

UNFINISHED SENTENCES:
A DIAGNOSTIC TOOL FOR THE FIRST DAY OF CLASS*

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Teachers quickly learn that the first day in any class is of critical importance. Despite this understanding, most of the teacher's time and thought goes into syllabus planning for the semester and formulating the overall course goals. Specific day-to-day objectives do not receive the same attention. As a result, the first day of class is often treated as a 'lost day' and the time is devoted to checking class lists and going over course or text requirements. The remainder of the time is often spent on marginally useful introductory or time-filler activities, often including asking each student to tell the class his/her name, country, and why he/she is studying English. Even if a student doesn't know much English he/she is able to automatically recite these facts and that is how they're expressed - with little feeling or interest. Once this is accomplished the class is either dismissed or the remainder of the time is filled with a game or an activity which under other circumstances and with better planning could be a valuable activity, but in this case is used simply to fill time.

Often a teacher divides students into small groups or assigns partners, usually the student sitting next to him/her, with the purpose of conducting mini-interviews. After a designated period of time students then report back to the class what it is they learned about another member of the class. Since generally the same questions have been asked of everyone, the information reported is the usual name, language, country, marital status and field of interest, all of which is rather dry. After the second or third report they all begin to blend into each other. The need for introductions of some sort is not in question but rather the way in which to do this and the amount of time which should be devoted to it.

The first day of class should really be taken as a unique opportunity to create the proper class atmosphere and assess, as specifically as possible, the needs and abilities of individual students. As teachers we

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know how important it is to get off on the right foot. The first day of any class is critical in terms of setting the tone, creating impressions, establishing guidelines - in other words, bringing about the proper or desired class atmosphere. Achieving these objectives is only complicated by the teacher who regards the first day of class as a 'lost day' and THEN expects to set a serious tone on the first 'real day' of class. We can't retrace our steps and suddenly become more strict, expect more of our students and require a more sober approach. Unfortunately, teachers are often labeled 'easy' or 'hard' the first day of class and it's difficult to break out of this mold later on. These labels reflect, in part, the teacher's organization, confidence and control. One way to reflect this image is to use all the time allotted the first day of class (not to dismiss the class after 15 or 20 minutes) and to use it as effectively as possible.

An excellent way to accomplish the first-day objectives, creating the proper or desired class atmosphere and assessing the needs and abilities of individual students, is to use a technique called 'Unfinished Sentences' whereby the teacher provides students with lists of unfinished sentences or sentence stems, to be completed orally and/or in writing. By carefully constructing a list of sentences this technique can be both an introductory activity and a diagnostic tool.

First, it accommodates the need to accomplish introductions by revealing personal factors. Students complete the sentences with whatever comes to mind and thus reveal in certain sentences, as much or as little as THEY choose about their attitudes, interests, likes, dislikes, goals, etc. It's important to recognize that THE STUDENT chooses how much he/she wishes to share with the group.

Second, this technique enables the teacher to gather information for immediate evaluation and make quick, albeit tentative, adjustments to the syllabus. For diagnostic purposes, sentence stems LIKELY to produce particular grammatical patterns should be used. What those particular patterns are is determined by the syllabus or, if available, by performance objectives for the specific level one is teaching. To do this the teacher must first identify the grammatical patterns students should have mastered in previous levels. Second, the teacher must construct a list of unfinished sentences that are likely to evoke these grammatical patterns and demonstrate whether or not a student has mastered them. It's important to be flexible with this list. If a particular sentence doesn't elicit the desired response, change it. Revise the list and improve it from class to class. The more one fine-tunes these lists for different levels the more likely one is to obtain the desired information. Some grammatical points obviously lend themselves to this

much better than others. For example, if an unfinished sentence begins: "Yesterday I . . .", it will necessarily elicit a verb in the past tense.

As previously stated, these sentences can be completed orally and/or in writing. I have used variations depending on the level, the size of the class and the amount of time available.

One possibility is for the teacher to write the unfinished sentences on the board, one at a time and then whip around the room calling on students to complete the sentence aloud with whatever comes to mind. (Chairs should be arranged in a semi-circle if possible.) I suggest that the sentences be written on the board one at a time in order to focus and limit attention to that one item. If the sentences are written all at once it encourages students, once they've given their answer, to begin to think of the next response and not listen to the responses of others.

Another possibility is for each student to write out all the sentences before the oral whip begins. This variation allows time for thought and often produces longer sentences than those that are only responded to orally.

