

Correcting ESL Compositions with a Cassette Recorder: Getting to Know the Reader, Not the Proofreader

by Brien Hallett

In the teaching of ESL composition, cassette recorders are a significant technological innovation. They allow the composition teacher to become again a flesh and blood reader rather than a lifeless proofreader. The key to improving a student's writing is to teach him "to know his reader." But how can this maxim be any thing but a vague, empty adage if the student's only reader limits himself to the standard proofreader's marks and an occasional marginal comment? Such a procedure only teaches the student "to know his proofreader," a sharp-eyed stickler for detail with no apparent interest in what the student actually says.

Indeed, systematic error correction (i.e., good proofreading) is ineffective because it has little to do with teaching students what they really need to know: how their writing affects their readers. But how can a student learn this when the teacher, red pencil in hand, underscores this, crosses out that, and scribbles a few thoughts in the margin? This approach is obviously incapable of telling the student, in any meaningful way, how his audience has reacted to his writing.

Cassette recordings, on the other hand, permit students to know once again who their reader is, what their reader thinks about the composition, and why their reader thinks as he does. Without this full explanation, this direct personal challenge to the student, one wonders how the proofreader's marks left by the teacher can have any meaning at all, much less motivate the student to improve his writing (Hurst 1975). The point is well made by Farnsworth's students (1974: 287):

I rather prefer the using of tape cassettes to the comments on my paper because it isn't possible to explain the errors in such a little space; however, if the teacher uses a tape, she can tell us the

error and also the way she thinks it could be made better.

I prefer having my composition corrected using the tape method because it is more precisely commented on than the standard use of comments in the margins of my paper.

The cassette gives me more information about my paper and also I can understand better what you are thinking about.

Although cassette recordings can never match the give and take of a personal interview, they are the next best thing.¹ For instance, what else besides an *awk* or *ord* can a teacher using a pencil say to help a student improve this opening sentence?

"I've studied most lessons (1) which I've learned in school, by the method of cramming (2) by teacher (3) from elementary to college."

However, if he is using a cassette recorder, in a few seconds he can say,

This is a good topic sentence. However, it could be better. Number 1: Why have you used a whole relative clause to tell us that the "lessons" were learned in school? Could you have said, "I've studied most school lessons dot, dot, dot?" Would this have been simpler and more direct? Number 2: I really don't understand what you mean here. From what you say below I think you mean something like ". . .cramming the teacher's lectures. . ." or ". . .cramming lectures by the teacher." Whatever you mean, you haven't said it. This part needs to be rewritten. Number 3: Why is this phrase last in the sentence? "From elementary school to college" sets the scene for your whole composition--just like the opening scene in a movie. Don't you think you should tell the reader right away where the action

of your composition will take place? Therefore, shouldn't this phrase come at the very beginning?

In short, the teacher can make the lifeless proofreader's marks come alive with significance simply by explaining what he means by them. Furthermore, the cassette recordings allow the teacher to make full use of all the "affective variables" inherent in spoken language but absent from red pencil marks. He can express praise, amazement, anger, and irritation with all the subtlety of the human voice. For example, what is a student to make of a written comment like this?

Keiji, this paper is not worth reading. What happened? You usually do very good work, but this paper is sloppy, full of careless mistakes. You obviously didn't even proofread it. As for organization, there is none. You are wasting your time writing this junk and my time handing it in.

The teacher is plainly unhappy. But how unhappy--slightly irritated or really angry? Keiji has no way of knowing from the lifeless, emotionally empty written words. However, listening to the same comment on a cassette tape, Keiji knows immediately from the teacher's intonation whether the teacher is really put out or just slightly peeved at one sloppy paper. Again, it is the subtle qualities of the spoken voice which reaches out to give meaning, substance, and emotional weight to the words. The teacher is transformed from a distant, impersonal editor-in-chief into a real person with real emotions.

