

# Transforming Early- Stage Writing into Composing: How to Motivate Young ESL Learners to Write, the Activity Way

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## Abstract

Writing is an activity in which mind and body are simultaneously engaged; content and language correlate; a person and ‘an other’, as a representative of a community, coexist. If any one element in the pairs mentioned above turns dysfunctional, writing collapses. While in a second or foreign language, possibilities of such failures and mismatches are more. This paper explores the potentials of the activity theory as discussed at length in the Soviet psychology of the first half of the last century. The paper begins with an inquiry into how writing instruction in English as a second language (ESL) can be made more productive, and ends with a proposal of transforming the act of writing into an activity of composing, using the framework of activity theory.

**Keywords:** Activity, writing, composing, cognition, pedagogy, comprehensible input.

## Introduction

One key word in the subtitle is ‘motivate’. Motivation is at work behind any human activity—concrete as the one at the ‘potter’s wheel’, or abstract, as ‘at the writer’s desk’, as Karl Marx puts it. (*Das Capital*, Volume I, Chapter 14, Section 2). Marx uses this term to suggest the unity of manual and mental labour, and to illustrate how both are complementary to each other. Drawing inspiration from Marx, the Russian psychologist Lev Vygotsky (1896

– 1934) proposed a theory to explain human activities—physical and mental-- in terms of their relation with society. Activity theory, as developed later by his students, was widely used in psychology and many other social sciences, pedagogy included.

Vygotsky was specially interested in child development, and he placed all higher order mental faculties including language on a matrix of intra-and interpersonal negotiations. As a pedagogical framework, activity theory has been proposed in this paper for making writing in a second language more learner-inviting and learner-engaged.

### **Writing and composing: Converging and diverging points**

An ESL teacher may be interested in identifying the elements that differentiate between writing and composing. First, writing is more or less impersonal, form-focused, with greater attention on grammatical accuracy, choice of lexis and organization. On the other hand, composing is more subjective, meaning-focused, and there is an intention of getting the message conveyed. In the former, no specific message is meant to be transmitted; whereas in the latter, there is information gap—something that the writer knows; but the reader does not (at least, the writer believes so). Secondly, writing does not demand the support of cognition as intensively as composing does, since the latter has to invent something new. Thirdly, composing sees the act of writing from a holistic perspective, whereas writing focuses on parts, elements, or fragments. Yet another distinction is that writing progresses stage by stage, in a linear process; whereas composing, following a recursive process, tried to present a meaningful product. A fifth difference is that writing emphasizes on individual sub-skills; composing demands their integration or fusion. Again, the self of the writer gets more projected in composing rather than in writing—his or her preferences, likes and dislikes, attitudes and so on. One more point—writing remains sentence-bound; composing is discourse-oriented. To sum up, what has been composed is more lively, dynamic and promising than what has been just written, as demanded by the teacher or examination.

Perhaps it is best viewed as a continuum of activities that range from the more mechanical or formal aspects of "writing down" on the one end, to the more complex act of composing on the other end (Hadley, A.O. 1993, as quoted in Myles, J. 2002).

### **Where and why traditional second language writing pedagogy went wrong?**

Before proceeding further into the details of writing-composing distinction, it may be imperative to trace why ESL instruction treats writing as an act, but devoid of much liveliness or scope for self-expression in it. One main reason for getting the act of writing isolated from life (and, from classrooms, too) has been pointed out below.

Many people in "literate" societies, when asked to define literacy, almost always do so in terms of reading and writing abilities. This narrow interpretation of literacy, an offspring of reductionist psychology, has reigned supreme in many academic and educational contexts for decades, greatly shaping literacy theories and classroom practices (Gergen, 1990.pp.139).

‘The reductionist psychology’, as referred to in the quote above, perhaps contributed to the pedagogical fallacy that writing instruction must begin with form, and later, may proceed to function. That may be why early stage writing instruction has been dominated by notions such as sentence as unit, focus on formal grammar, and graded vocabulary. However, one may notice that, as in normal speech, these elements are backgrounded in real life writing too, which tries to project the message. The absence of a key message makes early writing instruction mechanical for the learner, and dull for the teacher. The same factor prevents the early-stage writer from moving beyond isolated sentences to discourse. It is in discourses humans function; not in grammatically well-formed sentences. Gergen adds, “...[w]e acquire much of our fluency in a discourse when we are unconsciously exposed to ways of saying-doing-believing-valuing in meaningful settings” (p.145).

Another crucial factor that blocks L2 students' efforts to communicate through writing or, better to say, move beyond writing to composing, is the lack of exposure to comprehensible input (Krashen, 1985), for both listening and reading. Metalinguistic terms and definitions, that were traditionally considered to be effective scaffolds, in fact, block the progress of second language learning.

