TEACHING WRITTEN ENGLISH TO ADULT ESL STUDENTS: Some Critical Annotations of Current Teacher Materials

by Diana Mae Sims

In a recent article in the *TESL Reporter* ("Distinctive Features of Written English," Summer 1978), Lynn E. Henrichsen noted a renewed interest in the teaching of writing skills and called the attention of ESL teachers to the characteristics of written English vis-à-vis spoken English. Characteristics were categorized in three ways: differences in medium, differences in time, and differences in distance. Under medium, a primary difference is described in this way:

> The first of these differences is that a system of writing and conventions of spelling must be learned, a rather formidable task in English but one which cannot be overlooked or passed over lightly in teaching ESL, especially in the case of students whose native writing system is not the Roman alphabet. When the orthographic system reflects the phonological system of the language as imperfectly as it does in English, instruction in this area is particularly important.

The implication is that ESL students of the writing system of English must learn a system of orthography which is so "imperfect" in its relation to English sound that instruction about spelling conventions is very important. Of course, mastery of English orthography is essential to students not only in writing English but also in reading it.

During the past decade, however, linguists have proposed that the spelling of English is a polysystematic reflection of the sound system of English. Obviously, knowledge of this relationship aids in reading, writing, and pronouncing written English. Theorists Noam Chomsky and Morris Halle (1968:49, *et passim*) have described this relationship,

and educators Wayne B. Dickerson and Rebecca H. Finney (1978) applied spelling information of this kind to the development of ESL curriculum.

If, then, ESL teachers are to be able to "develop in the speaker the additional skills necessary for good writing" (Henrichsen: 1978, 1), they need a familiarity with recent research as well as traditional pedagogy in the field to date. From this point of view, a representative array of TESL materials in use for teaching written English is examined below. A number of texts and essays, both theoretical and methodological, are annotated in chronological order:

1. Lado, Robert. *Language Teaching: A Scientific Approach*. New York: McGraw-Hill, Inc. 1964. *Language Teaching* is a classic in TESL. Lado's philosophy about written English is that it involves "Fit" (134), "associating the graphemes and the (spoken) language" by means of phonic generalizations and lists of exceptions. Although Lado feels that "the fit of English writing is very poor," he offers no pedagogical help other than admonishing that "nothing can be more deadening than having to recite all the exceptions to a rule" (136). As an example of poor fit, Lado cites the "irregularity" of (k) as both "K and CH as in king, chemistry." This view overlooks the way that the spelling KING follows the English orthographic system (according to Sims, 1978) and CHEMISTRY reflects a Greek etymology.

2. Schane, Sanford A. "Linguistics, Spelling and Pronunciation." *TESOL Quarterly* 4 (June 1970): 137-141. Sanford Schane's paper is an early notice of the interface between TESL and generative phonology. It perceptively calls for the development of TESL instructional materials which apply the systematic nature of English spelling to the teaching of reading and writing to second-language learners.

3. Chomsky, Carol. "Reading, Writing, and Phonology." *Harvard Educational Review 40* (May 1970): 287-309. Carol Chomsky's article has been frequently cited and anthologized (it appears, for example, in Mark Lester's *Readings in Applied Transformational Grammar*). It is perhaps the best short explanation of generative phonology and its application to the teaching of written English. Chomsky's discussion is important and useful, especially for non-linguists.

4. Hale, Thomas M., and Buder, Eva C. "Are TESOL Classes the Only Answer?" *Modern Language Journal,* 56 (1970): 487-492. Hale and Buder report experimental research showing significantly greater success in TESL among students totally immersed in English and isolated from speakers of their mother tongue. Especially relevant to reading ESL is their finding of student difficulty after the age of puberty with the low-level sound rules of English (thus, with the relationship between English spelling and sound).

Hale and Buder's article is reprinted in *Focus on the Learner* (Oller and Richards, pp. 290-300), which has an entire section on aspects of second-language learning.

