Controlled, Guided, and Free Writing

BY RICHARD J. PORT

The teaching of writing skills in second language learning is unlikely to improve until greater effort has been made to sequence those skills. At present, the attempt is made to filter out errors through extensive free practice. Some students learn in this way, but the second language teacher needs only to look at his students' papers to see for himself how unsuccessful this method usually is for a majority of his students.

With extensive free practice, students' errors accumulate until these become so numerous and varied that students can not determine which ones require their most immediate attention; reinforcement of correct writing procedures does not take place; students become discouraged because they are unable to see any real improvements in their writing ability and the teacher becomes a machine turning out an infinite variety of red marks on students' themes.

Ideal Program

Is there an alternative? We need first ask ourselves what an effective writing program should provide for the students. Ideally such a program should:

1) Make it possible for students to write error-free papers.

2) Reinforce correct writing procedures.

3) Build students' confidence in their own ability to write.

4) Motivate students to improve their writing ability.

5) Increase the amount of students' practice.

6) Enable students to proceed at their own rate.

7) Develop students' ability to use

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skillfully the complex English structures so evident in the writing of educated adults.

Writing techniques which control students' practice, as well as guide and channel progress, show considerable promise in meeting the criteria just mentioned. By programming and isolating various structures of study and by combining these in such a way as to enable students to use the complex structures found in the writing of educated adults, we can provide a tool for writing practice which is so controlled that students are ensured success at every attempt.

Substitution Is First Step

A student can begin by making simple substitutions on existing models. He can work his way through a series of graduated steps involving modifications and transformations unitl finally he begins to expand upon the model and create original models of his own. As difficulties arise, the student can be branched for further practice. Only in the last stages of this technique, only after the student has proven he can do so successfully, is he required to work with the steps which ask him to write freely and creatively. One of the most encouraging aspects of this technique is that it can provide students with practice which will allow them to proceed according to their own abilities and at their own rate of speed.

Early in 1964, an experimental set of materials was developed using this technique. These materials were used with a number of groups of foreign students at Teachers College, Columbia University, with second language students in Nigeria, Japan, and elsewhere around the world as well as with younger first-

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language students in Massachusetts. In every tryout the results indicated that students were consistently able to write both simple and complex structures of the language correctly and gain confidence in their writing ability.

It is encouraging to discover that we may, at last, have a tool that will provide extensive writing practice and will develop writing skills systematically and without discouraging the student or overburdening the teacher with successive corrections. Other approaches have not met with very great success. At the very least, this technique deserves our attention and consideration.

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1 Ananse Tales, A Course in Controlled Composition. Gerald Dykstra, Richard Port and Antonette Port, Teachers College Press, Teachers College, Columbia University, New York, 1966.