

TEACHING COMPOSITION IN MEXICO

Part I: Some Theoretical Considerations ¹

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Teachers of EFL in Mexico, as well as their students, often encounter much frustration when attempting to teach and to learn to write English compositions. Although most of our students have studied English from five to fifteen years, these same students often receive papers returned with comments such as "illogical", "awkward", or "disorganized". True, some of the problem arises from the students' poor grasp of English grammar and/or vocabulary; yet, more accurately, the reasons for these difficulties are the following: (1) differences between accepted ways of written "logic" or argumentation in English and Spanish; and (2) inadequate methods of teaching composition in both the Spanish-Language and the EFL classrooms.

CULTURAL ORIENTATION IN WRITING

The way in which an opinion or argument is presented is, to a large extent, culturally determined. As Robert Kaplan has pointed out in both "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural Education", as well as in his Anatomy of Rhetoric, ". . . rhetoric is a phenomenon tied to the linguistic system of a particular language as that logic." (Kaplan, 1972, p. x) and ". . . logic, per se, as well as language, is a cultural phenomenon." (Kaplan, 1972, p. 6). One can verify this by reading or listening to educated Spanish speakers. Native speakers of English often find themselves criticizing the former group for "not sticking to the point." While it is acceptable for Spanish speakers to digress or introduce extraneous material, in English, we "come to the point" and, thus, become impatient with those who do not. Thus, what is preferable in Spanish is not acceptable in English. Students need to know this important difference. Kaplan illustrates the differences in logic and rhetorical approach between English and Spanish in his now famous graphic representation:

Figure 1EnglishSpanish

(and other Romance Languages)

Survey of Teaching Techniques and Points of View. (Kaplan, 1972, p. 64)

All teaching of composition reflects assumptions as to what writing is or should be. What teachers say about professional writers, what they say about the process of writing, how they plan their lessons and assignments, how they evaluate writing; all these imply a definition of composition and its role in the classroom. Although the understanding of these factors may be vague for the teacher, it does affect what techniques are employed.

Numerous suggestions as to how to teach composition in the EFL classroom have been made. Here in Mexico composition is not emphasized, as it is in the United States. (If anything, the only "method" used is Free Composition, where students are expected to learn how to write by writing. This approach will be discussed in detail later.) Therefore, the approaches outlined here are ones from EFL classrooms and relevant programs in composition for native speakers of English.

As an aid to understanding the major philosophies to be discussed, the chart below illustrates these composition writing processes as analysed by Vivian Zamel:

Figure 2

| Total Control | (Increase in complexity —) Free composition | |
|--|---|---|
| Substitution, manipulation of transformation of sentences & patterns | Imitation & differentiation of stylistic patterns | Frequent, uncontrolled writing practice |

TOTAL CONTROL

Most foreign language teachers have belonged to a group that

emphasizes order. While they believe that grammar, as such, has little to do with the ability to write well nevertheless, they are deeply concerned with control. At the beginning and intermediate levels, writing usually consists of mere translations of oral pattern practices. While there is nothing wrong with this, it is not the creative act of composing, but, rather, another grammar drill.

Another major theme of this group has been influenced by the Audio-Lingual Method. The belief is in a strict hierarchy of skills, culminating in writing. (Writing is dependent on the first three: listening, speaking, and reading.) The fear is that students, when asked to write too early, only give ungrammatical semi-translations. Thus, in accordance with another Audio-Lingual tenet, all language instruction should be so carefully controlled so as to avoid any possibility of student error. Some of the many language methodologists who propose postponing composition instruction include Allen and Valette (1972, pp. 217-238), Rivers (1968, pp. 240-260), Finocchiaro (1958, pp. 156-162), and Chastain (1971, pp. 220-238). One sound criticism of this thinking was presented in a recent TESOL Quarterly article on composition. There, Zamel writes that "While I do not argue with this approach in terms of the kind of preparation ESL students need, I take issue with the fact that the exercises described are identified with the skills of composing. Teachers are aware that their students must have a basic linguistic competence in order to write creatively." (Zamel, 1976, p. 69).

Also on the theme of control are a series of exercises called Controlled Composition. There are usually used in the intermediate level of language learning and consist of grammatical manipulations or transformations of sentences or passages. Writing is still seen habit-formation and the careful avoidance of errors. Also, it still involves grammatical proficiency. (Pincas, 1963, p. 183) In controlled composition, guided, restricted activities are imposed. In this step-by-step process, an examination and specific transformation is made of a model paragraph. Dykstra explains that the program can be seen as one of

. . . changing models into products that are less and less like the models, until they are, in effect, new creation, and until the models are no longer directly or consciously used . . . The steps include substitutions, transformations, reductions, expansions, completions, additions, revisions, commentary and creations. (Dykstra, 1972, p. 208).

