A STUDY ON THE READABILITY
OF THREE COMPOSITION MODELS

by W. D. Cline

A common teaching approach is that recognition usually precedes production. This implies that in a composition course, reading often precedes writing. As Arapoff stated, "... obviously students have to know what writing is before they can be expected to produce it..."[1] More recently, Krashen has stated, "It is reading that gives the writer the "feel" for the look and texture of reader based prose."[2] Many teachers have observed that students who are good readers are usually good writers. Because of the relation between reading and writing, models have long been used in teaching writing. Models are usually short passages, paragraphs, essays, or extracts from longer works which students can read as examples of "what writing is." Models can be used in a number of ways ranging from being intensively studied and analyzed in class to being left for the students to use at their own discretion.

At a recent workshop, "Teaching Expository Prose," Dr. Nicholas J. Teele discussed a number of issues concerning the teaching of composition to Japanese students. Dr. Teele recommended that low level vocabulary be used in teaching students to read paragraphs. He stated that students may confuse the difficulty of the words in a model with the difficulty of writing in a particular pattern of organization.[3]

The relationship between reading and writing and Dr. Teele's remarks led to a study of three composition models

used at Osaka Jogakuin Junior College. Two of the models studied were for second year students and the other model was for first year students. The second year composition textbook, *Effective Writing: Methods and Examples*, was the source for the model, "Energy Crisis."[4] *Chatterbox 1983-1984*, a collection of essays written by second year students the previous year, was the source of the passage, "Shining Stars."[5] The third model came from an exercise out of *Evergreen: A Guide to Basic Writing*, the first year composition textbook. The study of these three models was done to gain insight into the degree of ease or difficulty that they might present to students.

The first two models were studied for readability using a cloze test technique. This technique was presented in the Temple University course, "TESOL Methods and Materials, Part II: Reading and Writing."[6] The procedure is to take a passage of at least 250 words, leave a lead-in sentence intact, and delete every fifth word following, giving a total of 50 blanks worth two points each in scoring. Thus, a maximum score would be 100. The test determines three levels of reading. The first is recreational, meaning that students can read the material on their own without help. The second level is instructional, meaning that the students need the help of a teacher with the material. The third level is frustration, meaning that the students will have such difficulty with the passage as to cause frustration. Two methods of scoring were given. In exact word scoring, only the exact word from the original passage is counted as correct. In any acceptable word scoring, which is less reliable, any word which can appropriately fill a blank is accepted. The scoring is:

	Exact Word	Any Acceptable Word
Recreational	53 or above	60 or above
Instructional	52 - 44	59 - 51
Frustration	43 or below	50 or below

"Energy Crisis." from *Effective Writing* and "Shining Stars," from *Chatterbox* were selected for this test because both passges had the required number of words, followed the same method of development, and were far enough ahead of the students' place in the texts that it was unlikely that the students had previewd them. It was expected that "Energy Crisis" would be in the frustration level and that "Shining Stars" would be in the recreational level.

The cloze tests were prepared so that one student would have "Energy Crisis" on the first page and "Shining Stars" on the second page; the next student would receive the tests in opposite order. On October 22, 1984 the tests were given to 19 students in second year composition class, IId. The students were given 30 minutes time to complete the two tests. All of the students were able to complete the first page of their tests, but a number of them did not have time for completing the second page. In computing the test results it was decided to eliminate tests which had not been completed into the last paragraph. The results for completed tests were:

		"Shining Stars" (17 students)	"Energy Crisis" (13 students)
Exact Word	Mean	42	22
Scoring	Average	42.4	19.4
Any Acceptable	Mean	53	25
Word Scoring	Average	55.8	25.7

Using these mean and average scores indicated that according to exact word scoring, both "Shining Stars" and "Energy Crisis" were in the frustration level of reading difficulty. By using any acceptable word scoring, "Shining Stars" was in the instructional level of difficulty while "Energy Crisis" remained in the frustration level of reading difficulty.

Another way of looking at these results is to examine the number of students who were in each reading level. The following two charts indicate the number of students who scored in each level of reading difficulty according to both methods of scoring.

"Shining Stars"

	Exact Word Scoring	Any Acceptable Word Scoring
Recreational	2	8
Instructional	6	2
Frustration	9	7

"Energy Crisis"

	Exact Word Scoring	Any Acceptable Word Scoring
Recreational	0	0
Instructional	0	0
Frustration	13	13

In personal conversation, John Haskell, whose research was a basis for these cloze tests of readability, said that the tests are only a rough guide. Dr. Haskell also said that if students have had practice with cloze tests, they are likely to

score better. In the case of these tests, the students were only given a brief explanation and example before doing the tests. Another point to consider in using these scores, is that the students were limited to thirty minutes time with a number of them not finishing or not having time to review their work. There is a good chance that if the students who took these tests had been given more practice with cloze tests and more time on these particular tests, they might have scored higher. Nevertheless, since all the students took the tests under the same constraints, there is a basis here for a relative comparison between the two passages. It should be considered that while 13 students were able to complete "Energy Crisis," 17 students were able to complete "Shining Stars." These results indicated that "Shining Stars" was more difficult than expected but confirmed the difficulty expected of "Energy Crisis."

