BASIC WRITING

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1. ERROR

ERROR

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MINA P. SHAUGHNESSY

INTRODUCTION

A policy of admissions that reaches out beyond traditional sources for its students, bringing in to a college campus young men and women from diverse classes, races, and cultural backgrounds who have attended good, poor, and mediocre schools, is certain to shake the assumptions and even the confidence of teachers who have been trained to serve a more uniform and prepared student population. For the English teacher, the shock and challenge of this diversity is experienced first through the written words and sentences of the new students, for here, spelled out in words, woven into syntax, is the fact of inequity—in our schools and in the society that is served by these schools. Here, for example, are two high school graduates from the same city and school system writing about the economic value of a college degree:

(a) A high school graduate with superior aptitude should by all means go on to college. Having superior skills, this student will probably excel in college as well as upon graduation from college and be able to find work. The superior student might not seek employment upon graduation, but instead pursue advanced graduate work.

Another type of student is the high school graduate who lacks the necessary skills for college work. In some instances, with remedial work, such students might eventually succeed in college. For the most part, however, college is wasted on those unprepared for it. This type of student would do better to seek employment upon graduating from high school.

The real problem lies with the average student. Most of these students would well appreciate the value of college and are also more or less equipped to exist under the college system. Unfortunately though, it is this type of student that suffers most when seeking employment after college. Due to the scarcity of jobs, most of the good jobs have already been taken by those with superior ability. Thus an average student is the one who should seriously debate whether to attend college or seek other employment.

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(b) I feel that for a young person. Who has just completed High School and wishes to attended college. To get a higher education that this moved is a very wise one. I know for a fact that there are people. Who have attended college and have recived a college degree. Who are reciving the same paid as high school graunted. A person who has a chance to attended college should do so. this oppunity does not happens everyday and not just anyone. College is so of a orrention couse. It also brondens your veiws, helps you kop with things you will face in the furture.

College English teachers who encounter passage-*b* writing for the first time are not likely to know where to begin or even whether to begin. Everything in their training and experience leads them to suspect that students who write such passages are not very bright and that no amount of instruction, especially at this late stage, is going to matter. Should such teachers be faced, as they well might be in an open admissions classroom, with a number of writers of this caliber, they may simply go on teaching the same course they taught before, yielding nothing to the inferior preparation of their students, insisting, rather, that maintaining standards is a matter of no one's budging except the new student, or they may decide to abandon the old standards, not because the standards are invalid but because they are now inexpedient, given the new students' academic difficulties and the limits these seem to impose upon their futures.

Both approaches offer an escape from the students themselves, dismissing either their past academic experience or their incipient excellence. Yet the third approach—setting about in as thorough and deliberate a way as possible to teach the students what they haven't learned (or to unteach what they have)—leads into unmapped territory. Little of what the teachers learned in graduate school will seem of much use. At first they may search for The Answer or The Formula in books (about linguistics, perhaps, or psychology or sociology), discovering in the process the extent of their ignorance about language and the hopelessness of finding The Way in those shifting and turbulent disciplines. They will search their own experience as writers or editors or students for a better understanding of the skill they thought they could teach. They will ponder over students' papers or pounce upon some illuminating remark that slips out in conference. They will be alternately exhilarated and downcast, and almost always vulnerable. But if they stick with their decision to teach, they will slowly begin to discern a "logic" to their students'

difficulties with writing, a path that leads inexorably back through all the schoolrooms where these students did not learn to write but learned instead to believe that they could not write or even make sense of the confusion of do's and dont's they mistook for the subject of English.

The plight of such students—of young men and women who want to be in college, who have the intelligence to do college work, but who are not skilled enough when they arrive on campus to survive in a rigorously academic environment—has begun to reshape the freshman English course in many colleges, expanding it, linking it to the work being done in other disciplines such as linguistics and psychology, and most important, challenging teachers who came into their departments of English to teach poems or novels, plays or criticism, to take a closer look at the job of teaching writing.

It is to such teachers that the *Journal of Basic Writing* is directed. The editors of the *Journal,* who are in this first issue its contributors as well, have all been teaching writing for the past five years or more in the Basic Writing Program at City College, a program that serves over 3,000 students whose needs as writers range from instruction in the rudiments of writing (English 1) to the acquisition of a style of discourse appropriate for professional and academic work (English 2 and 3). A parallel (but extended) sequence of courses serves foreign-born students, who make up about 10 percent of each freshman class.

Aware by now that teachers who teach across such a range of skills and experiences can expect to confront more questions than they will ever be able to answer and abandon more strategies than they will ever finally accept, the editors nonetheless believe that much can be gained by the exchange of observations and theories among such teachers. This is in fact what happened initially among the editors themselves, who after several years of talking together about their experiences in the classroom decided to prepare short papers for their meetings so that their ideas might be more carefully explored. This first issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* grows out of that exchange and begins with the subject that in one way or another dominated many of the early discussions about student writing—the subject of error.

Error may seem to be an old place to begin a new discussion about teaching writing. It is, after all, a subject English teachers already know about. Some people would claim that it is the English teacher's obsession with error that has killed writing for generations

of students. Yet error—the unintentional deviation from expected patterns—dominates the writing of many of the new students, inhibiting them and their readers from concentrating on what is being said. And while no English teacher seems to have difficulty counting up and naming errors, few have been in the habit of observing them fruitfully, with the intent, that is, of understanding why intelligent young adults who want to be right seem to go on, persistently and even predictably, being wrong. Most of the articles in this issue are trying in one way or another to deal with this problem. The opening and concluding articles take up some of the social and pedagogical issues that hover about the subject of error.

The next issue of the *Journal of Basic Writing* will be entitled *Courses.* Its purpose will be to discuss specific hypotheses about the way students learn to write and to describe courses that grow out of these hypotheses. Subsequent issues will be devoted to *Order* and *Vocabulary.* The editors hope that other teachers from other open admissions campuses will want to contribute to the *Journal* and thereby enlarge the experience of us all in what is, in some ways, a new profession.

SARAH D'ELOIA

TEACHING STANDARD WRITTEN ENGLISH

Perhaps the place to begin this journal of Basic Writing is with an explanation of why we believe teaching "basic" writing is synonymous with teaching standard written English. By the latter we mean not only standard orthography, inflections, syntax, and punctuation, but also the standard modes of academic discourse. Within these standard modes we comprehend not only the common methods of development (comparison, contrast, classification, process analysis, argument), but ultimately those larger formats of exposition which emerge as the conventionalized ways of presenting the answers to the questions asked in various disciplines, as, for example, the report of an experiment which includes the statement of the problem, a survey of similar experiments, a statement of the research design and a defense of its structure, a presentation of the results, a comparison of these results with previous results and an analysis of possible causes for similarities and differences. We consider all of these competencies the mark of an educated person and, therefore, essential skills of economic and professional survival among students who are pursuing professional career options.

To some we may seem to belabor the obvious. But within recent years, numerous individuals and groups have argued that teachers should leave whatever English our dialect-speaking students use alone, by which they usually mean that we should not bother teaching our students standard inflectional and syntactic patterns. Some have gone further and suggested that English composition courses concentrate upon narration and biography and the more "creative" modes of writing, upon developing in our students an enjoyment of language and a better self image, and that we recognize the variation inherent in all languages at all times and dispense with the cramping rules of spelling, punctuation and grammar. Even among linguists, those we expect to know most about all aspects of language use, including how the standard dialect might be most easily acquired, there is

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considerable disagreement about what to teach, how, when, and to whom. There is, however, among all parties an abundance of good will toward their dialect-using students (if not always toward each other) and considerable agreement about the desirable ends they wish to achieve, but through alternative courses of action.

There are a number of arguments frequently advanced against the traditional emphasis on standard English in college composition.

One of the arguments made against the traditional preoccupation with "standard" or "textbook" or "edited" English is that it ignores the linguistic fact that language use is comprised of an infinitely subtle continuum of styles, tones, and choices varying according to the circumstances of time, place, purpose, and shared context with one's hearers,—such as a conversation with a young child, a personal letter, a technical report, a lecture to a large group, a dirty joke, a left-handed compliment. The unrelenting emphasis on standard English, it is argued, ignores the variety, versatility and fluidity that is language, substituting for the realities of language use a single narrow, public dialect, useful within a rather narrow set of public circumstances. Further, it ignores, they argue, the real fluency our students have with other language varieties and with other modes of expression—personal narrative, poetry, etc. English teachers are, they argue, largely responsible for the inflexible, prissy notions of linguistic etiquette held by the general public and codified in the handbooks—and what previous generations of Miss Fidditches have done, this generation of teachers can undo.

Many argue, and rightfully so, that all languages are structurally equal: no language or dialect is inherently any "better" than any other language or dialect in its grammar: no language is intrinsically any more "logical" or "illogical" in the way it segments reality into grammatical categories and combines grammatical categories into words, phrases, clauses, and sentences. Thus a language which lacks systematic past tense marking of the verb, like the English regular verb *-ed,* is not in the least handicapped provided the language has some other mechanism for indicating past-ness when the idea is needed, for example, words comparable to *yesterday, last week,* or *ago.* Similarly, within a language, a dialect of English which marks plurality only once (*two* boy, *two* pair) is not less logical than another which marks plurality twice (*two* boy*s*, *two* pair*s*) or even three times (*two* boy*s* go-, in which the absence of the third person singular present tense *-s* on the verb also indicates the subject is plural, particularly in the absence of a noun plural marker; as in *the sheep*

go-). Non-redundant plurals, multiple negatives, double comparatives and superlatives, and non-standard subject verb agreements are just as logical as their standard counterparts. Furthermore, questions of logic aside, every language is equal in its inherent resourcefulness: equally well adapted to the demands previously made upon it by the uses given it and equal in the capacity to evolve whatever mechanisms are needed to communicate whatever meanings subsequently need to be communicated as new uses are given it.

Since all dialects are equal in their logicalness and resourcefulness, this argument continues, there is absolutely no linguistic reason to compel a person to give up his native dialect. Indeed, to put the argument affirmatively and forcefully, every person has a right, not only to use his native dialect, but to use it with pride and self-respect, without being badgered by misguided educators to conform to a different dialect which can demonstrate no linguistic superiority. Opponents of teaching the standard dialect point with real compassion to the psychic damage done to the student who is made to feel that the language he uses is "ignorant" and "low class" and a bad reflection on himself, his family and friends, his race, his entire background. And they argue that simply requiring the student to learn and use the standard dialect is to force him to form this negative opinion of himself, since merely to teach the standard is to imply that it and its users are "better" than his language and its users.

And, they argue, the standard dialect is not inevitably better, not even for those academic, formal, expository purposes to which it has been, in the course of its historical development, especially adapted. They point to the directness, exuberance and vitality of various non-standard dialects, and to the prissiness, verbiage, and obfuscation that characterize the standard English of many middle-class high school and college students and government bureaucrats.

Perhaps the most compelling arguments are the practical ones. And here those who oppose an emphasis on teaching the standard fall into two categories. The optimists maintain that the use of a dialect "seldom obscures clear, forceful writing," that the standard written dialect is really not important for large numbers of students, and that, for the "certain kinds" of students it is important for, "its features are easily identified and taught."[1] The pessimists take

[1] "Students' Right to Their Own Language," *College Composition and Communication*, Special Issue, 25 (Fall 1974), p. 8.

the opposite view. They argue that the effort to teach standard English to lower class youths is largely futile, especially at the level of college composition. On the one hand, no amount of help or pressure from middle-class teachers will inspire a lower-class student to learn the standard where there is not, in addition, strong middle class or upward mobility pressure from his peer group, immediate family, or community, or where the person is not what is known in black street culture as a "lame"—a youth largely alienated from his peer group and the vernacular culture, with well-developed upward mobility aspirations. On the other hand, students who are going to learn the standard dialect will do so almost without regard to what teachers do or fail to do. They will simply imitate those forms of English to which they are exposed which they recognize as most prestigious. Even if a student is motivated to acquire the standard dialect, college is too late to begin. Dialect switching becomes increasingly difficult as a person grows older, and the ability to do so has already declined markedly by late adolescence.

The ultimate argument is the argument from political and moral values, and these value judgments are the central assumptions from which the other arguments derive. Status seeking is judged an unworthy, morally demeaning pursuit, apparently unredeemed by any positive spinoff; it is a pillar of a corrupt social, political, and economic order which deserves to be undermined rather than shored up. In the view of prominent linguist James Sledd, educators who soak up state and federal revenues in projects to teach standard English as a second dialect are simply complicit in 1984-ish Big Brotherism. He argues that teachers of English have no business enforcing middle-class white linguistic prejudices, no business openly or tacitly endorsing the upward mobility rat race. He argues that linguistic change is the effect and not the cause of the social changes sought, and that there are far more important facts and values to be taught than those which foster social climbing. These are the facts and values which support social, political, and economic reorganization.[2]

We agree with the ends sought by the opponents of teaching standard English: a more equitable social order and the psychological

[2]See James Sledd, "Bi-Dialectism: The Language of White Supremacy," *English Journal*, 58 (Dec. 1969), 1307–1315, and "Doublespeak: Dialectology in the Service of Big Brother," *College English*, 33 (1972), 439–456.

well-being of our students. However, we believe these ends are better served when students enjoy the wider range of options opened to them by fluency in the standard dialect.

The question of values must come first. If one is persuaded that the business of the English teacher is more properly teaching a radical critique of our present social order rather than equipping students with the language skills necessary to cope successfully in it, there is, indeed, little point to teaching standard English. However, to pursue the former course of action as the more moral, one must assume that our social order is changing so rapidly that our students can safely ignore social dialect and class as well as racial discrimination and, more importantly, that they can safely ignore the demand for skills of a technological society. We do not believe either can safely be ignored. In the absence of this safety, two facts remain: It will be important that middle class Americans learn to tolerate a broader spectrum of linguistic diversity, at the same time that upwardly aspiring minorities make linguistic accomodations toward the standard, especially in writing. While it is true that broad scale linguistic change is the product of social change, it is equally true that linguistic change toward control of the standard facilitates social mobility and social change for individuals.

Secondly, whatever the political philosophy of the teacher, the values of the student must be given pre-eminence. All evidence indicates that most students, including those at City College, are in college because they wish to improve their economic and social status in life. Their decision to enter college and their perseverance in pursuing their degrees indicate a desire to participate in mainstream American culture, of which the standard written dialect is clearly a major component. To refuse or to fail to offer students the language competencies necessary for them to hold themselves forth as educated Americans is to deceive them about what they have obtained in their struggle to complete their educations and to deceive them about their economic and social prospects afterwards. If we have not delivered the goods, they cannot. Their struggle for a more secure life for themselves and their families does not deserve to be viewed merely as morally vacuous status-seeking. It is the outgrowth of fundamental principles of our American democracy and can be sniffed at only by those or the descendents of those who have already come through the struggle successfully.

Thirdly, we do not deny the right of every student to use his native dialect with self-respect and pride, exclusively if he chooses,

nor do we believe that any person should be coerced into learning the standard written dialect. It is, however, simply fallacious to argue from the presumed stylistic weaknesses of the standard dialect to the presumed stylistic strengths of non-standard dialects: each has its "flavor"; each is capable of both obfuscation and directness. It is equally fallacious to confuse the linguistic equality of dialects with their social inequality. While we doubt that anyone can be taught standard English when he does not wish to learn it, we do believe that every person should have the opportunity to learn the standard written dialect, and that he should have the opportunity to do so in an environment in which the instruction is most likely to succeed.

We believe it is possible to teach the standard dialect without inevitably doing psychological damage to the student, provided it is taught in an environment in which language differences are explored and celebrated rather than stigmatized. Students can and should be encouraged to view acquiring the standard dialect and retaining their native dialects as an opportunity for linguistic and cultural breadth, never as a painful choice between mutually exclusive alternatives. To the extent that students feel a healthy respect for what they already are as well as for what they, by their educations, hope to become, they minimize debilitating conflicts and feelings of disloyalty in their quest for upward mobility.

For this reason we endorse approaches to teaching composition which recognize the variety of language, which give students opportunities for self-expression, creativity, and virtuoso performances within the varieties and modes of which they are already masters. All these contribute to their enjoyment, sense of verbal power, and self esteem.

On the other hand, great psychological damage is inevitably done when a student is cut off from the way of life he wishes to lead because he lacks the competencies expected in professional life. For us to shirk the more difficult job of teaching the standard dialect and the traditional modes of academic discourse is a serious mistake, for which our students pay the price. For these are precisely the varieties of language use to which the majority of our students lack access and which they are far more likely to need in their public capacities. However onerous the fact, however difficult it makes our job, the standard dialect does have its uses, its legitimacy, its special place on the continuum of language styles. Although this generation of teachers can do a lot to eliminate the misconceptions popularly attached to other dialects, nothing it can do will eliminate the need for a public dialect—nor, because of the important public function

it fulfills, the status which automatically attaches to it and to those who can use it fluently.

Finally, we believe that a decision not to teach the standard written dialect—its inflections, syntax, spelling, punctuation, vocabulary, the modes of public discourse which are its special domain, and the syntactically more complex, contextually and conceptually more explicit expository prose style which is their vehicle—is, at bottom, a vote of no confidence in the student. We reach this conclusion without sharing the optimists' view that the identifying characteristics of the standard written dialect are "easily identified and taught." We find that the reverse is true. Too often it is easy enough to tell that a particular grammatical construction diverges from the standard written dialect, but almost impossible to determine, without considerable experience, whether or how it fits coherently into the student's native grammar, or how we can teach the complex constraints which determine the use of the standard equivalent. With painful frequency, we discover that we can not formulate these constraints ourselves. The difficulties are no fewer when the problem is not strictly grammatical. Long sequences of short simple sentences, lacking the subordination and coordination of related parts, are equally a mark of an immature command of the standard written dialect. How are we to give failsafe advice for correctly working out appropriate emphasis and the logical and syntactic relationships? And how do we teach another student to untangle the syntactic snarls he creates when he strains to extend his command over the more complex syntactic possibilities of the language? Finally, how do we persuade the student who produced the passage below that he has not produced public discourse, that however "correct" the passage, his real meanings remain inaccessible?

