The Language Environment of Student Writers

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Since April of 1978 faculty of the English Composition Board (ECB) have been reading essays written by undergraduates as they enter the University of Michigan for the first time. During the past four years we have evaluated approximately 20,000 samples of students' writing; we have, over time, come to recognize certain styles of writing that many of these entering college students have in common.

One style of writing, readers say, creates a "strobe light effect"; an essay contains a sufficient number of ideas but the ideas are not in an order that allows a reader to follow the writer's line of thought easily nor are the ideas connected by transitions. Because ideas are not differentiated from each other in importance nor linked well to one another, they read more like rapid-fire individual observations than thoughts that have been integrated into a unified theme governed by a consistent point-of-view. Readers refer to this style of presentation in expository writing as "chaotic" writing (Kirscht and Golson,1).

One example is the following paragraph taken from an essay written by an entering freshman on the subject of smoking (the seriousness of the problem was to be discussed and possible solutions suggested). The writer concludes with the following four sentences (reproduced as they appeared, though I have numbered each sentence for discussion):

[1]More propaganda about stopping or baning cigarettes should be used. [2]If the younger generation was more aware of the potency of cigarettes, there would be a large decrease in the percentag of smokers. [3]Cigarette smoking is an unimagenative way to combat anxiety or nervousness. [4]Once one makes a decision to stop smoking, don't procrastinate, the delayance will only prolong the way back to achieving a healthy mind and sound body.

Here, sentences 1 and 2 combined together make a single argument: increasing the number of advertisements and testimonials about the harmful effects of cigarettes will persuade many young people to break their smoking habit. Then, however, the writer introduces a new idea, one that does not follow from the previous argument; no connection between the increased use of propaganda to prevent smoking and finding imaginative alternatives to smoking is established. Moreover, no connection between anxiety or nervousness and individuals' smoking habits is made. Finally, the writer concludes the essay by putting together two different types of sentences which have contrasting tones and intentions: first, a warning to stop smoking and, secondly, a speculation about the harmful effects of delaying to do so.

Despite the problems of coherence in this paragraph, the writer demonstrates an awareness of several sentence structures and different sorts of rhetorical strategies. When these sentences are read together, however, the reader experiences jarring shifts in content and emphasis. Taken together, the sentences lack the collective, coherent power of a sustained argument; considered individually, they are understandable. Where have our students learned this chaotic style of communication? Why does disconnected discourse sound all right to them?

One of the answers offered to these questions about students' difficulties with written composition originates from a recognition of the differences between informal conversation and formal academic writing. Those who argue for this explanation of the problem hold that inexperienced writers lack substitutions for inflections of voice and other signals speakers use to communicate meanings face-to-face; writing is extremely dif-

ficult because, they claim, the act of writing is different from the act of speaking. Novice writers have not yet learned the appropriate, and very different, vocabulary of cues experienced writers use to signal transitions between ideas, or to indicate the degree of emphasis being placed upon an idea. It is true, of course, that parallels between informal speech and formal academic writing are so few that making a transfer from speech to writing required in school is exceptionally difficult. Nevertheless, I no longer believe that by itself the difficulty of transferring the spoken word to the page accounts for many patterns of writing ECB readers find; I believe that chaotic writing, for instance, is a particular style of communication which students have learned from the language environment most teachers of writing would rather forget while they are in the classroom: television.

We must keep in mind that the language environment of our students has changed during the past several decades. In 1980 the New York Times calculated that "by the time the typical Americal schoolchild graduates from high school he or she will have spent 11,000 hours in school and 15,000 in front of the television tube. Another way of saying this is that American students confront two 'curriculums'--two sets of ideas and impressions that are, in some fundamental ways, diametrically opposed"("The Schools,").

Researchers tell us as well that sustained, well developed conversations occur less frequently in homes now because families spend so much of their time watching television. It can be argued, then, that television now provides a predominant and much-reinforced source of language learning for many in our society; the experience of watching and listening to television is certainly far different from that of engaging in sustained conversations (or reading or even spending time thinking one's own thoughts). In addition, since we cannot respond to individuals shown on television as we do to those with whom we talk, we do not listen to oral communication in the same way we once did.

I believe we must pay more attention to the oral language environment television creates. To refer to Mina Shaughnessey, if our students are to have the ability to make maps of where [they are] going," they must have an idea of "where [they have] been"(Shaughnessey, 249). Therefore, we must help our students understand "what it is the language of television is saying to us"(Fiske and Hartley, 20).

Let's examine some differences between the messages we receive daily from television and the language we hear elsewhere; differences between language learning from television and ways in which we experience language otherwise are worth specific consideration.

