



WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER



Vol. V, No. 5 (January, 1981)

The gloom of winter may be an appropriate time to share some of the light or humorous moments of working in a lab. To start our collection, I offer an old favorite from our lab, a teacher's comment on a paper brought in by a student: "The passive is not to be used."

Send your "lighter moments," along with your articles, announcements, reviews of materials, suggestions, names of new members, and donations of \$3 (in checks made payable to me) to:



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A SENTENCE-COMBINING LABORATORY FOR BASIC-WRITING STUDENTS

For several years now, the English department at the University of Hartford has enrolled freshmen in a three-part writing program: a triad, trivium, or--for basic-writing students--trriage. One side of the triangle is the year-long writing course, Composition 1 and 2. The second side is the Learning Skills Center, which offers individualized tutorials to students with difficulties in reading, writing, and study skills. The third side is new and experimental: a weekly two-hour sentence-combining laboratory required of all students in basic-writing sections of Composition 1.

While the two-hour laboratory period had become something of an institution at Hartford, the sentence-combining curriculum was new to teachers and students alike. Until the fall of 1979, the lab period had been, as Leo Rockas described it in his 1977 essay "Teaching Literacy," a "singing class" where students deficient in grammar, spelling, punctuation, and coherence drilled aloud on these

skills. Faced with semi-literacy, Professor Rockas heroically set up a lab "so old-fashioned it may seem radically new."¹ This was back to basics with a vengeance, and it got respectable results: students averaged a ten-percent gain in spotting errors on a mastery test.

But while there is a place for error-centered instruction in a comprehensive writing program, the question was whether a laboratory with about fifty students per section (later subdivided into discussion groups of twelve to fifteen students who regularly worked with a single lab leader) was indeed that place. Since the 1930's, study after study has shown that group drills on lists of common errors are far more costly and less efficient than individualized instruction on individual difficulties--tutorials.² Since the Learning Skills Center already offered just such tutorials to almost eight hundred clients each semester (six hundred freshmen visited the LSC an average of five times each in the fall of 1979), and since students' regular composition classes already included analytical work on pre-writing, organization, and style, the lab period was put to a new use, as "a skill-building adjunct to regular composition work," to borrow a phrase from William Strong.³ In no way did the sentence-combining lab replace classes or tutorials; in no way did it compete with traditional remediation. Research has shown that by the time students reach grade four they have mastered all the basic "grammar" of English--what linguists call the phrase-structure and simple transformational rules of the language. But what basic-writing students have not mastered is to bring this internalized competence to the level of written performance.⁴ The laboratory was redirected toward this goal.

Well publicized studies by John C. Mellon and Frank O'Hare, as well as recent experimentation in freshman composition by Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg at

Miami University in Oxford, Ohio, all indicate that as part of a comprehensive writing program sentence combining is a fail-safe method for enhancing both syntactic maturity and overall writing quality.⁵ The strategy asks students to combine simple sentences--primer prose--into more mature ones that show close relationships between ideas. Unlike traditional grammar drills, sentence combining stresses language production over linguistic description, accomplishments over errors, and options over rules. Its apparatus is simple, and its exercises can be more play than work. Most importantly, however, at the college level, sentence combining connects neatly with rhetoric--the teacher's real concern.

The Hartford sentence-combining laboratory arose out of well-established research. It is original only in its logistics. Appropriately, its basic text has been The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining by Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg; the Miami trioka.⁶ The Writer's Options breaks into two major sections, each containing both signaled and open sentence-combining exercises. Part I, "Structures," offers students instruction and practice in manipulating the principal sentence-combining structures from the relative clause through the absolute phrase and noun substitutes. Part II, "Strategies," addresses larger rhetorical issues: rearrangement, repetition, emphasis, coherence, and tone. Moreover, after a brief introduction to the structure or strategy at issue, every chapter in the book includes rhetorical as well as syntactic exercises, ones like "Judging Sentences" and "Rewriting Exercises" that ask students to make rhetorical choices in relation to varying purposes and audiences.

