

A Method for Improving Incoherent Sentence Structure in Writing

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Reference Data:

Cole, T. (2013). *A method for improving incoherent sentence structure in writing*. In N. Sonda & A. Krause (Eds.), *JALT2012 Conference Proceedings*. Tokyo: JALT.

In poorly written English, the expression of ideas may be stifled through incoherency at the sentence level. Student learners unable to self-correct may also be rendered dependent on teacher correction. Hypothetically, and in a very limited way, a sentence generator would help improve syntax and reduce teacher dependency. In an attempt to provide supportive evidence for this, a trial was conducted with a specially developed generator called “the matching method.” In this paper, the results of the trial are reported and the difficulties of the method are discussed.

うまく書けていない英語では、考えの表現が文レベルで首尾一貫性を欠き、読みづらいことがある。自分で文を直すことのできない学生、学習者たちは指導者(教師)に頼らざるをえないかもしれない。仮説的に、あるとても限られた方法において、sentence generatorは構文を改良し、指導者への依存を減らすだろう。これを支える証拠を提供する試みとして、ある実験がthe matching methodと呼ばれる、特別に開発されたgeneratorを用いて行われた。この論文では、その試みの結果が報告されると共に、その方法の難しさが議論される。

THE CONCEPT of interlanguage has been credited to Selinker (1972) and has been defined by Ortega (2009) as “the language system that each learner constructs at any given point in development” (p. 110). In the field of SLA, interlanguage constitutes the mental rules and representations created by a learner to determine how things in the language may be interpreted or expressed. In an abstract sense, the system may also be regarded as four sub-systems, each handling one of the four language skills. For writing, sentence incoherency suggests a defective subsystem. Teacher correction may help students acknowledge their errors, but the associated defect in the interlanguage may be unaffected, meaning that students would likely repeat the incoherency. Students may also be incapable of self-correction, which would suggest the absence of appropriate underlying sentence patterns in the interlanguage. Without such patterns, it could be difficult to form coherent sentences. “Implanting” appropriate sentence patterns onto the interlanguage system is thus worth considering as a way of supplanting defective patterns. A way of mapping information onto appropriate sentence patterns would then constitute a remedial possibility for incoherency. Such a process would, essentially, be a sentence generator.

The Matching Method

For the purpose of this study, a remedial generator to help students struggling with sentence coherency was developed and called the “matching method.” It includes the following three steps:

- Step 1: Decide what to express.
- Step 2: Decide the sentence components, that is, subject (S), verb (V), object (O), and so on.
- Step 3: Place the sentence components into one of the five English sentence patterns.

The method aims to help students who cannot produce sentences patterned after the basic five English sentence patterns and who cannot self-correct. In the study of syntax, “the underlying thesis of generative grammar is that sentences are generated by a subconscious set of procedures (like computer programs)” (Carnie, 2013, p. 6). The matching method is not a generative grammar, which predicts grammatically acceptable patterns instead of mapping words onto given patterns, but the underlying motivation is still a set of procedures. The following is an example application of the matching method:

- Step 1: The student has to decide what to express. As an example exercise, the student could be shown a picture of a man reading a newspaper and asked to make a statement. The student will, hopefully, decide to make a statement about the action of the man.
- Step 2: The student decides the sentence components. Following the example, the student, again hopefully, will decide S = man, V = read, O = newspaper.
- Step 3: This is the matching step. The student places the sentence components into an appropriate sentence pattern, in this case S + V + O, to create the sentence *Man read newspaper*. Although the verb form is incorrect, the word order is acceptable.

Although the matching method aims to give the writer more sentence coherency and less teacher dependency, a major drawback is the resolution of teaching problems at each step. For a lower level student, deciding what to express in Step 1 can be confusing. Practice exercises such as the newspaper example present a single clear choice. If, however, a park scene of someone walking a dog in the foreground and someone kicking a ball in the background is shown, an extremely weak lower level student may not be able to separate the two actions and could possibly end up combining elements of both into one jumbled sentence. In Step 2, giving students an intuitive understanding of the sentence components is also a difficult problem. In the newspaper example, if the student can grasp that the object component is that which is acted upon by the subject, the student will have more than a random chance of deciding that the man is the subject. In Step 3, although a sentence pattern can be determined from the components decided in Step 2, it would be helpful if the student could also gain a sense of the kind of ideas that each sentence pattern can express. Another drawback of the method is that it is limited to formation of sentences patterned after the basic five English sentence patterns without sentence complications such as adverbs and other adjuncts.

The Trial Candidates

To find support for the hypothesis that the matching method would reduce syntax error and teacher dependency, the method was administered to a low level English class of 18 first-year students training to become hairdressers at a junior college in Tokyo. Although English was a required subject at the junior college, the class included a number of students incapable of writing coherently, in part because a minimal level of English competency was not a prerequisite for college entry. For some of the students, their inability only reinforced negative perceptions of a subject that was neither a strength nor favourite at high school.

