

## SENSITIZING BEGINNING TEACHERS OF WRITING

The teaching assistants in the composition program at Idaho State University where I taught are probably very similar to teaching assistants at many other schools. They are graduate students in English who enter the program with little experience in the classroom. They often do not have strong backgrounds in composition theory, teaching methodology, or language studies in general although most of them have done reasonably well in their own writing courses and can write coherent papers, free from major errors. Based on their own experiences as students, they tend to believe in the efficacy of rules and "grammar." Although they have never had serious problems composing sentences and none of them has profited much from sentence drills and repetitions, they tend to like handbooks and accept unquestioningly the workbook tradition. They also tend to accept the notion that practice makes perfect, believing that all students can learn if they work diligently and apply themselves with purpose. Finally, almost all of them view the teaching assistant experience as a financial necessity rather than an intellectual challenge. They expect to find their intellectual work in their study of literature: good books and deep minds. For many, plowing through student papers would hardly qualify as an intellectual experience.

Because our teaching assistants come to the teaching of writing with a set of tacit, deeply held attitudes and assumptions, it is simply not possible to reorient them to the teaching of composition in a one-day program or even a series of workshops given at the beginning of a semester. Instead, our composition staff has begun to recognize the need for a long-term sensitization program that chips away at preconceptions while supplying alternatives to them, a program that introduces the intellectual challenge of teaching composition but does not overwhelm too quickly with theory. As part of this program, we have begun to introduce our beginning teaching assistants to a number of writing problems that appear on the surface to be relatively simple, yet can, with analysis, yield a surprising number of insights into the difficulties both teachers and students encounter in the writing classroom. In what follows, I will concentrate on one of these problems, the *comma splice*, in order to sketch out an approach to sensitization that can be adapted to a variety of teacher training programs.

---

*Irvin Y. Hashimoto was Director of the Writing Center at Idaho State University (Pocatello) for five years. He is now Assistant Professor of English and Director of the Writing Center at Whitman College.*

Background for our discussion of the comma splice is Mina Shaughnessy's *Errors and Expectations*. We introduce the book not as a text with answers or, indeed, as a text that should be read and absorbed all at once, but as a text with an idea--that there are "styles to being wrong":

[...]the teacher must try to decipher the individual student's code, examining samples of his writing as a scientist might, searching for patterns or explanations, listening to what the student says about punctuation, and creating situations in the classroom that encourage students to talk openly about what they don't understand.<sup>1</sup>

The notion that we can recognize "styles of being wrong" is important. It offers to beginning teachers an alternative to drills and improbable, often dull, workbook exercises. Instead, they can use their students' own writing as a source for instructional materials. Rather than dwelling on general, often unessential "grammar" study, they can focus on the specific errors students actually make. Such a notion also suggests an alternative model for understanding student behavior. Instead of seeing students as passive responders, beginning teachers can see them as active participants who come to writing with strategies and intentions that affect how they view writing as well as how they write. Recognizing students as active learners is especially important for teachers working with adult learners because it requires teachers to take into account students' previous language experiences, to accept student errors as a necessary part of the learning process, and to focus on techniques that students can use to analyze their own writing.

What makes the notion of "styles of being wrong" particularly appealing for the initial orientation of teaching assistants is that beginning teaching assistants generally understand the approach. To recognize a style of being wrong, teachers must scan student errors, looking for patterns or clusters of errors that might indicate the underlying assumptions that may have contributed to a student's method of approaching writing tasks. This is precisely the procedure students use to study literature: analysis of texts to discover patterns of language, methods of organization, clues to authorial intention, insights into meaning.

Having given our beginning teachers a general background on and orientation toward error, we can proceed to individual problems such as the comma splice in an attempt to provide realistic practice and give credence to Shaughnessy's remark that "...the issue of error is much more complex and troubling than it seems in theory."<sup>2</sup>

On the simplest level, we can introduce examples of student comma splices as recognition exercises:

---

<sup>1</sup> Mina P. Shaughnessy, *Errors and Expectations: A Guide for the Teacher of Basic Writing* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Shaughnessy, p.9.

a. My attitude toward grammar was never positive, and probably never really stressed. It seemed to me that the teachers left it up to the students to learn the grammar themselves. I think the only thing that the teachers stressed in my whole exposure to English was spelling, they had the notion that if a student could spell well, then the student automatically knew everything there was to know about grammar, I never really understood the phrases and catches that went along with writing. Even today I have to think of what a noun or a verb is, or when and how it is used. Again I can remember getting back papers in English that I had written and all that was on the paper was spelling error marks. The teachers weren't concerned if you used a noun or a verb correctly, they only cared about the spelling.

b. I saw a sight that made me feel like my stomach was in my throat. The side of the old oak was covered with blood and hair where James' head had struck it at over 100 mph. I turned around and climbed in my car. As I slowly drove towards my house I realized that what people had tried to tell me was true, maybe I had been a fool for racing.

