

# Writing Training: Written Output, Visual- Auditory Input, and Noticing

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## Reference Data:

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In this paper I introduce an activity that helps elementary level students compose their own sentences in English. Elementary level students normally have difficulty composing their own ideas in English without any models. This activity is designed to provide scaffolding so that the learners can compose their own ideas and sentences with the support of a model. Based on classroom observations, this step-by-step method for teaching sentence writing to a small group of elementary level students is detailed. The student outcomes for the activity suggest that this method helps learners start writing meaningful sentences and become more autonomous as learners through a student-centered teaching style.

本稿では、初級レベルの英語学習者が、意図する内容を伝える英語の文章を書くようになることを目指した作文練習方法を紹介する。意図する内容を手本なしに組み立てることは、初級学習者にとって困難がつきまとうが、紹介するメソッドは手本を足がかりとして与える事で学習者が英語によって意図する文章を作り出しやすくしている。初級レベルのsmallグループにこの方法をどのように適応するのかを、筆者の経験に基づき詳しく解説している。また、参加者の練習の成果をみると、学習者中心のこの方法が学習者として自律するのに役立つことが示唆される。

**I**N MY experience, elementary level learners tend to hesitate more when engaging in the practice of productive skills, such as writing and speaking, than with receptive skills such as reading and listening. When beginning learners try to engage in a productive activity like writing, they face two problems. First, traditional writing instruction, such as free-writing practice, tends to leave the topic open, and students have to decide what to write. When the teacher tries to prompt students to write their own sentences, one of the difficulties the students frequently face is that they cannot come up with their own ideas to write about. They may spend almost half the time allocated to writing practice just thinking about what they should write. When the ideas finally come, little time is left for them to compose sentences.

After students decide what they are going to write, the next challenge is to produce sentences that convey their intended meanings. Producing their own sentences is very challenging for novice writers, partly because they have no models, but also because they do not have the necessary vocabulary or grammatical knowledge to explain what they want to say. Then the teacher collects their compositions, checks them over, and returns them to the students, perhaps in a few days. By that time, however, the writers have already lost touch with or perhaps even forgotten what they wrote and have lost interest in going over the corrections the teacher



has made. As a result, the same mistakes appear repeatedly, left unnoticed by the students. For the teacher, working with students on writing skills like this can be discouraging. Checking individual students' compositions requires a great deal of time and energy, and the fact that the checked compositions frequently end up not being reviewed by the original writers is not very rewarding.

In this paper I present a method of overcoming these difficulties by adopting four steps. Students (a) listen to and read a two-page short story, (b) illustrate the story in a set of three drawings, (c) explain the pictures in their own words, and (d) self-check their writing referring back to the original text in order to notice the gap between what they want to say and what they have actually said. Students draw pictures in the first session and the drawings are then used for that session and the other three sessions as well. Based on observations of a course in which I used these techniques, this paper provides some data from the classroom that show the kinds of mistakes which novice writers can or cannot easily notice. I also discuss how this approach lowers the obstacles these novice writers face, along with both advantages and limitations of the approach.

### Output and Input Enhancement

This approach is based on the output hypothesis. As Swain (1985) observed, producing comprehensible output requires learners to take a more active role, which leads them to pay more attention to the subsequent input. There are three generally agreed-upon roles that comprehensible output may play (Swain, 1995). First, it can lead a learner to *notice* the gap between what they want to say and what they actually can say. Second, comprehensible output involves hypothesis forming and testing. Third, comprehensible output can lead learners to think about language. The role of noticing in acquiring formal elements of a second language is proposed by Schmidt and Fro-

ta (1986), who argued that learners need to notice a difference between their interlanguage and the new form that appears in native speaker speech, and only when this difference is noticed by the learners can the gap lead to acquisition. With regard to the function of noticing, Izumi (2002) provided empirical data that suggested that learners' written output prior to a reading task functioned as a consciousness-raising tool that led to language acquisition. Given these findings, it can be hypothesized that the benefit that novice writers receive by producing written output prior to being exposed to visual and auditory input is that they can notice the mismatch between their interlanguage forms and the target language input, which can then lead to second language acquisition.

