

# TESL

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## PROGRESSIVE DECONTROL THROUGH DELETION: A Guided Writing Technique for Advanced ESL Learners in Technical Fields

by Robert C. Weissberg

Second language teachers have long used the techniques of guided writing in their composition classes. To date, these tech-

niques have been used to best advantage in developing writing skills at the elementary level, but have posed problems when adapted to the needs of advanced students. The manipulative, rigidly controlled nature of much guided writing practice is not attractive to learners who have already developed fluency, though perhaps not accuracy in their writing, and who have sophisticated, original ideas to express. The purpose of this paper is not to argue against the use of guided writing practice with advanced students, but rather to identify its drawbacks and to illustrate a technique that seems to answer them.

The teaching hypothesis underlying guided writing as a method is that by systematically building up a repertoire of writing features in the second language, students will acquire fluency in writing in a gradual, orderly fashion. Cooper's complaint (1970: 305-8) that a second language probably cannot be taught by analyzing and sequencing its discrete features need not necessarily be taken as a refutation of guided writing *per se*, but it should alert us as practitioners to dangers inherent in the method. If communicative competence is to

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be our goal in teaching writing, classroom exercises are probably valid only insofar as they are set in situationally relevant contexts. Certainly, we must guard against the use of non-contextual materials for second language learners at any level of proficiency, in any skill area.

Neither should Rivers' warning (Rivers 1972:24) against practice that excludes the original language input of the student invalidate all guided writing. However, it serves to remind us that any technique which overemphasizes manipulative operations at the expense of genuine, student-initiated communications is likely to be as ineffective in developing competence in writing as it is in speaking. Although such techniques provide intensive practice in specific areas of difficulty, they give no assurance that Rivers' "great leap" will be made from skill-getting to spontaneous skill-using (Rivers 1972: 23).

Selecting appropriate guided writing materials for advanced students is especially problematic in that these students' weaknesses are very often just those discrete points (e.g., proper use of tenses, articles and prepositions, connectives, referentials, etc.) which seem best approached through repetitive, manipulative practice. The methodologies currently available attempt to solve this dilemma through various strategies, a few of which are briefly examined here from the standpoint of the advanced learner.

**1. Step operations:** In this technique the student is asked to perform a programmed series of grammatical operations arranged according to a hierarchy of difficulty (e.g., alteration of sentence subjects in number or gender, shifting tenses, expanding existing sentences with clauses or phrases, etc.). A variety of passages is provided upon which the operations are to be performed (Paulston and Dykstra 1973). This technique has the advantage of isolating and strengthening specific grammatical problem areas, while providing a variety of contextual settings to maintain interest. Its disadvantage is that at best students are engaging in a pseudo-communicative activity (Rivers 1972:22-3) which is of questionable value if not followed by genuine skill-using opportunities. The learner is in effect abandoned at

the most crucial stage in the acquisition process: just as he is ready to integrate the new item into his own writing repertoire. Also, advanced students tend to complain of the mechanical nature of such practice, sensing that the grammatical operation has priority over meaningful content.

**2. Situational models:** A series of composition models is provided, illustrating various written language situations (e.g., a cookbook recipe, a bread-and-butter letter, a political speech, a short biography, etc.) The student first copies the model, then studies various grammatical patterns and lexical features selected as typical of the modeled situation. Finally he constructs his own passage along a related topic, attempting to utilize the selected features as best he can (Baskoff 1971). To the extent that the model provides an authentic example of written language relevant to students' needs, this can be a valid and useful technique. All too often, however, the

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language situations presented are neither relevant nor sophisticated enough to maintain face validity for the advanced student. Also, this technique often neglects intensive written practice of discrete points in favor of its communicative bias. Unhappily, it is exactly these points which the advanced student needs to practice and refine. Thus, problems remain uncorrected and the student continues to make the many small errors whose cumulative effect is often to render his writing incoherent.

