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FROM READING TO WRITING ACTS

RESUME

L'article décrit une approche de l'enseignement de l'anglais écrit à des apprenants de Queen's College (City University of New-York). A partir de l'observation des difficultés et des autres activités des apprenants, notamment leurs lectures, l'auteur propose une démarche fondée sur l'analyse en actes de parole et la réduction de textes en « phrases thèmes ». Après avoir donné des exemples des catégories utilisées, l'auteur décrit les exercices proposés aux apprenants. La dernière partie de l'article est une critique constructive de la méthodologie proposée : le manque d'exhaustivité de l'analyse, le niveau d'abstraction trop élevé, le manque de netteté dans la délimitation des catégories sont les trois principaux problèmes soulevés.

I. BACKGROUND AND JUSTIFICATION OF THE APPROACH

The development of the approach to writing to be described in this article was prompted by several factors :

Three semesters of **observation of the writing problems** of intermediate ESL learners at Queens College (City University of New York). These problems proved to be not only of a grammatical nature, but more often of an organizational one. Learners were unable to write coherent paragraphs providing supporting details for one given topic sentence[1], an especially important task for our learners, as it is part of the final exam which determines their eligibility for college. Further analysis of their writing showed an unawareness not only of cohesion/coherence techniques but of the very relationships between sentences ; an ignorance of the hierarchization of information in a text, an unawareness of the levels of generality within a text — that is, an inability to differentiate between the general and the specific ; in short, an overall lack of knowledge of the rhetorical conventions which constitute normal written discourse[2].

Observation of a general **emphasis in composition manuals** and classroom teaching practices either on strict sentence construction or on descriptive and narrative writing. Unfortunately, as J.F. Green has pointed out, it is expository writing which is so necessary for college, while " imaginative, narrative, or informal personal writing is rarely required ". This emphasis, then, must be construed as a failure to recognize learners' needs and prepare them adequately for the demands of college writing as a babying tendency in the nature of the tasks we expect learners to be able to perform, and, as such, as a perpetuation of the gap that now exists between ESL writing and writing for a real university situation. Moreover, the exclusion of preliminary reading tasks from descriptive and narrative writing exercises automatically eliminates the need for training in the critical analytical processes — that is, practice in the interpretation and re-structuring of information culled from reading materials, and the re-incorporation of this selected information into a new piece

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[1] Topic sentence is taken to mean a restricted generalization which " expresses the main idea on which a paragraph is based and developed ". Di Pippo (1971).

[2] It should be noted that because rhetorical conventions are culturally-linked, these problems varied with each national group. Needless to say, there was the occasional student to whom rational discursive development came naturally, but, this being the exception, the problem of making this explicit and helping learners to adopt certain patterns, remained. For even though " what appears as a logical sequence of main and supporting ideas by our rhetorical traditions is the result of our cultural conditioning " (Dubin and Olshtain, 1980) college professors will expect ideas to be dealt with in ways traditional to English, and we therefore must accept this imposition of " culturally conditioned rhetorical traditions ". (Dubin, 1980).

of expository writing. Again, the ESL writing — college writing gap looms before us.

Learners' **involvement in two other types of activities,** which seemed to set the stage for the introduction of this approach to writing :

a. Reading Comprehension using Authentic Materials[3] :

At the beginning of each term, learners were given a choice as to the type of reading texts they would prefer : recommended commercial ESL readers or materials taken from newspapers, magazines and college textbooks. In spite of repeated warnings that the latter would necessarily be a more challenging choice (due to the uncontrolled nature of the authentic text — the absence of grading of difficulty, the lack of grammatical progression, proliferation of new vocabulary words, idioms, cultural references, etc...), an overwhelming majority of learners each term opted for authentic materials. (Perhaps their choice should serve as an indication to ESL teachers that the learners themselves perceive the gap between ESL work and college work mentioned earlier, and that their motivation is greatly increased as this gap is narrowed).

For the purposes of this demonstration, a detailed description of all the reading comprehension exercises accompanying these texts would not be appropriate. Suffice it to say that learners were asked to carefully read each text at length at home, and work in groups on various exercises in class.

Each text was then discussed extensively in order to ensure total comprehension before proceeding to summarize the text.

