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## TRANSCRIBING PRACTICE MAKES BETTER WRITING ESL

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### Abstract

*“Practice makes perfect” is well-known English saying and in something like ESL, practice will make students better especially if there is enough of the right kind of practice. To be truly effective practice needs to be incorporated into new paradigms. Students need to realize that practice, practice and more practice is the major key to unlock success: Practice for writing English needs to be broken down into the components of writing and the separate components are then practiced till they are much better. This is the system sports people use to achieve success – practice the components – then put them together to win on the day. So ESL students must learn the habits of practice – keeping an English diary, and most importantly transcribing at least five pages of hand written English every day, copying great writers. It must be hand written and it should be read aloud as it is written –why because we remember a little of what we hear, read and speak but we remember a lot of what we write - so no photo copying! Hand written, legible, double-spaced hand writing! Most ESL students do not listen to English enough, do not read enough, do not speak enough and do not transcribe enough English to make great improvements in their English. ESL students must learn a new Paradigm, “Learn, especially transcribe what I can use, and then practice what I’ve learnt.” That way we might spawn new generations of great ESL writers.*

**Keywords:** *More practice, writing, transcribing English.*

### INTRODUCTION

The genesis for these reflections, this is a reflective paper not a research paper, well the genesis occurred when we were bemoaning the poor English in papers which we were editing for publication in an English Studies journal which were written by graduates of our esteemed schools of English. So we were gabbing away and throwing up ideas for how the teaching-learning process for writing English ESL could be improved. Whilst we acknowledge there will be no magic solutions, no *sim-salabim* we believe that the result of these reflections need a lot of future trials over long periods to see if what we propose can make a substantial difference to learning the art and practice of writing good, fluent, captivating English.

Of the four forms of language, writing is one of the most challenging. Both writing and speaking have two modes – the first where we are repeating what has already been written or spoken and the second where the writer or speaker is creating the written or spoken words. In this paper we will focus on repeating good or great writing to solve some of the problems associated with creating good writing.

Now when we look at the way in which writing is taught we find that in general students are asked to write about something or other starting from writing about simple things to more complicated writing as time goes by (Trimmer & Sommers, 1984). So the students are asked to write

English and be creative at the same time. Then there are lots of grammar exercises where the students are asked to pick the right answer or write a letter in a box or fill in the right words in the gaps left in a Cloze sentence.

But nowhere do we find students being asked to *hand-write* or *transcribe* a copy of existing writing, of a great speech or part of a great novel or a great newspaper article or even part of a text book on grammar. Hereinafter we will write about transcribing existing writing avoiding the term copying writing to avoid confusion with the similar but different act of copy-righting. We will strongly advocate transcribing great writing for the private purpose of building memory muscle of how good English is written

### **PRACTICE! WHAT DO WE MEAN BY PRACTICE?**

Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English (2001) defines *practice* (n) as: a regular activity that you do in order to improve a skill *"It takes hours of practice to learn to play the guitar."* *"With a little more practice you should be able to pass your test."* It is also relevant to what we are writing about Longman's (ibid) also includes Put something into practice – if you put an idea, plan etc. into practice you start to use it and see if it is effective. *"The hard part is putting it all into practice."* And they include "Practice makes perfect" – which is used to say that *"if you do an activity regularly you'll become very good at it"*.

So practice is not something we do just when studying but it applies to all kinds of activities we do from driving to debating, from studying to singing. In fact practice is the basis of all learning. We first learnt to practice in kindergarten – we can still remember the songs we learnt in kinder: Like *"Potong bebek angsa"* and *"Twinkle twinkle little star"* and that is how we learnt the alphabet and basic vocabulary and how to put basic sentences together and how to count and tell the time. We learnt them all by practicing them. Students can still remember those nursery rhymes, why? Because they practiced them over and over again.

And one important thing to note that most practice is repetitive practice. Driving hundreds of times round and round the same race track like great racing car drivers (Jakarta Post, 2016) playing over and over the same sonatas till the performer knows them by heart, till they are engrained in memory muscle banks.

