

# Developing a Computational Tool for Learning and Testing the Simple Sentence Patterns in English: An ESL and Communicative Approach

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## ABSTRACT

According to Anne Seaton and Y.H. Mew (2007), 'a sentence is a group of words that expresses a complete thought; and it must have a subject and a verb'. This is the basic idea of a sentence in English language and it is called a *simple sentence* which is the first type of sentence one learns to speak and write. In English, a simple sentence is formed by five sentence elements known as *clause elements*. These elements which are *Subject (S)*, *Verb (V)*, *Object (O)*, *Complement (C)*, and *Adverbial (A)*, work together to express a central idea of the sentence. According to Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk (2001), a simple sentence may appear in any of these seven combinations or patterns: SV (Subject + Verb), SVdO (Subject + Verb + direct Object), SVC (Subject + Verb + Complement), SVA (Subject + Verb + Adverbial), SViOdO (Subject + Verb + indirect Object + direct Object), SVdOC (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Complement), and SVdOA (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Adverbial). By studying these sentence patterns, a student learning English as a Second Language can put a strong foundation for the basic written and spoken English knowledge in his or her educational career. When English language development of ESL students is thought of, many factors like *socio economic background of family, lack of skillful teachers at schools, traditional educational system, lack of parental support*, etc. hinder the progress of the development. Having considered this fact in mind, this article attempts to develop a simple, but effective computational tool for learning and testing the simple sentence patterns in English for the students of ESL to promote their written and communicative competence as they need a set of language skills to root their educational success in the current competitive world of work.

**Keywords:** simple sentence, clause elements, ESL students, sentence patterns, computational tool, communicative competence, language skills, world of work.

## Introduction:

Now, English has become the predominant language for communication in the world. Communication is one of the most critical skills required for everyone in any stage. In the case of the students of ESL, communication is as important as any of the ways of expressing themselves in the English speaking environment. It assumes even more significance when a language such as English is taught as a second language. In Sri Lanka and India, although English is taught as a second language, it is used as the medium of instruction in all the higher educational institutions except one or two functioning in the respective mother tongue. Moreover, now-a-days a large number of students from India and Sri Lanka travel to many countries for their higher education. Thus, English language is inevitable and teaching it to them is compulsory; but, teaching English is now a challenge. Though it is challenging or inspiring, the current technologies like computer, telecommunication, etc. have made the task

easier, interesting, and rewarding. Further, the use of technology to teach a language such as English is indispensable at this current age and stage in India and Sri Lanka. Thus, in this paper, the computer technology, i.e. software technology is utilized in learning and testing English, especially the simple sentence patterns to the students of ESL; and the study involves the explanation of the patterns of simple sentence for the black and white process and communication, and most of the sentences in the exercises are based on the English language and its aspects which help these students not only develop their written and communicative power but raise their general knowledge about English and the academic performance, as well.

### **Objectives:**

- To provide the students of ESL the knowledge in the basic patterns of simple sentence in English for their day-to-day educational follow-up.
- To enhance their writing and speaking ability by gaining the required knowledge in the simple sentence patterns.

### **The Definition of a Simple Sentence:**

Every grammarian, it seems, defines a simple sentence in his own way. A simple sentence is a complete unit of meaning which contains a subject and a verb, followed, if necessary, by other words which make up the meaning (L.G. Alexander, 1990). Sentences have a structure described in terms of clauses; and a sentence composed of one clause is called a *simple sentence*, and its structure is the same as that of a clause (Jackson, 1982). A simple sentence contains one main clause and no embedded or subordinate clauses in its structure (Demirezen, 1998), i.e. a simple sentence has one independent clause. Any independent clause can stand alone with a full meaning as a sentence; and it has a subject and a verb with which a complete thought is expressed. From these definitions, it is clear that a simple sentence has a single clause in it. Further, to begin identifying a simple sentence, it is necessary to understand its building blocks or elements, known as *clause elements*.

### **Claus elements:**

There are five clause elements to analyze the simple sentence or clause in English language. They are Subject, Verb, Object (direct and indirect), Complement, and Adverbial.

