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Phrase and Clause Grammar Tactics for the ESL/ELL Writing Classroom

Author(s): Dennis Sjolie

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Dennis Sjolie

# Phrase and Clause Grammar Tactics for the ESL/ELL Writing Classroom

Although debate over grammar instruction continues, Dennis Sjolie asserts that a solid foundation in sentence construction is particularly necessary for English language learners. He shows how sentence-combining activities can lead to comprehension of different types of phrases and clauses as well as improved student writing.

**T**o teach grammar or not to teach grammar. The debate continues. Conventional wisdom today puts forth a host of arguments regarding both sides of the issue. But what happens to English Language Learners (ELLs) while we debate? Don't speakers of other languages need to understand English grammar if they are to speak and write English with increasing proficiency? *Assessment* is the educational watchword of the moment sparked by legislative mandates and decrees insinuating that "progressive . . . teachers don't mark errors and approve of anything that students spel or rite" (Tchudi and Thomas 46). Administrations, school boards, boards of regents, and the like demand *accountability*. Back-to-the-basics reform! Fine. Grammar is undoubtedly *back-to-the-basics*. It is not wrong to approve of teaching grammar. And it *is* important to know approaches for wielding such a wild, often unwieldy tool to enhance its effectiveness.

In a small ESL program at the University of South Dakota, *the* smallest state flagship university in the nation with between eight and nine thousand students, my students, beginners through highly advanced, respond well to phrase and clause grammar tactics. They experiment with sentence structures, study sentence-building handouts and worksheets, and perform well on phrase/clause quizzes. They work to bring the structures they learn into the texts they generate. The most advanced students, those enrolled in doctoral programs across

campus, have written and polished their first English papers for professional conferences or their first English articles for publication utilizing phrase/clause tactics. Exciting accomplishments! Beginning-level students are just as excited by being able to correctly change adjective clauses into participial phrases and move the new phrases correctly about in sentences.

## Students and Their Needs

Learning that fails to serve the present situations or address the past experiences of ESL students quickly becomes irrelevant to those students. Patricia Byrd and Joy R. Reid note how students' needs must dictate the decisions teachers make regarding grammar instruction. More than ever, those students in ESL/ELL classrooms are, as characterized by Dana Ferris and John S. Hedgcock, a very heterogeneous population with great diversity linguistically, ethnically, and culturally. Moreover, these learners exhibit wide diversity in learning styles as well. While these learners may produce nonstandard forms in their writing, they "have typically learned most of their English in the classroom and generally have received considerable explicit grammar instruction; thus, they are often able to access and explain grammar rules" (Frodesen 235). Indeed, international students frequently have knowledge of English grammar that is far superior to that of native speakers. Regardless, not all students in ESL/ELL writing classrooms are international students. Some are permanent residents.

Others are immigrants, perhaps refugees, many of whom have little or no past exposure to English grammar or any grammar in any language. Nonetheless, students are expected to write competent academic prose in a variety of undergraduate and graduate degree programs.

## The Failure of Grammar Correction in Writing

While knowledge of grammar is essential for ESL/ELL students to produce increasingly sophisticated, error-free sentence structures, study of grammar itself and correction of problematic sentence structures offer little in the way of sentence structure improvement. So says one argument. Ronald Gray, George Hillocks Jr., and Stephen D. Krashen each claim that grammar study and grammar correction typically lead students nowhere. How can such a concept be true? As H. G. Widdowson states, "Language learning *is* essentially grammar learning, and it is a mistake to suppose otherwise" (154; italics in original). Grammar is the key! Nonetheless, Ilona Leki argues that "after ten years of studying English in classrooms abroad, ESL students still may have trouble writing effectively in English and . . . students who can recite grammar rules, as many ESL students do quite well, are not always able to use those rules in producing language" (23). Likewise, George