**3. Teaching cognition:** Other types of guided writing materials attempt to teach the second language student to write comprehensively by teaching him to think logically within the prose categories com-

mon to written English (e.g., comparison and contrast, narrative sequence, cause and effect, proposal, refutation, etc.) (Lawrence 1972, Arapoff 1970). In its most useful form this technique provides students with the linguistic devices necessary to express abstract relationships in the second language. Often, however, it is tacitly assumed that the student has developed neither the cognitive processes nor the language to express them and must be instructed in both. Granting the possibility of the latter, the former is of dubious validity, especially with students at the university level, where such an approach results in a loss of student interest in the materials.

Still granting the basic validity of guided writing practice at the advanced level, the materials developer is thus faced with the task of providing students with 1) intensive practice with discrete features of the language, 2) contextual writing situations, 3) opportunities for original language use, and 4) content of sufficient interest and sophistication to maintain credibility. A technique featuring progressive decontrol through deletion meets the stated objectives.

**Decontrol through deletion:** The technique of deletion has been established as a useful means of determining second language competence, as in cloze tests (Oller 1973: 192-4). It has also been employed by Newmark (1964) in a writing text as a practice device to develop control over "chunks" of language as cued by the surrounding context. Newmark's technique differs from a cloze in that phrasal groups as well as individual words may be deleted from a passage, and a set deletion schedule (e.g., every sixth word) is not followed. The technique to be illustrated here uses deletion-by-grammatical-category as a means of focusing attention on discrete areas of written grammar. As in Newmark, deletions need not be limited to single lexical items.

The deletions are gradually expanded, giving the student progressively more freedom to deviate from the original text. The corpus employed may represent any type of written English the instructor finds appropriate for his students. The examples given here are of the technical English found in agricultural extension bulletins, since the

students with whom these materials are used are working toward graduate degrees in agricultural fields. It should be kept in mind, however, that the corpus could just as easily represent the English used in newspapers, the academic writing of the social sciences, or any other desired type.

The target feature used in the present examples is the passive voice construction, one of the most common features of technical English. In our classes the instructor precedes the deletion exercises with an introductory lesson on the passive, consisting of example sentences projected from a transparency and small-group oral drill. From there, progressive decontrol through deletion proceeds as follows:

1. **Identification:** Copies of an appropriate written sample are handed out and students are asked to identify and underline all examples of the target feature they can find. In our class, students read an extension bulletin describing a pesticide experiment, underlining passive constructions (see Example 1 for excerpts). The instructor checks the results of the exercise with the students as a group to be sure that everyone is able to identify all instances of the feature.

At this point the instructor checks students' comprehension over the passage as a whole. In our class, individual students are asked to briefly explain the purpose, method and results of the study described in the bulletin. Any problems with specific vocabulary or questions on the content of the study are dealt with at this time.

2. **Fill-in:** In a succeeding class period a ditto hand-out of the original bulletin is presented as a fill-in exercise. The target feature has been deleted at each occurrence and the students are to replace it (see Example 2). From their previous exposure to the passage, students usually find it easy to replace the deleted segments. In our class exact duplication of original wording is not required, although use of the passive is, and we insist that whatever wording the students choose to use be contextually appropriate.

This exercise accomplishes two purposes: to check students' over-all comprehension of the passage, and to provide for controlled practice of the language feature as it is used in *appropriate* situations. The last is most important; in those situations where

the passive construction is inappropriate (e.g., “. . . the decrease in hoeing time ranged from 45% for Dacthal . . .”), the restrictions on the use of the target feature must be pointed out to help students avoid its misuse.

**3. Completion:** A new hand-out is provided in a following class period in which the same selection is reproduced, this time with whole phrases or clauses containing the target feature deleted (see Example 3). This presents more of a reconstruction problem than the fill-in, although if the passage provides enough contextual clues to support the deletions students can generally approximate the intention of the original. Use of the target feature is required in each clause or phrase replaced but variations in wording are encouraged. Following the activity, the students' completions are discussed with the class and all acceptable variations are acknowledged.

This step serves as an intermediary between mechanical fill-in of memorized segments and freer writing; although the content is predetermined, the student is given opportunity for original input. Many students will try to rewrite verbatim the missing segments, reconstructing them with little or no variation. This is not viewed as unproductive since through direct recall of the forms the student is often internalizing them, thus making them available for use in other, analogous contexts.