In addition, listening to the teacher's recorded comments gives ESL students much needed experience in listening comprehension which is both personally relevant and of high interest--their grade depends upon it. This is especially helpful to students whose written English is stronger than their listening comprehension. The teacher's recorded comments are a listening exercise in which the topic, the vocabulary, and the context are all focused upon the student's practical concerns. Any new vocabulary or expressions which the teacher may introduce are presented in a context which is clearly and directly related to the student's

immediate communicative needs. It is an opportunity to further integrate the ESL curriculum which should not be overlooked.

All these advantages can be achieved without undue trouble or effort. The basic procedure is simple enough. The students hand in a blank cassette tape along with their papers. The teacher reads the papers marking the points he thinks need attention. He composes his thoughts for a minute and systematically dictates his reaction to the paper. Finally, the cassettes and the papers are returned.

Considered in more detail, the initial problem is to keep track of each student's cassette and paper. Klammer (1973) has his students hand in a file folder contain-

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ing their paper and their cassette. He then uses a large box to carry the folders to and from his office and to keep the cassettes from falling out of the folders. Farnsworth (1974) favors assigning each student a cassette number which he puts on both his cassette tape and on his composition. She then collects the cassettes in a sack, the papers in a pile, and sorts them out in a few minutes when she is ready to correct them. However, I find that the problem is solved just as well by having each student put his paper and his cassette into a paper bag or a manila envelope.

Marking the papers is no problem. Mechanical errors are noted with conventional proofreader's marks. These are not usually commented on unless they happen to be the point of the lesson. Problems of content, organization, or vocabulary choice can be numbered, underscored, circled, or otherwise highlighted, perhaps with a brief note

to the teacher so he does not forget why he circled it. Farnsworth (1974) reports that Harris used a vertical line in the right hand margin to signal a favorable comment and vertical line in the left hand margin to signal an unfavorable comment. Other marks can be developed as needed.

Points to remember when dictating are all common sense:

1. Begin by addressing the student by name and use the title of his composition.
2. Accent the positive; make your first comment favorable.
3. Give a global impression first, then address each item systematically (e.g., Write a number beside each item you wish to comment on. Then begin each comment by saying, "Number 1 is a vocabulary problem Number 2 is").
4. Summarize your comments at the end.
5. Give the grade. (Giving the grade last ensures that the cassette tape is listened to.)

It takes between ten to fifteen minutes to correct a two or three page paper. If classes are large and time a problem, the teacher need not correct all the papers each time with a cassette recorder. For each assignment, half or a third of the papers could be corrected using a cassette recorder and the rest in the traditional way.

Nowadays, in most places, every student owns a cassette recorder. If, however, this is not the case, remember the students do not have to own a recorder but only have access to one for short periods of time. Thus, students who do not own cassette recorders can be given access to one by pairing them with students or cooperative neighbors who do. In those rare situations where only one or two machines are available to the class, the teacher can either organize a listening schedule or can limit his recorded corrections to only those few students who have the greatest need—those who are especially weak or who require extensive correction. Weaker students often appreciate this special attention.

The usefulness of cassette recorders is not limited to correcting student essays. In addition to recording her comments, Popovich (1976) has her students hand in a recorded reading of their essay as a form of self-evaluation. The recording and the typed text are compared. Any discrepancies between the two highlight passages that need to be re-written. For those few students who cannot write because they cannot even form the letters, Murry and Croft (1979) have the student record his story. Afterwards they write it out for him to copy. This allows the teacher to work on vocabulary, grammar, content and organization even before the student learns to draw the letters. But the use of cassette recorders for pre-writing and self-evaluative exercises is another story for another time.

In summary, the use of cassette recorders to correct ESL compositions provides numerous advantages over both impersonal and ineffective marginal notes and time consuming personal interviews. By carrying the teacher's voice to the student, cassette recordings re-introduce all the affective dimensions of oral communication and re-establish the teacher as a most knowledgeable and concerned reader instead of a mechanical proofreader.

¹See Medlicott (1979) for an example of a teacher who combines cassette recordings and personal interviews.

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