

*PASSA*  
*Vol. XIV No. 2*  
*December 1984*

## *Techniques in Teaching English Writing*

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The Soviet psychologist, Vygotsky, likens the comparative difficulty for a child in acquiring speech and writing to the difficulty he finds in learning arithmetic and algebra respectively. All children learn to speak and express themselves effectively at roughly the same age, even though some may be more articulate than others. On the other hand, many people never learn to express themselves freely in writing. And this is their native language. The old saying: "If you can say it you can write it" is simplistic in its concept of communicative writing. On the other hand, "He talks like a book" emphasizes the elaborate and comprehensive explanations of written messages which are quite unnecessary in face-to-face communication.

We must not be surprised therefore that a high level of written expression is so difficult to obtain in a foreign language. It cannot be achieved by chance as a by-product of other language areas, although it draws on what has been learned in these areas. Writing is often treated as a compendium to a lesson, an empty exercise in form, rather than worthwhile in itself. As we shall see, however, writing should form a natural, sequential part of any ESL, parallel, not subordinate to, any progress made in other areas such as speaking, listening and reading.

So what exactly does good writing require? First of all, of course, it requires a knowledge of grammatical and stylistic conventions. It requires precision and nuance which can only be developed through an understanding of the syntactical lexical choices available. To be interesting, it requires the ability to vary structures and patterns for stylistic effect. Good writing therefore will not develop merely from

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This article is based on the lecture given to Thai teachers of the English Language in the secondary schools of Thailand.

practice exercises in grammar and vocabulary alone. In the early stages, of course, as we shall see, the experience of speaking freely greatly facilitates writing, which often parallels what one would say orally. The development of a writing style, "per se", however, will depend to a large extent on the learner's acquaintance with the output of native writers in all manner of styles; at all levels, therefore, writing should be integrated with reading skills, so that texts are analyzed and students recognize that styles often vary according to their degree of formality or informality. Thus, they get a feel for the written word.

The relatively poor level of written ability we observe here at, Chulalongkorn University Language Institute, Bangkok, Thailand, in spite of years of exposure to the language, means, that perhaps we need a new approach or approaches to teaching writing skills in our secondary schools. Even at the university level, one still notices the tendency still to translate from Thai-native language interference the tendency to think too much in isolated words, rather than overall patterns and structures resulting the inability to write sentences which interlock. Therefore, we hope to discuss and evaluate one or two different approaches to the problem, although due to space limitations, this is likely to be far from exhaustive. However, one would, at this stage, like to stress 2 things: there is no one approach to teaching writing skills which will solve all the students problems; there is no "cure-all". One has rather, to be eclectic in one's approach, to draw on a variety of written exercises, to vary one's approach as much as possible to avoid boredom. Secondly, we will stress the fact, again and again, that writing should be a purposeful communicative exercise, rather than an empty indulgence in writing for writing's sake. Just as in any communicative or notional-functional syllabus, the teacher tries from early on to confront the student with realistic situations, to encourage him to express his own ideas, thoughts, feeling-to make the language more "vital"-so it should be with writing.

To begin with, however, we should like to say something about marking. The traditional approach, whereby the teacher works and corrects classwork or homework has many disadvantages, not the least: it puts great strain and unnecessary demands on the teacher. Secondly, it encourages passivity on the part of the student; only the highly-motivated learner the one who causes the least worry anyway-is likely to look over the teacher's corrections carefully. Most students just glance at their work and then toss it away; therefore the learner doesn't learn from his own mistakes and no progress is made. One other disadvantage is that too much correction or insensitive comment can undermine a child's confidence. So what's the answer? The answer is self-correction and correction by one's peer group, working in pairs or small groups to discuss each other's mistakes.

Firstly, the teacher should institute and pre-teach a set of symbols that he is going to use to correct the students' work; it should be easy to understand (here colour-coding could help of course) and it shouldn't be too long or complex. Here are some ideas, for example, although each individual teacher is free to invent whatever system suits his or her own personal taste best.

