

## REVIEWS

Munsell, Paul and Martha Clough. *A Practical Guide for Advanced Writers in English as a Second Language*. MacMillan, New York, 1984. 301 pp. Paperback R23,40.

Teachers of University level ESL students in South Africa have a particularly challenging task. They are dealing with students at a relatively advanced level of interlanguage, but who have not yet attained the desired degree of proficiency in English. Also, as a result of a number of years of often inadequate ESL teaching, these students have lost their initial plasticity and enthusiasm, and have usually 'fossilized' an array of linguistic habits that are often both stigmatizing and communicatively interfering. At tertiary level the teacher's task is thus simultaneously one of remediation (in the sense of having to deal with the students' existing linguistic imperfections) and 'upliftment' (in the sense that the students' level of fossilization must be destabilized, and the students must be stimulated to refine their competence to reach the standard of Academic English required by their university studies).

The stated intent of this textbook's authors is to help advanced ESL students to 'write more accurately' and 'to select and organize ideas more effectively'. They approach writing as a product, rather than as a process, and provide tools, techniques and strategies which - if applied rote-fashion - are supposed to both correct imperfections, and raise the overall standard of the students' essays.

The Units in the book conduct students through a graded series of writing tasks, working from the (comparatively) less complex discourse forms (description, narration) through successively more cognitively challenging ones (classification, compare and contrast, analysis, argumentation, persuasion). Each Unit consists of a Warmup activity, an Editing exercise, a Planning and Writing section, and a sample composition of the type being taught in the Unit.

The Warmup Exercises nod at the expressivist school of writing by suggesting that the students try brainstorming, journals, freewriting and peer group sessions, but basically the prewriting and invention stages are largely ignored. After at most suggesting a group discussion question, or a brainstorming outline, the majority of the Warmup exercises move briskly into 'safe' cognitive formalist exercises - lists, outlines, structured 'fill-in-the-blank' questions. The exercises are predominantly analytical in nature, and emphasize sorting and arranging of textbook-provided material. When material has to be student generated, it is very often rigidly controlled by giving the student specific 'gaps' to fill. A structure is provided, which the student must then flesh out, a topic sentence assigned for the student to write a paragraph around, or a statement made for which supporting details of examples must be found.

[For example, in a unit dealing with chronological discourse (specifically, writing about a trip), students are asked to find examples to develop the three themes 'Exciting', 'Tiring', 'Dangerous' for each of ten given details about the trip.

('1. The taxi ride to the airport.'  
'2. The airport and the boarding of the airplane' and  
so on) p. 15]

This results in a type of 'colour by numbers' approach, allowing the student very little autonomy, and placing direction firmly in the hands of the teacher.

This approach is obviously an attempt (and it is a laudable one) to make the process of writing as stress-free and unchaotic as possible. In teaching writing one has always to balance out the dialectic of creativity and control. Too much of either extreme gives unhappy results. An overemphasis on creativity can result in chaotic, overpersonalized, 'writer based' prose, while too much control inhibits the composing process and produces stilted and constricted writing. ESL teachers usually emphasize the 'control' end of the continuum as it is manifestly obvious that ESL students must have some command of the medium before freeing their creativity.

There is, however, always the danger that accentuation of control in an attempt to make writing as safe as possible can totally sterilize the composing process. Writers need some chaos and stress. They need to wrestle with material, to experience some dialectical confusion in order to generate a point of view, something to say, and an exigency to say it. Ideally, one must oneself gestate a pattern out of chaos, not have the pattern presented to one to fill in. The pitfall in teaching writing this way is that control and mastery of the medium are learned by rote, not by personal experience. (I am irresistibly reminded of those slimming machines that simulate activity in muscles via electric currents, but do nothing for one's actual, intrinsic level of fitness).

The control-creativity debate is a difficult one to resolve satisfactorily, and I do not think that this text has managed to avoid the pitfalls inherent in the choice of one approach in preference to the other.

In addition to the exercises discussed, many of the Warmup sections involve revision or pruning of sample essays in the Unit. The logic of including revision and editing tactics in a period designated as a 'warmup' session prior even to a first draft totally eludes me.

