

# Improving Intermediate Learners' Writing Skills: Combining Listening and Writing in Teaching English

## 聴き取りと作文練習を絡めることで、中級英語 学習者の作文技能の向上を

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### Abstract

*Writing in English for non-natives is always difficult to teach and learn. Because of this difficulty, writing is often a neglected area in English teaching and learning. At the intermediate level, learners need more opportunities to practise writing in order to improve their overall command of English, which is the de facto international language of communication in the modern world, and is used for communication among different peoples both aurally/orally and in writing. At the intermediate level of writing, the emphasis should be placed on fluency in expressing one's ideas rather than accuracy. In the exercise proposed in this paper, listening and writing are combined in such a way that the receptive skill of listening supports the productive skill of writing. It is then a small step for intermediate learners to reach more advanced levels of writing in English.*

**Keywords:** writing, fluency in writing, listening and writing

### 1. Introduction:

We often talk about the four skills of English, that is, speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These can be combined in various ways. For example, all four can be taught and learned at the same time, and '[t]he best coursebooks try to integrate where possible the skills of writing, reading, listening and speaking' (Brookes & Grundy 1998: 11). There are other common combinations such as speaking and listening, and reading and writing. Combining listening and writing can also be useful and effective, particularly for intermediate learners, who already have a basic knowledge of English and who now wish to improve their writing fluency. In my proposed combination, learners can improve their listening and writing abilities, a combination in which the receptive skill of listening supports the productive skill of writing.

In this paper, I will describe how the combination of listening and writing can be implemented in the classroom, and how we can encourage learners to write more in English.

### 2. Rationale

Writing is often 'a neglected area in language teaching' (Brookes & Grundy: 1) and '[f]or many years the teaching of writing was neglected as a result of concentration on the aural/oral approach' (10). Hess (2001) says generally that 'Literacy, unlike talking, is not a natural skill ... Reading and writing are social inventions that have to be taught and learned, practiced and mastered' (77). Writing *is* neglected by '[t]eachers of large multilevel classes'

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because they tend to think that 'writing is the most problematic skill to teach in such classes' and that it is 'the most challenging of the four skills to master' (77). We know that writing 'requires some conscious mental effort' (Byrne 1988: 1) and therefore 'is a difficult activity for most people, both in the mother tongue and in a foreign language' (4). Nunan (1999) says:

In terms of skills, producing a coherent, fluent, extended piece of writing is probably the most difficult thing there is to do in language. It is something most native speakers never master. For second language learners the challenges are enormous, particularly for those who go on to a university and study in a language that is not their own. (271)

He (2000) reiterates a similar point in another place:

Learning to write coherently, and in a way which is appropriate for one's purpose and audience, is something which many people never manage in their first language, despite the fact that a substantial part of the educational process is devoted to the development of such skills. The process is every bit as difficult in a second language. (99)

Thus it is acknowledged by many that writing is difficult to learn, and we have to recall again that '[g]ood writing skills usually develop from extensive reading, some specific training, and a good deal of practice' (Davies & Pearse 2000: 96). By combining listening and writing, we can provide learners with writing practice, while still keeping the element of listening comprehension, which is also important in language learning.

Acquiring an overall command of English language, including writing ability, is particularly important in this modern world. Hyland (2013) says:

English has emerged as the international language of research and scholarship. With half the world's population predicted to be speaking the language by 2050, English seems to be becoming [sic] less a language than a basic academic skill for many users around the world. (54)

He is mainly talking about the situation in academic circle where 'academics from around the world are now almost compelled to publish in English' (54). I realize that not all Japanese students will become academics. However, recently, English has increasingly been regarded even among ordinary people 'as a language of wider communication' and 'the international language *par excellence*' (McKay 2002: 5), and writing in English has become more important to them than before: 'Without doubt, a major impetus to writing pedagogy has come in recent years with the rapid growth of word processors, as well as the use of the Internet as a means of communication' (Nunan 1999: 272). It is said that the dominant language used on the Internet is English: 'today over 84 per cent of the Internet servers are English medium' (McKay: 18). Lindsay and Knight (2006) say: 'We write for many different reasons – to pass on information and opinions, to ask questions, request or offer something, to entertain, to keep a record, to organize our thoughts, as part of the assessment process, and so on' (85). Such forms of writing are required in one's native language as well as English. Thus writing ability in English is indispensable in the modern world. We should therefore provide learners of English with more opportunities to engage in writing practice.