The assumption upon which the summarizing was based — simply that by selecting for each paragraph a topic sentence and supporting details, learners could then string the topic sentences together to form a summary — was dealt with in M.J. Gremmo's work on reading :

" At the macro level of the discursive organization of the text, it appears that for a student to fully understand a text, it is vital to identify the sentences fulfilling the role we have termed Positing. (Taken here as synonymous with topic sentence). The positing sentences are differentiated by the fact that they are not related to the directly preceeding or succeeding sentence but correspond to the hierarchization of the information carried through a text. They often could start a text on their own. The positing sentences of one particular text, grouped together, can serve as an " acceptable " summary of the text ". (Gremmo, 1977, p. 23).

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[3] Authentic materials are defined as any documents produced for purposes other than teaching a second language ; that is, materials produced in real communication situations for native speakers, and not texts that have undergone simplification or other modification to render them more digestible to second language learners. For a more complete discussion of `` authentic materials '', see Abé et al. (1979).

A similar approach seems to be suggested by Dubin and Olshtain (1980, p. 360) : " [ESOL learners] need to know that most paragraphs have a single controlling idea usually recoverable in a topic sentence. They need to look closely at how the other sentences of the paragraph support the topic sentence ", although their goal is to use " the plan of the written material as a tool for better reading ", and not, as is the case here, to use the reading material as a means to achieving better writing [4].

b. Exposure to Speech Acts :

A parallel component of the learners' training consisted of listening to recordings of authentic interactions between native speakers, with the aim of first identifying the communicative functions manifested in these interactions, and then of reproducing acceptable utterances at the appropriate times. They had, thus, already acquired a repertoire of categories or " speech acts ", along with specific realizations of each act, either provided by the teacher or derived from listening to these taped interactions. (An example of a speech act and some of its realizations would be : speech act : Giving Advice

realizations : If I were you, I would...
Why don't you...
Try + ing
You could always... etc.

If, then, this notion of categories could merely be transferred to writing, the labeling of the categories being changed to suit the purposes of writing, the learners should be able to repeat the process of first identifying the discursive categories, or " WRITING ACTS " obtained by summarizing the reading texts, (thereby considering each text not simply as a linear sequence but as a hierarchical arrangement with certain acts linked to form the main propositional development and others playing a supporting role), and then reproducing realizations of these acts in appropriate situations.

A desire not only to encourage effective acquisition of writing skills, but more so, **to provide these learners with the methodological tools** with which to continue improving these skills beyond the boundaries of the classroom and without the direction of a teacher. For even once these learners have passed the exams required for college entrance, and have been accepted to various universities, they are still burdened with sometimes several semesters

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[4] The present study would seem to suggest that Dubin and Olshtain's (1980) model :

Writing Process   ⟶   Text   ⟶   Reading Process

is a reversible one.

of English — often of composition courses, regardless, it would seem, of their intended fields of study. The politics, economics, or ethics behind these rigid requirements for foreign students are, no doubt, questionable and worthy of investigation, yet such is not the purpose of this article. The problem at hand is that of showing learners how to use the media materials which are readily available to them, how to conform to the concrete norms of already published materials (and whatever complaints one may lodge against published writings today, one must assume that if these have, in fact, been accepted for publication, then they do fulfill certain conditions) instead of to some abstract notion of writing which may or may not be shared by the community of teachers whose job it is to judge their writing. In other words, the attempt to first instill in learners an awarenesse of how authentic texts are constructed, and then demonstrate to them some of the possible techniques for reproducing acceptable texts, stemmed from the desire to make them more autonomous — less dependent on the classroom, on didactic materials and on the teacher for providing tasks, models, for correcting and evaluating (in sum, for teaching !)

This approach to writing, then, was merely a logical extension of the training learners were already getting in reading comprehension and speech acts, a response to their writing problems and condition as foreign students anxious and impatient to enter American universities, and an attempt to implement an autonomous learning strategy in a new setting.

II. DESCRIPTION OF METHODOLOGY

The text below on " Brainwashing ", extracted from a college psychology manual, was chosen by two learners as the basis for their reading comprehension project. Their exercises were subsequently re-used by the entire class and summarized — the topic sentences and writing acts being determined. Prior to this analysis, learners had been given a list of writing acts including :

— Generalization (usually, for our purposes, the topic sentence)
— Exemplification
— Consequence/Result
— Explicitation (becoming more specific, narrowing down of information)
— Elaboration (extending, expanding, widening of information)
— Giving Reasons (telling WHY)
— Explanation (telling HOW)
— Classification
— Definition
— Description
— Characterization (partial definition)

— Reformulation (re-stating in different words a preceeding proposition)
— Evaluation (writer's interjection, opinion)

The function of each of these acts was discussed, in order to give learners an initial understanding of the framework within which they would be analyzing their texts.

