

## Exposing EFL Students to Different Sentence Opening Patterns to Enhance their Written Production

عرض طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية على مختلف نماذج مفاتيح الجمل  
لتحسين تعبيرهم الكتابي

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### Abstract:

In EFL contexts, effective writing requires certain features like sentence variety which can be in terms of patterns, length and opening. Sentence opening, using different forms to begin a sentence, is beneficial for writers as well as readers. As a matter of fact, EFL students are not able to vary their sentences in terms of openings; rather they rely on the same sentence starter. The aim of this study is to suggest for teachers a new and practical strategy: Serial Sentence Opening, through which EFL students are taught the different forms of sentence opening to boost their written production. In the present study, experimental design is selected to examine the impact of teaching different patterns of sentence opening on the writing of second year EFL/ PES students at Teachers' Higher College Taleb Abdurrahman Laghouat, Algeria . The findings of this study reveal that using of different sentence patterns strategy to teach EFL students the different forms of sentence opening has a positive impact on their writing performance.

**Key Words:** English as Foreign Language Students, Writing, different sentence opening patterns

ملخص:

من بديهيات اللغة أن الكتابة الجيدة تتطلب قوالب معينة من بينها التنوع في الجمل من حيث النماذج ، التراكيب ، الطول و الخواتيم .مفاتيح الجمل، أو استعمال عديد من النماذج لبداية الجمل، مفيدة للكتاب و حتى للقراء. طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية غير متمكنين من تنوع الجمل من حيث البداية، أو بالأحرى يعتمدون على نوع واحد من البدايات أو المفاتيح . تهدف هذه الدراسة إلى اقتراح للأساتذة إستراتيجية

جديدة وعملية: سلسلة نماذج مفاتيح الجملة، و التي من خلالها يتعلم طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية مختلف أنواع بدايات الجملة ; لتحسين منتجوهم الكتابي.

من خلال هذا البحث، تم اختيار المنهج التجريبي لدراسة تأثير تعريض طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية لمختلف نماذج الجمل على كتابة طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية في المدرسة العليا للأساتذة طالب عبد الرحمان بالأغواط طلبة السنة الثانية أساتذة التعليم الثانوي . نتائج هذه الدراسة تكشف أن لاستعمال إستراتيجية عرض نماذج مفاتيح الجمل تأثير ايجابي على التعبير الكتابي لمتعلمي اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية .

الكلمات المفتاحية: طلبة اللغة الانجليزية كلغة أجنبية، الإنشاء الكتابي، إستراتيجية نماذج مفاتيح الجمل  
كلمة مفتاحية، كلمة مفتاحية، كلمة مفتاحية، كلمة مفتاحية.

## 1. Introduction

In EFL context, the aim of teachers is to develop their students' communicative competence which refers to the ability to use English language by means of the four skills so that they become able to listen, to speak, to read and to write English language. In fact, in EFL University situation, writing skill has a salient role for it serves the students' present academic and future professional career. However, it is a complex skill (Nunan, 1989; Richards and Renandya, 2003). For this reason, EFL teachers and students meet difficulties when approaching writing; the difficulties facing students when writing concern not only "what to say", that is content, but also "how to say", that is style which includes vocabulary, syntax and paragraphing (Hogins and Lillard, 1972); style is one of the rhetorical canons (Corbett, 1965). As a matter, "what to say" and "how to say" are two complementary elements in writing; ideas are not meaningful if they are not appropriately and effectively expressed. In other words, writing is the skill of arranging words to form

grammatically correct sentences and paragraphs in larger units so that thoughts may be communicated to others.

