2.0 SENTENCE CONSTITUENTS

YOU WILL UNDERSTAND:

1. How to define and identify sentence constituents
2. Typical challenges for learners with sentence constituents
3. Techniques for teaching sentence constituents
4. Resources available for teaching sentence constituents

YOU WILL BE ABLE TO:

1. Accurately identify sentence constituents
2. Effectively use sentence constituents as an error correction tool
3. Teach sentence constituents effectively.

SENTENCE CONSTITUENTS

Sentence constituents refer to the parts that make up a sentence in each language. Sentences are generally grouped into five parts or constituents: subject, verb (and predicate), object (direct and indirect), complement and adverbial. It is important for both teachers and students to know what sentence constituents are because these form the patterns of the language. Identifying patterns is a major step in the process of learning the grammar of a language. Knowing sentence constituents can also help us as teachers identify student errors with the language. We will consider each of these constituents in turn in this lesson.

Subject

A **subject** is the group of words that is based on nouns or pronouns. It is the part of the sentence that identifies the *doer* in the sentence; this is the person or thing that is responsible for the action in the sentence. Here are some examples:

- ***The children*** *wanted Santa to give them candy canes.*
- ***The children's concert*** *amazed the parents.*
- ***The ability of the young children to play so well*** *caused a change in their parent's attitude.*
- ***There*** *were multi-coloured and sweet-smelling candy canes for the children.*

The concept of subject is not usually problematic for learners to understand. However, there are three challenges that learners may encounter: the placement of the subject, when the subject can be omitted and subject-verb agreement.

English is what is called an S-V-O language; the subject constituent comes first, followed by the verb, followed by the object. Other languages place these constituents in a different order, for example S-O-V or V-S-O. Some students, therefore, may place the subject AFTER the verb, rather than before it, based upon the patterns from their first language.

Another challenge with the subject is knowing when it can be omitted from a sentence altogether. In some languages, the patterns allow for the subject to be omitted if it is understood to be there. In English, the main pattern that allows for the omission of the subject is when the verb is in an imperative form. In an imperative sentence, the subject *you* is understood but not directly stated:

- ***[You]*** *Open the door!*
- ***[You]*** *Move out of the way!*

Learners encounter difficulties if they omit the subject in sentences that do NOT have an imperative verb. By omitting the subject where it should not be omitted, learners create an incomplete sentence or a sentence fragment.

The final challenge with the subject sentence constituent is in what is called subject-verb agreement. In English, the number of people or things in the subject must be reflected in the verb; a singular subject should have a singular verb, and a plural subject should have a plural verb. This seems quite simple; however, it can be difficult for students whose first language does NOT have subject-verb agreement. It can also be difficult if the subject looks plural (e.g. it has an –s on the end) but is in fact singular.

Predicates and Verbs

A **predicate** completes a sentence and makes it a complete thought. The subject names the *doer* or *be-er* of the sentence and the predicate does the rest. A **simple predicate** consists of a **verb**, **verb string** or **compound verb.**

- *The Titanic **sank**.* → Verb
- *The Titanic **was sinking**.* → Verb string
- *The Titanic **broke apart** and **sunk** into the sea.* → Compound verb

They can also contain verbs which link up to the subject. These verbs, called **copula** or **linking verbs**, connect the subject to the predicate. They do not express an action; rather, they describe or provide additional information about the subject. When referring to this type of verb, we will use the term linking verb.

- *The children's concert **amazed** the parents.*
- *The ability of the young children to play so well **caused** a change in their parent's attitude.*
- *The children **wanted** Santa to give them candy canes.*
- *There **were** multi-coloured and sweet-smelling candy canes for the children.*

A **compound predicate** consists of two (or more) such predicates connected.

- *The Titanic began to slip under the waves and eventually disappeared completely from view.*

A **complete predicate** consists of the verb and all accompanying modifiers.