### Research Questions

In order to address the difficulties elementary level students face in their initial stage of practicing writing, I decided to implement a self-developed method based on Izumi's study (2002). This was a class of beginners who were struggling with written output. One of the participants in particular had failed to write any meaningful sentences at all since she started taking my lessons. I hoped that this method would at least meet her need for lowering the obstacles in writing practice. Also I hoped that students would be able to do this writing practice with less assistance from the teacher than necessary in traditional writing instruction.

To determine the effectiveness of this approach, three research questions were posed:

1. Does this method make it easier for elementary level students to start producing written output without much thinking time prior to a writing task and spend more time on writing practice itself, in which they describe things in their own words?

2. Does this method make it easier for elementary level students to notice the gap between what they want to write and what they actually can write, which in turn leads to self-correcting their mistakes both in English form and content?
3. Does this method make it easier for elementary level students to start writing their own sentences?

## Classroom Context and Method

### Participants

The participants were a group of three elementary level learners at a private English school: two 1st-year junior high school students (students A and B) and one elementary school 6th-grader (student C). Student A had studied English for about 8 months, B for about 14 months, and C for about 2 years. I had observed that student A took a very long time to come up with what she was going to write about. She often spent more than half the allocated time for a writing task just thinking about what she was going to write and tended to make numerous grammatical and spelling mistakes. Student B had never started writing English sentences and in most cases submitted a blank sheet of paper at the end of the lesson. She tried producing some sentences but eventually ended up erasing what she had written. Student C appeared to like thinking and writing and had little or no difficulty explaining her ideas in writing. At the same time, C described her frustration at being unable to use the appropriate language form to convey her intended meaning.

### Procedure

The English class met twice a week for 2 hours each time. The procedure consisted of a set of four steps of visual-auditory input, a drawing activity, written output, and noticing. The

drawing activity was conducted only during the first session. The other three steps were repeated in the second and third sessions, using the pictures drawn in the first session. In the fourth session students simply explained the three pictures without listening to, reading, or self-checking them. The first 30 minutes of each lesson session were used for the writing activities.

### Visual-Auditory Input and Picture-Drawing Activity

Students listened to and read a two-page short story (Howe, Border, & Hopkins, 1984). In the first session this was followed by each student drawing a set of three pictures that illustrated their understanding of the content of the story. The pictures indicated how much they had understood the content of the story. When students appeared not to understand the story completely, extra assistance was provided. Then as a group they checked the meaning of difficult sentences in cooperation with each other. The same story and the same set of three pictures were used for all four sessions.

### Written Output

In session one, after listening to and reading the story and then drawing three pictures to describe the whole story, students explained the first picture in written form without referring back to the text. The students were asked to explain the story in their own words without copying the sentences of the original. In the second session, students explained both the first and second pictures they had drawn in the first session. In the third session they explained all three pictures. In the fourth session they explained the three pictures without listening to or reading the original text.

## Noticing

In the first session, in order to self-check their compositions, students compared their own description of the first third of the story with the model of the first third of the original text. The compositions were then collected to be rechecked, and returned within the same lesson session or before the next session started. In order for the compositions to be returned by the end of the same session, I rechecked them while the students were working on reading material during the same session.

These three steps of visual-auditory input, written output, and noticing were repeated in each of the first three lesson sessions. In the second session, students again listened to and read the whole two-page story and then described the first and the second pictures. The self-checking process followed. Then the teacher rechecked the newly written sections and returned them. In the third session, the same basic procedure was repeated except that students described the third picture as well as the first and second pictures. In a final fourth session, students produced compositions about the whole story while only looking at the three pictures.

## Observations

Noticing is defined here as acknowledging the differences between what students wanted to write and what they were actually able to write. I observed that some differences were easily noticed and others not. Verb tenses were easily noticed and self-corrected, while spelling mistakes and unknown grammar points were frequently overlooked. Even after being corrected by the teacher, the same spelling mistakes kept appearing in later writing. Also grammatical mistakes related to grammar points not fully understood by the students kept appearing in later writing as well. Taking student A as an example, the same

mistakes of “want buy” instead of “wanted to buy” appeared two times in the first and the third sessions.

