Basic Writing and its Basis in Talk: The Influence of Speech on Writing

Jay L . Robinson[1]
Department of English
The University of Michigan

Knowing how to use a language involves knowledge of many kinds, among them at least these three: knowledge of the meanings and functions of words and of word parts such as derivational and inflectional endings; knowledge of formal structures such as those for constructing words, phrases, and sentences and for connecting groups of sentences; and knowledge of strategies for using words and sentences to make language mean and to organize and communicate meaning in a way that is both purposive and effective. Let us call the first two kinds of knowledge grammatical knowledge, and the third kind, knowledge of discourse. Grammar is language in potential--a formal system that makes human interaction possible; Discourse is language in use--a product of human interaction.

A bald assertion: teachers of language use (following the lead of language scholars) have paid inordinate attention to grammar and have ignored discourse. A bold assertion: teachers of language use can improve instruction by focusing upon discourse--the strategies for making language mean and for making it communicate effectively.

Assuming that they are native speakers, students come to school with tacit knowledge of English grammar; and the older students are, the more likely they will be equipped with a comprehensive knowledge of that grammar. Even illiterates,

if they know English, know the grammar of English save perhaps how to form learned plurals (datum, data; phenomenon, phenomena) or how to reach toward but not beyond the permitted range of syntactic options ("stealthily crept the intruder toward his sleeping victim, breathing hotly the while"). Such structures, of course, are learned from the pages of books, not from the lips of companions. Students also come to school with tacit knowledge of rules for English discourse: otherwise they could not talk meaningfully, purposively, and effectively, as of course they do. But the rules they are most likely to know are the rules for organizing and manipulating talk, not the rules for organizing and manipulating the written word. The younger the student, the more likely her reliance upon the rules for talking; the less exposure older students have had to reading and writing, the more likely their writing will be more like talk and less like writing.

In general, and putting aside for one moment the question of dialect difference, the same word and sentence-level grammar underlies both spoken English and written English. Exceptions (like those suggested in the preceding paragraph) are those few forms that have existence primarily in print and those syntactic formations that are very bookish. The tacit grammatical knowledge students have equips them as well to write as it does to talk, but in learning to write students will have to learn when to use certain structures that they already know and how to edit sentences for compactness and grace. The discourse rules for talk and writing, however, differ significantly. In actual use, talk and writing do not resemble one another except in their basic grammar. The two modes are not organized in the same way, and what is

meaningful and effective in talk is not necessarily so in writing.

For the inexperienced writer who is asked to produce a piece of written discourse, it is only natural to rely on the discourse rules he or she already knows. The result is likely to be something that resembles talk. Take this example, borrowed from Mina Shaughnessy's Errors and Expectations (pp. 19-20):

A writing teacher's customary approach to such a theme is to treat it merely as a piece of writing and to evaluate it with expectations derived from reading written texts. Such a reading is likely to focus upon such faults as these: use of incomplete or ungrammatical sentences; failure to mark the boundaries of sentences with capitalization and punctuation; incorrect marking of such boundaries; "incorrect" verb forms; misuse of capitalization.

```
 1  First of all the system, don't really care about the students, schools are
 2  always overcrowded and the students get the, impression that really there
 3  are some teachers, just like students just to Be there, and the children
 4  performing below par is mainly the parents fault too, they really don't
 5  stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
 6  to do the Best they can instead they are encourage to learned Basketball,
 7  But in all the fault would lie on the state and government officials,
 8  Because really they don't care about children Education they're more con-
 9  cerned about what's your color or do your family have a good Income? and
10  really with all the pressure society put on the children they don't have
11  enough time to learned, But for the kids that are real Bright they can
12  make it through, But what about the kids that need a little extra Time so
13  with all this its too much, for them if a mother asked her child what did
14  you learned today, the average child would say nothing Because there is always
15  something going on Beside Educational, so when this kid is out of school he
16  or she has nothing, Because all those school years were just problems society
17  has push on the Kids, and when they hit the outside world they're not ready
18  not because they' are dumb, But society has effect them on the wrong side,
19  But who get the Blame? Always the children, if a kid could go to school and
20  learned, without meeting society, they would come out a Better product, and
21  could be ready to hit head on with society, over' all its all of our fault in
22  one way or another, but to put it plain society is more the blame, But then
23  again we the people make society up, but far as the children concerned not
24  that much, so I would suggest that society get on the good foot, because
25  whether they like or not we're the future   (pp. 19-20)
```

