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LISTENING AND WRITING

Successful writers do not simply express thought but transform it in various ways for the needs of the reader. Whereas oral discourse "normally takes place in an actual situation that provides abundant non-linguistic clues to the speaker's intended meaning,"[1] written discourse, by contrast, depends upon supplying a sufficient context for interpretation in the absence of the contextual clues found in ordinary speech, a context which is determined by the conventions of code and audience. This eccentricity of written discourse creates problems which cannot be solved even by the ablest of native speakers without practice and instruction and which often prove insurmountably difficult for students lacking sufficient experience in reading and writing. One method, however, whereby students can learn to focus upon the concept of the audience, a method which has not yet received a great deal of attention, is to provide them with the opportunity of not only reading their own discourse, but of listening to it as well. Listening to their own writing as well as to that of their classmates enables student writers to cultivate a necessary detachment from their own writing and an imaginative attention to audience. Such a technique can benefit college student writers at all levels and is particularly useful to disadvantaged writers, who often experience severe difficulty in establishing an adequately developed context for their written discourse in the absence of actual audience feedback.

Many beginning college writers produce what Linda Flower calls "writer-based prose," which she defines as an "unretouched and

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[1] E.D. Hirsch, *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1977), p. 21.

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underprocessed version"[2] of the writer's own thought, and which may be differentiated from "reader-based prose," which presents a deliberate attempt to communicate something to the reader, using a shared language and context between writer and reader. Writer-based prose, familiar to all teachers of composition, is characterized by "the absence of expressed causal relations and the tendency to express ideas without proof or development,"[3] characteristics which Mina Shaughnessy identifies as descriptive of the composition of basic writers. Shaughnessy cites evidence "in Basic Writing papers of the egocentricity of the apprentice writer, an orientation that is reflected in the assumption that the reader understands what is going on in the writer's mind and needs, therefore, no introduction or transitions or explanations."[4] College classrooms at all levels are filled with writers who have not learned to move away from writer-based prose into a public reader-based expression.

Writer-based prose shares many of the features of the egocentric speech used by the developing child. In studying the emerging thought of children, both Vygotsky and Piaget observed a mode of speech which seemed to have little social or communicative function. In Vygotsky's synopsis of Piaget's theory, "In egocentric speech, the child talks only about himself, takes no interest in his interlocutor, does not try to communicate, expects no answers, and often does not care if anyone listens to him."[5] According to Piaget, the child's non-communicative or egocentric speech is a reflection not of selfishness, but of the child's limited ability to assume the point of view of listener.[6] Similarly, one may say that writer-based prose has nothing to do with discourtesy or selfishness but is a reflection of the student's inability to assume the point of view of reader.

Of course, we encourage students to become their own readers and to reformulate discourse by the process of revision. Few writers are capable of finding and formulating their full meaning in a first draft of a discourse, no matter how much time they devote to the prewriting stage.

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[2]Linda Flower, "Writer-based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing,"*College English*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (September, 1979).

[3]Flower, p. 27

[4]Mina Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 240.

[5]Lev Semenovitch Vygotsky, *Thought and Language*, trans. Eugenia Hanfmann and Gertrude Vakar (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1962), p. 15.

[6]Herbert Ginsberg and Sylvia Opper, *Piaget's Theory of Intellectual Development* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1969), p. 89.

It is usually during the second stage of the composing process, the revising stage, that meaning clarifies and deepens. However, as all composition teachers know, merely urging students to revise often proves to be of little use, even if we reward revisions with higher grades. Beginning writers, in particular, are often unable to maintain sufficient psychological distance from their own discourse in order to detect when the stated meaning does not match the intended meaning and therefore cannot know when to add, substitute, reorder or restate. This perceptual blindness is particularly acute when students begin rereading their work immediately after they have written a first draft; they fully recall and read into their texts all their unexpressed semantic intentions.

Furthermore, the process of revision imposes an additional difficulty on disadvantaged students in that it requires that they read perceptively, an ability which many college students simply do not have. Skillful revising implies skillful, that is, critical, reading, but unskilled writers are often unskilled readers as well. John Butler points out,

> One thing we know about remedial writers is that most of them are also remedial readers. What is often forgotten... is that such a person is a poor reader not just of essays, stories, poems, and so on, but of his teacher's comments.[7]

To ask them to re-read their own prose for the purpose of revising it is to impose a task that is doubly difficult. Revision for such writers is often merely a "hit and miss" procedure—the correction of a few misspelled words, a half-hearted sprinkling of commas. No real reformation occurs.

