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## IMPROVING FRESHMEN STUDENTS' SENTENCE ACCURACY THROUGH SENTENCE COMBINING DRILLS: A CASE STUDY IN BINA NUSANTARA UNIVERSITY

Joice Yulinda Luke, Kristianus Oktriono

Language Center, BINUS University  
Kemanggisan Ilir III No 45, Palmerah, Kemanggisan, Jakarta Barat 11480, Indonesia

Corresponding e-mail: [jlake@binus.edu](mailto:jlake@binus.edu)

**Abstract:** Expressing ideas using accurate sentences is commonly a problematic case for freshmen students due to lack of sentence structure knowledge and inadequate drillings in classroom. It happens because a lot of freshmen students still produce meaningless and unclear sentences in writings. This phenomenon applies to freshmen students of Bina Nusantara University (BINUS), who took English subject in the first semester. Thus, this study attempts to investigate whether Sentence Combining Drills can improve sentence accuracy of BINUS freshmen students who took English Access. For data collection, the study gathered the data from forty eight freshmen students who share similarity in upper-intermediate level of English. The research method will scrutinize the results from the students' scores and students' opinions about positive improvements as written in the questionnaires. The study used descriptive qualitative analysis to discuss the findings. The findings of the research proved that practicing sentence combining exercises can boost the scores of sentence constructions and improves the quality of students' writing. At the same time, the results of the study are valuable for enriching approaches of teaching academic writing in EFL contexts.

**Keywords:** *Sentence-combining, freshmen, writing*

### 1 INTRODUCTION

For freshmen students, writing is a tedious task. It involves countless preparations from getting the idea to write and compose the ideas in writing until proofreading the written ideas. In short, writing process involves technical and intellectual skills. Often times in writing, freshmen students look terrified, because the ideas doesn't come out right when it is written. Therefore, freshmen students are often found to like speaking than writing.

Despite the fact that writing is not as interesting as speaking, writing is still a prerequisite subject for college or university students. As in Bina Nusantara (BINUS) University, writing has been given in the first semester. The freshmen students have to learn how to write sentences accurately and meaningfully. Hence, clarity becomes the key of any writing products in BINUS.

Unfortunately, the freshmen students are often misconstruction by sentence structure

matters. Lack of grammar knowledge as well as limited vocabularies lead unclear sentences that could create misunderstanding or confusion for readers. For example: *I think so No, Only I love you, It is happened because they forgets to bring the books.* Sorts of errors above may not be occurred if the freshmen students realized that having good knowledge of sentence structures in English is very important. Putting words wrongly can trigger misinterpretation.

Based on the fact above, the study focused on the application of sentence combining exercises to improve the freshmen students' sentence accuracy in writing. The sentence combining exercises enable the language learners, i.e. freshmen students, to recognize various ways to combine sentences in order to produce effective writing. This approach will ultimately benefit for the freshmen students, because the students will know the differences of sentence variety.

The research also would benefit for English instructors or lecturers in the attempt to improve

teaching methods particularly in teaching academic writing for university students. Finally, this study could serve as a basis for other researches in the development of useful and applicable teaching methods for improving university students' writing skill.

### **1.1. Theoretical Frameworks**

Writing is a complex activity. It involves process of drafting, composing, and evaluating or proofreading. Regarding the process of composing writing, one important skill that should be mastered by students is combining sentences. According to Chin (2000:2), sentence combining is "the strategy of joining short sentences into longer, more complex sentences". By engaging in sentence combining tasks, students may learn to vary sentence constructions in order to improve the meaning and style of the sentences.

For undergraduate students, particularly freshmen students, sentence combining tasks are very challenging tasks due to lack of knowledge and practices of varying sentence patterns (Abdullah, 2004). Because of that many undergraduates are still reckoned to produce under qualified writings. To improve the quality of undergraduates' writings, researchers agree to use students' writings as the basis of teaching sentence-construction skills. By doing this, teachers help the students to identify and correct problems in sentence structure and usage (Chin, 2000).

Since crafting sentences is a potential skill that should be mastered by undergraduates, Saddler, et.al (2008: 18) suggests integrating sentence-combining approach in teaching writing for college students. Various previous studies have proved that teaching sentence combining skills can improve the quality of students' writing, especially in the process of revising the texts and improving writing ability (O'Hare, 1973; Hillocks, 1986; Saddler and Graham, 2005).