At Hartford, a typical two-hour laboratory breaks into three parts, each about forty minutes long. First, students compare and discuss their sentence-combining exercises from the previous session in the light of their leader's annotations. While in their helpful essay "Using Sentence Combining: A Sample Exercise" Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg recommend dittoing off several versions of a given exercise for comparison, we found that basic-writing students worked better off their own papers, considering the most difficult combinations closely and testing out strategies aloud.⁷ Naturally, much discussion

of the remedial basics--grammar, spelling, punctuation, and coherence--arises during this time as the students look over their leader's comments. Furthermore, during this time the leaders often present brief lessons on these matters.

Next comes a presentation of new material, either a new structure or a new strategy. Students are asked to read a chapter of the text before each week's lab, but lab leaders review the lesson informally during the session. More importantly, they get the students to practice the structure in three ways; aloud, on the board, and on paper. Here the leaders choose freely among the book's "Basic Pattern," "Creative Pattern," and open sentence-combining exercises, avoiding only the one exercise that has been set aside for all the students to write up and hand in.

Finally, when about forty minutes remain, all the students write up their weekly assignment, an open sentence-combining problem made up of from fifty to one hundred simple sentences. During this time the lab leader circulates around the group as needed, whether to help with particular combinations (or non-combinations; not to combine always remains an option) or to dispense incidental aid with the basics. At the session's end, the students hand in their papers, thus leaving a record of their attendance--and performance.


At the end of their experiment, the Miami researchers took an "attitudinal survey" of their students. Asked "Did you like sentence-combining as an approach to writing?" 69% of the students' responses were positive (five or better on a seven-point scale). More importantly, 72% felt that a semester of sentence-combining practice had increased their writing skills. A hearty 67% gave the students' ultimate tribute: they said they would recommend a sentence-combining section to a friend.⁸ At Hartford, where the two-hour laboratory was a requirement above and beyond the call of the composition class for basic-writing students, we can only envy such rave reviews. Still, while students regularly complained of being worked to death, many kissed the rod and praised the lab. As one weary student admitted in his evaluation of the pilot study, "The sentence-combining exercises were long, but they were the only effective way to get the point across." More heartening still, several students felt that the lab was indeed what Strong had hoped sentence combining would be,

"a skill-building adjunct to regular composition work," as this comment from Mark Slusarz indicates:

The sentence-combining English lab helped me to recognize sentence structures, but moreover, it helped me to use them. My revised papers for Composition 1 improved in sentence structure when my point was better made by the techniques I learned in the lab. English is easier to understand when it's broken down into simpler forms. English lab helped me accomplish this. Whenever a problem arose in Composition 1, I could always bring my problem or paper to the lab for help; the instructor as well as the whole class always helped me.

As Mark's note hints, for the most part our leaders were also adjunct instructors, the same people who taught Composition 1 and gave tutorials in the Learning Skills Center. It was possible, though unlikely, for a student to have the same teacher in all three. This triple-duty system bound the three-part writing program together, since the lab leaders often referred their students to the LSC and classroom teachers monitored their students' work in the lab. Lab work itself was graded only "Pass" or "Not Pass"--no letter grades were given. Passing the lab was made a condition for passing the Composition 1 requirement, however, so students took their lab work seriously.

Some years ago, in a pioneering essay, William Strong urged basic writing teachers not merely to go back to basics but beyond them, into the exciting fields of inquiry that current research opens to us. As an ongoing experiment within a comprehensive writing program, the Hartford sentence-combining laboratory represents one school's attempt to break new ground continually by translating an exciting theory into everyday practice.⁹

 William L. Stull, Director of Writing
The University of Hartford

Notes

¹Leo Rockas, "Teaching Literacy," College Composition and Communication, 28 (October 1977), 273-75.

²See two classic studies: P. C. Werner and W. S. Guiler, "Individual versus Group Instruction in Grammatical Usage," Journal of Educational Psychology, 24 (1933), 140-51; and M. Karp, "An Individual Method and a

Group Method of Teaching College Freshmen the Mechanics of English Composition," Journal of Experimental Education, 11 (1942), 9-15. On the larger question at issue, see Janice Neuleib, "The Relation of Formal Grammar to Composition," College Composition and Communication, 28 (October 1977), 247-52.

³William Strong, "Sentence Combining: Back to Basics and Beyond," English Journal, 65 (1976), 61. This article is printed with a counterstatement by Robert Marzana, "The Sentence Combining Myth" (pp. 57-59).

⁴See Walter Loban, The Language of Elementary School Children, NCTE Research Report No. 1 (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963).