That second language writers need to acquire the grammar of the target language goes without saying. Yet, the efficacy of grammar instruction has been challenged in the field of second language acquisition as well. One of the most vocal opponents of metalinguistic awareness in the 1980s was Stephen Krashen, who argued that the metalinguistic knowledge and tacit grammatical knowledge were separate and that the former did not facilitate the latter. He argued that second language acquisition happened primarily through comprehensible and meaningful exposure to the target language (Matsuda, P. K. (2012.p.152).

Let me point out one more strong reason why second language instruction remains aloof from real life needs and expectations. Theoretical linguistics, while analysing its object called language, generally hesitates to enter the realm of pragmatics, or language in real operation. The safe zone of 'the ideal speaker-listener' (Chomsky, 1965) has always been the first preference for them. Distractions, shifts of interest, errors etc. which always accompany language performance, were outside their concerns.

In order to keep linguistics and especially grammar nice and clean, not only have many linguists preferred to remain within the seemingly safe boundaries of the sentence, but at the same time they have tried to discredit as linguistically or grammatically 'foreign' most of the specific units, categories, or levels used in various kinds of discourse analysis, admitting these at most to a theory of language use, to

pragmatics, to rhetoric, or to other theories or disciplines outside their scope of responsibility (Van Dijk, T.A. 1981.p.178).

### **The pedagogical implications of activity theory**

The term ‘activity’ has been used in this paper not in the general sense, but as it has been used in the restricted context of psychology. The following quote may make the distinction clear.

Everyday meanings of *activity* focus on observable appearances, referring to “states” (e.g., being in motion), “qualities” (e.g., doing something), and “things” (e.g., a particular task; cf. Oxford English Dictionary). The scientific meaning focuses on the essential relations that underlie or motivate activity (in an everyday sense). In everyday speech, one can do an activity to make transformations where one’s activity is the transforming action. It is not immediately apparent that the scientific meaning of activity in this case is referring to specific structural relations within the everyday meanings. At the same time, it is valid to say that activity, in its everyday meaning, is relevant to activity in the systematic meaning (even if it is not sufficient and is missing the most critical aspects), therefore it is all too easy for scientific speakers to sometimes shift into using an everyday meaning or for listeners to interpret a scientific meaning in an everyday way(Chaiklin, S.2019:13).

This paper posits activity on two matrices for the benefit of pedagogical analysis— person-society matrix and physical act-cognition matrix. Language, the issue we are focusing on here, functions as an interface between these two matrices. A society, or in the restricted sense of language instruction, a speech community is in constant interaction with its members (persons), and in turn, each individual borrows language from the speech community only to return it in refined forms, with additions and modifications. For example, a slang is a contribution of a single individual, to begin with, but may be modified within a small group

such as teenagers and, automobile workers. Simultaneously, a similar activity called ‘language use’ takes place on the second plane in which the physical act, for example, preparing a clay model by working in pairs, progresses with the support of cognition. The language being employed during the progress of the physical act is a meaningful activity, since (i) it serves a purpose in a speech community, (ii) physical act and cognition are merged together in it, (iii) it transforms the world around, (iv) and, it serves as a triggering factor that may give birth to another activity, in due course.

### **Bridging the gap with the help of activity theory**

It was the disciples of Lev Vygotsky, the Russian psychologist, following Vygotsky’s line of thinking, developed the activity theory in the first half of the twentieth century, for enabling psychologists to interpret human actions in terms of their social existence, and in relation to their cognition and other higher order mental mediating tools such as language. Lantolf, and Thorne devote two full chapters on elaborating the activity theory in their seminal volume, *Sociocultural theory and the genesis of second language development*. An activity is an intricate creation, made up of certain personal and social faculties, such as body, mind, memory, language, other beings including humans, social context, and so on. An activity is initiated by an individual with a purpose or motive, vaguely or clearly articulated for oneself and/or for others, which in turn, gives the activity a direction. It is the object at which an ordinary human act is directed, that “connects ... individual actions to the collective activity” (Engestrom, 1999.p. 31). Secondly, an activity takes place in a social context, a community with one or more participants such as the family, classroom, religious or social group. This partnership leads to another feature of an activity—role assignment and fulfilment. This division of labour progresses in line with the shared beliefs and conventions of that community. Actions—physical or mental—are carried out with the help of appropriate tools, concrete such as a machine or abstract such as language.

Therefore, activity is always tool mediation. Finally, on the completion of the activity, or even during the process, observable behavioural changes emerge as the outcome. (Lantolf, and Thorne, 2006).

