

SOME OBSERVATIONS ABOUT COMPOSITION

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Many people mistakenly believe that writing each composition is meant to be the same as creating a work of art. Others fall into the trap of saying that writing a composition is meant to teach the writer to think. Instead, I believe writing a composition is an attempt to expediently communicate the writer's thinking. That is, the writer hopes someone else can share his or her ideas and experiences through his or her writing.

Gerald Dykstra lists four types of material available for use in the teaching of writing and some implications of their use.

“The first type stresses grammatical knowledge. Whether this knowledge is presented in traditional terms or in current linguistic terms, the approach rests heavily upon the theory that knowledge about language will assist in the development of the writing process. The second type provides models of good writing which the students may read. In a sense this type is more nearly direct. If the first tells *about* good writing, the second provides the opportunity to observe the product. It is worth noting, however, that in the case of this second type, it is the product of other people's writing, not the students' own product, and it is the product—not the process—of writing that is observed. The third type emphasizes “free” writing, with the inevitable aftermath of extensive error checking and correction by

the teacher. The immense amount of teacher effort involved in this type and the evidence of poor organization of content have brought many who continue this approach for a time to feel that the major problems will be overcome if only they can teach their students to think. As a consequence, it is the teaching of thinking that has become the basis for the fourth type. Teachers using this approach speak with conviction about the value of logic. But good writing — even beautiful writing — and logic and truth are neither synonymous nor approximately so. It may be that 'teaching students to think' seems to be a more high sounding calling than 'teaching students to write.' Perhaps there is further lure in that the failure to teach students to think is less measurable and evident than is the usual, and possibly expected, failure to get them to advance very much in their ability to write."¹

I use this extensive quote by Mr. Dykstra to point out that there are various approaches to composition each of which has its inadequacies. Even Mr. Dykstra's solution, his controlled writing program, while having many benefits, seems to lack enough instruction on rhetorical organization. For better or worse, in my junior college composition courses, I use a method which I think Mr. Dykstra would consider an example of the the third type, and I try to stress four areas: Organization, Mechanics, Material, and Expression. Of these four, Expression seems to be the most troublesome for the students.

First, however, let me comment about the other areas.

Organization: This area is perhaps more troublesome for the teacher than the student especially when the lectures are given in English. To acquaint the students with the various aspects of the methods of development, especially aspects such as the differences between classification and analysis, is difficult when

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using a restricted vocabulary. But, this is not an impossible problem to overcome, and once the students grasp the pattern, very few errors are repeated. A good textbook can help a lot in this area.

Mechanics: This area receives much criticism from students and teachers alike. Yet, it is necessary to pay attention to mechanics if only to provide signals in the composition which are recognizable by the reader. An idea which is seemingly often forgotten is that a composition is not created for the benefit of the writer, at least not directly, but instead, to communicate with a reader. However, the more the signals differ from standard usage, the more difficult, distracting, and, possibly, confusing it is for the reader. Generally, I find several different mechanical errors such as comma placement and misspellings in each composition, but three errors which come to mind as I write this paper and which seem to be deeply rooted enough to recur even after several sessions about their correction are: not capitalizing the proper words in a title, placing improper punctuation marks at the beginning of a line, and putting commas and periods outside of the quotation marks. These errors can be corrected by learning which marks of punctuation are acceptable at the beginning of a line, and by memorizing the convention for capitalization in a title (Capitalize the first and all major words in a title. Do not capitalize articles, prepositions, and connectives unless they have more than five letters) and by remembering that commas and periods always go inside the quotation marks.

Material: I encourage my students to choose their specific topic from their experiences because if they are familiar with their choice it is easier for them to write about it, and it automatically makes the composition original. They can express something that is meaningful to them, and the compositions are

more interesting for the teacher to read. Three problems in this area are choosing a guiding topic that is interesting and provides a purpose, convincing the students that their personal experiences are worth writing about, and getting them to use concrete details to support their abstract statements. Once they grasp the idea of using concrete details, we can proceed with the idea that often their writing can show not tell. That is, through this concrete detail we can understand the abstraction better than if we are given the abstract word directly, and we avoid asking the question: How do you know? For example, if someone writes, "The dog bared its teeth, growled, and chased me down the street," we understand better than if the writer had simply said, "The dog doesn't like me."

Expression: As I said before, this area seems to be the most troublesome for the students. Several types of errors of expression occur though some may seem, at times, to belong to one of the other areas. Of course, expression is closely related to material. In fact, I have often thought that if the students could express in English what they are thinking in Japanese, the problems related to material would mostly be solved. This is why I disagree with the statement about teaching the students to "think." I believe they are thinking, and they are trying. But, it is simply a fact of life that since English is their second language, their vocabulary and knowledge of sentence structures, prepositional phrases, and idiomatic phrases is still growing. Just as I attempt to use English word order when I am not familiar with the Japanese word order, so I find my students using aspects of Japanese when they are unfamiliar or confused about English usage. As with the mechanical errors, some errors of expression seem to recur more often than others and seem to resist efforts at correction. Some of these, with their probable causes given in parentheses, are:

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1. Leaving the "s" off a plural noun. (Imitating the Japanese plural form.)
2. Confusing words; for example, "computers" and "calculators." (Unsure of meaning.)
3. Confusing words similar in sound such as "most/almost" and "first/at first." (Unsure of meaning.)
4. Confusing words similar in meaning such as "later/after" and "after all/finally." (Unfamiliar with English usage.)
5. Leaving out necessary prepositions as in "cry (for) economy." (Unfamiliar with the English phrases.)
6. Confusing the expletive "There (plus a BE verb)"-used to replace the subject at the beginning of a sentence-with its twin word "There," the adverb of placement, as in "There is a wonderful place." (Unfamiliar with the English phrases.)
8. Using *-ed* to form the past tense of irregular verbs as well as regular verbs, for example, "spreaded" for "spread." (Not aware of the irregular form; using the analogical form.)
9. Choosing the wrong English synonym when translating from Japanese. (Unsure of the English connotation.)
10. Translating literally from the Japanese, for example "flashed" for "realized" or "come out in front of" for "meet." (Translation.)
11. Using a plural noun with a singular verb, for example, "The passengers was confused." (Forgetting about subject-verb agreement.)

However, my most interesting problem sentence to date included this phrase: "...the Beatles was also one of honor students..." I leave it to you to guess what happened here.

This list is not meant to be nor can it be all inclusive. Other people may find errors that I have not included, or some errors may appear or disappear, particularly on the college level, because of changes in the materials and methods used for

earlier levels.

Certainly, it is not surprising that expression is the most difficult area for students of a foreign language because the other areas have general or specific rules that may be followed or which are at least instructive, but the way of expressing ideas or thoughts continually changes. Indeed, as students in composition, and sometimes in other instances when we are writing, we are told to "be creative," "put that in your own words," or "say that in a new way." Likely, as teachers we echo these statements to our students. It is not wrong to make these statements, of course, but I feel sure that it must lead to frustration when a student finally masters a phrase in a foreign language and uses it in a composition only to be told that it is an "overused" phrase and that it must be rewritten in an original way. On the other hand, students must be aware that English demands originality, and they should be encouraged to experiment with English expressions.

So, in sum, it is perhaps enough to note that Organization, Mechanics, and Material can be relatively well guided through examples which can be found in the various teaching materials available, but Expression seems to rely more on the student's ability to sense the underlying meaning of the English expressions and to simulate that meaning in a "new way."

NOTES

- 1) Christina Bratt Paulston and Gerald Dykstra, *Controlled Composition in English as a Second Language* (New York: Regents Publishing Company, 1973), p. VII.