



TEACHING WRITTEN COMPOSITION TO AN ADVANCED LEVEL IN AN L2 CONTEXT: SOME PRACTICAL PRERQUISITES

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RESUME

Cet article se propose de traiter du problème de l'enseignement de la rédaction dans le processus d'apprentissage d'une langue étrangère. A cet effet, en s'appuyant sur le type de compétences liées à la rédaction que l'individu est censé acquérir dans le contexte du natif, l'article propose, sur la base d'une situation particulière, une approche systématique qui vise à préparer les apprenants à maîtriser ces compétences à un niveau avancé.

Mots clés: *Rédaction ; Syntaxe ; Rhétorique ; Compétence rédactionnelle communicative ; Dissertation ; Résumé ; Fonction du langage.*

ABSTRACT

This article takes advanced written composition as its main focus. In this respect it presents a brief outline of the types of advanced written skills in a L1 context. Then, an attempt is made to extrapolate from these considerations to an L2 context, which entails setting a particular scene and suggesting and exemplifying in detail a systematic approach meant to pave the learners' way towards a mastery of these skills.

Key words: *Written Composition; Syntax; Rhetoric; Communicative Written Competence; Essay; Summary; Language Function.*

INTRODUCTION

Developing command of the written language in addition to that of speech may be regarded as one of the basic goals which the language learner has to pursue. Therefore, this makes the teaching of writing one of the language teacher's tasks, inasmuch as learners have to sit for written exams all along their curriculum. As Harmer (1) points out,

there are many reasons for getting students to write, both in and outside the class. Firstly, writing gives them more 'thinking time' than they get when they attempt spontaneous conversation. This allows then more opportunity for language processing – that is thinking about the language – whether they are involved in study or activation.

However, as writing ability is not proportional to and does not essentially depend on the mastery of the spoken language and knowledge of the grammatical structures, various problems will plague both the native and the non-native speakers' efforts to express themselves in writing competently.

This article which seeks to tackle the teaching of advanced written composition will commence with an outline of the types of advanced written skills which may be thought of in the context of the native speaker. Then, in the light of a particular learning context that is familiar to me, some types of material and techniques whose main purpose is to pave the learners' way to a mastery of advanced written skills are suggested.

I.- ADVANCED WRITTEN SKILLS AND THE NATIVE SPEAKER

Written composition may be viewed as a thinking process which suggests a creative generating of sentences on the one hand, and the organization of these sentences into coherent pieces of discourse on the other. It also comprises two aspects which, although not depending on each other, are all the same

equally essential in the process. These are syntax and rhetoric. In this connection, Zamel states: *syntax and rhetoric are complementary yet separate aspects of the writing process, neither one being responsible for improvement in the other* (2).

In classical times, these two components of writing were referred to as 'invention', that is *the process whereby subject-matter is discovered*, 'arrangement' or *the ways in which material can be effectively organized in discourse*, and 'style' finally, that is *efficient manner of discourse*, in other words, the ability to use acceptable syntax in context in writing (3)

On the strength of the above considerations, it may be assumed that advanced written composition will exhibit these different aspects in the context of the native speaker or an L1 situation. As Raines points out, *the native speaker learning how to compose must learn how to form, organize, and express ideas* (4). In other words, s/he must develop the ability to write essays, reports, summaries, letters, criticisms or comments generally speaking. Although these skills may be said to be better mastered by the native speaker, it is my belief that they may nonetheless be instilled in the non-native speaker's writing competence through adequate coaching to some extent. In the forthcoming section, possible ways of dealing with this issue in the context of a non-native speaker or an L2 situation are suggested.

II.- THE TARGET LANGUAGE LEARNING CONTEXT

The belief just mentioned may be said to imply that, basically, the language learner must aim at the same goals, that is, s/he needs develop the ability to express herself/himself coherently and arrive at a relatively unconscious fluency in writing. In this respect, Raines remarks that *s/he must develop communicative writing competence in the new language and learn the rhetorical structure as well* (5), not to mention an awareness of cultural constraints on a coherent organization

and expression of ideas. Before I can deal with ways in which these different aspects can be taught, it is fitting to shed some light on the particular L2 context I am concerned with.

I shall assume that the advanced level in question involves Congolese undergraduate students who have chosen English as their main subject and have registered in the Department of Modern Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences (Marien Ngouabi University). In addition, in order for them to meet the expected advanced written performance, formal instruction will have to be provided to them starting from the first form of High secondary school or lycée¹⁴.

Moreover, types of material and technique will be introduced according to each form which in turn will be divided into three parts. These parts correspond to the three terms which a school consists of. Basically, as far as the first form is concerned, emphasis will be laid on the syntactic aspect whereas the second and third forms will involve a combination of both syntax and rhetoric. Let us concentrate on the first form to begin with.

