a consequence of this approach, learners can be emboldened in sentence combining, which is another way to develop sentence structure literacy. Sentence combining, in other words, facilitates learners' awareness of various transformation-related processes (e.g., embedding, permuting, coordinating, substituting, adding, and deleting) that are involved in producing and comprehending sentences in authentic texts (Ariasian, 1996; Allison, 1995; Morenberg et al., 1999; Phillips, 1996; and Strong, 1994). Likewise, "de-combining" or taking apart challenging syntax can help learners sort out meanings and navigate the complex structures in any difficult texts they are reading. However, in addition to syntax, other linguistic and cognitive variables contribute learners to acquire the linguistic features of texts.

➤ ***Learners learn to produce their own sentence structures in contexts***

When teachers encourage learners in the classroom for producing their own linguistic patterns, and observe their productions, they will realize their inspired reflections in their usage of language. This is the other strategy that learners can be motivated in the performance of the language; as a result, learners will gain self-esteem and promote their inner capacity demonstrating this in their own writing. While producing their syntactic patterns, this should be in set of clustered sentences instead of isolated sentence patterns in grammar instructions. This will lead learners to be aware of unity and coherence in producing any text.

As a consequence of encouraging students to produce their own sentences, we, teachers, need not to spend excessive class time on non-contextualized or isolated

grammar exercises since this type of approach results in mechanical drills rather than critical thinking on the context. By drawing our learners' attention specifically to the formal properties of the target language, we can motivate them to assert this as a potential facilitator for the acquisition of linguistic competence (Rutherford & Sharwood Smith, 1985, p. 274). Otherwise, we will spend years of class time for exercises based on structure instead of enriching learners' literacy experiences. Hence, this will kill learners' creation of meaning for functional communicative purposes.

### **Conclusion**

There is no doubt teaching grammar is primarily important in order to learn a foreign language. However, while presenting this to learners, there should be other ways than introducing the rules directly and spending time on mechanical drills. Grammar instruction need not to be totally discarded as long as there is ample time for authentic literacy lessons. In other words, when too much classroom time is spent on grammatical analysis, this is considered as a time not spent on writing and reading discourse of authentic texts; however, it is necessary for learners to gain literacy abilities and literate language skills in order to produce contextual texts. By many researchers, it is observed that a great deal of time spent on grammar exercises is time that is not spent on learning language functions and strategies. Therefore, it is better to provide learners time for reading authentic challenging texts as literacy skills can be learned there. As a result, writing inspired will be achieved in better-established written texts when introduced to students in a non-threatening way in order to make them familiar with the unity.

In order to achieve our goals for learners to produce written text enriched literally, there should be some steps taken into consideration: (a) teaching only the grammatical concepts that are critically needed for editing writing, and teach these concepts and terms mostly while helping learners edit; (b) referring to the process of acquiring a foreign or second language as a subconscious process by which language learners gradually organize the language they hear, according to rules they construct for generating sentences; (c) Helping learners expand their syntactic repertoire and explore their own style by considering effective examples, then experimenting and discussing the results; (d) having learners experiment with and discuss various activities in sentence combining, expanding, and manipulating; (e) giving learners opportunities and encouragement to read outside the classroom extensively in order to write for a variety of purposes and real audiences; and (f) finally, giving learners opportunities to have selections with more sophisticated sentence structures raising their motivation to the literature.

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