Substantive revising can occur, however, through the process of listening, which can take place either in the classroom, during office conferences, or in a listening center located in the writing lab. In a setting which stresses the importance of listening, students can read their drafts aloud to one another and gain the benefit of immediate audience feedback. Comments such as "Wait, I didn't understand that section," or "What do you mean by that?" help students realize that what they intended to say may not actually be written in their early drafts. Moreover, when students gain experience in commenting on one another's work, they acquire greater insight into their own efforts.

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[7]John F. Butler, "Remedial Writers: The Teacher's Job as Corrector of Papers," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. XXXI, No. 3 (October, 1980), p. 271

Without being instructed, they learn to regard "readability" or "listenability" as an important criterion in written discourse.

Listening to writing can also take place in the writing lab between tutor and student, with the tutor reading the student's paper aloud to him or the student reading it aloud to the tutor. It can also occur with the use of tape recorders, a method which has been suggested by Jerome Bruner.[8] With this method students read their drafts aloud into the tape recorder and then listen to them, either with or without the written texts before them, or else they trade cassettes with other students. Whichever method one may prefer, the act of reading aloud[9] forces students to move more slowly through their writing, sentence by sentence, paragraph by paragraph, enabling them to perceive more readily those errors in punctuation and diction which are due simply to carelessness, and to hear, as well as see, the effects of incoherence and disorganization.

While listening to writing in class, office or lab provides a useful alternative to silent reading for transforming writer-based prose into reader-based prose, one may question whether listening is as reliable a method for evaluating prose as is reading it; whether "listenability," defined as the comparative ease or difficulty of the style of a message in an aural signal for the person listening, equals "readability," defined as that quality of writing that permits a reader to read and understand it readily. This question is difficult to answer in the absence of more research in the area. E.D. Hirsch asserts unequivocally that "listenability and readability are the same,"[10] a position which he bases on two publications on the subject, one by I.E. Fang and the other by T.G. Sticht. Fang has demonstrated that a .96 correlation exists between his listenability test and the Flesch Reading Ease Formula.[11] Sticht's experiments have shown "no differences between reading and listening scores,"[12] within carefully graded groups; that is, Sticht's readability formula (based upon Farr,

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[8]Jerome Bruner, *Toward a Theory of Instruction* (The Belknap Press of Harvard University: Cambridge, Mass., 1966), p. 111 and Patrick Hartwell, "A Writing Laboratory Model," in *Basic Writing: Essays For Teachers, Researchers, Administrators*, ed. Lawrence N. Kasden and Daniel R. Hoeber (NCTE, 1980), p. 69.

[9]For a discussion of the advantages of reading aloud as a means of evaluating writing, see David Bartholmae, "The Study of Error," *College Composition and Communication*, Vol. XXXI, No. 3 (October, 1980), 253-270 and E.D. Hirsch, *The Philosophy of Composition*, p. 162.

[10]Hirsch, p. 94.

[11]I.E. Fang, "The Easy Listening Formula," *Journal of Broadcasting*, II (1966-1977), 63-68.

[12]T.G. Sticht, "Learning by Listening," *Language Comprehension and the Acquisition of Knowledge*, ed. John B. Carroll and Roy O. Freedle (New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1972), p. 288.

Jenkins, and Patterson's modification of Flesch's readability levels) appears to have been "appropriate for scaling listenability also."[13]

According to these studies, listening is sufficiently similar to reading; what can be understood with relative ease or difficulty by one method is correspondingly easy or difficult by the other method. It makes sense that this approximate equivalence should hold true. Listening resembles reading in many ways, sharing

> many of the same characteristics...beginning with the prerequisites of attention and memory. Beyond that, both require the acquisition of language--of understanding the system for selecting and sequencing conventionalized signs. Furthermore, it is necessary that these signs be decoded and processed into conceptualizations. That is, auding and reading both imply the recognition and conversion of symbolization into meaningful cognitive content. In addition, both skills rely upon the ability to form discriminations between stimuli (either visual or auditory) and depend on the development of higher order strategies (e.g. chunking) for subsequent improvement. To state it concisely, auding and reading differ primarily in the manner in which the individual receives the stimulus words; they are similar in the sense that they are both receptive communication acts that require a central language and conceptualizing base.[14]

As Walter Kintsch expresses the idea, "the comprehensive process is the same whether a person reads or listens to the text, after the initial perceptual analysis."[15] Given the limits of voice and print, what one understands by reading one can understand by listening.

Reading and listening are not strictly equivalent, however, nor equally effective for all texts or purposes. T.J. Glasser points out that although "readable and listenable are generic, if not somewhat less abstract labels for comprehensible,"[16] in some instances it is conceivable that "readability/listenability formulae may promote clarity at the expense of precision."[17] Similarly, Merton E. Carver, discussing the variables affecting the relative value of reading and hearing the same material,

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[13]Sticht, "Learning By Listening," p. 288.

