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Glue: A Technique for Eliminating Fragments and Run-Ons

Many students who are nonnative speakers of English, yet highly proficient, are placed into basic writing or English as a Second Language courses when they enter college. While these students may have advanced oral English proficiency, their writing frequently suffers from a lack of training in academic writing and commonly contains fragments and run-ons, a frustrating sentence-level problem for these students. A review of current writing texts uncovered a general failure to treat these problems as a sentence-boundary issue. The approach taken here is that such students will be able to monitor their writing for incorrectly formed sentences if given a system designed to help them understand English sentence structure. The key concept is *Glue,* a term used for all clause markers. Working through exercises, in which they label the *Glue* and systematically identify fragments, run-ons, and complete sentences, students see a system emerging, which brings them to an understanding of English written conventions. Using *Glue,* the students gain control of their writing and are able to avoid fragments and run-ons.

Since the late 1980s, U.S. community colleges have been experiencing a growing influx of immigrant students who have exited ESL programs and have graduated from U.S. high schools. These students, who exhibit strong oral and aural language proficiency, still share many characteristics with their ESL counterparts; however, because of their extensive exposure to English and U.S. schooling, they have different academic needs from those of ESL students (Miele, 2003). For the college writing instructor, this population frequently poses a particularly challenging problem.

These students, while fluent speakers who may communicate effectively via text messaging, e-mail, and sundry other forms of informal writing, often lack college-level academic writing proficiency. These students typically suffer from a lack of training in academic reading and writing in English, and they also lack academic skills in their native language (Goen, Porter, Swanson, & VanDommelen, 2002; Myles, 2002; Roberge, 2002; Sohn & Shin, 2007). In addition, their language typically contains fossilized language errors that may not be readily apparent in speech because of their lack of hesitations, pauses, and/or accent, among other factors. This population is often referred to as Genera-

tion 1.5 because the linguistic abilities of these students place them somewhere between native speakers and ESL students (Harklau, Losey, & Siegal, 1999).

Because these students have graduated from a U.S. secondary school, they consider themselves familiar with the culture in ways that ESL learners are not (Blumenthal, 2002). Because of their "in-between" status, many of these students do not respond positively to an ESL approach to writing instruction, nor are their needs adequately addressed in writing classes designed for native English speakers (Blanton, 1999). To become successful writers of academic English, these students need to make the switch from colloquial, everyday English to written, academic English, and to do so, they require a nontraditional approach to the teaching of writing (Blumenthal, 2002; Hageman, 2003).

One especially problematic area for these students is the recognition of sentence boundaries. The writing of these students commonly contains fragments and run-ons, often their most frustrating sentence-level problem. Because they believe that they are communicating effectively and because they have no reliable self-monitoring system for analyzing their writing, these students do not direct their attention and energy to the elimination of fragments and run-ons in their work. The focus of this paper is to suggest a framework for writing instructors to effectively help their students address and overcome, at least to some extent, this particular problem.

Affective Issues

Students are less likely to become engaged in the writing process if editing and revising focus primarily on correction (MacGowan-Gilhooly, 1991). Although error feedback is important and plays an important role in helping learners become better writers (Ferris, 2002; Leki, 1998), it should not be the sole focus of the writing class. Instead, instructors should emphasize analysis to help students become effective writers. That is to say, rather than asking students to find errors, instructors should ask students to identify the various elements used in a given sentence (Friedmann, 1983). By focusing on analysis, instructors help students to reread their writing in a nonthreatening manner and involve the students directly in their own learning process. With the emphasis on "what I did" rather than "what I did wrong," students are less resistant to an instructor's guidance and more likely to progress.

Students who regard themselves as successful users of English often express frustration when they are placed in basic writing or ESL classes. Furthermore, these students often express frustration with much of the feedback instructors give them regarding sentence fragments and run-ons because it doesn't seem to make sense to them. Why, they often ask, is something such as *Because she wanted to* or *Which my sister likes to do* considered a sentence fragment? And why is something such as *You get happy then it makes everyone else happy but you can't always be sure about that* a run-on? From *anyone's* point of view, the students reason, the sentences can be understood.