When read silently, as one would read any other student essay, this short theme is neither clear, coherent, nor effective. But when heard, from a reader who treats the theme as if it were a transcript of talk, the message makes sense, coheres, and conveys its point with force. Experiments with several groups of teachers who have listened to such readings have proved this to be true.[2]

The teacher who marks such faults is judging the theme against the grammatical and typographic norms of standardized written English. If she also judges the theme against discourse norms for "the standardized written English classroom essay," her paper-ending comments will likely include these: "The paper is badly organized"; "There are no paragraphs." In most cases, however, grammar

---

[2]Van't Hul and I gave instructions like these: "Please listen as I read this English message. What I'll read was either spoken in the first place or written. Having listened to the reading, please guess which." We then followed the reading with questions about the effect of the message and the competence of the speaker/writer. A majority of hearers always identifies the message as spoken.

and mechanics receive primary if not exclusive attention.

But suppose a teacher were to approach this theme not with expectations based on the norms of writing, but in the expectation that the theme reflects speech: that in writing it, this inexperienced writer has tried to make meaning using the grammar and discourse rules of his or her own talk. Directed by this latter expectation, a teacher's reading of the student's work will lead to strikingly different conclusions about the student's competence and needs. What follows is a step-by-step illustration of how a teacher might take such an approach:

GRAMMAR: SENTENCES AND SENTENCE BOUNDARIES

Approach: (1) Ignore the punctuation provided in the original; (2) Read the theme aloud, trying to invest it with meaning; (3) Put a slash at the end of each sentence-like unit. When you are uncertain as to where a unit ends and another begins make a guess. (The slashes below are the author's guesses.)

(4) Now read aloud each unit marked off by slashes.

Reading: When you read aloud each unit you have marked, you will find that there <u>are</u> sentences in this theme. This is <u>not</u> the way the theme will read if you <u>pay</u> attention only to the punctuation, if you read it expecting sentences to be those units begun with a capital and ending with a period or some other terminal marker. Moreover, when you read aloud the sentences indicated by slashes, you will find that most are complete and that most are grammatical, even though many contain unexpected grammatical forms (<u>to learned</u>, for example, in Line 6). Sentences 2 and 4 omit words; sentence 12 can be read as a fragment and 15 is a fragment, though an effective one. But the remaining sentences have subjects, predicates, and most other elements required by the rules of English grammar.

Judgment: This student knows how to <u>make</u> sentences, but not necessarily how to recognize them once they are written down (in talk, sentences don't begin with

```
1   ¹First of all the system, don't really care about the students,/²schools are
2   always overcrowded and the students get the, impression that really there
3   are some teachers, just like students just to Be there,/³and the children
4   performing below par is mainly the parents fault too,/⁴they really don't
5   stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
6   to do the Best they can/⁵instead they are encourage to learned Basketball,/
7   ⁶But in all the fault would lie on the state and government officals,
8   Because really they don't care about children Education/⁷they're more con-
9   cerned about what's your color or do your family have a good Income?/⁸and
10  really with all the pressure society put on the children they don't have
11  enough time to learned,/⁹But for the kids that are real Bright they can
12  make it through,/¹⁰But what about the kids that need a little extra Time so
13  with all this its too much,/¹¹for them if a mother asked her child what did
14  you learned today, the average child would say nothing Because there is always
15  something going on Beside Educational,/¹²so when this kid is out of school he
16  or she has nothing, Because all those school years were just problems society
17  has push on the Kids,/¹³and when they hit the outside world they're not ready
18  not because they' are dumb, But society has effect them on the wrong side,
19  ¹⁴But who get the Blame?/¹⁵Always the children,/¹⁶if a kid could go to school and
20  learned, without meeting society, they would come out a Better product, and
21  could be ready to hit head on with society,/¹⁷over' all its all of our fault in
22  one way or another, but to put it plain society is more the blame,/¹⁸But then
23  again we the people make society up, but far as the children concerned not
24  that much,/¹⁹so I would suggest that society get on the good foot, because
25  whether they like it or not we're the future/
```

capital letters or end with periods). The student needs to learn how to <u>mark</u> sentences with capitals and <u>terminal</u> punctuation, and (s)he needs to learn the functional differences between commas and periods. But the student does <u>not</u> need to learn how to make sentences; (s)he already knows how to do that.