When a class is very large I have the students complete a set of unfinished sentences in writing which I collect and then do the oral whip with a comparable set of sentences. If a group is small I can keep a mental record of errors fairly easily but in a large group I lose track of which patterns present problems for which people. It would be a mistake for the teacher to make notes as students respond since this would be inhibiting and could destroy whatever momentum had been achieved. Even if a teacher can remember errors in a fairly large group, having written responses can serve as a back-up and provides additional information.

Another variation is for students to write out their sentences and then break into pairs or trios and discuss their finished sentences. This approach serves as an ice-breaker by allowing every student to speak with at least one other student that first day. A common first-day activity I mentioned before, interviewing a partner, accomplishes this as well but does not elicit the same high interest responses and discussions. In this variation where 2 or 3 students discuss the finished sentences I also think it's important to have written responses to similar sentences as support. In addition to serving as a useful tool for the teacher, the written responses serve the same purpose that an end-of-the-week quiz usually does; evidence to the student that he or she is properly placed. Having this information on paper the first day is beneficial. It certainly should not be the only criterion for moving a student up or down but it can be valuable information

to use in conjunction with other opinions or information; the more we have to go on and the earlier we have it the better able we are to insure proper placement.

The "Unfinished Sentence" technique then is both a diagnostic tool and an introductory activity. It provides a way to profitably use the first day of class by:

- 1) Revealing specific information about levels of proficiency within the class.
- 2) Providing teacher and class with interesting or unusual information about individual interests, attitudes, etc.
- 3) Giving every student several opportunities to speak or write.
- 4) Creating a supportive, stimulating atmosphere.

EXPLANATORY NOTES

1. The sample sentence stems which follow are general examples for low, intermediate and high level classes. When using this technique in class, however, the unfinished sentences should be constructed for a particular level.
2. It is important to note that students would not be given a sheet of paper with unfinished sentences on it. The sentence stems would be dictated or written on the board.
3. The information directly across from each group of sentence stems indicates the desired grammatical pattern and is for your information only. It does not enter into the student activity at all.

SAMPLE
UNFINISHED SENTENCES
- LOW LEVEL -

GRAMMATICAL PATTERNS

*At 10:00 class _____

I always _____

SIMPLE PRESENT
(verbs other than 'be')

*I come to class _____

*We study English _____

ADVERBIALS OF PLACE
& TIME

Last night I _____

Last year my family _____

SIMPLE PAST

*Pine Hall is on _____

*We are speaking _____

ARTICLES

*I'm a student at _____

Let's not _____

Would you please _____

REQUESTS

Would you like a _____

The supermarket sells _____

COUNT AND NON-COUNT
NOUNS

Sometimes I'm too _____

When I arrived in San Francisco I was very _____

USE OF 'very', 'too',
'enough'

I think I'm old enough _____

*recommended for written exercises only

GRAMMATICAL PATTERNS

I can _____

Next summer I might _____

Children shouldn't _____

MODAL AUXILIARIES

SAMPLE
UNFINISHED SENTENCES
- INTERMEDIATE LEVEL -

GRAMMATICAL PATTERNS

I have already _____

PRESENT PERFECT

I haven't ever _____

Next May I will have visited _____

FUTURE PERFECT

I had lived here for a week when _____

PAST PERFECT

If I go to Lake Tahoe _____

If I didn't have class today _____

CONDITIONALS

If I were President _____

I know that _____

EMBEDDED STATEMENTS

I imagine that _____

I should be more _____

COMPARATIVE FORMS

I was happier _____

The best _____

SUPERLATIVE FORMS

The most _____

I would rather _____

I don't have to _____

MODAL AUXILIARIES

In my country a driver must _____

SAMPLE
UNFINISHED SENTENCES
- ADVANCED LEVEL -

GRAMMATICAL PATTERNS

It's not easy for me _____

INFINITIVE PHRASES

Most fathers want their sons _____

I always avoid _____

GERUND PHRASES

I can't keep _____

Everyone occasionally wishes _____

WISHES
(Unreal conditionals)

Whether we like it or not _____

REAL CONDITIONALS

If I need help _____

I'll stay home tonight _____

If the weather is nice this week-end _____

SUBORDINATORS
('if', 'unless', 'because')

I chose this University because _____

In personality I'm like _____

ADJECTIVES
(Comparisons)

Some people say I look like _____

I would have _____

MODAL AUXILIARIES
(emphasis on past forms)

I could have _____