In addition, sentence combining has a positive impact to improve writing styles. Noguchi (1991) research found that sentence combining is an effective method for helping students to develop fluency and variety. By combining sentences, the students can explore

various sentence varieties, sentence length, as well as discover the best phrases and clauses that have sophisticated meaning for the readers. According to Saddler(as cited in Graham, MacArthur, & Fitzgerald, 2007:165) that "sentence combining exercises can prompt students to use syntactical options in their writing by providing them practice in consciously controlling and manipulating syntax". In other words, sentence combining exercises enable the students to produce readable and meaningful sentences.

### **1.2. Statement of Problems**

This study aimed to investigate whether the use of Sentence Combining Exercises can improve freshmen students' Sentence accuracy at Bina Nusantara (BINUS) University, Indonesia. Specifically, this research is sought to answer the following questions:

- 1) What scores do BINUS freshmen student get after practicing sentence combining exercises?
- 2) What sorts of positive improvements do BINUS freshmen students experience after doing sentence combining exercises?

### **1.3. Hypotheses of the study**

The following were the hypotheses of this study:

- 1) BINUS freshmen students' sentence-construction scores have significantly improved after practicing sentence combining drills.
- 2) BINUS freshmen students have significantly experienced positive improvements in writing after dealing with sentence combining drills.

## **2. METHODOLOGY**

This section consists of five sections. The sections are: research designs, population and samples, data collection procedures, data instruments, and data analysis.

### **2.1. Research Design**

The descriptive survey using closed-ended questionnaires to determine the positive improvements gained by BINUS freshmen students after practicing Sentence Combining drill in order to improve the accuracy of sentences made. Along with the survey, a set of sentence combining drill was designed to monitor sentence construction scores of BINUS freshmen students as well as to define the samples of this research

### **2.2. Population and Sample of Study**

The population of this research was forty eight freshmen students enrolled at English Access class LA02. Then, the study narrowed the number of samples into fifteen freshmen students, who got high scores in a set of sentence combining drill. The next step is examining the samples for obtaining the research data.

### 2.3. Data Collecting Procedure

A set of sentence combining drills were distributed among the population of this study, forty eight BINUS freshmen students. The worksheet contains 4 parts that resembled methods of combining sentences with 10 questions for each.

After obtaining scores from the sentence combining worksheets, the study picked the targeted respondents by using the scores the freshmen students got from every part of the drills. Finally, 15 students were selected as the appropriate samples of this research because the students got scores 8 for each part.

Then, a survey using closed-ended questionnaires with three-point scales (1=Disagree, 2=Don't know, and 3=Agree) were circulated among fifteen respondents in order to obtain data resembling impacts of using sentence combining drills to improve accuracy in writing sentences.

### 2.4. Data Collection Instruments

Two instruments were applied for this research. First, a set of sentence combining exercises adopted from three online resources, such as Purdue OWL engagement, Johnson County Community College, and Sinclair Community College, with some modifications. The instrument was used to define freshmen students' scores in order to decide the suitable samples to be investigated genuinely.

Another instrument was a modified closed-ended questionnaire consisted of 14 questions with rating scale 1-3 (i.e. score 1 = disagree, score 2 = don't know, and score 3= agree) adopted from Using Sentence Variety Checklist (Abdullah, 2014). The instrument was used to verify whether using sentence combining drills has significantly

improved the accuracy of sentences produced by the freshmen students of BINUS.

### 2.5. Data Analysis:

For data analysis, this study specifically used two statistical tools as follows:

- 1) Frequency counts which was used to describe BINUS freshmen sentence-construction scores.
- 2) Percentage which was used to describe positive improvements experienced by BINUS freshmen students after doing a set of sentence combining drills.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This part consists of two parts. The first is describing the results of data. The second is discussions based on the results. All discussions will be explained descriptively.

### 3.1. BINUS Freshmen Student's Scores after doing Sentence Combining Exercises

In general, BINUS freshmen students still have problems in combining sentences, especially when combining more than two independent sentences. Most of freshmen students who scored below than 8 in this study have low level of competence in sentence combination as indicated by the students' scores shown by Figure 1.

