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## **WRITING A FOREIGN LANGUAGE VERSUS CREATIVE WRITING:**

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### **Abstract**

*Writing is one of the two productive skills that a learner is expected to achieve in order to ensure his communicative competence. The communicative competence of the learner should be tested in respect of both the productive skills viz. speaking and writing. The role of a language learner in the case of the receptive skills is passive, where it becomes very active in the case of productive skills. In writing and speaking the language learner is engaged in communicating his ideas and feelings. In the case of speaking a kind of give and take situation between the speaker and listener exists. In other words there is a possibility of discussion or exchange of thoughts and ideas between the speaker and the listener. But in the case of writing, the message communicated has a higher degree of fitness and this skill requires real proficiency if the communication has to be effective. Before a learner attains a stage of being able to effectively communicate in the target language, he should have acquired sufficient mastery in its vocabulary and grammar. The initial stages of writing begins from the formulation of characters of the script of the target language; if the script system of the target language is different from that of the source language. The testing of writing skill in the context of second/foreign language learning should begin from the formation of characters to the testing of the learners' proficiency in expression, use of appropriate styles, vocabulary and accurate use of the structure of the target language.*

**Keywords:** communication, writing skill, vocabulary, structure, foreign language.

### **Introduction**

The ability to write a worthwhile composition is not possessed by all the speakers of a language; the ability to write creatively requires special talent and special training. A person can write his native language without being able to create anything beautiful or of intrinsic value for its content. We cannot then use this creative power as a sign that a student knows how to write a foreign language. Writing a foreign language as the ability to use the language and its graphic representation productively in ordinary writing situations. More specifically we mean by writing a foreign language the ability to use the structures, the lexical items, and their conventional representation, in ordinary matter-of-fact writing. We then recognize two major elements in writing a foreign language: the language elements and the graphic representation of the language.

With this kind of analysis it is obvious that the problem of writing will be different for each native language group, because the language burden differs according to the native language and because the graphic representation burden is different according to the experience of each group with the writing system of the native language. The problem is also a special one for those whose native language has never been written or who never learned to write it. To be thorough and efficient we need to prepare a list of the language matters, and their graphic representation that will constitute problems for the particular linguistic background we wish to test. We can say that when a student has mastered these problems he knows how to write the foreign language. With such a list we will be able to prepare better tests of writing and achieve more objective scoring.

### **How to Test Writing a Foreign Language?**

#### **General Technique:**

Techniques used to test writing in the native language can often be used in the foreign language as well; the difference lies in the problems to be tested. These techniques vary

according to whether they deal with the integrated process of writing or with separate factors such as punctuation, spelling, structure or vocabulary. In every case, however, we set up a stimulus to obtain a controlled response containing the problems we wish to test.

### **The Written Composition as a Testing Instrument**

A single picture, or a single composition topic given in the goal language or in the native language of the students is widely used as a writing test especially when the student's ability to produce a connected piece of writing is the chief skill being tested. The virtues claimed for this kind of approach are the realistic nature of the response and the fact that it can show how well a student can think in the language. The shortcomings are the difficulty of scoring the responses objectively and the inadequacy of the sample contained in most compositions. A single composition is probably not the best means to test writing a foreign language. Scoring, however, still remains a complex process that requires time and can be done with precision only by highly trained personnel.

### **Approach through the elements of writing:**

When we abandon the attempt to elicit complete written samples to test writing, we are better able to cover the entire range of difficulties in the language and in its writing or any representative sample of these problems. We are able to secure a wider sample by this approach and the scoring can be made either more objective or completely objective depending on the technique. An eclectic design using both the synthetic approach for wider sampling and easy scoring and the composition approach with its more readily acceptable validity, does not of itself guarantee a good test since the total test will be only as good as the sum of its parts and any part that is unsatisfactory will weaken the test accordingly.

### **Completion Technique**

A technique that can be used to test punctuation, spelling, vocabulary and grammatical structure objectively consists of providing an incomplete piece of writing and asking the student to complete it. To test punctuation we leave out some of the punctuation, to test spelling we leave out a letter or letters, to test vocabulary we leave out a word or words, and a test grammatical structure we omit some structure signal.

**Punctuation:** to test punctuation we can use parentheses or brackets at the point where the student has difficulty: **Ex:** "( ) Do you plan to come tomorrow ( )" "Yes, I do."

The student is asked to supply the punctuation needed if any. The Spanish literate speakers might place an upside down question mark at the beginning as well as the right one at the end, for that is their practice in Spanish.

**Spelling:** to test spelling we omit the problem letters and define the word by context. **Ex:** "Pro-e-or Smith teaches history in college." The student is asked to supply the missing letters. This technique is superior to dictation as a test of spelling because it does not require any more writing than the crucial in a relatively short time. In addition it does not mix spelling problems with pronunciation ones as may be the case in dictation.

**Grammatical structure:** The following item would test an irregular plural in English.  
Ex: “How many child-do you have?”

It is not always easy to write items such as this to test structure, pictures, more detailed linguistic context, or the native language of the students are helpful in such cases.

**Vocabulary:** Best-known among these completion-type techniques are those that omit vocabulary items in a self-defining context. Ex: “ My nephew’s sister is my \_\_\_\_\_.”

**Limitations of the completion techniques:** completion items are more difficult to answer than ordinary multiple-choice items for the same problems and are sometimes preferred because they force the student to produce the answer. Since writing is a production activity, production items requiring completion are assumed to be more valid in testing writing than multiple-choice recognition items.

