A Way To Teach Writing
Towards the Unification of Reading and Writing

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The writer reports how he used the reading passages to get the students to practise writing paragraphs and whether they made any progress in their writing ability through rhetorical transformation exercises.

1. Method

The subjects were senior students, twenty in number (three males and seventeen females), who selected two-unit optional English taught by the writer. The procedure was as follows. One unit was allotted for usage-oriented exercises: (1) to supply the students with rather simple reading passages1 (2) to resort not to translation into mother tongue but to polar questions and wh-questions for comprehension exercises. The questions used here were invented so that students could answer them if they found in the passage particular sentences corresponding lexically and syntactically with the interrogative sentences. The exercises of this kind were too artificial rather than authentic, which might make them feel compelled and bored. The aim of such pedagogical exercises was recurrently told them: to get them to practise manipulating the grammatical patterns of English < mechanics-oriented practice>.

The other unit was allotted for rhetorical transformation exercises < content-oriented practice >. In reading, the reader must not only trace the propositional development through sentences, but also read between the lines to really understand what is meant. Once he has made clear the main point of a passage, he can practise rhetorically transforming the original passage to tell its gist using his own vocabulary. The passages2 used as a basis for the development of the writing ability must be the ones which require the students to decide the value of the sentences. And questions must be asked in a way that gets them reveal their own interpretations of a passage. An example will be next shown. Reading material3:

"My son is getting smarter all the time," bragged the father. "His letters are so literary, they keep sending me to the dictionary."

"You are lucky," said the friend. "My daughter's letters are so easy enough to read, but they keep sending me to the bank."

The dialogue above was shown on June 2, 1980 to the subjects, who were told to tell what happened to both the fathers. So as to carry out rhetorical transformation, students were allowed, of course, to resort to grammatical transformation, conversion, paraphrasing. A well-written paragraph was chosen and the teacher corrected the errors found in it and showed the corrected paragraph to all the subjects at the following class meeting.

A student's paragraph with errors corrected will be next shown:

"As the son was very smart, his letters were so literary all the time. So his father had to use the (a) dictionary to read them, because they were too literary for him to read without (a) dictionary.

The father's friend had a daughter. Her letters were very easy enough to read. But her letters always said, 'I want money!' So her father had to go to the bank, and sent her money every time he got her letters."

In a manner described above, the subjects, who were not absent, wrote their own paragraphs thirteen times based on the reading passages given to them during their learning period Apr. 1980 to Jan. 1981. In order to discover how their writing skill had improved, the writer made a comparison between their first paragraphs written on May 19, 1980 and the tenth ones on Nov. 10, 1980.
2. Scoring

In order to determine improvement in the subject's writing skill, the writer used the following three measures.

Error Index: The rater corrected all the errors except the phrases or sentences impossible to understand in any way and the sentences copied from the original reading passage. Errors included: (1) the words which a subject had used but which the syntactic structure did not need, (2) the words which a subject had incorrectly used and which the rater rewrote in order to properly convey the meaning intended by the subject, (3) In the latter instance, if the number of the words used by a subject was greater than that of those rewritten by the rater, the former determined the number of errors, and vice versa. All the other words were error-free-words. The Error Index was determined as follows:

\[
\text{Error Index} = \frac{\text{error-free words} + \text{errors}}{\text{error-free words}}
\]

<Reading material> Restaurant customer: "If they weren't so crowded all the time, this place would do a lot more business." <Student's answer> There are always many people in restaurants, so that there are also many people who cannot enter restaurants. In this instance, the number of error-free words is 16; the number of errors, which are marked with a notch in the student's answer, is 4; accordingly the Error Index is 1.25.

Cohesion Ratio: All the sentences within a paragraph must be arranged in a proper sequence. Their interrelationships must be clearly indicated. One recognizes, for example, five transitions in a paragraph which comprises six sentences. In case three sentences of them are arranged coherently, the Cohesion Ratio is 0.6.

Clarity Evaluation: Here subjects' paragraphs were graded by clarity from the grammatical and semantic point of view. When a whole paragraph was clearly expressed, it was given a mark of 5. In case half a paragraph was expressed clearly, a mark of 3 <average> was given. An ambiguous paragraph was graded 1. A mark of 4 meant 'above average' and 2, 'below average'.

