

Sentence Makers In English Language Teaching

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There are various types of pocket chart suitable for language teaching but probably the one that has the greatest use at the Lower Secondary level is the Sentence Maker. There is nothing new or revolutionary about using the Sentence Maker to teach English. However, it is a device that is rarely seen in classrooms in Malaysia.

The Sentence Maker is a particularly useful device for helping pupils to form written sentences. Herein lies its value. It overcomes the difficulty that many pupils have in spelling words. Instead of their having to deal with individual letters, pupils are dealing with whole words. Moreover, because pupils are able to handle the word cards and move them about, using them in different contexts while they are doing so, they learn these words and remember them. It is the involvement in a self-made writing passage which is the heart of the learning process. Thus, the Sentence Maker need not involve the student in actual writing even though he is involved in making sentences. The fact that the words have a physical reality helps many pupils who learn by handling and doing.

The Sentence Maker has other advantages:

1. Pupils learn the importance of the order in which words occur in written sentences.
2. They also learn the way that grammatical inflections such as -ing, -s and -ed are added to words.
3. Pupils are learning new words in structures and not in isolation.
4. Importantly, they learn the way in which sentences may be altered by moving some words into new positions, and through this, learn to correct mistakes and vary sentences.
5. There is also scope for making sentences which are interesting because they are the pupils' own. Generally this freer use of the Sentence Maker would come at the later stages of learning English although there is no reason why better pupils can't be given the chance to compose their own sentences for the Sentence Maker.
6. The Sentence Maker can be used for teaching all the basic language skills. It is particularly useful in composition work. More will be said on this under the section on the Uses of the Sentence Maker.
7. Finally, it is a very useful device to use in conjunction with other teaching aids, especially the flannel board, magnet board and various types of pictures.

Construction of a Sentence Maker:

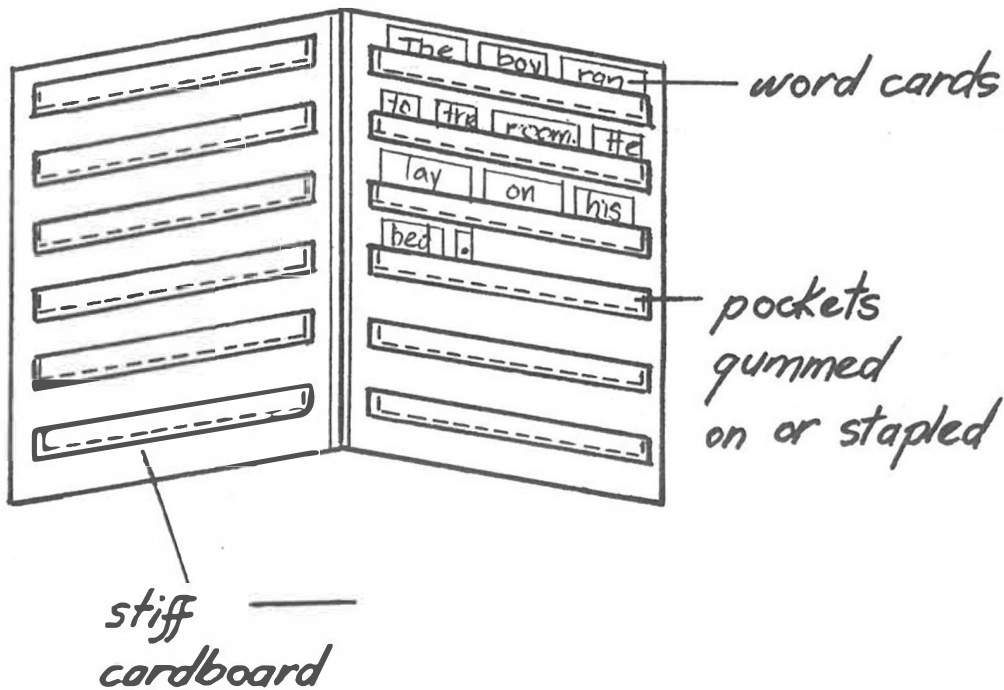
Normally sentence makers are teacher-made as they are not available on the market. However for teachers with few do-it-yourself abilities, it is suggested that a carpenter or upholsterer be given specifications for making a Sentence Maker for you.