III.- TYPES OF MATERIAL AND TECHNIQUE

This section concentrates on the type of material and technique which a teacher can use as prerequisites which are meant to equip secondary school learners with sound written skills before they enrol at the university.

To begin with, the teacher may start with the following activity: S/he introduces himself/herself to the class briefly. Then S/he asks each learner to do the same. Afterwards, s/he expands her introduction with more details regarding address, education, interests, hobbies and the like. This time s/he will require a written performance from this class. This usually throws considerable light on their basic weaknesses and enables s/he to plan grammar lessons accordingly. In the light of these weaknesses which may be thought of in terms of tense confusion, agreement, word-order, etc, written exercises at this level must aim at enabling the pupils to write simple sentences, join them in meaning paragraphs, and master the basic word-order in English. It should be emphasized here that these exercises should be geared to grammar lessons. One may begin with word-order. For example, having taught the simple present tense, the teacher chooses a relatively short passage which exemplifies its use. S/he reads it to the class and comprehension questions which are answered orally. Then, the following type of written exercises may be given, using the words from the passage (it is understood that the pupils do not have the passage in front of them).

- 1) Who is your friend?
 - 2) Where does he live?
 - 3) What do you both often do?
- (After Alexander) (6)

In addition, the pupils may simply be given groups of words and asked to make sentences according to a given pattern. For example:

¹⁴) After primary education, Congolese pupils go to the low secondary school where they are expected to spend four years. Upon passing the general Certificate of low Secondary Education, they move on the High Secondary School or Lycée which consists of three forms. Then, having obtained the General Certificate of Secondary Education or Baccalauréat, they may enrol in the Department of their choice at the university

(C) Look at this:

Paul – read – book - Paul is reading a book
Do these in the same way:

- 1) George and Alice – do – homework
- 2) Daddy – read – newspaper
- 3) I – play – guitar

The main purpose of this kind of exercise is to provide a kind of starting point

for original composition. It may be said to be challenging in that the pupils have not only to supply the correct form of the verb, but also to insert in the appropriate function words such as articles, possessives and so on.

An alternative to this exercise may be to provide tables such as the following:

(D) Make as many sentences as you can from the following table:

| | | | | | |
|---------------|-----|---------|------|-----|------------|
| The teacher | Is | Going | On | The | Blackboard |
| The pupils | Are | Playing | A to | | Football |
| Kofi | | Reading | | | Book |
| Paul and Jane | | writing | | | market |

Furthermore, having taught tenses like the simple present, the simple past, the following activities may be practiced:

(E) Use the simple past in the following passage:

Everyday, Manon wakes up at six o'clock in the morning. First she

makes the bed and sweeps the house. Then she has a bath and makes breakfast.

(F) Use the present tense in the following sentences:

- 1) Paul was absent yesterday
- 2) She was cooking at that moment

It may realized that this exercise demands more thinking on the part of the pupils the more so as they have to pay close attention to the time phrases which have to be change as one moves from one tense to another.

So far, the exercises have focused on simple sentences. The pupils may also be

taught to write complex sentences at this stage by means of exercises of this kind:

(G) Complete the following sentences. Use one the words in brackets. Then write similar sentences of your own.

Example: (and, both) Paul and his sister were absent yesterday

Both Paul and his sister were absent yesterday

- 1) (and, again) the man knocked at the door. He waited
- 2) (but, so) His father bought a car last month. He is not satisfied with it

Throughout the second term, the same type of exercises should be practised. However, the passages will become progressively longer and more complex. At this stage, more emphasis must be laid upon enabling the pupils to start writing complex sentences and joining them into paragraphs. The procedure used with regards to simple sentences during the first term may apply here. To begin with, exercise (B) above may be

modified in the following way, particularly with regards to the questions:

(H) Text:

Our long vacations last three months. During the last week of the holidays we get ready for school. We buy pencils, pens, paper, new books and school uniforms. On the first day of school, we see all of our old friends again and we tell them about the holidays.

Questions:

- 1) How long do our long vacations last?
- 2) Why do we buy pencils, pens, paper for? (in order)
- 3) Whom do we see on the first day? What do we tell them? (and)

The words in brackets here are meant to help the pupils to form complex sentences. Besides following a grammar lesson on

relatives, the following exercise may be suggested:

Paul has a cat. It likes playing with mice.

