TEACHING COMPOSITION IN MEXICO

Part II: Some Guidelines and Practical Suggestions

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Part I of this article explored the cultural differences between English and Spanish writing and pointed out the difficulties Spanish-speakers have in expressing their ideas in ways acceptable to native English speakers. It also reviewed major teaching techniques and found each to be partially inadequate for the English-as-a-Foreign-Language student.

Before recommending general guidelines and specific suggestions for an EFL composition program, it would be wise to consider the needs of EFL students here in Mexico, as well as the restrictions of our particular teaching situations. Why would Mexicans need to write in English? The ability to speak seems to be a much more realistic goal: tourism, business, friendships, all seem to demand spoken English. Yet, for a growing number of students, being able to write in English is a very relevant goal, too. More and more of our students want to study and/or work in the United States or England. In competing with native-English speakers, these Mexicans should not be at unnecessary disadvantages because they don't know how to write adequately in English. Those staying in Mexico, though, may need to write papers in English, as well, such as at the University of the Americas where some classes are offered only in English. Also, businessmen here are often required to write their business letters in English. With the trend towards English-for-Special-Purposes, composition program developers should realize the limited purposes students of certain professions have for learning to write English. It is also wise to remember that some students may have no need to write in English, and, therefore, it would seem a waste of time to include this skill in those EFL programs. A student-needs inventory clarifies and provides many of these answers. The teachers and curriculum planners can then limit their objectives.

Teaching in Mexico presents certain other restrictions. Most important is the limited amount of time allowed for contact with English. Often EFL classes meet only three to five hours per week. Those hours must obviously be well-spent. Any composition program must be very organized and contain specific goals. Within this issue of economy of time is the realization that program goals be realistic and that the level of competence in written English not be too high. A limited range of

ability should be expected. A certain static set of skills should be carefully taught and practiced.

General Guidelines

Following are a set of beliefs which should affect the "spirit" and execution of composition programs to be developed. The first four guidelines should be reflected in how composition content is stimulated and in how assignments are given. The fourth and fifth will, hopefully, guide the evaluation of student work. Lastly, the sixth guideline is the essential belief that we must simplify the complexity of skills and truly teach writing.

1. Writing is a communicative skill. The goal of composition instruction is to teach the logical relationship of ideas. Grammar and mechanics are merely means to this end. Students should be encouraged to express their ideas in this foreign language, and teachers should encourage honest expression rather than concentrate on the mechanical aspects of writing.

NOTE: This guideline has a limitation, however. Speaking is a much more common form of communication than writing. Besides occasional personal writing and the "institutional writing" done as part of the professional activities of lawyers, journalists, educators, businessmen, and politicians, very few people need to write at all. Certainly, writing in the language class has a sense of unreality. Even the approach that students can express their personal perceptions, feelings and thoughts in writing is limited to first language composition classes. As pointed out, "In the case of second language learners, it is the learners' native language (Spanish) which will naturally fulfill such a function: to use the second language (English) would create a kind of artificiality..." (Davies, 1974, p. 180).

An alternative is to relate the EFL classroom writing to other subjects in the school curriculum. EFL students can write about history, science, geography or any other subject that they are studying. The businessman, engineer, and others can also relate composition in English to their daily concerns. Somehow, writing must become a meaningful activity which is related to the learner's world for it to be truly a form of communication.

2. Quality writing is usually experience-grounded. Organizing experiences and giving them meaning is a responsibility of the learner. The teacher's goal is to involve the students meaningfully in activities where they may gain new experiences.

3. A variety of stimuli should be employed in learning activities realizing the integration of all language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Concentrating on the written word in a visual world may ap-

pear old-fashioned to the students. Therefore, the inclusion of numerous forms of audio-visual stimuli in the classroom activities is imperative. Radio, TV, movies, want ads, cartoons, popular songs, brochures, all these are valid stimuli. Furthermore, activities traditionally labeled listening or speaking can, and should, be related to, rather than separated from, composition activities. In fact, there is little validity in the assumption that composition can be taught as a separate discipline of language instruction. The labels of "Grammar," "Conversation," "Listening," "Vocabulary," and "Writing" should be replaced with "Language Lessons."

4. A writing program should account for individual needs and interests. The emphasis should rest on the learner doing, rather than listening only. Small groups, two-person groups, and individual groupings should be students' options. A specific example of accounting for individuality is to allow students to write on suggested topics of their own choosing.