Eg. T = tense, P = punctuation, Sp. = spelling,  
 VA = verb/subject agreement, Voc. = vocabulary, wrong word  
 Prep. = wrong preposition.

Now this is far from exhaustive; one could add W.O. = wrong word order; the point is it should be short and clear. One or two abstract symbols will be necessary too, for example, when something is missed at the end of a word—most likely the plural 's'; the symbol may also be necessary for pointing out that a word has been missed out. The old fashioned question-mark could be used generally as: Are you sure of this? type symbol? At later stages one might introduce the wavy line meaning that while something is communicable (i.e. the reader understands the writer's intentions) or while it may be grammatically correct, there is a better way of saying it. One should however be careful not to overwhelm the students with red marks everywhere. One should be prudent in just exactly what one does mark wrong. It might therefore be a good idea to develop the attitude, suggested by Byrne (1979), of *readers* rather than judges and in doing so we would perhaps look not so much at what learners have failed to achieve but what they have actually *succeeded* in doing.

Hence a piece of corrected homework might look something like this;

T                      Prep                                      VA

My father is going abroad for business every year. My family have eight  
 VA  
 member and each of us have accompanied him either to Hong Kong or Singapore.

?                      P                                      V

In Singapore we go to shopping eat out at Chinese restaurant. Sometime we go  
 P  
 sightseeing

In the early stages have the students correct it in groups or pairs. The advantages of peer group correction having been proved again and again, in addition to which the students learn to work critically as *readers*. For homework, and as the students get gradually more advanced, each student should correct his own individual work. However, if done in class the teacher can get immediate feedback as to what is error and what is a mistake. The following definitions will be of help:

ERROR :- caused by lack of knowledge of the target language, in this case, English or by incorrect hypotheses about it.

**MISTAKE**:- caused by temporary lapses of memory, confusion, slips of the tongue and so on. If you want to check whether a student is making an error or a mistake, a good rule of thumb is this : challenge the student and if he can correct himself, then he has probably made a mistake, not an error. Either way the teacher can take remedial action. One other thing at this point, in spite of prevailing theories the teacher should not be too hasty in rejecting a controlled amount of grammatical terminology and mother-tongue explanation. Grammatical explanation alone however is unlikely to be effective. It is rather a back-up device.

So let's take teaching writing broadly, one step at a time. The first stage of course is copying down—the traditional method. Now there's not much to say about this, except that one should try, as much as possible to make the material as realistic or as meaningful as possible since in real life we often have to copy things down to make a record of them : addresses, the times of trains, recipes, as well as other bits of information we think may have a future use e.g. poems or songs.

#### **Example of Meaningful Copying Exercises**

a) Ask the students to draw a plan of a house which includes the following rooms : kitchen, sitting-room, dining-room, bedroom and bathroom. Ask them to write the names in on their plan.

b) Ask them to dictate to you (or one of the students) a list of furniture and smaller objects (telephone, flower vase etc.) which could be found in any of these rooms. Write (or have a student write) them on the blackboard.

c) Ask the students to use the list on the blackboard to compile five lists, one for each room of the house, on a rough piece of paper. Each list should contain items that might be found in that room. Some items, of course may appear on more than one list.

d) Ask the students to put the items in alphabetical order and copy these lists into their exercise books. Each list should appear under the appropriate heading.

e) Get the students to compare their lists with others in the class.

They thus have a reference list that they can be encouraged to add to from time to time.

One can also make handy use of visual material to reinforce particular structures and vocabulary.

One draws a picture of a room on the blackboard with certain objects in it. The student is given a model e.g. There is (a lamp) (on the bookcase). There are (some glasses) (near the lamp).

The students are then asked to generate sentences of their own, using the given model. Slowly then, the student gets away from a purely copying exercise to generating his own material. It is in fact a kind of substitution drill.

### Substitution drills

The main criticism of substitution drills is that they can be too manipulative. Take the following example.

Last Tuesday	}	afternoon, my wife	}	and I went to visit	}		
Friday						brother	see
Wednesday							

John and Mary in their new { house  
home

Here the student does not have to think at all; if he makes any mistakes at all, it will be in copying. In fact, it is more of a copying down exercise than anything else.