Three designs are suggested below :

1. A Folded Cardboard Sentence Maker:

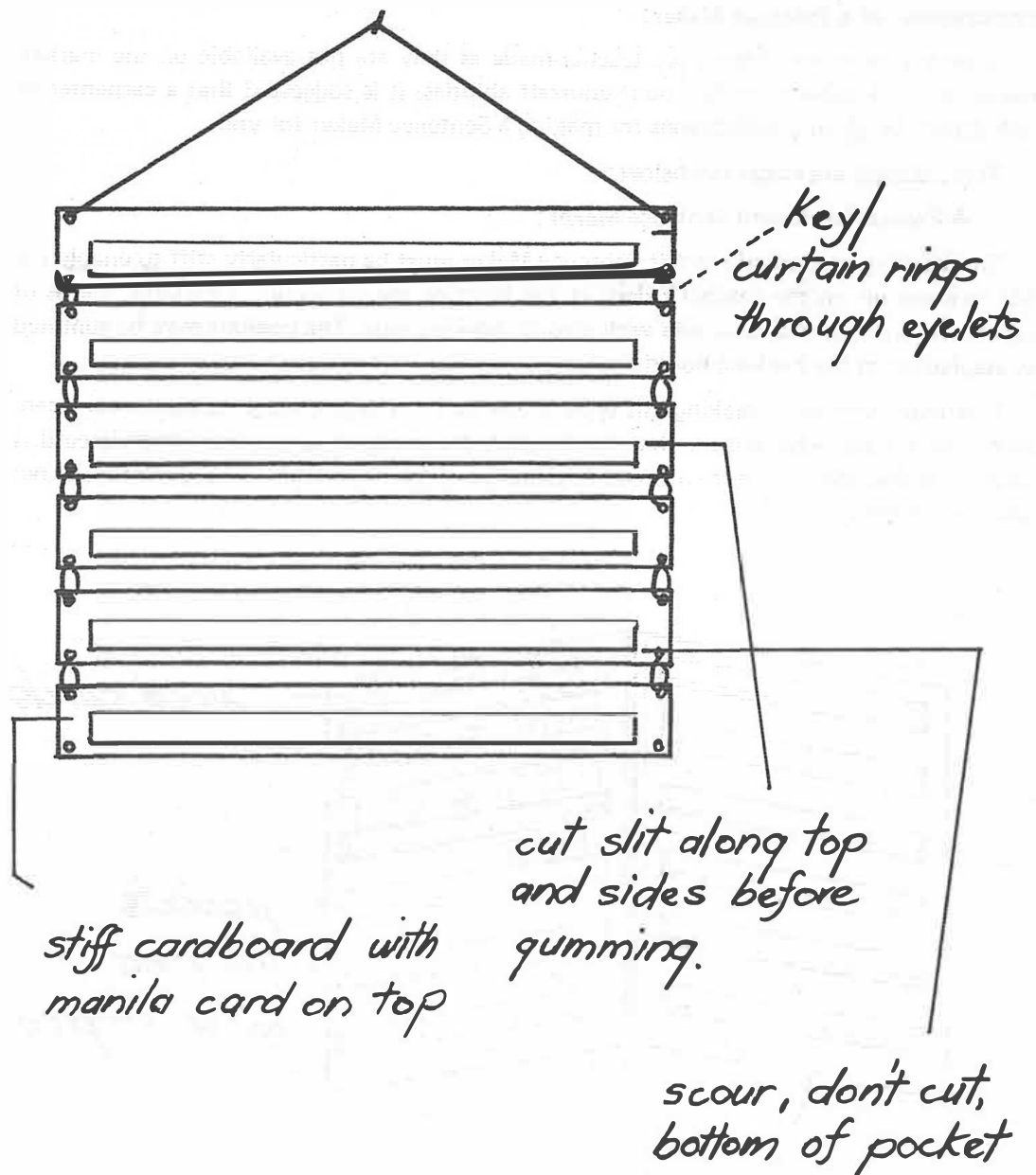
The backing cardboard for this Sentence Maker must be particularly stiff to enable the SM to stand up on the teacher's desk at the front of the classroom. Two large pieces of cardboard are joined at one side with strong masking tape. The pockets may be gummed or stapled on to the backing board.

It is important when making this type of SM that it is large enough to hold several sentences at a time. Also ensure that the pockets are made of strong card (manila card is ideal) and that they are not so broad that the word cards will be obscured when slotted into the pockets.