> As far as education is concerned, I had a little of the wrong kind. It wasn't that I wanted it. It was because I felt things a lot easier. I had no time to get what I really needed. But all I wanted at that time was money. Loving is something for my head. I had to know and deal with some of the best of people because I wanted some of the best. I figure if I am going to spend my time, it might as well be with some of the best.

How do we teach him how to judge the degree of common ground he can assume? how far he must go in spelling out his meanings in detail? how many cues of place, sequence and reference he must build in?

On the other hand, we are not so pessimistic as the pessimists. We are far from despairing. In spite of the real difficulties of acquiring fluency in the standard written dialect, we believe there are legitimate reasons to believe that many of our students can succeed. Studies of the social stratification of speech and of the process of language acquisition support this conclusion. Speakers of all social classes within a speech community show considerable uniformity as to the spoken varieties of the language they consider prestigious and non-prestigious. These varieties differ not so much in the absolute presence or absence of stigmatized forms—such as *tin* and *den* for *thin* and *then,* double comparatives, etc.—as in the greater frequency of the stigmatized forms in the non-prestigious (non-standard) dialects, and in the informal colloquial levels of both dialects, the more prestigous dialect always having considerably fewer, usually fewer of the features in its most casual style than the non-prestigious dialects have in their most careful. Negative social judgments of speech are based on the relative frequency or infrequency of the stigmatized features, that is by their repetition and their clustering with other features into a predictable configuration. Many of these features also serve as cues to stylistic level, with the result that persons hearing the careful speech in a non-standard dialect may conclude it is the casual speech of a more prestigious one, and vice versa.

Thus, while it is undeniably true that for most people it is far more difficult to acquire a second language or second dialect written or spoken, during late adolescence and early maturity, it is also true, with regard to second dialects, that many of the non-prestigious features are already under a measure of control, within the stylistic levels the student already uses. Thus, in some measure, acquiring the standard involves extending the use of cues already in his repetoire. The student may be able to reduce the level of error which derives from interference from his native grammatical code to the point that the stigmatized forms rarely obtrude themselves as "errors," and this is especially true when the occasional use of native forms occurs in the context of a well-developed, coherent, thought-provoking essay.

Many of the characteristics of the expository prose style of the standard written dialect derive not from differences in the grammatical system or code per se, but from greater exploitation of the mechanisms creating syntactic complexity and explicitness inherent in the code, from access to more levels of vocabulary, and from a stronger sense of the degree of shared context that may be assumed,

the depth of detail required to inform or persuade. These are problems common to all developing writers, and when these skills are mastered, the occasional dialect error passes almost unnoticed. It is to this level of competence with the standard written dialect that we hope to bring our students.

BARBARA QUINT GRAY

DIALECT INTERFERENCE IN WRITING: A TRIPARTITE ANALYSIS

Although neither their teachers nor non-standard dialect speaking students perceive many of their difficulties in writing standard English to be related to dialect interference, there is good evidence to suggest that areas of contrast between standard and non-standard usage contribute significantly to such writers' problems. There appear, in fact, to be three distinct types of dialect interference that occur in written form. Different pedagogical approaches seem appropriate for teaching standard performance in areas affected by each type of interference. And although each kind of interference has a different potential for being totally brought under control, the role that interference plays seems to change as a writer's expository techniques mature.

The development of mature and effective writing abilities is often stunted by a writer's confusion and dismay in trying to use standard grammar. But the role that dialect interference plays in this dilemma is often obscured. Dialect speaking students rarely, if ever, associate their writing difficulties with their knowledge of a variety of English that is significantly different from what they have to produce in writing. On the contrary, because such students know themselves to be fluent speakers of the English language, they assume, with some logic, that a basic cause for the errors teachers continually perceive in their writings stems from an inability to write as well as they speak. In addition, they may attribute their problems to spelling, which, while often an additional facet of the difficulty, is a convenient scapegoat since spelling is strictly a matter of written convention and may bear little relationship to oral language. Finally, they assume that their difficulty stems from their very real lack of an elegant, educated vocabulary. But while nonstandard speakers may be aware of differences among kinds of spoken English, they generally perceive deviations from the standard language largely

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as elements of "slang" vocabulary. They consider what they regard as non-standardisms to have no bearing on writing because they are recognizably inappropriate to school situations.

Student problems may be compounded because their teachers are also unaware of the role of dialect interference in their students' writing. Certainly, they recognize the copious errors in the written English that their students produce, but their perception of such work as error-ridden often obscures its status as a correct representation of some oral variety of the language. Writing that approximates the spoken form of a non-standard dialect may not be error-filled at all, in the sense that its deviation from standard norms does not result from mistakes but is, instead, quite consciously and intentionally produced. Non-standard writing, while problematic for use where standard written form is required, is nevertheless a problem of a different sort than that characterized by genuine mistakes, things immediately recognizable by their producer as wrong.

Teachers may be misled in their perceptions of non-standard writing by a long series of English courses that typically regard the English language as one sacred, ideal set of forms to be cherished and guarded against corruption. Such a view clearly ignores the variation that has always been inherent in English, as in all other languages.

In addition, grammar texts widely available for classroom use have a limited view of dialect-based problems since they are apparently intended for populations that speak a relatively standard dialect. One representative text, for example, explains subject-verb agreement in the following way:

> Make subject and verb agree in number; singular subjects require singular verbs; plural subjects require plural verbs . . . [examples omitted]. Violations of this rule occur when the writer does not know which word is the subject, or when the writer is not sure whether the subject is singular or plural.

This explanation clearly requires that a reader know the standard inflection signalling singularity and plurality of verbs and nouns. It entirely ignores vast numbers of non-standard dialect speakers who would violate the agreement rule, not because they can't identify the subject or are uncertain of its number, but because their dialect simply does not use the -s inflection uniformly to designate present tense singular verbs or plural nouns.

Thus, students and their teachers are generally unaware of the critical differences between standard written English and some

non-standard dialect forms. This ignorance was illustrated to me when I asked several classes of non-standard dialect users what they thought was meant by the term "standard English." The dominant response was that it referred to common, everyday English," or "the English that most people speak most of the time," definitions apparently derived from the usage of "standard" in such phrases as "standard procedure," in which it does, indeed, mean "usual."

In spite of student and teacher assumptions to the contrary, the writing of non-standard dialect speaking students reveals three categories of their syntactic production that may be directly related to their knowledge of a non-standard grammar and that distinguish them from fluent writers of the standard written dialect. If one defines a grammatical rule as do the transformationalists, as a generalization that summarizes a systematic element of linguistic behavior, one can then consider these categories to be 1) invisibly rule-based, 2) visibly rule-based, and 3) non-rule-based—each a dialect interference with its own pedagogical implications.

"Invisibly rule-based" errors are exhibited through a writer's avoidance of particular grammatical elements. One can often sense that a writer's work is handicapped because he knows language patterns from his native dialect that he understands are not part of the standard language and so cannot be used in educated writing but he does not know the standard equivalents for these forms. Thus his writing may be characterized by an artificial stiltedness or simplicity resulting from the inability to reproduce the complexity of a thought in the standard form.

Features that may be invisible but significant in writing can often be guessed after listening carefully to the writer speak to determine what forms he is likely to use orally but not in his writing. Many black students, for example, use the invariant "be" form and the negative "ain't" in conversation, although they rarely if ever use them in writing. A widely-recognized linguistic pariah, "ain't," also fails to appear in the written work of whites who use it as a spoken form. Similarly, "youse," the second person plural pronoun whose use is widespread among whites in New York, is not found in their writing. With the loss of such forms as these and the nuances of meaning that they carry, dialect speakers working in the standard language may feel themselves bereft of important vehicles of self-expression. Unsure of how to replace them successfully with acceptable forms, they often try to avoid using them at all.

A good example of this kind of dilemma can be seen in the work

of writers who indicate verb tense through non-standard devices. For instance, linguists report the use by black dialect speakers of "been" and "done" to form perfect tenses. While these forms rarely appear in written work, they may underlie the writing of a black dialect speaker who consistently uses the simple past tense, not showing gradations in past time that may be implicit in his message. For instance, a student writes:

> On saturday I *woke up* about two in the afternoon, only to find that I was a lone. Everybody else *went* shopping.[1]

It seems clear here that "went" is meant as the equivalent of the standard "had gone."

Features in this category may not always stand out as errors, as does the example above. Such features may, however, be the underlying force that pushes a student into an unproductive corner. The student knows he can't write the form that he wants but doesn't know what else to use and so he must work to circumvent a structure altogether.

That invisible rules may underly some writing problems suggests an informative pedagogical approach rather than a corrective one. This is an area in which the standard dialect may legitimately be dealt with as a foreign language, comprised of unknown forms. Even without knowing each student's non-standard rules, if a teacher knows, for example, that standard English tenses comprise one widespread contrast with non-standard dialect forms, she can present standard tense formation paradigms as new material, making sure to do so with the completeness that a presentation of any foreign language system requires if a learner is to be able to use it productively. Such a representation leaves behind any implication that failure to use standard forms has been due to carelessness or sloppiness. English teachers have too long applied such humiliating and inaccurate explanations to non-standard interferences in their students' writing, resulting in confusion and distress for the writers, who may, in fact, have been quite careful and neat.

Exposition of standard grammatical forms often results in astonishment from students who had no idea that such forms existed. For instance, such students distinguish the times designated by the perfect tenses, but they "never knew you could say that" in the standard

[1] All quotations from students' writing used herein are reproduced exactly as originally written with italics added for emphasis.

format. Such open interest in finding new forms to replace recognized non-standard ones makes this category of interference easier for students to eliminate than is the second category, "visibly rule based" interference.

In contrast to the influence of "invisibly rule-based" features in writing, "visibly rule-based" performance produces a variety of identifiably dialect-based features that are highly visible to readers due to their conspicuous, often systematically recurring, departure from standard written form. These features are correct by some dialect rules but not by the standard ones. While some of them, appearing together in the work of a single writer, can lead a reader to guess at the racial or ethnic identity of that writer, as individual items they all cross racial and ethnic lines. Such items include non-standard 1) use of relativizers:

I answered to find that it was a friend of mine *in which* I hadn't heard from in years.

He is supposed to be much more mature polished, responsible *than that of* a high school teacher.

My coach has a round face and a bright red curly afro *which upon it* sits a black derby.

2) use or non-use of final -s to indicate possession, plural nouns, or third person singular verbs:

Being a college graduate one can get the job *he want.*

The skilled *potter* wrinkled *brow show* concentration.

3) verb forms:

I'*m send* an application.

They live in the South someway because they don't talk about snow falling and they *flown* kites around Christmas time.

As I *walk* outside my building in the afternoon I *would see* children playing games on the sidewalk.

What is critical about this category of dialect interference is that it consists of features that users do not recognize as inappropriate to contexts requiring standard performance. The features in this category are not elements that speakers typically identify when they consider what they may call their "bad" or "broken" English. They are not recognized as taboo forms. These features do, in addition, operate according to systematic rules. Thus, they are correct according to the linguistic intuition of their users.

This category of visible dialect interference is the most difficult for students to eliminate because they do not have a mental uncertainty about the features of it that would signal a place for insertion of a standard form. Instead, they are faced with the need to deliberately produce forms that are absolutely wrong according to their native grammars in order to be right in the standard.

Discussion of such areas of grammar with students reveals the dilemma that this category of interference can create for them. In considering the standard English subject-verb agreement rule, for instance, students are often bewildered to discover that -s can signal singular (on verbs) as well as plural (on nouns.) Once having grasped the idea that -s on the subject generally precludes it from appearing on the verb, students often explain this phenomenon by asserting that "a plural subject requires a singular verb," a statement that reveals the illogic that they find in the system they are confronting.

This category of interference is amenable to comparative techniques. The growing body of research into non-standard grammars is a useful source of the information to facilitate comparison of non-standard and standard equivalents. One can, however, often elicit from their users dialect rules that are not formally phrased as rules but that are remarkably correct representations of the logic according to which a feature is produced, simply by asking in a noncritical way why a feature is present, or why missing. So, one can come to know the system which he must help his students contrast as "spoken English" with the standard written requirements either through research or through inquiry. Or perhaps best, one can learn through a combination of both that will allow modification of researchers' generalizations to fit the usage of a given individual or group as well as recognition of a particular person's report about his grammar as fitting into a recognized pattern.

A pedagogy that compares two grammatical systems is often welcomed by students who are in the throes of a conflict between their own sense of the English language and the demands that academic English is placing on them. Such an approach can allow them to understand the systematic integrity of their usage as well as that of the standard formula, whereas a spotty identification of some forms as "right" and others as "wrong" can leave them with a queasy sense of hopeless chaos in both grammars.

While the first two categories of written dialect interference are directly related, either visibly or invisibly, to functioning non-standard rules, the third category, that which I call "non-rule based" interfer-

ence, appears as written forms that are not discernible in the spoken language of the writers who produce them. They seem, therefore, to be forms that are recognizably incorrect in the dialect of the writer himself. At the same time, they are identified by standard-English-using readers as incorrect. Such features include 1) attachment of -ed onto words where it doesn't belong:

> There is a great need for someone *to related* to the people of our *problemed*-communities.

and 2) omission of negative markers in situations whose meaning is clearly negative:

> All those years in college would have been wasted because you didn't get any further than a person who *did go* to college.

The first of these errors characterizes the writing of students who often do not pronounce -ed inflections. They know that they must insert -ed in some places where they don't say it but are not entirely in command of the complex processes for determining exactly what those places are. The second appears in the writing of students whose dialect has retained a multiple negation rule that has dropped out of standard usage. The conventional explanation of the standard negation rule is that only one negative is permissible—"two negatives make a positive"; such explanation does not include the corollary that allows more than one negative if there is more than one clause. Hence, the author of the second example seems to be following what he has been given as the standard rule and so omitting the negative from his final clause.

Interference of this sort does not suggest a contrastive teaching technique, since it does not contain a form that the writer feels is legitimate or functioning within a comprehensible system. The fastest and fullest strides toward standard performance can be made in this category of interference because it is here that the writer knows himself to be floundering. Explanation and exercise in the use of the standard negation rule and of standard infinitive and tense formation, for example, can provide students with the information and understanding that they need to produce the standard forms. But, as in dealing with invisibly rule-based problems, care must be taken to explain the standard rules in all their complexity, so that a student is not left trying to function with only partial knowledge of the new system.

One implication of this breakdown of dialect interference in writing

into three categories with differing presumed causes is that the kinds of interference have very different potentials for being eliminated from a writer's formal written production. It does seem, however, that while all dialect forms may not necessarily disappear from student writing, they take on a vastly diminished significance as the student becomes a more fluent, self-confident writer, learns the standard forms for those areas in which he was adrift at first, and develops a command of expository prose techniques that increases his ability to make the structure and content of his writing match the sophistication of his thought.

If, as William Labov suggests,[2] one forms negative social judgments about another person's speech on the basis of the relative frequency or infrequency of stigmatized features rather than on the mere fact of their presence or absence, then only at a certain level of frequency do non-standardisms obtrude themselves as such on the hearer's consciousness.

This phenomenon, which Labov observed in spoken language, appears to operate in writing in which one finds a variety of forms that arise from non-standard pronunciations as well as non-standard grammars. In a well-developed, coherent, thought-provoking essay, three or four non-standard forms which persist will not more than momentarily distract the reader, whose attention remains focused on the content. Only when the deviations from the standard become so frequent that they interfere with the reader's ability to concentrate on the message do they cause irritation and become the probable source of negative judgments about the writer's social and intellectual status.

This theory is supported by what appears to happen to my own students who, as entering freshmen, were placed in the lowest level Basic Writing course. Such placement means that English department faculty reading these students' placement essays have found that they show substantial departure from the standard grammar and lack clear, formal development of content. Papers eliciting such judgment tend to be very brief—having fewer than 400 words to show for an hour's writing—and to have errors that exceed 5 per cent of the total word output. Such writers' first few class-assigned essays, not produced under the pressure of an examination situation,

[2] William Labov *Social Stratification of English in New York City*, the Center for Applied Linguistics, 1966.

tend to have the same characteristics. By contrast, successful papers—those earning an A or B—produced by ex-Basic Writing students after having completed the three semester writing sequence, are not characterized by total freedom from the types of grammatical non-standardisms that appeared in their initial writing. But the number of errors in total word production is 2 per cent or below, and the word production is greatly increased as the writer has gained command of effective techniques for recording his thought development on paper. It is perhaps not accidental that this 2 per cent figure is identical to the 2 per cent that Labov feels is the degree of ungrammaticality in the average person's spoken output.[3] The implication is that hearers and readers are used to filtering out a small percentage of error in language production. As long as dialect interference in writing does not exceed that percentage, it can easily be ignored. When interference rises above that level it overtaxes a reader's filtering processes.