In most cases, the sentence was taken as the unit, mainly because it was a more convenient one when transferring from reading to writing. There were, however, occasions where larger chunks of discourse were taken as the unit and assigned one particular function, as can be seen in the analysis of the text below, arrived at through discussion among the learners in small groups and consultation with the teacher. (This group work did yield variations on the analysis of the text, a problem which will be discussed in part III).

Box 2

BRAINWASHING

Brainwashing

[1] The term " brainwashing " is a loaded one, with different meanings for different people. [2] For some, it has come to mean almost any case of a person's being persuaded to do or think something that he or she later regrets having done or tnought. [3] For exemple, consumers complain that they are brainwashed into buying products they don't really want. [4] For others, the term " brainwashing " has a sinister ring to it, with connotations ci tortures, mind drugs, and brain stimulation. [5] Most accurately, however, brainwashing refers to a set of techniques that are used in an attempt to change a captured person's basic attitudes and values.

[8] These techniques do not depend on physical tortures, drugs, or gadgets.

Rather, they are based on a recognition of the social foundations of attitudes ; they work (when they are successful) by tearing down the existing social foundations of a person's attitudes and erecting new ones in their place.

[9] The word " brainwash " comes from the Chinese expression *hsi nao*, which literally means " wash brain ". [10] The Chinese Communists devoted a lot of effort to developing these techniques as part of the program of thought reform tnat followed their takeover of mainland China in 1949. Brainwashing techniques were used to convert Chinese young people and intellectuals, and similar techniques were also applied to Westerners in China and to American prisoners captured by the Chinese during the Korean War.

[1] Thesis statement
[2] Definition
[3] Exemplification
[4] Definition
[5] Definition

[6] Negative explicitation
[7] Positive explicitation
[8] Explanation
[9] Definition
[10] Exemplification

[11] Brainwashing has two major phases. The first is to destroy the person's existing group ties and, in so doing, to break down his or her sense of identity. [12] This may be done by isolating prisoners from other people, by restricting communication to them, and by making them feel guilty for their actions. [13] For example, the Chinese would deliver American prisoners their mail only if it contained bad news. [14] And they told the prisoners that their failure to receive mail proved that their loved ones at home had abandoned them (Schein, 1957).

[15] The second phase of brainwashing is to give the prisoner a new set of relationships, tied to the new ideals that the brainwashers want the prisoners to adopt. [16] Edgard Schein (1957) reports that Chinese " instructors " sometimes lived with American prisoners for long periods of time in order to establish close relationships with them. [17] And they offered the prisoners special privileges if they would make public confessions or engage in other propaganda activities [18] By inducing the prisoner to engage in public behaviors that betrayed their old group and ideas, the brainwashers hoped that their private attitudes would change as well.

[19] Brainswashing was back in the news recently when Patricia Hearst was placed on trial for taking part in a bank robbery while she was a captive of the militant radical group called the Symbionese Liberation Army (the SLA). [20] One of the witnesses in Patty's defense was Robert Lifton, a psychiatrist who had done extensive research on Chinese brainwashing techniques. Lifton claimed that the SLA employed many techniques with Patty Hearst that

came right out of the Communist Chinese's book. [21] They toppled Patty's sense of self by locking her in a closet for weeks, and they created feelings of guilt and self-blame by branding her as " the daughter of a ruling class family, the Hearsts ". When Patty emerged from the closet, they induced her to take steps to renounce her old identity, such as making a tape on which she publicly called her parents " the pig Hearts ". And the bank robbery itself (which, Lifton claimed, Patty was forced to take part in) further cut off her links to the past.

Instead, Patty took on a new name (" Tania ") and a new identity, as a member of the group that had captured her.

[22] In spite of the power of these techniques, it is extremely difficult to brainwash someone successfully.

