

Using Rods to Teach X-Word Grammar

Linda Ann Kunz

"Rods" are familiar to many ESL teachers as a valuable resource for using The Silent Way, an approach to teaching languages that enables students to begin speaking from hour one, level 1, while their teacher is largely silent. The Silent Way rods, properly called Algebricks, are available at a very reasonable cost from Educational Solutions, Inc. in New York (212-674-2988), which is the organization founded by Dr. Caleb Gattegno, who created The Silent Way.

X-word grammar is the classroom application of Dr. Robert L. Allen's Sector Analysis, a system of linguistic analysis that sees languages as a relation of **form and function**, which translates to **construction types and positions**, or sectors. In the 1970's teachers who were using both the Silent Way and x-word grammar began to teach the basic sentence patterns of English with rods, and "grammar" got to be easier, more fun. There are, wonderfully, fewer than ten different construction types in English—trunks, clauses, phrases, clusters, and a few others—and the ways in which they are arranged to make written English sentences—all written English sentences, in fact—are tremendously orderly. The most complex sentence can be "peeled down" level by level, with rods alone, from its surface structure to its depth, showing all its construction types and the positions they fill.

ESL teachers have been most interested in the surface structure. What do we need to make a sentence at all? How can a student test whether a group of words is a sentence? Can fragments and run-on sentences be located and corrected? How many sentence patterns does English have? Does punctuation derive from sentence structure? What's the structural difference between *and*, *but*, *so* and *furthermore*, *however*, *therefore*? How can students condense and recombine their sentences to increase variety and sophistication?

1. What is a sentence?

Ask students to tell something they did yesterday, like "I visited my sister-in-law." As soon as you're sure a sentence has no "extras" like when or why and only one main verb, show a blue rod (a **trunk**), and ask them to repeat the sentence. Then turn it over, and ask them to make a yes-no question ("Did I visit my sister-in-law?" or "Did you visit your sister-in-law?"). Tell students:

This is the basic unit of an English sentence. It's called a **trunk**, like the trunk of a tree, because it's the one part of a sentence you can't do without. And it's the structure that will turn into a yes-no question. Let's try some more.

Get some more trunks from students and have each speaker make the yes-no question.

2. Trunk and Shifter

Ask students to tell another thing they did recently, but this time add which day they did it. This should give you sentences like "Yesterday I stayed home" and "I went shopping with my cousin last Saturday." Now you need to decide which construction type students are using and whether they are putting this extra "when" information before or after the trunk. Here are the most common possibilities:

red blue

Yesterday I went shopping with my sister.

blue red

I went shopping with my sister yesterday.

lavender blue

Last Saturday my cousin José came over.

blue lavender

My cousin José came over last Saturday.

yellow blue

On Wednesday I had to go to the dentist.

orange blue

Whenever I go there, I get nervous.

Yesterday is a single word, and since it gives more than just grammar information, it is considered a content word, and it is red. So the first example is a content word (*Yesterday*) in the position FRONT SHIFTER (F), which gives us the sentence pattern FT. The second example is the same sentence with its shifter moved to the END position (TE).

The next example begins with *Last Saturday*, which is a noun and its modifier. Any combination of noun + modifier(s) is called a noun cluster, so this is still the pattern FRONT SHIFTER AND TRUNK (FT), but now a noun cluster fills the front shifter position. Once again the following example is the reverse, TE.

The fifth and sixth examples begin with a phrase and a clause, which are, respectively, a preposition and its object and an includer and its trunk. Like anything you can find in the front shifter position, the phrase and the clause will readily shift to the end position. See the list *Introducers* for a complete list of prepositions and includers.

Ask the student who volunteers each sentence to repeat it by "reading" it as you hold up the appropriate rod combination. Then switch the rods and ask the student to "read" it again. Students do this easily, and you have a chance to underscore two beautiful facts: (1) the three patterns looked at so far—T, FT and TE—are already close to half of all the sentence patterns of written English; and (2) the shifter and trunk combination represents the favorite way English writers put together dependence and independence. Students are thrilled to see how the dependent shifters and the independent trunks need each other to complete the meaning of the sentence. The grammar allows a trunk to stand by itself, but semantics looks for more. This is a good place to end a lesson.

3. Trunk plus Trunk

ESL students are often troubled by run-on sentences (also called "comma splices," an even less comprehensible term than "run-on."). This is one of the most solvable ESL problems. Ask students to tell you two different things, say, about the weather. You're looking for two different subjects on the same topic. You might get something like "It's very warm," and "The sun is shining." Put one blue rod right on top of another and ask a student to repeat the two trunks. Then ask, "So what punctuation can I put between these? Just a comma? That's a run-on sentence—two yes-no questions with nothing but a comma in between. You need more than just a comma if you want to keep the two trunks together." Put a white rod between the two blue rods:

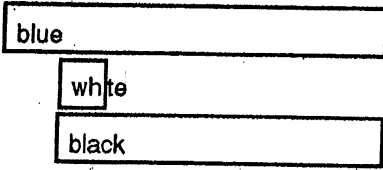
blue
white
blue

*It's very warm,
and
the sun is shining.*

TRUNK PLUS TRUNK (T+T) is a very popular pattern, especially with two different subjects. The white rod in between represents a joiner, which is a connector that joins two structures of the same construction type. (I like to relate T+T to husband and wife whereas FT and TE are more like parent and child.) Joiners are simple and few in number: *and, but, so, yet* and semi-colon (;).

