

TESOL

Teaching English as a Second Language

Volume 10 No. 3

Laie, Hawaii

Spring 1977

TOWARD INTERACTIVE MODES IN GUIDED COMPOSITION

by Gerald Dykstra

Guided composition is a tool now widely used by teachers to elicit relatively large amounts of substantially correct and acceptable writing while simultaneously calling on each writer to contribute at a level commensurate with his or her ability.

It is worth emphasizing that guided composition arose out of the traditional school goal of composition writing and that the two still resemble each other very much. I would like to suggest how that happened and go on to characterize the current look of guided

composition. Having done that, I will come to my dual purpose in this presentation. I want first to propose a manner of relating guided composition to much of current thought in linguistics and psycholinguistics, then propose some still little-used but promising learner interactions that can contribute added variation, vitality, and relevance to composition and the teaching of composition.

Society's insistence on "the three R's" has given an important place to writing in our school systems. Our school systems, in interpreting the writing mandate, have included composition. Composition thereafter evolved as a need within our educational institutions. The extent to which it actually functions for all people in life outside of our educational institutions has been and may continue for some time to be a question subject to varying answers and points of view. We need not insist on the answer here, but it is useful to recognize doubts about its efficacy and relevance.

Very clearly, however, students in schools are asked to write. Composition writing is highly relevant to school life. Furthermore, student writing is not expected to reflect a highly personal style. It must, rather, reflect common standards of form and style to a considerable extent. Teachers giving writing assignments usually assume these standards. The results have not always been encouraging. The student products resulting from writing assignments have, for the most part,

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been less than fully acceptable to teachers. Guided and controlled composition in a wide range of forms came in response to the evident needs. They have been suggested as one approach to support all the early stages of learning to write.(1) There is an attempt in guided composition to break down the writing assignment from the broad "write a composition" to ever smaller components until we come to the assignment that the learner can handle readily. The learner can then move up the scale until we finally reach once again, the assignment "write a composition." (2)

The basic format of controlled and guided composition is a series of models, one or more paragraphs long. The learner uses the model as a guide and follows the explicit directions of a step which varies according to the learner's ability. If the learner is relatively unsophisticated, she/he follows the directions of a beginning step which will call for minimal learner contributions. If the learner is relatively advanced, she/he follows the directions of a step that calls for more extensive, or even maximum learner contribution. In this framework, the length and sophistication of the model remain stable throughout the course and students at varying levels of ability produce final writing products that look approximately equally sophisticated and that are very regularly acceptable in form and style. (3)

The unanticipated power of these early courses is attested to by the fact that folk tale style, an incidental characteristic of models of one of the early courses, was discernable in the subsequent writings of students who had taken the course, and was commented upon by others who did not know about the nature of the students' course. In a more recent development, models, while remaining constant within a book, show increasing length, complexity, and sophistication from book to book in a multi-book series. (4)

I am suggesting the view that controlled and guided composition consist of a more careful and successful version of the old assignment "write a composition." I have not tried to answer the question of the real world outside-of-school applications of composition ability. Whatever those applications might be (a question I will not deal with here), it seems fully evident that

humans do not universally learn to write acceptable compositions as a normal species specific behavior without reference to special training. Learning to write school compositions has not been like learning to speak one's native language.