Schein found that although the Chinese were successful in obtaining behavioral compliance and collaboration from many of their American prisoners, they produced very few ideological conversions. [23] People's attitudes and ideals are rooted in decades of training in their original groups, and breaking down these strongly held attitudes is no easy matter. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that by systematically destroying and replacing people's group supports and self-image, lasting changes in beliefs and attitudes can be produced. [24] During the Hearst trial, Robert Lifton was asked whether there is any system that would enable a prospective victim to avoid being brainwashed. His answer : " There is none. [25] If one's captors are sufficiently determined, they can break down anyone " (reported by Turner, 1976).

[11]   Classification
[12]   Explanation
[13]   Exemplification
[14]   Exemplification
[15]   Classification
[16]   Explanation
[17]   Explanation
[18]   Statement/consequence
[19]   Exemplification
[20]   Elaboration
[21]   Description/elaboration
[22]   Restament
[23]   Explanation
[24]   Elaboration
[25]   Restament

The following summary was proposed for this text :

The term " brainwashing " is a loaded one, with different meanings for different people. For some, it has come to mean almost any case of a person's being persuaded to do or think something that he or she later regrets having done or thought. For others, the term " brainwashing " has a sinister ring to it, with connotations of tortures, mind drugs and brain stimulation. Most accurately, however, brainwashing refers to a set of techniques that are used in an attempt to change a captured person's basic attitudes and values. The word " brainwash " comes from the Chinese expression hsi nao, which literally means " wash brain ".

Brainwashing has two major phases. The first is to destroy the person's existing group ties and, in so doing, to break down his or her sense of identity. The second phase of brainwashing is to give the prisoner a new set of relationships, tied to the new ideals that the brainwashers want the prisoners to adopt.

In spite of the power of these techniques, it is extremely difficult to brainwash someone successfully.

Nevertheless, there is no doubt that by systematically destroying and replacing people's group supports and self-images, lasting changes in beliefs and attitudes can be produced.

Having thus sensitized the learners to the hierarchical interlocking of writing acts in authentic discourse, the focus was then shifted to individual writing acts. Definition and Classification, well-represented in this text, were chosen as the basis for the first writing exercises or " Pastiches ".

A. Definition

Although there are many ways to define a word, the model demonstrated here was akin to : " For some, it has come to mean almost any case of a person's being persuaded to do or think something that he or she later regrets having done or thought. For example, consumers complain that they are brainwashed into buying products they don't really want ".
That is : Definition (restricted generalization) + Exemplification.

The text below was taken from *Future Shock* (Toffler, 1970).

Culture shock is the effect that immersion in a strange culture has on the unprepared visitor. Peace Corps volunteers suffer from it in Borneo or Brazil. Marco Polo probably suffered from it in Cathay. Culture shock is what

happens when a traveler suddenly finds himself in a place where yes may mean no, where a 'fixed price' is negotiable, where to be kept waiting in an outer office is no cause for insult, where laughter may signify anger. It is what happens when the familiar psychological cues that help an individual to function in society are suddenly withdrawn and replaced by new ones that are strange or incomprehensible ".

Once comprehension of this text was established, learners were given the skeleton of the paragraph :

Culture shock is the effect that immersion in a strange culture has on the unprepared visitor.

It is what happens when the familiar psychological cues that help an individual to function in society are suddenly withdrawn and replaced by new ones that are strange or incomprehensible.

They were then asked, working in small groups, to substitute three new examples of culture shock taken from their own personal experiences of life in New York City. (Elements such as the physical layout of cities, the conception of time, dating rules, greetings, waiting on line, etc. were suggested, but numerous others were mentioned). Whether or not they chose to repeat the same sentence structures as those in the original text was entirely up to them.

This exercise provided learners with a framework for definition — leaving them only to supply appropriate support in the form of examples. Subsequent exercises dealt with the writing of definitions from scratch, using this same model, and others.

B. Classification

This writing act was chosen not only because a realization of it had appeared in the text on " Brainwashing ", but also because it had become evident, as suggested by Henry Widdowson (1978, pp. 111-143) that the use of non-verbal representations for classification was extremely instrumental in getting learners to distinguish — through visualization and mapping on diagrams — levels of generality.

The following text was used first for reading comprehension.

The positions which the child assumes in utero may be divided into two general classes : longitudinal and transverse.

In the longitudinal the spinal column of the child is parallel to the spinal column of the mother ; in the transverse it is at right angles to that of the mother, forming a cross with it. The former is normal, accouting for more than 99 % ; while the transverse position is rare, occuring in less than 0.5 %.