### **Subject:**

A subject is a clause element about which something is said in the clause or sentence. It normally consists of a noun phrase (noun and its modifiers, but this isn't always the case and for this paper the simple subjects are considered.) and comes before the verb phrase. Thus, in the sentences *The children play happily*, *He got the promotion*, and *suddenly, they could hear footsteps*; *The children*, *He*, and *they* are the subjects, preceding the verb phrases *play*, *got*, and *could hear*. In these sentences, the subjects typically represent the *doer*.

### **Verb:**

A verb is a clause element which shows an action or a state of being. Verbs are divided into two classes: Lexical verb (main verb) such as *study*, *concentrate*, *play*, etc. and Auxiliary (helping verb) verb. Auxiliary verbs can be, further, divided into two categories: Primary auxiliary like *am*, *is*, *are*, etc. and Modal auxiliary like *can*, *could*, *will*, etc. Primary auxiliaries consist of the manifestations of the forms of *to be*, *do*, and *have*. All these manifestations except *being* can function as a main verb in a simple sentence. Thus, in the sentences *Rama studies hard* and *She is a teacher*; *studies* and *is* are the main verbs respectively.

### **Object:**

Object is a clause element which normally follows the main verb in a simple active clause. In terms of meaning, the object is often identified with the person, thing, and so on that is affected by the action described by the verb. Thus, the object typically represents the *doee*. An object is usually a noun phrase, a pronoun, and others like *final clause*, *non-final clause*, etc., but for this paper the simple objects are considered. Thus, in *Goats eat grass* and *She bought a bottle opener*; *grass* and *a bottle opener* are the objects of the sentences. A useful way to identify an object is to consider it as an answer to the question with *What* or *Whom*: *What do goats eat?* (*grass*) and *What did she buy?* (*a bottle opener*).

When an active clause has a passive equivalent, the object of the active clause is equivalent to the subject of the passive clause. For example:

- Goats eat grass. (*grass* is the *object* of the *active clause*)
- Grass is eaten by goats. (*grass* is the *subject* of the *passive clause*)

A simple active clause may have an *indirect object* in addition to a direct object: in *Dr.R.Saranya is teaching her sons linguistics*; *her sons* is the indirect object (representing those who are indirectly affected by the action, in this case the beneficiaries) and *linguistics* is the direct object. Indirect objects express the animate entity to or for whom an action is performed or addressed. They are indirect because they are neither the instigator of the action (the subject) nor that which is directly affected or created as a result of the action (the direct object).

**Note:** *An indirect object always supposes the presence of a direct object in the same sentence, but direct objects can occur without indirect objects.*

### **Complement:**

A complement is a clause element which is added to another component or constituent in order to *complete* the meaning or structure associated with that component. Two complements can be talked of: *subject complement* and *object complement*. A subject complement provides the additional information about the subject of a clause. It may be a noun phrase, adjective phrase, etc. In *Chomsky is a syntactician*, *He is also interested in politics*, and *She felt satisfied*; the noun phrase *a syntactician* and the adjective phrases *interested in politics* and *satisfied* are the subject complements in the sentences. An object complement follows the object and describes what the object refers to. It may be a noun phrase, adjective phrase, etc. For example, in *They have elected her the president* and *The committee has made her satisfied*; the noun phrase *the president* and the adjective phrase *satisfied* are the object complements.

A clause with complement typically has no passive equivalent. Complements usually, though not always, follow the verb *to be*, known as *copula verb* or *linking verb*. Other *linking verbs* are words such as *become*, *seem*, *appear*, *look*, *feel*, *smell*, *taste*, *remain*, *sound*, etc.

### **Adverbial:**

An adverbial is a clause element which adds extra meaning about the event or state of affairs described in the sentence. Despite their name, adverbials do not necessarily contain adverbs. They may consist of *an adverb phrase*, as in *She left very suddenly*, *a prepositional phrase* as in *She looked at the stars through the window*, or of *a noun phrase* in *She had a terrible*

dream *last night*. An adverbial functions as an adverb and modifies verb, adjective, or even other adverb. It usually answers to questions *How?*, *Where?*, *When?*, etc. as in She is smiling *happily*, They showed the film *in the school*, and The mason completed the work *yesterday*.

Adverbials are normally optional and they do not harm the sense or meaning of the clause though they are removed. The adverbial *suddenly* is optional in *The students left suddenly*. Further, adverbials are typically mobile, i.e. they can occur in more than one position in the clause, as in She left *suddenly* ~ She *suddenly* left ~ *Suddenly*, she left.