- *The Titanic **broke apart and sunk into the sea.***

A **predicate adjective** follows a linking verb and tells us something about the subject.

- *Alexandria is **beautiful.***
- *Your behavior in class has been **unacceptable.***
- *The new flowers in your garden smell **delightful.***

A **predicate nominative** follows a linking verb and tells us what the subject is.

- *Ana is the **captain** of the softball team.*
- *She used to be the fastest **girl** on the team.*

Since predicates refer to everything other than the subject, many challenges can arise for students with respect to predicates. However, there are two common challenges with predicates and subjects:

The first is the use of the imperative. With the imperative, the subject *you* is never mentioned but rather is implied.

- ***[You]** Sit over there on the floor.*

The second challenge is with the use of the word *there*. *There* is never the subject itself but rather points to the subject, which is mentioned later in the sentence. As in the example below, the real subject is *three black cats*.

- *There were **three black cats** in our backyard.*

There is sometimes called a **dummy subject** because it is positioned as the subject, but in terms of meaning, is not the subject. When deciding what the subject and predicate is, it is best to think of who is doing the action. This will point to the subject, whether implied or appearing later in the sentence.

Objects

When nouns are not the subjects of a sentence, they are usually the **objects**. Objects receive the action; they receive what happens when the subject and verb join together.

- *The children's concert amazed **the parents.***
- *The ability of the young children to play so well caused **a change** in their parent's attitude.*

The parents and *change* are **direct objects** of the verbs that precede them. They tell who or what received the action of the verb.

- *I'll give him **a piece** of my mind.*
- *After a long pause, she told him her **opinion**.*

In these two sentences *piece* and *opinion* are the **direct objects**. The underlined *him* in each sentence is an **indirect object**. Indirect objects, like all objects, must be nouns or pronouns. Indirect objects answer the question to/for whom or what did the verb act upon.

- *I hope to give <u>him</u> the same **opportunity**, whether he likes **it** or not, because I want **him** to succeed.*

In this sentence the first *him i*s an **indirect object** and *opportunity, it*, and the second *him* are **direct objects.**

Whenever you see the pronouns *him* and *them*, you know they are objects of something. Please note *her* is often an object, but sometimes it modifies a noun and is a possessive. For example:

- *Don't give the book to **her*** and *That is **her** book.*

Students commonly confuse direct and indirect objects. Consider:

- *I sent my mother flowers.*

The teacher may ask who or what receives the action. A student may be tempted to say 'my mother' because she received the flowers. So, the teacher must clearly ask who or what receives the action of *sent*: what is being sent?

In addition, students may also have difficulty with **transitive** and **intransitive verbs**. Transitive verbs are verbs that take a direct object; for example, *hold* and *break* need a direct object to complete the idea. However, intransitive verbs are verbs that do not take a direct object; for example, *sleep* and *improve* do not need a direct object. Students may not know which verbs can take objects and which ones cannot. This can be especially problematic when they start learning and using the passive voice.

Finally, students may confuse **objects** and **complements**. The most common verb in English is: *is (to be).* When *is* (or another form of *to be*) is followed by a noun (*Dickens **was** a writer*), that noun is not considered an object but a **complement**. Other common verbs such as *seem* and *feel* act in the same way and are called **copula verbs**. If you can substitute *is* for a verb and still have a meaningful sentence, that verb will NOT be followed by an object. You will learn more directly below.

Complements

A **complement** is a sentence constituent that completes the meaning of a subject, an object, or a verb.

A **subject complement** follows a linking verb; it is normally an adjective or a noun that renames or defines the subject in some way. Here are some examples:

- *A whale is a huge **animal.***
- *Whales are **intelligent** and **graceful**.*
- *This whale has not yet fully **matured** and so still needs to be with its mother. (*verb form acting as an adjective: a participle)

An **object complement** follows and modifies or refers to a direct object. It can be a noun or adjective or any word acting as a noun or adjective. Here are some examples:

- *We named our daughter **Nancy** to keep our parents **happy**.* (The noun *Nancy* complements the direct object *daughter*; the adjective *happy* complements the object *parents*.)
- *The poor test result made the student very **worried.*** (The participle *worried* complements the object *student*.)