2. An Accordion Type Sentence Maker:

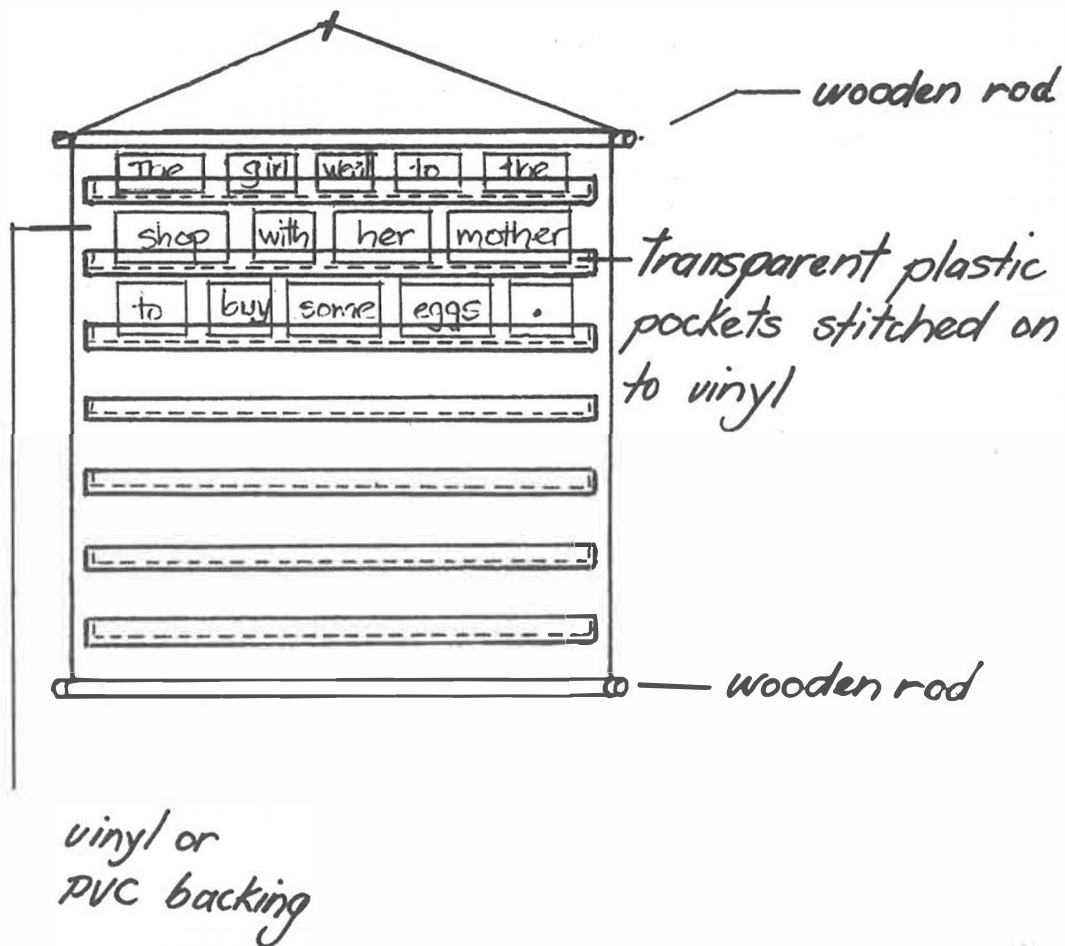
This has the advantage of being easy to carry around and store. It is made of 6-7 elongated pieces of very stiff cardboard. On top of each piece is gummed a sheet of manila card which has been cut beforehand to form pockets. The 6-7 pieces are then joined together with key rings or curtain rings. The SM can then be easily folded like an accordion. Furthermore, extra pieces can be added to the bottom of the SM if the need arises.



3. A Roll-up Vinyl Sentence Maker:

This type is probably the easiest to make. It also has the advantage of being easy and light to carry around as it resembles a roll-up blackboard. This SM is made of a sheet of vinyl or PVC (plastic) to which are attached transparent plastic strips which form the pockets. Two dowels are attached to the top and bottom to support and give weight to the SM.

It is important to choose a very thick, stiff transparent plastic for the pockets so that they will not flop forward when the words are inserted.



The Word Cards:

Although sets of flash cards may be purchased at stationers' here, it is best that the teacher produces his own word cards. In that way he will be producing exactly what he needs for a given structure/lesson. Preferably the lettering should be done in black ink (broad-tipped felt pens are ideal) and in lower case or small letters. Capitals do not give a distinctive shape to a word. It is important, too, that the words are written large enough for clear visibility from the back of the classroom. It is wise to have in the classroom a number of blank cards so that if a word is suddenly needed the teacher can produce it on the spot. Paper rather than cardboard could be used to make words that are only going to be used once and are not likely to be needed in future lessons.

Storage of cards: Although it is possible to build storage pockets for the different categories of words (nouns, adjectives, etc.) into the design of a Sentence Maker, this tends to be rather messy and, in the case of types 2 and 3, impossible. It is best to have a separate storage system — a cardboard box with divisions, a small box file, etc.

The Use of the Sentence Maker in the Classroom

Below are some suggestions for use of the SM. They are not in any particular order and they do not necessarily follow the teaching of the basic language skills.

