

READING, LISTENING, WRITING: AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO TEACHING EXPOSITION

In this essay, I propose a set of teaching devices which rest on principles derived from a number of disciplines, and, more directly, from personal experience. The purpose of these devices is to help students learn to write exposition in the standard dialect. To define problems and to establish a theoretical framework, I first discuss speech-writing distinctions that, while probably familiar to the reader, are so crucial to my proposal as to bear restatement.

At the outset, I must report that my proposal will not be supported by evidence from the kind of controlled experiments that humanist scholars are learning to appreciate if not to perform for themselves. Hence I am reluctant to make claims that might be made for the results of a more systematic study. Even results of this kind, we know, are often accompanied by caveats that caution the reader against uncritical acceptance of what the research appears to demonstrate. I offer the method and its rationale because it has helped many of my students.

The student who has just solved a batch of subject-verb agreement problems in an exercise may then proceed to write *He don't* in the first sentence of the next composition. By now, composition instructors may be dismayed but not surprised by this tendency of students to make the same errors in compositions that they are able to correct in exercises. The psychologists will tell us that the student is "overloaded." Too many tasks must be performed simultaneously. In the exercise, the student can deal with the problem of agreement in isolation from all the other demands of writing. Closure is neatly and quickly achieved. In the composition, on the other hand, the student must invent, predicate and assemble ideas, control syntax, observe conventions of usage and mechanics, and select proper words, all in the context of developing a topic. (Francis Christensen once observed that the first composition precipitates all the problems of writing.) Under the stress of cognitive overload, the student goes home to the oral dialect. Writing *He don't* or *Me and John like Mary* (to use crude examples of surface structure errors) may be the only natural act among several unfamiliar ones including, for many students, the motor act of

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stringing words together on paper. Most young people are exposed far more often to speech than to writing; they talk and listen, as we all do, more than they write; and, as a result, they find it easier to put down what the ear has assimilated than to recall what has been learned in a formal academic setting, especially in drills and exercises.¹

The problem illustrates the difference between language acquisition and language learning. Most literate people *acquire* the standard written dialect from reading. When they write, they shift automatically to the forms they have internalized from reading, sometimes too self-consciously, with the result that the prose is wooden and needs to be nudged back gently in the direction of colloquial ease. Moreover, no matter how unbuttoned their conversation may be, it will contain signs that the essential features of written English are among the speaker's resources. For these people, formal training in composition serves to activate, reinforce, expand, and refine knowledge that has been acquired unconsciously for the most part. What they *learn* when they learn to write is what we can teach them about rhetorical and stylistic refinements.

On the other hand, many of our students can manage only the rudiments of the written dialect, even though they have acquired at least one oral dialect more or less perfectly. Furthermore, the oral dialect was formed in response to the necessities of immediate communication, in which the interlocutors shared enough information and verbal habits to make sense out of what might remain unintelligible to an outsider. Oral dialects serve nicely for general communication, especially when the subject is personal and the mode anecdotal; and many students express themselves with considerable force and vivacity, however informal and elliptical their speech. Indeed, in playful (and not so playful) exchanges, effectiveness often depends upon the compressed and allusive retort, sometimes in diction and structure that are richly connotative only to insiders. However, these speakers remain largely unpracticed in the more exacting task of communicating sustained thought to an unknown and unseen audience. They lack a dialect in which they can express ideas with order and precision. In other words, they lack automatic access to standard grammar, ease in using the stylistic options more characteristic of the written dialect, and the expository habit of mind and expression in which ideas are formally patterned for an unfamiliar, not necessarily sympathetic, audience. For these students, learning to write is similar to learning a second language; and when they shift from talking to writing, the many features of talking are likely to interfere with learning the somewhat different features of writing.²

The differences between speech and the grapholect, as E. D. Hirsch refers to writing, reach beyond matters of etiquette.³ The disorganized syntax and faulty predications that appear so frequently in student writing may at times be the result of conceptual laziness; but often they suggest the character of loose conversation, in which the speaker counts upon the listener, assisted by context, gestures, and intonation, to unscramble the mess and supply the proper syntactic relations. The surface structure of talk often misrepresents or imperfectly formalizes the intended deep

structure.