In light of the suggestion that writing need not be entirely error-free to be successful, teachers should not concentrate on absolute control of non-standardisms to the exclusion of necessary work on expository prose techniques. It is equally true, however, that teachers cannot assume that if non-standard writers learn to express their ideas fully and clearly their grammatical difficulties will evaporate. The numerous writing problems that stem, at least in part, not from careless mistakes but from the three kinds of dialect interference outlined above cannot be controlled unless they are recognized for what they are and treated accordingly. Only then are students likely to reduce the level of nonstandard dialect interference, if not down to zero, at least down to a point where it no longer detracts from a reader's ability to keep his attention focused on content.

[3] William Labov, "The Study of Language in its Social Context," *Studium Generale*, 23, No. 1 (1970), p. 42.

PATRICIA LAURENCE

ERROR'S ENDLESS TRAIN: WHY STUDENTS DON'T PERCEIVE ERRORS

Observation of the way that remedial writing students *see, hear, read* and *write* words has led me to appreciate Spenser's warning about the monster Error: *God help the man so wrapped in Error's endless train.* Teachers create the monster by being more preoccupied with recognizing than explaining student errors and, pressed for time, by offering simplistic solutions to complicated linguistic problems. Students, in turn, become obsessively involved with the making, recognizing, and correcting of errors at the cost of linguistic understanding and the full expression of their thoughts and feelings in writing.

Aware of this monster and hopeful of describing an aspect of it, I find myself wondering how writing instructors are to penetrate the linguistic and psychological process which students experience when making certain kinds of errors commonly labelled as spelling or proofreading mistakes: confusing similar words, *conversion* for *conversation;* failing to attach proper suffixes, *biology* for *biologist;* confusing voiced and unvoiced consonants, *thing* for *think;* reversing letters, *how* for *who;* leaving out syllables, *marlous* for *marvelous;* confusing minimal sound pairs, *on* for *own;* remembering two words and writing them as one, *undevlored* (a combination of *undeveloped* and *explored*) for *undeveloped;* and inconsistently using inflections like *-s* and *-ed.* Errors like these are the most resistant to improvement in remedial classes.

I am stymied. My students, generally seventeen to twenty years old—Black, Chinese, Greek, Irish, Italian, Jewish, Puerto Rican and Slavic—sit in front of me, inexperienced in and confused about written words, and, in some cases, no longer even curious about them. I see that on a very basic level these students have problems with words: they do not focus on words in a structural way so there is little generalization about form and function; they have basic sound

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confusions because of second language/dialect interference or poor early training in phonics; they do not have strategies for approaching unfamiliar words which they must spell or read; they have a limited visual word storage—some of the reasons why they have difficulty finding errors in their own essays.

We must start with words, the student's understanding of and perception of words and morphemes. Too often discussions of word perception and error ignore the influence of the senses upon cognition: the way in which we gather information about words and the way in which we process this information are considered separate functions. However, in practice, language is perceived through both visual and auditory shapes, and is therefore as much perceptual as conceptual. Rudolf Arnheim captures this relationship:

> . . . the cognitive operations called thinking are not the privilege of mental processes above and beyond perception but the essential ingredients of perception itself. I am referring to such operations as active exploration, selection, grasping of essentials, simplification, abstraction, analysis and synthesis, completion, correction, comparison, problem solving, as well as combining, separating putting in context. . . . By *cognitive* I mean all mental operations involved in the receiving, storing and processing of information: sensory perception, memory, thinking, learning. . . . I must extend the meaning of the terms *cognitive* and *cognition* to include perception. Similarly, I see no way of witholding the name of *thinking* from what goes on in perception. No thought processes seem to exist that cannot be found to operate, at least in principle, in perception. Visual perception is visual thinking.[1]

Finding and correcting errors which reveal perceptual and cognitive confusions such as those listed earlier is a skill which is often underrated by writing instructors who tend to consider such activities as simple, when they are, in fact, part of a very complex process. What we have minimized in our often misdirected preoccupation with error is the collateral relationship between perception and cognition explored in the field of psychology for the past sixty years. Students' perceptual confusions run rampant while professional composition journals blithely print articles with such titles as *English Composition as a Happening,* and day-to-day teaching is guided almost solely by pragmatic rather than theoretical considerations.

[1] Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), p. 13–14.

Here is a sampling of some perceptual confusions found in student papers which emerge from conceptual, visual, and phonetic mis-codings. Conceptually, a student may not be aware that the form of a word indicates its function, that word endings indicate relationships between words. Because of this he may not know how suffixes operate and he will easily confuse words in the same family, writing *psychology* for *psychologist* or he may be unfamiliar with different forms in the same family turning the noun *conversation* into the verb *conversate.* Rhythmic features of words might lead the student astray so that he writes *incident* for *indigent;* similar beginnings of words may cause a student to write *conversion* for *conversation.* Or unfamiliar academic words will lead to guesses, as in *sugetivism* for *subjectivism.*

There is also a particular kind of spelling problem, which I have labelled the *portmanteau problem,* which has to do with word cues and memory. A student will begin to write a word and while in the process remember another word which leads her astray. For example, the student who writes *undevplored* for *undeveloped* starts off writing *underdeveloped* but perhaps at a certain point in her memory of the sequencing of letters, around the *-vpl-,* she is reminded of the word *explored* and so finishes the word on another track.

The student may also have speech habits, aside from second language or dialect variations, which cause her to slur final consonants and thus write *an* for *and.* Or she may confuse words in writing where sound discrimination is non-existent, as in the homophones *know-no,* which are also blurred with the word *now* because of similar visual word shape. Words where the sound differences are minimal also cause problems, *sence* for *sense, one* for *won, then* for *than.* Consonant clusters cause difficulty, *attrack* for *attract,* as do voiced and unvoiced consonants, *altitute* for *altitude, savely* for *safely.*

A student may also make visual as well as phonetic generalizations about words, recalling words whole and then encoding without any conscious attention to sequencing of letters. Anticipating the *ur* in *future,* the student writes *furture.* Focusing on the presence of *t*'s in *situation,* he adds an extra *t* to *situtation.* Students reverse letters, particularly vowels as in *musuem* for *museum, dose* for *does.*

A student may also have not yet realized that similar sounds in English can be spelled different ways, writing *televition* for *television* (/š/&/ž/), *shure* for *sure.*

Other students develop desperate strategies to cope with their lack of phonetic and visual word storage, and some of them have a marked tendency to write *phonetically, wot* for *what, addiquit* for

adequate. Others vaguely remember the visual shape of a word and you see it in the margin of an essay written several different ways: *gorgus, gorgos, gorgeus* for *gorgeous.*

The origin of these various types of word confusions differs depending on the student's language background, awareness and training, but in writing this exploratory paper I am groping toward an explanation of why certain remedial writing students fail to *see* certain errors in their own writing even after focused attention and seemingly effective grammatical instruction and practice. Why, I ask, don't my carefully-prepared, structured grammar lessons or my lessons in discrimination between confused pairs of words transfer to the writing of my students? What am I overlooking in the language learning process? Am I paying enough attention to the mediating processes which insure transfer? What part do recall and sequencing play in word perception? What is the relationship between word perception and grammatical knowledge and do these processes ever interfere with one another?

How often have we, as writing instructors, repeated monologues like this in conference with students:

> Did you reread your paper? You did? There is an error in this sentence. Can you find it? It is a verb form error. Do you see it now? Look here, this word: what's wrong with it? Focus on the ending. What's missing.

or

> Let's compare this sentence which is correctly-written to the sentence next to it. Do you notice any difference between the way the two sentences are written? No? Look at the verbs in both sentences: is there any difference between them? Look at the endings. What did you add to the verb in the correctly-written sentence which is missing from the other?

What are we misunderstanding or minimizing when we ignore a student's revealing silences and charge ahead to refine her perceptual focus as in the above examples, launching into a grammatical explanation, and fulfilling the student's red pencil image of a writing instructor: someone who can be depended upon to perceive and correct errors.

And how do we view the errors we find? The Myopics see errors as flashing lights. They concentrate minute attention with red marks which swell up all over the student's paper at the expense of any thought or feeling ventured. The Romantics are bleary-eyed. They

believe that if teachers can motivate students to open the floodgates of self, to liberate the *voice,* then all mechanical and careless errrors will disappear. The Graces look heavenward. They are horrified that the basic skills of spelling and grammar are woefully lacking in student writing and keep insisting that *Correcting errors is a very small and trivial affair.* And so it seems, judging from numerous faculty discussions, that we are much like the ten blind academics and the student, disputing loud and long *each in his own opinion/Exceeding stiff and strong./Though each was partly in the right,/And all were in the wrong.* Perhaps our attitudes toward error are a part of the student's problem.

Generally, students with word perception problems are in an English-as-a-Second-Language or a remedial class, and can be grouped into three types: 1) those students who have an identifiable interfering schema derived from second language or dialect variation; 2) those who have a generalized or confused recall of words either because of poor early training in the coding of words, inexperience in and difficulty with reading, or a limited word storage related to a poor visual/phonetic memory; 3) those who have a partial interfering schema with attendant word confusions. All three types of students respond to the printed or written word passively, dramatically presenting through multiple errors, silences, and the comment, *I can't see what's wrong* their form of words as the only possible form.

We can explain the first type of student's limited sense of words with Piaget's theory of *assimilation* and *accommodation.* Such a student overlays her *schema* derived from a second language or dialect background, and makes what she sees on the written page conform to an internal idea of what should be there. Perception is inaccurate because the student *assimilates* the external words to her notions rather than *accommodating* herself to what is to be seen. But her notion of words is derived from an identifiable *schema.*

The second type of student has a generalized or confused recall of words which causes him to produce words which generally look or sound like the word in mind. The reasons for this inaccurate recall are various and related to the mysterious way in which words are conceptually, visually and phonetically gathered, stored and processed in the brain.

The third type of student is somewhere in-between the two types just described: he speaks another language or dialect or is surrounded by people who do, and thus he selectively shares some of the language features of an identifiable *schema.* However, the student is not literate

in that other language or is only vaguely familiar with its written form and so has many structural and conceptual confusions as a result of not knowing either language very well. This is the case of many of the Chinese-American and Puerto Rican students placed in our remedial classes.

These three types of students are out of touch with words and sentences *as they are,* something easily discovered by having students proofread or read aloud: a student who articulates *-ed* endings may not write them or notice that they are missing when proofreading; a student may sometimes articulate an *-s* which is not present on the printed page when reading; or a student who generally slurs word endings in pronunciation, such as saying *an* for *and,* may also not read and write such words correctly. Perception is inaccurate and the student *assimilates* words to his idea of them; however, with one type of student we have an identifiable system of interference patterns while with the other type of student identifiable patterns of confusion must be established for the individual. Once the teacher identifies the known and unique schemata of individual students she realizes that changing these schemata is a difficult job, and a major part of the difficulty is related to Piaget's general theory of *centering:* the inability of students to shift perspective so as to perceive configurations, including words, in a new way. The student has only one response or a number of desperate guesses available when reading, writing or proofreading, along with a limited repertoire of grammatical rules and limited language awareness; therefore, he cannot see what is wrong or thoughtfully imagine other possibilities.

How do we begin to bring such students closer to the standard forms of words?

For purposes of teaching, we must first *identify* the general categories of word perception errors for the heterogeneous language population in our ESL and remedial classes. This identification should cut across the categorization of the three types of students mentioned earlier, a useful grouping for understanding but not for the actual teaching situation or materials development. In the Appendix I present a categorization of perceptual problems based on an analysis of about 250 papers from all types of students in my remedial classes. Using these categories, I have begun to develop materials to help students *de-center* their response to words: to see and deal with words in a more flexible way by realizing the connections between parts and wholes, form and function. First, to encourage new ways of seeing words, I am developing slide-tape units which jar the student out

of habitual ways of perceiving words. Second, to insure a greater transfer of grammatical knowledge to writing, I am developing step-by-step self-instructional units, to be illustrated later in relation to the inflection *-s,* which focus on a neglected stage in learning to write, the transferring or mediating processes. The units will deal with the perceptual problem areas listed in the Appendix through visual, spatial and aural strategies. Third, I am developing strategies and games for students to use in searching for errors, a complicated process commonly reduced to *proofreading.*

In our overall strategy, we must begin to link the student's perception, what he *sees* and *hears* when writing words with his conceptual understanding of word formation, grammatical rules and relationships. We must find out how long it takes young adults to coordinate knowledge and performance in the early stages of learning to write and how language connections are learned and maintained in their strength. We must link psychological with linguistic analysis, and turn away from the actual error on the student's paper to develop the underlying perceptual and cognitive operations necessary for students to see what needs to be corrected.[2] We must begin to develop the kind of language awareness in our classrooms which would enable students to treat language as an object of analysis and evaluation in its own right since such awareness is critical for the processes of reading and writing.

Such skills are dependent not only upon the understanding and generation of grammatical rules, our present emphasis, but also upon visual and aural word encoding and decoding skills established during the early years of learning to read and write. These skills set the stage for *de-centration,* the ability to see words in new ways. It is not a simple process of association or copying words seen or heard: word formation and perception depends on a system of generalizations and transformations which hopefully becomes progressively adequate as the student goes through school.

However, given the fact that many of our students have not received proper training in the encoding and decoding of words, they have not experienced this system of transformations in relation to word formation and understanding. It is probable that many of our students received sight word and comprehension training in their early years

[2]Gilbert Voyat, "Minimizing the Problem of Functional Illiteracy," *Teacher's College Record,* 72, no. 2 (December, 1970), 171–186.

of learning to read at the expense of a coding emphasis.[3] Thus we have a group of students coming from homes where a second language or second dialect is spoken, who have never learned how to approach and analyze standard English sounds, letters, syllables, syntactic patterns, and who feel the daily strain of attempting to speak and write *educated* words in an academic atmosphere when they have barely mastered the seemingly common ones.

We need a new theory of error, one with more focus on how young adults acquire the word perception skills which have been neglected in earlier stages of readiness and development. It must deal with how students experience, process, and store words, and must resolve the existing tension between the *romantics,* those who expect that a student's *insight* into grammatical rules will solve his writing problems, and the *Gradgrinds,* those who believe that only *drills* will erase such problems. My contribution to a new theory of error is to emphasize the relationship between perception and cognition brought to my attention by Piaget, and, as far as I know, not yet focused upon as something theoretically as well as pragmatically important in the teaching of writing.

In examining psychological theories of perception, I have realized that what we have failed to pay attention to is the fact that perception interferes in cognition and cognition interferes in perception. A student's word perception, his ability to *see, hear* and structurally analyze words *as they are,* determines his ability to grasp a grammatical rule or to apply grammatical knowledge to his own writing. Let me here further describe how mis-perception and faulty understanding interfere with one another:

With the first type of problem, a student does not grasp a grammatical concept because of *cognitive interference,* and therefore can't *see,* understand, or correct errors in his writing. For example, the student who does not realize that words consist of parts and wholes, that word endings indicate relationships between words in a sentence, will have difficulty understanding certain adjective or noun markers. Such a student may confuse words in the same family, writing *tragedy* for *tragic.*

With the second type of problem a student may not be able to apply a grammatical concept that she knows because of *perceptual interference.* For example, she may understand the use of the inflection

[3] Jean Chall, *Learning to Read: The Great Debate* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1967).

-s after instruction in our classes, be able to apply her knowledge in structured exercises, and still be unstable in her use and perception of *-s* in writing. This student's awareness of *-s* on the paper in front of her, her ability to *see* and focus upon it in the way that she must in order to solve her problem, is deficient, and she needs perceptual training of a sort I will illustrate later. Part of this instability in her skill is caused by our lack of emphasis on perception of error on the written page, proofreading strategies, and transfer. The steps between the sudden insight into a grammatical concept and accomplished learning should involve more preoccupation with perception and repetition of an operation on a carefully graduated continuum of structured and non-structured writing exercises. The instability in seeing *-s* is also caused by teachers' and students' lack of respect for the skill commonly called proofreading, a separate step in writing which remedial writing students need to focus on not only to master error and thus concentrate on meaning, not only to appreciate writing as a craft, but also to deal with the very real demands of academic instructors who according to most research will tolerate no more than 2–3% error rate in a student's paper before being unfavorably distracted.

Piaget's description of perception is helpful here.[4] Briefly, he implies that as perception develops it follows a logical sequence of events. Piaget limited himself to the study of visual illusion and here I apply his theories to word perception errors in writing. In the first stages of development, perception is static and *centered.* A student sees a word or object in one way, his way, and visual and cognitive exploration is unfocused and unsystematic. This student may perceive letters and parts of words, but recognition will not itself result in meaningful interpretation. The *field* or *ground*[5] dominates what is seen and perceptions are not analytic but restricted to the general forms of a word or an entire essay. In the later *de-centered* stages of development, the self and seeing are more flexible and an internal equilibrium arises. As this awareness develops, perception becomes a more stable function of *accommodation* to the external world whereby the student progressively approximates and eventually generates what is seen or heard. He develops the ability to mentally re-arrange, re-group, and re-orient parts and wholes: letters, syllables, prefixes, suffixes,

[4] Jean Piaget, The Mechanisms of Perception (London: Routledge & K. Paul, 1969), ch.2.

[5] Form, continuity and closure determine what is seen in the visual field.

words, words in relation to one another. The student's exploration becomes more active, more thorough, and is directed by a strategy.

Inattentiveness to or ignorance about omitted, added, condensed, expanded or reversed letters, parts of words or sequences of sound may indicate a lack of knowledge about word formation, instability in spatial perceptions, limited visual and phonic word storage, field dominance or lack of cognitive strategies for finding errors. The student's perception remains in the preliminary *centered* stage.