The three scoring methods explained above were applied on the subjects' first (May 19, '80) and tenth (Nov. 10, '80) paragraphs. The results obtained were as follows:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject</th>
<th>May 19</th>
<th>Nov. 10</th>
<th>May 19</th>
<th>Nov. 10</th>
<th>May 19</th>
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<th>Nov. 10</th>
<th>May 19</th>
<th>Nov. 10</th>
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<tr>
<td>Error-free words</td>
<td>140</td>
<td>74</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
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<td>75</td>
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<td>1.55</td>
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<td>*5</td>
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Note: The paragraph written by Subject No. 5 on Nov. 10 and reading material, used on the same day, are attached at the end.
The table shows the following facts: (1) The Error Index 1.00 shows there is no error found in a paragraph. The Error Index need to be below 1.20 seen from the clarity point of view. (2) The Cohesion Ratio 1.00 shows the sentences are coherently linked to form a rhetorical sequence. (3) Concerning the Clarity Evaluation, a paragraphs graded 4 proves to be comprehensible. Examining the paragraphs written on May 19, one finds none that satisfy, at least, two of the conditions explained above. The examination of Nov. 10 paragraphs reveals that seven subjects satisfy two of the same conditions, which means that 44% of the subjects have progressed in their paragraph writing skill.

3. Evaluation by the subjects

The writer got the subjects, eighteen in number, two being absent, to answer a set of questions on Jan. 12, 1981 in order to learn what were their attitudes towards such a way of teaching as described before.

The first question was asked to learn what they felt when they read a sample paragraph written by a subject and corrected by the teacher. Their answers were as follows:  to feel interested when a friend's interpretation of the passage is different (4 subjects)  to learn from a paragraph expressing the same idea in a different way (1)  to find a new point of view (1)  to feel surprised at a paragraph nicely expressed after careful consideration (2)  lots of paragraphs are written rather correctly seen from the grammatical point of view (1)  appropriate locutions are used (1)  sentences are rather short and expressed honestly (1)  the friends whose paragraphs were presented to the class seem to have a fairly good knowledge of English (1)  to be amazed that so many words were used to relate about only one thing (1)  to be filled with envy at a successfully-written paragraph (1)  to feel inferior to others (1)  to feel my knowledge of English is too poor (1)

The second question was asked to find what were the subjects' impressions of the way of teaching. The following results were obtained: 80% of the subjects answered 'Good'; 15%, 'Bad'; 5% made no comment. The answers given by the seven subjects whose writing skill had fairly improved were as follows:  (Subject No 2) I cannot express myself unless I understand the reading passage completely, so I feel improving myself in English. I wish the teacher would correct all the students' paragraphs.  (No 4) To me this approach was a new one. If Japanese had been resorted to in order to help us learn, I should not have felt it new and fascinating. It was good that Japanese was not used.  (No 5) I have nothing particular to comment on.  (No 6) I think this was a good approach, to which I, however, grew too accustomed to tell whether my English has improved. Yet I think it of much use to learn through thinking.  (No 7) It is difficult to write a paragraph. Writing practice, however, is of much use to each of us. I wish the teacher may allow us once in a while to learn through group discussion.  (No 8) Both reading and writing exercises were good. They seemed, however, to be beyond me.  (No 9) There seems to be no need to practise expressing ourselves in English, for entrance examinations do not require us to do it. It is, however, a necessary practice if we want to improve our English ability.

4. Conclusion

Through this practical teaching method, 44% of the whole subjects made a remarkable progress in their paragraph writing ability. The examination of their writings revealed the following points: (1) Mechanics-oriented ability improved. For example, fewer grammatical errors. (2) Content-oriented ability improved. For example, better paragraph coherence and better arrangements of ideas. (3) The teacher evaluates learner's growth in writing. Judgement finally depends on the teacher himself. This is why the teacher must be a good writer and critic.
Notes
1 「基礎問題英語長文の演習」早田恒男編
2 Reader's Digest (US edition), Mainichi Daily News
3 Mainichi Daily News May 13, 1980 issue

References

Reading material for writing practice:
May 19, 1980 ....... (omitted)
Nov. 10, 1980 ....... When the wealthy gentleman passed away, his entire family gathered for the reading of the will. "To my wife, I leave all my money and my house," the lawyer read. "To my sons, I leave the cars. And to my brother-in-law, who kept saying, 'health is better than wealth,' I leave my sunlump." (Q. Was the man's brother-in-law happy or not? Explain why)
Subject's paragraph as it was written:
May 19, 1980 ....... (omitted)
Nov. 10, 1980 ....... The wealthy gentleman's brother-in-law was miserly. He wanted to get the gentleman's wealth. So he behaved as if he would not want wealth, he always said, "health is better than wealth." Because he thought that if he would behave so, the gentleman give him his money and his house and so on, thinking his brother-in-law was good man. But the wealthy gentleman believed his brother-in-law's saying. He decided not to leave his money and house to his brother's wishes for him. Therefore he left the sunlump to him. It is needless to say that his brother-in-law was not happy.