Example 1: To teach guided composition:

First show pupils pictures (a series or a composite picture) and discuss the contents. Divide the class into small groups and distribute cards to the groups (each set making up a sentence). Each group has to unjumble the cards to form a sentence which refers to the visuals which were discussed earlier. When each group has formed its sentence a pupil from each will approach the SM and insert his correct sentence in the pockets. The teacher can then discuss the correct ordering of the sentences as they have been inserted (especially if the pictures describe a narrative) and then number the sentences in the correct order. After one or two readings of the passage the pupils can then copy it into their composition books.

Example 2: To teach letter writing:

Go through the format of a letter orally with the pupils. Ask leading questions about the format. The format can then be summarized on the blackboard. The teacher also has the format written on cards but the sentences (or words/phrases) are jumbled. Individual pupils can then come up to the teacher's desk, pick out a suitable sentence and insert it into the SM. Initially pupils will be building up the address and opening followed by the body of the letter and the close. Pupils can then copy the letter into their books.

Example 3: Story telling:

Pupils are told a simple story by the teacher using a series of pictures. Pupils are divided into groups. Each group is given a jumbled sentence which the group members rearrange and insert into the SM. This time sentences must be inserted into the SM in their correct order. Pupils can then copy the story.

Example 4: Teaching minimal pairs for pronunciation practice:

Teacher puts up sets of minimal pairs on the SM. The teacher then reads the sets and the pupils listen and repeat. The teacher then takes off the SM one of each pair of cards and puts these on her desk. Individual pupils are then asked to come forward and find (and insert into the SM) the other half of the minimal pair.

Alternatively, the teacher can put up a set of words containing say, the /i/ sound as in 'ship'. Pupils can then come up and select a card from these provided to teach the contrasting sound ('sheep').

Example 5: Teaching vocabulary:

1. Use the SM to teach regular comparatives – long, longer, longest, etc. The teacher inserts the base word and pupils can choose appropriate comparatives from the cards supplied by the teacher.

2. Build up a paragraph using words that pupils have learnt in the lesson (or in previous lessons). The teacher starts by putting one word on the SM. Pupils can come up in turns to select another word to add to the previous one. This can continue until the pupils have built up a 5–6 sentence paragraph. This is a good exercise for testing whether pupils know the different parts of speech, and their relative positions in a sentence.

3. Use the SM to teach prepositions in conjunction with a picture. Make the exercise competitive. The picture could be of a scene which is conducive to the teaching and learning of prepositions. Divide the class into groups. Each group has an identical set of cards containing, for example, phrases like 'under the tree'. The teacher then asks questions like 'Where is the cat?' and the first group which inserts the appropriate card on the SM gets a point.

Example 6: Teaching grammatical items:

1. The SM is an excellent device for showing transformations, for example, the transformation from the active to the passive voice, the use of relative pronouns, etc. Transform a sentence having a preposition followed by an object into one which omits the preposition: e.g.

I gave the ball to Ahmad.

I gave Ahmad the ball.

Groups of pupils could compete in restructuring the sentences.

2. The SM can be used for correcting mistakes. Sentences can be altered or mistakes of pupils can be corrected by moving words (or letters). This is one instance when it would be best to use paper rather than cardboard for the words as many of the words may not be needed again.

3. The positioning of adjectives and adverbs can be usefully taught using the SM.

4. Matching halves of sentences. Pupils can be given halves of sentences on cards and be asked to form a good, complete sentence on the SM. Matching of sentences can be done with 'if' clauses also, possibly in conjunction with pictures. For example, sentences with 'if' clauses are written on cards. These are then cut up to form two lists, A and B. Pupils in groups are asked to match the parts and arrange them on the SM.

Example 7: Games:

The SM is ideal for game-like teaching activities. It offers endless possibilities to the imaginative teacher for consolidating structures that have been taught in earlier lessons.

It is hoped that the above ideas will provide inspiration for the use of the Sentence Maker in the English language classroom. I have found the SM to be one of the more exciting teaching aids in the classroom. The pupils thoroughly enjoy using it especially as it gives them an opportunity to leave their seats and actively participate in the lesson/activity. A word of warning is necessary here. Pupils are often so enthusiastic about the Sentence Maker that the noise level in the classroom rises considerably and some discipline problems may arise. I think it is important that at the beginning of the year or term or whenever the teacher starts to use a Sentence Maker, he establishes rules regarding noise, rushing to the front, calling out answers, etc. Once these have been established, and adhered to, I am sure that both the teacher and the pupils will derive considerable pleasure and benefit from the use of the Sentence Maker in the English language classroom.