We all botch oral syntax to one degree or another, but our students, whose speech is filled with gaps and *you knows*, seem habitually to overlook in writing the need for clearer signals of meaning. What is more, just as a learner of a second language is likely to continue to think in the first language, the poorly read among our students are likely to display in their writing the cognitive and structural features of most oral discourse, no matter who speaks it, whether nonstandard or entirely standard in its grammar. For instance, punctuation for oral pauses will appear where writing conventionally omits it, as in "What the fuss was all about, was my late hours." Connectives that writers use to integrate separate chunks of meaning appear rarely in the prose of students who have almost never seen or heard these locutions. And since casual conversation, unlike writing, does not require extended development of ideas, student prose often lacks those structural devices that experienced writers employ because they are aware of the need to remind readers of where they have been in relation to where they are being taken, and that are for the writer, not incidentally, important markers and creators of the thought structure.⁴

For a long time in the schools there has been a pedagogic fancy for personal writing, so that many students are more comfortable with the prose of experience than with the prose of ideas. They carry over into discursive writing the hallmarks of narrative-descriptive prose: syntax held together more by spatial and temporal associations that inhere in the subject matter than by explicit connectors that signal the imposition of pattern and hierarchy by a reasoning mind; and the use of *and* (or *then*) as a factotum conjunction. At another level, it is more difficult for many students to imagine an audience (apart from the teacher) for their ideas than for their experiences. In particular, then, the expository mode is two modes removed from how these students have been accustomed to expressing themselves. Interference to writing good expository prose comes both from oral dialects and from habits developed to meet only or mainly the requirements of expressive writing.

If my assessment of the situation is correct in its essentials, writing instruction, especially instruction for basic writers, should proceed by methods that take into account several factors: (1) unfamiliarity with the grapholect, except as adapted to represent experience; (2) continuing interference from the oral culture, with the likelihood that features of the oral dialect will surface when the student is under pressure to compose; (3) the inadequacy by themselves of drills and exercises that anatomize the structure of prose into isolated units for study; (4) the oral-aural alertness of contemporary students (requiring methods that take advantage of an oral orientation while frankly intending to suppress oral practices that are unsuitable to writing); (5) the organic relationship of the decoding and encoding processes; (6) the need to simulate as nearly as possible the developmental conditions under which the initial oral dialect was acquired; (7) the need for procedures that systematically involve eye, ear, hand, and brain in order to emphasize how these organs cooperate not only to process and retain information but also to internalize the forms in which the

information is presented; and (8) the general principles of human learning.

Before giving the operational details of a procedure that meets these eight requirements, I want to amplify the eighth point with particular reference to what I shall propose. Although the field of learning theory has produced many useful insights, we still do not know exactly how humans learn. In some situations, input and output can be described with fair precision, but we cannot accurately describe what happens in the nervous system to process the input and produce the output. For instance, a golfer can study a pro's swing, even watch it in slow motion on film, and then adjust his own swing to produce better shots. No one, however, has been able to explain how this visual experience is translated into motor instructions that control the muscles involved in a golf shot. The act of learning to write is immeasurably more complex. Regardless of the nature or complexity of the task, however, our intuition suggests that the constant in human learning is a neural matrix where analysis and synthesis occur almost simultaneously, where perception and conception overlap, and where comprehension gives way to action, probably with an assist from the imagination, which projects the observer into the role of performer and generates imitation of the model. Indeed it may be true that no one can do something without first wanting to imagine himself doing it. For the person obsessed with cutting five strokes off his golf game, motivation is hardly a problem. For the student who comes to us with little experience in writing, and that not notably successful, motivation arises less often from internal sources. He lacks an image of himself as a writer. The golfer I have been speaking of wants desperately to envision himself in the role of competent performer. For him, motivation is tied directly to a situation, say, Saturday morning with his friends or business associates, out on the course, with at least the need to attain a standard of performance that will not embarrass him. Improving his game is not merely an instrumental objective but rather is integrated into a social context with implications for his sense of personal worth. Thus he attends to his lessons, live or graphic, with heightened receptivity.

We may say, then, that an effective learning process is situational, integrative, and holistic, in the sense that absorption and reproduction of the principles of the model depend upon an understanding of it as a gestalt. What the golfer may learn from drawings of the grip and swing remains abstract until he "feels" the unbroken movement of the swing itself. He must live the syntax of the activity. Similarly, the student learning to write must come to develop a feel for how the elements of prose are synthesized. For this reason, the reinforcement that comes from repeating a discrete task in grammar and usage drills must be supplemented not only by the writing act itself but also by learning activities that define writing as a total system of behavior. Although we may not be able to motivate many of our students to want to write with the same fervor that fuels our Saturday golfer, we can still aim for learning conditions that call into play the natural acquisitive powers that humans possess as language-learning organisms, and trust that as students improve they will come to regard writing as worth the effort if not a whit easier.⁵

Against this background of suppositions and assumptions, I propose a method that consists of several interlocking phases:

1. The student is asked to select a relatively self-contained passage of exposition, 300-400 words long. The content must be something the student wants to read, preferably wants to learn, or at least is being required to learn, perhaps in another course. The function of this passage in the student's life provides the *situation*. The instructor must, of course, approve the passage; but, especially the first few times this method is used, the student should be allowed considerable freedom of choice. Otherwise, the procedure will lack the realistic foundation it depends on so heavily.