GRAMMAR: VERB FORMS AND PARTS OF SENTENCES

Approach: Underline all word forms and parts of sentences, phrases and clauses that seem ungrammatical. But jumping to no conclusions about these, ask yourself these two questions: (1) Would these forms be normal in the speech of this student? (2) Are these forms the customary ones in non-standard dialects of spoken English? (To answer the second question, of course, you need to know something about the grammars of the spoken dialects of English, as every writing teacher should).

Reading: Many of the forms in this theme do not conform to the usages of standardized written English. Some are simply mistakes in mechanics that do not reflect an influence from speech; others are importations of colloquial forms, several of which reflect the fact that this particular writer speaks a dialect of English that is non-standard. All inexperienced writers import colloquial-isms into their written texts; but most teachers, unfortunately, are far more impatient with non-standard colloquial-isms than with those found in dialects considered standard. Yet both kinds of importation reflect the same process: An inexperienced writer is using the lan-guage (s)he knows best--the language of talk.

<u>Mechanical mistakes</u>

Line 4: no apostrophe in <u>parents</u>
Line 13: ⎫ no apostrophe in <u>its</u>: a common "spelling"
Line 21: ⎭ mistake

1 ¹First of all the system, <u>don't</u> really care about the students,/²schools are
2 always overcrowded and the <u>students</u> get the, impression that really there
3 are some teachers, just like students just to Be there,/³and the children
4 performing below par is mainly the <u>parents</u> fault too, /⁴they really don't
5 stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
6 to do the Best they can/⁵instead they are <u>encourage</u> to <u>learned</u> Basketball,/
7 ⁶But in all the fault would lie on the state and <u>government</u> officials,
8 Because really they don't care about <u>children Education</u>/⁷they're more con-
9 cerned about <u>what's your</u> color or <u>do your</u> family have a good Income?/⁸and
10 really with all the pressure society <u>put</u> on the children they don't have
11 enough time to <u>learned</u>,/⁹But for the kids that are <u>real</u> Bright they can
12 make it through,/¹⁰But what about the kids that need a little extra Time so
13 with all this <u>its</u> too much,/¹¹for them if a mother asked her child what did
14 <u>you learned</u> today, the average child would say nothing Because there is always
15 something going on <u>Beside Educational</u>,/¹²so when this kid is out of school he
16 or she has nothing, Because all those school years were just problems society
17 has <u>push</u> on the Kids,/¹³and when they hit the outside world they're not ready
18 not because <u>they'</u> are dumb, But society has <u>effect</u> them on the wrong side,/
19 ¹⁴But who <u>get</u> the Blame?/¹⁵Always the <u>children</u>,/¹⁶if a kid could go to school and
20 <u>learned</u>, without meeting society, they would come out a Better product, and
21 could be ready to hit head on with society,/¹⁷ over' all <u>its</u> all of our fault in
22 one way or another, but to put it plain society is more <u>the/blame</u>,¹⁸ But then
23 again we the people make society up, but <u>far</u> as the children <u>concened</u> not
24 that much,/¹⁹so I would suggest that society get on the good <u>foot</u>, because
25 whether they like it or not we're the future/

76

Line 18: use of apostrophe after they before full
         spelling are. (Apostrophes don't occur in
         speech.)

Colloquialisms

Line 11: real as adverbial intensifier
         (Perhaps the alternation child, children;
         kid, kids throughout the essay; perhaps
         the phrase get on the good foot in Line
         24, although semi-formal contempory prose
         style is more accepting of such
         colloquialisms than at earlier times and
         in more formal contexts.)

Non-standard colloquialisms

Verb forms

(1) No -s (-es) on the third person singular present
    tense of verbs. This reflects a feature of
    pronunciation in certain non-standard dialects.
       Line 1: don't rather than doesn't
       Line 10: put rather than puts.
       Line 9: do rather than does.
       Line 19: get rather than gets.

(2) No -d (-ed) on certain past tense forms. This
    reflects a similar feature of pronunciation.
       Line 6: encourage rather than encouraged
       Line 17: push rather than pushed.
       Line 18: effect rather than effected (or
                 affected, if one wants to call this
                 also a failure to discriminate
                 between two words pronounced alike
                 in most dialects).