### 3. The level of learners

The level of English learners I have in mind for my proposed exercise is mainly intermediate. The majority of university students are of this level and they already have a certain amount of experience with English. My exercise is designed to develop their English writing capacity further. At the beginner and elementary level, this exercise is perhaps a little too difficult to do because 'the *amount* of language which the learners will have at their disposal for writing will be limited' (Byrne: 6). Those learners may need simpler exercises such as 'writing things down' practices, typical 'in the Audio-lingual method', for example, 'as an aid to language learning', before they start to tackle writing as 'composing (i.e. writing as a skill enabling us to say what we wish to) for which some language

knowledge is required' (Brookes & Grundy: 11). I wrote that writing is often neglected, but the first kind of simpler writing exercises has been fairly common in classroom teaching. My suggested exercise is part of the other kind of writing, albeit of a simpler level, that is, writing as composing and forming 'a coherent whole' (Byrne: 1).

However, I am very much aware of the fact that among intermediate learners some can write better than others. My exercise is a combination of listening and writing, and the listening part helps weaker learners with their writing. The listening part itself, being indeed quite a challenge to some intermediate learners, helps them write by providing them with the scaffolding of the basic structure of their writing; they are simply asked to reproduce what they just have heard and understood. They do not really need a careful thinking process in planning for their writing, an important stage which is required in more advanced kinds of writing (See Hedge 2000: 305-306, Richards and Lockhart 1996: 65). But they just have to write their understanding in continuous prose, often in their own words, which is an appropriate challenge to intermediate learners. Ferris (2012) says: 'L2 writers often have had little experience with producing ... extended pieces of L2 text, and thus lack fluency and confidence in their ability to write longer papers in academic or professional settings' (227). Our intermediate learners usually have not reached such an advanced stage of writing at which they are ready to produce academic or professional papers. Before that they need to go through a stage at which they produce a meaningful quantity of continuous prose.

While weaker learners are supported by the listening part, more able learners have more opportunity to write in order to improve their fluency. Thus the proposed exercise can cater to both groups of intermediate learners. All in all, it is designed to develop their writing to a higher level, a level at which they have to start to plan the structure of their writing themselves. It is a small step towards this more advanced level at which they 'recognise the importance of intelligibility and very often also of persuasiveness when communicating through writing' (Brookes & Grundy: 11) and 'become comfortable with writing. To reach that level of comfort, they have to write a great deal' (Hess: 78).

#### **4. Procedure**

##### **4-1. Preparation**

- (1) Choose an intermediate-level text, a short story or passage on a general topic, that you will read to the students in each lesson. You will not show it to them before their writing. If you think that it is useful for them to read it in class or by themselves, you can distribute copies to them *only* after they have finished writing.
- (2) Make notes of words and/or expressions in the chosen text that you think may be new to most students or difficult for them to understand.

##### **4-2. In class**

- (1) Tell the students that they will be doing a writing activity later by reproducing what you have read to them once or twice, depending on the level of the learners.
- (2) Give the students the title of the story or passage, if there is one, by writing it on the board. This gives them some idea of what they will be listening to.
- (3) Write on the board the words and/or expressions you prepared in 4-1. (2), and then explain *orally* what they mean. The students may make some brief notes.
- (4) Read the chosen story or passage once at *normal* speed. It is better not to slow down the speed of your reading to accommodate weaker students' comprehension. Instead, you should always let them catch up with your delivery. While you are reading, the students may be allowed to make some very short notes while concentrating on understanding what is being read. In fact, they have no time, for example, to copy every sentence read by you because you read at normal speed. Thus their notes inevitably become very short if taken.

- (5) Read the story or passage a second time if you feel it necessary, but don't slow down the speed of reading, but keep the same normal speed.
- (6) Tell the students to reproduce what they just have heard on a piece of blank paper. However, tell them not just to jump into writing, but encourage them to spend a few moments to make a very simple plan of what to write, by arranging all the relevant points in the order of appearance in the reading. Also tell them that fluency, rather than accuracy, in writing is more important in this exercise.
- (7) Limit the time allowed to complete their writing. You should find out from experience how many minutes should be given to the students to complete their task.
- (8) Do not allow them to use dictionaries or any other reference materials while writing. Encourage them to write using all the English knowledge they possess at the time of writing.
- (9) Collect the papers from the students when the allocated time is up.