5. Wilkins, D. A. *Linguistics in Language Teaching.* Cambridge, Massachusetts: M.I.T. Press, 1972. Wilkins (62-67) succinctly describes for non-linguists the present standard theory of generative phonology. In dismissing this theory as having no pedagogical value, however, the author restricts generative theory to pronunciation and fails to note its applicability to reading and writing. Thus, he remarks on the use of alternating forms in teaching English whereby "the learner might be required to repeat, with phonetic accuracy, sequences" such as ALTERNATE / ALTERNATIVE / ALTERATION (66). Other than pronunciation drill and extensive reading, though, Wilkins makes no suggestions for teaching the spelling system of English.

6. Finocchiaro, Mary. *English as a Second Language: From Theory to Practice.* New ed. New York: Regents Publishing Company, Inc., 1974. Finocchiaro, an indefatigable worker in the field of TESL, presents essentially an audio-lingual approach to methods and materials in this widely-used text. Although calling for the inclusion of rationalist-cognitive theory in language pedagogy (18), she suggests techniques for teaching written English which reflect a preoccupation with surface structures. For example, Finocchiaro (76) believes that "it is only after students can say material with reasonable fluency that they should be permitted to see it." Indeed, reading consists "of making sounds in our throat. We read faster, therefore, if we know how to say the sounds." Such tenets have been disputed by other reading specialists (e.g., Chomsky, C., *supra*).

7. Wardhaugh, Ronald. *Topics in Applied Linguistics.* Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1974. Anyone involved in TESL should read *Topics in Applied Linguistics,* Parts 2 and 3, on spelling and reading. Wardhaugh demonstrates how an understanding of generative phonology can be applied to mastery of the English writing system. He stresses the morphophonemic character of English spelling where "letters are used to represent sounds in ways which preserve important morphemic units" (25).

Wardhaugh's survey also contains a cogent and telling critique of phonics. Included is an explication of the well-known analysis of English spelling patterns by Venezky (1967). Venezky's analysis and, in turn, Wardhaugh's are notable because they point out how information on English phonology and orthography, integrated with phonics, can contribute to reading and writing theory.

8. Dixson, Robert J. *Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language.* New ed. New York: Regents Publishing Company, Inc., 1975. In the treatment of the writing system of English, Dixson's text has some questionable features. For instance, it contains an assertion about the pronunciation of CH which is not altogether true:

> Ch in English clearly represents the initial sound in church and child. It is a sound not easily confused with any other. (89)

Other potentially confusing sounds of CH are overlooked: [š], as in MACHINE, and [k], as in MECHANIC. Moreover, while the

Guide states that [č] is clearly represented by CH, this sound can also be represented by T, as in Natural, and TCH, as in DITCH. Indeed, the other sounds for CH and spellings for [č] are not infrequent in English.

Practical Guide to the Teaching of English as a Foreign Language also contains a questionable statement about S. The instance occurs in its closing remarks:

> In many English words containing s in medial position, the s remains unvoiced and is pronounced as s. Examples are master [maester], last [laest]. In others, it is voiced and pronounced like z. Examples are busy [bɪzi], reason [rɪzən]. Since English spelling gives no indication in any of these words as to how the s is to be pronounced, the foreign student is naturally confused. . . . Most students need long and continuous drill. (108)

This sort of attack on English orthography has been questioned by transformational-generative linguists. Chomsky and Halle (1968:49, *et passim*) and others have pointed out how English spelling, when considered with phonological rules, is, in fact, revealing of pronunciation. Especially predictable is the rule which voices /s/ to /z/, as in the alternation SIDE/RESIDE.

9. Chastain, Kenneth. *Developing Second Language Skills: Theory to Practice.* 2nd ed. Chicago: Rand McNally College Publishing Company, 1976. Chastain's methods text is a comprehensive discussion of research on TESL and of the psychology of teaching. It relies on phonics and suggests that instruction in phonic generalizations precede reading or writing activities (309). "The connection between the sound and its written symbol" must first be established, according to Chastain, and writing requires the same kind of readiness:

> The first step that students should take in learning to spell what they hear is to learn the different graphemes possible for each sound and the context in which each occurs. The teacher should isolate these graphemes and present them one at a time in the early stages of writing. (368)

Chastain assumes that English has a phonetic writing system. Thus, with respect to TESL, the text is a kind of pedagogy which has proved wanting even for native-speaking students.