5. Students should be evaluated according to known criteria. The teacher's definite assignment desires should be made known before the students write. A check-list method suggested by Knapp (to be discussed later) can be presented to the student before he begins. According to this guideline, the art factor of composition can and should be minimized, and the skill factor rightly emphasized. Being tested on known criteria which have been previously practiced in class should also help to maintain student motivation.

6. The critical features of written discourse should be pointed out. Students should not be expected to generalize the features of how to write in English. A culminating step to any lesson should be the student verbalization of the features under consideration.

Practical Suggestions

Stimulating Content

When students write about subjects or experiences that they know well, they tend to write better. Some of the possible areas of activity which may provide a background for learning to write are listed below.

1. Conversation. Telling about experiences helps the students to find new elements and connections in that experience. "Conversation" is used here to cover discussion, interview, speeches, demonstration, panels, and formal debates. Conversation helps to clarify new experiences, and thus, is used in gaining information and the categorization of that information.

2. Listening. Listening is an important way to gain new information. Cassette tapes with music, speeches, or model paragraphs are useful.

Furthermore, radio, TV, guest speakers, as well as the teacher, may provide listening experiences which can teach a particular composition skill or provide new ideas for consideration.

3. Creative Dramatics. Acting out a role can be an effective means to explore not only thematic concerns but only stylistic choices due to varying perspectives, roles, and situations. Interpreting literature in this way, for example, may increase the meaningfulness of a particular concept, idea, or experience.

4. Reading. As a springboard to other activities and eventually writing, reading is the basic and the most traditional activity. Model paragraphs, essays, and quotations are common in the English class. In addition, though, "Dear Abby" advice columns, culture capsules, poetry, pamphlets, or want-ads can also be areas for study. In analyzing the written word, it is possible to see how native speakers use language.

5. Music. Music is a powerful medium of expression. Song lyrics with a musical background often have a strong emotional appeal. Music divorced of lyrics also has a great appeal. Either way could stimulate discussion and subsequent composition.

6. Art. Like music, art takes into account experiences and feelings. For the students who have difficulty finding words to express themselves, some work of art can stimulate them later to share their thoughts verbally using this art as a center of interest. Art is also an effective medium for description and practice in sharpening one's observation for details.

7. Multi-media. Multi-media provides numerous possibilities for combining all language skills: sight, sound, and semantics. Record players, tape recorders, cameras, TV, movies, cartoons, comic books, and newspapers all provide means to view language as it is used.

8. The Community. For a student learning English in the United States or England, the entire community is a classroom. The sights, sounds, and people of that community can provide areas for him to analyze, experience, and attempt to understand. Ms. Blackburn wrote a very good article relating field trips to EFL composition programs, "English for Foreign Students Goes Out on the Streets." (Blackburn, 1971) In Mexico, the English-speaking community can serve a similar purpose.

Giving Assignments

What should students write about? Although compositions must have some sort of content, the actual subject written about is not very important. What is important is the skill of organizaing that content. The

teacher's job is to first stimulate content and then to provide a list of suggested topics. If a student wants to write about another topic not suggested, that is acceptable, too. The only caution is to watch for copying from book jackets or encyclopedias.

Two ideas for subject matter have already been proposed earlier: relate topics to (a) other school courses and (b) to the daily concerns of the professions. A third consideration was discussed in the preceding section, "Stimulating Content," that is, to get topics from the EFL class activities. A last possibility is to ask the students to generate a list of topics that they would like to write about.

Some restrictions in giving writing assignments are given below.

(1) EFL students need more limited topics than a vague "Write about X in 300 words." The topics must be "spelled out." (2) Provide topics that are less likely to develop into clichés. Avoid items such as "Describe Your Daily Activities," "Describe Your Family," or "Why English is Important to Me." (3) Suggested topics should be within the assumed knowledge and interests of the majority of the class. Cars, sports, cooking, and children are still very sex-related in knowledge and interest. Some items that would probably appeal to only few of the students could be included, however, as suggestions to choose from. (4) Don't pick purely emotional issues. True, the debate and ensuing compositions about "The Ideal Husband/Wife" were lively and interesting, yet less emotional issues are just as effective, since they often involve some more thought. (5) If in-class compositions are occasionally desired, the topic must be simple enough to organize quickly in the hour provided. Note that having students write in-class has the advantage of seeing what can be done under pressure and without help. The disadvantage is that it takes up a precious class hour.