### **Classroom composing as an activity**

As the sub-title elaborates, the intention of this paper is to explore the ways and means of getting learners involved in the ESL writing, and the tool suggested is the activity theory. Within the limited space of a classroom, how can we make sure that the ‘something’ we did was an activity; and therefore, it is likely to invite learner’s attention? There must be a difference in the class environment, and in the doer of the activity, between the pre- and post-activity period. Let us elaborate it further. Two children are at work in the school garden for about 15 minutes; and in the end, a few sapling have been transplanted safely. As instructed earlier, the children use their own English—whatever its quality may be. They have been functioning in English for the last 15 minutes—instructing, following, agreeing, disagreeing, modifying, correcting, adding, supplementing, explaining, illustrating, demonstrating, complimenting, congratulating and so on. Utterances may not be well-structured, nor the vocabulary chosen, the apt or accurate ones. Still, the activity is over, both are happy. Their job is congratulated by the teacher—in better English. Many changes take place at the intra-personal and inter-personal plains. Change takes place in the environment, too—the class as well as nature. Instant feedback and words of encouragement from the adult (teacher) and peers prompt the learners to undertake the next activity—erecting a fence around the garden. Development takes place simultaneously on four plains--physiological, psychological, cognitive and linguistic.

The little development of the spoken idiom through interaction, can later be transferred to the written mode, as well. For example, the two who were at work in the garden, sit with better informed or more knowledgeable others, to draft a brief report of what

they did in the garden. This piece is going to be displayed on the wall magazine. The activity in the garden triggers motivation to compose, because the write up is going to be noticed and read by peers and teachers. It is no more simply ‘writing’, it is elevated to the heights of ‘composing’.

### **Listening churned into comprehensible input for composing**

Comprehensible input may be available from several sources—listening to peers, more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky,1978), and electronic media; also from self-motivated reading. Cognitive and linguistic development occur faster in the company of the more knowledgeable others, including peers and electronic media. This development can be best made use of in the writing class, if properly guided. Since the spoken idiom of the target language is best captured through listening to others, the same will help the writer in narration and description on one plain of writing. On another plain, the learner is able to cut-paste or adapt chunks of dialogues from the processed language intake while composing a story or conversation.

### **Reading provides chunks of language as such, for composing.**

The traditional notion that sentence-level grammatical accuracy may lead to meaningful composing has been proved false; students end up with transforming sentences from active to passive voice and from direct to indirect speech, in their examination scripts. To borrow a much popular pair of terms, ‘usage’ does not lead to ‘use’. (Widdowson, H. G. 1978). If explicit teaching of grammar were partly replaced by inspired reading, the result would be better in second language classrooms across the globe.

Reading can be defined as the best source of comprehensible input in an exposure-poor classroom and social environment as in the case of India. There is no harm, if teachers go back to the early twentieth century prescription of Reading Method, specially designed for the Indian classrooms by Michael West. Subconscious assimilation of larger units of

language, generally known as ‘chunks’, through motivated reading is likely to contribute more and better to comprehensible input. These chunks, again, are likely to be ‘cut-pasted’ by learners while writing. For example, let us look at the chunks available in English to begin an animal story, a fable or a fairy tale. ‘Once upon a time’, ‘long ago’, ‘once’, ‘many years ago’ etc. are some of the easiest and natural ways for a learner to begin an imaginary narrative of one’s own, again by ‘cut-pasting’ characters from various stories, already read. Thus, a super human being from one story, a beast from another, a tiny insect from yet another fable together form a new team. For example, the ancient character, the thirsty but clever crow, the modern Micky Mouse, the ant that saved the dove from the hunter’s arrow, the tortoise who won the race through ‘slow and steady’ movement—all can be ‘actors’ in the ‘forthcoming story’. The action words or verbs can be borrowed from earlier reading (flew back, walked as fast as he could, was aiming at etc.). The features and qualities of the characters in terms of adjectives, surface from memory to the writer’s help-- – the *clever* crow, the *cunning* mouse, the *slow* tortoise. Again, the ways and manners in which certain things happened (adverbs) in the stories read earlier in terms of adverbs are readily available for the learners in their composing --walked *fast*, leaped *forward*, was *terribly* shocked and so on. The same is the case with locale, too. The same pattern of permutation-combination is available for choosing a locale to begin with and, then moving to some other topography--this can be pooled from the various stories already read.

Little conscious effort is at work in choosing the tense forms, subject-verb agreement, low order passivization and indirect speech and so on. Syntax does not surface; it follows the flow of the story. Of course, mistakes will be there in this type of composing; but a pedagogically well-informed teacher can help learners through effective, timely remediation processes. Mistakes do not pull the writer back from freely composing since she or he has a new story emerging within. This ‘possession of a new message’ acts as a powerful triggering

force of motivation in composing. This element of motivation is absent when the learner ‘writes’ or reproduces the story of the thirsty crow in the classroom or in the examination hall.

### **Conclusion**

This paper tried to offer a small set of guidelines to teachers of ESL writing, especially in the primary classes on how the act of writing can be transformed into composing by making it more learner-inviting, engaging and participating. Activity theory drawn from psychology provides the theoretical framework.

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