When most of the controls are relaxed, "free" composition is finally appropriate. Some of the best-known controlled composition programs have been organized by Dykstra (1972), Paulston (1972), Pincas

(1963), Robinson (1965), and Slager (1972). Again, this very controlled method does provide a needed system to composition teaching, yet that same emphasis on systematic syntactic and lexical exercises is not directly related with the complexities of the organization of thought that is reflected in genuinely "free" composition.

IMITATION OF STYLISTIC PATTERNS

A second group that still insists on control, changes the emphasis from sentence manipulation to model imitation. Restraints are still put on compositions, and writing continues to be seen as habit formation. However, this group moves closer to true writing as an expression of real thoughts and feelings, within a given rhetorical structure. The two major variations are (1) The Rhetorical Method and (2) The Literary Analysis and Imitation Method.

In the first method, The Rhetorical Method, organization is a very important aspect. Special consideration is given to a set of paragraph "Types" such as comparison, cause and effect, analogy, etc. Models representing these types of development are presented, analyzed, and finally, imitated.

Finding examples of these "most common" and "most useful" paragraph types is just one of the problems encountered when using the rhetorical method. As many scholars have pointed out, few paragraphs or multi-paragraph compositions employ one method of development. Instead, most writing, except possibly that done especially for composition textbooks, combines various methods, (Goreman, 1973, p. 4) Perhaps a limited number of relationships do exist, but the variations are innumerable. Therefore, the usefulness of teaching an artificial schema of paragraph types is doubtful.

A second objection to the rhetorical method is concern whether knowledge of paragraph organization will actually improve a student's compositions. Perhaps it would be more beneficial to put an emphasis on the basic concepts of writings, such as unity, coherence, and the selection and arrangement of supporting details. Those details may or may not conform to a particular type of development. Best-known for employing this method are: Arapoff (1969; 1971), Baumwoll (1965), Carr (1967), Kaplan (1963), and Pincas (1964). The second prominent approach within this philosophy is called The Literary Analysis and Imitation Method. Here, the teacher presents extracts from the works of well-known, "good" writers. Together with the students, these passages are analyzed, and eventually

imitated. The assumption is that some of the stylistic characteristics of the original will be transferred to the written work of the students. Although some professional writers claim to have learned in this osmosis-like fashion, most experts today do not recommend this use of literature in the EFL classroom. (Goreman, 1973, p. 3)

Although fictional models are generally considered unsatisfactory, they, along with non-fictional examples, can be effectively used to illustrate a particular stylistic or rhetorical feature or to provide subjects for discussion. An oft-used technique in EFL classes is to take composition topics from readings. The subject matter is limited, but the organization is left to the student. This is an example of the Free Composition approach, which will be analyzed and critiqued below.

FREE COMPOSITION

Free Composition is probably the most-used, as well as abused, approach to teaching writing. Two basic variations exist.

The first view is that students only need help in finding something to say. The teacher only needs to stimulate the student's mind through literature, visuals, music, research, speakers or any other means. Beginning with these experiences, the student organizes and reorganizes the material numerous times until a "meaningful" pattern arises. Experiences are considered more important than an externally imposed structure that the student is expected to conform to. "True structure is something that we have worked out to give shape to our material." (Guth, 1972, p. 35) Usually, the teacher corrects these papers marking only grammatical or lexical problems, but not organizational weaknesses.

In the second method, all controls are eliminated. It is felt that ". . . language is a self-correcting and self-expanding system and that the more it is used the greater the facility there is in the use of it." (Erazmus, 1960, p. 25) Quantity is prized over quality of expression. The students are ". . . pushed and motivated to produce extensively with little regard to the number and type of errors made and directed to write rapidly with little revision." (Erazmus, 1960, p. 25) In one view, no writing is corrected by the teacher; in another variation, the students write with little instruction, but their finished writing is corrected. Briere's famous study seems to indicate that this emphasis on writing rather than on error correction improved student writing. (Briere, 1966, p. 146)

Much criticism is directed at this method. Such freedom results in undesirable word-for-word, often ungrammatical, translations. There is, in fact, no convincing evidence that requiring students to write freely and at length under circumstances in which

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