### **The simple sentence (clause) patterns:**

A systematic meaningful arrangement of words in a sentence is known as a sentence or clause pattern. A simple sentence has one independent clause that can stand on its own with a complete meaning. According to Sidney Greenbaum and Randolph Quirk (2001), a simple sentence may appear in any of the following combinations or configurations or patterns.

#### **1. SV (Subject + Verb):**

At the heart of every simple sentence in English is almost the Subject-Verb relationship. The subject tells who or what about the verb. A verb, instead, shows an action or a state of being. For instance:

- The plane crashed.
- The water is flowing.

Simple sentences with SV pattern or structure are very common in English. They are formed with intransitive verbs which do not require an object.

#### **2. SVdO (Subject + Verb + direct Object):**

This is the simplest and most basic sentence pattern in English sentence. Some verbs require a direct object which is generally a noun phrase or a pronoun that receives the action of the verb. An object as a single element follows the verb immediately.

- Lexicography studies the lexicon.
- Siva and Arul love their mother.

Here, passive voices are possible for the above sentences as they depict the direct objects.

#### **3. SVC (Subject + Verb + Complement):**

Complements are of two types; subject complement and object complement. In this pattern, subject complement is involved. The subject complement describes what the subject refers to as *excellent* in *Her ideas are excellent*. The subject complement, which normally follows the forms of *to be*, *become*, *remain*, *seem*, *feel*, *look*, *grow*, *turn*, *appear*, *taste*, *sound*, *smell*, etc., may consist of an adjective (phrase) or a noun (phrase) as *happy* in *She is happy* and *a profound thinker* in *My professor is a profound thinker*. Another two examples are as follows:

- Elephants are big.
- Swimming is a good exercise.

#### 4. SVA (Subject + Verb + Adverbial):

As mentioned above, an adverbial is a clause element which adds extra meaning about the event or state of affairs described in the sentence. For example:

- The computer era began in 1950.
- The boys ran into the forest.

#### 5. SViOdO (Subject + Verb + indirect Object + direct Object):

This pattern is the conjugation of subject, verb, indirect object, and direct object. It is clear that some verbs, like *want*, must need an object. A number of verbs, however, usually doesn't have one object, but two. Thus, the sentence below is not complete, even though it has a subject, a verb, and one object which is in *italics*:

Nurses give *the patients* .....

We are left asking that nurses give the patients *what*? It is true that *the patients* is an object, but verbs such as *give* need a second object, too:

Nurses give *the patients tablets*.

*Tablets* is the second object which is direct - it is what the nurses give. *Patients* is the indirect object because the patients are the ones (the people that the tablets are being given to) who benefit from the tablets. This type of sentence can also be rephrased like this:

Nurses give *the patients tablets* → Nurses give *tablets to the patients*.

**Note:** If a verb like *give* takes two objects, it is called *ditransitive verb*.

#### 6. SVdOC (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Complement):

Like subjects, Objects also have complements. They occur in clauses constructed in the following pattern:

1. Books make students informative.

This sentence pattern, SVdOC, can be contrasted with the pattern, SViOdO, which we looked at above, and is given below:

2. Nurses give patients tablets.

It is true that both have two elements after the verb: a direct object and something else. In the second sentence, *patients* and *tablets* refer to completely different things. In the first sentence, *students* and *informative* refer to the same thing; and the word *informative* serves to give more information about the object, *students*: it completes it. Hence, it gets the name as *object complement*.

#### 7. SVdOA (Subject + Verb + direct Object + Adverbial):

Some verbs like *put* and *throw* take an object and then also require an adverbial. For



