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Who Can Be Taught?

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ELICITING VERBIAGE and refining style are the principal concerns of the English comp teacher. In fact, J. Ross Winterowd specifically disclaims the English teacher's responsibility for more basic problems.[1] Certainly, being able to explain thoughts fully and in an effective fashion aren't trivial concerns, but they are second order problems for the truly non-proficient writer, the one who habitually produces deviant sentences [See (1)-(6) below], or who can't say what he means [See (7)+(8) below].

Group composing as espoused by John McNamara in "Teaching the Process of Writing" may seem to be a viable method for teaching the very unskilled.[2] However, it violates one important principle of language acquisition, and learning to write is, to a great extent, a language learning problem. This is readily seen when advice such as Lou Kelley's, to "talk on paper," is examined.[3] What are the actual ramifications of such advice, which is also rather commonly given in the form "Just write it the way you'd say it"? Students of mine who have been told this frequently complain to me that it is very aggravating advice. No matter how they try, the written sentence doesn't come out like talking. And no wonder. Talking and writing are separate skills actually governed by different networks in the brain. Studies with aphasics have shown that damage to one skill does not necessarily imply damage to the other. Furthermore, telling students to "talk on paper" misleads them. It falsely implies that writing is as easy and natural as talking, and, patently, it is not. Moreover, if the student is led to believe that he should be able to write just because he can talk, and he fails, he can feel pretty stupid. It is far better if, at the outset, he is made aware of the nature of the task before him. In my experience, students are grateful to know what it is they have to learn: a new skill. Furthermore, they are stimulated to try to learn when they realize that their failure to write doesn't imply lack of intelligence, merely lack of a skill.

All the information imparted by tone, stress, tempo, intonation, clarity of enunciation, and a variety of other phonological gambits is, obviously, missing from writing. Instead, there is increased complexity of lexical choice and sentence structure. Indeed, it may well be that certain combinations of structures belong entirely to the written language. At any rate, even the most non-proficient students have no diffi-

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[1] W. Ross Winterowd, "'Topics' and Levels in the Composing Process," *College English*, Feb. 1973, pp. 701-09.

[2] John McNamara, "Teaching the Process of Writing," *College English*, Feb. 1973, pp. 661-65.

[3] Lou Kelley, "Toward Competence and Creativity in an Open Class," *College English*, Feb. 1973, pp. 644-60.

culty bringing in samples of written English not likely to be spoken, such as:

> By that I mean to suggest that the selection of a location formulation requires of a speaker (and will exhibit for a hearer) an analysis of his own location and the location of his co-conversationalist(s), and of the objects whose location is being formulated (if that object is not one of the co-conversationalists).[4]

> While the economy rule does not preclude the use of combinations of membership categories for single population Members, its presence does mean that the task of being socialized to doing adequate reference does not involve having to learn combinatorial possibilities for each pair, triplicate, etc. of categories as a prerequisite to doing adequate references.[5]

Regardless of how one judges such selections, it is incontrovertible that they represent one style of written language, but not of spoken.

The following are examples of non-proficient writers' attempts to explain either their thoughts or their knowledge:

(1) The need to find out who he is, is something every freshman wishes he could make.

(2) The basic question is not the color of the prisoners to determine the government's action but to put down the rebellion.

(3) He will see how convenience and gain are no substitute for a true love of the way one uses his life for real accomplishment according to an earlier period of human spirit.

(4) Even though they make their money this way, newspapers print scare headlines.

(5) As opposed to standard English speech where the 's is used to show possessive, the non-standard dialect use a formation of words in a sentence to show it.

(6) The use of plurals also shows up a great deal in non-standard Negro English.

These last two sentences appeared on an essay exam. Later conference with the student revealed that he certainly was aware that standard English uses "a formation of words" to indicate possession, and that using plurals "a great deal" is a feature of all English dialects. He meant, and said spontaneously, that black English, omitting the redundant genitive marker, often relies on placing nouns next to each other to show possession, and that black English does not always mark plurals as standard English does.

