

Vivifying the Writing Class "You Are There" Style

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Over recent years, auxiliary language educators have become increasingly more concerned with favorably engaging student feelings in the language acquisition process. For some the matter is a primary issue. Stevick (1976:122) states flatly, "The crucial factor in second language learning is the quality of personal activation."

Note we are not talking about the communicative approach(es) per se. Granted, all communicative approaches must pay major concern to favorably engaging student feelings. But not every language teaching approach or method which does so could be called communicative in the most complete sense. Thus, Suggestopedia, for example, is of interest for the affective climate it manages to create, even though the semantic organization of Lozanov's syllabus, or any particular student processing of that syllabus in itself would perhaps be regarded of small note by most communicative methodologists.

What this means is that, "How can I get my students to communicate more?" and "How can I more deeply activate my students internally?" are not the same question.

The present article has developed from the second of these quests. It is about seeing, about feeling, about reading, and—in particular—about writing. About a particular technique of writing whose purpose, as used by professional journalists, is to arrest attention.

"You Are There"

Two men sit at opposite ends of an aluminum skiff on a muddy brown river.

A dugout canoe, its sides still wet, lies nearby on the riverbank. Two new machetes and a small pile of food are heaped next to the canoe. One of the men holds a camera in his moist hands. The other, his face streaked with sweat, calls again and again into the dense jungle growth along the shore, not 15 feet away, in the blunt words of a strange language: "Yo! Yo!" Listen, he is saying. We are friends. Do not run. We will not hurt you. Take our gifts. Don't run away. "Yo!"

Thus does Herbert Liberton begin his article entitled "New Guinea: The Outer Limits," which appeared in *GEO* magazine in April of 1982.

"She Flies Through the Air with the Greatest of Ease" by Joan Ackermann-Blount, published January 16, 1984 in *Sports Illustrated*, starts like this:

"Isn't this fun?" Edna Gardner Whyte, pioneer woman aviator, has just stalled her plane at 1,500 feet, sending it toppling in a free-fall spin. Her passenger, someone who doesn't do too well on Ferris wheels, is screaming piteously at the earth that is whirlpooling up toward her, wrapping itself around her head, unfurling like an explosion in a ribbon factory.

"Edna . . ." The scream funnels out from some unexplored part of her psyche, filling the void where the motor once roared.

"Edna. . .the motor. . .is everything all right?"

"Yes, now relax. I want you to enjoy this."

What these two leads have in common is that they are written in "you are there" style. Journalists have found this an engaging manner to transport the casual, uncommitted, image oriented magazine reader from his own concerns to those of the magazine he is holding: It is the equivalent in print of turning on the television set.

Four Components

Before considering a place for this technique in TESOL, we will briefly discuss four basic components of an arresting "you are there" vignette:

1. setting
2. characters
3. point of view
4. action

First, there is a specific, concrete setting whose chief features are sharply lit. "Two men sit at opposite ends of an aluminum skiff on a muddy brown river. A dugout canoe, its sides still wet, lies nearby on the riverbank," gives the reader—the advanced reader, at any rate—something definite to work with. "Some men are in a boat on the water. Another boat is out of the water," clearly gives less, and thus proves less arresting.

Second, there is a character or characters that become the focus of reader concern; what is happening to them—what is going to happen to them—prompts reader identification:

Her passenger, someone who doesn't do too well on Ferris wheels, is screaming piteously at the earth that is whirlpooling

up toward her, wrapping itself around her head, unfurling like an explosion in a ribbon factory.

Third, there is conscious manipulation of point of view, the angle from which the scene is framed, the action filmed, the story "told." The reader, in short, is given a good seat. Everything important for him to see is shown "on camera"; anything else important for him to know is mentioned unobtrusively, whispered into his ear, as it were, while his eyes remain fastened to the screen. Once again, we refer to Ackermann-Blount:

The passenger looks up through the window at the sky and wails out loud when the slide of the sky is replaced by a slide of the earth as three Gs pass through them both like riptides. (One G is the gravitational force on a person when standing on the ground. Three Gs feel like three people are inside one's body and along with everything one has ever dreamed, thought or eaten, they're all stampeding to exit from one's head.) Edna is radiant. "Aerobatics keeps you young," she says.