As stated before, in the early stages, written work will often closely parallel what's happening in spoken communication lessons. Dialogues, therefore, often provide excellent writing practice.

e.g. Give the students a model dialogue :

A : Give me that book please.

B : Which one ?

A : The big one on the table.

B : Here you are!

A : Thanks very much.

The students are then given key words to write similar dialogues :

a) umbrella/red/behind/armchair

b) box/small/on top of/cupboard etc.

The keywords are gradually phased out, so that in the end the students write one or two dialogues on their own.

### Another activity

a) Provide students with sentences they have to rearrange in order to form a dialogue.

b) Provide the students with a dialogue which they have to complete by reference to a list of sentences, not in order.

Maybe ask the students to provide a construction of the dialogue.

This is a valuable way of re-presenting rather than repeating structures and vocabulary presented orally. In fact, they can then practise the dialogues, thus showing them they have written something which can be used.

c) Interview students about their abilities (Give the students a mimeographed table)

e.g. Name  
 Play the guitar  
 Speak French  
 Speak English  
 Sail a boat.  
 etc.

The students interview each other, writing 'Yes' or 'No' in the appropriate columns. The students are then asked to write some sentences about their friends in their exercise books.

### Back to substitution drills

As we have seen, if used creatively, substitution drills do have a place in the writing curriculum. The key is to vary their use as much as possible, to prevent boredom setting in.

Consider the balloon type:

	to the snack-bar
He	to the bank
She	to France
They	to the library
Mary	

		snails
to know	went	the Eiffel Tower
to see	drove	some books
to eat	flew	some money
to take out		

This type of substitution table is slightly more challenging in that it gives the student practice in sequencing. Furthermore, if the students work from a table of this type on the blackboard, rather than directly from their books the teacher may elicit ideas from the class in order to expand the balloons; thus student involvement is increased and creativity—within limits—encouraged.

### Chain and Choice

Most traditional substitution tables make use of a key pattern or CHAIN in order to allow the learner to practice various choices within it. This is fine, as far as CHOICE is concerned, but it does not help the learner who is having problems with the chain of language (or syntax).

For this kind of student the following activity would be useful. In essence, it is a kind of substitution table in reverse, the underlying concept being familiar to the balloon type previously discussed.

in the park	played	tennis	he
there	was playing	football	she
yesterday	should have played	games	Jack
well			the boy

Another way of getting the students to develop a feel for English syntax is by using coloured cards. Most simple sentences can be broken down as follows.

is carrying	Mr. Smith	in his right hand	a black umbrella
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In English a clause or simple sentence can be broken down into four components: Subject, verb, object or complement, adverb (phrase). Colour-coding each component obviates the need for grammatical terminology and has the added advantage that the teacher can correct errors on the spot before the student enters the right version in his notebook. One further advantage is that it involves a certain 'play' element; one can even turn it into a competition to see which individuals, pairs or groups can create the most sentences in a given time. A points system having been agreed upon, the rest of the class may then be invited to spot any errors in a particular individual's efforts.

One could also use cards with detachable endings (or morphemes) by which a number of grammatical operations could be exemplified, e.g.

THE	BUS	ES	GO	ES	TO	TOWN
FROM	THIS	BUS	STOP	WENT	DO	DOES
DID	N'T	?				

Some people, however, may prefer to use single words on cards rather than structures, in that case we would refer them to c.f. Mackay, Thompson and Schaub: *Breakthrough to Literacy* (Teacher's manual-Longman).

Later we will mention the matter of COHESION—joining 2 sentences together to make longer sentences—those sentences have to relate to each other to form a paragraph. Given this goal, therefore, cards are useful to give the student a chance to play with language patterns, make mistakes and correct them. In this case cards are clauses or sentences, but the joining words are separate.

E.g.            because                            although                            they went for a walk  
                   it was raining                            a little  
                   they were tried of                            sitting in the house

(N.B. There is no ONE correct answer and there may be a problem with punctuation and capitals)

Other ways of varying substitution tables.