[14]*Auding and Reading*, p. 70.

[15]Walter Kintsch, "On Comprehending Stories," *Cognitive Processes in Composition*, ed. Marcel Adam Just and Patricia A. Carpenter (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977). p. 33.

[16]T.L. Glasser, "On Readability and Listenability," *ETC.: A Review of General Semantics*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1975), 138.

[17]Glasser, p. 140.

maintains that "the effectiveness of auditory presentation tends to vary inversely with the difficulty of the material presented,"[18] a statement with which anyone who has ever attempted to listen to an MLA paper being read aloud can easily agree. An early study by Day and Beach supports this statement, concluding that "the relative effectiveness of the visual presentation increases with the increasing difficulty of the material."[19] It would seem from these studies, taken collectively, that using listening as a revision strategy might work to keep the content of the message relatively simple but not to improve the clarity and effectiveness of its presentation.

Further research is needed to determine the various ways listenability relates to readability. However, when we assert that students can profit from listening to their own prose, we are assuming that all facets of discourse are fundamentally inseparable, that, as James Moffett maintains, "anyone reading or writing necessarily merges all three levels of coding (experience into thought, thought into speech, speech into writing)." Moffett asserts that "reading and writing can progress little further than the limits of their oral base. If a learner cannot understand something said to him, he will probably not comprehend it in a book. If he cannot say something to himself, at least, he will not be able to write it." According to Moffett, "the best way for the receiver to learn to comprehend is to compose. Like any game, you have to play all roles if you wish to compose. A learner needs to practice all roles and relations of the communications structure." Because the skills are interrelated and mutually reinforcing, "people can learn to write by talking, to read by listening, to spell by reading, and so on...It is precisely this fact of transference that justifies integrating all language activities with one another."[20]

The Writing Laboratory Model discussed by Patrick Hartwell in a recent collection of essays concerned with basic writing presents a similarly integrated view of discourse. The assumption in this model is that "the connection between speech and writing occur[s] at the highest level, the level of communication, rather than at the low level of surface features of dialect and written code."[21] Moffett's and Hartwell's models of

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[18] M.E. Carver, "Listening and Reading," *The Psychology of Radio*, ed. H. Cantril and G.W. Allport (New York: Harper, 1935), p. 159.

[19] Willard F. Day and Barbara R. Beach, *"Auditory Versus Visual Presentations,"* Listening: Readings Vol. 1, ed. Sam Duker (New York and London: The Scarecrow Press, 1966), p. 403.

[20] James Moffett and Betty Jane Wagner, *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading, K-13, second edition* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1976), pp. 10, 31, 15, 44.

[21] Patrick Hartwell, "A Writing Laboratory Model, " p. 66.

discourse, both of which assume the inseparability of reading, speaking writing, and listening, suggest that listening can provide basic or beginning writers with an important aid to revision.

These models provide theoretical justification for the use of listening as a means of revision. One important advantage of the listening option is that many basic writing or beginning students will be significantly more comfortable and/or successful when they listen to writing as opposed to when they read it. This increased success is due to the fact that college students who come to the composition classroom with inadequately developed reading and writing skills, are almost all equipped with habits of speaking and listening which are, by contrast, fairly well established. According to E.B. Huey[22] and others, skill in learning by listening precedes developmentally the acquisition of skill by reading. T.G. Sticht, in a recent work, *Auding and Reading,* notes that "performance on measures of ability to comprehend language by auding will surpass performance on measures of ability to comprehend language by reading during the early years of school,"[23] a time presumably when reading skill is first being learned. Disadvantaged college students, like younger children who have not yet acquired facility in reading, are often ill at ease when they read. Reading for them has not yet become a workable tool which they can use easily when they revise. It is reasonable to suggest, then, that for students, to utilize listening, a skill which they have been using all of their lives, would serve to divest the writing process of some of its inhibiting mystery and threat by returning one part of it, comfortably, to the realm of the familiar.

And, because listening is a skill they can perform easily, many students will prefer to listen rather than to read for the purpose of revision. Research in reading and listening indicates that proficient readers usually prefer to learn by reading rather than by listening and that the converse is true for poorer readers. Moreover, when students are not proficient readers, their ability to listen actually exceeds their ability to read. In an early study by Sticht, the poorer the reader, the greater the preference for listening rather than for reading.[24] A more recent study by Charles A.

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[22]E.B. Huey, *The Psychology and Pedagogy of Reading* (New York: Macmillan, 1908, republished Cambridge, Mass., MIT Press, 1968).