One very familiar form of television language occurs in commercials; as many as twenty commercials are likely to be broadcast in an hour of prime television time. Because these commercial "spots" are so expensive for advertisers to broadcast and generally last only thirty seconds, television producers and writers have developed conventions of communication which eliminate both the need for transitions between units of spoken discourse as well as between the pictures we see. As viewers, therefore, we have learned, because we have been forced to do so, automatically and intuitively to supply an immense amount of information. Because we are so familiar with the genre, we fill in the blanks; consider, for instance, the following transcript of

a 30-second commercial as it was broadcast this year by CBS:

ILLUSTRATION I

Kitchen scene:	A mother, father, and young son are in a kitchen eating breakfast.
Father:	Big game tonight, huh?
Son:	Dad, gonna be there?
Father:	I'll be there.
Office scene:	The father is at his desk now with his supervisor standing nearby.
Supervisor:	Frank, I need this analysis before you leave.

We see alternating quick cuts of scenes showing son looking distressed during play of game and father absorbed in work at his desk. At the conclusion of the scenes, father arrives at the game and son is overjoyed.

Unseen Narrator (speaks during these scenes): When you've got an important deadline you need a Honeywell Office Automation System. Using a desk-top terminal, executives can organize data, analyze statistics, and get their work done. At Honeywell, we know how important it can be to meet a deadline.

(sound of musical scale ascending in the background)

Narrator:	Honeywell. You should see what we do with computers.

The dialogue between these characters conveys only enough information to reinforce the message we receive visually. The "story" is a device; it rapidly appears and then disappears from the screen. So accustomed are we as viewers to processing such rapidly-paced dramatic vignettes whose issues are quickly resolved that we ignore "unanswered" questions we would ask if this story appeared in print: Why cannot Frank return after the game to finish his work at the office? Why cannot the son be told that his father will be late arriving at the basketball court? In fact, we have no time to question the problem as it is given nor the solution offered. And the advertiser hopes we come to believe that somehow Honeywell improves the life of a family as well as the efficiency of an office. The viewer is "taught" a great deal by Honeywell, but much that is "learned" results from our being willing to make unspoken connections between ideas.

Commercials, carefully scripted with underdeveloped plots, provide only one kind of familiar television language experience. A similar kind of language experience requiring the television viewer to create bridges between ideas is required of listeners during televised broadcasts of spontaneous live events.

Nielson ratings inform us that approximately one fourth of the vast amount of viewing time of the American public is spent looking at sports events of various kinds (Cole, 74). An exact transcript of approximately 20 seconds of reportage from the 1982 NCAA championship basketball game between North Carolina and Georgetown serves as an illustration of what popular televison sports commentary has accustomed viewers to hearing:

ILLUSTRATION II

But you can hear the big guy comin' behind ya and Jimmy Black tries to get it up on the short hop.
It's not there and here comes Jordan again.
We said a very dangerous offensive rebounder.
What an awful feeling that's gotta be, Billy, to know that Ewing is coming down your back.
He is one of the best runners for a big man I have ever seen in basketball and I think that's one of the assets he has and a lot of people don't rate it.
There's Ewing.
Perkins a short hook.
He got it off quickly (Morris and Nydahl, 16).

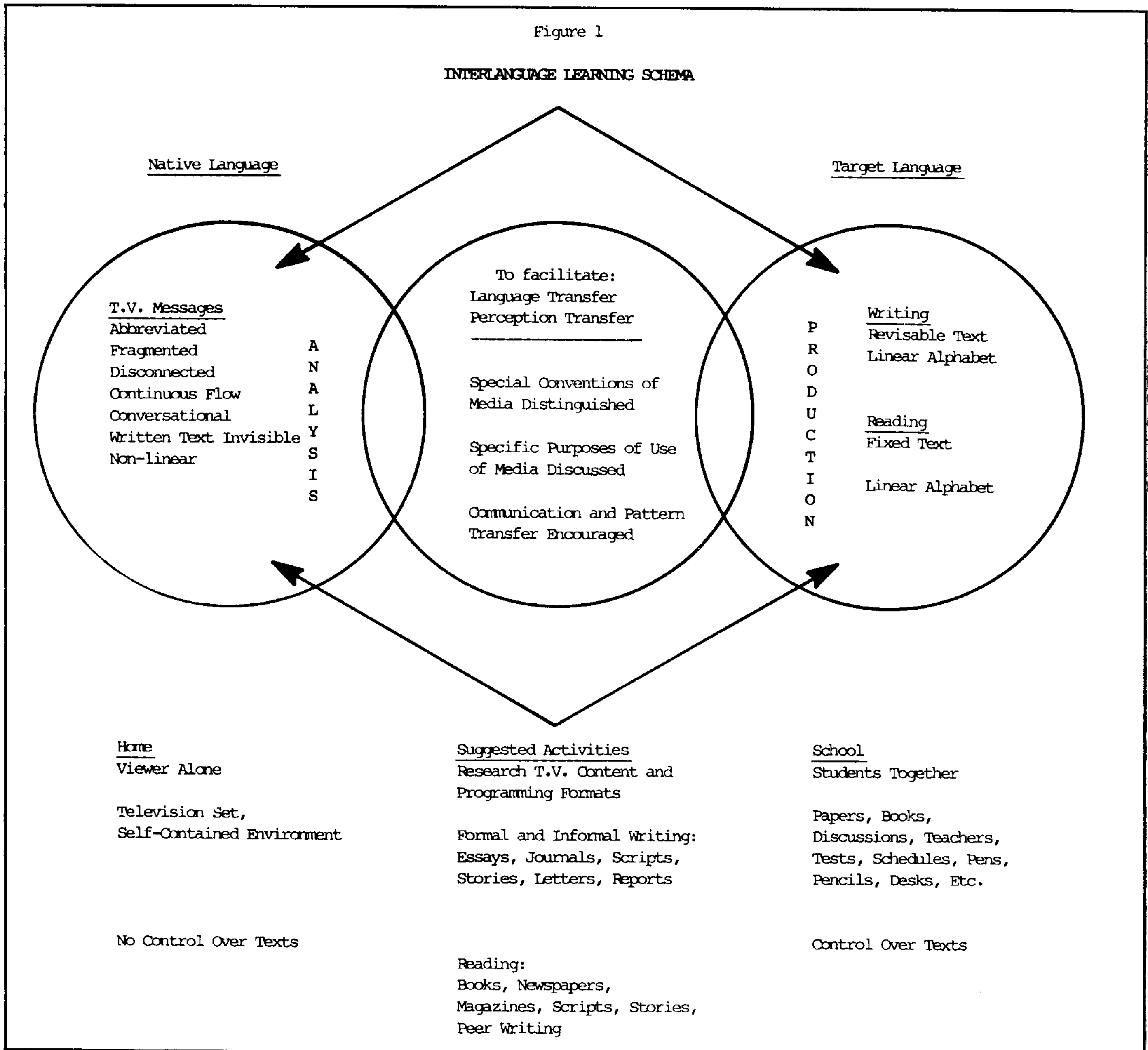
As in the case of the Honeywell commercial, this language of television, also accompanied by an informing picture, lacks transitions between observations--those links we expect to find in print.

