

Subjects Made Simple:
A Fast-paced Approach to Improving Sentence Structure

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The next few pages briefly describe an approach to the teaching of sentence structure in the English classroom. The main goal of this exercise is to teach the recognition of subject and predicate in a sentence with the hope that recognition practice will lead to the proper utilization in original student sentences.

An examination of the information available on the notion "subject" reveals that a good deal of what the English teacher attempts in teaching students sentence structure is weighed down by terminology. This is a result of trying to teach all the forms that the subject, predicate or object of a sentence may take. Specifically, the subject of a sentence may take the form of 1) a single noun, e.g., George lost his case.; 2) a noun phrase, e.g., The Case was hopeless.; 3) a clause, e.g., Whoever owns the red convertible report to the main gate!; 4) an infinitive, e.g., To repent would be wise.; and, finally, 5) a gerund, e.g., Swimming is good exercise. Adjectives and adverbs may also function as subjects of sentences but these are rarely found in practical use.

The restrictions of time and student ability which the teacher is subject to force her to narrow the course objectives to the acquisition of very specific skills related to the recognition and use of the subject. These specific skills need not involve the cumbersome acquisition of all the labels that we as English teachers can apply to the aforementioned forms the subject may take. For the students that I work and have worked with these labels would provide enough frustration in their learning to result in little progress toward the goal of recognition and proper use of the subject plus predicate in a sentence.

Realizing and correctly assessing your students' needs can result in limiting many of the obstacles that most teachers of composition face. My students, for instance, had demonstrated that they did not know how to write a correct sentence, i.e., a sentence containing a subject and a predicate. They did not recognize that in any sentence there is a "doer" (the actor in the sentence) and the thing "done" (the

action in the sentence). Addressing the problem in these simplified terms, i.e., "doer" and "done," I disregarded the previously mentioned forms that the subject may take. From this point on my goal was to teach recognition of the "doer" in a sentence.

In the first class session the students took a pretest consisting of twenty-five sentences with instruction to find the subject and write it out on the line provided. In evaluating these tests it was obvious that the students did not know what questions to ask themselves in recognizing the subject. Worksheets which they were given directed them to ask one of the following two questions after locating the "done" or simple predicate of the sentence:

1) "Who did?"

Example - Mary asked for a coke.

Asked is the simple predicate.

Who did (asked)? Mary did.

Mary is the "doer" or subject of the sentence.

2) "What did?"

Example - The car rolled down the hill.

Rolled is the simple predicate.

What did (rolled)? The car did.

The car is the "doer" or subject of the sentence.

Of course this questioning method does not make a distinction between simple subject and complete subject. At this level of subject recognition it is irrelevant.

A review test was next administered to check the students' progress in recognizing the subject through the utilization of the above questions. Most students in a relatively short period of time had successfully mastered this skill.

Three isolated areas in subject recognition had to be introduced as discovered in the original subject pretest. These three areas had to be addressed separately because the questioning method of locating the subject wasn't sufficiently adequate to deal with them. The three areas were as follows: 1) There is never the subject of a sentence., 2) A subject may be compound; that is, a sentence may have more than one "doer"., and 3) In an interrogative the subject rarely comes first. The three problem areas were covered in the last six pages of the subject worksheet unit.

To understand that the word "there" is never the subject of a sentence the student need only to learn a rule and apply it. The complete rule read as follows: "There is never a subject. When the word there begins a sentence, the subject comes after the predicate."

Example - There are ten apes in the room.

Simple predicate = are.

Who did (are) or what did (are) in the room? Apes are in the room.

Therefore, apes is the subject.

Recognizing the subject of an interrogative was also covered. Again, a simple rule was to be learned and practiced. The rule read as follows: "In sentences that ask questions the "doer" or subject of the sentence usually does not come first."

Example - Are you coming with us?

Simple predicate = are coming

Who did (are coming) or what did

(are coming)? You are coming.

Therefore, you is the subject.

The final problem area to be covered was the recognition of compound subjects. The rule to be learned and practiced read as follows: "A subject of a sentence may have more than one part. It is said to be compound. These parts may be joined by words 'and', or 'or'." (The conjunctions 'neither...nor' and 'either...or' were not included as skills to be exercised, but they were mentioned.) Examples of each are:

1) and - John and Mary went home.

Simple predicate = went.

Who or what did (went)?

Mary went. John went. The word

and connects John and Mary, therefore,

John and Mary is the subject of the sentence.

2) or - John or Mary went home.

Simple predicate = went.

Who or what did (went)?

John went. Mary went. The word or

connects John and Mary, therefore,

John or Mary is the subject of the sentence.

All previous skills acquired were continually exercised through additional board work. A review test was administered at the completion of the assigned exercises to measure the general progress toward subject recognition with reference to all areas covered in the exercises. I continually checked students' papers, handed them back for student correction and then rechecked their work. The worksheets demanded the immediate attention of both teacher and student.

As each student successfully completed (achieved a grade of 90 or better on the final review test) the subject unit he was asked to write three original sentences using the word there at the beginning of a sentence, three sentences using a compound subject, three interrogatives and three sentences not to be like any of the previous sentences in subject form. These sentences were compared with original sentences written before the introduction of the subject unit. (Note here: A unit on the predicate had been successfully completed by each student before the introduction of the subject unit.) A careful evaluation of the students' sentences, in most cases, pointed toward a clearer recognition of and utilization of the subject in the areas covered.

I found the experience I had teaching sentence structure in this way successful enough to attempt again. I made some changes to adapt the material to the grade level of my second group of students but, on the whole, the basic premise of this unit remained the same. The basic premise of this unit was that students who are starting at the most fundamental level of composition--constructing a sentence--need not be burdened with needless terminology. Disregard the labels and give the students some basic skills, practice in using them and practice in verbalizing both orally and in writing these new skills and, in most

cases, the desired result of improved sentence structure will be obtained.

For the reader's review here is a list of all the terminology used in introducing the subject:

1. subject - "doer"
2. simple predicate - "done"
3. compound.

It is obvious that at this point in their development as writers my students could not list nor identify the parts of speech, but they could and can demonstrate an understanding of their utility through example.