10. Mazurkiewicz, Albert J. *Teaching about Phonics.* New York: St. Martin's Press, Inc., 1976. *Teaching about Phonics* is a methods text for teachers and prospective teachers. According to its preface, Chapters 2, 3, and 4 are useful in TESL. In using the phoneme as a group of related sounds, and in emphasizing sounds as keys to meaning, its approach is typically structural or descriptive. Thirty phonic rule-generalizations for print-sound relationships and a list of phonemes of English are proposed for teaching the writing system of English.

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11. Paulston, Christina Bratt, and Bruder, Mary Newton. *Teaching English as a Second Language: Techniques and Procedures.* Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1976. In this methods text two well-known TESL educators, Paulston and Bruder, advocate "word study" for reading skill. The technique involves practice in recognizing derivational suffixes and lexical "word classes" as keys to "the decoding of words" (189). Thus, their concentration is not on the morphological relatedness of forms to underlying representations and to orthography. Instead, it is on suffixes attached to related forms of a morphologically-related set. While the text pinpoints morphology as the area contributing to reading success, it fails to exploit knowledge about spelling as one means for improving reading skill.

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12. Saville-Troike, Muriel. *Foundations for Teaching English as a Second Language: Theory and Method for Multicultural Education.* Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey; Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1976. The discussion of phonology in this methods text centers on phonemes, allophones, and the sounds of spoken English. This descriptive interest extends to a theory of the English writing system built on spelling-sound correspondence. For instance, the text states the following about orthography:

> A student of any age learning English must learn to hear, and then produce, twenty-four distinctive consonant sounds. The symbol used for each of these phonemes is . . . sometimes different from the symbol which represents the sound in conventional spelling. (34)

As an example, the spelling symbol for [č] in NATURE is T instead of CH, "the symbol which represents the sound in conventional spelling." Consequently, the text suggests teaching phonics to ESL students as a key to reading (113).

Aside from advocating phonic techniques, the text contains some provocative exercises for instruction in English orthography. The author suggests that ESL students, using a printed passage, search for words having a specific sound. Then they analyze their lists for alphabetical sequences of the sound, so that "spelling regularities [are] induced in class discussion" (112). Beyond suggesting a phonics approach, however, the author is never specific about what these "regularities" are.

13. Diller, Karl C. *The Language Teaching Controversy.* 2nd ed. Rowley, Massachusetts: Newbury House Publishers, Inc., 1978. Diller espouses a rationalist approach to language and asserts his propositions in strong terms. His theoretical work *Generative Grammar, Structural Linguistics, and Language Teaching* (1971) is now in a new edition entitled *The Language Teaching Controversy.* It has relevance to TESL as a succinct overview of the schism between structural and generative approaches to second-language teaching which has characterized and divided second-language pedagogy.

Diller's view is that readers and writers of English must have a productive command of language structures. Diller praises the "direct method," in which ESL students learn the writing system (i.e., spelling system) of English from the outset of instruction. The direct method involves study of the sound system of English as a prerequisite to reading and writing proficiency.

14. Downing, John. "Linguistic Awareness, English Orthography and Reading Instruction." *Journal of Reading Behavior,* 10 (Spring 1978): 103-114. Downing summarizes traditional and new views of the basis for English spelling. He argues for an understanding of the historical development of English spelling principles as a basis for instruction in reading. Phonic instruction, believes Downing, should be supplemented with "an intelligent understanding of why English words are written the way they are" (114). While not focused toward TESL, this survey is important to ESL teachers because second-language learners also must master spelling principles of English. An excellent reference list follows Downing's paper.

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