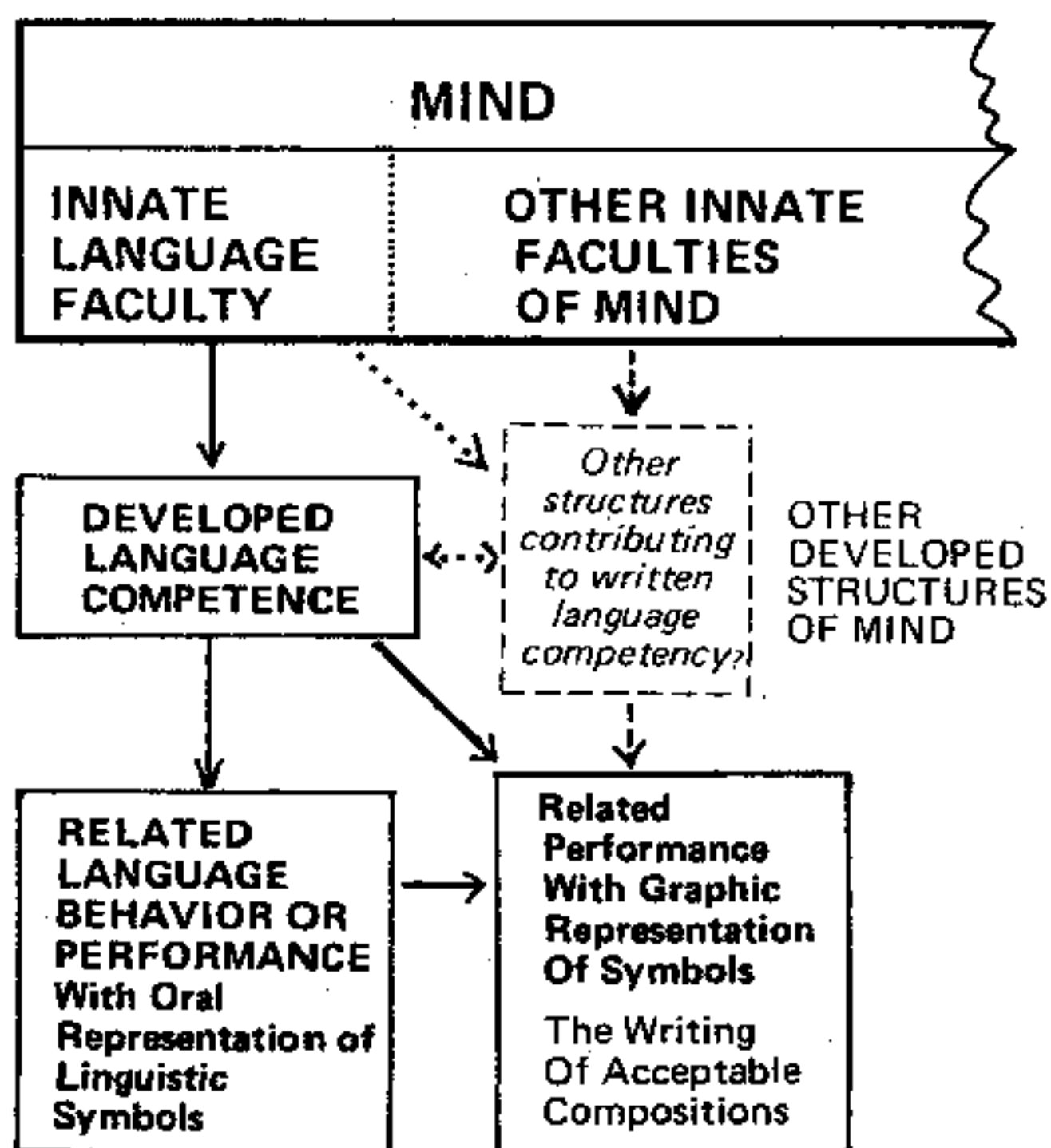
Where is guided composition in relation to some of the current rationalist outlook in linguistics and psycholinguistics? This may be of interest inasmuch as some followers of transformationalist theories have uniformly condemned efforts to introduce control into the acquisition of any ability related to language.

I think we can show such condemnations to be misdirected and counter to the rationalist view itself. In the first place, at least one major variety of guided composition (that variety which is the principal concern of this article), rests "heavily upon transformation, albeit less to explain grammar than to elicit actualizations of it in performance. More important, the condemnation rests upon the obviously erroneous assumption that writing a composition is a species specific behavior on a par with learning to speak a language. The rationalist framework suggests that universal species specific behaviors are acquired without reference to training or structural programs. It does not imply that other behaviors are so acquired. Quite the contrary. Still more important, students with guided composition are demonstrating learning that was not equally achieved without this structure. Just as we might presumably have a lesser number of successful physicists or engineers if we relied wholly upon "natural" situations without educational institutions or programs it seems we would have fewer and less acceptable compositions without appropriately developed programs. One might be happy with such a situation, but that relates to the question of out-of-school relevance which we cannot consider here.