(3) The use of -d (-ed) where it does not belong.
    This is a feature of hyper-
    correction. Since the writer knows that -ed
    goes on some verbs and not others and cannot
    trust his or her pronunciation as a guide, (s)he
    throws in a couple.
       Line 6: ⎫ learned rather than learn.
       Line 11: ⎬
       Line 14: ⎮
       Line 20: ⎭

(4) Unmarked possessive. Also probably a feature of
    pronunciation rather than grammar, although the
    point is disputed.
       Line 8: children for children's

(Line 15 beside for besides is a related
         feature. The z sound is not
         pronounced.)

(5) Verb inversion in indirect questions: a
    syntactic feature of certain non-standard
    dialects.
       Line 9: what's your color rather than what
                 your color is.
       Line 9: do your family have a good income
                 rather than whether your family has
                 a good income.

Judgment: The writer is making errors,
but the errors are not simple ones.
Very few are random or careless errors
(as is the missing it in Line 5, for ex-
ample), and hence are not easily correct-
ed simply by calling attention to them.
Most errors show that the writer either
does not know certain features of stand-
ardized written English, or else is so
uncertain in her control of them as to
revert to spoken alternatives; others are
hypercorrections in which the writer aims
at the correct written forms, but errs in
doing so. The spelling to learned (Lines
6,11,14, 20) is a typical hypercorrec-
tion: the -ed ending is added where it
never occurs in standardized written En-
glish; the student knows that -ed is
added to verbs, but puts it on the wrong
verb form. To help a writer who makes
mistakes like the ones in this theme, the
teacher must first find causes for the
errors that occur and only then try to
help the student find appropriate reme-
dies. Forms that are perfectly grammati-
cal in non-standard speech can be errors
when used in writing; but the student is
confused when a teacher merely calls all
such forms grammatical errors without
explaining that two grammatical systems
are in conflict. To learn how to write,
students need explanations that explain.

+ + + + +

So far I have dealt only with the grammar
and mechanics of the theme, not with dis-
course: What I have tried to suggest is
that teachers will better understand the
sentence and word-level problems of inex-
perienced writers if they look for the
origin of aberrant forms in the grammar

of speech; and that once having found the origins of errors, teachers can more effectively correct them. This is an approach called "error analysis," and it has been the dominant approach in studies and textbooks that have dealt with dialect interference in writing. Error analysis is useful for teachers whose students are young or ill-prepared, and it is a clear advance over the traditional approach of "error marking," in which aberrant forms are merely circled and sometimes labelled, often inaccurately. But when restricted only to the domain of grammar, error analysis is a limited approach. Even if one were to correct every deviant grammatical and mechanical feature of the theme we have been analyzing, the result would <u>still</u> be more like speaking than like writing. Contrasts in <u>discourse</u> rules have to be noted if one is to perceive the crucial differences between talk and writing. Writers have to learn, and learn how to apply, the discourse rules of writing if they are to compose coherent and effective written texts.

Describing the rules of discourse is not easy. Discourse analysis is much less well developed than grammatical analysis as a sub-field in linguistics. And the variables one must deal with in trying to state discourse rules are both many and complex: Discourse is variable and highly sensitive to context--to persona, audience, topic, and genre. We know much less than we would like to know about talk and about writing. But we do know that talk, like writing, is highly organized, and that our students' own sense of the requirements of spoken discourse can enable them to intuit and then apply the rules of written discourse when encouraged to do so. Canny teachers can begin with talk and help students discover how it is shaped and organized; they can then move to writing and point out similarities and contrasts. We need not wait for a "Compendious Discourse Analysis of Written English," which will probably never be written anyway, and we can make effective use of such information as we have.

Consider the problems a talker must and does solve in order to make a meaningful contribution to an ongoing conversation. The talker must: (1) get the floor from those engaged in the conversation; (2) say something relevant to the topic under discussion (or else try to change the topic--always a hazardous ploy); (3) say something significant to the listeners (all talkers fear the "So what!" response); (4) hold the floor long enough to finish the message (conversation is competitive, and the task is not easy); (5) signal to the other participants that the message has come to an end. There are these other problems as well: Because conversation moves rapidly there is little or no time for planning how to organize the message that will be sent; because human memory is limited and talk transient (spoken words are gone even as they are heard) the information a talker sends must be immediately retrievable. A listener cannot flip back and scan earlier parts of a conversation. But in compensation for this last problem with talk, both listener and speaker are present and clarification can be requested and provided.