2. The instructor then reads the passage carefully onto a cassette tape, using intonation to stress the structural joints in the passage and, perhaps, to emphasize formal features that are different from those of the student's natural dialect. For instance, the instructor's reading might emphasize tense and person markers that are habitually omitted from the student's writing.

3. Next, while reading the passage, the student listens to the instructor's recording of it. The instructor may want to direct the student to listen for particular features but, if directions are given, they should not divert attention from the formal integrity of the passage or from what is being communicated. The acquisition of language forms, we believe, is incidental to the main business of communication, and is thus largely unconscious. Moreover, grammatical analysis is not the objective of this activity, certainly not grammatical analysis that requires the student to learn terminology. We want the acquisitive faculty to operate with as little hindrance as possible, and we want to avoid overload: the student must not be made to think of too many things while listening.

4. Now comes the student's turn to record the passage, after which the instructor listens to the tape to be certain that the passage has been read correctly. If errors in reading occur, the student records the passage until they have been corrected. The reading need not account for all the rhetorical effects, but it should be true to the basic semantic intent of the passage, respect junctures both within and between sentences, and clearly enunciate morphemes that signal tense and person.

5. The student, while reading the text, listens to a playback of his own accurate recording.

6. Using a recorder with a pause control, the student, without visual access to the passage, transcribes *his* recording of it. This step can be a powerful aid to diagnosis since some students, even after having seen and heard the passage several times, may (and do) ignore correct English uttered in *their own voice* and introduce errors that surface stubbornly from the repertoire of their "native grammar." Without the written text to consult, students have no visual clues to guide the transcription and to help them suppress features of their native grammar that might compete in their inner voices with the correct features being spoken by their actual voices. Errors made at this stage are probably strong indicators of deeply ingrained dialectal, or even idiolectal, habits that can subsequently be

addressed in focused instruction.

7. The next step is to have the student return to the printed text and copy it verbatim, in longhand. I am persuaded that it is useful for students to see good prose in their own handwriting, even if the prose is not their own. Although the student does not invent the message, it must still be sent from the brain to the hand for transcribing.

After the student has copied the passage, the instructor can talk to the student about how it was written. For some students, the basic writers, it will be enough to point out functional suffixes, indicators of sentence and clause boundaries, and conventions of usage. For others, attention might be directed to transitions, to features of syntax they fail to employ, or even to structural idioms like "The more he tried to excel, the more he felt the pressure." For still others, those a little further along, the instructor can identify stylistic devices of compression and emphasis. The instructor will be the best judge of what needs to be highlighted at a particular point in the student's development as a writer. During the discussion, students should be encouraged to articulate their own discoveries, even, one would hope, to be the first to say what the passage has shown them about this "new dialect" in contrast to their own writing habits.

If this exercise is to offset the atavistic influences that work against the student's gaining control of written English, it must be repeated frequently, at least two or three times a week. Instructors who cannot invest this much time may want to enlist the help of staff in the learning center or writing lab, if these adjunct services are available on campus. Parents, friends, fellow students, if competent, might also be brought into the process to record passages and to check the correctness of student recordings and transcriptions.

As a corollary to what I have proposed, students can be advised to warm up before they begin to write their own compositions. I once heard a professional writer say he overcame fear of the naked page by typing out word-for-word several paragraphs of the work of a writer he admired. While he was thus warming up for the dreaded task of "pushing words around," as Philip Roth's character in *The Ghost Writer* puts it, he also picked up a feel for the good prose he was not so mindlessly copying; and in some way not fully understood, he began to incorporate into his own writing some of the felicities of the other person's work. Much current research has contributed to our understanding of writing anxiety. Few have put the matter as succinctly as Dr. Johnson: "Anyone who tells you that the act of composition is a pleasure is either a liar or a blockhead." Most of our students are neither. They make no secret of their anxiety. We can be certain that if we and the professionals are intimidated by the blank page, our students are virtually paralyzed, all the more so because for sizable numbers of them writing is indeed an unnatural act. Approaching it stiff of mind and hand intensifies the difficulty. Instead of sitting and staring at the paper, students can perform the calisthenic of copying out someone else's work. The effect will be to loosen them up, to remind them of how written English works, and, perhaps, to stimulate invention.