None of the above should suggest that we have reached a plateau in progress. It only suggests that we now have an alternative that is superior to the simple instruction "write a composition." That simple instruction commonly had to be combined with the hope that writing a composition would be intuitively learned by all students in a way exactly parallel to the way that oral language had been learned. (The difference should

perhaps be sufficiently highlighted by the fact that we don't have to say to infants prior to speaking age "speak a sentence" as we have to say to students "write a composition.")

The use of oral symbols representing the language competence of the individual is widely regarded as universal in the human species and related to the human mind. Any representation of the relationship of mind to oral or written symbols must at this time be regarded as approximate and tentative rather than precise and determinate. Nevertheless, it seems worthwhile stating such a relationship in order to clarify the reasoning behind the use and apparent functioning of approaches to development of facility with use of written symbols when parallel approaches to development of facility with oral symbols seem not to function well. The figure below represents my interpretation of a rationalist conception of the mediated, but quite direct relationship of human mind to oral language behavior. (5) Appended to this representation is a postulated double relationship for the area of performance with graphic symbols. Here of course, we will be concerned primarily only with the productive use of graphic symbols--writing.



An extended diagram would presumably specify other faculties of mind and would indicate that some learnings are less than innate or pre-programed; that some (perhaps science abilities, perhaps some aspects of

writing ability) can be achieved by choice and with the help of carefully designed programs of presentation; that even some bizarre learnings (nonsense syllable sequences and other old laboratory favorites) can be learned through carefully arranged rewards and punishments.

We are highly prepared (6) to learn to function with the oral representation of linguistic symbols. We seem less well natively endowed, less highly prepared to learn to write (there is no empirical evidence that composition writing is universally learned from as messy a set of data as that we use for

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learning oral language) or do science, and still less pre-designed to learn to walk a tight rope or recite long lists of nonsense syllables. We are highly unprepared to learn to peck at seeds or fly by flapping any of our appendages.

Assuming for the present that learning to write compositions is a less predetermined learning category than learning to speak, and assuming that composition writing is nevertheless a desired goal, we may accept within rationalist legitimacy of environmental adjustment as well as within empiricist thought the legitimacy of environmental adjustment in the form of 1) programming from easier to harder for the learner and also, 2) providing contingencies of reward in the form of making the tasks more varied and vital, and putting them in richer and more relevant social contexts.

Since composition is not as universally learned as oral language, since its relevance or extent of function outside the classroom is not immediately clear to all, since it is nevertheless required of almost all of our young people, and since we have been able to put considerable structure and sequence into the assignment "write a composition," to the point where success is more readily achieved by a larger number under more favorable conditions for both teacher and student we might now gain a further step by adding oral language and other interactive modes to our guided composition programs.

We will present two simple interactive modes here (I and II) with variations on each and with an indication of how they may be combined (III). Essentially all of the possibilities mentioned here have been validated in a range of learning environments, though all have not been validated with the guided composition programs referred to in this article. Finally, we will mention an interactive mode that highlights evaluation and suggests possible future developments toward getting the writing of compositions to tie in more closely with life's needs and possibly having it become more naturally learnable like oral language though possibly with less relevance for composition programs as we now know them.

I. Interactive variations in producing the composition.

At the most advanced stage of normal use of guided composition the learner always knows the appropriate step to work on. She/he locates this step number on a chart and selects one of several models on which that step can be worked. The learner can then proceed with the task and usually does so successfully. Ordinarily the writer works alone.

A minor variation which adds a new dimension is to have two "writers" (whom we shall here call A and B) work together in any of the following slightly variant ways.

1. A dictates what is to be written, B writes it from that dictation.

2. A and B discuss what is to be written and produce a joint project.

3. A writes while B watches the process and comments wherever B thinks improvement is possible or has a question. A is free to ask for advice at any point, but the product is A's.

4. A and B write simultaneously, but at different step levels, or, if at the same step level, then using different models. They also stop to examine each other's progress and assure themselves that each is doing the best that either is capable of. They may be encouraged to comment sparingly or, alternatively, to kibbitz extensively, or even to heckle or argue strongly for changes wherever they see possible alternatives.

5. At all step levels where there are elements of free choice partners generate a given number of alternatives (say 10) before the author (or authors, if they are making it

a joint product) make a selection of any element that is contributed to the composition.