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L. Greaney asserts that students who for years have studied English grammar and syntax may lack "passive knowledge of such structures as relative clauses [and may] not automatically generate such structures in their writing" (par. 1). In a landmark 1986 study involving Japanese students learning English, Thomas Robb, Steven Ross, and Ian Shortreed concluded that grammar correction on student essays served no essential

tial purpose so far as helping students correct grammatical writing errors. Students made the same errors in follow-up writing assignments, the researchers concluded. Similar studies by Krashen

and Shawn Loewen discussed in Gray concur: "making full (every error is corrected by the teacher) or selective (only one type of error is marked at a time) grammatical correction is also not effective. . . . Nor was the lack of benefits of grammatical correction dependent upon students' gender, age, proficiency level, or educational background" (par. 5). Further, John Truscott stresses how little error correction has to do with learning when he states, "Often a student will repeat the same mistake over and over again, even after being corrected many times . . . [so] the teacher should conclude that correction simply is not effective" (341).

But how can it be that grammar correction and grammar feedback do not result in widespread writing improvement? It seems impossible. Nevertheless, Gray lists four specific reasons to account for the incomprehensible. First, grammar correction deals with "only the surface appearance of grammar and not with the way language develops" (par. 8). Second, language and grammar acquisition occur developmentally and hierarchically: "if a student is given a correction for a [language/grammar] stage he has not yet reached, it would not be effective" (par. 8). Third, teacher and student understanding of grammar comments vary greatly. Teachers frequently misinterpret student writing and address grammar concerns built on misinterpretation, whereas students "often find teachers' remarks vague, confusing, and contradictory" (par. 9). Fourth, students "only make mental note of the corrections they have understood, and if they have to rewrite their papers, regularly do not incorporate these corrections into their work" (Gray, paraphrasing Cohen, par. 9). Nevertheless, Robin C. Scarcella stresses how lack of grammar teaching has proven detrimental to students in need of advanced writing skills. Patsy M. Lightbown, once an advocate of the nongrammar classroom, more recently argues for corrective feedback after witnessing the outcomes of noncorrective and nongrammatical-focused teaching approaches, believing now that students require structural and grammatical input. As debate escalates, we might do well to consider Patrick Hartwell's insight: "It would seem unlikely, therefore, that further experimental research, in and of itself, will resolve the grammar issue . . . that the grammar question is not open to resolution by experimental research" (185).

## Phrase and Clause Tactics

Marianne Celce-Murcia insists that as language use becomes increasingly professional in register, the need for attention to form increases correlatively. Focus on phrase and clause variation, as introduced through sentence-combining exercises, provides essential curriculum for all levels of ESL/ELL writers. Sentence combining, as Beverly Ann Chin defines it, “is the strategy of joining short sentences into longer, more complex sentences” (par. 12) and has been shown by a host of researchers to serve an effective purpose in improving the writing of native language speakers. The key component of sentence combining as a springboard to creating more interesting, more formal, or more “professional-sounding” sentences is the same, whether the base sentences are basic or more challenging in structure. Beginning-level students, for example, can combine the simple sentences “Bob is taking me camping this weekend” and “Bob happens to be an expert outdoorsman” to create the complex sentence variations “Bob, who happens to be an expert outdoorsman, is taking me camping” and “Bob, who is taking me camping this weekend, happens to be an expert outdoorsman.” Likewise, more advanced students can work with the sentences “Marxist theory offers one vital approach to literary criticism” and “Marxist theory addresses issues of class struggle and ideological construction of social reality” to create such complex sentence variations as “Marxist theory, which addresses issues of class struggle and ideological constraints of social reality, offers one vital approach to literary criticism” and “Marxist theory, which offers one vital approach to literary criticism, addresses issues of class struggle and ideological construction of social reality.”

From these beginnings, the first group of students would next create an appositive phrase, as found in the sentence “Bob, an expert outdoorsman, is taking me camping this weekend,” whereas the second group of students might write “Marxist theory, one vital approach to literary criticism, addresses issues of class struggle and ideological construction of social reality.” Students of varying levels begin to understand how sentence “pieces” can be manipulated and moved to provide sentence variation for fresher writing. This understanding is critical. Frequently, students at all levels lament

how “boring” their writing is, how their sentences perpetually are structured subject-verb-object, lacking any variation to add excitement or flair. Of course, some students ask why they ought to worry about changing an adjective clause to an appositive phrase. Why? Because an appositive phrase can move to the front of the sentence. Adjective clauses cannot. Thus, we have the sentences “An expert outdoorsman, Bob is taking me camping this weekend” and “One vital approach to literary criticism, Marxist theory addresses issues of class struggle and ideological construction of social reality.”

