

SECTOR ANALYSIS AND WORKING SENTENCES

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(This is a continuation of "Sector Analysis and Working Sentences" which appeared in the Spring 1977 TESL Reporter. Part I dealt with the textbook *Working Sentences* and sector analysis, the grammar upon which the text is based. Part II proceeds to explain some of the results of using *Working Sentences* in a developmental ESL writing course as part of an in-country bachelor's program in American Samoa.)

In American Samoa, *Working Sentences* worked very well. It was used with two groups of students in an attempt to bring their writing skills up to a college level. All students in both groups were adult learners, teachers or principals in American Samoa schools. Most had received substantial exposure to, and much instruction in, English over the years. Consequently, their basic conversational skills were quite good, and in a casual conversation they could do deceptively well. But when it came to formal writing, their scores on the Michigan Test of

English Language Proficiency and their performance in writing essays demonstrated a substantial deficiency and a definite need for specialized instruction in writing.

Since English is one of the languages of American Samoa and is widely used in the island schools, most of the people in the classes had been speaking English for many years. To many, improving their language ability in a few short weeks seemed improbable. The first group met for nearly three hours every afternoon for seven weeks, but half of that time was spent in a reading improvement course held in conjunction with the writing class, and 30 minutes every day were spent working in the lab.* Only about 28 hours of actual classroom instruction and practice with *Working Sentences* were given. The second group met during Christmas vacation and after school for three weeks following the vacation for a total of 23 class periods. Away from class, the students still had to work in school all day long and were involved in a number of

*Along with *Working Sentences*, another approach to writing improvement *Composition: Guided-Free*, levels six and eight, (Gerald Dykstra, ed.) was used and proved to be a good companion to *Working Sentences*. Each day, students in the first group spent 30 minutes (second group students spent 45 minutes every day) in what was called lab, working on the *Guided Free* series. Since the series is highly individualized, each student was able to advance at his own speed. One student completed 81 steps, another only 20.

Basically, the *Guided-Free* series consists of a series of steps or tasks (transformations, substitutions, combinations, or additions) of increasing complexity which are performed by the student on a number of models supplied in the book. Starting with simple copying, the student gradually advances to free writing at the end. In the beginning and intermediate steps, there is

only one acceptable finished product for each step/model combination. Any deviation from the correct product, any error, however minute, earns the student a horizontal arrow, indicating that he must repeat the same step with a different model. Initially, many mistakes are due to simple carelessness, but students soon learn to double check their work. This teaching of care in writing may be one of the greatest unsung advantages of the Dykstra series. The series also has the advantage over other similar programs in that it advances gradually, giving the student adequate practice, and the instructions use a minimum of grammatical terminology and are supported by readily-understood examples.

(For further information about this series and its possibilities in the classroom see Gerald Dykstra, "Toward Interactive Modes in Guided Composition," *TESL Reporter* (Spring 1977).)

community and family responsibilities. With these circumstances in mind, the gains made by the students must be considered quite impressive.

The Michigan test was given to all students before the class actually began. It was also given at the conclusion of the class. On a scale of one to one hundred, representing an extremely broad range of English language skills, the first class' mean raw score improved from 61.5 before the class to 70.7 at its conclusion, an improvement of 9.2 points, a respectable gain even when an allowance is made for practice effect. The mean raw score of the second group improved from 63 to 67.8, a gain of 4.8 points.

The range of student scores, especially in the second group, was very broad. Initial raw scores on the Michigan test ranged from 37 to 87. It should be noted that students scoring below 55 experienced substantial difficulty with the content of *Working Sentences* and, as a group, did not benefit from the instruction nearly as much as those whose scores were in the sixties, seventies, and low eighties.

Using the rank-difference method, a number of correlations were computed (see table). Some of the results were quite surprising. With the first group, the highest correlation was between attendance and Michigan test score improvement, and the second highest correlation was between improvement and homework completed, both suggesting that *Working Sentences* was the key factor in student improvement. The number of *Composition: Guided-Free* steps completed by the students did not correlate very highly with either Michigan test score improvement or final Michigan equated score. With the second group, however, these figures were almost reversed. The highest correlation was between number of *Guided-Free* steps completed and final Michigan test equated score, the next highest was between *Guided-Free* steps and Michigan test score improvement, and attendance and Michigan score improvement did not really correlate at all.

With the second group, attendance didn't correlate highly with anything; perhaps, because, since attendance was so good (average attendance was above 90%), there wasn't a wide enough range, not nearly as wide as the range of student abilities. Besides

that, even some of the low scoring students were very stalwart attenders.

The same thing was true with homework. Low correlations in the second group may be explained by the fact that some of the lowest scoring students did all their homework. They could have done it wrong, but they did it all, whether they understood it or not.

A statistical look at the Michigan test items most frequently missed by students is also revealing. The test consists of three parts: grammar (40 points), vocabulary (40), and reading comprehension (20). Twenty-nine items were missed by half or more than half of the students in the first group taking the test at the end of the class. Of these 29, only six (15%) were in the grammar section of the test. Thirteen (33%) were in the vocabulary section, and ten (50%) were in the reading section. Both of these comparisons seem to show that, as a group, the class did better on the grammar portion of the test, the portion most directly affected by their instruction in the writing class.

It must be admitted that the students in this class were highly motivated. Their eventual receipt of a B.A. degree depended on their performance in the class. However, in this respect, they were not radically different from many students. Much credit must be given to the motivation inherent in the materials used. Mention has already been made of the teachability and consequent "understandability" of sector analysis as presented in *Working Sentences*. The students did not complain about the exercises being boring or meaningless; perhaps because they could see the immediate applicability of what they were learning.

Much of what was presented through sector analysis in class was also very useful to students in the lab as they worked through *Composition: Guided-Free*. The lab and the class were mutually supportive, presenting and practicing many of the same things. In fact, one student inquired if the two books had been designed to be used together. The lab increased the motivation for learning what was taught through *Working Sentences*, and when a student failed to pass a step in the lab, sector analysis provided a very good vehicle for explaining

COEFFICIENTS OF CORRELATION

	Group 1	Group 2
Michigan Test Score (Equated) Improvement and Attendance	.76	— .03
Michigan Test Score (Equated) Improvement and Homework Completed	.44	— .14
Final Michigan Test Score (Equated) and Attendance	.31	.07
Final Michigan Test Score (Equated) and Homework Completed	.38	.02
Michigan Test Score (Equated) Improvement and <i>Composition: Guided-Free</i> Steps Completed	.08	.45
Final Michigan Test Score (Equated) and <i>Composition: Guided-Free</i> Steps Completed	— .06	.82
Initial Michigan Test Score (Equated) and <i>Composition: Guided-Free</i> Steps Completed	— .11	.58

why he did not pass and what he should have done.

The combination of *Working Sentences* and *Composition: Guided-Free* was a success in American Samoa; the one providing valuable instruction, and the other, a great deal of carefully-guided, individualized practice. This balance of emphases was only one reason for the class' success, however; other reasons being the compatibility of the materials used, their practical design, the soundness of the grammar and learning theory behind them, and the motivation built into them. When used by students who are at the right level, these materials, combined with enthusiasm and hard work on the part of both students and teacher, should result in improved writing by adult ESL learners, not only in American Samoa, but wherever they may be.

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