

Teaching Composition to ESL Students

by Dolores A. Foley

The most difficult task I encounter in teaching English as a foreign language is teaching the student to write a clear, organized and interesting composition. I was really quite discouraged about it until one day I had lunch with two regular English teachers. I was talking about the problem and they laughed at me. Then the one said, "You're discouraged because you can't teach in two years what many English teachers are not able to accomplish in twelve years with native speakers. Why do you think all colleges require a freshman composition course?" When I returned to my classroom I felt better about it but the problem was still there.

My students learn to speak English rapidly, not just from my teaching but from twelve hour daily exposure to English. They

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also learn to read English rapidly and with good comprehension because I was a reading specialist before I started teaching English as a foreign language. Now if I can learn to teach my students to write clear, expository paragraphs I'll feel satisfied.

I have used Lois Robinson's *Guided and Free Writing* for students of English as a foreign language. The only criticism I have is that my students became very adept at turning interrogative sentences into declarative sentences, but still did not seem to improve much in writing original paragraphs.

One method I have been using with some success is to show the class a picture. I usually take pictures from *Life* or *Look* magazines. Sometimes I have xeroxed copies of Margaret Bourke-White pictures. Then as a group we look at the picture. I have the individual student tell me what they see in the picture. What message does the picture convey? I write the sentences on the blackboard exactly as the students say them. We correct grammatical errors. Then I explain how we must change the sentences somewhat because we don't always write

the way we speak. When we speak we do not always use complete sentences because we can understand so much from the situation, the speakers tone and facial expression. So therefore in writing we use a different vocabulary so the reader can visualize our experience through the words we use. We use a much higher vocabulary in writing. As a class exercise we copy the sentences as we say them. Then we re-group them, organize them and change the vocabulary to make the paragraph more interesting and enjoyable. Then the entire class copies the completed paragraph.

As we progress to longer compositions I use a modification of the forms used in our school writing program. With the native speakers the English teachers use a very structured system called the 3-3 paragraph. We pick a topic. Under this topic we put 3 sub-topics, under the 3 sub-topics we put 3 supporting details. The following is a typical outline written by one of my European students.

I'll never forget my first trip to an American super-market.

I. It was an exciting experience

1. It was necessary to catch a bus because the supermarket was not in the residential area.

2. So many people were hurrying in so many directions it created an exciting atmosphere.

3. The parking lot was a sea of many colored cars of all models so large compared to European cars.

II. It was a confusing experience

1. The weights and measures were so different.

2. The money confused me and I was afraid I wouldn't have enough to pay at the checkout counter.

3. There was such a variety of packages that I had a difficult time making a choice.

III. Shopping is so different in my country

1. Each market has only one type of food.

2. You must carry a shopping basket; nothing is put in bags.

3. There are no frozen foods.

Once the student has made his outline he is ready to start his composition. Making this outline helps the student think and put

his thoughts in some sort of organizational and sequential form. This is what I have done up to now to teach my students to write.

During this workshop I have examined many texts and have come to the conclusion that I will not restrict myself to one text but will take the ideas from several texts that will best suit the needs of my students. Following is a review of some of the texts I examined:

I liked *A Programmed Approach to Writing* by Gordon, Burgard and Young Books 1 & 2. In this text the student does not work from rules or definitions but from discovery. The exercises on such skills as putting ideas in order, seeing logical relationships of time, space, cause and effect are very good.

Perhaps a good text for an advanced student or a native student to use for reference

is *Troublesome Verbs* P81 would be useful for the foreign student. Pages 84-89 give good examples of words and expressions frequently misused. She should put pages 10-17 somewhere at the end of the book or leave them out entirely.

The *Ananse Tales*, a course in controlled composition by Dykstra and Port is excellent because it doesn't make repeated use of changing from the interrogative to the declarative. In such exercises as the following the student must recall the proper pronoun to use to fill in the blank. He is using the language and not merely manipulating words.

I saw John. I saw *him*.

I saw Mary. I saw

Then after the student fills in the blank he can turn the page to find out immediately if he has made the correct response.

A First Book in Composition L. G. Alexander has exercises that are short, exact and simple enough for the beginning student to use with success to build confidence in ability to write in English. I would use these for classroom exercises.