Sentences (1)-(4) above were picked at random from my voluminous file of deviant sentences produced by freshman comp students in classrooms as free, friendly, and open as I could possibly create. All of the creators of these sentences speak normally, or at least not recognizably oddly. They just write strangely. Asking such students to "[restate] sentences that are not clear" (Kelley, 1973:653) or seeing that "he adds some concrete details or visual images. . . ." (Kelley, p. 653) is almost beside the point at this state of their art. For, many of the students who fail to achieve proficiency in English comp actually do not know the syntax of the written language. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that they have gaps in their knowledge. The implication of this is that learning to write is a language learning task, much as learning French is. It is

[4] Emanuel Schegloff, "Notes on a Conversational Practice: Formulating Place," in *Studies in Social Interaction,* ed. David Sudnow (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 83.

[5] Harvey Sacks, "An Initial Investigation of the Usability of Conversational Data for Doing Sociology," in *Studies in Social Interaction,* ed. David Sudnow (New York: The Free Press, 1972), p. 35.

not just a problem of developing style.

What, then, can be done with (or should it be *to* or *for*?) such students? First, there is the very real question of whether they can be taught at all. Winterowd says:

> If the student . . . is incapable of generating these core sentences [George kisses Mary—Mary is kissed by George] there is obviously some dysfunction that is beyond the reach of pedagogy. (p. 707)

Actually, I have never come across any adolescent who could not create a passive sentence with the verb *kiss*, or, for that matter, *make*, *cook*, or *cut*, to mention a few common verbs. But consider:

(7) —pollution loses lives.
(8) Since American support is gradually depleting—

The errors evinced here are akin to not being able to passivize correctly. That is, in many sentences, more than one noun may be a subject. If an object is chosen to be subject, then a passive sentence results. In (7) the deviance was caused by incorrectly making *pollution* the subject. This should read:

(7a) —lives are lost because of pollution.

Does this writer have a "dysfunction beyond the reach of pedagogy"? Or is he aware of alternations like:

(9a) Cowardliness loses wars.
(9b) Wars are lost because of cowardliness.

Thus, he might assume that *lose* allows a noun denoting cause to be subject when, at this stage of English syntax, it does so only if the noun derives from an adjective plus the suffix *-ness*, or if a noun denoting Beneficiary is stated as in the informal:[6]

(7b) Pollution loses them their lives.

Such intricate and, yes, arbitrary restrictions on the positions a noun may take relative to a verb are extremely important in English syntax. [See (10)-(16) below for further explanation.] Sentence (8) is another example. This should have been:

(8a) Since American support is being gradually depleted—

Here, the passive should have been used. Does such an error, comparable to saying "Mary kissed George" if George was the agent, indicate some sort of pathology? Or, did the author of (8) know that *diminish* does not require the passive:

(8b) American support is gradually diminishing—

Since *diminish* and *deplete* share semantic features, the unwary might well assume that they appear in the same relationship to nouns in sentences. As it happens, *deplete* requires an overt object in a sentence. This can be signalled either by using the passive, as in (8a), or by placing a noun in direct object position. *Diminish* does not require an object. The errors in (7) and (8) do result in a failure to generate core sentences correctly. Winterowd seems to reflect the attitude of the profession accurately when he assumes that teaching such basic sentence relations is not the function of the English teacher. If this is true, then the function of the English teacher is merely to refine style. This is, to be sure, the basic assumption behind every article in the February 1973 issue of *College English*, an issue devoted to composition, as well as, I might add,

[6] Speakers do not seem to categorize in this fashion on a conscious level. That speakers use rules and categories is well-known, but precisely how these are used is not.

behind virtually every rhetoric text on the market. Even the Christensen and Mellon works which Winterowd justifiably praises are addressed to complex sentence formation, not core or kernel relations (p. 707). If, indeed, the inability to produce simple sentences were necessarily pathological, then English teachers could say, "Whew! get rid of those kids. They're not college material, and English 101 is not for them." However, it is apparent that errors in simple sentences, like those in complex sentences, may result from not knowing a rule or from applying it incorrectly. Neither of these conditions necessarily derives from a "dysfunction beyond the reach of pedagogy." By rules, of course, I don't mean shibboleths like when to use *like,* or other inventions of 19th century grammarians. Rather, I refer to the rules which produce sentences accepted as non-anomalous English by educated readers.