These two general classifications of the fetal position may be subdivided into more exact groups. We term these more specific positions presentations : this refers to the precise part of the fetus which presents over the bony birth passage, the pelvis. At term, 96 % of fetuses present by the head ; 3.5 % with the buttocks ; and in less than 0.5 % the child lies transversely, a shoulder presenting. (Guttmacher, 1956) [5].

Comprehension having been checked, learners were asked to fill in the diagram below using the information given in the text.
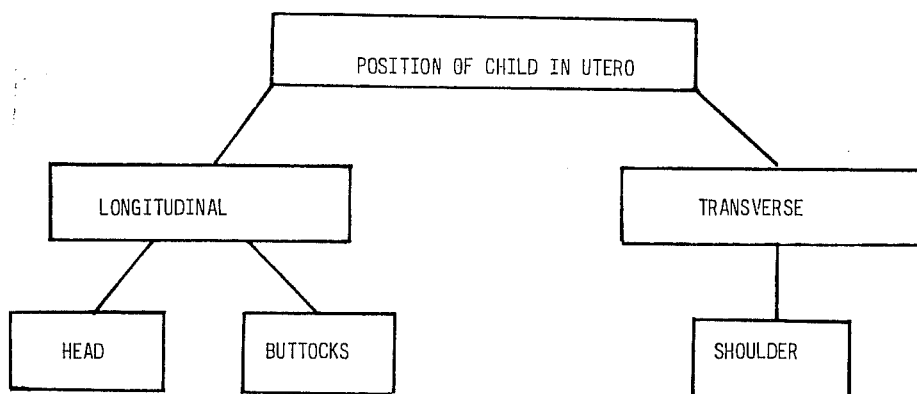
At this point [6], learners were asked to glean from the text the expressions typically used for classification. The expressions —

[5] The choice of a text of this nature is justifiable on the grounds that two members of the group — one learner and the teacher — were pregnant at the time, and therefore, questions and discussions of this type were not uncommon.

[6] The question of what to do about grammar has most likely arisen by this time. The answer is simply that whatever grammatical structures were needed to carry out these writing tasks (for example : modals, passive voice) were introduced at the appropriate times ; that is, before or after the writing task had been completed, according to the needs of these intermediate learners. Grammar, it should be stressed, was dealt with as a means to an end, and not as an end in itself.

X may be divided into two general classes...
These two general classifications of X may be subdivided into more exact groups...

formed the beginning of a list which was later supplemented with others such as —

X can be broken down into...

X can be classified according to whether...

There are... groups of X...

X is composed of...

X is made up of...

X comprises...

X constitutes...

X consists of...

X includes...

X contains...

Next, a second text, extracted from their reading material, was provided along with a blank diagram to be completed using the information on " women who work ". (The task of actually drawing the diagram had proven too difficult for previous learners and for this reason, blank diagrams were given from then on).