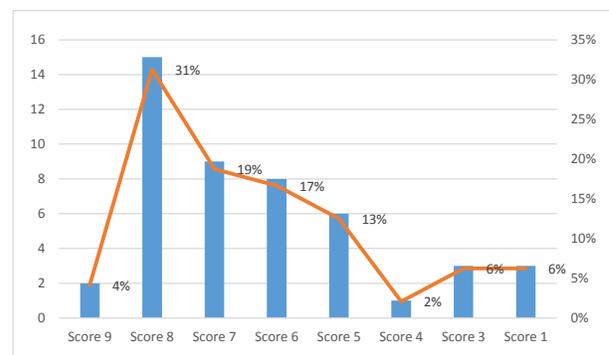


Figure 1. Distribution Scores of BINUS Freshmen Students after doing Sentence Combining Drills.

The results reveal that BINUS freshmen students obtained various scores after completing a set of sentence combining drills. The freshmen' scores were ranging from score 1 to 9. Within the range of scores, the highest scores (score 9) was

only pertained by 2% out of total students, while the lowest score (score 1) was achieved quite higher in percentage (65%) of the total students. Surprisingly, the highest portions of BINUS freshmen students were scored 8 with 31%.

The students who got scores 8 above may have good sense of sentences as well as adequate knowledge of writing. It is in line with Davidson (1977:52) who stated that “the students do not know the use of relative clause but has the sense that the two clauses he has written belong in the same sentences”. For example: *Sinclair, one of largest community college in USA, has many innovative programs.* Unfortunately, students who got scores below than score 8 are higher (65%) than those who got score above 8 (35%). Statistically, the results prove that BINUS freshmen students were still lack of sentence combining competence and need more sentence combining exercises.

### 3.2. Positive Improvements Gained from Sentence Combining Exercises

Each learning activity has positive outcomes. Practicing to combine sentence may help the learners to vary writing styles as well as improving the quality of writings. Besides that, sentence combining exercises also brings positive improvements for freshmen students as can be seen from the following Figure below:

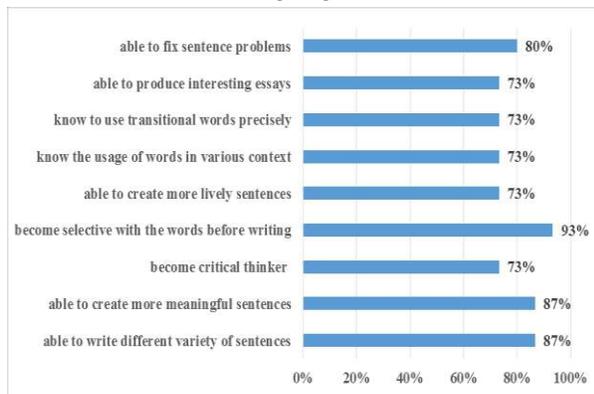


Figure 2. Six Positive Improvements Gained after Practicing Sentence Combining Drills

According to the results of survey on the improvements freshmen students gained after drilling sentence combining exercises, there were six out of fourteen improvements that mostly

experienced by BINUS freshmen students. Among six positive improvements as seen in the Figure above, the first biggest improvement that almost all BINUS freshmen students experienced was become more selective with the words before writing them up (93%). The second biggest improvements were able to create more meaningful sentences and able to write different variety of sentences (87% each). The third biggest improvement was able to fix sentence problem (80%). Then, the last biggest improvements were able to produce interesting essays, know to use transitional precisely, know the usage of words in various context, able to create more lively sentences, and become critical thinker (73% each).

The above findings corroborates with Hillock and Smith (1991) study in which sentence combining surged the knowledge of syntactic structures and improved the quality of sentences in terms of its stylistic effects. In other words, sentence combining exercises can train the students to create more logical sentence variations without losing the essence of meaning. Overall, the results demonstrate that sentence combining exercises have great contributions on improving the BINUS freshmen students' writing performances, particularly the students' sentence variety and styles. The students becomes more aware with the phrases and clauses

## 4. CONCLUSION

In summary, sentence combining drills are useful for helping the students improve their writing, especially the styles of their writings. It is also beneficial to lead the students to create better, effective and readable sentences. Besides, teachers or lecturers can use sentence combining drills to monitor students' writing performance. These research findings also imply that there is a need to carefully examined students' particular problems that hinder the students to produce effective sentences, chiefly when dealing with clauses. Also, the research suggests further development in terms of integrated approach for teaching sentence-combining and its assessments.

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