Syntax refers to the sentence structure. The importance of carefully building sentences should precede the beginning actual writing. For Memering & O'Hare (1980), no matter how the writer's ideas are interest or organized in an essay, a writer should have control over his syntax. Additionally, Rustipa (2013a) believes that excellent writing necessitates students' ability to write excellent sentences and to organize them logically into paragraphs and essays. Since it is a significant component and hallmark of writing style, sentence structuring contributes to the quality of writing and it provides students with a competence of composing a longer text by manipulating a variety of sentence patterns (Podis & Podis, 1984). Sentence variation can come at three different levels: structure, and length and opening (Imroatus, 2017).

Sentence opening signifies the use of different initial forms to begin a sentence. This feature of writing style is advantageous for it can add to one's writing interest and maintain it fresh and more creative (Lai, 2015). It also draws the reader's attention and interest so that he is kept eager to read more (Lai, 2015; Scott, 2015). It seems that writing a correct sentence is the chief difficulty in writing (Memering & O'Hare, 1980). Moreover, EFL students' writing lacks sentence variation in terms of opening; they rely on the same sentence starter because they don't have knowledge about sentence opening and lack awareness of its importance in writing (Scott, 2015). Since the rhetoric of the sentence



comprises of the same fundamental principles as of the larger units of composition, starting with sentence writing skill in the process of writing is advantageous. This study aims at teaching EFL students different forms of sentence openings to enhance their writing style, and providing teachers with a new and practical strategy: Serial Sentence Opening, to boost their EFL students' writing production.

### **1.1 Sentence Variation**

In the context of writing, variety or variation refers to the practice of different forms of sentences. As it is a sign of students' writing efficiency (Tuftte, 2007), sentence variation is required for the writing quality for certain reasons. It helps writers to avoid monotony so that their sentences aren't monotonous but rhythmic in pleasing manner (Hodges and Whitten, 1986). As a consequence, it can also add life and flair to writing and reflect a hallmark of good style (Podis & Podis, 1984). Varying sentences can reduce repetition. Besides, it enables students to make their writing more creative by providing more appropriate emphasis to some points in their writing and, hence, to attract the reader and foster his engagement with the text by helping him in identifying propositions in the text more readily (Lai, 2015).

Since the quality of an essay can be partially assessed on the basis of sentence variety; there are a number of strategies of sentence variety which are classified into three ways: length, structure and opening, (White, 1986 cited in Harjanto, 1991). Sentence length refers to the number of words employed per sentence in order that sentence can be short or

long. Sentence structure denotes the types of clauses: dependent and/or independent, used in the sentence so that it can be (1) short simple sentences, (2) compound sentence, (3) complex sentence and (4) compound-complex sentences. How to begin each sentence within an essay is one way of sentence variation (Lai, 2015). Sentence opening means giving sentence different forms of initial. To vary in the beginning can be done through placing adverbs, adjectives, or prepositional phrase before subjects, etc.

## **1.2. Forms of Sentence Opening**

Sentence opening can be done through different ways that are classified under two general headings: subject cluster or sentence openers (Lai, 2015).

### **1.3. Subject Cluster**

Subject cluster refers to the single or the group of words, in the form of phrase or clause, which appear in the structure of a sentence subject that is the person, place, thing, or idea that is *doing* or *being* something, and that is situated in its ordinary place; it is not forwarded or backwarded. It is the most commonly used by students. In fact, subject cluster can take various starter forms which are presented below associated with examples:

- Noun: *John* write a letter to his friend.
- Pronoun: *He* does the works of his father.
- Noun and pronoun: *Mary and I* went to the meeting.
- Article (the, an, a): *The turtle* felt confident and challenged the hare to a race.



- Quantifiers: (both, such, few, some, etc): *Both pupils* have good marks.
- Demonstrative: (this, that, these, those): *This* cookie tastes sweeter than *that* cake.
- Possessive: (his, her, its, my, etc): *My brother* travelled to London last year.

### 1.4.Sentence Openers

Sentence opener denotes to the elements that are used to begin a sentence. It delays the introduction of the subject; if it does function as a part in the subject cluster, then it's not an opener. That is to say, a sentence can start with other elements than subject cluster, but they can be placed in the middle or the end of a sentence. A sentence starter, whether a single or group of words, can be: an adverb, a verb, an adjective, a conjunction, a preposition and an inversion (Tufte, 2007).