Instructors should acknowledge that yes, meaning is there, and yes, they may be getting their point across, despite the fragments and run-ons. In other words, to claim that the formation of complete sentences is essential to being

understood may not be very persuasive. Instead, instructors need to explain the conventions of academic or formal written English, which differ from spoken English or informal English, such as text messaging or e-mail. Formal written English requires complete sentences, regardless of the clarity of meaning obtained without them. By shifting students' focus to the conventions of academic writing, rather than focusing on students' "poor" writing, instructors will meet less resistance. Instructors want to show that by paying attention to these conventions, the student-writer is ensuring that the reader's attention focuses on meaning because the jarring effect of the fragments and run-ons do not divert the reader from the writer's intent. Furthermore, by focusing their attention on different types of audiences or discourse communities and expectations, these students begin to realize that their writing is not necessarily "bad" or a "problem" (Canagarajah, 2002), but that it is not meeting the expectations of an audience, in this case, academia, which is different from others they have been used to addressing in their writing.

Textbook Presentations of Sentence-Boundary Issues

By far the most common approach to fragments and run-ons in basic writing textbooks consists of two separate chapters, one on each topic (e.g., Choy & Clark, 2006; Langan, 2008, 2009; Meyers, 2005; Wilson & Glazier, 2009; Wingersky, Boerner, & Holguin-Balogh, 2009). In many cases there are few or no opportunities for students to see the interplay of these two types of sentence-boundary problems. Some of these texts do include an exercise, usually termed "review" or "proofreading," that combines fragment and run-on errors (e.g., Choy & Clark, 2006; Wilson & Glazier, 2009; Wingersky et al., 2009). Although this is a step in the right direction in that students are asked to integrate different things they have learned, these exercises ultimately remain inadequate. Such exercises are not the summation of a presentation on how fragments and run-ons are part of a larger system and thereby, related problems. Because the concepts are not brought to a higher, metacognitive level, students are left to remember a series of seemingly disconnected rules, rather than coming to a holistic understanding of sentence structure. A common misconception, for example, resulting from this type of presentation is that students typically believe that they can't start a sentence with *because*. In contrast, the approach outlined in this paper demonstrates that there is a systematic way to conceptualize sentence boundaries, one that fully integrates fragments and run-ons (Marshall, 1982).

The *Glue* System

Through the years of working with nonnative speakers, such as those characterized above, the authors have come to realize that these students can indeed learn to monitor their own writing for fragments and run-ons by introducing and practicing a concept, which we have labeled *Glue*. The term *Glue* refers to all clause markers, including coordinating conjunctions and subordinating conjunctions, relative pronouns, and noun-clause introducers. (See the Appendix for a list of common *Glue* words.) The traditionally taught rule, "Every

sentence must have one independent clause," is, for many of these students, meaningless. By allowing students to "experience" the rule, they are more likely to retain and truly understand it. Learners remember what they experience, not what they are told (Jensen, 1998; Kolb, 1984).

The instructor introduces the concept of *Glue* by explaining that just as the substance *glue* is used to join two items, grammatical *Glue* is used in English to join two clauses, each having a subject and a finite verb, or two SVs.[1] The term *SV* is used instead of *clause* because it contains a reference to two generally familiar concepts, *subjects* and *verbs*. In every sentence, there must be one more SV than *Glue* word, so that the sentence contains at least one independent clause. Creating a sentence with one *Glue* and only one SV would be like having a piece of paper with *glue* spread on it and nothing stuck to it. A run-on is analogous to expecting two pieces of paper to stick together without using *glue*. To further clarify the rule for a complete sentence, the instructor can demonstrate the concept of two SVs for every *Glue*. First, the instructor writes a complex sentence such as (1) on the board:

(1) I went out because the sun was shining.

The instructor asks students if they can identify the *Glue* word and underline it.

(1a) I went out <u>because</u> the sun was shining.

She then asks students to identify the subject and verb before and after the *Glue* word they have identified:

(1b) I went out <u>because</u> the sun was shining.
S V **S V**

Next, the instructor asks for a volunteer. This volunteer places a hand on the desk to represent the first SV in the example. The instructor then places her hand, representing the first *Glue* (*because*), next to the student's SV (*went*) and asks the rest of the class if these hands represent everything that they have labeled. Students realize that there is still one SV that the hands do not represent (*the sun was shining*) and the teacher instructs the volunteer to place the other hand after the instructor's to represent this SV. At this point the instructor asks students how many hands or SVs the volunteer has down and how many she does. Since the volunteer has two hands down and she only one, they are representing the rule that a complete sentence contains one more SV combination than *Glue* word. The instructor can move into lengthier samples of language to continue to demonstrate this rule.