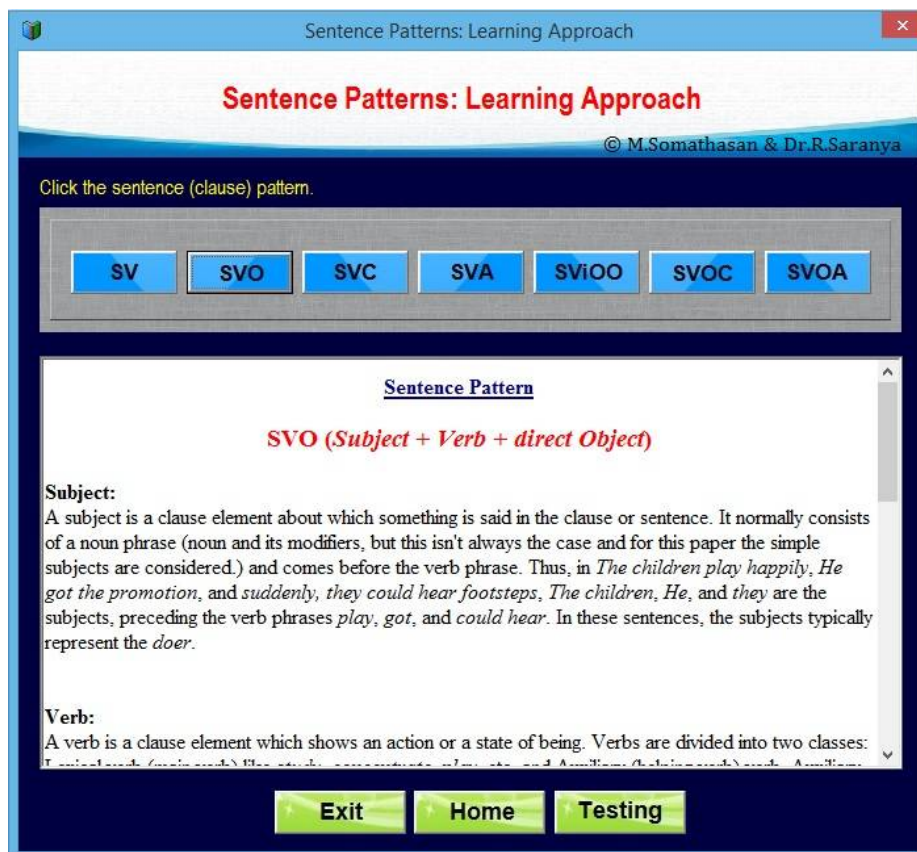
example:

- He put the eggs in the basket.
- The people threw him away.

### Methodology:

In Sri Lanka and India, English is taught as a second language and it is very important especially for the students of ESL at the secondary level in schools and for the students in the higher educational institutes. For this approach or study, the students at CAS in linguistics at Annamalai University were considered as participants as the medium of instruction at this department is English. Here, all the linguistic subjects are lectured in English. To elicit the basic existing knowledge in written and spoken English from these students, they were given some simple sentences and asked to name the patterns of them. Only 34 % of students came across the correct answers and others were struggling to find out the right ones. The asked sentences were: *The sky darkened (SV)*, *The dog bit the man (SVdO)*, *She is a teacher (SVC)*, *The sun rises in the east (SVA)*, *The minister gave the people TVs (SViOdO)*, *The people elected him the president (SVdOC)*, and *He opened it by his teeth (SVdOA)*. The result showed that the students should be given enough explanation and exercises in simple sentence patterns; and as now the computer technology plays a big role towards pedagogy, it was felt for a user-friendly learning and testing computational tool of simple sentence patterns which could help not only the poor 66% of the students but also the 34% of the successful students develop their basic written, spoken, and even their subject knowledge. Further, most of the sentences embedded in this tool have been taken from the ESL-related materials and background for the good side of the students. Moreover, the programming language, VB6, is used to design this effective tool.

### Sample visual of the developed tool



### **CONCLUSION:**

A simple sentence is the most basic type of sentence pattern that contains only one independent clause which provides the base for every day communication. The patterns of a simple sentence or clause vary. They can be *SV* as in *The ice melts*, *SVdO* like *They repaired the fence*, *SVC* as in *Siva is a student*, *SVA* like *Elephants live in pajamas*, *SViOdO* as in *The mother gave the child an apple*, *SVdOC* like *They have made him captain*, and *SVdOA* as in *She wrote the letter at the midnight*. It is clear that the skills, writing and speaking in English, are important for the students of ESL to be successful in their academic arena; and they should make use of any chances effectively that will be able to help them boost and maintain their standard of English. Therefore, when these students go through the developed tool and learn about the patterns of a simple sentence and test them, they will get the required basic knowledge in English sentence patterns. By doing so, there is no doubt that they can, self-confidently and continuously, promote their written and spoken ability in English language to great extent.

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