

TEACHING COMPOSITION

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Most approaches to teaching composition differ from each other in the amount of help they give the learner. In guided composition the learner is given a model to follow, so that it is unlikely that he will make many grammatical mistakes. In free composition little help at all is given to the learners. They are often allowed to choose their own subjects, or else they are given very broad subjects to write about. Between strictly guided and completely free composition, there are many different types of composition practice with differing amounts of guidance. Often the amount of guidance a teacher gives depends on the ability of his class and the theories that the teacher holds about learning English as a foreign language.

GUIDED COMPOSITION

In guided composition the main idea is that the learners should not make mistakes when they write. The quality of their writing is most important.

1. The simplest form of guided composition is copying. Copying is not always an easy job for all learners. It can be made a more useful exercise if the learners look at the model, look away from it, pause, and then write. The pause forces them to try and remember what they have seen. If they try to remember large pieces of the model at each look, then the value of copying is increased.
2. Many guided composition exercises require the learner to choose items from a substitution table. The substitution table contains several compositions. This is not just an ordinary copying exercise, because the first choices that the learner makes have an effect on what he must choose later in the composition.
3. Some other exercises in guided composition require the learner to fill blanks, join sentences together, rewrite a passage making certain changes in structure or subject, or write a composition based very closely on a model composition. In this last type of exercise, usually the vocabulary for the new composition is supplied and the sentence patterns are exactly the same as the model. (Examples of the types of guided composition mentioned in sections 2 and 3 can be found in a book called *Guided Composition* by D.H. Spencer, Longman).
4. Pictures are also often used to give practice in guided composition. Often a series of four pictures are used to show the development of the story. The learner is also given sentence models to follow.

COMPOSITION WHERE THE LEARNER IS GIVEN GREATER FREEDOM

There are several types of composition practice that give the learner some help but at the same time allow him a large amount of freedom. Usually in these types of composition the teacher can vary the amount of freedom he allows.

1. Blackboard composition involves the whole class working together. The teacher suggests a subject and asks members of the class to put up their hands and give a sentence to put in the composition. If the sentence is correct then it is written on the blackboard. If it is not, it is corrected by the class or the teacher and then it is written. When the whole composition has been finished in this way, the learners re-read it and then it is rubbed off the blackboard. Then the learners have to re-write it from memory. This last part can be done as homework.
2. A very interesting type of composition practice makes use of dictation. The teacher reads a short story and the learners have to write it from memory. If the teacher wants to give a lot of help, he reads the story several times, but he never reads it so much that the learners can copy it exactly. The learners are not expected to write exactly what the teacher said, but because they cannot remember it all, they have to make up parts of it themselves, and thus exercise their composition skill. This exercise is sometimes called a dicto-comp because it is half-way between dictation and composition.
3. The learners can be given a series of questions to answer. The answers to the questions make the composition. The questions give the learners ideas for the composition. Usually a list of useful words is also supplied.

FREE COMPOSITION

In completely free composition the learners are given a topic to write about and then they write. The teacher does not usually give any further help. In this type of composition there is a great possibility that the learners will make mistakes. There are two opinions about this. Briere (1966) found that giving most attention to fluency (number of words written) rather than correctness (number of mistakes) resulted in a large improvement in correctness as well as fluency. Mistakes disappeared as a result of practice. Bright and McGregor (1970) however consider

The pupil does not learn from his mistakes. If he did, the more mistakes he made, the more he would learn. Common experience however, proves that the pupil who makes the most mistakes is the one who has learnt and will learn least. In theory no mistake should ever appear in writing.

The following classroom experiment tested this hypothesis.

AN EXPERIMENT

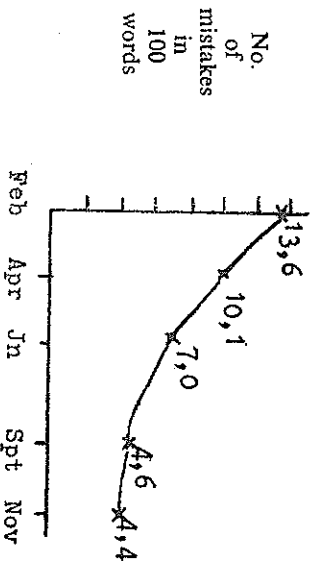
The course was held with students of the English department of a government teachers training college. They had previously studied English for six years. Twenty-eight learners followed the course. They wrote one forty minute composition each week over a period of ten months, making a total of 26 compositions. The learners were instructed to write as many words as they could in the space of forty minutes. At the end of this time they counted the number of words in their composition and wrote this at the bottom. The topics for the composition (Describe this city, A famous hero, Life in the country, etc.) were written on the blackboard with two or three questions designed to give the learners a few ideas. The learners were told to write as much and as quickly as possible.

Every mistake in the compositions was indicated according to a marking system and the compositions were returned to the learners the following week. The number of mistakes was counted and a figure was reached using the following formula.

$$\frac{\text{total number of mistakes}}{\text{total number of words}} \times \frac{100}{1} = \text{number of mistakes per 100 word.}$$

In this way the learners could see their progress.

The following graph shows the decrease in the average number of mistakes per 100 words.



At the beginning of the year, every seven words contained a mistake. By the end of the year the rate was one mistake in every twenty-two words. The average number of words written in each composition remained the same during the year at 340 words in 40 minutes.

The following table shows the average improvement made by the learners in relation to their score on the first composition they wrote.

IMPROVEMENT IN RELATION TO INITIAL SCORE

Initial score.	Average improvement.
Number of mistakes in 100 words	Number of mistake in 100 words
6 — 10	2, 3
11 — 15	5, 9
16 — 20	7, 2
21 — 25	12, 5
26 — 30	16, 6
	25, 8

As predicted by Lado (1949) learners with the largest amount of mistakes at the beginning make the greatest improvement.

Bright and McGregor's hypothesis is thus disproved.

1. Although the learners initially made many mistakes these mistakes were dramatically reduced as a result of composition practice.

2. The learners who initially made the most mistakes made the greatest improvement.

Free composition does seem a useful method even for learners who initially make many mistakes.

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