Development of a written style among newly literate people

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Teaching reading to first and second graders in a public school in the U.S. may seem a far cry from working in a literacy program among a newly literate people. But at least one parallel has been observed in building the bridge between oral and written communication, particularly as it relates to the development of a written style distinct from that of the oral.

Many have successfully used a language experience approach to reading, involving such activities as recording verbatim what students actually say, and then having them read it back. They are their own words, they know what they have said, and the feedback is immediate. True, there may be more memorization than reading going on initially, but with repeated opportunities, reading takes the fore.

In one case, the visit of several boa constrictors (along with their keeper) to a first grade classroom provided a springboard for an animated discussion of snakes, what it feels like to touch them, and how they live. Some of these ideas were then written down on the chalkboard as the children offered them, and later several classroom books were made, using the children’s own language.

Throughout the year, the children in this room also did weekly “cartoons,” coloring and cutting out a ditto of familiar cartoon characters, and then dictating a conversation to an adult to write down for them, again in their own words.

Page 1.
Very little was ever said about the acceptability or grammaticality of any particular word or expression that the children chose; if they said, “He a big man,” that is what got written down, so that there would be a match between what was said and what was read. But in the course of doing many such chalkboard stories and cartoons, the teacher noticed something curious. After a dictated statement had been written down, the children sometimes did some unconscious editing when they read it. Thus the spoken, “I don’t wanna go” might be read back as “I don’t want to go”, or even “I do not want to go.”

What was going on? Quite possibly, the children sensed an increased formality associated with writing and reading over against speech, and they were unconsciously correcting as they read back what they had said.

Here is where the comparison with newly literate peoples may conceivably be drawn, as they initially develop a written style in their language. It should not surprise us that such a written style diverges from the oral, as it does in major world languages, though even that seems to take many of us aback at first. But what is even more surprising, and has been noted by many working among the newly literate, is that they seem to have an intuitive sense of what elements should make up their written style, even before any body of literature has been produced.

Reactions to direct transcriptions of speech texts evidence this fact in the Highlander bilingual education project in Vietnam, “… the people strongly objected to certain speech elements being written just the way they spoke them in normal speech …. ‘We know that’s the way we talk, but it doesn’t sound right written that way. It should be this way ….’”

What is probably the most difficult thing for an outsider to do as a body of literature begins to be produced, is to keep hands off as far as actual elements of style are concerned, and let the vernacular literature develop in its own way. Sarah Gudschinsky emphasized this idea: “One of the most basic factors in a successful literacy program is letting the vernacular style develop by itself without any instructions from us.”

This does not mean, however, that no input should be given to indigenous authors as they begin to write. If this were so, there would be no need for writers workshops that have proved to be very effective.

Rather, based on the reports of those with experience in this area, this paper proposes the use of a short list of questions regarding written style, in the hope that some of them may prove productive as a follow-up in a particular language. The question format provides an alternative to prescriptive approaches which have attempted to lay down universals of written style, but which have not necessarily been applicable to the wide variety of languages currently under study.

For a given language, certain of the questions may have no bearing at all. But it is hoped that some of them may prove useful in languages where indigenous authors are beginning to write, and that as more research is done in this area, a more productive list of questions can be formulated. The questions have been grouped roughly into categories in an attempt to organize them in an orderly fashion.

1. Audience

Who is the audience?
What cues will they need?

Is the audience in the writer’s mind as he writes?

Is the language simple enough to be understood by a 12 year old?

If speakers of more than one dialect will be reading the material, has editing been done (by one or a group of individuals) to eliminate as many unacceptable words or expressions as possible?

2. Grammar

Does the written style need to be more concise, or more elaborated, than the spoken?

Is there information implicit in the oral communication that needs to be made explicit in the written mode?

Is the level of redundancy such that it allows for inclusion of sufficient information to make the meaning plain, without overloading the reader?

Is there a need for overt marking of participants, clause relationships, paragraphs, or other features?

Is it necessary for the written text to be more or less strict with chronology and logical sequence?

Does the purpose for which something is written, or the type of literature it is, affect its composition and style?

3. Editing

Is it more productive to have the author edit his own work, or to have someone else do it?

Has attention been paid to who is doing the writing and editing? Are there cultural factors that must be considered to avoid potential difficulties? (Male/female, older/younger, high/low status, inclusion/deletion of author’s and editor’s names)

Is individual editing or group editing a more productive way to discover the vernacular rules of written style?

Is it helpful to record such language-specific rules as they are “discovered” for reference during editing?

If so, do you train writers to use these rules as they write, or only later during editing?

If individuals edit their own work, how much time should elapse between writing and editing?

If a bilingual speaker does the editing, has there been a check to see that the editing does not reflect the influence of the second language?

4. Comparison

Has any comparison been done between a story told orally first, and then later written by the same person without reference to the spoken version?
Has a general comparison been done between 1) texts transcribed from tape, 2) edited texts transcribed from tape, and 3) texts which originate in the written form? Does this give any clues to writing “rules” operating in the native speaker’s mind?

5. Speech patterns

How have elements of the spoken style, such as intonation, pause, gestures, speed, and context been incorporated into the written style?

Are the speech patterns emphasized and clarified by the punctuation, or violated?

How have quotations been dealt with in the written text, especially to distinguish between speakers?

6. Phonology

Are there phonological distinctions lost in oral communication (contractions and consonant/vowel elision) which should be preserved in the written mode?

7. Loan words

Is there any reaction to inclusion of loan words in written literature?

8. Conversation

Have conversational texts been analyzed to get at natural style?

9. Format

Who has determined the actual format of written documents, and how has it been done? (size of paper, type, lines, paragraphing, illustrations, colors, and binding)

References

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Page 5.