

## WRITING: THE FORGOTTEN SKILL

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In his book "Deschooling Society" Ivan Illich discusses the enormous step which learning to read and write constitutes. The example he gives is of the indigenous tribes of the Amazon, about whom he says that political awareness begins when they learn to read and write, because of the permanence of the written word. A thought which you express in writing is no longer an ephemeral idea tossed around in your mind, to be regarded as of limited consequence: it is now something which has acquired stability, which can be hardened into the basis for an edifice of other thoughts. In other words, Illich is implying that the acquisition of reading and writing skills in a person's first language constitutes a major increase in his thinking ability and consequently in his communicative ability.

Without becoming involved in a discussion of the implications of literacy at such an elevated level as political awareness, we can, nevertheless, observe the usefulness of being able to read and write at a communicative level. Life involves many writing activities: filling in forms, writing letters and notes, signing cheques etc. At the same time, returning somewhat to the ideas of Illich, the ability to write, to set down one's thoughts, implies the ability to organize and express them.

If we accept the importance of first language literacy from a very basic communicative point of view, it would appear to be logical to extend the same argument to second language learning. The same communicative abilities which the individual requires in his native language must be equally useful and necessary in any other language which he may learn.

Unfortunately, due to the influence of audio-lingual theories of language teaching, the development of writing in a second language is a skill which has been largely neglected. The belief that the teaching of listening and speaking should precede the teaching of reading and writing has tended to result in the total or partial disregard for the teaching of writing. Whereas it is true in first language acquisition that a child learns to understand and speak before he learns to read and write, this is not necessarily the case with a second language. To begin with, generally the learner will already be literate in his first language when he is confronted with a second language. Moreover, literacy in a first language generates the desire or need for literacy in the second language - if the individual is at a level where he can interpret and fill in documents in his first language, he will naturally want and need to do this in his second language.

Therefore, writing activities should form part of a course from its beginning, commencing with simple activities of a communicative nature, such as filling in forms with personal information (name, address, etc). Another aspect of second language learning where writing could play an important role is that of controlled progression and reinforcement; in other words, the progressive advancement of the second language level without an enormous increase in the number of mistakes being made by the learner. We found an example of this problem in our own experience teaching English at university level, using a course with little or no consideration of progressive writing activities. There are six levels in the four-skills course, ranging from beginners to advanced-intermediate level. We experimented by asking a second level group and a fourth level group to perform the same task: to write a composition in English on the same topic. The rather depressing result was that the fourth level group did no better than the second level group. In fact, if anything, they made more mistakes. Interestingly enough, however, when analysing the students' compositions, it could be seen that the fourth level students were trying to express themselves in a far more complex way than the second level ones and they were making a mess of it. Their grammatical ability did not match their readiness to communicate. The fact is, moreover, that the same thing can be observed in class with regard to their oral expression and even in their answering of multiple choice exams. Students in the sixth level, for example, will be making the same mistakes as they were making in fourth level.

Obviously something is missing from the students' learning of English and it is arguable that this missing element is the practice and development of written expression. This being the case, the problem lies in the focus of teaching towards multiple choice exams. This is because we are preparing our students (and let us accept that if an exam exists then our teaching must in some way be directed towards it) for what is in the end a linguistically unproductive activity: recognizing the correct alternative.

This raises the question as to what a four-skill course is all about. While it must be accepted that multiple choice exams have the advantage of being easy to mark, objective and easy to computerize in order to improve them by reference to the statistics provided, at the same time, if we accept that exams constitute not just the physical end of the term, but also its end in the sense of its goal (that the students must pass their exams), it would appear logical to conclude that tests really ought to contain a more productive element.

Here we return to the original argument for the necessity of written expression in the teaching programme. It is a fact, proved by observation if not by statistical evidence, that if exams do not contain an element of written expression, the students will not be motivated towards performing written tasks during the course. If we accept that communicative writing tasks should form part of a second language course, then we must include at least one writing item in every exam we give to our students, in order to motivate them to do some writing in class.

In what way can writing be used not only as a useful communicative skill, but also as a tool to support, somehow, second language learning? The answer lies in the role of writing to clear up doubts that the student may have and to expose and correct his mistakes. The heard word and, worse still, the word spoken by the student himself, may be erroneous; the student is doubtful and loses confidence. Only the written word is "correct" for the learner. Moreover, the word written by the student himself may be incorrect, but at least the uncertainty vanishes. The student has made a decision. It may be wrong, but it has been expressed permanently, it can be corrected, the correction can be seen, referred to and questioned countless times and, it is to be hoped, acted upon.

The fact is that "learning" or "acquiring" a second language also involves the acquisition of a large number of mistakes, through mis-hearing, misunderstanding and misinterpretation. If these mistakes are not to take root, forming the basis for false fluency or inhibiting the student's progress, the student must be given the opportunity to correct them. In other words, a degree of what may be termed "conscious learning" must enter the scene. Writing could be an important part of this. The learner has to organize his thoughts; express them carefully. He has to make decisions and, if he does make mistakes, he will not remain in doubt, because the correction is as visible as the error and any necessary explanation will be durable. Most students probably need to feel secure in what they are learning and the decision-making and permanence implicit in written exercises, together with the opportunities for correction and explanation which they provide, are an essential aspect of the growth of this security.

The failure to correct basic errors progressively and the growth of false fluency are important problems. Many students seem to struggle their way through a four-skills course and end up far from fluent or happy with their English. Moreover, in order to promote the expressive basis of a course, examining should have a greater basis in production activities. There is a big difference for the student in an exam situation between having to react productively in a context and merely having to recognize a response out of a given number of alternatives. Only when exams reflect the course itself, which should involve students' learning to communicate effectively in a second language -- in our case in English -- will writing be able to come into its own as an important aspect of the course, both as a formal constituent of the process of second language learning and as a natural, communicative element of the second language, which should be acquired by the learner for its own sake.