READING TREE IN PARAGRAPH WRITING CLASS:
A CAR EXPERIENCE WITH LEP (LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT) STUDENTS

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Abstract: Identifying a deficiency in the fundamentals of correct usage and disorganization of ideas in my LEP (Limited English Proficient) students’ writing works, I designed a read-to-write program to improve their basic writing skills. They were to read reading texts prior to writing their paragraphs in order to familiarize themselves with good quality texts in terms of ideas organization and grammar. Through the processes of transcribing, paraphrasing, and imitating, they first learned to reproduce others’ ideas. At this point, they learned originality of expression rather than originality of ideas. As soon as they acquired the competency in writing grammatical sentences, they practiced producing and organizing their own ideas. This change in teaching basic writing methodology has alerted students of what qualifies a good writing piece. To illustrate, an advantage of reproducing others’ ideas is that the students’ problem of writing is simplified by providing the students with models of how ideas are organized and expressed in grammatical sentences.

Keywords: LEP, read-to-write program, good quality text

Accommodating equal learning opportunities for students from disadvantaged regions of Indonesia, the Department of English of State University of Malang has recently experienced working with students with varied entry-behavior. The term varied refers to situations when teachers were often posed to such challenges as having to communicate with them in elementary English, that is, they could say and understand a few things in English (as described in accordance with Common European Framework of Reference for Languages of the Council of Europe). Hence, they faced difficulties when attending lectures and conversing with both the teachers—in teacher-student conferences—and their peers.

Parallel to this situation, in my Paragraph Writing class I identified these students as bearing the characteristics of LEP (Limited English Proficiency), i.e. having some English language skills, but not enough proficiency to participate in class (Adame-Reyna, 1993). They showed a deficiency in the basic aspects of writing. First, at sentence level, they had problems in sentence structure and so their writings were marked with run-on, choppy, and sprawl sentences as well as sentence fragments and non-parallel structures. Next, expressing ideas was also problematic as they could not write a piece of writing with clear, complete, and well-developed ideas. In addition, transitional signals and the thread connecting the central and supporting ideas that were absent from the piece indicated their writing deficiency in terms of organization. Further, they had to struggle with choosing the correct diction to convey their ideas.

The read-to-write project

In attempts to overcome their deficiency in the fundamentals of correct usage and disorganization of ideas so as they can improve their writing performance, I designed a read-to-write program in the frame of classroom action research. The idea of designing this program laid in the study of Stotsky (1983) showing that “better writers tend to be better readers”, which was later confirmed by the work of (Krashen, 1984, 1993)—reading directly improves writing abilities. The program provided the class with ample reading materials, the topics of which varied from literature-related to general knowledge, taken from various sources which I selected and graded in such a way that they formed a “tree”—with its “roots” giving the foundation of writing with guided writing and its “branches” providing students with models of independent writing and that was how the name Reading Tree was coined.

A sample of the reading texts is presented in Figure 1.

Barking Dog
One night, Mr. Jones woke up because he heard a dog. He heard a dog barking outside his window. Mr. Jones got out of bed and walked to the window. When he looked out the window, there was a big brown dog on his lawn. It was barking very loudly. Mr. Jones opened his window and looked at the barking dog. “Why are you barking so loud?” he asked the dog. The dog looked at Mr. Jones. Then it stopped barking.

Figure 1 Reading Text Sample “Barking Dog”
Attending this program twice a week—each meeting last for 100 minutes—over the course of four
months, students read a selection of the reading texts in the first half and produced their writing pieces in the
second half of each meeting. The students initially began with the process of transcribing, which was the
simplest form of reproduction. They read a reading piece and copied it on paper. While writing, they were to
observe its structure and the relations of its parts, i.e. the topic sentence and supporting sentences.

With this weekly exercises, students had the chance to practice identifying the main idea in a passage
and how it was developed by the supporting ideas. These simple exercises also established the idea of how to
write with the correct spelling and punctuation. In addition, whenever they came across difficult words, they had
to look them up in the dictionary. Hence, they increased their vocabularies and learned how these vocabularies
could be used to help them express ideas.

The next stage was paraphrasing. The students were to rewrite the texts they transcribed in other words.
To find the correct other words, the students used their dictionaries; however, I encouraged them not to simply
find a synonym for each adjective, noun, and verb in the texts. They could, on the contrary, repeat any word if its
meaning was clear and simple. Only when they came across unusual words, could they find their equivalents.
When paraphrasing, students were to keep in mind that the message of a paraphrase should be clear, that can be
tested whether other people understand the meaning of the paraphrase without reading the original text. In this
way they learned to reproduce the thoughts of other writers.

An example of a paraphrase of the text in Figure 1 is presented in Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure 2 A Paraphrase Text “Barking Dog”</th>
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Barking Dog

One night, Mr. Jones woke up because a dog barked. The dog barked outside his
window. Mr. Jones got out of bed and walked to the window. When he looked out the
window, he saw a big brown dog. It was barking very loudly. Mr. Jones opened his
window and looked at the big brown dog. He told the dog to stop barking. The dog
looked at Mr. Jones. Then it stopped barking.


The last stage was imitation, which was the most difficult stage of all as imitating required the students
to explore their own ideas to be developed into a paragraph. They also decided the sentence structure and choice
of words themselves. The only aspect the students could share was the text structure. However, exposed to good
writing through this method of imitating, the students learned to compare their writing works with the model
texts and subsequently, as they had to create a writing piece of their own, they learned to develop their own
thoughts and, hopefully, the skill of creative writing.

Table 1 below compares the original text and an imitation text one of the students developed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Original text</th>
<th>Imitation text</th>
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<tr>
<td>Ben’s Favorite Pen</td>
<td>Festi’s Favorite Shoes</td>
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<td>Ben, who is eight years old, lost his favorite pen. He could not find it. “Where is my favorite pen?” he asked his younger sister. His sister did not know. “I don’t know where your pen is,” she said. Ben thought about it for a long time. He used his pen before dinner. He used it to write a note to his English teacher. The note said, “Dear teacher, Thank you for helping me. Ben.” He put the note in his notebook. Where was his notebook? He looked in the kitchen, it was not there. When he looked in the living room, he found his notebook and favorite pen there. It was next to the CD player.</td>
<td>Festi, who is 10 years old, lost one her favorite shoes. “Where are my shoes?” she asked her mother. Unfortunately, her mother did not know. “I don’t know, but did you put them back in the shoe rack after school?” her mother asked. Festi tried to remember where she put them. Then, she remembered she left her shoes on the doormat at the front door. However, she could not find them on the doormat. She looked around and suddenly she saw them under the flower pot. Apparently, her cat Missy played with the shoes. “Now, you know you always have to return your shoes to the shoe rack”, her mother reminded her.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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The imitation text shows that the writer of the paragraph has acquired correct usage of English, the skill of exploring and developing an idea, as well as organizing her ideas. S/he can even go further as including a moral message in the story.

A Closing Note
In conclusion, I will say that students with limited English proficiency as reflected in writing deficiency is not “the end of the world”. My research has taught me that reading-to-write is a promising method for such a situation. Although there may need a verification as to the research method, this reading-to-write method can be a “savior” so long as it is properly prepared and implemented. Yet, considering the needs of my students, other methods of teaching writing to nurture the students’ skill in creative writing need calling for.

ED Laksmi is a member of teaching staff at the Department of English, Faculty of Letters, State University of Malang. She has in the past years involved in teaching of various levels of EFL Writing.

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