1. One column of the substitution table that is particularly easy can be missed out.
2. Certain words can be missed out.
3. Picture prompts can replace some of the words.
4. Turn the whole thing into a game. Set a time limit and see who can make the most sentences.
5. Interest can be increased by more student involvement.  
e.g. The whole class can help the teacher make up the substitution table.
6. The teacher can rub out sections of the table and get the students to make different but correct replacements.
7. The teacher can read the substitution table and then gradually erase parts of it. The amount erased depends, of course, on the ability of the group.

Perhaps something here ought to be said about the place of dictation, its place in the writing curriculum and a few do's and don'ts concerning its use. Firstly, dictation should not be done too often in a test atmosphere—many children react against this restriction. It should rather be approached as part of the classroom routine, thus giving the students teacher immediate feedback and the students the chance to think about the language by correcting the piece themselves, preferably in groups or at the very least pairs (if the latter one should try to pair off the weaker and the stronger as this given the students a chance to learn by peer group correction, whose advantages we've already mentioned.) Secondly, the piece should be new i.e. one not already studied. Dictation should not necessarily be a test. Neither should it contain any unfamiliar vocabulary or structures or any spelling traps. It is also suitable for use with MULTI-ABILITY levels and is of course suitable for integration with the listening and reading components. At least in the beginning, perhaps not too much stress should be put on orthography. Furthermore one can use realistic forms, such as notices, messages or even dialogues as the form of the dictation. Consider the following passage :

*One morning David announced he was going to leave home and see the world./His father was very upset/and reminded him that the money he had saved would not last very long./ But David insisted,/telling his parents that they need not worry/ as he was sure he would be able to manage.*



**Level A (very good)**

This could be done as a straightforward dictation: and used as a basis for follow up activities e.g., writing a letter from David to his parents, telling them a little about his problems, but trying, at the same time not to worry them.

**Level B (good)**

This could be a partial dictation. Certain structured words and content words could be missing from their copies of the dictated passage. The students would have to put them in. Also the follow-up activity could be to write a straightforward letter, after discussion with teacher to give the students some ideas.

**Level C (not so good)**

In this case the students would have the complete passage in front of them, but there would be multiple-choice frames within the text and they would have to indicate the word or phrase they thought they had heard.

As a follow-up, the students are given a letter as a comprehension exercise. Also cloze exercises are good for a mixed ability class. Use the same passage for everyone. For Level A. leave out every 7th word; Level B. every tenth word. For Level C. use a modified cloze exercise and use multiple choice frames.

**Cohesion**

So far the most we have practised is writing (and thinking in units) or phrases “to the bank” “to the cinema” “to the store” or structures “He is fond of ice cream” “I’m fond of jam” etc. Most students, even at the university level, even though they may have mastered the sentence unit to a greater or lesser degree, still have problems developing a piece of their own—especially expository—writing.

The time has come, therefore, to perhaps discuss activities to practise sentence linking and sequencing, to promote COHESION. A basic kit of such cohesive devices, might consist of the following:

Co-ordinators	and, but, or, so
Conjunctions	although, when, until, so that (etc.)
Sequencers	then, after that, meanwhile, first, next, finally
Linkers	moreover, however, therefore, as a result, in fact, of course, on the other hand etc.

a) Give students linking sentence which they have to combine together with the linking device used.

e.g. It was raining. John went without a coat (although).

Not much thought at all is involved in this activity—except where to place the bracketed word: therefore it’s very mechanical. If the students are given a longer list of cohesive choices from which to choose, this is a little (especially is not all are suitable) more challenging.

b) Another approach is to give students already linked sentences but with blanks which they have to fill in.

e.g. Although it was ..... John went without a .....

This exercise gets the student to think about the meaning relationship.

Another advantage is that students get the chance to generate different sentences, which they can afterwards compare with each other

	was raining		a raincoat
e.g. Although it	was wet	John went without	an umbrella
	was a wet day		a coat
	was cold etc.		his hat etc.

One can expand this so students are producing sentences of 3 to 4 lines, -i.e. mini-text.