And, unlike the commentary of a radio broadcast, which supplies listeners with a rich context of description while a contest proceeds, the commentary of television is predominately a mixture of objective details and subjective elaborations. We "see" the information that connects whatever statements we hear. The point is, finally, that though there is not one kind of television broadcast that has dominated the verbal world of our students, by and large, the majority of television's languages have one thing in common: they have accustomed viewers to verbal comments without verbal transitions.

My students are surprised to discover that television has acclimated them to this particular style of communication which is vastly different from the highly informative, carefully sequenced writing I know they must learn to produce for academic audiences. They are also pleased to discover that, to some extent, they have mastered the language of television. What they must do, I point out, is learn to move from one language to the other. I introduce them to the differences between television language and reading and writing by distributing the schema reproduced in Figure 1.

Figure 1

INTERLANGUAGE LEARNING SCHEMA



In some of my classes a discussion of this issue is sufficient. Introducing the idea to students that a special language environment (actually, a cluster of similar but differing languages) has influenced their own patterns of discourse is helpful in and of itself. In most of my classes, however, I pair this schema with one or more assignments that either require students to study and report upon the features of their favorite television language to the class or I ask them to analyze a "chunk" of television language I have audiotaped and transcribed into a printed text.

The bridge between the world of television and the world of written and spoken communication is a better understanding of television itself; the words we hear from television are "rather like the language we speak: taken for granted, but both complex and vital to an understanding of the way human beings have created their world" (Fiske and Hartley, 16). The teacher of writing can use television to help students escape from, or transcend, the language limits of the television medium alone.

REFERENCES

Fiske, John and John Hartley, Reading Television, New York: Methuen Press, 1978, p. 20.

Breaks ground in its semiotic analysis of televisions messages.

"The Schools and TV: Two Kinds of Teachers," New York Times, (20 April 1980), p. 29.

One of several articles published in The New York Times, surveying the history of research into television. Speculates about links yet to be made between television and the public educational system.

Kirscht Judith and Emily Golson, Unpublished Paper, "Empty and Chaotic Essays: Are They the Products of Our Own as Well as Our Students' Errors and Expectations?" 1982.

Discusses two different types of assessment essays written by entering students at The University of Michigan: empty (too few ideas) and chaotic (ideas are not organized).

Morris Barbra and Joel Nydahl, "Sports Spectacle as Drama: Image, Language, and Technology," The Second International Conference on Television Drama, East Lansing, Michigan: Michigan State University, 25 June 1982.

Analyzes the effects upon the audience of the interaction of image, language and technology in a televised sports spectacle: the 1982 NCAA championship basketball game.

Shaughnessey Mina, Errors and Expectations in the Teaching of Writing. New York: Oxford University Press, 1977.

Because she understands the logic underlying error, Shaughnessy is more capable of responding constructively to it than the teacher who can merely spot error. An indispensable book for the teacher of basic writing and a valuable resource for all writing teachers.

Television Today, Ed. Barry Cole. New York: Oxford University Press, 1981

Collection of essays about the content of television that raise useful issues for classroom discussions.