Another extension of the procedure is to have students record their own compositions on tape and listen to the playback.⁶ While reading their own work aloud, students who have been taught to respect terminal juncture marks in other people's writing have a chance to hear where they should have used full stops instead of commas. They might also see opportunities to combine short sentences that sound immature or create staccato rhythms for no good reason. Vague or ambiguous pronoun references might reveal themselves. Other errors that the proofreading eye has failed to detect might show up simply because they do not sound right. This procedure reinforces the cooperation between eye, ear, and brain that eases acquisition of the grapholect. It has the added advantage of elevating the student's own work to something like equal status with the professional work that is being recorded, listened to, and copied. And it may gradually produce the image of the self as writer that animates all good writing.

The saturation technique I am recommending, while designed to counteract the oral culture, is not meant to separate students from their own dialect, if that were possible. Neither is it meant to inhibit creative thinking. In prewriting activities, even in first drafts, students may need to sort out their ideas in what James Britton has called "expressive" language, as opposed to "transactional" language.⁷ Written communication is normally the result of a process that moves from conception through incubation to production. For the communication to be successful, at some point in the production stage the expressive use of language, in which the writer discourses for his own benefit, must give way to the transactional use of language in which the writer discourses for the benefit of others. The effectiveness of the transaction will depend in part upon how well the writer understands the needs of his readers. He will be as aware of his audience as of himself. In these terms, I have defined the problem as one in which the inexperienced writer ignores audience needs and continues to employ expressive language and conventions in the production stage. To interdict this tendency is not to stifle a necessary rehearsal for writing but rather to emphasize the fact that expository writing as the representation of what Benjamin De Mott has called "consecutive intellection," fully realized, is different from what engenders it. At least by the time the student is revising the composition, he should have become fully aware of what is required both structurally and semantically to facilitate the transmission of ideas.⁸ Recently, there has been a shift in emphasis away from product to process in writing instruction. To the extent that such a pedagogy reflects the way that writing actually comes into being, it will assist the student in the conception and incubation stages. But, as teachers of second languages know, immersion in the language, even pressure to use it at the risk of making mistakes, is the best way to achieve breakthrough into spontaneous production of its features.

The method I have described, along with its extensions, seeks to bring reading and writing together to serve multiple interpenetrating objectives: (1) learning to read with a heightened sense of how meaning is signalled, and to speak the written language accurately; (2) learning the content of

the recorded passages, which together, for example, might constitute a chapter in a college textbook or in a book on the student's hobby; (3) learning to discuss the features of what one has read; (4) and, of course, learning to write expository prose.

Before closing, I want to anticipate some possible objections, which were put well by a friend who read an earlier draft of this essay: "The procedure for addressing the problem is interesting but not wholly convincing—not because it doesn't make sense but because...one is simply suspicious that it sounds too pat. For one thing, I wonder whether students can be put in contact with a wide enough variety of syntactic and grammatical forms *often enough* to internalize and acquire them for personal use."

My method is intended to illustrate certain pedagogic and linguistic ideas and to describe one procedure that embodies them. All models of this kind tend to sound too pat on paper, especially when they are presented as a series of steps. In practice, I include or exclude or modify components to fit the situation, including such practical considerations as the availability of time, resources, and assistants, and such instructional considerations as the level and temperament of students. Because the program does possess a sequential coherence, however, I try to keep it intact whenever possible. I would hope that it also suggests the kinds of things that might be done, with or without variation, separately or in combination, by teachers who consistently encounter in student writing the difficulties mentioned in the first part of the essay.

In response to my friend's question about grammatical and syntactical variety, I emphasize that the procedure is designed primarily as an *introduction* to the written dialect for students who require developmental instruction. Restrictions of space prevent a full account of what has happened in the cases of individual students, but, in general, the two major improvements I notice both occur at the sentence level: sentence boundaries are recognized and properly indicated; phrasing becomes more direct and accurate. My first goal is to help students eliminate disorganized syntax. Complexity of design for emphasis and for other effects will come in time, or with further instruction, if students are first taught to keep related words close together, to eliminate deadwood, to concentrate on clarity and firmness of predication, and to indicate relationships between ideas. As a result, their own prose is less likely to resemble oral discourse in which chunks of meaning float more or less free of one another.

The final point to be made about the method I am recommending is that it carries no threat: there is really nothing to get wrong, as in exercises and compositions. It calls for teamwork between instructor and student. Above all, it puts students constantly in touch with the dialect of English that sooner or later they must use reasonably well to take full advantage of their education.

