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ABSTRACT

The approach to writing as a process of problem-solving through experimentation is used in a sentence-expansion technique for college-level remedial English. Students are presented with an uninteresting, two-sentence story that they expand by experimentation, building confidence in their knowledge of appropriate sentence structure and grammar. The same process of experimentation and discovery could be accomplished with a teacher-authored microcomputer word-play program that would facilitate on-screen comparison of alternative sentence structures and possibly provide animated words and special graphics. The program could provide syntactical or grammatical prompts, according to the teacher's purpose and desire for structure, making all sentences grammatically acceptable and freeing the student of concern about errors. A similar technique could be used for making sentence-combining exercises more interesting. (MSE)

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by Roberta Bosc

Writing Phobia: Its Development and Arrest

Ask students in primary grades through graduate school to explain why they write, and two answers come very quickly: self-expression and communication. This is what they've been told by their teachers, so it must be right. Besides, they have to write papers in school, at least to answer essay questions on exams. Society forces them to learn, because they might have to write something "in real life" later--a memo on the job or a note to the auto mechanic. But when asked what they write, students literally "have no idea." How are they to "express and communicate" nothing? Writing is a trap of misplaced modifiers, faulty agreement, fragments and comma splices, confused vowels, non-standard usage--a maze of errors. Students are warned in advance about the seriousness of these errors and how much will be deducted from grades for each one. When teachers go error-hunting with red pens through jungles of student papers, it is inevitable that students commit the very sins they supposedly were learning to avoid (Shaughnessy, 1977).

Correcting mistakes in workbooks is the traditional task in English class, but teachers are frustrated to find that sequential vocabulary and grammar and syntax lessons have to be re-taught grade after grade. Homework drill and mastery of discrete "skills" as evidenced on objective tests do not seem to transfer into the students' own writing (Sherwin, 1969). It's an overwhelming dilemma for curriculum-makers: "How can they write essays or even paragraphs when they can't even put a sentence together?" When the lessons do "take," the writing products might be models of correctness and conformity, but their content lacks originality, coherence--often a thesis of any kind. If essays of famous authors are presented as examples, the effect is intimidating. Ability to "decompose" or critique a text (Berthoff, 1978) does not guarantee that it can be recomposed again, just as a wrecking crew is neither equipped nor expected to rebuild the structure. Furthermore, attempts at such stylistic imitation usually are no better than parodies, and a subtle message is relayed to students that everything worthwhile has already been written by Shakespeare and Milton.

A reaction against this building-block approach has been made by professional writers and composition teachers who do not believe that writing is a craft for which only the proper "tools" and "skills" must be supplied. The most extreme view has been expressed by Peter Elbow (Writing Without Teachers, 1973) whose freewriting technique depends upon the theory of writing as inborn talent developed by constant practice. As long as the pen is moving across the paper, if only to repeat, "I don't know what to write," the creative juices will eventually begin to flow. Merely dumping words on paper with regularity and frequency is enough. This is much like beginning a lecture with, "Any questions?" but classrooms turned into writing studios and teachers become facilitators and coaches are common. The novice writer is offered writing stimuli and an unstructured, often nonjudgmental writing atmosphere, and encouragement in the form of "Even professional writers struggle." (Murray, 1968) From this same philosophy of writing as art comes the suggestion

that classes be suspended in favor of individual conferences, so that the teacher is seen as editorial advisor, responding to the artist's problems as they arise. Such sporadic guidance leads students to wonder why they are enrolled in a formal course and how they will be evaluated.

There is another "school of thought" about teaching composition. Flower and Hayes (1980, 1981) by studying writing protocols, the "thinking aloud" decisions made by writers in the process of composing, describe writing as problem-solving. Writers certainly must have appropriate vocabulary and knowledge of language structures, but they also need the intellectual ability to make a logical statement; social cognition, to create context for the absent reader; and knowledge of conventions of genre, texts of different types and purposes. All of these choices vie for attention simultaneously. But word-level choices made automatically by experienced writers preoccupy basic writers (and their teachers) to the extent that the functions of writing as concept builder and thinking tool are never fully realized (Emig, 1971). The writing process, rather than linear in stages of prewriting/writing/rewriting (upon which most formal instruction is based) seems to be more like a recursive spiral, and revision can occur at any point. Therefore, instead of reteaching "foundation skills" before any "real" writing assignments are given, teachers should be helping students, no matter how young, to discover their own ideas (invention). This can be done through discussion and reading, two ways to expand experience. "What is there to say" precedes "How to say it," because arranging and expressing those ideas (organization and style) depends upon the writer's purpose in communicating with an audience of actual readers. Students must be relieved of the worry of error-making so that they can experiment with words to discover ideas.

Teaching Composition through Word Play

Generative grammar, a variation of Chomsky's transformational grammar (1968), is a system for understanding linguistic structures (Christensen, 1978). To kernel sentences (simple bases containing only subject and object nouns and present-tense verbs) are added free modifiers in the form of adjectives and adverbs, appositives, prepositional phrases, embedded relative clauses, and other more complex constructions. These cumulative sentences have directionality, texture, and levels of generality: that is, modifiers can precede, interrupt, or follow the base; modification can be rich and dense or scarcely enough to identify the main components; one statement can contain both general propositions and specific examples. Christensen's analysis can be readily applied to text already written: to dissect stylistic elements of a Pope essay, for instance. But generative grammar is a study in itself, and as such has proven too technical for teachers to present or students to use while composing their own papers. Workbook adaptations would require so much preliminary explanation that the exercises, instead of providing practice and opportunity for exploration of language, would tend to be fragmented and confusing. This is probably the reason for Christensen's theory not having been translated into composition classroom or textook practice.