The Five Sentence Patterns

Almost all of the students claimed to have studied the five basic sentence patterns of the English language at high school (see Figure 1). Despite this, associating the patterns with concrete sentences could be confusing. When asked to identify the sentence pattern of *Mary met Peter Green*, many students answered correctly with S + V + O, identifying the family name *Green* as part of the object *Peter Green*. Some students, however, placed the sentence as S + V + C or S + V + O + OC, perhaps mistaking *Green* to be a color complement. Students also asked about the components: “What is a verb?” (Usually for this question, unless an instructor was confident of his or her ability to explain this clearly to low level students, reference to a grammar book, preferably in Japanese, was the least confusing or time consuming way of explanation.)

Sentence Pattern	Component abbreviation
Subject + Verb	(S + V)
Subject + Verb + Complement	(S + V + C)
Subject + Verb + Object	(S + V + O)
Subject + Verb + Indirect Object + Object	(S + V + IO + O)
Subject + Verb + Object + Object Complement	(S + V + O + OC)

Figure 1. The Five Basic Sentence Patterns in English

Syntax Exercises

Common syntax exercises may help students become familiar with the application of the matching method. The following is a selection of examples. Where possible, adjectives, adjuncts, subordinate clauses, and other sentence complications are removed. Passive voice is also avoided.

Exercises 1-4 check a student’s understanding of the sentence patterns. As each exercise is a multiple choice question, the students do not have to construct sentences by themselves.

Exercise 1.

Choose the component corresponding to the underlined word in *The cat chased the mouse*.

- a. S b. V c. C d. O

Exercise 2.

Choose the word corresponding to V in *Peter played the drums*.

- a. Peter b. played c. the drums

Exercise 3.

Choose the sentence pattern corresponding to *Mary is famous*.

- a. S + V b. S + V + C
c. S + V + O d. S + V + IO + O

Exercise 4.

Choose the sentence that corresponds to the sentence pattern S + V + C.

- a. Tom is a nurse. b. Mary studies art.
c. Jane sent Kelly a postcard.

Exercise 5 is a practice exercise for Step 1. Because lower level students often cannot decide what to express, an exercise such as Exercise 5 may help provide example ideas.

Exercise 5.

Choose a suitable statement about the picture.



- a. The footpath is empty. b. A man is walking.
c. It is raining

Exercise 6.

Decide the components for a possible sentence about the picture. Write — if not needed.



S: _____ Girl _____ V: _____
C: _____ O: _____

Exercise 6 is a practice exercise for Step 2. In this example, with the subject given, students only have to decide the remaining components. It is hoped that students would decide “play” for V and “soccer” for O, and realize that there is no complement. A more difficult challenge would require students to decide their own subject.

Currently, the pattern *There is/are . . .* is treated as a special case of the matching method. After students have decided the presence or nonpresence of a common noun entity, Step 2 is bypassed and *There is/are . . .* is regarded as the appropriate pattern in Step 3. Exercises such as Exercise 7 aim to help students associate the pattern with the idea of presence or nonpresence.

Exercise 7.

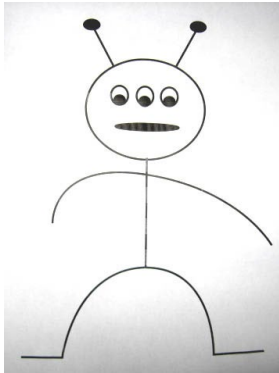
Choose an appropriate sentence to describe the picture.



There is a car
There are many dancers.

Exercise 8.

Complete the sentence with *The alien is* or *The alien has*



_____ three eyes.

For many lower level students, the association of *It has* . . . with possession, and *It is* . . . with equivalence is vague. If this is not clear, the matching method will break down at Step 2 when the student tries to guess the verb, resulting possibly in a sentence such as *Tom has tall*. Exercises such as 8-9 attempt to help students discern the difference.

Exercise 9.

Use *The giraffe has* and or *The giraffe is* to complete the sentences.

_____ tall.
_____ a long neck.

In Exercise 10, the student must apply all three steps, hopefully first deciding to express the spiciness of the curry. Exercise 11 also requires the student to apply the three steps.

Exercise 10.

Summarize the main point of the information in one sentence.

- | | |
|-------|--|
| Curry | <input type="checkbox"/> Extremely hot |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Very hot |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Hot |
| | <input type="checkbox"/> Mild |

S: _____ V: _____ is _____

C: _____ O: _____

Sentence: _____

Exercise 11.

Summarize the main point of the dialogue in one sentence.

Jake: What happened to the ice?

Ross: It melted.

S: _____ V: _____ is _____

C: _____ O: _____

Sentence: _____

For Exercise 12, a student who can identify the components and appropriate sentence pattern is likely to manage the problem. If not, the student will guess at a probable permutation. A drawback with this exercise is that students do not have to decide the words for the sentence and know that, for example, one of the given words is the subject. In more challenging exercises, not all words are provided.

Exercise 12.