Some research indicates that students with average or better intelligence who have difficulty retaining verbal configurations have difficulty spelling because of severe instability of spatial and temporal *Gestalten.*[6] Eleanor and James Gibson have concluded in *A Developmental Study of the Discrimination of Letter-Like Forms* that certain critical features of letters like the number of coils (m,n); curved letters (c,o); asymmetrical letters (m-w, c-u, d-b, p-b, g-q) and differently oriented or compressed forms cause more errors in discrimination.[7] Students spatially transform letters by rotation or reversal writing *c* for *u*, *d* for *b*, *p* for *b*, *g* for *q*. Though these are extreme orientation problems, many of our students do have word confusions and generalizations of letters and words, phonetically as well as spatially. Which type of generalization occurs depends on the way in which the individual stores words in the brain. Phonological interferences are often due to the presence of a second language, second dialect, or poor early training in sound-letter correspondence. The problem is compounded by the fact that the same sound can be spelled many different ways in English.

The effect of trials or practice, that is the slow growth in the ability to perceive letters and words as a function of repeated presentations of words, has been explored in the perceptual studies of Haber and Hershenson[8] and Eleanor Gibson has suggested that perception becomes more accurate through training involving dif-

[6] Katerina de Hirsch, "Two Categories of Learning in Adolescence," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry,* 33 (1963), 87–91.

[7] Eleanor and James Gibson, "A Developmental Study of the Discrimination of Letter-Like Forms," *Journal of Comparative and Physiological Psychology,* 55 (1962), 897–906.

[8] M. Hershenson and R. N. Haber, "The Role of Meaning on the Perception of Briefly Exposed Words," *Canadian Journal of Psychology,* 19, no. 1 (March, 1965) 42–46.

ferentiation of smaller and smaller difference between pairs of words.[9] Perhaps this research along with David Elkind's experiment *Reading Achievement in Disadvantaged Children as a Consequence of Non-Verbal Perceptual Training* indicates a need for perceptual training, to refine and stabilize our students' approach to words.[10] Elkind concludes that an experimental group of elementary school children made greater progress in word formation and recognition skills after being exposed to a series of visual training materials than a control group being taught through traditional basal readers.

Gibson, Haber and Hershenson, and Elkind believe that structured practice brings a student to closer and closer approximations of words until accurate perception results. Through gradual, step-by-step perceptual training they seek to implement the operations of *assimilation* and *accommodation* which Piaget describes as part of the process of learning. For Gibson, Haber and Hershenson and Elkind words are *out there* in the world, on the printed page, to be approximated and finally accurately perceived and learned. They are preoccupied with the mechanistic or atomistic way in which perception can be trained.

Jerome Bruner, on the other hand, believes that intelligence structures reality and helps to program the way in which perceptual data are collected. Perception changes when one is motivated and learns appropriate ways of structuring or categorizing external events. Bruner's strategy for making possible the perceptual growth that Piaget describes involves the student's understanding the ways of classifying parts of words, a knowledge of where to concentrate attention, and a knowledge of pertinent grammatical rules. His emphasis is on the cognitive.

Both the cognitive and mechanistic orientations in the field of psychology are reflected in teaching practice. One group believes that word perception problems are caused by the lack of conceptual understanding of the way words function, and the other group believes that students need perceptual training in order to see and correct errors even though they may have a conceptual understanding of particular grammatical forms and functions. Teaching experience

[9] Eleanor Gibson, "Improvement in Perceptual Judgments as a Function of Controlled Practice or Training," *Psychological Bulletin*, 50 (1953), 401–431.

[10] David Elkind and JoAnn Deblinger, "Reading Achievement in Disadvantaged Children as a Consequence of Non-Verbal Perceptual Training," Final Technical Progress Report, Office of Education, (1968).

has led me to combine both approaches in the classroom and materials development: an overall conceptual understanding and strategy for finding errors along with focus and training in particular areas of perceptual problems such as those listed in the Appendix. Only a teacher's analysis of the unique origins of an individual student's word perception problems will indicate the use of one or the other or both strategies described.

As Bruner has noted, a strategy is one of the most important things a student needs when searching for errors. Aside from particular perceptual interference problems, a strategy is what most students lack. When rereading an essay to find errors, students tend to focus on several aspects of words and sentences at a time. Often the meaning of a sentence will dominate her attention, as in speaking, and individual letters, syllables, sounds of word relationships in a sentence will remain uninspected. An essay will not be perceived as an aggregate of patterns: words, phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, thoughts, and because a student is not aware of writing as such a series of manageable patterns or stages her seeing is undifferentiated and unfocused. Development in learning to see errors is marked by her ability to deal with these several dimensions of writing simultaneously, allocating the time and attention appropriate to these several levels.

Also the student's attention to certain critical features of words, such as endings or sentences is not consistent. In Piaget's term, the student has not yet established a conscious principle of *conservation* with words whereby he operates with consistent rules or criteria.

Discouraged about his ability to master language skills, the student may adopt a *don't look back strategy,* and, on a broader level, may not even believe in the search for errors. As Bruner states:

> One of the chief enemies of search is the assumption that there is nothing one can find in the environment by way of regularity or relationship. . . . For the person to search out and find regularities and relationships in his environment, he must either come armed with an expectancy that there will be something to find or be aroused to such an expectancy so that he may devise ways of searching and finding.[11]

The student, not having a consistent expectancy or criterion to operate with, feeling the need to use *educated* words, under stress, and confused

[11] Jerome Bruner, "On Perceptual Readiness," *Psychological Review,* 64 (1957).

between his own and newly-learned schemas, develops premature conclusions about written words. The student generally has a poor visual memory for the shape of words, as well as phonetic confusions. He is unanalytical and passive in his approach to words and does not operate with a consistent strategy, rather with what Bruner labels *perceptual recklessness*. And this strategy doesn't work.

Recently I have found that one of the most useful strategies for changing inaccurate perceptual habits for a large group of students in the beginning remedial course is to focus on the visual perception of errors in writing. This focus occurs along with and reinforces the grammatical discussions in class. The processes of perception and cognition continually influence each other until a discovery is made or an equilibrium is reached, depending upon whether you favor the Gestalt or Piagetian framework. By diminishing the force of misperception of words, partially through a series of exercises (some of which will be illustrated later), cognition and perception can be integrated so that more effective and lasting learning occurs.

The student, for example, who does not perceive or generate final *-s* should be gradually taken through the steps of perceptual development: exercises which expect the student to have a generalized perception of *-s* in phrases, clauses, sentences, paragraphs, essays; exercises which expect the student to discriminate between the five kinds of *-s* in the English language in clauses, sentences, paragraphs; exercises which expect the student to show the relationship between certain *-s*'s and other words in the sentence; exercises which expect the student to perceive selected *-s* errors in essays; and finally, exercises which would be designed to specifically generate a composition involving the use of present tense third person singular. Here is a sample of some exercises for students which give a visual emphasis to the perceptual/cognitive discrimination of *-s:*

GRADUATED PERCEPTUAL EXERCISES: THE INFLECTION *-s*

1. The generalized perception of *words which end in -s:*
   a. in short phrases
      i.e. Circle all of the words which end in *-s* in the following phrases:
      City Limits
      The Boys on the Bus
   b. in sentences
      i.e. Circle all of the words which end in *-s* in the following sentences:

One thing bothers me when I pass hitchhikers: fear.

c. in paragraphs
i.e. Circle all of the words which end in *-s* in the following paragraphs:
(paragraph)

2. The perception of the *final -s:*
   a. in sentences
   i.e. You have been circling all of the *words* which end in *-s* on the last three pages. Now go on to circle *only the final letter -s* in the following sentences:
   Even an animal uses sounds and movements to share information.
   b. in paragraphs
   i.e. Same principle as 2.a.

3. The principle of "conservation": operating with a consistent rule for *-s:*
   i.e. Move around the letters in the nonsense words below and make a recognizable word. Leave the *-s constant* at the end of each word.

   ksas = _____s

   jpmus = _____s

4. Perceptual exercises in the uses of *-s* in the English language:
   i.e. Since you have completed the Module on the uses of *-s* in the English language, you know that there are five kinds of *-s:*

   VERB *-s*
   PLURAL *-s*
   POSSESSIVE *-s*
   CONTRACTION *-s*
   NATURAL *-s*

   Using this knowledge, circle the different kinds of *-s* in the following headlines:
   a. Circle only the POSSESSIVE *-s.*
   b. Circle only the VERB *-s.*
   Brooke appeals to Nixon to Resign for Nation's Sake
   Defeat of Reagan's Tax Plan
   c. Circle only the PLURAL *-s.*
   Earthquakes Rock Iran

The Market Continues to Drop

5. Manipulating the five kinds of *-s* by generating phrases from a set of cards:
   i.e. Using the set of cards given to you, make as many phrases as you can using at least one kind of *-s* in each phrase.

The student	's	book
card 1	card 2	card 3

   Write each phrase on this page.

6. Encouraging students to perceive the RELATIONSHIPS and CONNECTIONS between words fostered by *-s:*
   i.e. Three of the four kinds of *-s* signal relationships or connections between words:

   VERB *-s*
   POSSESSIVE *-s*
   PLURAL *-s*

   a. In the following sentences, circle VERB *-s* and then draw an arrow to the word it connects with. Your circle and arrow will show the relationship between words in a sentence.
   b. POSSESSIVE *-s*. Apply same principle as 6.a.
   c. PLURAL *-s*. Apply same principle as 6.a.

7. The perception of isolated kinds of *-s* in student essays.
   i.e. Circle and correct the errors in the following student essays. (Each essay has problems with one particular kind of *-s*.
8. The perception of multiple *-s* problems in student essays:
   i.e. Circle and correct the errors in the following essays. (Each essay exhibits multiple problems with the different kinds of *-s*.)

9. The student is asked to generate a short essay to test the TRANSFER of the perception of *-s* to his own writing:
   i.e. Write a short essay (200–300 words) in which you describe what *one* member of your family does every morning (your mother, sister, father, brother, aunt, grandmother etc.).

   Every morning my _____

What we must start to do is to identify those students who, despite a general ability, manifest perceptual problems with the written

language. On a daily basis, we must jar students out of their *whole word* approach by stimulating them to generalize, use structural analysis, and devise strategies for finding errors. Non-verbal activities with particular emphasis placed on visual/spatial and occasionally aural strategies are proposed here as a way of generating changes in the student's dynamic of seeing words and word endings. Perhaps what is needed now, as well as in the earlier grades, is more dynamic visual teaching of the written language. More attention should be paid to the mediating process of perception.

This focus should be considered as an adjunct to and a reinforcement of writing, and not as a comprehensive writing program which necessarily involves grammatical understanding, development, and organization of ideas and writing and re-writing activities. We must determine the degree of conscious work needed in the area of word perception and proofreading without impeding the student's flow of ideas. Perhaps we make too many assumptions about the way in which students experience words, and it is probably time that remedial programs develop more intensive, specialized, self-instructional units for students with certain types of perceptual problems, auditory and visual, which are more pervasive than we wish to acknowledge. This strategy for teaching and materials development deals with the *perception* of error as a dimension of grammatical understanding. It seeks to give students strategies to master and overcome their fear of the monster Error and her *endless train.*

APPENDIX

WORD MIS-PERCEPTION CATEGORIES

These categories of mis-perception emerged during an analysis of errors in the essays of two hundred and fifty remedial writing students. This categorization brought seemingly random or careless errors closer together so that I could generalize about areas of perceptual confusion in the overall remedial student population. Of course, distinctions between the perceptual and the cognitive cannot be strictly drawn without knowledge of an individual student and several samples of his writing, but these groupings of perceptual confusion are indicators of areas in which materials and learning strategies could be developed.

VISUAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING: the following categories of error seemed to be caused by the students' lack of memory for the visual

shape of words, perhaps caused by inexperience in reading the written word. The sound distinctions between the confused pairs below are minimal and so a visual strategy and materials for teaching are being developed.

HOMOPHONES:

birth/berth
break/brake
buy/by
capital/capitol
do/due
fair/fare
for/four
foul/fowl
hear/here
hole/whole
know/now/no
knowbody/nobody
meat/meet
piece/peace
plane/plain
prepair/prepear/prepare
roll/role
seam/seem
shown/shone
sought/sort
their/there/they're
theirfore/therefore
threw/through
to/too
waist/waste
ware/wear
whether/weather
witch/which

/s/ *CONFUSION:*

absense/absence
advise/advice
cent/sense
choise/choice
deside/decise
facinated/fascinated
noncence/nonsense
sence/sense
sigarette/cigarette

/š/ *AND* /ž/ *CONFUSION:*

conclution/conclusion
directen/direction
desicion/descicion/descion/decision
educatan/education
explotion/explosion
fashon/fashion

possesian/possession
pulusion/pollution
sanitatian/sanitation
televition/televissin/television

/w/ *CONFUSIONS:*

were/we're/where
wait/wate/wot/what
wich/wish/witch/which
went/when

AURAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING: in origin, the following categories containing words which students confuse are based on a lack of discrimination between certain sounds. The teaching strategy should focus on the auditory perception of the student.

SLURRING OF FINAL CONSONANTS (PARTICULARLY /t/ *AND* /d/):

an/and
attain/attend
builting/building
curren/current
done/dont
lease/least
mine/mind
one/want
pass/past
when/went

ONE PHONEME DIFFERENTIATION:

accept/except
affect/effect
choose/chose
his/he's
lose/loose
mislead/misled
one/won
then/than
weak/wake
will/well

Particularly Troublesome Sounds: /d/, /t/, /θ/, /ð/. Missing, added or confused medial sounds are most commonly /m/, /n/ and /r/.

CONSONANT CLUSTERS:

attrack/attract
contack/contac/contact

VOICED AND UNVOICED CONSONANTS (PARTICULARLY /d/ AND /t/, /f/ AND /v/)

/d/ and /t/	*/f/ and /v/*
altitute/altitude	believes/beliefs
attendant/attendant	myselve/myself
bandid/bandit	releave/relief
badle/battlemedal/metal	savely/safely
president/president	strive/strife
seeded/seated	
thread/threat	

STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS STRATEGY FOR TEACHING: these categories of error seem to be caused by the student's ignorance of or inability to distinguish parts/wholes in his conception of words. Conceptual understanding of suffixes along with visual and aural strategies are being developed.

Suffixes: particularly troublesome suffixes are -ly, -y, -ing, -er, -est, -ic, -ist.

Missing Suffixes:	*Incorrect Suffixes:*
actual/actually	biology/biologist
bad/badly	frightful/frightening
beautiful/beautifully	hypocrite/hypocritical
big/biggest	optimistical/optimistic
bore/boring	psychology/psychologist
bright/brighter	psychoanalysis/psychoanalyst
difficult/difficulty	remedize/remedy
ever/every	slightness/slightest
total/totally	tragedy/tragic
young/younger	yelled/yelling

WORD PAIR STRATEGY: this category of commonly confused words is created by students' overgeneralization of words which are some-

what alike in root, visual shape, rhythm or sound.

angerly/agrily
aspect/respect
agreedments/agreements
acquirements/requirements
brothered/bothered
instance/instant
lie/liar
morale/moral
prepare/prepair/prepare
priviledge/privilege
quiet/quite
reguarding/regarding
remainded/reminded
conversion/conversation
dumby/dummy
doughtfully/doubtfully
dissented/decended
finely/finally

VALERIE KRISHNA

THE SYNTAX OF ERROR

Perhaps the most vexing problem that teachers of basic writing face is the fact that the most serious errors that appear in student papers are those that we are the least equipped to handle, those that are in fact next to impossible to deal with by traditional methods. Unfortunately, the mistakes that students make are not always those clear-cut and predictable errors that are the most precisely described and categorized in the grammar books—errors of punctuation, spelling, agreement, tense, case, and so on. Important as these details are, they dwindle in significance next to problems of incoherence, illogicality, lack of conventional idiom or clear syntax—amorphous and unpredictable errors involving the structure of the whole sentence that are difficult to pinpoint, define, and analyze. The fact is that the most serious and the most intractable mistakes are those that do not fit into neat categories and defy analysis. Here are a few examples:

1. In regard to the Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with, it is of concern to all citizens.
2. The use of the pilgrimage was created to make the scene more realistic.
3. His concern for outward appearances is mainly to use it to convey the inner character.
4. Man has invented various types of poisons to kill insects; among the surviving insects, they have all become immune to these poisons.
5. By limiting the open enrollment program won't help to solve the problem.

A teacher who discovers a sentence of this type in a student's paper is hard put to know how to begin to deal with it. It is clear that the student has committed some sort of error. It is also clear that the error is a more serious, more fundamental mistake than the "classical" errors of verb agreement, punctuation, pronoun case,

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and so on that are systematically set out in the grammar books. A conscientious teacher will recognize the gravity of the problem and will wish to deal with it before moving on to work on conventional errors of detail. However, it is not exactly clear just what the error is that has been committed. The sentence might be labeled "illogical" or "incoherent"; the writer might be said to have "shifted syntax" in mid-sentence. Grammar books caution against illogicality and incoherence, and some of them even give a name to this type of syntax shift—the "mixed construction"—but most offer little help in correcting any of these problems. They offer little help because gross structural errors of this type are not amenable to correction by the method that is used for errors of detail.