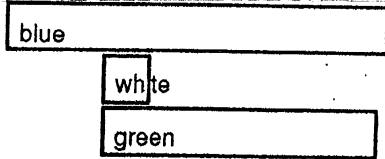
4. Trunk with Two Parts

If you want to say two things about the same subject, there is a better pattern than T+T.



*I stayed home all day
and
wrote letters to my family in Perú.*

TRUNK WITH TWO PARTS (T=) is either one subject and two predicates (which means two x-words and two main verbs) or one subject, one x-word and two main verbs. In the first example, black represents a second predicate. Predicate is a position which must be filled, but it has no flexibility. It comes right after the subject in nearly all written sentences, and its filler is always the construction type predicate, which always begins with an x-word.

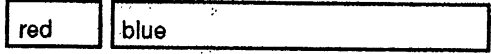


*I was thinking about happy days
and
feeling a little homesick.*

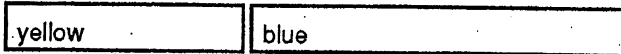
The second example has one x-word, *was*, and two "verb-plus" structures we'll call verbals. Verbals are simply predicates minus their x-words, and the "subtraction" of the x-words gives them tremendous flexibility. A verbal like *feeling a little homesick* can also be used in subject position, object position, shifter position and, as we'll see shortly, insert position. And in spoken language, all it needs is a rising intonation to become a question! *Feeling a little homesick?* T= can, of course, be extended to three or more parts, as in *Jack gets up at 7:00 a.m., takes a shower and shaves.*

5. LT: An Overused Pattern

Many ESL writers overuse linkers like *Therefore, Moreover, As a result* and *On the other hand* and sometimes use them between trunks instead of connecting with joiners.



Suddenly, the phone rang.

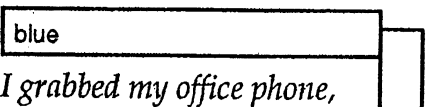


In fact, two phones rang at once!

Linkers come along with their own commas except one group of handy linkers called sequence signals, like *Then, Next, Later* and *The following day*. Linkers tend not to shift because their whole purpose is to link the meaning of the sentence they begin to the meaning of a previous sentence.

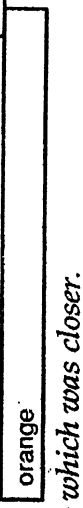
6. TI: An Underused Pattern

The last of the seven basic sentence patterns of English is extremely common in sophisticated writing, but it is rare in speech and acquired slowly by ESL writers.

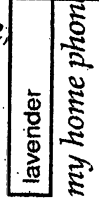


I grabbed my office phone,

INSERTS, in the pattern TRUNK WITH INSERT (TI), can be words, clusters, phrases, verbals or clauses, and they turn up most frequently between subjects and predicates or tagged on at the ends of other structures.



The other one,



kept ringing.

Inserts always bring along a pair of punctuation marks (two commas, two dashes, a comma and a period, a colon and a period, or a pair of parentheses or brackets), and they don't shift because they want to stay next to the thing they tell extra information about.

7. Patterns and Punctuation

The only punctuation summary shorter than the one you are about to read is "When in doubt, leave it out."

Commas		No Commas	Semi-Colon	Colon
Lists	LT	T	T;T	T:list
T+T	TI	T=	T;LT	
FT (w/long F)		TE	Lists of items w/commas	

Does this mean that students immediately begin to punctuate their compositions correctly? No. But it does mean (1) that the seeming arbitrariness of punctuation—or worse, the idea that it is related to "pauses"—is gone; and (2) that you have something students already know to work with. For example, orange-blue takes a comma; blue-orange does not.

8. Further Study

Both *X-Word Grammar Intermediate* and *X-Word Grammar Advanced* have chapters on sentence patterns, sentence variety and punctuation, as well as specific teacher/tutor notes on using rods to teach and practice skills related to syntax. Each one also has appendices summarizing the patterns and all the construction types with their corresponding rods.

9. Your Own Practice

Get a box of rods from Educational Solutions. Then take any sentences—even *New York Times* or comparable sentences—and try to analyze their surface structure with rods. Look for trunks, shifters, inserts and linkers, and let punctuation help you. If you struggle, try these exercises first, then check your answers on the bottom of this sheet. **Instructions:** Read the trunks below and try to combine them as follows:

- Make one sentence with any connectors you'd like: joiners, includers, prepositions.
- Make one sentence again, but this time use no joiners or includers and only one subject and one x-word.

Joe Biggs was disappointed.

He was the captain of the team.

He hadn't made a touchdown.

He walked out of the room.

He slammed the door behind him.

He didn't give a thought about his teammates.

Hint: Keep a hidden *did*. You can omit words and change the form of main verbs.

10. Questions, Suggestions and Complaints

All comments and questions welcome! Contact Linda Kunz in New York: 212-873-9271.

a. [B was disappointed because he was the captain of the team, but he hadn't made a touchdown, so he walked out of the room and slammed the door behind him without a thought about his teammates. [blue-orange-white-blue-white-blue-white-black-yellow].
b. [Disappointed at not making a touchdown, [B, the captain of the team, walked out of the room slamming the door behind him without a thought about his teammates. [green-blue/lavender-green-yellow].