With these problems in mind, let's take another look at the theme.

GETTING THE FLOOR AND SAYING SOMETHING RELEVANT

A writer need not worry about getting the floor (though she has to worry about whether of not there will be readers); and because a writer sets her own topic (except in response to exam questions or writing assignments like them), saying something relevant is either not a problem or else is a problem of a different kind: For example, how to say something significant in a universe of discourse delimited by what has been written on that topic; or how to follow through a series of implications in a deductive sequence. Note how the theme begins:

1 First of all the system, don't really care about the students, schools are
2 always overcrowded and the students get the, impression that really there
3 are some teachers, just like students just to Be there, and the children
4 performing below par is mainly the parents fault too, they really don't
5 stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
6 to do the Best they can instead they are encourage to learned Basketball,

There is no general statement of topic, no thesis sentence. Instead, the theme begins in a way that appears responsive, perhaps to an assignment from the teacher: "Write an essay discussing why children don't do well in school." But in fact, the theme begins in much the same way a conversational response to a spoken question might:

Q: "Why don't students do well in school?

A: "First of all the system don't really care about the students."

One expects an enumeration, and can imagine fingers thrust forward and bent down as the points are counted off. (A discerning teacher in one of our workshops, having guessed that the theme was a transcript of speech, said: "It sounds like something a person would stand up and say at a school-board meeting in response to an earlier speaker.")

HOLDING THE FLOOR

Since conversation is competitive (everybody wants to talk), silence must be avoided by a talker who wishes to hold the floor. When a break in the flow of sound occurs, it is usually taken as a signal that the floor is open to another speaker. Talkers have many ways to keep sound flowing long enough to think up something else that is pertinent. One way is to use relatively meaningless phrases or words that serve only to keep the vocal cords vibrating, and another is to signal continuation by using conjunctions: Once an _and_ or a _but_ is spoken, a slight pause is possible because a speaker has signalled an intention to hold the floor. Consider the underlined sentence openers in the theme:

1 ¹First of all the system, don't really care about the students,/²schools are
2 always overcrowded and the students get the, impression that really there
3 are some teachers, just like students just to Be there,/³and the children
4 performing below par is mainly the parents fault too,/⁴they really don't
5 stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
6 to do the Best they can/⁵instead they are encourage to learned Basketball,/
7 ⁶But in all the fault would lie on the state and government officials,
8 Because really they don't care about children Education/⁷they're more con-
9 cerned about what's your color or do your family have a good Income?/⁸and
10 really with all the pressure society put on the children they don't have
11 enough time to learned,/⁹But for the kids that are real Bright they can
12 make it through,/¹⁰But what about the kids that need a little extra Time so
13 with all this its too much,/¹¹for them if a mother asked her child what did
14 you learned today, the average child would say nothing Because there is always
15 something going on Beside Educational,/¹²so when this kid is out of school he
16 or she has nothing, Because all those school years were just problems society
17 has push on the Kids,/¹³and when they hit the outside world they're not ready
18 not because they are dumb, But society has effect them on the wrong side,/
19 ¹⁴But who get the Blame?/¹⁵Always the children,/¹⁶if a kid could go to
school and

20 learned, without meeting society, they would come out a Better product, and
21 could be ready to hit head on with society,/[17]over' all its all of our fault in
22 one way or another, but to put it plain society is more the blame,/[18]But then
23 again we the people make society up, but far as the children concerned not
24 that much,/[19]so I would suggest that society get on the good foot, because
25 whether they like it or not we're the future/

Some of the connectives bear semantic or structural weight (instead in sentence 5, for example; but in sentence 10; over'all in sentence 17). Most, however, are importations from speech of those very necessary signals that say to other would-be-talkers, "You will wait, please, until I finish!"

SAYING SOMETHING SIGNIFICANT, OR HOW TO AVOID "SO WHAT!"

The theme begins with topic focus upon an abstraction: the system. But focus quickly shifts to persons, as the following underlinings show (the underlinings are of sentence and clause subjects and of embedded subjects):

The strongly personalized stance of the final sentence:

> So I would suggest that society get on the good foot, because whether they like it or not we're the future.

is thus anticipated in the focus upon persons in most of the preceding sentences. Abstractions are okay in conversation, but only if their effects upon persons are indicated, and especially upon persons like those who are talking together. Otherwise, the conversation might well result in a "So what!"