II. Interactive variations in checking or reading the composition.

In the normal classroom, laboratory or programmed use of guided composition, the teacher can quickly spot check the learners' compositions. Little time is needed for traditional correction work. Learner papers are all substantially correct and yet each is working at approximately his or her maximum level of contribution within the current framework of prepared programs in guided composition, within the constraints that are given. Yet, the teacher is still ordinarily the ultimate target—the one for whom the composition is written. The teacher is the only guaranteed reader or checker—the one who determines whether the learner advances to the next step. This is true to the traditions from which guided composition sprang.

A minor variation on the teacher's serving as the only reader consists of having one or more learners serve as readers too, in any of the following slightly variant ways.

1. Learner A writes, learner B proofreads before initialing the work and passing it on to the teacher. (Further variations are possible here inasmuch as B's proofreading, and any resultant notations, may be passed directly on to the teacher or may be used by A to make corrections on the original version or to write a corrected version.)

2. Learner B proofreads as in 1 above. Learner C also proofreads and, if necessary, makes notation in differently colored markings.

3. Learner B edits, She/he reads several compositions for response. She/he ranks compositions on the basis of form and/or content, making either complete rankings or putting compositions into two or more categories, e.g., half only in the "near-perfect" basket, or in the "more interesting" category or in the "most publishable" category, etc.

4. Learner B serves in the role of professional critic or general user and writes a response to the ideas presented in the composition with emphasis on critique.

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III. Combinations of interactions.

Although the variations presented above are minor enough so that they can be initiated without necessarily changing the procedures of a guided composition classroom in any drastic way, it will be noted that highly detailed procedures are not given. In II, 1 above, for example, a loose arrangement may be set up wherein each writer is required to submit any completed composition to a proofreader and all other members of the class constitute qualified proofreaders. Alternatively, learners are paired and serve as proofreaders for each other only. Alternatively, again, the proofreading task may be considered a desirable introduction to a step that must subsequently be achieved. In this case qualified proofreaders consist only, or mostly, of those who have not yet reached a given step but who are next in line to reach that step. Alternatively, once more, the proofreading task may be considered the determining factor in deciding whether the learner is to proceed to the next higher step. In this case qualified proofreaders consist of those who have just successfully completed a given step, etc.

Detail will not be presented here on the possible combinations of variations either. A sample, listing some of the subheadings above, will be enough to give an idea of the intent.

An original writer (W) and teacher (T) interaction might look like this:

$$W \leftrightarrow T$$

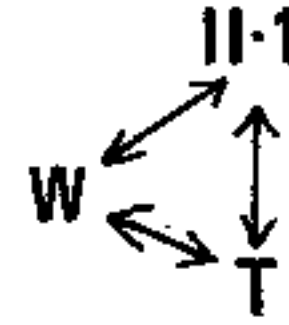
The writer gives a completed writing product to the teacher, and the teacher provides feedback which either "promotes" the writer to the next higher step or moves the writer to a new model at the same level.

A more complex interaction, adding a proofreader (see II, 1 above), might look like this:

$$W \leftrightarrow II:1 \leftrightarrow T$$

It is probable that the interaction arrows will have to be more complex than indicated here. If, for example, the teacher interacts not only with the proofreader, but also with the writer it would be more

accurate to represent that in the following way.



The possibilities of one way and two way arrows, and multiple interactions are extensive. This is not the place to present them. Bypassing all such complexities, we should nevertheless illustrate, on a straight line, a combination that might be possible. Using the subheadings listed above, one such complex set of interactions might consist of something like the following:

$$W \leftrightarrow I:2 \leftrightarrow I:4 \leftrightarrow II:2 \leftrightarrow II:3 \leftrightarrow II:4 \leftrightarrow T$$

It is also probable that the reading and correcting roles of the teacher could and should be diminished or eliminated for most purposes.

Further indication of the intricate possibilities is not properly a part of this presentation. The intent here is rather to suggest that, of the hundreds of possibilities, there are surely some that will make composition more of a language related activity, one that is more relevant to communicative interchange, and perhaps one that may eventually be learned more naturally in the doing of tasks that are necessary and done not only in school, but throughout one's life

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