Ur (1996, p. 20) has written "Practice...is the activity through which language skills and knowledge are consolidated and thoroughly mastered. As such it is *the most important of all steps of learning*; hence *the most important activity of the teacher is to initiate and manage activities that provide students with opportunities for effective practice*". We wholeheartedly concur with Ur and it is our purpose in this paper to show that transcribing good and great English writing is one of the most effective ways for students to learn how to write better ESL.

### **Two Basic Types of Practice**

There are two basic types of practice, repetitive practice and creative practice. The first, repetitive practice is doing something repetitively or repeating what someone has already written either words or music or even transcribing or copying what someone has written or composed or painted or built before. Repetitive practice is the basis for learning most of the performing arts for concerts, plays, singing, even for painting (Picasso's father made him paint copies of great paintings from the age of 7) (Digneo, 2016) and also for making films, the artists practice their music or their lines over and over so that when they perform they know their notes or their lines by heart and they can then use their vocalization or playing or acting to create a maximum effect for filming or for their audience. Even public speaking, which appears extemporaneous, is often the result of much repetitive practice to learn a speech by heart, thus Reagan, the ex-actor, when he was President, would lock his office door for hours and practice a major speech so that he knew it by heart. As a result he could give a great speech without any notes. As Flora Morris Brown (Digneo, 2016) has written, "copying as training of brain muscle (for writing) makes sense (we) can compare it with baseball players hitting the ball thousands of times (in practice).

The other type of practice is creative practice – i.e. putting into practice what we have learnt by heart. To go back to sport, repetitive practice is what is done day in and day out to learn the component moves by heart, to build brain muscle, and creative practice is putting all you've learnt into practice during the game. Similarly repetitive practice is what Reagan did behind closed doors,

creative practice is what he did in front of his audience, speaking to his audience, and he could ad-lib, engage with them and empathize with them because he had learnt his speech by heart. Even our F1 drivers do the same: Repetitive practice is what they do before their races. (Practicing) Creative driving is what they do during the race when they can put all their driving skills to the test, racing against the other racers because they know the course inside-out and backwards and they each know their own car by heart so they know instinctively when to make a move to pass their opponent and when not to.

What we find when we look closely at what the top sport-persons and the top performers do is they make continuous, daily practice part of their personal paradigm for living. They set aside time for practice, usually at least six days a week, sometimes morning and afternoon, whatever they feel is necessary to reach and get to top performance. Moreover, we will find them repetitively practicing every component of their activity so that they can perform and even improve each and every component to the best of their ability and then they combine each and all of the components into outstanding creative practice i.e. playing the game or competing in the race. Similarly, each genre of writing has slightly different components and student writers should be free to choose the genres they want to write in then transcribe writings from well-known writers in those genres even writers with unique writing styles like Tom Peters in *The Circle of Innovation* (1997).

### **PRACTICING TRANSCRIBING OF GREAT WRITING**

The well-known saying, “*Practice makes perfect*” was introduced above: In writing ESL, even though practice may not make the student perfect, it will certainly make him better, especially if there is enough of the right kinds of practice. So the questions are what kinds of practice and how much of it is needed and how can students be helped to make changes in their personal paradigm for writing ESL to incorporate enough practice to make a really significant improvement in their ability to practice writing creatively.

The first thing we recommend based on looking at the other activities like sports and the performing arts is that we need to introduce repetitive copying, transcribing by hand coupled with recital where our students transcribe good writing produced by others and read it out aloud to get the cadence— this is something that is not being done at present, e.g. transcribing parts of Paulo Coelho’s *The Alchemist* (2008). There is a tendency to underestimate the difficulties in learning to write creatively in English. This in part stems from the fact that English and Indonesian both share a common alphabet and indeed many words are similar but it is precisely this similarity that leads to difficulties.