If no pathological condition is the cause of sentences (1)-(8), what is? Earlier in this article, I pointed out that learning to write is a language learning problem. It takes a child years and years of constantly using language and listening to it to get the rules down pat. If anywhere near a proportionate amount of time were spent on learning writing there would be far fewer proficiency problems. As it now stands, however, many schoolchildren do not get a regular chance to write entire sentences, much less compositions. Instead, they underline correct answers in workbook fill in the blanks, or circle the right number. Even if they are occasionally asked to write an essay it is frequently not corrected thoroughly, or, if it is, all too often the teacher has done so using the handbook numbers game. The pupil dutifully looks up the numbers and finds that he can't make any connection between his sentence and whatever the handbook is describing. Analysis and comparison of syntax is a sophisticated skill well beyond the ability of the uninitiated, especially if the sample sentence in the handbook bears no surface resemblance to the sentence in the essay which the writer has to correct, a rather common occurrence. It is now well known to linguists, at least, that children learn to speak by checking their utterances against those they hear. Thus they extrapolate rules of language which they constantly refine until they speak in an adult fashion. They might likewise learn to write if they were urged to write and if their writing were restructured for them, but few teachers have the will or the time or the whatever to do this.

It can now be seen why McNamara's group composing fails as an effective teaching device for the non-proficient. It gives too little opportunity for every student to create entire sentences which express what he wishes. In any event, the consequence of inexperience in writing is the number of college freshmen who are grossly deficient in writing. At Providence College, for instance, this number is approximately two hundred, usually about one-fourth of the entering class.

Experimenting with seven classes of these freshmen, I have found that the teaching of core sentences which Winterowd so summarily dismisses is actually a highly effective, many-pronged tool. The very fact that one can start with relations that even the most frightened and defeated students can recognize and discuss is of great importance. The simplicity of the early exercises shows them that they need not be afraid to notice and to make judgments. Since

their attention is first focused on structures they can understand, their curiosity about language and its manipulation is stimulated. Thus, they become increasingly sensitive to written language, noticing more and more about their own and their classmates' as the semester progresses. This, of course, is essential for continuing progress in writing. If awareness can be aroused, the student will continue to develop after leaving freshman comp.

But sensitivity is not enough. One must be able to play with sentences, and to evaluate the effect of rearranging words in the sentence. Consideration of the basic relations of the nouns to the verb, as in sentences (10)-(16) gives ample opportunity for developing both skills. Furthermore, it is impossible to ignore matters of discourse when dealing with such sentences, for which noun in a sentence may become subject is as much a matter of focus, style, or context as it is of syntax.

Finally, and crucially, presentation of core sentences quickly convinces students that language is rule governed behavior; thus one's being able to understand a sentence is no guarantee that it is not deviant. Then when the teacher corrects their sentences, students don't feel that he or she is capricious or merely trying to impose his or her own preferences (assuming, of course, that teachers confine themselves to correcting deviance and style, not the message!). And, of course, students can then better understand what is at stake in learning to write, what sorts of things they must pay attention to and learn.

Best of all, these lessons are not learned by lectures. They are learned from the students' own analyses. For instance, sentences such as these are presented to the class:

(10) Max planted corn in the garden.
(11) Tony gave Dave a sock in the nose
(12) Gwen poured Fred a cup of coffee.
(13) Irate citizens swamped the post office with mail.
(14) Max cut the meat with a cleaver.
(15) The flag fluttered in the breeze.
(16) The breeze ripped the flag.

First students are asked to change the positions of the nouns in (10) or whatever sentence I start with. They readily come up with:

(10a) Corn was planted in the garden by Max.
(10b) The garden was planted with corn by Max.
(10c) Max planted the garden with corn.

Two lines of discussion are opened by these. First, that (10b) and (10c) imply that the entire garden was planted with corn, whereas (10) and (10a) are ambiguous in this respect. These may be used whether or not other items were planted. Although implication governs whether or not *garden* will be placed so that it may appear without its preposition, other considerations govern whether or not the agent, Max, is to be subject. This brings us to another discussion. Although students consistently and readily supply the [by + agent] at the end of a passive, they just as readily agree it sounds funny. I tell them to substitute: "the tall, dirty freckle-faced kid with blue overalls" (or a similarly lengthy noun phrase) for "Max." The consensus, predictably, is that the heavily modified agent phrase seems more natural in a passive sentence than in an active, and conversely that the single word agent is better in an active. The principle that lengthy phrases and clauses tend to be zapped to the end of an English sentence is thus established.