A **verb complement** is a direct or indirect object of a verb. Here is an example:

- *My sister gave **me** all her **books**.* (Both *books*, the direct object, and *me*, the indirect object, are said to be the verb complements of this sentence.)

Students may have trouble identifying complements within a sentence because there are different types and forms of complements with different functions.

Adverbials

An **adverbial** is a sentence constituent that modifies or describes verbs. When an adverbial modifies a verb, it changes the meaning of that verb. In every sentence pattern, the adverbial gives information about the verb, for example, *where, when, why, how,* etc. Adverbials can be moved in a sentence and it is possible to have more than one adverbial. Here are some examples of adverbials:

- *I never drink at **parties.*** (where)
- *My brother walks **to stay in shape**.* (why)
- *We passed the exam **after studying hard**.* (when)
- ***After studying hard**, we passed the exam.* (when)

Students may have difficulty distinguishing between an adverbial and a complement. There is an easy test they can do to figure out the difference. If you remove an adverbial from the sentence, the sentence will still make sense. If you remove the complement from the sentence, the sentence will NOT make sense. The adverbial, then, is expendable; the complement is not.

TEACHING SENTENCE CONSTITUENTS

The two most effective ways to use sentence constituents in your teaching are for sentence analysis and error correction. Many of your students will already be aware of sentence constituents and will be skilled at analyzing sentences at the constituent level. This is particularly true of students from China, Japan, and Korea, where sentence analysis forms the backbone of English language education.

However, despite this ability to analyze sentences, these students lack an ability to produce them accurately; your sentence constituent work with these students should thus focus on performance and use.

Sentence constituent analysis is particularly useful for students whose first language has a different constituent order and different rules for constituents. In this case, your teaching should focus on identifying and correcting the sentence constituent errors in sentences students produce.

The following is an example of a lesson focusing on analyzing the constituents in sentences that students produce.

Objectives: SWBAT identify sentence constituents orally and in writing about A Christmas Carol.

BB	Time	Procedure
WU	15 min.	T introduces the movie, *A Christmas Carol*, and asks if anyone has seen it or read the book. If yes, have a student briefly summarize the plot, if not the Teacher can do so. T shows Ss a clip from the movie, *A Christmas Carol;* ideally the part when Scrooge is visited by the first ghost. T asks Ss to comment on the movie.
LK	20 min.	T puts a sentence on the board about Scrooge and *A Christmas Carol*: 'The presence of the first spirit amazed Scrooge'. T and Ss complete a sentence analysis: T elicits the name of each sentence constituent from Ss and writes it underneath the correct word. T and Ss discuss form and rules.
CP	10 min.	T elicits further sentences from the Ss on the same theme from the movie. Ss complete sentence analyses on their own. They then confirm their answers with a partner, then the whole class.
CP	20 min.	Ss watch another clip from the movie, when Scrooge encounters the third spirit and after. Ss make sentences about the movie and analyze them on their own. Some individuals read their sentences and the others can try to identify the subject, object, etc.

SENTENCE CONSTITUENT ERROR CORRECTION

A particularly useful sentence constituent error correction technique is as follows:

- Students give a piece of their written work to a partner.
- The partner must first identify all the sentence constituents in the student's work.
- Students then look at each sentence and its constituents to determine if it is correct in terms of placement and components.
- Students use this process to complete a correct version of the written work.

Sentence constituents are also useful in getting students to self-correct. The teacher can simply ask questions such as:

- *Where should the subject go?*
- *Which goes first, the subject or the verb?*
- *Which goes first, the verb or the object?*
- *Where should the adverbial go?*
- *Where should the complement go?*

And so on…

Complete the Task Journal.