One **weakness of the completion item**, however, is the difficulty in preparing a context that will allow only one possible answer.

- i. Ex: “ A vehicle of transportation,” for example may be a ship, a plane, a car.
- ii. Ex: “ A vehicle of transportation used on roads” may still be a truck, a car, a bicycle.
- iii. Ex: “ A passenger vehicle of transportation used on roads and having four wheels” may be a car or a bus.
- iv. Ex: “ A private passenger vehicle of transportation used on roads and having four wheels” may still be a car or a bus.

Providing additional context to limit the number of possible answers is not always easy. And in this process of adding context to remove ambiguity, we may easily make the context more difficult to understand than the very problem of recalling the word we set out to test.

Another **weakness of the completion item** is the time required for scoring. For classroom review and assignment testing the completion item is a useful and handy tool. But for large-scale testing, even five minutes’ scoring time per text can become a major consideration. In terms of masses of papers, three-thousand tests at five minutes each would require the work of a person for a month and a half at forty hours per week.

**Objective, partial production techniques:** Partial production techniques approximate the process involved in answering the completion items and at the same time are easier to score. The problem of supplying unambiguous context is considerably lightened by the incomplete, multiple-choice clues supplied in such items.

## Test Design

A test of writing should consist of several parts with different types of items and problems to sample the elements of writing:

**Part I:** Objective, partial production, multiple-choice items. Fifty to eighty items dealing with specific problems of spelling, punctuation, grammatical structure and vocabulary.

**Part II:** Objective items based on one long passage. Twenty to thirty items of the objective, partial production type on a single connected passage testing chiefly matters of sequence and transition signals.

**Part III:** Three pictures with instructions to write a paragraph about each. Written context should force the student to use other than simple preterit constructions, grade mechanics only, number of errors per 100 words.

**Part IV:** Two short compositions on assigned topics. Thirty minutes each. Style and content are graded as well as mechanics.

### **Improving the Objectivity of Scoring Composition Tests**

In scoring short or long compositions without dealing separately with the language and graphic problems, it is possible to improve the consistency of the grades by providing the examiner with sample compositions at each level or grade. The examiner is thus able to compare his own judgement with the grades suggested by the test maker.

### **Evaluating Content and Style**

**Content:** content much beyond the general knowledge and experience expected of any literate speaker of a language lies outside the range of foreign language tests as such. Composition tests are therefore usually confined to matters of common experience or topics for which the students are given the content.

### **Composition topics such as the following are frequently used:**

“Describe your home town to a friend from France.”

“Tell about your recent trip to.....”

“Describe your home.”

“What would you do if you had a million dollars?”

If a picture is used as the stimulus for a composition, the subject of the picture is usually one of common experience.

### **Given a valid topic for a composition, there are at least three things that can be measured in connection with content:**

- i. The points of information to be brought out;
  - ii. The organization and sequence in which these points are presented;
  - iii. The formal signals given the reader to guide him in understanding the topic fully;
- i. **The points of information to be brought out:** There is no limit to what can be said about almost any topic, yet the examiner can judge what points are relevant and he can list them. The test maker edits the list on the basis of what he or a group of competent judges deem relevant. Points of information mentioned by the weaker students can be compared with the list from the superior students to show critical differences for scoring purposes. We would thus have students of the same intelligence in the advanced group and in the beginning group, and the differences in content between the compositions of the two groups could not be said to reflect intelligence. This refinement is recommended for the preparation of a standardized test and not for an ordinary classroom test.
  - ii. **The organization and sequence in which these points of information are presented:**The points of information that are relevant for a particular topic can be organized in a limited number of ways. Depending on the nature of the information the points or constituents may be organized on some logical basis, on a time sequence, on a special arrangement of some

kind, on the basis of some movement or itinerary, on some arbitrary conventional system such as according to the letters of the alphabet or the decimal system of numbering, on the basis of what the writer considers favourable and unfavourable, or on some combination of these and other criteria.

- iii. **The formal signals given the reader to guide him in understanding the topic fully:** It is interesting that in writing we tend to use a larger stock of words to indicate the constituent points of a composition. This may be due to the fact that intonation and contextual stress are not marked in ordinary writing, although they play an important part in speaking and have to be replaced by sequence words in writing to avoid ambiguity. Their more extensive use in writing especially formal writing, accounts for the fact that they appear to be overly formal when used in ordinary conversation.

**Style:** The marks of literary style that set a part of great works of art are not the responsibility of foreign language tests to discover. Literary criticism, the favour of discriminating readers and survival over the years are part of the test of great works of art. But such matters of style as appropriateness or inappropriateness of the use of certain contractions in a friendly letter, the use of the first person pronoun, the use of colloquial language, etc., can be part of a test of writing at the advanced level.

## Conclusion

Difference in writing direct conversation, quoted conversation or indirect speech are in part matters of style that can be tested. Differences between the style of a factual report, a friendly letter, a defence of something etc., might be legitimately included in an advanced test of writing a foreign language. Differences between the style of poetry, as distinguished from prose, may be more properly considered in the teaching of creative writing than in the teaching and testing of the ability to write foreign language.

The ultimate aim of training in composition is to enable the individual to express his thoughts and emotions, feelings and attitudes in chaste and lucid language. But, it cannot be denied that majority teacher teach and most students learn writing especially in a course in English as a foreign language to become just functional. Only a few teachers go beyond this aim and make effort to let children expose their personality in creative writing. While most teachers tend to emphasize accuracy at the cost of fluency, only a few provide incentive to children to write creatively-for the sake of genuine pleasure.

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