An adverb can be the starter of a sentence; it can be a single word, a phrase or a clause. In case a sentence begins with a single word adverb, a comma should follow the adverb if it is emphasized (Lai, 2015). An adverbial sentence opener can also be a group of words in the form of phrase or clause in order to provide the sentence subject' and its predicate's with detailed information of time, place, manner and degree by answering questions such as: when? Where? How? To what degree? (Tufte, 2007). To make clear adverbial sentence opening, these are some examples:

- Single word adverb: *Slowly*, she turned the corner and peered into the murky basement.
- Adverbial phrase: *After missing the bus*, I decided to walk to class.
- Adverbial clause: *When the crow began to sing*, the cheese dropped to the ground.

Starting sentence with a verb is another technique of sentence opener. A verbal sentence opener can be an infinitive or a participle either present, past or progressive to introduce a description of longer between the two actions happened at the same time or to describe the status of the event or a person. As it is situated in the beginning, it should be separated from the subject using a comma (Scott, 2015). In fact, in some cases, present and past participles can stand as noun and adjective correspondingly (ibid). To illustrates, here are some examples:

- Infinitive verb: *To show* his delight at the proposal, Mr. Smith jumped off the stage.
- Past participle: *Delayed* by a traffic jam, the Jones family arrived several hours after the party started.
- Progressive participle: *Checking* the computer system, Steve discovered a virus.

In addition to adverbs and verbs, a sentence opener can take other forms such as an adjective, a conjunction and preposition. Adjectives are considered as the longer sentence opener words appearing in the beginning of a sentence (ibid). They can be purely adjectives or participles, for example:

- *Vibrant, bold, and irrepressible*, Zora Neale Hurston took the Harlem literary community by storm.



- *Tired and exhausted*, the children quietly went to bed.

Conjunction and preposition are also other types of sentence openers. On the one hand, conjunction involves short and long conjunctions which they serve to connect or contrast the new sentence with its predecessors, and to reduce repetition (ibid). In other words, sentence opener can be a subordinate or coordinate conjunction. If the coordinators includes: and, but, for, so, or, nor, and yet, the subordinators, standing for conjunctive adverbs, are: consequently, nevertheless, accordingly, etc (ibid). Here are some examples of conjunctive sentence openers:

- Coordinator: *And* in setting a new standard for commentary on an often intractable topic, it may even set off a revived-and revitalized-debate.

- Subordinator: *Because* my sister forgets to go grocery shopping yesterday, my brother went to the store to buy bread.

On the other hand, prepositions can be also employed as openers (ibid), for instance:

- *In the doctor's office*, the bandaged man waited.

- *At 6:45 a.m.*, my train leaves the station.

Other types of sentence openers are included under a general heading which is known as inversion (ibid). This latter refers to the placement of an element from its normal situation to the beginning of a sentence so as to put emphasis and achieve cohesion (ibid). Inversion occurs when a writer brings forward a structure in sentence such as object, adverbial structure, prepositional phrases, adjectives, adverbs, numerals and comparatives (ibid).



- *Not* until much later she realized that she had made a huge mistake.
- *The very interesting subject* he studied.
- *More important than* most of the dramatic production within the Surrealist movement was the work of some of its members

It also happens when postponing the subject using, respectively, expletives- words that add to the strength of a phrase without affecting its meaning- such as “there” or “it” followed by verbs such as be, seemed, appeared, and sometimes with an adverb (ibid). To exemplify:

- *There* are many reasons why people enjoy surfing.
- *It* is the reason for my project.

Writer can also start his sentences by inverting negatives, for example: nor, neither, etc (ibid), for instance:

- *Nor* was there any normal forage on the island, since it was inhabited only by fishermen and growers of grapes.