We eradicate errors of detail by concentrating on them. Grammar books isolate, define, categorize, and in general supply us with a great deal of information about them. We know, for example, exactly where an error involving verb agreement is likely to occur (in sentences in which the subject and the verb are separated by a prepositional phrase, the verb comes before the subject, or the subject is a collective noun, and so on). Thus an error such as this is comprehensible, predictable, and amenable to correction. We can anticipate such errors and try to head them off, either by having students do exercises that duplicate the kinds of sentences that we know are likely to give rise to such errors or by training students to be especially alert for verb agreement errors in these kinds of sentences when they proofread.

We have no such guidelines for errors such as the mixed construction and other errors involving problems of structure, coherence, and logic. For one thing, labels like "illogical" and "incoherent" and terms like "mixed construction" are vague: they do not isolate and define an error clearly. For another, there are so many different ways in which a writer can shift syntax in the middle of a sentence or "mix his constructions" that such errors simply cannot be categorized and predicated in precisely the way that errors of verb agreement can. Similarly, no one can possibly anticipate all of the different ways in which a piece of writing might be illogical or incoherent. Errors of verb agreement can almost be thought of as one error—or several very well understood variations on one error—that is committed over and over again. Every mixed construction, every incoherence, every illogicality seems to be a unique and original creation. Therefore, because grammar books cannot deal with them in the same way they deal with errors of detail, they lack information

on structural errors. Hence, the teacher despairs as he feels that such errors are random, unpredictable, and impossible to handle at the same time that he recognizes that they are the most serious problems than can appear in a student's papers.

The impossibility of classifying structural errors per se and of dealing with them in the traditional way forces us into another approach. Rather than concentrating on the errors themselves as finished products and attempting to define them as such, I believe that we can understand and deal with them best by understanding the type of approach to the sentence that stands behind such errors. That is, though I do not believe that structural errors in themselves can be categorized, I do believe that the sentences in which they appear can. Many of these structural errors are not the random aberrations that they seem to be, but instead are the direct outgrowth of what I call a *weak structural core* that is disjoined from the idea that a writer is trying to express. Students who are making structural errors, though they are committing mistakes that are unique and unclassifiable in themselves, are often following a sterotyped formula in constructing the sentences in which these mistakes appear. Such writers habitually "back into" their sentences, putting the heart of their idea into prepositional phrases, object noun clauses, adjectives, adverbs, or other ancillary parts of the sentence, wasting the subject and/or the verb position on indefinite, evasive expressions such as *it is, it appears, this seems to be the case,* or on other general, abstract, imprecise words (or omitting the subject or verb entirely), and finally joining the ancillary part of the sentence to the main clause awkwardly and illogically. This habitual wasting of the subject-verb position, along with the frantic struggle to fit a central thought into a peripheral expression and then to fit the expression to the main clause is the source of many, perhaps most, of the structural errors that appear in student papers, and, I believe, contributes to idiomatic, stylistic, and grammatical errors as well. The structural errors that are the most difficult to fit into a neat category and thus the most difficult to deal with are especially likely to occur in sentences that have this feeble structure: an anemic main clause too weak or indefinite to hold up modifiers and a clumsily attached, overburdened prepositional phrase into which the writer has attempted to cram the central idea of his sentence. The way to correct such mistakes, as well as to avoid them, is to strengthen the main clause, to move the central idea into the subject and/or the verb.

This common thread runs through the examples cited above, which

seem at first glance idiosyncratic and baffling. Let us look again at the first sentence.

> In regard to the Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with, it is of concern to all citizens.

In this sentence, whatever the student wants to put forward as his central idea (and the teacher, of course, cannot be sure what it is) is very far from the core of the sentence—the subject and the verb—which is occupied by the vague expression *it is*. A teacher can help a student to rewrite this sentence by instructing him to move his central idea into the core of the sentence. Generally, if one asks the writer of such a sentence what the subject of the sentence is, he will answer "Watergate affair," "recent problems" (or both), or "White House," that is, he will name the *logical* subject of the sentence. The teacher can then point out that the logical subject is not in the position of grammatical subject, which is occupied by the uninformative word *it*. The teacher can then explain to the student that the logical subject and the grammatical subject ought to coincide and instruct the student to recompose the sentence, using the logical subject as the grammatical subject. I have found that, when students recompose sentences in this way, structural errors frequently disappear. For example, if the student decides that both "Watergate affair" and "recent problems" are his subject and moves them out of the prepositional phrase and into the position of subject, there is no longer any place for that indefinite *it* (which happens also to be a pronoun without a clear reference), which is messing up the structure of the sentence, and the student will have little difficulty in restructuring the whole sentence since the source of the problem has been removed (though he may run into a verb agreement problem because of the compound subject):

> The Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with are [or *is*, as the case may be!] of concern to all citizens.

If the student is instructed to do the same thing with the verb that he has done with the subject, the sentence improves stylistically:

> The Watergate affair and the recent problems that the White House is involved with concern all citizens.

Similarly, the second sentence cited above is easy for a student to finish, once the student has moved whatever he considers his

logical subject into the position of grammatical subject, occupied in the original sentence by the vague word *use:*

The *pilgrimage* was created to make the scene more realistic.

or

The writer (or *Chaucer*) created the pilgrimage to make the scene more realistic.

The third sentence may be rewritten in several ways, depending again on what the student decides is his logical subject. The important point is that when a word that expresses his idea more precisely is moved into the position of subject, the rest of the sentence follows easily:

Outward appearances are used to convey inner character.

or

The author (or a proper name) uses outward appearances to convey inner character.

The fourth and fifth sentence seem at first glance to exemplify errors that are very different: one a faulty pronoun reference and the other a missing verb. However, in both cases, what appears to be the logical subject has been buried in a prepositional phrase and needs to be elevated to the position of grammatical subject:

Man has invented various types of poisons to kill insects; the surviving insects have all become immune to these poisons.

Limiting the open enrollment program won't help to solve the problem.

Idiomatic errors, also difficult for teachers to deal with, may also be eliminated when the main clause is strengthened. Many idiomatic errors involve prepositions, and these often appear in sentences in which the writer has similarly put his central thought into a prepositional phrase, rather than into the subject and verb, and then joined this phrase with the wrong preposition to the main clause. The following sentence is an example:

Everybody in the world tries to make money, but everybody thinks differently in using it.

When I questioned the student who wrote this sentence, she said that she had felt uneasy about the prepositional phrase but didn't know how to go about "fixing it." I asked her what action she wanted to talk about in the second part of the sentence, whether she really wished to say something about *thinking.* She replied that she had

actually wanted to say something about *using,* and then went on immediately to *but everybody uses it differently,* automatically eliminating the unidiomatic preposition.

Some conventional grammatical errors, such as dangling participles, can also be corrected by this method, as in the following example:

> By paying directly, it is assured that we get better service.

Once a student substitutes a noun that expresses his thought more precisely than the indefinite *it,* the core of the sentence is strengthened, and the dangling participle disappears:

> Paying directly assures us better service.
> By paying directly we are assured better service.

We cannot help but wonder why students write in this way. Three possibilities suggest themselves to me.

1. It may simply be that students have a habit of attacking sentences in this roundabout way because they have the mistaken notion that simplicity and directness are the mark of the simple minded and are trying to "dress up" their writing. These introductory circumlocutions may appear impressive to them, and they may be using them to make their writing look profound. If so, this habit may be nothing more than a variation of the pompous, inflated writing affected by writers of all types (with the difference, of course, that basic writing students have a hard time pulling it off without making structural and grammatical errors).

2. Perhaps students write in this way to disguise the fact, from the reader and from themselves, that they are not thinking clearly or that they actually have nothing to say. It could be that, when ideas fail them, they take refuge in this construction simply as a means of filling up the page, hoping that the reader will not notice the difference. (There is a kind of wild logic in this process, because if one has nothing to say, it makes sense for the subject and the verb to be as nearly empty of meaning as possible.) Recently, for example, one of my students, in a paper entitled "New York City," after two detailed, interesting, coherent, and elegant paragraphs on Manhattan and Brooklyn, began his third paragraph with the startling sentence

> In the Bronx and Queens it's more of a suburban type living.

When I called the student's attention to the way in which his style had suddenly deteriorated, he confessed that he had had problems

writing this paragraph, that he really had nothing to say about the Bronx and Queens, since there is "nothing there," and wrote the paragraph only because he felt he had to "to balance out the paper."

3. A third possibility is that students write in this way because they find writing painful and words treacherous and are trying to tread as lightly as possible in the world of the written word in order not to make fools of themselves. If this is so, then attacking errors indirectly through sentence structure in the way described here, rather than directly through teaching students everything we know about errors and daily painting a bleaker and bleaker picture of all the possible ways their writing might go wrong, might be even more important than I have so far suggested. Teaching students what *to do,* if it could be worked out as completely and systematically as has our traditional method of teaching them what *not* to do, how to construct a sentence rather than how not to, may be the only kind of craftsmanship that we can present without inhibiting our students so much that we drive them into the very errors that we are trying to teach them to avoid.

NANCY DUKE S. LAY

CHINESE LANGUAGE INTERFERENCE IN WRITTEN ENGLISH

In United States, there are above 40% of the population are come from foreign country, so that there will be a large number of foreign students.

When some foreign student come into United States. Although there will be have many different that he had to learn to satisfy the American style living, but sometime he still has have their own custom, for sooner of later it will change, but he still feel that the American world just isn't right with them. Because many foreign student felt there are many different for them, like the way they eat, speak, write, live and work etc. So that why most of the foreign student feel that still stay into their own country is better than leaving their own country enter the other new nation. And it is the most foreign students' compain.

What you have read is a typical sample of the writing of a Chinese student at City College. These students are, in one way or another, still being influenced by their native language—either directly or indirectly. They come from Hong Kong, Taiwan, Southeast Asia, and Latin America. Some have grown up in Chinese communities in New York. Some speak Cantonese and Mandarin; some speak Cantonese and are learning Mandarin; some do not speak or write these languages but understand them when spoken to; some do not speak, write, or understand these languages, though their parents do; and if their parents do speak these languages, they tend to pick up the ungrammatical English that their parents speak. While these Chinese languages differ phonologically, the variations of word order and grammatical structure are so minor that, for all intents and purposes, they are grammatically the same.

This paper will focus on some key errors that these students make, many of which appear in the student writing sample above. It will

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present a body of contrastive material to help the teacher locate a number of persistent errors in writing by Chinese students which may be ascribed to a degree of linguistic interference. In dealing with these students, it is very important that the teacher have some knowledge of the causes of the interference problems. An English-Mandarin Chinese contrast table is presented first to show how specific structures in English are handled differently in Chinese. Two of the most common of these errors, *pronouns* and *pair correlative conjunctions,* are then analyzed in greater depth. The learning problems for students with these two particular features based on my experience are presented in each section. This is then followed by a suggested method of working with students which heightens the teacher's awareness of the problem.

In the following section, a contrast table is presented which indicates the important areas of interference that I discovered from writing samples of 102 freshmen Chinese students in the fall of 1972. A number of these errors occur in the student essay.

ENGLISH-MANDARIN CHINESE CONTRAST TABLE

ENGLISH	MANDARIN CHINESE
A. DIFFERENT FORMS FOR ADJECTIVES/NOUNS	
Adjectives use endings such as *-y, -ous*	One form for both adjectives and nouns.
Nouns use endings such as *-ence, -tion*	
1. His/Her sickness is very serious.	1. ta de bing hen yanjung. he/she [de] [1] sick very serious.
2. He/She is very sick.	2. ta hen bing. He/or she very sick.
B. ARTICLES BEFORE NOUNS	
Mass nouns normally do not have articles.	Non-existent; numbers plus classifiers used instead.
Count nouns normally have articles; *a, an*—indefinite *the*—definite	
3. I have a book.	3. wo you shu. I have book.

[1] In the literal, word-by-word translation into English, certain words are untranslatable, like *de, ben, jyan, dzai.* These words are bracketed in the text.

ENGLISH	MANDARIN CHINESE
4. The moon is very bright.	4. ywe-lyang hen lyang. moon very bright.
5. I have a piece of furniture.	5. wo you yi-jyan jya-jyu. I have one [jyan] furniture.
6. Give me the book.	6. gei wo shu. give I book. or: gei wo neiben shu give I that book.
C. CONJUNCTIONS Used to introduce dependent clauses.	Used as question words and indefinites. *That* is used as a demonstrative pronoun only.
7. The man who stole the money is here.	7. tou chyan de ren dzai jer. steal money [de] person dzai here.
8. I don't like anything.	8. wo shemma dou bu syihwan. I [shemma] all [negative] like.
9. I know where he lives.	9. wo jrdau ta ju dzai nar. I know he live [dzai] where.
D. CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS (although/but, because/therefore) Dependent and coordinate conjunctions are not used together.	Used together as pair correlatives.
10. Although he has money, he does not give me any.	10. sweiren ta you chyan, keshr ta bu gei wo. although he have money, but he [negative] give me.
11. Because he is very tired, he does not like to work.	11. yinwei ta hen lei, swoyi ta bu syi-hwan dzwo shr. because he very tired, therefore he [negative] like work.
E. IMPERSONAL THERE Used an an introducer.	Non-existent; many times translated as "have."
12. There are three kinds of weather.	12. you san jung chi-hou. have three [jung] weather.
F. NOUNS—INFLECTIONS Used for number.	No external or internal changes;

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	numbers and classifiers or *hendwo* "many" used before the noun.
13. I have a book.	13. wo you yi-ben shu. I have one [ben] book.
14. We have three books.	14. women you san-ben shu. we have three [ben] book.
15. I have three dollars.	15. wo you san kwai chyan. I have three [kwai] money.
16. I have many books.	16. wo you hendwo shu. I have many book.
G. PREPOSITIONS (in, on, at) Used to indicate time and place.	No Chinese equivalent for *in, on, at* when used as expressions of time. In expressions of place, there is *one* Chinese equivalent for *in, on,at.*
17. See you at three o'clock.	17. san dyan jung jyan. three o'clock see.
18. The book is in the box.	18. shu dzai hedz litou. book [dzai] box inside.
19. He is at the train station.	19. ta dzai hwoche jan. he/she [dzai] train station.
20. The book is on the table.	20. shu dzai jwodz shang. book [dzai] table top.
H. PREPOSITIONAL PHRASES Adjectival prepositional phrase comes after a noun.	Comes before the noun with the use of *de* as a linker.
21. That person in the room is Robert.	21. dzai fang-jyan de neige ren shr Lwofu. [dzai] room [de] that [ge] person is Robert.
I. PRONOUNS Special forms for object pronouns: *him, her, them,* for example.	Object pronouns are the same as subject pronouns.
22. He gives the money to him.	22. ta gei ta chyan. he/she give he/she money.
Special forms for reflexive pronouns: *himself, herself, themselves,* for example	Reflexive pronouns are the same as subject pronouns plus *dzji* 'oneself.'

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23. He gives money to himself.	23. ta gei ta dzji chyan. he/she give he/she [dzji] money.
Special forms for possessive pronouns: *his, hers, theirs,* for example.	Possessive pronouns are the same as subject pronouns plus the modifying particle *de.*
24. He gave me his money.	24. ta gei wo ta de chyan. he/she give I he [de] money.
J. VERBS—TENSE INDICATORS Tense indicators.	Non-existent; use time words.
25. He sings a song today.	25. ta jintyan changger. he/she today sing song.
26. He sang a song yesterday.	26. ta dzwotyan changger. he/she yesterday sing song.
27. He will sing a song.	27. ta mingtyan changger. he/she tomorrow sing song.
K. VERBS—AUXILIARY VERB DO Used in questions and for emphasis.	Non-existent.
28. Do you come from China?	28. ni tsung Junggwo lai ma? you from China come [ma]?
L. VERBS—VERB TO BE Used before adjectives, nouns, verbs, and pronouns.	Not normally used before stative verbs except for emphasis.
29. He is very intelligent.	29. ta hen tsung-ming. he/she very intelligent.
30. When he was sixteen years old, he went to work.	30. ta shrlyou swei de shrhou, ta chyu dzwoshr. he/she sixteen year [de] time, he/she go work.
M. VERBS—VERB TO HAVE Used as a main verb and as an auxiliary.	Used as a main verb only.
31. I have done my homework.	31. wo yijing dzwo le wo de gungke. I already do [past] I [de] homework.

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N. VERBS—INFINITIVE TO Used with the base form of the verb.	Non-existent.
32. She likes to sing.	32. ta syihwan changger. he/she like sing song.
O. WORD ORDER -ly adverbs which occur in initial, mid, and final positions are normally placed after verbs.	Adverbs are used before verbs.
33. I get sick very easily.	33. wo shr hen rungyi sheng bing de. I am very easy get sick.

Because Chinese students have special problems with pronouns and pair correlative conjunctions, a detailed analysis of these two features follows.

PRONOUNS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

The subject and object pronouns in Chinese are the same. The reflexive and the possessive pronouns are formed by adding *de* for possessive and *dzji* for the reflexive.

Pronoun referents used are either *tamen dzji, ta dzji,* or just plain *dzji.* When the subject pronoun is used in subject position and the possessive particle *de* is added, then it is possible for one to say:

1. a. tamen de wenti hen dwo.[2]
   b. they [de] problem very many.
   c. They have many problems.

in contrast with,

2. a. tamen dzji de wenti hen dwo.
   b. they oneself [de] problem very many.
   c. Their own problems are many.

In sentence 2, the implications would be "their own internal problems" as opposed to "their problems in general," which could include internal and external ones.

[2] Illustrative examples will be presented in the following manner: (a) Chinese romanization, (b) literal, word-by-word translation into English, and (c) free translation of the whole utterance into English.

In many cases, *dzji* "oneself" is used alone as a pronoun referent. If it is used without the pronoun, then it would stand for *ta dzji* "he oneself," *tamen dzji* "they oneself," *ni dzji* "you oneself," depending on the context.