Evaluating Student Writing

As Guideline Five stated, students should be judged according to known criteria. A successful method of doing this is to use the check-list techniques. This check-list acts as a syllabus. Copies of the entire list are distributed to the students at the beginning of the course. The first and last compositions (preferably written in-class) act as a pre-test and as a post-test, and they are judged by this complete list. The other practice compositions, perhaps one per week, some written in-class and others out-of-class, will be evaluated by cumulative check-lists devised by the teacher according to which additional skills were taught since the previous composition. The student will revise his compositions to include those items not checked on his checklist. Time for student-teacher conferences and small group correction/evaluation groups should also be provided.

The advantages of this method of composition correction are listed by Donald Knapp: (Knapp, 1972, p. 220)

1. It eliminates proofreading, in favor of marking only those items that have teaching significance.

2. It provides for sufficient teaching and drill on the points to be learned so that they are learned, not just introduced or acknowledged.

3. It means that even grammar points and punctuation can be taught when the teacher is ready to teach them, and in the clearest and most favorable contexts.

4. It is structured to reinforce what the students want to remember and practice- their successes- instead of trying to force them to remember and learn from their failures.

5. It makes basic composition into a course with knowable, achievable goals.

6. It offers both the student and the teacher specific evidence that progress is being made - and how much.

7. It lets the student feel that he is being judged on his present achievement, not on his misspent past.

8. It eliminates the need for grading, and in its stead gives more precise evaluation of achievement in the separate composition skills.

9. The evaluation is direct and honest in terms of composition skills; it can be easily supported by the teacher, and accepted and respected by the students.

10. It changes the teacher's correction attitude from one of looking for errors and failures to one of looking for successes.

Chart 1

A sample check-list, adapted from Knapp:

Composition #5: Checklist

I. Use of Language

___A. Conjunctions used in compound sentences with correct punctuation.

___B. Connectives used to link ideas together.

II. Mechanics

____A. Title is given.

____B. Paragraphs are clearly indented.

____C. All sentences begin with capital letters.

____D. All sentences end with end marks.

III. Organization of Ideas

A. Outline

____1. An outline is given.
____2. The outline has correct form.

B. Topic Sentence

____1. A topic sentence is clearly given and underlined.
____2. The topic sentence is divided to clearly show the supports.

\+ = Done
++ = Especially well-done

Although the checklist can be used alone, composition symbols can also be employed to show a student his specific errors. Symbols are suggested rather than asking the teacher to write in all of the corrections, since the symbols make the students think, while the teacher's proofreading does not.

Chart 2

Correction Symbols

Sp= spelling mistake	P = error in punctuation
N = error in number	A = wrong or omitted article
T = error in tense	WO= error in word order
L = lexical error, wrong word used	R = rewrite, revise

Teaching the Critical Features of Writing

Seven important aspects of the composing process are listed below. Not only are these features to be introduced, but they must be practiced

again and again. Using the checklist method, the teacher can decide when and how to introduce these items one at a time. Then they are practiced over and over. Note that the teacher will be adding not only these features to the checklist but also lexical, punctuation and sentence structure items, too.

Some of the most critical features are: (1) Limiting the topic and the topic sentence, (2) Selecting and arranging details, (3) Outlining, (4) Providing for coherence and unity, (5) Using Connectives and Transitional Phrases, (6) Practicing methods of development, and (7) Recognizing style and word choice.

Unfortunately, space does not permit a complete listing of ideas for teaching each of these seven categories; therefore, only one technique for selecting and arranging details will be given here. This technique can also be used in discussing limiting the topic and the topic sentence as well as outlining.

One Technique. In a small group or as a class, list all the facts you know about a certain subject. Sample topics include: Tourism, Television, Three Places in Mexico a Tourist Should See. After this initial collection of ideas, look for subdivisions. Next, put numbers by each idea and capital letters for each subdivision. Put the numbers of the ideas under the appropriate letters. Can the facts be ordered within the groups? Write a summary sentence for each group. Do all the details talk about the same idea within their groups? Should some sentences be taken out? Now, write a topic sentence or main idea sentence for all your ideas. Follow-up: Use this to teach outlining- both topic and sentence forms. Then have the students write a short composition following this outlining.

Conclusion

It is hoped that the survey of theories related to composition learning and teaching found in Part I of this article will help teachers to understand what approaches have influenced EFL writing programs in Mexico and elsewhere. The foregoing suggestions in this second part form one attempt to tailor a more effective and realistic approach for the needs of our students here. These ideas have evolved from years of classroom experience with Spanish-speakers at the University of the Americas as well as in California and Arizona schools.

Teaching composition skills is a big job - yet an enjoyable one with definable and attainable goals. Hopefully, the guidelines presented here will aid others in finding their best direction.

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Part II

Note: See Part I of this article for additional references.

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