Rearrange the words to form a sentence.

drives / Tom / a car

Sentence: _____

Matching Method Trial

The hypothesis was tested by administering the matching method to a low level English class of 18 first-year students at a junior college in Tokyo.

The trial included three tasks. First, the students wrote a short passage of 60 words about Mount Fuji. Second, the students worked on 20 syntax exercises introducing the matching method and focusing on sentences that the students were likely to use while describing a place. Finally, the students wrote a second short passage of 60 words about a famous place of their own choice. Independent readers then rated the passage on the famous place as better, the same, or worse than the passage on Mount Fuji. Support for the hypothesis would be evident if the passage on the famous place were rated significantly better.

Trial Results

The results of the trial proved inconclusive with the hypothesis neither supported nor disproved. Of the 15 students who completed the tasks, only three showed apparent improvement. There was no evidence, however, to suggest that the improvements were due to the matching method. The results did suggest that it was more difficult to improve the writing of weaker students than better students. The following is an example of work that showed apparent improvement, with the student choosing to write about her own college, denoted here as “Y.”

Mount Fuji:

Mount Fuji is most pourer in Japan.

Mount Fuji is tallest in Japan There is a sizuoka

Mount Fuji is cauld. Mount Fuji is visit a

Many people. Mount Fuji is Fire Mounten

Mount Fuji is famous sizuoka

Many people like a Mount Fuji

Famous place:

Y is most famous callege. Many student

are study hair make. Y callege is in

Hachiouji. Y is beautiful callege.

Y student say “Y is very fun”.

There is school bus in Y. There is

fastival in Y. It is very good

Apparent improvements included an improved ability to express location:

There is sizuoka. → Y Callee is in Hachiouji.

and presence:

There is a sizuoka. → There is school bus in Y. and There is fastival in Y.

and, unless the student was attempting a passive statement, an improved understanding of S and O:

Mount Fuji is visit a many people. → Many student are study hair make.

The results indicated that the trial made very little, if any, impression on the writing of individual students. It also became clear that defective sentence patterns were too ingrained in the interlanguage systems of individual students and not likely to be removed easily. There was also the possibility that, rather than a defective pattern, absent patterns in the interlanguage forced students to guess at sentence constructions.

Possible Reasons for Trial Failure

After only one trial, it was clearly impossible to judge any long-term effectiveness. On the other hand, there were various reasons for the high number of students who showed no apparent improvement. A few students found the exercise too easy and could already demonstrate acceptable syntax. Some students found the work boring and applied little effort. In some cases, the second piece was worse than the first.

It was also clear that the 20 exercises used to introduce the students to the matching method were ineffective. It had been hoped that the students would familiarize themselves with the method through discovery, as it was not explained explicitly, but while the exercises attempted to illustrate by example what was required at each step (e.g., *At Step 2, decide the subject, verb,*

and other components), the students seemed focused only on the correct answer to each question, missing the point. The matching method thus made little or no impression on the existing interlanguage system of each student, possibly accounting also for some students constructing perfectly fine sentences in the exercises, but incapable of reproducing them in the second passage.

The trial also failed to take into account the students' natural learning ability. Installing a sentence generator into a student's interlanguage system essentially requires supplanting part of the student's existing system. But since no student is a computer, this obviously cannot be done simply. Clearly, in order for the five English sentence patterns to ultimately become part of the interlanguage, their application must be learned and practiced over time. With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the matching method was never going to make an immediate and lasting impression in 20 short exercises.

The design of the trial and matching method itself may have contributed to the failure.

Possible Improvements for a Retrial

Considering the inadequacies of the initial trial, a retrial including the following may produce better results:

- The students may have a better understanding of the matching method if it is explained to them directly.
- Besides doing the exercises, the students could try to set up similar exercises by themselves. By setting such exercises, the students may focus more on what is required at each step than on correct answers.
- For the matching method to become a habit, repeated practice over a period of time would be required.

Conclusion

Although its practical application remains problematic, the matching method is worth considering as it hypothetically provides assistance for learners who cannot write coherent sentences and who cannot correct their own incoherency. It is also worth considering for a number of classroom reasons.

First, with many students such as those at specialist junior colleges under pressure to complete their vocational training and secure employment, mandatory English lessons are rarely treated with priority or respect. However, there is still an expectation on teachers to cultivate rapid English improvement, even if this expectation is unrealistic. The matching method is a way of perhaps “installing” improvement.

Second, due to tight scheduling and limited resources, the weakest students in some English writing classes cannot be separated from the more capable students. As a result, poor sentence structure not only hinders the progress of the individual but also that of better students, sometimes forcing the formation of smaller teaching groups and even a lesson compromise. The matching method will hopefully encourage independence and self-improvement, freeing instructors from inordinate amounts of class time spent correcting basic structure problems.

Finally, some students do not even attempt any writing exercises, believing beforehand that English is impossible for them. The concept of a sentence generator may perhaps give these students belief that some form of assistance, albeit intangible, is at hand, in a way, a substitute for consulting translation programs or direct copying.

Bio Data

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