Using a reference list of the *Glue* words in English (see the Appendix), students label those that they have used. They then identify the finite clauses (clauses with a subject and finite verb), which are referred to as SVs. Finally, they count the number of *Glue* words and SVs to determine what type of sentence unit they have created. For example:

1*G* + 1SV = F (Fragment), as in:

(1) Because it was raining.
G S V

Similarly:

1*G* + 3SV = R (Run-on), as in:

(2) I didn't want to go out, I wanted to stay home because it was raining.
S V S V G S V

A complete sentence requires one more SV than *Glue*. Observe:

1*G* + 2SV = S (Complete Sentence), as in:

(3) I didn't want to go out because it was raining.
S V G S V

In editing their work, students learn to remove an SV, add a *Glue*, or in some other way make the sentence conform to the rule for a complete sentence.

The instructor can also point out that the rules for fragments, run-ons, and complete sentences are similar to math formulas, for example, 1*G* + 1SV = F. Some students conceptualize the *Glue* system better in mathematical terms, following Gardner's (1993, 1999) notion of tapping into multiple intelligences.

The Exercises

We turn now to a sample lesson as we consider how to focus students' attention on the rules for complete sentences. The first step is an exercise such as the one below, excerpted from Choy and Clark's *Basic Grammar and Usage* (2006, pp. 117-118).

Correct any run-on sentences, comma splices, or fragments in the following essay.

a. If you enjoy visiting distant, unfamiliar places.
b. You should consider vacationing in the eastern Canadian Arctic.
c. The official name for this region is Nunavut it means "our land" in the Inuit (Eskimo) language.
d. Nunavut is a vast, sparsely populated land.
e. It covers one fifth the total area of Canada, [but] it has fewer than thirty thousand people.[2]
f. This number equivalent to only 0.01 people per square kilometer.
g. Although Nunavut covers a distance from north to south equivalent to the distance between New York City and El Paso, Texas.
h. It has only twenty-one kilometers of highway.
i. More than eighty percent of the population is Inuit.

The instructor first asks the students to identify the sentences, fragments, and run-ons. Some may be able to do this; many may not. When the instructor asks them to explain why they classified each example as they did, their answers are likely to be vague and inadequate. "It's too long" is a common explanation given to account for a run-on, and "It's not a complete thought" for a fragment. They rely on an intuitive feel for a complete sentence, or "sentence sense" (Langan, 2008), but they can articulate no specific rules and have no systematic way of analyzing an example and classifying it.

The one exception to this is the rule stating that every sentence must have a subject and a verb. Even those students who do not demonstrate mastery of most grammatical terminology or concepts can usually state and apply this rule by identifying subjects and verbs accurately. Thus, they generally know that (f), for example, is a fragment because there is no verb.

However, these students are missing a key concept—*Glue*—that would enable them to explain the remaining examples. To help them develop a better understanding of fragments, the instructor asks the students to look at (a) and tells them there are two ways to fix the fragment: Add something or subtract something. This prompt guides the students to suggest the following:

(a1) You enjoy visiting distant, unfamiliar places.
(a2) If you enjoy visiting distant, unfamiliar places, you should consider vacationing in the eastern Canadian Arctic.

While the second solution, (2), is the intended answer for the exercise, the *Glue* concept can be highlighted and clarified if both solutions are included. The instructor explains that the word *if*, removed from (a1), is one of the many English words that performs a function called *Glue*. A *Glue* word joins two things, in grammatical terms, two Subject-Verb units or SVs. Because (a) has only one SV, there is no need for the *Glue*. By adding (a) to (b), however, a second SV is brought into the sentence, and the *Glue,* or *if,* is needed. In analyzing this example, the students learn that the *Glue* can be in initial position and that a comma indicates the boundary between the two SVs it joins. Looked at in this way, the rule for comma placement becomes much easier to internalize.