Someone usually manages to comment

that "by Max" need not be mentioned at all, whereupon I point out that avoiding mention of "who done it" is a common reason for using the passive. This leads to the subject of using the passive as a device for getting rid of a superabundance of *I*. Several *I* sentences can be thrown at the class so that it may passivize them for practice. Keeping a collection from old themes helps in such an exercise.

Next we discuss when it would be permissible to use "by Max." The very fact that it is not usual makes it what linguists call a marked construction. Therefore it is used if special focus is to be made on Max. Often I ask the class to write contexts for the sentences under discussion. For instance, for (10a) someone might produce:

(10d) The garden was planted with corn by Max, not Alec.
(10e) Although you'd never believe it, the garden was planted with corn by Max.

At the very start, when they first paraphrase (10), many students express surprise that they automatically supplied certain prepositions; if not, I ask them "Where did the *with* (or *by*) come from? How did you know which to use?" This starts our discussion of syntactic rules, deep structures, and transformations. So one sentence like (10) introduces several important rhetorical principles: rules of syntax, implications, criteria for naturalness, markedness, focus, context. If (10e) or the like is elicited, then presupposition can be added to the list at this time, for students readily note that this can be used only if Max was not likely to plant corn. As far as possible I allow ideas like presupposition to arise naturally from the class discussion. Somehow before the semester is over, most conceivable facets of writing do get mentioned, either in the grammar lessons or while discussing themes. For homework the class is given sets of sentences to paraphrase and/or to write contexts for.

A similar format is used for the other sentences. A brief rundown on lessons to be drawn from (11)-(16) might explain further, especially for those unversed in current linguistics. Note, however, that a teacher need not be a linguist to use this method. It is not necessary to use the jargon of transformational or case grammar, to use labels like *agent*, *range*, *dative*, or to draw complex trees. In fact, insisting that students learn labels or snowing them with jargon puts a damper on the whole discovery process. It is vital, if students are to learn, that they do the discussing and the analyzing, and that they make the points. The teacher can prod, can ask questions, can suggest activities, but, except for occasional rescue work, should refrain from lecturing. With this digression aside, on to (11)-(16).

Both (11) and (12) reinforce the principle that long phrases normally find their way to the end of a sentence. Substituting *money* for *sock in the nose*, and *beer* for *cup of coffee*, allows *to Dave* and *for Fred* to appear at the ends of their respective sentences with no special focus. Similarly, substituting *the obnoxious kid with the broken hand* for *Dave* or *Fred* forces their removal from indirect object position. Another point easily raised by sentences like (11) and (12) is that the positions which can be filled in a sentence, such as indirect object, are highly dependent on the particular verb. Although they can be readily understood, (17) and (18) are rejected by most students:

(17) *Wash Mary the dishes.
(18) *Drift John the log.

That even direct object position cannot always be filled even if the meaning of the verb doesn't prevent it is shown by:

(19) *The magician disappeared the rabbit.

The periphrasis "made the rabbit disappear" must be used. Knowing the raw meaning, so to speak, of a word is not enough. One must also learn its permissible contexts. Both (13) and (14) contain instrument phrases [*with* or *by* + noun]. When asked to make *post office* or *meat* subject, students rapidly supply the passive, but when asked to make *mail* or *a cleaver* subject they are stopped short. Of course, they get

(13a) Mail swamped the post office.
(14a) The cleaver cut the meat.

But what happened to *irate citizens* and *Max?* Again, the arbitrary nature of syntax is revealed. If the instrument is subject, the agent can't be mentioned in the same simple sentence. Using the instrument as subject is, then, another way of avoiding mention of who did the action. Also, (14), but not I think (13), allows a paraphrase of the type "use something to do something," as in:

(14b) Max used the cleaver to cut the meat.

Whether or not this type is freely interchangeable with that represented in (14), "do something with something," can bring on a debate. The implications of intentional versus nonintentional action may govern which is used. That is, the class usually agrees that (14b) is marked to mean deliberate action, whereas (14) is not. A similar marking can be achieved with the alternation of *by* and *with* as in:

(19a) The building was hit with a rock.
(19b) The building was hit by a rock.