Pronouns in Chinese are used at the beginning of a story. The reader is supposed to find out who is referred to from the context.

3. a. tamen dwei wo lai shwo haishr syinde bing ren, wo swo jrdau de bugwo shr tamen de sying—au erson.[3]
   b. They to me are still new patients, I [swo] know only they [de] last name—Olson.
   c. To me they are still new patients. The only thing that I know is their last name—Olson.

In Chinese, aside from the type of pronouns mentioned (those which take the place of nouns), words such as *jei* "this," *jeiyang* "this way," *nei* "that," *you sye* "some," *shei* "who" are also used as pronouns.

Shei "who" is also used as a pronoun to take the place of the object or complement position. However, there is no differentiation between "who" and "whom" in Chinese; neither is there between "whoever" and "whomever." Compare:

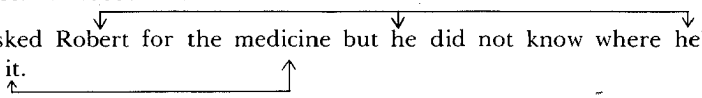
4. a. ta shr shei?
   b. he is who
   c. Who is he?
5. a. ni ba shu gei shei?
   b. you [ba][4] book give who?
   c. You gave the book to whom? *OR*
      To whom did you give the book?

Questions like "Who gave you the book?" or "Who is that man?" are not especially difficult for Chinese students to learn; but questions like "To whom did you give the book?" or sentences like "The man from Argentina, whom you saw me with last night, has published a book of poems." are very difficult. Not only is the form "whom" confused with "who," but the object or complement position in English appears at the beginning of the question which does not hold true in Chinese.

[3] Wang, Wen Shing. *Syandai Wen-Sywe.* No. 32, 1967. Szjye Wen wu publisher, Taipei. p. 1 (trans.).

[4] *ba* is a marker in Chinese used to shift the direct object before the verb.

In English, it is very important to be consistent and clear in one's reference. In the following sentence, arrows connect the pronouns and their antecedents:



The Chinese translation of the above sentence will be,

6. a. wo syang Lwofu yau yau, keshr ta bu jrdau ba yau fang dzai nali.
   b. I toward Robert want medicine, but he not know [ba] medicine put in where.

Compare these two sentences:

7. a. Lwofo de fuchin you yige syin dzye, keshr Lwofu bu jrdau ta gan shemma.
   b. Robert [de] father have one new job, but Robert not know he do what.
   c. Robert's father has a new job and Robert doesn't know what he's doing.
8. a. Lwofu de fuchin you yige syin dzye, ta dzji ye bu jrdau ta dzai gan shemma.
   b. Robert [de] father have one new job, he oneself also not know he do what.
   c. Robert's father has a new job and he doesn't know what he's doing.

In sentence (7), since *Robert* is used in the second part of the sentence, the pronoun *ta* "he, she" refers to *Robert's father.* Also, *keshr* "but" is a more appropriate connector than *and* because of the two different subjects involved.

In the second part of sentence (8), *he* refers to *Robert's father;* thus, in Chinese *dzji* is used after the first *ta* to refer to "he oneself."

LEARNING PROBLEMS FOR STUDENTS

1. Since subject and object pronouns are identical in Chinese, pronoun referents have become a problem for Chinese students, especially when they have to refer to something previously mentioned.

I asked *he* to come.[5]

Give this to *they.*

[5]These are actual student sentences.

That would make *I* wonder and surprise.

Every parents always love the son and daughter have a great future.

2. Since Chinese students are not used to changes in inflection, another problem concerns plural reflexive pronouns. Errors like "ourself," "theyself," "themself," seem to be the most common ones.

Or how did the people thinking of *themself?*

3. Another difficulty is how to use the correct pronoun reference in the sentence. Chinese students tend to make unclear, vague references with words like *it, this,* and *others.* In some sentences, the pronouns have no specific references at all:

But still *this* is not the only reason. (The *reason* was never stated.)

Their standard is much lower than *others.* (The *others* were not explained.)

In the other sentences, incorrect pronoun referents are used:

A people finish high school could be a salespeople but can't be a psychologist because *he* don't have the knowledge. Thus, I think a young person should go to college and learn as much as *they* can.

4. The unnecessary use of the reflexive pronoun is another common error.

They themselves went to the movie.

Whereas statements such as this are used in English only for emphasis of the personal pronoun, the Chinese student tends to introduce the form in normal unemphasized statements.

PAIRS OF CORRELATIVE CONJUNCTIONS IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

In Chinese there are many pairs of correlatives which connect two clauses together into compounds or compound parts of sentences, such as subjects or verbs. The following is a partial list of the paired correlatives in Chinese:

1. a. *sweiren* ta hen you chyan, *danshr* ta hen bu kwaile.
   b. Although he very rich, but he very not happy.
   c. Although he is rich, he is not happy.
2. a. *Yinwei* ren dwo, *swoyi* fan bugou chr.

b. Because people many, therefore food not enough eat.
c. Because there were many people, the food was not enough.

3. a. *jryau* ni neng lai *jyou* keyi le.
b. so long as you can come, then alright [past].
c. So long as you could come, then it is all right.

4. a. *jihran* women dou meiyou chr dzaufan, na *jyou* sya lou chyu ba.
b. In as much as we all have not eat breakfast, then go downstairs.
c. In as much as we did not eat breakfast, let us go downstairs and eat.

5. a. ta *budan* mei yubei gungke, *ping chye* hai yau chau bye ren de.
b. he not only not prepare for his homework, but he also want to copy from others.
c. Not only does he not prepare his homework, but he also wants to copy from somebody else.

6. a. *yaubushr* sya yu, *jyoushr* sya sywe.
b. if not rain, then snow.
c. If it is not raining, then it it snowing.

As the above examples illustrate, it is important for the teacher to know that the similarities between some correlatives in English and Chinese do not imply a similar system with interchangeable parts. It is probably important to point out that words like *although* and *because* typically function as subordinators (or subordinating conjunctions) in English and are not accompanied by a correlative in another clause. *Although* and *but* do not function as correlatives in English. *Although* signals that the statement made in the main clause is made in spite of, as a contrast to, or in opposition to what is said in the clause introduced by the subordinator *although; but* signals that the statement following it is made in spite of, as a contrast to, or in opposition to what is said in the other clause. Similarly, *because* signals cause; *therefore* signals result.

The use of one subordinator *only* is sufficient to signal in English what in Chinese requires a pair correlative conjunctions in these two critical cases. This problem might be why the Chinese students, when they attempt to transfer the concept into English, also transfer the grammatical formula by which it is expressed in Chinese.

In Chinese, the position of correlatives in a sentence depends upon whether the two clauses have different subjects or the same subject. If the two clauses have different subjects, then *sweiren* "although" occupies the pre-subject position, as in:

7. a. *sweiren* wo syang chr, *danshr* ni bu joen.

b. although I desire to eat, but you not allow.
c. I would like to eat, but you won't allow me.

If the two clauses have identical subjects, *sweiren* "although" occupies the post-subject position, as in:

8. a. wo *sweiren* syang chr, *danshr* hen bau.
b. I although desire eat, but very full.
c. I would like to eat, but now I am full.

LEARNING PROBLEMS FOR STUDENTS

Examples. At my night school, most students were adult, I just couldn't get along with the old guy, *because* they were always made fun of me, *therefore,* I dropped out in the next semester.

Although the most demanding job are not offered by the college, *but* going to college could prepare a young person in other field, such as more understanding toward the society and more social contact with other.

Because she is tired of cleaning the house and looking after the children *therefore,* she has devoted her life to go out to work.

The most common errors in pair correlatives found in the English writing of Chinese students are the use of *because/therefore* and *although/but.* These two pairs are used very frequently in Chinese. Whenever a *why* question is asked, the answer has to be *because/therefore.*

The Chinese consider the use of *because/therefore* and *although/but* as natural and normal. The tendency to use both in English is very strong among Chinese learners of English.

Chinese students also get confused with *since* and *although,* and sentences like the following occur very often.

Ex. *Since* this is a very common problem to all high school seniors, but also is very hard to explain deeply.

As one can see from the different contrasts presented above, writing English is very complicated for Chinese students. In trying out a number of approaches with them, I accidentally discovered a way to get students to think and to develop language awareness when they write. I was having a conference with one of my ESL students about one of his compositions. The student, serious about his study and aware of his need for language practice, wanted very much

to improve his English. In that particular essay where he described the educational system in Hong Kong, he had written, "There are private schools more than public schools in Hong Kong." Knowing that he had translated this structure from Chinese, I asked why he had made that error. Since he could not give me an answer at that moment, I told him to go home and give it some thought. The next day he wrote the following paragraph for me:

> Why did I make this mistake? It is because I always use the Chinese writing to translate in the English writing. The Chinese always say that (there are private schools *more than* public schools). In Chinese [here the student wrote the sentence in Chinese characters]. In English the word "more" is before the noun "private school," but in Chinese, the noun "private school" is before the word "more." So it is why I make this mistake.

The student's ability to analyse this error by referring back to the word order in the mother tongue is a sign that he also may be able to develop the habit of self-correction in the process of composition itself, first, by a heightened awareness of the extent to which he is translating from the mother tongue, and then by an active seeking-out of appropriate English forms as the vehicle to express what he wants to express. All this implies a strong grammar component in any course that seeks to develop such a skill. It does not require the teacher to do contrastive grammar for many different languages because it is the student himself who finds or fails to find a form or pattern in the native language which he has misappropriated in writing the second language. However, a teacher's knowledge of different patterns in Chinese, Spanish, or non-standard English is, of course, useful. The above hypothesis about the student's projected ability to correct written work through conscious contrast with the structures of the mother tongue has been tried out successfully and should be tested more extensively. Contrastive analysis may still be an issue today in language teaching. However, the approach of asking students to think through the reasons for the error as a result of native language interference is worth pursuing.

BETTY RIZZO AND SANTIAGO VILLAFANE

SPANISH LANGUAGE INFLUENCES ON WRITTEN ENGLISH

It is difficult to isolate what appear to be characteristic errors made by Spanish-speaking students in our urban schools when they are writing English; their writings are palimpsests through which the effects of many influences may be glimpsed. Among these influences may be the kind of Spanish spoken in their homes and neighborhoods; the kind of English spoken in their homes and neighborhoods either by Spanish-speaking people or by members of other ethnic groups with their own characteristic adaptations of standard English; and early conceptions, or misconceptions, as to how to write English. It is perfectly possible that sometimes a writing error which might have been caused by Spanish interference may also be shared, and hence reinforced, by the usage of other ethnic groups. In the last analysis, it is not possible to claim that any particular error in writing can be better understood by exclusively applying knowledge of the Spanish language, but it is one perspective, among others, which may help.

To increase the difficulty of the problem, the Spanish-speaking students in the City College population have such a wide variety of experience with both Spanish and English that perhaps we have no one kind of student we can call typical. First, the students or their parents have come from places ranging from Puerto Rico and Cuba to Ecuador and Chile, so that the Spanish itself, and the way it is spoken, varies. More importantly, the amount of Spanish that students know varies tremendously. On the one hand we have a few Spanish-speaking students, lately arrived in the United States, who know the Spanish grammar well and who speak formal Spanish fluently. At the other extreme are the students who have been born

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and reared here, whose first language nevertheless was Spanish, who still speak a kind of informal Spanish to their parents and friends, but who have no formal grammatical training in Spanish and who read the language minimally, in ads and newspapers. Between these two extremes we have students with every gradation of knowledge of Spanish.

Nevertheless, as those of us who have taught the writing of English to these students for several years know, there are certain kinds of errors which show up again and again in their papers, so that frequently we are able to say with accuracy, "This is the paper of a student from a Spanish-speaking background." Furthermore, the same kinds of errors, if not the same number, may turn up in the papers of both the New York-born and the Cuban-born student. For instance, a native New Yorker, in perfect control of spoken English, one day carelessly writes *birtually* for *virtually,* probably because *v* tends to be pronounced *b* in Spanish. Speaking from practical experience, it appears to us that *any* knowledge of the structure of Spanish, spoken as well as written, can result in the student's transferring certain conventions or constructions which are then perceived as "errors" in written English.

A student appreciates knowing, when he finds he is committing some error, that he is not an inferior learner, a failure at writing his own language, but that he has simply been analogizing—the most respectable of mental activities—in a situation where, rather exceptionally, to analogize produces error. In by far the greater number of situations, to draw analogies between the structures and usages of Spanish and English would result in acceptable writing. It is from the exceptional cases, when the structures of the two languages are not exactly analogous, that errors derive. Thus we must emphasize at the outset that in our view the writing problems we treat in this paper do not indicate a lack of intellectual development or learning potential on the part of Spanish-speaking students, but are instead a direct result of the students' use of analogy to deal with the often idiosyncratic nature of English syntax.

In this paper we present some of the errors often made by these students that appear to have origins in Spanish grammar, pronunciation, usage or spelling.[1]

[1]The list is by no means intended to be comprehensive; it is merely suggestive. The problems dealing with verbs, for instance, which might make a very long paper in themselves, are here only touched upon.

Some kinds of errors result in what at first glance appears to be a carelessly omitted word in English.[2]

The first I would do is to buy myself a beautiful house.
But who really is *the responsible* for people's education?
I don't understand why if *a young* is fifteen years old *has* to go from junior high school to high school without adecuate preparation.
The reason a child may see and hear things more differently is because *has* no reason to see things otherwise.
Is not only the people itself.
But *is* a matter of fact that I am always trying to get more and more education for myself because I realized that *is* absolutely neccesary.

In fact, all these errors are in all probability caused by Spanish interference. The first three errors may arise from the fact that in Spanish the combined article and adjective can be nominalized, or used in place of the English language's article, adjective and noun or pronoun, so that *the beautiful* in Spanish means *the beautiful one, the young* means *the young one,* and so on. The remaining five errors may be explained by the fact that in Spanish the subject pronoun may be omitted, because verb forms are differentiated so that the person and number of the pronoun are perfectly clear. The writers of the sentences have probably been translating too literally from Spanish into English.

Another omission common in the Spanish-speaking student's writing is the *n* on the indefinite article before a word beginning with a vowel sound. This refinement has no equivalent in Spanish and is hard for students to master.

The main point of the passage is to give you the idea of what college requires and to give you *a* idea of what the college student is *expect* to know.

The omission of the *ed* from the past tense and from the past participle, as in the example above, is difficult to attribute to a principle connected particularly with Spanish, especially as this omission is common to many non-Spanish-speaking students. But in the case of Spanish-speaking students there is a reinforcing principle, the fact that because the final *t* and *d* are very difficult to pronounce, they tend to be dropped in *spoken* English.

[2] All examples are from actual student papers.

It is a place *fill* with rats and filth lying everywhere, a place where one cannot walk the streets safely at night for fear of being *attack.*

Besides the errors caused by omission, there are certain common interference errors of addition.

The problem with the American students is that they don't worry about *the school.*

I hope and I pray that by 1980 *the education* and *the students* will be of a better class.

The main point of the passage is staten the problems that we are going to face in the future as the result of *the poor education.*

In Spanish the definite article is used, as above, before generalized and abstract nouns.

Another troublesome addition is the refinement of making the adjective agree in number with its noun, according to Spanish usage:

In *publics schools,* as far as I can see, seems like nobody cares about the students. (In this case, the *s* on *public* was carefully added by the student after proofreading.)

In the *differents colleges* they can learn other languajes but in the High Schools or *elementals schools,* they learn one languaje and the recieve a low idea about another languajes.

It is because I want to know some *personals things* of that person.

Maybe it changes because the *generations* are *differents.*

The double negative is permissible in Spanish, so that an extra negative may frequently be added to an English sentence by a Spanish-speaking student. In Spanish, a statement is first negated by the insertion of a *no* before the verb; then the subject and adverbs are changed to negatives wherever possible.

She did*n't* do *nothing* about *nothing.*

I feel that now children are *not* learning absolutely *nothing* for schools.

In some cases the Spanish-speaking student is confused when there is a distinction made in English which is not present in Spanish. For instance, in Spanish the relative pronoun *que* may mean *that, which, what, who* or *whom.* Accordingly, the Spanish-speaking student frequently fails to distinguish between *which,* referring to objects, and *who,* referring to people. *Which* is, for some reason, the preferred form.

Probably, comparing a student from another country, *which* has only

gotten to eight grade has a better knowledge academically than a High School graduated student from the U.S.

In this college we find many different people *which* have many different ideas.

Another such error may be caused by the fact that *mucho* in Spanish is the equivalent of both *much* and *many* in English.

The married woman has *much* financial troubles.

The comparison of adjectives, too, appears to differ enough in the two languages to cause problems. In Spanish the most common method of comparison is to use the adverb *más* for both *more* and *most*. The Spanish-speaking student may accordingly have difficulty in handling the distinction between comparative and superlative. *Worse* and *worst* seem most frequently to be confused.

I had recieve a good education better than many people that are around me and *worst* than many around me.

Another kind of error is caused by the fact that while two grammatical forms may both exist in both languages, the frequency with which each is used may vary. Such a situation prevails in the case of the infinitive and the gerund. In English, verbs may take as a complement either the infinitive or the gerund; in Spanish, almost all verbs must take the infinitive. The Spanish speaker will therefore tend to use the infinitive where in English the gerund is the correct form.

Apollo tricks Mario *to believe* that he is his girlfriend.

I have always dreamed *to live*.

The selfishness of both generations *to understand* each other is worsening every day.