In (c), students can see two SVs and at least a few students usually realize that there is no word that is functioning as *Glue*. Because they have realized that the need for the *Glue* is due to the presence of two SVs, some students will suggest adding *and,* another *Glue* word.

Next, the instructor asks the students to show why (e) is a complete sentence with two SVs and one *Glue* through a similar series of questions and answers. The instructor continues this process until the exercise is completed.

After this first exercise, the students, using their list of *Glue* words, are given sample paragraphs and asked to label the S, V, and *G* (*Glue*) found in these paragraphs. Once they are comfortable with the procedure, they move to labeling these elements in their own writing. As they continue practicing, the instructor reminds them that if they use two SVs, they need to have *Glue;* likewise, if they use *Glue*, they need to have two SVs.

At some point, students encounter longer sentences, either their own or in the text, and the instructor expands the rules to explain these. For example, one student wrote, "The woman is alone however she doesn't look unhappy because she has a smile on her face." The instructor pointed out that *because*, although *Glue*, could not join all three SVs, but rather only two of them and that therefore, the student needed a second *Glue* to form the sentence correctly. The student also learned that *however*, when used to show contrast, is not one of the *Glue* words; *but*, on the other hand, is.

The woman is alone, but she doesn't look unhappy because she has a smile

S_1 V_1 G S_2 V_2 G S_3 V_3

on her face.

The notations under the sentence show how the students can label their work, indicating each SV by number. By counting the number of SVs and the number of *Glue* in each correct sentence, each fragment, and each run-on, students learn to find and correct many of their fragments and run-ons.

Suggestions for Further Research

In implementing *Glue* in a college composition course specifically designed for nonnative speakers with limited academic writing skills, the authors found preliminary indications that this strategy helps these students recognize and correct fragments and run-on sentences. During one month we focused on the forming of complete sentences. The class met three times per week and each week the 18 students worked on a different writing assignment, using the writing process and producing an initial draft and revised version. We informally compared the effectiveness of the *Glue* instruction by comparing two in-class compositions, one written before the instruction and one after the instruction. Although statistical research still needs to be done, the results for this pilot group reveal improvement.

The average number of fragments and run-ons per 250 words in the initial compositions was 2.23 and in the second it had dropped to .85. Stated differently, the students produced a fragment or run-on for every 112 words in their first compositions, which dropped to every 239 words in their second compositions. We find this noticeable decrease in fragments and run-ons for the class as a whole encouraging. We plan to expand our work with a wider range of both nonnative and native English speakers and to enlist other writing teachers to investigate the results they obtain. Since less experienced native speakers often confront similar problems with fragments and run-ons, it would be useful to test out the system with this population to observe the effects of *Glue* instruction on their academic writing.

We encourage readers who implement *Glue* to provide us with their comments and insights regarding the success of the system, not only with the students known as Generation 1.5, but also with other populations of struggling writers.

Conclusion

In this article, we have suggested a nontraditional approach, known as *Glue,* to address in a new way the persistent problems many Generation 1.5 students have with fragments and run-on sentences. *Glue* provides these students with a simple and reliable system for helping them to understand and identify fragments and run-ons. In place of learning piecemeal rules, students are presented with the concept of *Glue* as a system and guided in developing the ability to take control over their use of language and to create correct sentence boundaries. Because the *Glue* system makes extensive use of their own writing, these students become more personally involved and more vested in eliminating fragments and run-on sentences in their work. The focus on *Glue* as a system, and the emphasis on analysis in addition to correction, encourages positive student attitudes and better learning experiences for Generation 1.5 students. We believe this system will also work with other types of students who have problems with fragments and run-ons, and we plan to address this in future research.

Authors

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Notes

[1] The assumption here is that basic subject-verb sentences have already been reviewed with the students.

[2] The word *but* was added for the purposes of showing the *Glue* system.

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Appendix
Basic *Glue* List

Initially, instructors provide students with a short list of basic *Glue* words. As the course progresses and the students become aware of more *Glue* words in their textbook and in readings, they expand their lists. Instructors work with the students on placing the new *Glue* words into the appropriate categories.

and, but, or	(coordinating conjunctions)
because, although, if	(subordinating conjunctions)
who, which, that	(relative pronouns)
what, where, how	(noun clause introducers)