Students working with the “Bob” sentence can go on to create “Being an expert outdoorsman, Bob . . .” while students working with the “Marxist theory” sentence can write “Offering one vital approach to literary criticism, Marxist theory . . .” and “Addressing issues of class struggle and ideological construction of social reality, Marxist theory . . .” In doing this, students transform the appositive phrase into a participial phrase for yet another example of sentence variation.

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## You Control the Grammar!

Often ESL/ELL students ask the questions, “When do I have to use this form?” or “When do I have to use such a grammatical structure?” A freeing response to such typical questions is, “You control the grammar, the grammar doesn’t control you!” By manipulating sentences to create a variety of possible adjective clauses, elliptical adjective clauses, appositive phrases, participial phrases, and absolute phrases, students realize how freeing grammar exploration is. Consider, for example, a phrase/clause sentence-combining exercise in which students create a variety of phrases and clauses (see fig. 1). Possible answers are included in parentheses in the figure.

Students learn to master such exercises through a series of ten- to fifteen-minute minilesson handouts they work on during class time the first weeks of class. During this time, students learn and practice each new phrase/clause concept, ask

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**FIGURE 1.** Phrase/Clause Sentence-Combining Exercise

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1. Julie had written the letter.  
Julie set out for the post office.  
  
Participial Phrase: (Having written the letter, Julie set out for the post office.)
2. The letter is a long series of complaints about her sister's behavior.  
The letter took Julie a long time to write.  
  
Appositive Phrase: (The letter, a long series of complaints about her sister's behavior, took Julie a long time to write.)
3. Julie lives in St. Paul, Minnesota.  
St. Paul is a big city across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis.  
  
Adjective Clause: (Julie lives in St. Paul, Minnesota, which is a big city across the Mississippi River from Minneapolis.)
4. The post office was closed.  
Julie dropped the letter in the mailbox outside.  
  
Absolute Phrase: (The post office being closed, Julie dropped the letter in the mailbox outside.)
5. Julie looked up at the sky.  
The sky was dark and heavy and threatened to send snow.  
  
Adjective Clause: (Julie looked up at the sky, which was dark and heavy and threatened to send snow.)
6. Julie decided to go to a nearby restaurant for a cup of coffee.  
Julie felt lonely on the gloomy winter street by herself.  
  
Participial Phrase: (Feeling lonely on the gloomy winter street by herself, Julie decided to go to a nearby restaurant for a cup of coffee.)
7. The restaurant was one of Julie's favorites in the city.  
It was a warm, busy, colorful place to drink coffee and read.  
  
Appositive Phrase: (A warm, busy, and colorful place to drink coffee and read, the restaurant was one of Julie's favorites in the city.)
8. Julie sat down at a table beside the door.  
Julie's favorite table was taken.  
  
Absolute Phrase: (Her favorite table having been taken, Julie sat down at a table beside the door.)
9. Julie pulled a book of poems from her handbag.  
Julie ordered a cup of coffee with cream and a sugar cookie.  
  
Participial Phrase: (Pulling a book of poems from her handbag, Julie ordered a cup of coffee with cream and a sugar cookie.)
10. Julie decided she would not think about her ex-boyfriend or her sister.  
Her ex-boyfriend and her sister were both jerks.  
Her ex-boyfriend and her sister deserved each other.  
  
Adjective Clause: (Julie decided she would not think about her ex-boyfriend or her sister, who were both jerks and deserved each other.)

questions, and receive additional handouts and assignments allowing further practice regarding the new phrase/clause types. Students then begin revision of past writing exercises and essays, utilizing a variety of phrases and clauses to vary sentences. After a seven-minute freewriting exercise, for example, students might revise their freewriting as homework, being sure to include at least one adjective clause, one participial phrase, and one absolute phrase as further sentence-control practice. Grammar errors such as dangling participles or misplaced modifiers will be corrected later. The important thing now is for students to work for achievement of greater sentence variety, to reach for grammatical structures previously unused, and to take control of grammar for sentence building. Many students will apprehensively (albeit proudly) turn in revisions, stating, "I tried to use more participial phrases here, but it's a mess," or "I used several absolutes, but I'm not sure if they are correct." No matter. Writing maturity develops through practice and trial and error. We must first challenge our writing to improve it. Safe writing allows no room for growth.