There must be an immediate change of these techniques to be able to prepare the individuals for a productive service to society, since people increasingly become more interested *to participate* in the complicated activities of their communities.

Another common problem with infinitives is that sometimes, either in Spanish or in English, the *to* of the infinitive may be omitted, while it is required in the translation.

What we must *to do* is get a better education. (must = tengo que)

Literal translation of idiom is probably the most fruitful source of awkwardness and error, and is interfused with the problem of literal translation of prepositions.

If you want your child to grow *in a right way,* give him a better community housing environment. (in a right way = de un modo recto)

All the while the heads of these countries in the Middle East are at war, the people who was not willing to die and want peace are the ones who are fighting. (all the while = mientras tanto)

The years are *getting on him.* (los años le estan encima)

I *made* no notice. (no le hise caso)

I *made* a line. (yo hise fila)

If all English teachers were like Mr. Pedullo, English would be enjoyed by students, and teachers wouldn't have to *worry of* students cutting class. (worry = preocuparse de)

Concerning to the education in the U.S., I don't see any advance. (concerning to = en lo concerniente a, respecto a, tocante a)

I went dancing *to the Caguas Highway Inn.* (al Caguas Highway Inn could translate as *at* or *to*)

He got *married with* his wife in 1969. (married with = casarse con)

Spelling problems are sometimes apparently connected to pronunciation problems, and sometimes seem to arise because the student is familiar with the somewhat different spelling of an equivalent Spanish word. It may also be that even when the Spanish-speaking student is not very familiar with Spanish spelling, he may try to make English words conform to the Spanish norm of one vowel and one consonant per syllable.

The fact that Spanish-speaking students are inclined to pronounce the letter *i* in English as *ī* (so that sĭt becomes sīt) seems to cause two different kinds of spelling errors. Perhaps assuming that the English letter *i* is pronounced like the Spanish *ī,* the student uses *i* to spell the sound *ī.*

Nixon has proven himself irresponsible and *deciving* to America and the world.

One must *percive* things as an adult.

Some teachers don't put much attention to their students so that it makes them *fill* like getting out of school and finding a job.

A complementary error may occur because the speaker has been mispronouncing the word, and now substitutes a written word that he spells as he is pronouncing.

Is very simple to state that to *leave* in this world we must have some education.

His interest, his culture, everything, even his language made him feel out of place when he has to *seat* down in a classroom where they are speaking a foreign language to him.

Consonants are rarely if ever doubled in Spanish, and often a doubled consonant in English is the major difference between two closely related words; in this case, the student tends to drop a consonant. Even when there is no closely equivalent Spanish word, the student may tend to change a doubled to a single consonant.

The needs of writing and reading skills of a high order will be more *necesary.* (necesario)

I have received a fragmented "education" wich . . . taugh me a lot of "knowledges" about *diferent* thing, without educating me. (diferente)

The English language is teached in a very poor *maner.* (manera)

It requires all what this society needs, that is: more interaction, understanding, and *comunication* of old and new ideas. (comunicación)

After the student becomes aware that a word has a doubled consonant, he frequently seems to double the wrong consonant:

But is a matter of fact that I am always trying to get more and more education for myself because I realized that is absolutely *neccesary.*

I consider for me specially is kind of hard because of the language, but not *impposible.*

The kind of education we receive is bad enough to destroy people from the *beggining.*

Spanish-speaking students frequently seem to misspell an English word to make it accord more closely with a Spanish equivalent or with Spanish phonetic principles.

I think that the *apaty* of teachers, students and parents as well are contributing to the failure of the Educational *sistem.* (apatía, sistema)

I don't understand why if a young is fifteen years old has to go from junior high school without *adecuate* preparation (adecuado)

I was prepare to live in a *diferent* country whit *diferent* languege and *tradictions.* (diferente, tradición)

Although the words *when* and *went, want* and *what,* are confused by other writers than Spanish-speakers, they are so frequently confused by Spanish-speaking students that once again mispronunciation seems to be part of the cause of confusion. Spanish-speaking students may avoid pronouncing *h,* and if the Spanish speaker pronounces neither the *h* in *when* or the difficult final *t* in *went,* the confusion between the two words becomes understandable. *Want,* too, pronounced without the *t,* becomes similar to *what,* pronounced without either *h* or *t.*

These people and this place have been the best education for me because they have taught me *want* it is to be without one.

I *what* people to see me as all big and all powerful.

I *when* dancing.

Finally, while it is fairly easy to identify the errors the Spanish-speaking student commits in writing English, it is less obvious that there are some English constructions which typically have no parallels in Spanish, and which he may avoid using. His grasp of these unfamiliar structures, then, may be to some extent a measure of his proficiency in writing English.

One of the tests for such a student is the proper use of the possessive with the apostrophe and *s*. In Spanish the possessive is indicated by the alternative form: *the shoe of the girl,* rather than *the girl's shoe.* The Spanish-speaking student may still favor the equivalent form.

Meanwhile, the uncle of the boy was rushing everywhere looking for him.

Somehow in the fight the dog managed to injure the tongue of the cat.

Another such test, also involving the unfamiliar apostrophe, is the verbal contraction, for which there is no parallel in Spanish. The contraction may either be omitted, or improperly spelled.

Many students are at fault in that they *do not* recognize the importance of education.

It is very diferent living in a country *that is not* similar to the one you were born and race.

I will have to try and work hard to learn how to read, understand and write in English.

I *could'nt* say that since I'm a foreigner, my troubles are the fault of others.

In Spanish, the indirect object is always indicated by the preposition *to.* A Spanish-speaking writer, then, might write *Give the ball to the child,* instead of *Give the child the ball.*

Only the teacher can give the knowledge to the student.

Clauses are far more frequently required in Spanish than in English. There are many instances in English where a prepositional phrase would be stylistically preferable to a relative clause, but this would not necessarily be so in Spanish. As in the case of the indirect object, then, use of the form preferred in English would be a sign of the

writer's proficiency. The Spanish speaker might write *the baby that has the cold* rather than *the baby with the cold.*

When I was almost graduated from high school I was more like a student that was in the eight grade.

Clauses are also used in Spanish after such verbs as *want, expect, ask* and *tell,* where we would tend to use a verbal complement. *I wanted her to dance* would be, in Spanish, *I wanted that she would dance. He asked me to hurry* would become *He asked that I would hurry.*

My professor expected that I would not pass the test.

In sum, the writing of a Spanish-speaking student may sometimes seem heavy with clauses and with *thats.*

Today's world is such that we have to put into practice whatever that we have learned.

Another problem for Spanish-speaking students may arise because the Spanish language does not use the verb *to do* to form the intensive as the English does (*I do see, I did see*). It is accordingly sometimes difficult for the Spanish speaker to frame a question properly in English.

You understand this problem?

Because the gerund is less frequent in Spanish than in English, it is a mark of sophistication for the Spanish speaker to use it, as in *seeing is believing,* even though *to see is to believe* is not incorrect.

To read and to write, are these skills of a high order?

Adverbs in Spanish are more frequently used with the preposition than with the inflected ending, *mente.* Thus Spanish speakers might prefer to say *he runs with grace,* rather than *he runs gracefully.*

My math teacher puts his point across with skill.

In English, however, the inflected ending is more frequently used.

It is valuable to both teacher and student to recognize why a student writes as he does, and why he commits certain characteristic errors. When the teacher perceives that the student is not committing errors out of ignorant willfulness or willful ignorance, he will begin to show a necessary respect for and interest in where the student has been and what he has been learning before his arrival in his present class. There is, we think, a kind of logic behind almost

any writing error. A good writing teacher should try to understand the logic that the student is using, whether it is properly applied or misapplied; if misapplied, the teacher should point out the alternative system and explain that one is standard in English, and one is not. It may make a great deal of difference to a student to know that he has not been dumb, but that he has simply been using one system of logic where another is called for. Remediation cannot be accomplished by the teacher's simply laying the learning on the student; the exploration should be mutual.

ISABELLA HALSTED

PUTTING ERROR IN ITS PLACE

I began teaching Basic Writing six years ago by, first of all, doing my homework: aside from reading the popular classics on ghetto life, I found articles about dialect and went to lectures. On the first day of my first class, I presented my students with a list of all the errors they would most likely be making during the semester. In the left margin of this sheet, I had handwritten all the symbols I would be using to indicate their errors in red, and for each one, I supplied sentences with examples of subject-verb agreement mistakes, verb tense inconsistencies, plural *s*'s left off, *etc.*—sentences I had either gleaned from the texts I had been reading or had made up, using Relevant contexts. (In those days, relevant was spelled with a capital R.) By the end of the semester, I was quite satisfied that many of the students had learned, for example, that subjects should agree with verbs, that "John book" circled in red was a problem to do with possession. Students who showed they knew what these errors were got good grades—they passed the tests—and if they continued to slip up in their own writing, I figured it mainly would just take time.

It was only when the special program I was working in established a work-study system where older students could tutor others that I began to learn something about teaching students how to write. I eavesdropped while Tony, whom I had hired to tutor some of my "weaker" students, worked with Deborah on one of her papers in my office. I cannot remember now exactly what they were saying as they looked at the sheet; what I do remember is how they were both attacking it with pleasure—drawing marks across it, writing in, starting anew upside down on the side—because it really didn't say what she meant at all. His saying: "Look, man, this doesn't make sense, to me anyway. I just don't get the scene. And by the way, that was *yesterday*." "Oh, yeah," (she sighs, scratching it in) "*-ed*, right?" "Right . . . sure . . . So, go on tell me what you *really* felt when

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he looked at you that way on the bus." "Well . . . ," she begins, "I . . ." "So why didn't you say so in the first place? Put it *down.*" (She starts in.) "*Good!*" I could say that of course Deborah felt more comfortable with another student, and in this case, another Black, and leave it at that. But to do so would be skirting the issue: Tony was teaching writing, not Error.

The novice teacher of remedial writing may never be as misguided as I was, but I believe that most of us even after years of experience in this field still tend to fall back on Error, sometimes as an old friend. This is most likely because here we are on solid ground—for if we are rightfully questioning everything else we are doing, we can never doubt our growing expertise in the recognition of Error. We need only look at the kind of feedback we tend to give our students on their papers—especially when in a hurry. The words circled in vivid color ("blood," as one student puts it), the cop-out comment "awkward" (or "AWK!"), or "This paper is better than the last one, *but* . . ."—all show the penchant we have for teaching the *good* in terms of what it is *not.* And whether we mean it to be so, our students recognize what they already have learned so well: this is what the teacher looks for, this is what writing is all about: The Avoidance of Error. Our students tell us so, in many ways.

Witness Lois, a student whose anxiety runs high, though her writing is superior to most in my class this semester:

> I'm sorry my typing is so bad and its' rather messy, I was going to type it agin. But I just couldn't make it (This is why I didn't go to class today) I hope you will take into account my effort and disregard the untidyness.

"What do you do when you sit down to write?" I ask Diane, who is biting the end of her ballpoint, unable to start. "Well, first I figure out what you want me to say, then I try to say it." Merline writes in pencil so light that you can hardly read it. Stan writes pages and pages with never a single indentation, the *-ed* and *-s* endings sometimes there, sometimes not, and all of it joined by commas. He leaves as soon as his hand gets tired or the bell rings, flinging it all at me. David, in an hour's time, writes, rewrites, rewrites and hands in six sentences, in very neat, impeccably neat script. Sam, during a free-writing exercise ("just write, forget grammar, write anything that's in your mind, write until I say stop"), lets it all out:

> I am behind in my writing for my English class. I have delt with

my writing in the past but. I think this time it's got the best of me. When it comes to writing I have the right idea in my mind but I am can not put it down on paper. I know how important it is to stay in college and to be able to express your self in writing. I know I have troubles in my writing and in my mind I said I want to overcome these probelms but these is allway something on my mind that stops me from writing.

(What is that "something" on Sam's mind?)

These students have in common their alienation from writing—writing is a foreign activity. Little in their experience has shown them the significance of written language in their lives—its daily necessity, its possibilities for discovery, its pleasures—or the many purposes to which they can put this kind of language. True, their school experience has drilled them to comply with, if not necessarily to respect, certain pragmatic uses for writing, but the focus has often been the avoidance of Error. The student whose egregious grammatical, syntactical, and proofreading habits place him in English 1 and the student in English 2 or 3 who writes what she figures I want her to say are alike in their distance from the process of writing and their preoccupation with the possibility of wrongdoing. Sam, of course, has an enormous obstacle: he lacks the basic skills required for communication in written standard English, and knows this so well that it "stops me from writing." But Diane is also deprived—she writes brief, vapid, generalized essays, organized simplistically, never reflecting her complicated person, her intelligence, or her desire in spoken dialogue to express her often opinionated views. Sam has an important edge on her: he knows he wants to "put it down on paper."

In a departmental exam, one student was outspoken in his view of the problem:

> Is writing easier than talking? I believe it is not because writing has a lot of regulations where talking doesn't have so many. . . . Grammer happens to be something that requires rules and regulations. Grammer includes things such as, noun and verb agreement, when is the proper time to use adjectives and adverbs, and then what punctuation mark is needed at the end of the sentence. English happens to be the worst language to write in because this is the only language which has exception. . . . Spelling is another hardship for many people. English being a rotten language anyway encounters many difficulties because English is derived from many languages and also many words have different spellings in different situations dued to these so-called

> exeptions to the exceptions. . . . After one has conquered these mistakes in writing, there is the main problem left which is trying to project one's ideas in writing to another person. . . . In talking the main thing is communication. . . . In talking you can forget a few things and make it up but in writing it is disastorous.

This student is freer than most from the curse he describes—he has taken a clear stance of resigned disgust and calls it all "disastorous"—, but I feel that he is speaking for the rest of them: Writing is a burden; English "grammer" is full of rules, regulations and hardships ("being a rotten language anyway"); the goal is first to *conquer the mistakes.* All would agree: talking is easier, yes, because thank god—and by contrast—in talking, at least, "the main thing is communication." (In writing, it's not.)

Like this one, our students come to us with a thorough misconception of what writing is all about. Only a rare few say they enjoy it. Some will admit outright that they fear it. When I asked a class to describe how their attitude had changed, if at all, since the beginning of the semester, one wrote: "I guess it's changed. I don't think I'm as afraid as I was before. Maybe that made all the difference." Another: "I can write more words and ideas than I normally did in the past. I am not scared to write about anything I feel." Others, as I have suggested, reveal their fear and dislike through the way they do it, rather than what they directly say—*e.g.*, in the refusal to proofread, the anxiety to "find out what you want me to say," the manic concern with neatness, or conversely, the wish to be unreadable, or to get it all out of the way as fast as possible. At the ages of eighteen or nineteen, they are so engaged to the fear of Error (read that also: "What is Right?" "What do you want me to say?" "What is the Rule?" "Forgive my typing errors.") that they are incapable of spontaneity or trust in themselves. And lacking these, how can they begin to break through to writing? How can they hope to succeed—or be willing to fail here and there along the way? And where do we come in?

I believe that the students' fixation on Error is equally matched by our own, however well-meaning we be. We must look again at our own attitudes and the images of language and of writing we project in the classrooms and in our offices as we read and mark our students' papers. Yet so often here it is Error, not communication, that is being taught. A case in point: the other day a former student came to my office extremely upset with the first long paper she had written for her present English teacher. I turned each page,

looking at red marks: circled commas (misplaced); carats (word missing); every misspelled word underlined with an occasional remonstratory remark like "What, Miss X, you've done it *again!*"; and one or two "good points" in the margin. I got to the end of the paper and found an oversized *F* with the brief comment: "Although this paper shows considerable thought and is well-organized, your run-ons and spelling mistakes are *inexcusable.*" This teacher had doubtless thought that by emphasizing errors, he might jolt the student into doing something about them. Needless to say, the effect was the opposite. Rather than emphasizing and so encouraging her performance where it mattered—her thought and her ability to communicate it logically to her reader—he reinforced her pessimism and sense of despair. He was teaching Error, not writing.

Are we unwittingly perpetuating attitudes which are a major cause of our students' problems with writing? As we become masters of Error, more and more skillful in this pursuit, it seems that we are very hard put to agree on what good writing is—and this is part of where the trouble lies.

It is doubtful that in the last analysis writing effectiveness can be measured wholly objectively—and those who claim this, I feel, ignore the subtleties involved in what constitutes communication—but it is surely possible to find a middle ground between that extreme and the other, which refuses objectivity altogether. That teachers do apply standards they consider absolute to their students' writing is a fact, yet the vast discrepancy in teachers' standards is legion. At a Basic Writing meeting recently, teachers were asked to be "blind readers" of several papers, to simply place these students on various levels and to justify their choice. Of a group of merely twenty-five or thirty teachers, all with considerable experience in the field, there were those who placed a student's paper in English 3 where others would have put it in English 1. Some teachers focussed on grammar mistakes; others ignored these in favor of logic; others loved style. Yet very few, I think, had they read any of these papers at leisure, would have said: "This is a student who can write, who doesn't need my help."

And if that is so—if teachers generally acknowledge a student's need for help—there must be a means of defining what constitutes writing that is *not* in need of help. What *do* we mean by good writing? Why do we sometimes sense that student X, with the occasional dropped *-ed*'s and peculiar word order configurations, might actually make it on his own? What is it about Y's writing, grammatically

competent, neatly organized, that makes us feel she needs at least a semester more? Why do we place a student in English 2 rather than English 1? Why do we decide the English 2 student can skip English 3? We are given decisions like this to make, but can we define our standards for judgment? If we acknowledge that a major problem our students (and we ourselves) have is a fixation on Error, an anxiety about "conquering the mistakes," what can we do to put Error in its place?