What are the potential benefits of this transcribing and reciting? Firstly transcribing by hand with recital out loud is the method guaranteed to achieve maximum memory retention. And what is it that we should remember – whatever the student and the teacher feels are important - certainly a variety of writings in many different genres. From transcribing the student will get into the habit of putting his qualifiers, adjectives etc. before his nouns instead of after as in Indonesian and so on and so forth and there is so much to learn to embed in his memory that 1,000 pages a year of transcribed writing would be a good target to aim for. Oh, and it must be transcribed by hand- because when something is written by hand it is remembered far better than when it is typed and if it is typed there is no way to ensure it is not duplicated, photocopied or reprinted from some other student or even just downloaded from a web site. What is important is that each student transcribes their own written copies of their chosen books, articles, speeches, songs, poems, brochures, articles even and especially so, transcribing parts of text books for learning English e.g. parts of Penny Ur’s excellent *A Course in Language Teaching* (1996) or O’Dell and McCarthy’s *English Collocations in Advanced Use* (2008) and Alan Crawford’s *Thinking Classroom* book (2005). And this is not something new, Mike (Digneo, 2016) in a comment on a blog noted that this kind of practice was a habit from Elementary School when he had to copy pages from the dictionary! And, please take note, this is being done as practice in a school in the USA where English is the mother tongue of the students, so how much more important must it be for students of English ESL to practice transcribing English even dictionary entries or whole dictionary pages.

So if our target is 1,000 pages hand copied in two semesters, how much is that in a day? Assuming 16 weeks per semester, at 6 days a week, it is only 5 pages per day. Now assuming the

student can hand-transcribe 5 pages per hour that is only 1 to 2 hours per day which is a reasonable work load for a student who is serious about improving his ability to learn to write good English.

### **But That's Boring!**

Boring is in the mind – if the student finds it boring then he better take another more interesting course like Mortuary Management but if the teacher encourages the students and stimulates their interest with complimentary activities then the keen student should approach the transcribing with the attitude that the purpose is to learn by heart forms, patterns, collocations, (O'Dell, 2008) the cadences and expressions of great English. If the student finds it boring copying writing why is it not boring to sing songs again and again, singing the same words, again and again. The amount of material out there is so vast, so the real problem now is choosing which parts of books, speeches, poems or blogs etc.-to transcribe? Which parts to remember?

### **EXPECTED RESULTS**

After completing the proposed transcribing and comprehension units it is expected that students will build up a brain-bank, a memory muscle, of collocations, forms of expression, of great writing and good grammar which will enable them to compose well-constructed creative writing with good collocation and grammar much more easily than at present when they are trying to compose creative writing with very little stored in their memory banks which results in poor compositions and frustration for both students and teachers alike. The present writing programs are expecting the students to fly, but they have not let their feathers grow first, so the result is, as to be expected, the students fall or flop down. Transcribing with comprehension exercises is similar to listening comprehension lessons, will enable their feathers to grow, so that, when they have grown enough, the students can then be expected to fly, to write creatively and to write well independently.

This expectation is borne out in a blog by Greg Digneo, only a few years ago, and in the comments on that blog. Digneo's (2016) guest blog entitled *The Brain-Dead Simple but Astonishingly Effective Way to Become a Better Writer* basically postulates that transcribing good writing will help aspiring writers to become better writers; and this is for writers with English as their L1. And the comments following the blog from many different people supported Greg's exhortation. Many of the commentators referred to their own experiences using copying practice to learn other creative skills like playing music, singing, art, sports and karate; they also referred to other well-known English writers who had used transcribing practice to develop their own skills including Hemingway. The advantage of transcribing by hand rather than by typing was also discussed with general agreement that physically transcribing by hand strengthened the memory muscles for writing and Greg (ibid) commented that it will help the learner to learn the cadences of a writer's style.

### **Proposed Course: Transcribing English**

We recommend that English departments should introduce units of *"Transcribing English"*. A draft syllabus could include the following:

- Definitions, scope of course
- Choosing genre
- Choosing and transcribing works or parts of works
- Analysing the transcribed works,
- Ghost writing / copying the style of the transcribed work
- Sharing and evaluating writings by partners and peer group members

And even before any such courses are introduced, serious students of writing ESL can create their own one-man courses and start transcribing great English every day. Each student who does so is sure to be able to write much, much better ESL after doing that for a year.

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