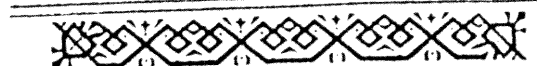
⁵John C. Mellon, Transformational Sentence Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition, NCTE Research Report, No. 10 (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969); Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction, NCTE Research Report, No. 15 (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1973); and two recent studies by Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg: "Sentence Combining and Syntactic Maturity in Freshman English," College Composition and Communication, 29 (February 1978), 36-41; and "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study," Research in the Teaching of English, 12 (October 1978), 245-56.

⁶Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, The Writer's Options: College Sentence Combining (New York: Harper and Row, 1979). This book is reviewed by Carol Gurolnick Rossi in College Composition and Communication, 31 (February 1980), 93-95.

⁷Donald A. Daiker, Andrew Kerek, and Max Morenberg, "Using Sentence Combining: A Sample Exercise," Arizona English Bulletin, 21 (April 1979), 16-22.

⁸"Sentence-Combining and Syntactic Maturity," p. 41.

⁹Cf. James L. Kinneavy, "Sentence Combining in a Comprehensive Language Framework," in Daiker, Kerek, and Morenberg, eds., Sentence Combining and the Teaching of Writing: Selected Papers from the Miami University Conference, Studies in Contemporary Language, No. 3 (Conway, Arkansas: L & S Books, 1979), pp. 60-76.



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A
READER
COMMENTS...

I have often read and learned from the articles and letters in the WRITING LAB NEWSLETTER. It seems odd to me that my first occasion to write to the newsletter is caused by less than encouraging circumstances.

Just last month the writing center of which I was director, the one at the Fort Omaha campus of Metropolitan Technical Community College, of Omaha, Nebraska, was closed. The center was closed because of budget cuts.

For a word of warning: follow the Biblical admonition not to hide your light under a bushel. That is, if your writing center is having a high success rate with students, regardless of how you measure "success," publicize the fact. This may be done publicly or, perhaps more importantly, within the administrative network of your school. To clarify, I mean by "publicize" more than just word-of-mouth notice and praise; accolades, even from students, sometimes do not speak as loudly as figures submitted to college board members, figures often submitted in unsolicited writing center reports. As a new writing center director who inherited a low student case load, I belatedly learned the importance of "blowing my own horn," a horn that was beginning to prove more and more effective to the students of Metro Tech.

Perhaps an even more significant fact that I learned as director of the writing center was the difference between messages of content and messages of relationship. The message of content, the actual grammatical information conveyed in a tutoring session, often proved secondary to the message of relationship, or the reaction to the student as an individual. Fortunately, as I mastered the content of the students' textbooks at Metro Tech, I was free to enjoy working with each individual. Also fortunately, this enjoyment more often than not seemed mutual.

So the writing center closed, and I am now a part-time instructor at Metro Tech. The move has been a good one for me, but I feel the re-opening of the writing center would be beneficial to many Communications students.

So, publicize the success you have in your writing center and the good you're doing the

students of your college or university. The publicity will help many more people than the writing center staff.

Gary Brienzo
Metropolitan Technical Community
College



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INTERDISCIPLINARY PROGRAMS
AND THE WRITING LAB:
The Evolution of a
College Writing Lab

Many colleges and universities are currently assessing the quality and effectiveness of their writing programs. After a decade of renewed interest in the teaching of composition, initially spurred by the open admission policies of the 1970's, many colleges have discovered that the writing problems of students are not limited to the gross grammar and syntactical deviations from written standard English displayed in the writing of "beginning writers;" the problem includes students who have mastered the technical features of written standard English, but who can not write an organized, coherent, and thoughtful piece of discourse. One or two semesters of Freshman Composition does not have an appreciable or lasting effect on the writing abilities of these students. As a result, colleges are exploring alternative methods of developing student writing proficiency. The most favored alternative program is the interdisciplinary or college-wide approach to writing instruction. The major advantage to this approach is that it removes the burden of and responsibility for student writing proficiency from the English

Department to the entire academic community within a college. Obviously once a college makes the commitment to an interdisciplinary approach to writing instruction, this new approach has a significant effect on all existing academic programs, but our experience here at SUNY, New Paltz shows that the writing lab probably undergoes the most significant change.