[23]T.G. Sticht, L. Beck, R.H. Hauke, G.M. Kleiman, J.H James, *Auding and Reading: A Developmental Model* (Arlington, Va: Human Resource Organization, 1974), p. 70.

[24]T.G. Sticht, "Learning by Listening," *Language Comprehension and the Acquisition of Knowledge,* ed. John B. Carroll and Roy O. Freedle (New York: John Wiley and Son, 1972).

Perfetti and Alan M. Lesgold indicates that competent readers were able to recall more of both normal and scrambled texts when they read, as opposed to when they listened, but poorer readers were more successful on both kinds of texts when they listened.[25] Similarly, in Sticht's more recent study, *Auding and Reading,* at the college and adult level, the proportion of comparisons in which reading clearly exceeded auding (A<R) was only .5, suggesting that some college students and adults never achieve superior efficiency in gathering information by looking at print as opposed to listening.[26] Many college students, then, will be more comfortable and successful when they listen to rather than read their own prose for the purpose of revision.

Listening to writing provides other advantages to beginning or basic writers. In addition to helping students to become their own audience and to evaluate their own discourse, it supplements and reinforces the silent reading procedures used in the past. According to Sticht, "the combined visual and auditory presentation of material leads to more efficient comprehension than the presentation of either auditory or visual material alone,"[27] suggesting that listening to writing can only enhance the process of revision for students at all levels. Furthermore, listening to writing can actually improve student reading skills. As Sticht asserts, "training in comprehending by auding of a particular genre (e.g. listening for the main idea) will transfer to reading when the skill is acquired,"[28] which suggests that students who are trained to listen to their own writing will then become more perceptive readers. This transference of comprehension skills is supported by considerable pedagogical research, particularly the studies of Devine (1967, 1968, 1978), Duker (1969), Durrell and Murphy (1953), and Schneeberg (1977).[29] One's ability to listen, then, can enhance one's ability to read, which, in turn, can enhance one's ability to revise,

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[25]Charles A. Perfetti and Alan M. Lesgold, "Individual Differences in Comprehension," *Cognitive Processes in Composition,* ed. Marcel Adam Just and Patricia A. Carpenter (Hillsdale, New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1977).

[26]*Auding and Reading,* p. 72.

[27]*Auding and Reading,* p. 72.

[28]*Ibid.*

[29]T.G. Devine, "Listening," *Review of Educational Research,* 37 (April, 1967), 153-158; Sam Duker, "Listening and Reading," *Listening: Readings,* ed. Sam Duker (Metuchen, New Jersey: The Scarecrow Press, 1971), pp. 68-82; D.D. Durrell and H.A. Murphy, "The Auditory Discrimination Factor in Reading Readiness and Reading Disability," *Education* 73 (1953), 556-560; H. Schneeberg, "Listening While Reading: A Four Year Study," *The Reading Teacher,* 30 (March, 1977), 629-635.

which, finally, has significant implications for the production of coherent discourse.

In evaluating prose by listening, students should focus upon the following five points:

- To determine whether or not the paper contains a main idea, oriented toward a central purpose;
- To evaluate the organization and development;
- To judge the extent to which the supporting details accomplish their purpose; to distinguish among relevant and irrelevant details; to judge whether or not more information is needed to prove the writer's point;
- To judge whether or not the writer has attempted to attract the reader's attention and to hold the reader's interest;
- To determine whether or not the paper is structurally complete.

These five points can be incorporated into a worksheet used for evaluation and self-evaluation. Such a worksheet would contain the following sets of questions for the student to answer, based upon what he has perceived by listening:

1. The purpose of the paper is to prove that...
2. Three main points which support this idea, together with at least two supporting details for each main point.
   A.
      1.
      2.
   B.
      1.
      2.
   C.
      1.
      2.
3. Do all of these details make sense?
   Is more information needed? What? Where does it belong?
4. Name two ways that the writer of the paper has attempted to hold the reader's interest.
   List any words the writer has used which have the effect of creating pictures in the mind.
5. Does the paper contain all of its parts?
   An introduction?
   At least two middle paragraphs?
   A conclusion?
   Does the conclusion support the introduction?

The above worksheet will help to direct the students' attention toward both the overall and supporting structures of the discourse and to enable them to form judgments about whether or not the writer has achieved his semantic intention. As Moffett maintains, "What students need is not information, but awareness of their own egocentricity,...the biggest single cause of problems in comprehension and composition."[30] For beginning writers at all levels, and for basic writing students in particular, listening can become a significant link between the very real abilities students have acquired throughout their lives and the academic skills they have always lacked.

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[30]James Moffett, *Student-Centered Language Arts and Reading*, p. 34.