### Additional Points to Consider

When students understand the phrase/clause tactics, they might next spend time building sentences containing noun clauses and adverbial clauses. Students are interested in learning adverbial clauses according to type (e.g., time adverbial clauses, place adverbial clauses, adverbial clauses of concession, and so forth). Punctuation rules, another aspect of grammar, are beneficial for students at this juncture as well, especially punctuation rules such as *Adverbial clauses, like participial phrases, must be followed by commas when they begin the sentence, but are not preceded by commas when they end the sentence.* Of course, students need ongoing review of the phrases and clauses previously covered. ESL/ELL students, too, will have persistent trouble with comma placement pertaining to nonessential adjective clauses—as do many native English-speaking students. Grammar proficiency, including punctuation, unfortunately, is not like riding a bicycle. We forget the grammar that we do not utilize; therefore, ongoing review is imperative. Handouts, exercises, quizzes, and games provide fine methods of

ensuring student grammar retention. Another technique is to include phrase/clause tactics on peer review sheets for those days when students must read and comment on one another's papers. Items such as *Indicate several sentences that might be combined for smoother flow or greater clarity* or *Where might a participial phrase or an adverbial clause work especially well within this writing?* help keep students on the watch for opportunities to craft sentences by applying the grammar they have learned.

### Grammar Remains the Understructure

To teach grammar or not to teach grammar: Regardless of varying viewpoints, regardless of arguments highlighting both sides of the debate, the choice remains ours and demands our attention. Is grammar correction in writing a pointless waste of time? Is grammar-focused instruction too much of a one-size-fits-all proposition? Maybe. Maybe not. Depending on student need. In academic situations, ESL/ELL students *must* write as proficiently as their peers. That reality dictates student need. As student need establishes high expectation, the teaching must rise to fulfill the need. That is the simple truth of the situation.

Admittedly, phrase/clause tactics may be a one-size-fits-all approach to grammar through writing, but if the size actually fits most students, student needs are served. There is surely no shortage of new ideas in education. Some of those ideas are nonsense; others require serious contemplation. As Frodesen asserts, even now the widely varying components of global "Englishes" challenge the idea of what Standard English ought to be. Rising populations of non-native English speakers outnumber native speakers three to one and bring forth "questions about what the expectations should be [regarding] 'linguistic correctness,' even in formal written English" (246). Still, I argue that grammar remains the understructure upon which we hang the competently written word and echo Frodesen's conclusion in my own: "in some form, the role of grammar will remain as an essential component of effective written communication" (247). Moreover, as Diane Larsen-Freeman contends, "grammar is about much more than form, and its teaching is ill served if students are simply given rules" (251). Grammar aids writers in crafting their sentences. In this, it is the tool of the artist.

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**Dennis Sjolie** is associate professor of English and coordinator of ESL at the University of South Dakota. He also teaches courses in TESOL, creative writing, and gothic/horror literature, and publishes fiction. email: dsjolie@usd.edu.

## EJ 10 Years Ago

### Shakespeare Verbs Nouns, and So Can I

One can go on. (And on—about sentence fragments, for instance.) When I raise these questions—ever so delicately—with my students, I am struck by how many of their inherited rules seem designed to dull their writing (as well as dampen their ardor). You mustn't verb nouns, they remind me piously—as I think of Shakespeare's animal verbs (to shark, to spaniel) and his bodypart verbs (to nose, to fat) and of all the great verbs they have spawned (to beaver, weasel, ferret, buffalo; to stomach, belly, scalp, kneecap). And what of his double comparisons (more wider), double superlatives (most unkindest), double negatives (passim)?

Peter Brodie. "Never Say *Never*: Teaching Grammar and Usage." *EJ* 85.7 (1996): 77–78.