(I) Join the following pairs of sentences using a relative:

Exemple:

Paul has a cat which likes playing with mice

Do these in the same way:

- 1) He eats only cassava the cassava bread. His mother makes
- 2) I want to find somebody. He can lend me some money
- 3) The chair was broken. It has been repaired

This exercise may be made more challenging in the following way:

Join the sentences on the left with the appropriate ones on the right using a relative (after Jordan) (7):

| | |
|-----------------------------------|---|
| 1. A square is a geometric figure | a) he has composed a lot of songs |
| 2. A doctor is a person | b) it is situated between RDC on the east and Gabon on the west |
| 3. Congo is a country which lies | c) it has four equal sides and four right angles |
| 4. Youlou Mabiala is an artist | he gives medical treatment |
| | d) they study |

The pupils may also be taught to join sentences into a paragraph by means of the following procedures:

(J)

To begin with, the teacher may tell a short story and asks a few questions to check comprehension. Then s/he writes its sentences down on the board in disorder. The pupils think it over for a while and attempt to reconstruct the whole story.

As soon as they are well familiar with the exercise, groups of about five may be formed and given some sentences to be memorized by each member. Each group then try to find out who among them has the first sentence, the second one and so on. Afterwards, the group come in front of the group when they have reached an agreement, and produce the sentences one after the other. A general discussion meant to decide whether the passage has been well reconstructed will ensue. Finally, the teacher gives some similar written individual exercises to be done in class first, then as homework.

The third term should constitute an opportunity to revise the exercises which were introduced during the first two terms. However, they must be made more complex

and challenging. An exercise based on reported speech may run as follows:

(K)

Write down as many sentences as you can from the following table:

| | | | | | | |
|-----------------------------------|---------------|--|----|--------------|-------------|----------------------------------|
| Father I The teacher Bob | Told Asked | Me You We The pupils Mary Her brother | To | Open shut | The Door | |
| | | | | Go write | On To | The |
| | | | | Look at | her | New dress Exercise book |

This exercise may be followed by an oral one. For example, the teacher has the pupils make a sentence, and asks another one to report it. Afterwards, a written one may be required.

For example:

(L)

Report what each character says in this dialogue:

Example:

Paul: 'I'm very hungry', mum.

Reported speech: Paul told his mother that he was very hungry.

Do these in the same way:

A: 'Can you lend me an envelope please?

B: 'I'm sorry I haven't got any. May be George has some.'

A: 'I'll ask him. Thanks a lot.'

Conversely, the pupils may be asked to write a dialogue out of a passage. For example:

(M)

I asked Paul if he could lend me his dictionary, but he told me it had been stolen. I asked him when he realized that it was missing. He said he could not remember.

The dialogue may start as follows.

A: 'Can you lend me your dictionary, please?'

B: 'I'm sorry, it has been stolen.'

Before the pupils can do it on their own, it may be useful for the class to work on it orally. The teacher should also draw the pupils' attention on reporting verbs such as 'tell, ask' which they have to employ while writing the dialogue.

Furthermore, having clarified the distinctions in the meaning of connectives, some written work may follow. For example:

A; however B (B is different from A)
 A; therefore B (B is because of A)
 A; consequently B (B is the result of A)

A; otherwise B (B will happen if A does not)

Etc (after Steed) (8)

(N) Join the following sentences using the appropriate connective:

Example:

Paul never learnt his lessons. He failed his exams (a)- however; b)- consequently; c)- otherwise)

Paul never learnt his lessons. Consequently, he failed his exams.

Do these in the same way:

- 1) You must learn your lessons. You may fail your exam (a)- however; b)- therefore; c)-otherwise).
- 2) Paul's sister was ill. She could not come to school yesterday (a)- therefore; b)- however; c)- as soon as).

In addition, it may worth introducing connectives according to the given relationships which they signal. For example, the following exercise may derive from connectives signalling cause and effect relationships:

(O) *Join the parts of sentences on the left with the appropriate ones on the right.*

| | |
|--|---------------------------------------|
| 1. He succeeded his exam because | a) he knows how to use them |
| 2. there are some eggs in this bag therefore | b) he worked hard |
| 3. John studied the connectives | c) it must be carried with great care |

The section above centred on the first form. Now I turn to the second one. On the whole emphasis should be laid upon what Harmer refers to as writing-for-writing, that is writing which *is directed at developing the students' skills as writers. In other words, the main purpose for activities of this type is that students should become better at writing, whatever kind of writing that might be* (9). In other words, the main focus here is not the language itself; rather, the emphasis is on the writing of such things as summaries, reports, different kinds of letters, emails, etc. This applies equally to the third form.

In order to establish a useful link between both forms, the first term in the latter should be devoted to revising the type of exercises introduced in the former. However, the exercises should be made more challenging. For example, having practiced exercises (D) and (E) above, the pupils may be given a sentence containing a connective and asked to write down a second one which makes sense (After Ortblad) (10)

(P)

Example: he caught a fish, therefore_____

he caught a fish, therefore we knew there were fish in the river

Do these in the same way:

- 1) George has never been absent; however_____
- 2) His father spent the night drinking palm-wine; therefore_____

The main goal of this exercise is to enable the pupils to develop what may be regarded as the intuitive skill or ability to predict. This also gives them the opportunity to generate sentences of their own within given situations. Therefore, exercise (B) may be expanded as follows:

(Q)

The teacher selects a passage, and has the pupils write whether some statements about it are true or false. In order to prevent them from making wild guesses, they are required to justify their answers.