The many women struggling with the conflict between careers and children cannot be dismissed as victims of their mother's expectations, of the feminine mystique. Motherhood, the profound human impulse to have children, is more than a mystique. At the same time, more women than ever before hold jobs not just because they want to " find themselves " and assert their independence, but because they *must*. They are single and responsible for their own support, divorced and often responsible for their children's support as well, or married and still partly responsible for their families' support because one paycheck is not enough in this era of inflation. B. Friedan (1979).
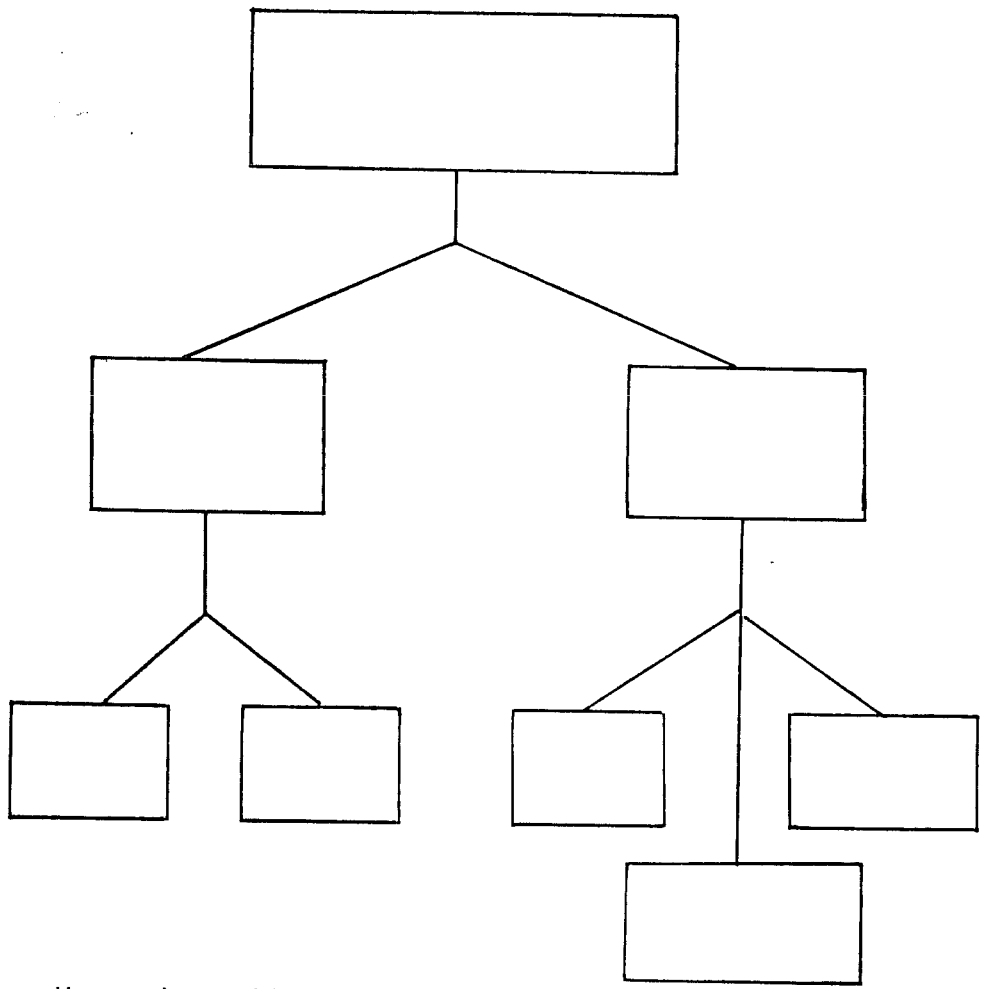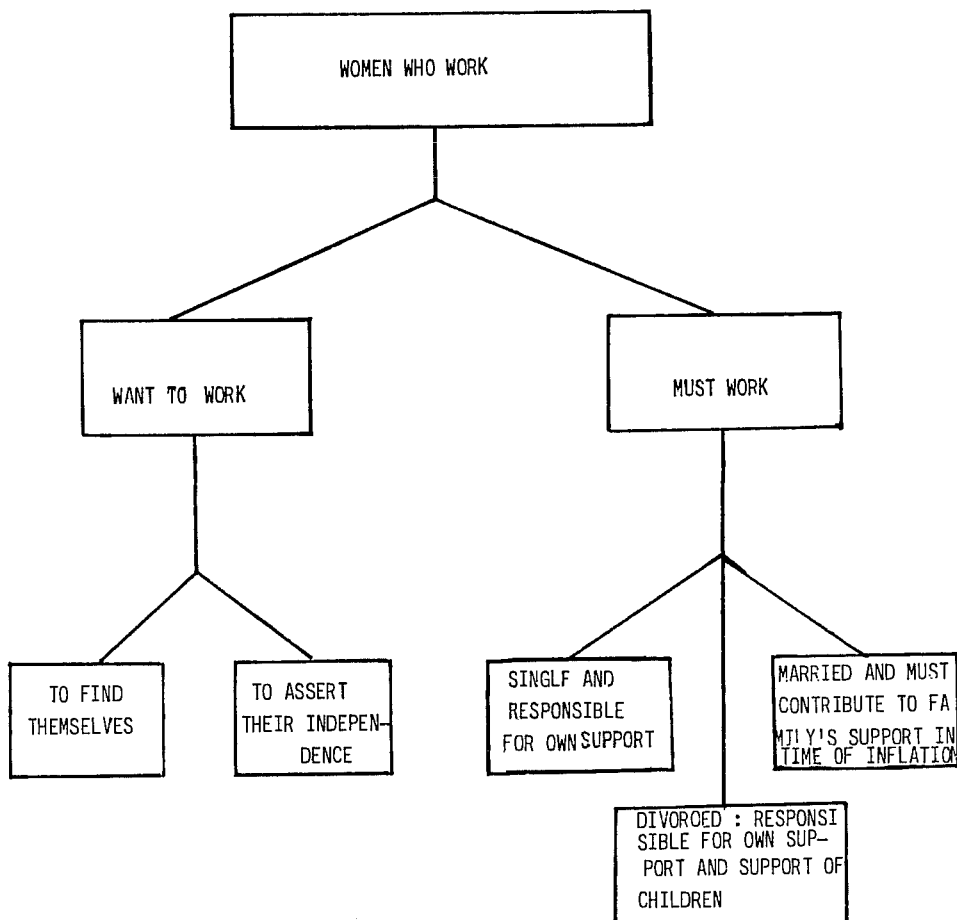
Here again, careful attention had to be paid to the levels of generality in the text, so as to avoid something like :
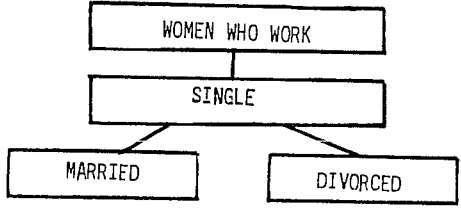
which was often the first interpretation rendered.

