

Linguistics and Composition:  
Teaching Writing as a Second Dialect

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The relationship between the teaching of writing and the field of linguistics has been a rather tenuous one throughout much of the existence of linguistics as a scientific discipline. Despite the fact that studies

have shown little or no significant improvement in writing skills as a result of linguistically based instruction, educational devotees of linguistics continue to promise that "the objective study of the English language" carried into the composition classroom will improve students' writing skills. Very few linguists, in fact, believe that the discipline can or should be directly applied in the classroom as either content or technique.

Linguistics does, however, offer an analytical perspective on language that a composition instructor can profitably apply in his teaching. Similar to that which linguists have established in the teaching of English as a second language (ESL), this perspective centers on the very real distinction between the spoken and written forms of language. Whereas the ESL teacher focuses primarily on teaching the verbal forms of English, the composition instructor works solely on the written format. In essence, while the ESL and composition teachers are dealing with the same language, they are very significantly focusing on different levels or even dialects. Each level of the language, in turn, has its own distinctive signals, patterns, and conventions. To master the spoken level, which most children accomplish in the early school years, is not necessarily to learn to communicate effectively on the written level. Writing, in effect, must be taught and practiced.

Many common problems in both the mechanical and abstract areas of composition stem from the interference of the verbal forms and patterns of English with the written structures and conventions. Writing is not simply "a secondary visual representation of speech" (Bloch and Trager, Outline of Linguistic Analysis, Linguistic Society of America, 1952). On the purely mechanical (nevertheless meaningful) level, writing uses punctuation where speaking involves stress, pitch, juncture, and rhythm. Because punctuation does not necessarily correspond to the oral patterns, we have, for example, the frequent misuse of the comma. Again on the mechanical level, we have paragraph indentation in writing but no really comparable signal in speech. Perhaps this indicates that we do not have the concept of a paragraph or as tight an organizational unit in normal, unplanned speech. When speaking, one is allowed to be somewhat less deliberate and more redundant than when writing. Effective written communication hinges on the logical development and organization of an idea in as clear and concise manner as possible. Also because the distance between a writer and his reader is certainly greater in both physical and temporal terms than that between a speaker and listener, the writer does not see the puzzled expression on his reader's face. As a result, he cannot go back to the confusing point and, as a speaker can, explain the idea again with different words or examples.

While the use of commas, the idea of paragraph development and organization, and the concepts of audience and effectiveness are but a few of the problems, one can certainly see how wide-ranging the difficulties of working with two levels or dialects of language can be. In many cases, the composition teacher is dealing with what the ESL teacher would call "premature fluency"--the phenomenon where the student tries to carry the patterns and conventions of the system he already knows to the one he is attempting to learn. Composition students do have difficulty making the transition from the more spontaneous and somewhat less deliberate verbal form of language to the more deliberate and consciously organized written form. As a result, errors that range from comma splices and sentence fragments to inappropriate diction and illogical or unordered development appear in student papers.

The student needs to be aware that when he is writing he is manipulating a level of language that is by nature very different from the one he uses when he is speaking. Keeping a contrastive analysis of the characteristics of speech and writing in mind, the teacher can work from what the student already knows in order to illustrate and practice the differences between speaking and writing. By focusing on the distinctions and thus possible points of interference between the oral and written dialects, the composition instructor can develop in his students the ability to dialect or code "switch." The linguistic perception of writing and speaking as two codes, forms, levels, or dialects of the same language is thus a valuable outlook from which the composition teacher can approach many of the problems that students have in writing.