1 [1]First of all the system, don't really care about the students,/[2]schools are
2 always overcrowded and the students get the, impression that really there
3 are some teachers, just like students just to Be there,/[3]and the children
4 performing below par is mainly the parents fault too,/[4]they really don't
5 stress How important is, and that when they go to school they should try
6 to do the Best they can/[5]instead they are encourage to learned Basketball,/
7 [6]But in all the fault would lie on the state and government officials,
8 Because really they don't care about children Education/[7]they're more con-
9 cerned about what's your color or do your family have a good Income?/[8]and
10 really with all the pressure society put on the children they don't have
11 enough time to learned,/[9]But for the kids that are real Bright they can
12 make it through,/[10]But what about the kids that need a little extra Time so
13 with all this its too much,/[11]for them if a mother asked her child what did
14 you learned today, the average child would say nothing Because there is always
15 something going on Beside Educational,/[12]so when this kid is out of school he
16 or she has nothing, Because all those school years were just problems society
17 has push on the Kids,/[13]and when they hit the outside world they're not ready
18 not because they' are dumb, But society has effect them on the wrong side,/
19   [14]But who get the Blame?/[15]Always the children,/[16]if a kid could go to school and
20 learned, without meeting society, they would come out a Better product, and
21 could be ready to hit head on with society,/[17]over' all its all of our fault in
22 one way or another, but to put it plain society is more the blame,/[18]But then
23 again we the people make society up, but far as the children concerned not
24 that much,/[19]so I would suggest that society get on the good foot, because
25 whether they like it or not we're the future/

80

BRINGING THE MESSAGE TO AN END

There are many ways to end a message in conversation (assuming that someone else doesn't end it for you by interrupting). One is to generalize or sum up; another is to bring reference back to present time (in narrative) or to the general present. A useful device for bringing reference to general present in talk is use of a proverb or aphorism. In this theme, there is a semi-conclusion in the form of a summing up:

> over'all its all of our fault in one way or another

But that sentence evokes yet another comment:
> But then again we the people....

So there is good use for an aphoristic statement:

> So I would suggest that society get on the good foot

ORGANIZATION

Writing can be planned: A writer has time for planning, and readers expect that planning will be done. The customary expectation for the "standardized written English schoolroom essay" is that it will be planned hierarchically, with alternating movements from the general to the specific and back again, in a scheme something like this:

> Generalization I
>   Specification I
> Generalization A
>   Specification A
> Generalization B
>   Specification B
> Generalization C
>   Specification C
> Regeneralization of I: A, B, C

Talking is rarely planned in advance, though a plan usually emerges as speakers cooperate in the task of making meaning. And talk is organized--as organized as writing is, though not in the same way.

The theme begins, as has been suggested, as a response--either to a real or to an imagined question:

> Why don't children do well? . . .
> First of all the system. . . .

The pattern of implied question and response continues: sentence 6, for example, is a second response to the first implied question. And there are explicit rhetorical questions:

> Sentence 10: But what about the kids? . . .
> Sentence 14: But who get the blame?....

The use of the adversative but is further evidence of the dialectic structure of the theme. It is almost as if the writer imagines a conversing partner.

The theme is not planned as a series of movements from the general to the specific and back again. There is some analysis of generalizations for their component parts (for example, "schools," "students," "teachers," comprise "the system"); but there is no consistant hierarchical arrangement. Rather, a topic is stated--usually as a response to an implied or rhetorically stated question, and thoughts about the topic are written down more or less as they come to mind: a pattern of message-making very familiar in talking, since the speaker must retrieve information instantaneously and has no time to order it in any other than a temporal sequence.

What finally holds the theme together--or at least can in an oral rendering--is the strongly projected stance of the author: the sense a hearer (or sympathetic reader) gets of a person worrying a question of personal concern and talking about it. The multitude of connectives that assert connection between ideas, even if they do not denote explicitly what the connections are, and the management of focus, even though the focus is subject to rapid shift, also contribute to overall coherence. These, too, are strategies, however, more customary and

more effective in spoken discourse than in writing.

The theme is <u>not</u>, of course, a transcript of a monologue uttered in a conversational context. It was written down, and it is written text, and it consequently has features charactistic of writing as well as many characteristic of speech. Inexperienced writers produce what might be called transitional texts as they progressively learn the discourse and grammar rules of written English genres. By recognizing the oral features of texts, teachers can help smooth the transition.