Finally, having successfully completed the diagram —

learners were asked to re-use their list of expressions for classification and the text on fetal positions as models, and write a short paragraph formally classifying the different types of women who work.

III. CRITIQUE OF THE METHODOLOGY

The problems inherent in an approach of this kind are far from having been resolved. The principle difficulty is that of the categories themselves.

First, they are not exhaustive. Categories such as " performatives ", " deduction ", " referencing " (Gremmo, 1977), and others (comparison and contrast, qualification) have been completely omitted simply because they did not appear in the texts studied.

Second, the set of categories made available to the learners was presented and explained in the abstract ; no isolated examples of each act were initially provided. This obviously would have facilitated recognition of the acts in the reading texts.

Third, these categories at times overlap, allowing for various interpretations of the same sentence. For example, in the text on " brainwashing ", is the following segment :

" They toppled Patty's sense of self by locking her in a closet for weeks, and they created feelings of guilt and self-blame by branding her as 'the daughter of a ruling class family, the Hearsts'. When Patty emerged from the closet, they induced her to take steps to renounce her old identity, such as making a tape on which she publicly called her parents 'the pig Hearsts'. And the bank robbery itself (which, Lifton claimed, Patty was forced to take part in) further cut off her links to the past. Instead, Patty took on a new name ('Tania') and a new identity, as a member of the group that had captured her ".

— a case of explanation ?   (how they toppled Patty's sense of self...)

— a case of explicitation ?   (of " The SLA employed many techniques with Patty Hearst that came right out of the Communist Chinese's book ")

— or a case of description   (of the brainwashing techniques)

In sum, there is no authoritative analysis to which a teacher — producer of materials can refer, and consequently, the analyses arrived at by teachers and learners may well be debatable or completely erroneous. Whether or not this flaw negates the value of the exercise is the question which must be raised here. In other words, is it the process itself or the definitive result which is of most vital importance to the learner ?

Perhaps the very difficulty of the analysis, coupled with discussions of suggested variations, will sufficiently sensitize learners to the hierarchical nature of texts and to the various discursive functions of their components, thereby fulfilling the goal of enabling them to develop more effective writing styles which will meet the requirements of the American universities they seek to enter, and spare them endless semesters of reading and writing courses.

Some of the remaining questions are :

— What are the formal devices or markers (the position of a topic sentence in a paragraph, cues signalling specific writing acts, etc.) which could be emphasized so as to aid learners in recognizing and reproducing these acts, and how, for example, can the logical connectors (however = qualification, therefore = consequence) be introduced in such a way as to reinforce this general approach ?

— Is there a recurring sequencing of these acts of which learners could be made aware ?

To the extent that this approach sheds light on the inner workings of a text (allowing for re-integration of the communicative values of the text), it affords learners the confidence and ability to deal with real-life texts, and equips them with a set of categories which can be expanded at will, and analytical techniques which can render them more autonomous in both reading and writing skills, the approach, however tentative, does offer many possibilities to learners, and on that count alone, would seem to merit further study and elaboration.

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