The third passage studied for readability came from the first year composition textbook, *Evergreen*. *Evergreen* focuses on paragraph writing skills and therefore, lacks passages of 250 words or more until chapter 14, which the students study towards the end of the year. To study a passage prior to chapter 14 required the use of a different method of analysis than the cloze technique, since the cloze technique would not be as accurate with a shorter passage. This third model was analyzed in a similar fashion to that used by Rivers and Temperley to show, "How an unfamiliar text appears to a student."[7]

In this method of analysis, a reading passage is compared with a vocabulary list representing the words that students should know. Words in the reading passage which do not appear in the vocabulary list are deleted. These deletions

prevent the teacher from reading words that the students haven't learned. The passage than reveals to the teacher just those words that the students are supposed to know.

The first model passage in *Evergreen* was used as an example. All the words and one idiom were whited out which did not appear in the vocabulary lists of a representative high school reader.[8] According to Rivers and Temperley, the teacher should, "... get the feeling their students may have on being confronted with this text for the first time."

a.   The summer   gave ladies a chance to   their
      <u>hands</u>. On the   , chickens and
         in their own <u>fat</u> and in a   whose
in the family like a   . However, every true
      artist could   her   to the delight and   of the
town. Orange   cakes and dark brown
         chocolate stood layer to layer with ice-white
and light brown   . <u>Pound cakes</u>   with their
<u>weight</u> and small children could no more   the
than their mothers could   slapping the sticky fingers.
<u>Proven</u> <u>fishermen</u> and <u>weekend</u>   sat on the   of
trees at the pond. They pulled the struggling   and the
      from the   water. A   of young girls <u>scaled</u>
and cleaned the <u>catch</u> and busy women in
and rolled the fish in   meal, then dropped them in
         trembling with   <u>fat</u>. On one corner of the clearing a
      group was rehearsing. Their   , packed as   as
         ,   over the music of the <u>country singers</u> and
melted into the songs of the small children's <u>ring games</u>.

Maya Angelou, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings.*[9]

The underlined words in the above passage would likely cause problems for the students, too. The underlined words appear in a form or compound that was not used in the reader. An example of this is the word, "fat," which appears in the above passage as a noun but was used in the reader as an adjective.

According to Cynthia B. Watson, the following are reasons that most ESL teachers would agree upon for using composition models:

> 1) Models provide exposure to the lexical items, structural patterns, and conventions of the target language at all levels of discourse; in particular, they take us beyond sentence level; 2) They demonstrate many modes of rhetorical organization and stylistic variety, related to variables such as communicative purpose and anticipated audience; 3) They are, especially when authentic rather than composed to order, windows onto culture in its widest sense, revealing customs, values, assumptions, and attitudes toward the world and man as percevied by speakers of the target language.[10]

Ms. Watson goes on to ask, though, "How much of this input can students actually take in, utilize, and incorporate in their own work?"

Given the global relationship between reading and writing, it would be unreasonable to expect that composition students could gain all of their competence in writing from their textbook models alone. While the present study is limited in scope, it points especially to the need to be sensitive to our students' reading ability when we use models with them. If the reading level of a model is such that students are

frustrated and cannot comprehend the meaning, then there is even less chance for the students to "take in, utilize, and incorporate" the input in their writing. Thus, the teacher should try to better match composition models with the reading ability of students.

NOTES

1   Nancy Arapoff. "Discover and Transform: A Method of Teaching Writing to Foreign Students" *TESOL Quarterly*, 3 (1969), 299.

2   Stephen D. Krashen. *Writing: Research, Theory, and Applications* (Oxford: Pegamon, 1984), p. 20.

3   Nicholas J. Teele. "Teaching Expository Prose," Temple University, Osaka, 7, 8 July 1984.

4   Kenneth R. Bindseil and Imogene B. Dickey. *Effective Writing: Methods and Examples* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1978), p. 60.

5   Sanae Nakamura. "Shining Stars," in *Chatter Box 1983-1984*, ed. A. Weaver, L. Roberts, and C. Buchan (n.p.: n.p., 1984), pp. 50, 51.

6   Donald Knapp. "TESOL Methods and Materials, Part II: Reading and Writing," Temple University, Osaka, 10 Feb. 1984.

7   Wilga M. Rivers and Mary S. Temperley. *A Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Second or Foreign Language* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), pp. 207-212.

8   Miyashita, et al. *High Road to English II* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1983), pp. 218-235.

Miyashita, et al. *High Road to English IIB* (Tokyo: Sanseido, 1984), pp. 195-207.

9   Susan Fawcett and Alvin Sandberg. *Evergreen: A Guide to Basic Writing* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1980), pp. 3-4.

10   Cynthia B. Watson. "The Use and Abuse of Models in the ESL Writing Class" *TESOL Quarterly*, 16 (1982), p. 6.

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