At this stage, exercises may concentrate on specific language functions. For example, the pupils may be taught how to express controversy, and particularly subjective arguments. A chart containing the sort of language required for this purpose may be provided to begin with; For example:

It is a fact that.....
It is undeniable that.....
I would argue that

There can be no doubt that.....

Then a given topic may be chosen and some opinions which the pupils have to turn into subjective arguments are proposed. For example/

- a) society could not exist without marriage
- b) marriage is unnecessary
- c) marriage restricts freedom
- d) marriage keeps the couple together
- e) marriage is a garden of love and peace

(After Arnold and Harmer) (11)

(R)

Moreover, the pupils may also be trained to compose paragraphs through questions which deal with, say, an aspect of their everyday life. For example, from the topic, 'what do you usually do every Sunday morning', the following questions may be asked:

- a) What time do you usually get up on Sundays?
- b) What is the first thing you usually do as soon as you get up?
- c) Do you usually go to church?

By means of their answers, then, the pupils are able to write a fairly coherent passage. This exercise can also be practised throughout the following two terms.

In the course of the second and third terms, the pupils must be given the opportunity to apply what they have learnt about word-order, sentence construction to writing essays and summaries. First of all, drafting will have to be introduced at the beginning of the second term.

(S)

To begin with, a given topic is chosen (a journey by train for example). The teacher discusses it with the class, writing down the relevant key expressions and lexical items on the board. Afterwards, the class attempt to make a first draft in groups at home; the following day, some drafts are read out to the class who are expected to suggest some improvement if necessary. This is carried out until a final and satisfactory draft emerges; later on, the pupils may start to work individually.

(T)

Furthermore, they may be taught how to summarize a passage at this stage. Prior to the actual teaching of summary, the pupils should be trained to look at the key ideas in a passage, and to overlook details. From a passage, they may be asked to point to what they think constitute the main ideas. This could be done orally first and as often as possible. This procedure, as Bright and McGregor observe, *forces the pupil to break away from a meticulous and detailed reading of the passage before he starts to think. He sees the wood before the trees get in his light* (12). An alternative may be to find a title and attempt to expand it up to a certain limit fixed beforehand.

As far as the third form is concerned, the same kind of exercises may be practised. Yet, the pupils should be taught and encourage

to write essays on a variety of topics. The following procedure may be used:

(U)

From a topic such as, 'Do you think that the dowry should play an important role in marriage?', the following structure may be suggested:

Paragraph 1: (Introduction)

- broad comment about the topic
- evidence provided

For example, the pupils may start by stating the existence of the dowry in marriage throughout their country; then they may say briefly what it consists of, with examples).

Paragraph 2:

- Argument in favour (the symbolic aspect of the dowry, the argument usually put forward by male parents that because of what they have had to do to bring up their daughter, they must be 'thanked' for it, as it were).
- Argument against (the excesses of certain parents who in way may be said to be 'selling' their daughters).

Paragraph 3: Conclusion. Personal opinion

On the whole, this type of work should be done orally at first. It may also be useful to initiate a class journal at the beginning of the year. Basically, pupils may be asked, in turn, to write about anything, any piece of news or any event which has drawn their attention during the day. The teacher must ensure that each pupil does not exceed two pages. This may constitute an opportunity for the teacher to spot some grammatical weaknesses and devise remedial exercises accordingly.

(V)

It may also be exciting to organise some projects throughout the year. The pupils are divided into groups of about five members. Each group chooses a topic and discuss with the teacher who provides them with the necessary advice and material. They may be encouraged to use pictures and drawings in their projects.

CONCLUSION

All things considered, I have attempted to present as systematically as possible, some ways in which learners may be lead to what Harmer (13) calls the building of the writing habit. This can be achieved by a combination of writing for learning and writing for writing activities. Although this does not imply that the learner will arrive at a native speaker's like fluency in writing, it may be assumed that

we need to engage them, from early levels, with activities which are easy and enjoyable to take part in, so that writing activities not only become a normal part of the classroom life but also present opportunities for students to achieve almost instant success. It is when students have acquired this writing habit that they are able to look at written genres and involve themselves in writing success with enthusiasm (14).

This suggests that the acquisition of advanced writing skills by the learners can be achieved if only the teacher is able to tackle the issue of their lack of confidence or interest by means of appropriate coaching designed to make them comfortable in the process.

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