Several advantages were observed in the course of applying this approach. First, the approach shortened students’ thinking time before starting to write. In the first session Students A and B started writing their own sentences after a few minutes of thinking time and spent the rest of the allocated time working to write sentences. Also, after this approach was adopted, these elementary-level students started writing their own sentences either for the first time or more smoothly than before. Student B, who had never actually written her own sentences, successfully started doing so. She wrote three sentences in the first session, seven in the second, and eight in the third. Student A wrote six sentences in the first session, eight in the second, and 13 in the third. Student C wrote six sentences in the first session, 15 in the second, and 25 in the third. In the fourth session when they were asked to reproduce the whole story without referring back to the text, students started working to describe the story without showing much hesitation. Furthermore, the picture-drawing activity helped students become aware of parts of the story that were difficult for them to understand. Students asked if they could use their dictionaries to check the meaning of the unknown words when I observed that their first drawings did not give a full illustration of the content of the story.

On the other hand, the disadvantage of the approach was that the repeated process of reading, listening, and writing made students memorize exactly the same sentences as the model, which discouraged Students A and B from creating their own sentences. However, Student C retold the story in her own words. The sentences she produced were not exact copies of the model. For example, she changed direct narration to indirect narration.

## Discussion

The observations summarized above and the resulting effects on students' writing suggest that this approach successfully provided the students with scaffolding that lowered the barrier that these elementary level students faced. Prior to introducing this method, some students took more time thinking than writing. During the activity, since the writing content was taken from the story, no time was wasted before students started writing. The students started producing sentences with little or no hesitation and they wrote more sentences within the allocated time for writing practice. The drawing activity was also a valuable tool for both teacher and students. Students' drawings provided insights into how much the students understood the content of the story. Their drawings revealed the need to work on unknown vocabulary and grammar points. This activity also promoted students' awareness of their understanding of the content of the story as well.

The limitation of this approach is that the repetitive process of receiving the same input and producing nearly the same output encouraged the students to remember the model. This could have caused students to lose the incentive to compose their own sentences, in spite of the fact that they were encouraged to describe the story in their own words. At the same time, this limitation can be an advantage for those elementary level students who have accumulated few useful English phrases that they can use productively. This method provides them with a good opportunity to learn new expressions that can be used when they write.

The teacher should be careful not to leave students' mistakes uncorrected. If mistakes are overlooked in the checking processes, either by the students themselves or by the teacher, the same mistakes are likely to be reproduced in the later writing and even reinforced through repetitive use. Also, the teacher can

gain insight into the students' grammatical weaknesses from the mistakes that a student repeatedly makes. With regard to grammatical mistakes, even when students notice the mismatch between what they wanted to write and what they actually wrote, without reaching a certain level of understanding of the grammar points, the mistakes are unlikely to be corrected.

Among the mismatches between what students want to write and what they actually can write, some mismatches are easily noticed and some are not easily noticed in the self-checking process. The self-checking process helps students become more independent as learners; however, rechecking by the teacher is still necessary for students to improve their writing.

Most importantly, this method helps students realize that writing English sentences does not have to be difficult and is within their reach. After practicing this method using three different stories, when asked to write about their favorite belongings with no model text, they first drew a picture of the item and started describing it in English with no hesitation.

## Conclusion

This approach involves four steps. A two-page short story is first presented to elementary learners for listening and reading. In this way, the teacher provides the subject matter to write about, so students are ready to compose their own sentences with no time wasted. The input is followed by a picture-drawing activity, which provides both the teacher and the student with insight into how much students have understood the story, and helps them reach a clearer understanding of the subject matter. By illustrating the story with pictures, students gain a clear idea of what to write about, and this allows them to spend more time on the language forms through which their intended messages can be conveyed. Then, as a fourth step, students compare their composition with the text as a model.

By alternating between listening and reading and writing, this method helped elementary learners notice the gap between what they wanted to write and what they actually were able to write, and began to close that gap. However, this repetitive process played both negative and positive roles in the development of students' writing skills. Students tended to memorize the sentences of the model, which discouraged them from composing their own sentences. On the other hand, for those who did not have enough vocabulary, the process provided an opportunity to acquire new phrases and vocabulary that they could then use to convey their intended meanings.

This approach could adopt a further intermediary step, which would be a review of previously corrected mistakes. Since it was frequently observed that the same mistakes repeatedly appeared in the same student's writing, the corrected mistakes may need to be more carefully attended to. This approach could also be applied with advanced level students with longer and more difficult texts. Since advanced students as well need their own level of vocabulary and expressions, this approach would help to acquire useful expressions to be used in the writing at their level.

## Bio Data

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