## **2. Method and Tools**

This experimental study aims at investigating the impact of teaching the different forms of English sentence openings on EFL students’ writing performance. To obtain the aforementioned objective, this study adopts one research instruments: a writing test, which is delivered to EFL student participants to elicit their written essays which constitute the text corpus for this study. The test is distributed in two stages:

pre-test and post-test, separated by training sessions in which the participants are exposed to and practice the different forms of English sentence openings. Figure 1 illustrates the three training sessions. Particularly, in the first training session, they are introduced to the first type of English sentence openings: subject cluster and its different forms. In the second training session, they were shown different forms of sentence openers, the second type of English sentence opening. In the third session, they exercised what they had been taught in first and second sessions. In other words, they suggested to each sentence different openings including subject cluster and sentence openers; they were sometimes required to add some elements.

The participants of this study are second year LMD students at the department of English at Kasdi Merbah University. The sample is a group consisting of thirty (30) students that were selected conveniently because of their accessibility and proximity. All of them have learned English as a foreign language for more than seven years. The participants were asked to write a paragraph on two different topics in no more than ten lines before and after the training sessions, and their pre- and post- test written productions were analyzed at sentential level to obtain information about sentence opening to measure whether teaching them different types of sentence opening enhances their writing performance. In fact, only participants who submitted their paragraphs in both pre- and post-tests were included in the sample, and hence their written productions were analyzed.