A college's writing lab or center has a necessary and important role to play in an interdisciplinary writing program. The lab or center is usually the only instructional facility on campus not constrained by the limitations of the traditional classroom situation, the restrictions of earning the necessary student-faculty ratios, and the pressures of evaluating student learning for the purpose of assigning grades. Because the writing lab or center is freed from these constraints, it can exercise a greater degree of flexibility and offer students alternative forms of instruction along with programs of instruction designed to meet a student's individual needs. The freedom, flexibility, and diversity make a writing lab or center an essential component of any interdisciplinary program. A writing lab center can adapt, modify, experiment, and even shift gears in mid-semester, if necessary--few if any other instructional facilities on campus can do this. For these reasons a writing lab or center can provide the on-going contact with students necessary to a four-year, interdisciplinary writing program.

At SUNY, New Paltz the faculty and college administration have adopted a proposal calling for a college-wide commitment to improving student writing proficiency. The proposal included the following:

- 1) The development of uniform testing for all sections of Freshman Composition and Basic Composition.
- 2) The development of courses in each academic discipline which would teach the form of written discourse appropriate for that discipline.
- 3) The identification of students needing writing assistance by having each faculty member indicate a student's need for writing assistance by entering a check on the semester grade form along with the student's grade for the course.

- 4) The establishment of a college-wide committee on writing to oversee and guide the college's efforts to improve the level of student writing proficiency.

What this program hopes to accomplish is to make writing instruction an on-going experience for New Paltz undergraduate students--an experience which extends throughout a student's undergraduate academic career. The Learning Resource Center will be an important component of the program to achieve that goal. An examination of the effect this programming has had on the LRC and its services will supply useful information to other writing lab directors who may be involved in similar undertakings.

First, I would like to describe our existing program before describing the effect of the interdisciplinary writing program on the LRC. Assistance in writing is only one of several services provided by the LRC. That assistance began as peer-tutoring for students enrolled in Basic Composition and Freshman Composition courses; later, a voluntary drop-in service, the Writer's Assistance Service, was added to the program to meet the needs of students composing written assignments for non-composition courses. These programs have been successful, but alone they can not meet the increased demand for service resulting from the college-wide commitment to increasing student writing proficiency.

Students who have been identified by the faculty as needing writing assistance are required to seek assistance at the LRC. The requirement adds a new and significant population of students to those already making use of LRC services. Before these students arrive at the LRC several problems had to be resolved. First, logistics; how would the LRC accommodate this influx of students, especially since our existing services were already strained to their limit. Second, staff; where would the LRC find the personnel to work with these students. Third, instruction; what form was the instruction to take and whatever form it took it had to be available to students throughout their academic careers. And fourth, control; how was the LRC to identify and follow these students through the program.

These problems were resolved by taking the following steps:

- 1) Removing the writing component from the interdisciplinary tutorial program and housing

OVERCOMING THE "NO SHOW" BLUES

it separately, but within the vicinity of the LRC. This new facility became known as the Writing Skills Center.

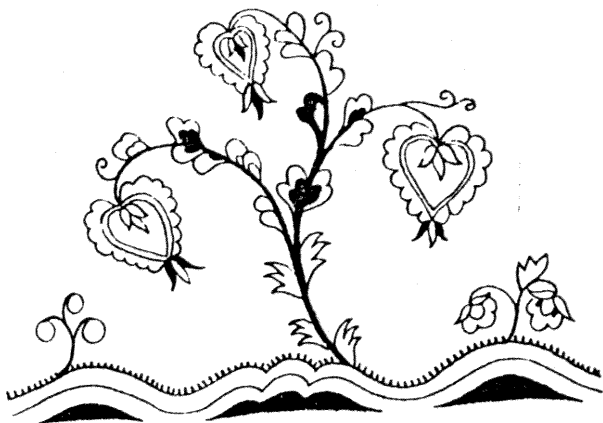
2) Drawing on LRC staff, faculty from various academic departments, and senior peer tutors to staff the Center.

3) Developing a one-credit writing tutorial in which students enroll. The writing tutorial is tied to the existing curriculum by requiring the student to be simultaneously enrolled in an academic course requiring a significant number of written assignments.