NOTES

¹ For a study of how particular oral practices affect student writing, see Gary Sloan, "The Subversive Effects of an Oral Culture on Student Writing," *CCC* 30 (May 1979): 156-160.

² For support of this viewpoint, see Patricia Silber, "Teaching Written English as a Second Language," *CCC* 30 (October 1979): 296-300. This concept of writing instruction is developed fully by Helmut Esau and Michael L. Keene, in "A TESOL Model for Native-Language Writing Instruction: In Search of a Model for the Teaching of Writing," *College English* 43 (November 1981): 694-710. For a different, though not necessarily conflicting viewpoint, one should consult Patrick Hartwell, "Dialect Interference in Writing: A Critical View," *Research in the Teaching of English* 14 (May 1980): 101-118. Hartwell, citing impressive research, challenges the notion of dialect interference as it is sometimes applied to features of *specific* oral dialects that appear in student writing. Like Silber, Esau, and Keene, I apply the notion to *all* oral dialects without reference to race or class or ethnic background, or even to any particular canon of "correct usage." It is my simple contention that people who live in a predominantly oral culture, who communicate mainly in speech, and who neither read nor write constantly will carry over into their writing some habits of expression formed to satisfy the less demanding requirements of oral communication. I agree with Hartwell that a command of "correct spoken English" (if it were possible to define such a dialect) is not a necessary intermediate stage in the ultimate mastery of the standard written dialect. Indeed, no spoken dialect, no matter what claim of "correctness" can be made for its pronunciation, tense forms, and grammatical structures, is fully adequate to the demands of good expository prose, as much recent research makes clear. Finally, I agree with Hartwell that control of the standard written dialect is likely to precede and not to follow correctness in oral expression.

³ My argument in this essay is predicated on the assumption that the grapholect is, as Hirsch contends, a mode of expression with norms that are different from the norms of both casual and formal speech. Hirsch argues, correctly, that all language instruction is, by definition, normative; and that teaching the norms of the grapholect is not elitist but democratic in objective. See Chapter Two of *The Philosophy of Composition* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1977). For an application of Hirsch's ideas to "prescriptive" writing instruction, see Leo Daugherty, "The English Grapholect and the Introductory Composition Course," *CCC* 30 (May 1979): 134-140. See also Robert J. Connors, "The Differences Between Speech and Writing: Ethos, Pathos, Logos," *CCC* 30 (October 1979): 285-290.

⁴ Janet Emig draws upon important basic research to demonstrate how the form of written discourse acts as both generator and vehicle of thought

and, in the process, functions as a powerful instrument of cognitive learning ; in "Writing as a Mode of Learning," *CCC* 28 (May 1977): 122-128.

⁵ For a full amplification of this point, see Julia S. Falk, "Language Acquisition and the Teaching and Learning of Writing," *College English* 41 (December 1979): 436-447.

⁶ See Helen Houser Popovich, "From Tape to Type," *CCC* 27 (October 1976): 283-285. She reports heartening results with a method similar to mine.

⁷ For an extended treatment of this subject, see Randall R. Freisinger, "Cross-Disciplinary Writing Workshops: Theory and Practice," *College English* 42 (October 1980): 154-156.

⁸ In her important essay, "Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing," *College English* 41 (September 1979): 19-37, Linda Flower asserts that "good writing...is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader." She makes a good case for regarding a first draft that displays the verbal, cognitive, and structural characteristics of egocentric speech "not [as] a composite of errors or a mistake that should be scrapped. Instead, it is a halfway place for many writers and often represents the results of an extensive search and selection process." In a later essay, she summarizes her distinction between writer-based and reader-based prose and offers useful techniques for transforming one into the other. See "Revising Writer-Based Prose," *Journal of Basic Writing* 3 (Fall/Winter 1981): 62-74.

In the same issue of that journal, David Hoddeson, in "The Reviser's Voice," 91-108, explains the relations among inner speech, outer speech, and written text, and asserts that the first two "must always be recast—revised—to create coherent texts." In his view, "error's endless train in part stems from a universal semiotic conflict: the writer's inability to switch off the inner voice that originally dictated, and that upon rereading revoices, written texts." In other words, the authority of the inner voice continues to assert itself even during revision and thus causes the writer to fail to supply the cues and conventions that distinguish writing from speech. The similarity of his ideas to mine, at least in pedagogy, can be seen in his remark that "an ability to read aloud with fluency must surely narrow the gap between voice and page, if only because the audible passage of written English through the oral/aural self eventually provides a repertory of such structures for future writing."