However, the sentence expansion technique has built confidence in my own Developmental English students (college freshmen, remedial level) when they were experiencing writer's cramp, writer's block, or--worst of all--writing phobia. When my reluctant writers complain that they don't know what to write about, I ask them what they talk about, and what they think about, and to share what they observe around them. If there is still a blank, I tell them my story:

> While driving home from work yesterday, I saw a man.
> He was standing on the corner.

As they wait for more, I say, "End of story." They silently wonder why I was struck by that sight and why they should care. Finally, one gets the courage to remark, "That's not very interesting," or "So what?" which gives me the chance to explain the choices: using precise, connotative or figurative language, or feverishly adding descriptors to the common nouns and verb. So I can say:

> A hunchback staggered and reeled in the gutter. OR
> The smelly, ragged drunken man stood teetering precariously on the dark and deserted city street corner.

Once while we were plowing through a particularly dismal workbook lesson on identifying prepositional phrases, I wrote on the board:

> Useless to underline phrases starting with prepositions unless you know their job in the sentence: to describe nouns or verbs!

And then I wrote: THE CAT SAT DOWN.

I asked them to describe the cat (what it looked like and how it acted) and the sitting down (where, when, how, how long, why). The result was a base sentence very well modified with naturally occurring prepositional phrases used both as adjectives and adverbs. Students couldn't believe that they all knew how to use them properly! But the real shocker was that, in spite of its length and seeming complexity, the sentence was still a simple pattern, consisting of only one main clause, and we could extricate that skeleton subject (cat) from the maze of modifiers.

Both of these demonstrations were performed on the blackboard, so I elicited suggestions from as many students as were willing to participate. They could have done seatwork or made small group decisions, and passed their papers in for grading. But those sentences would have been difficult to evaluate, there being no one right answer.

The Role of the Microcomputer: Discovery and Experimentation

The hand calculator has replaced slide rules and multiplication tables in most math classes, and microcomputers, by performing tedious computations, have enabled students to explore higher level mathematical concepts. In the same way, word processing programs are just now beginning to assure students of

perfect copy at the end of a composition session. But the microcomputer, with its memory and flexibility, has capabilities that have not been harnessed for the student writer. While it does handle drill and practice and tutorials with infinite patience and precision, the machine can be much more than an electronic blackboard. Creative applications involve interactions with students. Rather than passively receiving information from a filmstrip or book, students are allowed to experiment with the help of the computer. Traditional educational materials simply do not engage students to the extent that a tutorial can: in meaningful learning, in inductive reasoning and problem-solving, in discovery of divergent answers and new concepts (Bonner, 1984). The Apple or Commodore could take sentence expansion to each member of the class individually, while helping each to explore and compare and evaluate more options. The boredom and drudgery of pencil-and-paper revision could be replaced by animated words, clear and correct displays, possibly by complementary graphics or color, and best of all, by instant replay for feedback. The computer could do all this if properly programmed (Kingman, 1981; Stefan, 1983).

The Play on Words Program

After the title page, "Play on Words" as animated letters marching down the screen and changing to "Word Play," the screen would display "The cat sat down," and then spread the words apart to make room for student input. Instead of lengthy directions involving lots of reading, questions could be added one at a time:

> What color is the cat? What breed? Is it sitting on a fence or is it crouching under a chair? What time of day or night is it? Besides sitting, what else is it doing? Where is this all taking place? And what will the cat do next or what will happen to it?

Syntactical or grammatical prompts could be given, depending upon how much structure the teacher wishes to provide and the general purpose of the lesson:

> Add a "which" clause after "cat." Start with an adverb ending in "ly"or with a verbal ending in "ing." Separate the subject and verb with a long series of descriptors, or with a parallel set of participles. Add a coordinate conjunction and another main clause; then subordinate the new clause and try it both preceding and following the main clause.

The computer would have to display alternate versions at the same time, so that they could be compared for style and effectiveness. Parts of the final sentences could be shifted around for different emphasis. Then questions for evaluation:

> Is there any difference in meaning between the two versions? Which one emphasizes the subject? the action? the description? What effect does changing word order have for the reader?

Since all versions would be correct in the sense of being grammatically acceptable, the student would be free from the worry

of error-making, and free to pursue the possibilities of language without penalty for his/her courage.

Another technique that would suffer from the tedium of pencil-and-paper trial-and-error is sentence-combining, which has gained such popularity that whole textbooks and courses have been built around it (O'Hare, 1973; Strong, 1973). It is even included in Warriner's grammar handbooks, a series used all the way through high school and into college. But that would be another program, nearly opposite to this one, although the objectives would be the same. In both cases, the student is led to experiment with language and the final evaluation would be made not by a teacher but by the student, alone at the keyboard of a microcomputer.

The Author

Roberta Boss received an M.A. degree in English Education from the University of Maryland in May 1981 and is currently completing her dissertation titled Formative Evaluation of College Composition: Providing Feedback during the Writing Process. Publications include Junior College Articulation and The Senility Myth.

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