4) Arranging for students to enroll in writing tutorials at various points in their academic careers, but limiting the number of writing tutorials in which any student could enroll to three

Other problems which arose were coordinating our instruction with the faculty, training the Writing Skills Center staff to acquaint them with the various modes of academic discourse, developing diagnostic procedures which would provide the student, Center staff, and faculty with useful information on a student's skills, and developing material and instructional methods appropriate to interdisciplinary work. Since this is an evolving program, we are still experimenting with options and alternatives; not all of our problems are resolved.

Kate Hymes
Learning Resource Center
College at New Paltz - SUNY



Lorraine Perkins' description of the "no show" student at St. Cloud State University in the May 1980 issue of the WRITING LAB NEWS-LETTER reminded me of many experiences that we have had at our Writing/Reading Center, as well as countless similar ones told by colleagues from other schools. Although the problem seems to be particularly acute among students who come on a voluntary basis, it is by no means solved when they are required to attend. In many instances, mandatory attendance only creates a different kind of problem: the student who reluctantly does show up and gets little out of the session because he or she doesn't really want to be there.

We have found that the problem of the absentee student is a very difficult, if not impossible, one to solve, and the Writing Clinic at St. Cloud State seems to be following most of the standard methods to encourage students to attend. The suggestions that I would like to share with Lorraine Perkins and others will not necessarily solve the problem but might prevent writing lab staff members from becoming discouraged and developing negative attitudes that can affect their work.

First of all, it is important that writing lab staff realize that many needing help are what one might call "high-risk" students, who have had academic problems for years. Their difficulties often do not stem from lack of intelligence, but rather from personal problems: lack of support at home, insufficient motivation, and an inability to adjust to primarily middle class values, such as attending class, being punctual, and keeping appointments. Absenteeism, therefore, must be expected, and although at our Writing/Reading Center we can and do try to modify students' behavior, changing old habits is a difficult task. Since it takes a long time for new patterns to be established, I always like to remind our tutors of the people whom we are able to help rather than those we cannot because they don't show up for their appointments.

Furthermore, several years ago, we changed the "no show" designation to "absent" because the pejorative "no show" reinforces a negative attitude on the part of the tutor, and an effective tutor cannot put value judgments on a student's behavior. Also, being labelled a "no show" is upsetting to the student: we have simply to ask ourselves how we would feel being called a "no show."

Because of the absentee problem among our tutees, we make only one appointment at a time for our students. In the past, some requested an appointment every day, but very often these were the ones who did not show up at all. Thus, if the student has only one appointment and neither shows up nor cancels it, the tutor is only kept waiting one time. If the student comes, then he or she can schedule another appointment.

We have found that the best method to combat tutors' frustrations with absent students is for tutors to work with more than one student at a time. Although sometimes this procedure is a necessity because of an insufficient number of tutors during peak times, this situation also has some positive effects. Often it is pedagogically sound if a tutor is not able to give his entire attention to a student but must divide his time among two or three, for too much help can foster a dependency on the tutor. In this situation, if students are working on the same area, the tutor can talk to them about the common problem, give them exercises to do, and look over their writings while they are working. If they have different problems, the tutor can talk to one student while the other reads a handout, writes, or works on an exercise and then give individualized help to the second student while the first one works independently. In this way, if one student does not show up, the tutor is

still helping someone rather than becoming frustrated because he turned down another appointment and because he is wasting his time.

Because much of our tutoring is done in small groups, our tutors no longer have the time to become frustrated over students not showing up. In fact, they occasionally welcome the free time, to let them plan, think, and catch up on their paper work. At our Writing/Reading Center, the absent student is just one of the accepted facts of life along with other annoyances such as the paper work, inadequate space and unpredictable funding. We try to do the best we can, not only to improve the students' writing skills, but also to help them increase their motivation and to try to get those who need the help to come back for another appointment. But in the end, we have to focus and think about all those whom we have helped rather than those we have not been able to reach. And I would strongly suggest that the staff members in other writing labs, after doing everything possible, take the outlook that we have adopted. It really helps; the tutors feel better about their work, and they become better tutors for those students who do show up.