Whatever the reasoning is, it is at least consistent. From Warmup exercises we move straight into the Editing section. Students are given flawed sample compositions, with all the errors indicated, and asked to correct them. Throughout the *Guide*, there is heavy emphasis on correcting 'imperfect' writing samples with regard to style, structure and language. This assumes, firstly, that ESL students have the objective analytical ability to be able to perceive these imperfections, and the skill and knowledge to be able to correct them; and, secondly, that the ability to analyse and correct someone else's errors (stylistic, structural and linguistic) is a transferable skill, enabling one to write English that is free of such errors. Although seductive, neither of these assumptions has been conclusively proven. (In fact, I am sure many teachers of ESL will attest to the fact that dealing with numbers of samples of flawed writing is anything but beneficial to one's own English, and that prolonged exposure to imperfect language tends to wear away one's native speaker intuitions to an alarming degree).

In addition, little distinction is made between levels and types of imperfection in writing. The implication seems to be that the kind of paper you write on (one of the first issues raised

in the book), the structure of one's paragraph, the soundness of one's argument, and one's use of the present conditional tense are all of equal and simultaneous earth shattering importance. A sense of discrimination, as to when it is important to consider what kind of error and the weight to be assigned each, seems either to be assumed inherent in the student, or ignored as irrelevant by the authors.

At last, after being marched grimly through Warmups and Editing (with a 'Tip' thrown in to add a humanistic touch - sample: 'Even experienced writers have "off" days. Don't be surprised if you have days when it is difficult to write and when what you say seems worthless. Better days lie ahead.' p. 57), students arrive at the 'Planning and Writing' section of the Unit. Here they are given a short list of topics, related to work done in the Unit, and launched into writing their own essay. A drawback here, not the authors' fault, is that a great many of the Units (and hence the writing topics) are organized around experiences that will be common to ESL students studying in the United States, but that will not necessarily be meaningful or accessible to South African ESL students.

Each unit ends with a sample composition on one of the topics assigned. These seem especially concocted for the book, and while I appreciate the rationale behind supplying student-style writing as models, I regret the lack of a wider (and perhaps more stimulating) range of prose to serve as model and impetus for ideas, information, and interesting uses of language. (This is not a crucial gap, however, as a good teacher should be able to supplement the contents of the textbook with various writing samples culled from newspapers, reading texts, advertisements etc.)

By the end of the *Guide*, students have been guided through an almost complete spectrum of the kinds of writing they are likely to be asked to produce at tertiary level (including some kinds that they will only require at an American institution of learning - for example, the statement of purpose required by applicants to a Graduate Program). Used by a sensitive teacher, who will perhaps be able to modify the structuralism and formalism of the product - bias in approach, and to re-locate or apportion appropriate weight to the editing and revision work, this *Guide* could be a useful handbook in ESL writing classes. There are a number of very valuable guidelines for introductory and concluding paragraphs, transition techniques, strategies for achieving coherence, tools of the trade so to speak, which can provide inexperienced writers with reasonably 'flop-proof' recipes for churning out standard academic essays. I also liked the suggestion that students compile a Personal Checklist of

errors culled from their own (marked) assignments, for use in editing their essays before submission.

Accuracy and improved organization - the authors' stated objectives - may result from judicious use of this *Guide*. (Although I would be hesitant to commit myself to a wager on it.) It is, however, highly unlikely that any sense of joy, excitement or meaningfulness in the composing process will be communicated to the student. A personal commitment to the process of making meaning on paper and sharing this with an audience will not be one of the side effects of the kind of pedagogical approach exemplified. ESL teachers will have to decide for themselves whether this is, indeed, a priority or a luxury in the teaching of writing to their students.

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R. Quirk and H.G. Widdowson (eds). *English in the World: Teaching and Learning the Language and Literature*. London: Cambridge University Press, 1985. 275 pp. Paperback.

Here are the papers of an international conference entitled 'Progress in English Studies' held in London during 1984 to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the British Council. There were over 70 delegates to the conference. The organisers had the bright idea of allowing two commentators to summarise their views of each paper after it was read. Many of the commentaries, however, were simply laudatory.

As you might expect, the papers delivered stressed that English is now the lingua franca of the world. At present over 700 million people use it and do so anyway that they like so long as somebody gets the general idea of what they are saying. How can there ever be such a thing as a standard type of English? Will Australians and native-born Englishmen eventually find each other incomprehensible? What about the Americans? The doom-watchers who have descended on our generation like one of the plagues of Egypt are sure that the English diaspora will result in the geographically separated users of the language developing