Fourth, and most characteristically, there is action, happening now, at the present—to such a degree, with certain craftsmen, that the reader experiences the illusion that if he were to remove his eyes from the page, the succession of events would continue inexorably without him. This sense of the irretrievable moment is created through the use of 1) dialogue 2) present participial and absolute phrases and 3) the simple present and simple present continuous tenses, although the present perfect and present perfect continuous may be employed judiciously to fill out the situation without disrupting the effect:

"Isn't this fun?" Edna Gardner Whyte, pioneer woman aviator, has just stalled her plane at 1,500 feet, sending it toppling in a free-fall spin.

"You Are There" and "Personal Activation"

Up to this point, we have looked at some examples of "you are there" writing, analyzed its basic components, and observed that journalists use the technique fundamentally to arrest reader attention, precisely because ... it so powerfully stirs reader feelings. And there is good reason to presume that the effect on the writer himself is even greater than that on his reader.

Psychologists have long understood that there is a mysterious power of arousal in talking in the present tense about past events. They will sometimes have a counselee relate a past experience as if it were happening in the now, all over again. This simple technique tends to revive the feelings originally associated with the experience (even perhaps uncover long forgotten facts, remembered in a flood of emotion).

There is some evidence that whole cultures have shared in an emotive "you are there" consciousness. Whorf (1956) regarded the absence of past tense markers in some Indian languages of basic importance for understanding how the people who spoke these languages experienced their lives. It would be difficult to deny that the speaking of the past in present tense (for Whorf the present was "sensuous," the past "nonsensuous") contributed in some measure to the unique time/space consciousness conveyed in the book *Hanta Yo* by Ruth Beebe Hill and especially, with more reliance on dialogue, in the TV mini-series "The Mystic Warrior" based on that novel. (The reader should be advised, though, that not all versions dubbed for international distribution conserved this feature, unfortunately.)

The main point here, though, is simply this: Recounting our experience in present tense makes that experience seem more immediate, more spontaneous, more alive—both to ourselves and others. Having

students write "you are there" style is thus seen as consistent with one of our major goals in TESOL, that of positively enlisting student feelings, of encouraging "personal activation," of setting in motion deep, admittedly not well understood emotive-cognitive processes that would seem to favor language acquisition.

Getting Started

"You are there" writing is so common these days that teachers and students with ready access to Sunday newspaper supplements or popular magazines in English will have no trouble finding a host of examples for analysis and discussion. Of course, teachers may have to write simplified versions—perhaps two or three different approximations for some especially difficult models, where both vocabulary and sentence structure would be downstepped in combination. Thus, "Some men are in a boat on the water. Another boat is out of the water" may actually be the version of preference for a first reading of Liberton in an EFL classroom. We must keep in mind that reading problems create distance, and a "you are there" piece succeeds only to the extent that distance is minimized.

While students are still at the analysis stage (implicit throughout this discussion is the conviction that careful readers become effective writers), one simple yet profitable exercise is to have them change all the main verbs of an illustrative lead to past time. Students will see that the result may still be an effective piece of writing, but it is no longer "you are there." Why? In the one we seem to observe the action from the seats, at a safe remove; in the other, we seem more involved with the performers, as if we were in their company up on stage.

Writing assignments themselves can be thought of in preliminary stages as video portraits translated into print. There's no need, in other words, to assign an entire article just so students can have an

opportunity to write "you are there." Article ideas can be merely discussed, opening images talked over, and appropriate leads written as ends in themselves. Results are often quite satisfying, intact vignettes envincing their own particular charm. They do not have to be part of a full-length article to be meaningfully experienced.

To be sure, neither our students nor we ourselves, for that matter (this is a writing activity worth sharing in with them side by side), can be expected to become Libertsons or Ackermann-Blounts. But, then, that is not the goal. Is it not enough to sharpen our appreciation of the people who bring "light to our eyes," to perhaps heighten our awareness of an event (however modest), then seek to share that awareness with those in our immediate circle, through means of the new language we are acquiring?

References

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About the Author

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