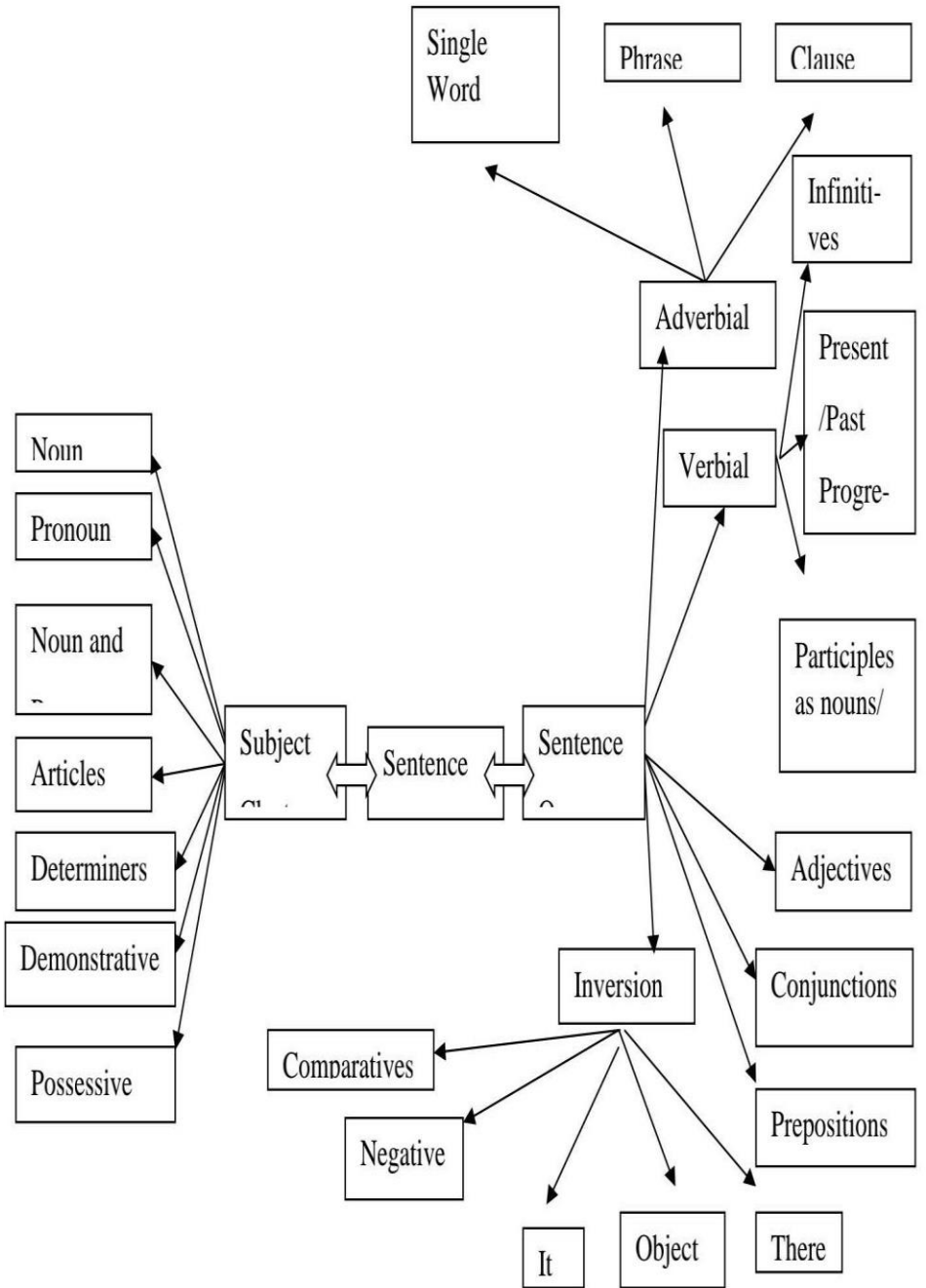


Figure (1). Types of Sentence Openings

### 3. Results and Discussion

The sentences which appeared in the essays (from 1 to 30) were analyzed according to their sentence opening. The analysis of the data yielded the following results.

#### 3.1. Number of Sentences

The data consists of thirty written texts of thirty students. The written essays were first analyzed in terms of the total number of sentences included in each piece. The results are summarized in Table 6.

**Table (1). Total Number of Sentences**

	Pre-test	Post-test
<b>Number of sentences</b>	252	595

Table 6 shows that the total number of sentences extracted from the participants' pre-test is 252 whereas the number of sentences in the post-test is 595. Though the results shown in the table reveal that number of sentences in post-test has increased in comparison with the pre-test, the focus in this study is to explore their sentence variation in terms of sentence opening.

#### 3.2. Sentence Openings

The participants' written paragraphs are analyzed in terms of sentence variation focusing on sentence opening including subject cluster and sentence openers. The results obtained from both the pre-test and the post-test are compared

in each phase to see whether the teaching intervention improves the participants' writing performance.

### 3.3. Subject cluster

The sentences appearing in the participants' written paragraphs from both pre- and post-tests were analyzed in terms of opening, shedding light on subject cluster, and its different forms. The findings are presented in details in Table 7.

**Table (2). Subject Cluster as Sentence Opening**

	<b>Pre-test</b>		<b>Post-test</b>	
	<b>Percentage</b>		<b>Percentage</b>	
<b>Noun</b>	96	23.30%	63	14.38%
<b>Pronoun</b>	65	15.77%	42	09.58%
<b>Noun and pronoun</b>	46	11.16%	32	07.30%
<b>Article</b>	56	13.59%	40	09.13%
<b>Determiner</b>	22	05.33%	16	03.65%
<b>Demonstrative</b>	10	02.42%	13	02.96%
<b>Possessive</b>	18	04.36%	12	02.73%
<b>Total number</b>	183	75.93%	220	49.73%

According to the results shown in Table 7 and Figure 2, in the pre-test the participants begin 183 sentences (out of 252 sentences) with subject cluster, that is to say, 75.93%. Specifically, the findings demonstrate that noun (23.30%), pronoun (15.77%), a combined (noun and pronoun) subject (11.16%) and articles (13.59%) are the most preferred forms of the subject clusters for the participants. In post-test, the number of sentences starting with subject cluster is 220 (out

of 595 sentences), that is to say 49.73%. Accordingly, though the priority is still given to noun (14.38%), pronoun (09.58%), combined (noun and pronoun) subject (07.30%) and article (09.13%) at post-test, the number of sentences starting with subject cluster is reduced compared to the findings attained in the pre-test, except for the case of sentences commencing with demonstratives: they increased from 02.42% (pre-test) to 02.96% (post-test).