### 5. Response and assessment

It is always difficult for the teacher to know how he or she should respond to and assess learners' writing. The level we are considering for the proposed exercise is intermediate, so we cannot expect learners at this level to produce from the start perfectly accurate, fluent, coherent, and intelligible writing. Rather, we should be content at this stage with a certain length of extended prose writing, with various errors and mistakes in their use of English: 'the focus, in the first instance, is on quantity rather than quality, and writers are encouraged to get their ideas onto paper without worrying too much about formal correctness in the initial stages' (Nunan 1999: 272. Also see Nunan 2000: 87). Accuracy, fluency, coherence, and intelligibility in writing develop only gradually with learners' effort and experience. For example, putting too much stress from the start on the variety and appropriateness of vocabulary and expressions and the correctness of grammar often discourages learners. Their weaknesses are indeed a problem, but 'a writing class should not become a grammar or vocabulary class, and there is ample evidence from composition research that simply teaching grammar in isolation does not necessarily improve the accuracy and effectiveness of student writing' (Ferris: 230). So don't be too hard on learners' errors and mistakes. It may be a good idea to have complementary grammar and vocabulary courses concurrent with your writing course, but it is always important to preserve its main purpose. We should always '[r]emember that writing will flow much more smoothly without the threat of the red pen hanging over it' (Hess: 79). As I said, accuracy and fluency in writing develop only gradually, and we cannot really expect learners to show great improvement in all areas in a short time. In recent years, teachers have shifted to the 'Communicative Language Teaching' from the Audio-lingual method, which 'focused on absolute correctness rather than communication' (Brooks & Grundy: 11). Language, spoken or written, is for communication and used to 'achieve a communicative purpose' (Widdowson: 2). So 'we should not be unduly preoccupied with the detection and correction of mistakes in written work. *Effective* expression is not the same as *accurate* expression' (Byrne: 123), and 'a piece of written work which has a number of mistakes in it may nevertheless convey the writer's communicative purpose perfectly adequately, while another piece, superficially free from mistakes, does not' (Byrne: 123-124). It is very important to send the message to intermediate learners that they can make themselves understood in English despite the errors and mistakes. Thus we should value communicative fluency more than accuracy in writing, as in spoken language, at the intermediate level.

### 6. Objectives

- (1) *To develop intermediate learners' writing skills by giving them opportunities to write*

One becomes an improved writer by writing. Development may be gradual, but if learners continue

writing in English, they will be able to attain higher levels. To be able to do so, they should always be encouraged to write as much as they can. Our exercise is a step towards more advanced levels of writing at which 'successful learners ... master a variety of genres or types of writing' (Brookes & Grundy: 11), and have their writing exercises 'organized chronologically (as in storytelling), or from general to particular (as in describing a place), or from most important to least important (as in making complaint), or working up to some logical conclusion (as in an argument or scientific investigation)' (Brookes & Grundy: 17).

(2) *To develop learners' resourcefulness in writing*

Learners are not allowed to fall back on the use of dictionaries or any other reference sources when they are doing the reproductive writing task, but must rely solely on themselves and their acquired knowledge of English. Being pressed to express themselves in such a condition, they are forced to try the best they can to make clear what they mean in writing. Through this exercise, they should be able to gain hands-on practical experience in how to communicate in writing; they should also gradually come to realize 'the importance of intelligibility and very often also of persuasiveness when communicating through writing' (Brookes & Grundy: 11).

(3) *To develop learners' listening comprehension*

Students will concentrate on comprehending what is being read. Their concentration will be more intense and focused than usual, simply because they have no text in front of them, and also because they know that they will have to reproduce what they have been listening to. Such concentration may, as a by-product, help them develop good listening habits.

## 7. Conclusion

Many intermediate learners of English feel that they are not very good at writing, and their teachers are often rather reluctant to provide them with opportunities to do so. Among the four skills of English, writing is the most difficult to learn since it requires considerable conscious mental effort on the part of learners. However, in this modern interconnected world, communications among different peoples are increasingly carried out in both aural/oral and written English, making English a much more important language than it has been before. Writing can be improved mainly through writing, so we should always try to provide learners with a great deal of writing practice. In my proposed exercise, listening and writing are combined in such a way that the receptive skill of listening lends support to the productive skill of writing, and it is designed to be a small step in improving the writing of intermediate learners to more advanced levels.

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