**4. Paraphrase:** The jump to freer writing is made here. The instructor elicits a general outline of the passage under study from the students and writes it on the blackboard. Students are asked to use the outline as a guide in composing a one page paraphrase of the original passage. A topic outline is preferable to a sentence outline as it allows the students more room for original writing. The students are asked to use the target feature in their paraphrase wherever they feel it to be appropriate, and to underline it at each occurrence to aid the instructor in reviewing their paper.

Ideally, results of this exercise determine the succeeding step; if the students have demonstrated an acceptable level of control over the content and the target feature, step five is appropriate. If not, repetitions of

previous steps may be called for, using different selections to maintain interest.

**5. Free composition:** The necessary extension of such a series of guided writing activities as outlined above is to allow the student to demonstrate mastery over the target feature within content he himself determines. Without this step there is no guarantee that he has in fact acquired the feature as part of his active writing repertoire. Our students are asked in a following class period to write a brief summary of a research study they have been involved in or have knowledge of. Since the students are engaged in graduate research, choosing a topic is not difficult. They are again asked to employ the target feature wherever appropriate, and to underline each occurrence. Passages written at this step are kept to about the same length as the summaries produced in step four. Here, accuracy in the use of the target feature is of primary importance in evaluating students' work, although clarity and general organization are also taken into account.

Materials based on this scheme have been found successful in our classes. Students' grammatical and stylistic repertoires have expanded and appropriately used target features appear regularly in their unguided writing. It was found that providing representative passages from a variety of different fields is essential to the success of the activities and to the quality of student writing, as not all students can be expected to write with equal enthusiasm on herbicide application studies. In general, writing is best when face validity of materials is highest for the individual student.

Perhaps the most useful aspect of progressive decontrol as a guided composition technique is its adaptability to a variety of teaching objectives. Although the examples here deal exclusively with a grammatical consideration on the sentence level, applications can easily be made to discourse level features such as the use of intersentence connectors and enumerative devices, or to the development of a micro-vocabulary and its collocations within a specific technical field (Kocourek 1972).

Whatever aspects of written language are chosen as the teaching focus, they will

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# Progressive Decontrol

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receive greater legitimacy in the mind of the learner if they are introduced in relevant, meaningful contexts. There is a greater likelihood of their being established in the learner's active repertoire if he is given opportunities to employ them in progressively longer segments of original output. Progressive decontrol provides for these features and so proves a useful addition to existing methods of instruction in guided writing.

**Example 1:** Excerpt from Extension Bulletin 213, "Weed Control in Chili Peppers," by Phillip M. Trujillo and J. Wayne Whitworth, New Mexico State University, October, 1971.

... In 1966, chili was seeded by hand into the beds to obtain between two and five plants per hill spaced at three-foot intervals. In 1967 and 1968 the seeds were hand-planted with the intent of obtaining one plant per each foot of row on the beds. The same variety of chili, Espanola No. 1, was seeded each year. Irrigation immediately followed planting, with additional irrigations as needed. A randomized block design was used each year with three replications in 1966 and five in 1967 and 1968 . . .

## Example 2: Fill-in

... In 1966, chili \_\_\_\_\_ by hand into the beds to obtain between two to five plants per hill \_\_\_\_\_ at three-foot intervals. In 1967 and 1968 the seeds \_\_\_\_\_ with the intent of obtaining one plant per each foot of row on the beds. The same variety of chili, Espanola No. 1, \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_ each year. Irrigation immediately followed planting, with additional irrigations as \_\_\_\_\_. A randomized block design \_\_\_\_\_ each year with three replications in 1966 and five in 1967 and 1968 . . .

## Example 3: Completion

... In 1966, chili \_\_\_\_\_ the beds to obtain between two to five plants per hill \_\_\_\_\_ intervals. In 1967 and 1968 \_\_\_\_\_ with the intent of obtaining one plant per each foot of row on the beds. The same \_\_\_\_\_ each year. Irrigation immediately followed planting, with \_\_\_\_\_. A randomized \_\_\_\_\_ each year with three replications in 1966 and five in 1967 and 1968 . . .

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