### 3.4.Sentence openers

The sentences appearing in the participants' written paragraphs from both pre- and post-tests are analyzed in terms of opening shedding light on subject cluster, particularly its different forms. The findings are presented in details in Table 8.

**Table (3). Subject Cluster as Sentence Openings**

		Pre-test		Post-test	
		Percentage		Percentage	
<b>Adverbial</b>	Single word	11	02.66%	22	05.02%
	Phrase	02	00.48%	13	02.96%
	Clause	04	00.96%	20	04.56%
	Infinitive	08	01.94%	17	03.88%
<b>Verbal</b>	Past/ present participle	03	00.72%	10	02.28%
	Past/ present participle functioning as adjective and noun	08	01.94%	14	03.19%
<b>Adjective</b>		11	02.66%	21	04.79%

<b>Conjunction</b>		09	02.18%	16	03.65%
<b>Preposition</b>		12	02.91%	18	04.10%
	There	10	02.42%	22	05.02%
	It	08	01.94%	19	04.33%
<b>Inversion</b>	Negative	05	01.21%	07	01.59%
	Object	06	01.45%	10	02.28%
	Comparative	02	00.48%	11	02.51%
<b>Total</b>					
<b>number of sentences</b>		69	24.07%	375	50.27%

The results presented in Table 8 and Figure 3 show that at the pre-test 69 sentences (out of 252 sentences) in the participants' written paragraphs are started with sentence openers, corresponding to 24.07%. Particularly, the findings reveal that participants employ to some extent different forms of sentence opener in their writing pieces, but they give preference to inversion with percentage 07.50% (total of all forms of inversion) to initiate their sentences the majority of which started with "there" and "it". At the post-test, the number of sentences started with sentence openers is 375 (out of 595), corresponding to 50.27% ; it seems that it is increased than it was in the pre-test 99( out of 412). Though there is a considerable difference as to the percentage of using of all forms of sentence openers between pre- and post-test, the participants still prefer inversion with the percentage 15.73% (total of all forms of inversion), and the majority of their sentences start with "there" and "it".

The analysis of the participants' paragraphs shows the big difference in terms of the results obtained from both pre-



test and post-test as to their sentence variation in terms of openings including subject cluster and sentence openers. In the pre-test, though EFL students expressed their ideas on the topics they selected, they frequently prefer the same sentence structures in which subject cluster is the most prevalent sentence opening. This preference to subject cluster demonstrates that the participants' writing style is still immature. In the post-test, after they were exposed to the teaching material in the training sessions, the participants' frequently use of subject cluster to start their sentences is diminished, as they use other openers to vary the opening of their sentences. The participants' preference of subject cluster decreased and different forms of sentence openers are existed in their writing performance. In other words, they start their sentences not only with subject cluster but also with sentence openers. This indicates that the participants' writing becomes more advanced than before. This can be interpreted by the positive impact of teaching the participants the different forms of sentence opening.



#### **4. Conclusion**

At the end of this study, we would say that teaching EFL students the different forms and patterns of sentence openings in order to develop their writing style at sentential level has been proved to be very fruitful. The focus is to enable them vary their sentences in terms of introduction as it is a feature of qualified writing. The findings of this study showed that there is positive impact of the use of serial sentence strategy on students' writing performance. Notably, the use of serial sentence opening strategy to teaching EFL students different forms of sentence opening is beneficial as it helps them vary their sentence openings and, hence, improve their writing. This study entails two implications. First, EFL learners have to receive training in the different forms of sentence openings so that they can vary their sentences not only in terms of structure and length but also sentence starting. Second, teachers should raise their students' awareness of the importance of sentence opening variation in writing through more practice .



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