+ + + + +

In workshops with teachers concerned with the problems of basic writers, we at the English Composition Board have had an opportunity to analyze transitional texts like "First of all the system. . ." and to work toward two results: a list of the kinds of importation from speech one can find in texts produced by basic writers; and an outline of a pedagogy for dealing with the various kinds of importation. Here is a list developed by participants in our most recent workshop:

Influences from speech may be found in all of the following:

1. Strategies for finding and shaping meaning
    a. Predominance of dialectic organization: question and answer; assertion and counter-assertion.
    b. Predominance of inductive movement: from example to generalization.
    c. Predominance of personal narrative; of narrative illustration used as evidence.

2. Rhetorical strategies (speaker-audience-topic relations):
    a. Predominance of highly personalized point of view.
    b. Tendency to rely on an extra- linguistic context and to ignore the needs of an absent audience of readers:
       (1) Failure to contextualize the topic;
       (2) Failure to state crucial presuppositions;
       (3) Tendency to assume background knowledge necessary to meaning.

3. Organizational strategies
    a. Predominance of topic-comment arrangement.
    b. Predominance of linear sequencing, especially temporal sequencing.
    c. As a hypercorrection, mechanical imposition of an organizational pattern (Introduction: Three points: Conclusion) that does not fit the content or the needs of the audience.
    d. Heavy use of connectives, especially coordinating conjunctions.
    e. Non-denotative use of connectives (<u>so</u>, used merely as a connective with no <u>resultive</u> sense).

4. Manipulation of code (differences in medium):
    a. Loosely constructed sentences, with weakly denotative adverbial openings, and with relatively empty fillers.
    b. Use of colloquialisms and of non-standard colloquialisms; hypercorrection of forms.
    c. Overuse of slang or of colloquial jargon.
    d. Restricted range of word choice; repetition; use of cliches.

5. Management of the special conventions of writing (script or typographical features):
    a. Non-conventional or uncertain punctuation.
    b. Spellings based on pronunciation; hypercorrections showing uncertain knowledge.

A glance at the list will show the limits of error analysis when analysis is restricted to the domains of grammar and mechanics and does not extend to discourse features.

The pedagogy we have been developing places heavy emphasis on revision. Basic writers should be encouraged to create first drafts rapidly, worrying most about the problem of putting meaning into words and worrying little if at all initially about the demands of form. Once a text exists, it can be read and re-written until it more closely resembles the norms of standardized written English of a particular genre. In a classroom discussion of examples, teachers can draw from students and then make explicit the crucial differences between speech norms and writing norms; and student writers can then revise their texts. The expectation is that student writers will internalize the appropriate norms and gradually modify their first drafts as well as later ones.

82

There are limits and dangers in this approach. We do not know much about the more important discourse rules of speech or of writing in their various genres: those that guide the translation of intention and conception into language. Knowing little, we may state rules narrowly and apply them over-rigorously, forgetting that both talk and writing in themselves are rich in diversity. Students must be engaged in trying to state the differences and thus be helping to formulate rules. If they are so engaged in a genuine act of discovery, we teachers acknowledge the vastness of our ignorance and thus avoid dogmatic prescription. In any work exploring differences between talk and writing, these must be the cardinal lessons: talk is every bit as good as writing; talk and writing differ only because they function differently in their human uses; sometimes writing that looks like talk is better than writing that looks too much like writing. It all depends, finally, on what a human being wants to do with her mouth or her pen.

These are the two more explicit messages this essay tries to convey: (1) Inexperienced writers, when asked to compose, use strategies and language forms that come readily to mind, especially when under pressure. The discourse strategies and linguistic forms used by inexperienced writers are likely to be those of speech. (2) A text does not exist until someone reads it. A reader creates a text on the foundation of certain preconceptions and expectations. Teachers should learn to expect in the writing of inexperienced writers strategies and forms derived from speech. In teaching writing, it all depends, finally, on what a teacher perceives in a student's work as a reflection of competence and need. There are some talkers in all classrooms, and most of them can also learn how to write.

REFERENCES

Shaughnessy, Mina P. Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teachers of Basic Writing. NY: 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.

Coulthard, Malcolm. On Introduction to Discourse Analysis. London: Longman Group Ltd., 1977.

Introduces a variety of approaches to discourse analysis and contains a useful bibliography to other sources.