The students could be given a short text.

Using suitable link-words or phrases from a given list.

Make it in the form of a letter. This has the additional advantage of introducing students to such points as the form of the letter, different words of address and salutation.

Alternatively they could be asked to complete a text by inserting clauses and sentences from a scrambled list of items.

....., although ..... because .....

..... However ....., so .....

But ..... and ..... that .....

By the way, .....

### Devising Communication Tests

The purpose is to show students that writing can be a meaningful activity; this therefore motivates the student to express himself through writing.

a). Ask students to write instructions which other students (or the teacher) have to carry out.

e.g.

Take your exercise book and put it  
on top of the cupboard!  
Go and hold George's hand!

They could be asked to write a sequence of instructions to introduce or practice sequential devices. First ..... next ..... After that .....

First go to the front of the class.  
Then write something on the blackboard.  
After that clean the board.

These could be given to anyone or addressed to someone in the form of a note or short letter: Dear Anne, ..... Your friend,

These notes are useful for practising structures and items of vocabulary which have recently been taught.

## b). Take this one step further.

Students write a note to one another in the form of a short letter.

E.g.

Dear Mary,  
 I like your new dress,  
 Where did you buy it?  
 Yours,  
 Ann

This has to be answered by the student to whom it is addressed.

e.g.

Dear Anne,  
 Thank you for your note. I bought  
 the dress at "Central". By the way, I like  
 your new sweater. How much did it cost?  
 Yours,  
 Mary

This could then generate a flow of correspondence round the class.

## c). Students write each other letters involving some form of role play.

e.g. invitation to a party; with a request to bring certain things. Suitable structures could be written on the blackboard (or elicited from students if done already, orally)

Would you like to .....? Could you please bring .....  
 Again, these invitations have to be answered.

## d). Mock Dictation.

TEACHER-Boss. Dictates (at normal speed) a letter or something. Working in groups, they are asked to play the part of secretaries who are not very good at dictation. They write down in note form what has been said, trying to get down all the essentials. They then have to reconstruct the text, in groups. The groups should then read out their efforts and compare them.

The above are just a few examples of the many approaches to writing one might adopt for the ESL student, from the elementary to intermediate levels. In the early stages, as has been seen already, uniting writing tasks will parallel largely what has been done in the oral component of the course. At the intermediate level, dialogues may still continue to be used as a means of reinforcement (either by dialogue completion, or less guided approaches such as where the teacher outlines a conversation and the required responses and the student writes out the complete exchange). From that point on however the aim should be to get the student to

create longer pieces of English by the use of cohesive devices. (where the information gained during our interview is used to fill in a form and written up as a report). The teacher's approach should be as varied as possible and by the use of realistic exercises such as memo-writing or letter writing show that writing is a valid, meaningful and communicative exercise. Finally, as in oral communication, the degree of control should gradually be relaxed, so that by the intermediate stages, the student will have had at least some practice in free writing.

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*PASAA*  
*Vol. XIV, No. 2*  
*December 1984*

*Language Across the Curriculum*  
*Singapore, 22-26 April 1985*

The Southeast Asian Ministers of Education Organization (Seameo) Regional Language Center (RELC) will hold its 20th Regional Seminar, 22-26 April 1985 in Singapore. The theme of the seminar is "Language Across the Curriculum".

The Objectives of the seminar are :

- \* To identify current trends in integrating language curriculum with general curriculum in the Seameo region and elsewhere ;
- \* To consider how further integration can be effected, for example, ways in which the content and study skills required in other subjects can be incorporated into the language curriculum ;
- \* To Discuss how information from the language curricula might provide guidelines to teachers and developers of curriculum in general subjects, including those who write textbooks, set examinations and produce teaching aids of various kinds ;
- \* To explore the ways in which syllabuses for different languages, and the curriculum materials supporting them, can be coordinated and sequenced so that knowledge and skills acquired in one language can be effectively transferred in the process of acquiring or studying a second language.

Further Information and invitations to participate in the seminar can be obtained from the following address :

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