

The Verb Nucleus Concept as an Improved Method for Teaching English as a Second Language

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The current study examined the efficacy of an innovative method of teaching English sentence construction. It was felt that this novel method would be useful for teaching English as a second language at the technical and vocational training level. This method centers on the hypothesis that the verb forms the nucleus of a sentence. This differs from the existing view that verb is a part of the sentence predicate. It is believed that application of this method would enable learners to easily process single, phrasal and clausal units surrounding the verb, as well as transformations such as questions, imperatives and passives. In Sri Lanka, the curricula adopted in technical institutes specify communicative language teaching. The lack of teacher proficiency, excessive use of the mother language, a dominant teacher approach and the lack of pupil centered activities have hindered its success. Although reading and writing skills are deemed important at the examination level, the teaching materials prescribed do not enhance correct or meaningful sentence construction. As a consequence, excessive the students are unable to construct sentences on their own. As a result, a large number of students fail the final written part of the evaluation. Hence, an innovative approach to teaching sentence construction is urgently needed. The data gathered in this research study was analyzed in relation to the ability of the students to construct sentences with single, phrasal and clausal units surrounding the verb nucleus using jumbled sentences. In addition, transformations were also studied. The theoretical foundation for sentence analysis was the prescriptive model, but modified by the introduction of the verb nucleus concept. The prescriptive model, classifies sentences as simple, compound, complex and compound complex. This classification was used for testing as it covers a fair representative sample of the total syntactic knowledge. Students following NVQ Level 5 courses were selected as subjects for this study. Out of the 6 groups selected for the study, 3 were control groups who learnt the verb as a part of the predicate. The 3 experimental groups were taught the new method, via a 10 lesson course specially designed by the researcher. The 3 experimental groups were then post tested against the 3 control groups in regard to their proficiency in sentence construction. There were no significant differences between the groups regarding overall performance. This could be attributed to many limitations due to unavoidable constraints imposed by the technical institutions where the research was conducted, such as allocation of time, insufficient sample size and the rush to complete the course in the stipulated period of time. Inability to conduct revision or remedial teaching programs including effective error correction was a severe drawback. However, certain insights could be formed. Among these, the impact of the verb nucleus concept on constructing simple sentences among the experimental groups was notable. The study implied the need to improve English Sentence construction in student groups with compromised second language skills using innovative methods. Another important finding was the inability to construct complex syntax especially with complex modification in contrast to mere combination of single units.

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