

# Controlled Writing

**Bryson McAdam**

(This is a summary of a short talk given at a SELTA meeting on 22nd April)

A teacher of mathematics would not dream of setting a Form I class a set of problems consisting of quadratic

equations or involving the use of graphs; he will wait until they are ready for this, perhaps at Form 5 level. Why then does an English teacher set Form 1 classes precisely the same type of work in Form 1 that another teacher will be expecting them to do in Form 5, namely,

“Write an essay (or composition) on ..... (Calling an essay of an imaginative nature a composition does not make the actual task any easier for a pupil). Yet the composition or essay writing as practised in many schools all over the country in the lower forms of secondary schools is exactly like this. “Write an essay on .....” or “Write a composition on .....” or perhaps just a title is given in the majority of cases. The English courses in use in this country are based on a linguistic and pedagogical system of grading, or at least they purport to be, so why is this careful grading thrown out of the window when it comes to writing?

An examination of course books in use will show that while writers often pay great attention to careful grading of structures etc, they usually pay scant attention to careful grading of written work. If you extract the parts concerned with written work in the Teacher’s Handbooks Parts One, Two and Three which are supposed to be used by all teachers in Forms 1, 2 and 3 in Malaysia, I do not think you will find much evidence of a carefully planned and graded course in writing. This is not to deny the utility of these handbooks in other areas, though they may be criticised on the grounds that they contain too much material (as do the Primary handbooks), but to emphasise the fact that writing is somehow expected to look after itself.

I am afraid I have to disagree with those who think that a piece of writing in a foreign language by pupils must contain original ideas. Many people who speak and write English fluently haven’t had an original idea in their lives. What have ideas got to do with a command of English? The pupil who has to set pen to paper is faced with two tasks – what to say and how to say it. As EFL teachers, should we really be concerned with what he has to say? Are we not more concerned with how he says it? If we want pupils’ ideas, let us get them in the Bahasa Malaysia lessons when pupils are not so concerned about how to say it because they have a good command of the language. Cambridge used to award marks for original ideas in the English language paper; perhaps they still do, but I think they have been mistaken in this. Let us provide pupils with the situation, with the ideas and let us see how they can communicate these ideas to us.

When a pupil in the early stages of learning English is given a composition topic to write on, he generally works out the various ideas in his head in his own language and then attempts to translate these ideas into English. The result is often appalling. Not only is translation a very difficult exercise, to be practised only by the highly skilled, but the pupil’s command of English is generally not good enough to put precisely what he wants to say down on paper. Yet in classroom after classroom, all

over the country, pupils are writing composition in this way. It is not surprising that little progress is noted over the years. Is this the way to *teach* composition writing? Do teachers actually teach it or do they merely point out errors and give a few vague general hints and leave the pupils to get on with it?

When the pupil who has written a free composition gets it back, he is totally discouraged by the masses of underlinings and corrections made by the teacher. He tries harder the next time, but still his composition comes back covered in red ink. After a while, he becomes discouraged and apathetic. His teacher is not of much help to him – every composition is different and each pupil writes it in a different way so the teacher’s general advice is not of much use. It is, of course, not only the pupil who gets discouraged but also the teacher. His pupils do not seem to make any progress and his bits of advice do not seem to have made any impact. There are so many errors – where he to begin?

There is also the possibility that the pupil, by writing down what he has worked out in his head, is fixing the errors he has made even more firmly. The teacher cannot correct every error he has made and the pupil may assume that anything the teacher hasn’t corrected is all right and may be used again. Should the teacher correct all the errors by writing in the corrections? Should he merely indicate the errors by underlining and use symbols to point out the type of error committed? Should he select just the major errors and pay attention only to them? Whatever method he uses, he has a major marking job on his hands and no assurance whatsoever that all the time and hard work he has put into marking will have any effect at all.

What teachers are asking their pupils to do when they set written work of this nature is to accomplish a very difficult task indeed. They are asking them to express their thoughts in a language over which they have not yet acquired sufficient control to express those thoughts. They are asking them not only to supply the original but also the translation. In “Language Learning”, XII, 3, Anita Pincas puts her finger on the problem when she says “People find it difficult to accept the fact that ..... not until (the patterns) have been learned can originality occur”.

In a Bahasa Malaysia medium situation, no “free” written composition in the foreign language should be attempted at all in the primary school and written work in the secondary school should follow a systematic programme of gradually diminishing control. As the pupils progress in their English, so the assistance

given should be gradually withdrawn. In the early stages, the work given should be so carefully controlled that pupils find it almost impossible to make an error. In oral work, teachers attempt to habituate pupils to correct forms of expression and we should attempt the same in written work, while still giving pupils a degree of choice in choosing equally correct alternatives.

Under the English medium system, when pupils were exposed to massive doses of English, we as teachers were able to get away with a fairly unsystematic approach to writing. Most of our pupils just learned to write reasonably correctly more or less on their own, perhaps because of their total exposure to English, their wide reading and their high motivation. In the secondary schools at the moment, though the standard of English is by no means anywhere near as high as it was before, the teaching of Science and Maths through the medium of English in what a ill called English medium streams has helped to slow down the dramatic decline. Now that this is on the way out too (Form I is already totally Bahasa Malaysia medium), motivation to learn English is almost zero and few schools have adopted a wide, comprehensive and appropriate reading scheme (the existing library books being almost totally unsuitable), a completely new approach to the teaching of composition is absolutely essential.

There are a number of writing courses on the market which have been devised for just this situation and teachers. Among the better known as "Ananse Tales" by Dykstra, Port and Port (pub. Teachers College Press, Columbia University, New York, 1966), "Guided Paragraph Writing" by Jupp and Milne (Heinemann, 1972), "Guided Course in English Composition" also by Jupp and Milne, with a teacher's handbook (Heinemann, 1968) and "Guided Composition Exercises" by Spencer (Longman, 1972). There is also a small booklet entitled "Guided Composition in English Language Teaching" by Alexander (Longman, 1971) which is well worth reading. I would in fact suggest that teachers should have their own copies of all these books because they will provide many useful ideas for written work and all of them emphasise the importance of careful grading in a composition course, supplying the ideas for the pupil and attempting to reduce as far as possible the production of errors by the pupil.

If any teachers are interested in having a look at a fully graded and comprehensive scheme for written work which has been found successful in other countries, I would be pleased to send them a copy if they write in to me at Box 539, Kuala Lumpur.

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