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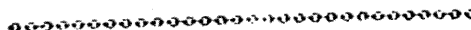
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Writer-Based Prose: A Cognitive Basis for Problems in Writing

IF WRITING IS SIMPLY THE ACT of "expressing what you think" or "saying what you mean," why is writing often such a difficult thing to do? And why do papers that do express what the writer meant (to his or her own satisfaction) often fail to communicate the same meaning to a reader? Although we often equate writing with the straightforward act of "saying what we mean," the mental struggles writers go through and the misinterpretations readers still make suggest that we need a better model of this process. Modern communication theory and practical experience agree; writing prose that actually communicates what we mean to another person demands more than a simple act of self-expression. What communication theory does not tell us is how writers do it.

An alternative to the "think it/say it" model is to say that effective writers do not simply *express* thought but *transform* it in certain complex but describable ways for the needs of a reader. Conversely, we may find that ineffective writers are indeed merely "expressing" themselves by offering up an untouched and underprocessed version of their own thought. Writer-Based prose, the subject of this paper, is a description of this undertransformed mode of verbal expression.

As both a style of writing and a style of thought, Writer-Based prose is natural and adequate for a writer writing to himself or herself. However, it is the source of some of the most common and pervasive problems in academic and professional writing. The symptoms can range from a mere missing referent or an underdeveloped idea to an unfocused and apparently pointless discussion. The symptoms are diverse but the source can often be traced to the writer's underlying strategy for composing and to his or her failure to transform private thought into a public, reader-based expression.

In *function*, Writer-Based prose is a verbal expression written by a writer to himself and for himself. It is the record and the working of his own verbal thought. In its *structure*, Writer-Based prose reflects the associative, narrative path of the writer's

Linda Flower is director of the Business and Professional Communications Program at Carnegie Mellon University. She is working under a grant from the National Institute of Education to study cognitive processes in writing. She has published essays in COLLEGE ENGLISH and Composition and Teaching, and she has just completed a book, Problem-Solving Strategies in Writing.

own confrontation with her subject. In its *language*, it reveals her use of privately loaded terms and shifting but unexpressed contexts for her statements.

In contrast, Reader-Based prose is a deliberate attempt to communicate something to a reader. To do that it creates a shared language and shared context between writer and reader. It also offers the reader an issue-centered rhetorical structure rather than a replay of the writer's discovery process. In its language and structure, Reader-Based prose reflects the *purpose* of the writer's thought; Writer-Based prose tends to reflect its *process*. Good writing, therefore, is often the cognitively demanding transformation of the natural but private expressions of Writer-Based thought into a structure and style adapted to a reader.

This analysis of Writer-Based prose style and the transformations that create Reader-Based prose will explore two hypotheses:

1. Writer-Based prose represents a major and familiar mode of expression which we all use from time to time. While no piece of writing is a pure example, Writer-Based prose can be identified by features of structure, function, and style. Furthermore, it shares many of these features with the modes of inner and egocentric speech described by Vygotsky and Piaget. This paper will explore that relationship and look at newer research in an effort to describe Writer-Based prose as a verbal style which in turn reflects an underlying cognitive process.

2. Writer-Based prose is a workable concept which can help us teach writing. As a way to intervene in the thinking process, it taps intuitive communication strategies writers already have, but are not adequately using. As a teaching technique, the notion of transforming one's own Writer-Based style has proved to be a powerful idea with a built-in method. It helps writers attack this demanding cognitive task with some of the thoroughness and confidence that comes from an increased and self-conscious control of the process.

My plan for this paper is to explore Writer-Based prose from a number of perspectives. Therefore, the next section, which considers the psychological theory of egocentrism and inner speech, is followed by a case study of Writer-Based prose. I will then pull these practical and theoretical issues together to define the critical features of Writer-Based prose. The final section will look ahead to the implications of this description of Writer-Based prose for writers and teachers.

INNER SPEECH AND EGOCENTRISM.

In studying the developing thought of the child, Jean Piaget and Lev Vygotsky both observed a mode of speech which seemed to have little social or communicative function. Absorbed in play, children would carry on spirited elliptical monologues which they seemed to assume others understood, but which in fact made no concessions to the needs of the listener. According to Piaget, in Vygotsky's synopsis, "In egocentric speech, the child talks only about himself, takes no interest in his interlocutor, does not try to communicate, expects no answers, and often does not even care whether anyone listens to him. It is similar to a monologue in a play: The child is thinking aloud, keeping up a running accompaniment, as it were, to whatever he may be doing."¹ In the seven-year olds Piaget

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