Sentences (15) and (16) again point up the primacy of the verb as sentence shaper, for although *flag* can be subject in (16), *breeze* cannot be in (15), at least for the majority of my students. Some, however, do insist that

(15a) The breeze fluttered the flag,

is fine and some, not necessarily the same, that

(16a) The flag ripped in the breeze,

is not. Those that reject (16a), however, accept

(16b) The flag ripped because of the breeze.

After all this discussion of the rule-governed nature of language, the uninitiated might be chagrined by this business of "some accept" and "some reject," but this is a natural result of the fact that people learn language by extrapolating rules from what they hear about them. Everyone doesn't learn all the rules the same. Regional and social dialect differences exist; so do differences between generations, and even between individuals. Language is always changing, always in the process of becoming, and English teachers must be alert to this. Fortunately most structures elicit wide agreement. For those which don't, a discussion of the variations in rules can be fruitful. Also, whether a certain form is permissible in informal but not formal speech may be a pertinent question. Sometimes, when a student insists upon the correctness of something which sounds un-English to most of the rest of the class, he can be asked to see if he can find it in print somewhere. The students and I have all been given a few jolts from such assign-

ments.[7] The important thing, however, is that the controversial sentence really makes students notice. It sends them delving into print. It makes them argue about language and think about what they do with it. That everything isn't laid out one hundred percent sure and proper is what makes language interesting.

Of course only a tiny sampling of a semester's work can be described here. A partial list will give an idea of the rest:

A. Causatives (for which (15) and (16) may also be used!: *make* + verb; *have* + verb; *because*, *from*, of — noun, etc.).

B. Pronominalization (what does *his* mean in "His creditors bankrupted John" and "His brothers hate each of Mary's sons," etc.).

C. Verb tense and aspect (Forget the old saws. This cries for new solutions. For instance, "I have taught in junior high, but never again" versus "I taught in junior high, but no more").

D. Co-ordination (So why can't you say "John made the bed and the coffee")?

E. Sentence embedding (Not just combining, but "I hate loud singing" vs. "I hate singing loudly." What is the subject of *singing* in each?).

Even those who have never had a course in modern syntax can find paradigms and other data to present in class by leafing through linguistic journals. I'm not advocating that anyone actually read the articles on syntax. Most are far removed from the concerns of English teachers, but the sentences and other paradigms used as proofs of various theories can be given to classes to chew on. I find Robin Lakoff's and Sandra Babcock's presentations very useful for such purposes, for instance. There is no reason why grammar classes can't be discovery times for teachers as well as students. Of course student themes are a great source of grammar material, and, as often as possible, should be used to illustrate points. As I correct themes, I always keep file cards handy. Sometimes figuring out what went wrong can be a real teaser for everyone. Amazingly, however, as the semester rolls along, the students always seem to come up with reasonable solutions. The important thing is that they learn to recognize and correct deviant or odd phrasing.

Needless to say, grammar lessons are only an adjunct to the main business: writing and correcting writing. Each class selects its own weekly topic, often a controversial one. Then, usually, they debate the issues in class. I rarely ask students to read what a professional has written, as emulation of the artist, reporter, or scholar is far beyond their capacity. It takes a good deal of linguistic sophistication to pull off that feat. It's enough at the start to get them to say what they want so others can understand it and not be offended by it.

Basing an English teaching method on the latest psycholinguistic and syntactic theory usually assures its efficacy, but many a good theory has a funny thing happen to it on the way to the classroom. Not this one! The students themselves, on anonymous questionnaires, affirm that the grammar lessons helped teach them to write, gave them insights into language, and, wonder of wonders, were interesting. Some even complained that there wasn't enough grammar. Less than ten percent overall found the gram-

[7] As linguists have long known, people are not always aware of how they really talk, e.g., what structures they use, much less what others use.

mar lessons not helpful in teaching writing or not interesting. Surely another measure of the success of the method outlined here is that the incidence of deviant sentences drops sharply as the semester progresses. If I wish data for my files, it must be collected in the first part of the semester.