

# TEACHING WRITING SKILLS TO ADULT NAVAJOS

by Sally Currie

The classroom was small. Over thirty students were packed around the tables and along the counters. A quick sweep of the eyes around the room revealed that two-thirds of the pupils were Navajos between the ages of twenty and forty. The remaining students were Anglo of about the same age range. Two years of living in San Juan County helped me to assess their general educational level. Most had finished high school but had not been back to school for several years. Perhaps a little less than 25% had dropped out of high school as a result of frustration and/or boredom. A handful had continued to educate themselves in one way or another; they were the truly literate ones. Political and economic pressure prevented the college from screening out the unequipped enrollees.

We met once a week for less than two hours. Already I knew the semester would be too short. I had never taught this advanced a class. The task: to teach a Freshman English class for these people seeking to launch on the road to teacher certification or perhaps to being a teacher aid for local elementary schools.

Several of these people had been social promotions throughout most of their previous school experiences. Others had signed up knowing they would receive a stipend for attending classes once a week. The rest had to take this and other classes as part of their job requirement as a classroom aid. With college text in hand I took a deep breath, aimed my instruction at the "average" student and plunged in.

Time, experience and further education makes me reflect on that episode with wonder. How did I get through it? Was I effective at all? Did I meet the needs of even half of those students? How would I handle it if the same opportunity were to arise again?

It is the last question on which I would like to speculate for the next few paragraphs.

Glancing through Richard Corbin's book entitled *The Teaching of Writing in Our Schools*, I get the feeling that he believes that if you train someone to be a good listener and reader of English, he will become a better speaker and writer. With the scrambled educational backgrounds experienced by so many of the Navajo people I lived among it is difficult to make them fit into any such pattern. Boarding

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schools, welfare placement programs, church placement programs, bussing to public schools, lax attendance practices, social promotions, etc. make it difficult to know which way is best to teach such a conglomeration of "educated" Navajo adults. But I would have a more defined system were I to relive my past experience.

First I would administer some kind of pretest to determine each student's writing skills level. Then applying a little "political pressure" of my own I would try to have the completely unequipped students reassigned or hope that they would soon eliminate themselves from the course.

Next I would divide the class into two groups: those almost ready to write and those ready to write. Either I would teach each group as separate classes at different times or else I would request that another teacher take one of the groups.

If I were to teach the group not yet

ready to write I would spend the first two class periods dictating sentences and then paragraphs. But as has been discussed and in I. Morris' book, *Teaching English as a Living Language*, I would dictate only that material that the students could write within their linguistic powers in English. Also, I would strive to dictate material that was pertinent to their work and lives. Hopefully this would help the Navajo students avoid translating from their mother tongue into English. I would use one or two word and sentence games in this step as I would also do in the next one.

The next step would be to spend a couple more class periods thoroughly discussing a simple fable or anecdote and then allowing the students to reword it according to their understanding. Using the results of their compositions I would then determine whether to discuss a more difficult topic placing the key words on the board first and having the students write them, or else put the class on the text *Working Sentences* by Allen, Pomian and Allen.

My experience with these Navajo people tells me that I would probably put them into the *Working Sentences* text as the third step. Again, periodic games might be administered to keep up the interest, motivation and understanding of the class.

A final exam would consist of having each class member summarize a reasonably challenging piece of reading material.

Returning now to the group ready to write (which would contain mostly Anglos and some Navajos), I would pretest them. The test would consist of having them summarize a suitable piece of written material with a minimum of prior oral review. Upon the basis of these reports I would place each student in the appropriate steps of the Dykstra Series or the *Composition Guided—Free* text. Possibly I could use the text *A Course in Controlled Composition for Intermediate and Advanced ESL Students* using selected graded materials from it. (This latter text has only manipulative exercises without the carefully guided free composition of the Dykstra Series). The final exam for the group would be a book report on a book of their own choos-

ing and my approval.

Other texts I might use either as supplementary material or as substitutes if the texts mentioned above were unavailable would be: (1) *Reading, Thinking, Writing* by Mary S. Lawrence. It gives a good blend of all three of these skills as they are inter-related. (2) *Writing As a Thinking Process* by Mary S. Lawrence. Interesting exercises on maps, orchestral seating arrangement, weather charts, house plans, etc. would make this a worthwhile experience in making this a worthwhile experience in gaining independence in style.

I concur with English teaching experts when they say advanced ESL students should be mentally stimulated by their course work. I would try to make this the fundamental goal of my lessons for this advanced group.

The end result of instructing this English course in the manner as described would be eventually to help both groups to become independent writers in English. Then with this skill perhaps they would be able to record their thoughts, summarize a year's worth of work in a required government report, record the color of their famous coyote tales, or develop instructional material pertinent to the Navajo students which make up 53% of the San Juan School District's student population.

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