We should begin by a reconsideration of what Error is, for writing, and reaffirm in the process what we mean by *good* writing so that we may instead teach *that.* As I have suggested so far, Error fixation includes the whole range: from what we might call the "details" of the language to the broadest areas—the logic and substance of the whole. So often, that attitude of mind in the student which worries to the point of paralysis about whether or not the grammar is "right" is the same attitude which automatically responds to a teacher's suggestion with "What do you want me to say? How do you want me to say it?"—attitudes which, of course, mirror the way the student has been taught to view writing.

How do we put Error in its place and so get on to the business of writing? Of course, we must become fully acquainted with the sources of errors of whatever nature in our students' papers and, if we don't have it already, build respect in ourselves for the validity of the languages our students are masters of and the cultures they reflect. This knowledge will help us to see Error in a different light and alter the ways in which we deal with it together, our students and we. We should give due respect to the importance of Error for what it is—no more *and* no less. Error is certainly *not* Sin; it is not Crime punishable by *F.* As Orwell once wrote, "Good prose is like a window pane." Like soot on the pane, Error is something that gets in the way of the clear vision. We know this: we are irritated by misused words and clumsy sentences just as we are by faulty logic or misused facts—and in our reading, by a printer's mistake. Error on all levels is distracting, annoying, obstructive. Error is inexcusable ultimately, yes, not because it is Wrong *per se,* but because, as Jimmy Breslin once remarked to one writing class to make a wider point: "Look, I wouldn't be caught dead with a misspelled word! *Who wants to read* a misspelled word? If I couldn't spell, I'd cut my fingers off!" In plain pragmatic terms, the absence of Error is useful; but when our students take pains to avoid it—by writing short sentences, by sticking to one tense, by writing as little as

possible—I doubt very much that they do so in order to better communicate with a reader, but rather to play safe, to avoid the red marks.

The *CCCC* position paper of last year ("Students' Right to Their Own Language") states:

> Perhaps the most serious difficulty facing non-standard dialect speakers in developing writing ability derives from their exaggerated concern for the *least* serious aspects of writing. If we can convince our students that spelling, punctuation, and usage are less important than content, we have removed a major obstacle in their developing the ability to write.[1]

The statement correctly identifies the students' "exaggerated concern" and implicitly, our *own* exaggerated concern, but in suggesting that such matters as spelling, punctuation and usage are not serious and that teachers should focus instead on content, it distorts the problem. The problem is not an "either/or," "correctness" vs. "content" issue. The problem is, rather, that in our teaching of spelling, punctuation, usage, we are going about it the wrong way; that in our teaching of other important aspects—sentence complexity, paragraph logic, or essay organization—we tend to teach negatively; and sometimes, too, when we focus on content, we are as authoritarian in our expectations as we are in our handing out of prescripts for the way to learn the so-called "least serious aspects." Typically, teachers who reject the teaching of "the least serious aspects" rush off to teach "content," feeling that such challenging topics as "abortion," "capital punishment" or "Watergate" will really turn the student on to communicating—or if these topics don't, by the way, they *should.* Yet, were we to pick up pencil and paper and sit down to write on these topics, we might find them as interesting as the proverbial "What did you do on your summer vacation?" Any of them may or may not be interesting to a student; what is so often deadly dull about all of them, for a writing course in search of subject matter, is that, out of context, they are false topics and too often taught with as much singleminded expectation of "right thinking" as are the "less serious matters" like subordination or *-s* on the verb.

When we are not teaching the language in terms of its pitfalls, we are often reinforcing in other ways the student's sense that writing

[1] "Students' Right to Their Own Language," *College Composition and Communication,* Special Issue, 25 (Fall 1974), p. 8.

has little to do with the communication of his or her thought to someone else. Setting ourselves up as the source of Right, by implication, we confirm the student's sense that whatever his or her offering, it must be short of the mark, if not Wrong. Positive remarks on a paper, or in the classroom, are so often to be found in subordinate clauses or overshadowed by "buts" ("*Although* such and such is good, . . ") ("That was an interesting remark, *but* . . ."). "Try harder" means "Not good enough." And we become, of course, the model for what *is*. I needn't spend much time here pointing out that there still do exist teachers who carry on dialogues with themselves in a classroom ("What is the topic sentence of this paragraph?"—with rising inflection, a pause, some furrowed brows, silence—"As usual, the topic sentence of this paragraph is at the beginning, and it is . . ."—falling inflection, pause, some relieved looks, more silence. "And how is it developed?" *Etc.*). This is an extreme, but it can be argued that what passes for "Socratic" teaching is often a much more subtle variation of the same thing. We are agile, clever and bright—artful dodgers—, but as we manipulate our class discussions, we are usually teaching the avoidance of Error: in this case, "What do I have in mind that I want you to say?"

This holds true as much for a lesson in syntax as for a discussion of the latest scandal in the *News*, Ralph Ellison's *Prologue*, or a student's description of someone she saw on the bus. Scene: I write a student sentence on the board. "Well, now," I say with a smile, "and what do we have here? Let's read it together." There is probably not a student in the class who doesn't instantly translate my words as, "What does she think of this? And if she's written it on the board, that means it's Wrong, and I wonder what it is she has in mind that's Right." We all bandy about alternatives for a while, Stan and Lois and Tony all coming up with very good ones and good explanations for them (usually safely phrased as a question: "Wouldn't it be better if the student had added a such-and-such?") No one else in the class says anything, but (I say to myself) they are all at least listening to, witnessing, the process of discovery. And in the friendly, open atmosphere of "let's hear from anyone," when Diane provides an unacceptable solution, fraught with new problems, what can Ms. Halsted say (if she wants to get to where she's going by the end of the hour) but: "Hmmmmm, yes, well, that's an interesting possibility, but . . . ," and Diane also smiles and decides wisely to keep her mouth shut from now on.

("What do you do when you sit down to write a paper?" "I figure

out what you want me to say, and then I try to say it.")

The so-called non-traditional teacher who wants to make sure that this classroom is a democracy where "It is not I who am right; your answer is just as good as mine as long as you can back it up" is so often lying. It *is* I who am right. My evidence is always stronger and in the end, I always win. Few students are unaware that there is a hidden agenda, and in this scene, classes become guessing games; "dialogue" is a matter of carrying on the game in an atmosphere of tease. It is a good class, for teacher and students alike, if finally someone provides an answer to the riddles and if, for the teacher, anyway, there's been quite a lot of tension, excitement, along the way (with at least fifty percent participation).

But we all know that this is not what writing is all about: writing does not mean the prating of someone else's views any more than it means the avoidance of errors. In encouraging students to focus on what the teacher has in mind, we reinforce the student's basic assumption: if he/she is not careful, he/she will do or say something wrong. The risk of Error will remain the fixed point, the main preoccupation. We must instead put Error in its place by shifting our own and our students' perspective away from where the student's work or thought falls *short* to where it genuinely succeeds.

When *does* it succeed? What is good writing? I suspect that no matter what we do in conference and in the classroom, we probably judge our students' papers no more by the objective interest or import of the subject matter than we do by the absence of errors—these are weighty factors, but factors only. I suspect we judge their writing by whether or not, as we read the first paragraph or two, we find ourselves interested in *whatever* it is the student is trying to say. Too many errors get very much in the way of course; and an opener like "Humbleness is a virtue, everyone has heard this saying at one time or another there lifetime" frankly gets in *my* way, but not chiefly because of the run-on, the spelling, or the missing word. *Is this really Philip talking? Who is he talking to? I really can't believe he cares.* We read on, and our interest is sustained or it is not. This writer is saying something to me, or, somehow, he is not.

The focus of a writing course should be communication. A student we judge to be well on the way to good writing shows basic awareness of what it is all about: there is a sensed audience and a point of view to be expressed, involving thought and demonstration. It is this basic awareness that we should develop in the class, in conference, in reading their papers. At all times, we should provide our students

with an experience where no matter what the material, they are encouraged to discover their individual points of view and are given the chance to see that these are worthy of attention, that others are listening, and that there are effective ways to communicate them in writing. And by focussing on this, we will help our students to understand, and even enjoy, the process of writing.

In conferences, or in our "silent" comments on our students' papers, we should create a dialogue which makes clear that the word, the sentence, or the organization of the essay are all simply ways of getting across what the student has in mind to say to *someone else.* If we are dealing with the "least serious aspects," let us in our emphasis show our students that errors are important for only one reason: they interrupt the flow between writer and reader. Thus, when the student-tutor Tony saw a dropped *-ed,* he pointed it out to Deborah almost as an aside, in the context of "didn't this all happen yesterday?" His emphasis was on meaning, rather than the rules. A dangler misleads, muddles, sometimes amuses; that it doesn't stand next to the word it modifies is not the main issue at all. That group of sentences has me going in three directions at once! What is your main point? (Not: "There is no topic sentence; you need conjunctions.")

In this dialogue, we function not as "Teacher" and therefore Right, as our students tend to think, but as interested, skeptical and close readers who want to know what our students have to say. Because we have more resources and experience, we can help to figure out how something can be said more effectively. To project this novel view, for our students, is very important. If they could eventually internalize this "intelligent reader" voice we speak with, they would not so often be saying to us, "When *you* read it and ask me those questions, I see what you mean. . . ."

But to talk here about the refinements of writing is starting, perhaps, at the end, rather than the beginning. We meet in conference with our students, usually, *after* the fact—when it is the time to proofread what's on paper, to refine, to rewrite, to think of the final product. Before this, our students must have gone through all the various aspects that make up the writing process—a process, which, as we have already said, they have little or no love for and scarce practice in doing.

We must do all we can to make that process meaningful, workable. Generally, we tend to stress writing as a finished product, forgetting what William Stafford, the poet, has expressed well: "A writer is

not so much someone who has something to say as he is someone who has found a process that will bring about new things he would not have thought of if he had not started to say them."[2] If this is so for all writers, we must rethink much of what many of us do to set off the writing process. Is it really valid, for example, to urge that students take notes, organize these into an outline, into a topic outline, into a sentence outline, *before* starting to write? "How can I know what I think 'til I see what I say?" our students so justly complain, echoing Forster's neat phrase. We seldom give as much importance to the draft copies our students write—if we allow them—as we do to the final product, and in dismissing the draft as a mechanical step, we force the student to picture only some abstract "perfect paper," by which standard any of his or her productions must fall into Error's grasp. A near impossible task, for anyone, usually provides a good incentive to lose interest, if not give up, in anticipation of failure.

"I must be willing to fail," Stafford goes on. "If I am to keep on writing, I cannot bother to insist on high standards. I must get into action and not let anything stop me, or even slow me much."[3] Stafford might well be talking for the free-writing advocates (e.g. MacRorie, Elbow) who contend persuasively that most of us in the classroom go about teaching/learning how to write backwards. Peter Elbow traces the progression of his paralysis as a writer, until in graduate school, which involved "deciding to try *very hard* and plan my writing *very carefully* . . . I finally reached the point where I could not write at all."[4]) He discovered what should be obvious to us all—that the obsession with the final product, the "high standards" we have had imposed on us and have internalized for ourselves, is what leads ultimately to serious writing block. More importantly, it is a sure way to close off avenues to discovering what it is you have to say. "Writing is a way to end up thinking

[2]William Stafford, "A Way of Writing," *Field*, Spring, 1970, p. 10.

[3]*Ibid.* By standards, here, Stafford specifies that he does not mean spelling, punctuation, etc. (details of "correctness" which he feels will "become mechanical for anyone who writes for a while"); he means "what many people would consider 'important' standards, such matters as social significance, positive values, consistency, etc." For the purposes of my argument here, I would include *both* "correctness" and "significance" or "consistency" as standards which must be set aside for the moment in this stage of writing.

[4]Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford, 1973), p. 17.

something you couldn't have started out thinking."[5] Elbow suggests a reverse: start writing, write and write without stopping, do not think, do not pause, do not criticize for a while. . . . *Later* for the critical eye, later for the editing, the organizing, the skills—the "standards."

Students go giddy at the happy notion that they can write about anything without looking back, that when they can't think of anything to write, they have to write something anyway. Free writing, at its freest, helps to restore the spontaneity and confidence that have been so successfully killed by Error-consciousness—to be replaced by the archenemies of writing: fear, caution, resentment, boredom. Returning to Sam, from whose free-written paper I quoted at the beginning of this article: for the first time in the semester he wrote steadily, two full pages. "I am can not put it down on paper," he wrote. "Sam," I said afterwards, "you just did."

I have found that teaching students to write freely, helping them to temporarily exorcise the censor in them, is in itself a project that takes time, but it is valid and fruitful. Not only does it help to put Error where it belongs (in this case, later), and so free the student to discover private thought; it becomes a way of teaching students that writing is also a "public" endeavour. As students and teacher share each other's writings (perhaps we have all taken off from the same general topic), we discover *not* that "Sam writes better/worse than I do" but we all think differently on this same subject. Free-writing is non-competitive: it produces many different, but equally valid and interesting points of view and ways of expressing them. We all begin to listen to each other and to discuss ways these first outspillings might be later developed into something more focussed, perhaps, more easily accessible to another, a reader.

In the classroom, there must be opportunity for the airing of many points of view. Students must want to express themselves and will do so only if they feel that each of them has a point of view valid to be expressed. If the class centers around what the teacher wants the students to know about something "out there," then the student feels, of course, that his or her writing should be at the very best a reflection of what the teacher has in mind about "that." If instead, the focus is on discovering what "I" have to say, on listening to what someone else says, how another reacts, what is said to reinforce

[5] *Ibid.*, p. 15.

the idea and how, how the other responds, etc., then the kinds of questions, the voices, the dialogue that goes on privately in our heads as we write with an audience in mind, are being experienced directly and out loud for the benefit of all.

Free writing is only one of the many ways that have been described elsewhere for restructuring what happens in the classroom so as to shift the emphasis from the teacher to the student, from emulating a model to tangling directly with the problems inherent to communication. I will only briefly mention some options: as much as possible, *let students teach each other,* by running class discussions, by being listeners and commentators, readers and evaluators of each others' work. By so doing, they all become aware of audience and discover first hand what standards for effective communication are. (We may be vague when asked to spell out our standards, but our students seldom are. Usually kind and generous, they are still very frank when it comes to asking key questions such as "Look, man, why didn't you say so?" "You didn't finish that sentence and made me go on reading, so I had to go back and read it all over again.")

Groups: A student who is part of a group working together to present something to the rest of the class can suddenly discover that without him or her some input is lacking, and that the putting over, to the others, is a project important in itself. Groups for teaching grammar, groups for presenting concepts, for analyzing a reading, groups for acting out argument (put Antigone on trial?)—students are involved without being told what they are supposed to be doing in defining a point of view, presenting it, communicating clearly to a willing and critical audience.

Media: Slides and films heighten individual perception, a key to good writing, and they do more than that: they provide a direct shortcut to the teaching of the equality of point of view, the subjectivity of inference, the necessity for substantiation and the need to persuade. Too, when students produce their own, they become involved in thinking processes fundamental to written composition: a student who made a collage as a pre-writing project for a definition of Justice discovered, as she explained to the class, that she had found many aspects she hadn't realized she could talk about, and that in making it, one of her most difficult tasks was which pictures to select and how to arrange them to achieve the focus she wanted so that they could see what she had to say.

These various possibilities imply a departure from what either our students or we have known as the traditional English class. For

our students, if all goes well, they mean an opportunity which many have never experienced before to discover that genuine communication does not end at the door of the classroom and that writing is a significant and absorbing part of it.

If all goes well. For ourselves as teachers, the departure is problematical, by no means easy. It means breaking long-entrenched habits of thought about what we are there for and how to proceed. What seems to be a "turning over" of authority, the opening up of the classroom (to let the students in?) is threatening. Genuine dialogue means listening and respecting the unexpected. Groups mean not only careful planning but a lot of noise, seeming chaos. Letting students run discussions means having to bite your tongue to keep quiet. Media means machines and *their* quirks. Freewriting means permitting the sentence fragment, doubting the perfected paragraph, for the moment. All of this takes such a lot of time that seems time wasted, if not violated, by our old standards. It is small consolation that in shifting the center, we free ourselves of the burden of feeling we must control every word in a lesson hour from beginning to end. Opening the class up to allow for dialogue means seeing our role as teachers differently and taking on a different kind of responsibility. It is much more difficult to be a guide than a director, a catalyst than a determiner, to suggest than to dictate. In this new situation, we must find ways to provide structure in such a way that, rather than giving students only an illusion of freedom and exploration, we create a framework which in fact allows our students to freely explore and produce. Only in this context will writing become meaningful to them.

We are teaching courses designated as skills courses. We are told to make up in four months or eight or twelve for twelve years of schooling which have failed to meet our students' various needs, else they wouldn't be with us. If we see our task as primarily something that must be done quickly, we are in danger of not doing it at all. There is no short-cut to teaching writing, and in my view, "skills" cannot be considered separate from all the factors that make up the process. This is particularly true for our students whose negative attitudes about writing are nearly insuperable obstacles. A student who does not want to learn something will not, and so our main concern must be to convince our students that writing—with all its components, including acceptable forms—is more than worth the effort. This can only be done where we make clear what it is for, by giving them opportunity to sense that what they have to say

is worth listening to, that others are there, and the work involved in putting it in writing opens up new possibilities for communication. If we can do this, we may also find ourselves learning much more than we ever could about our students, their language, and, incidentally, ourselves.