Such passages are not too difficult, but difficult enough to start with. In the first example, we can clump the student's comma splices--perhaps even make some judgments about why the student made them. The errors tend to cluster around ideas which the student seems to be relating closely together. In the second example, a student makes one comma splice at the end of the passage. This comma splice seems to signal a stronger relationship between the sentences than a simple period might. Changing the comma to a semi-colon also doesn't work well because the relationship of the ideas in the two sentences is not a coordinate one. Indeed, unless a student has been introduced to the uses of colons or dashes to introduce explanatory information, the closest device to do such work might be the comma.

More important than simply recognizing comma splices in controlled examples and suggesting one or two logical reasons why particular students might use such comma splices is the problem of recognizing a *wide range* of equally logical reasons for comma splices. William Herman, for instance, suggests the comma splice is an error in *punctuation*.<sup>3</sup> Virginia Underwood and Mariellyn Kett suggest it might be a problem in "sentence logic."<sup>4</sup> Jack Romine suggests the comma splice is an error that results from "haste or carelessness."<sup>5</sup> John Langan suggests that comma splices

---

<sup>3</sup> William Herman, *The Portable English Handbook* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p.211.

<sup>4</sup> Virginia Underwood and Mariellyn Kett, *Writing Skills, 2nd ed.* (Columbus, Ohio: Charles E. Merrill, 1977), p.400.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Romine, *Writing Sentences: A Self-teaching Guide to Grammar, Structure, and Sentence Combining, 2nd ed.* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1979), p.47.

occur when writers become "so involved" in the act of writing down their thoughts that they forget to make the breaks between their thoughts.<sup>6</sup> And Mina Shaughnessy suggests that some comma splices might occur because of a beginning writer's "aversion to closure."<sup>7</sup>

Beginning teachers often do not understand that they have such options in analysis. Furthermore, they often do not recognize that each choice they make concerning the cause of particular comma splices directs them toward certain teaching strategies. Teachers who see the comma splice as an error in "punctuation" are apt to concentrate their instruction on the conventions of standard written English. Those who see the error as "sentence logic" are apt to emphasize coherence devices or various methods of subordination. Those who see the error as "haste or carelessness" might turn to exercises that train students to be more careful--perhaps some form of controlled composition.

To underscore the difficulty teachers have deciding on the causes of comma splices, we can also introduce a few student examples for discussion:

- a. Brutus is a good, honorable man, he has a deep love for his wife and treats her with gentleness as he does his servants.
- b. Bilbo wants what most people desire, he desires friendship, to be of service to someone and to feel needed.
- c. There's so much as well as many things to see in life, Its great to see life as it happen's and as it is and its greatness and just how small we are in it.
- d. If we begin with the origin in the Early Colonial period, we have the conquerer, we see an indigenous indian population incorporated into the economy brought and developed by the conquerer, and his decendents, meaning the coastal "Creole Culture" which now stands as the Elite, Mestizo power of the country, in the cities like Lima and others.

Are the problems in *a* and *b* problems of haste? carelessness? sentence logic? Or are they both problems in parallel constructions and, hence, not comma splice problems at all? Is the problem in *c* a problem of punctuation or a problem in redundancy? Or simply a problem of having nothing to say? What exactly is the problem in *d*?

So far, we have only introduced causes of comma splices that are somehow student problems: students are too hasty; they have no sentence logic; they are too involved; and so on. We can make the issue much more complex by introducing teaching related errors as possible causes of

<sup>6</sup> John Langan, *English Skills* (New York: McGraw Hill, 1977), p. 294.

<sup>7</sup> Shaughnessy, p. 20.

student errors. Consider, for example, some of the problems students have with textbooks. Because our beginning teaching assistants have faith in textbooks, they tend to be unaware that such books present great difficulties to students who genuinely do not understand problems such as comma splices. The example we use is the *Harbrace Handbook*, currently favored by a number of faculty members in the department. As we pace our teaching assistants through the "comma splice" in the text, we point out the extent of grammatical knowledge students must already have in order to use the explanations in the book. In order to learn what a "comma splice" is, for instance, students must learn what "main clauses" are. The need to discover that "main" clauses can be distinguished from "subordinate" ones by recognizing first that "clause is often defined as a group of related words that contains both a subject and predicate" (p.18). They also have to learn the "main clause can stand alone as a sentence, a grammatically independent unit of expression, although it may require other sentences to complete its meaning" (p.22). Even though they may not be able to discover what it means to be "a grammatically independent unit of expression" or what it means "to complete...meaning," students might still go on to learn that a "complete predicate consists of a main verb along with its auxiliaries (the *simple predicate*) and any complements and modifiers" (p.441). And if they are still interested, they might further investigate "predicates," "auxiliaries" (which regularly indicate tense but "also indicate voice, mood, person, number") (p.425), and complements (objects, subject complements, and object complements), and modifiers (adjectives, adverbs, restrictive modifiers, and nonrestrictive modifiers).

Teaching-related errors, of course, are not limited to textbooks that don't provide sufficient help, and we need to introduce other sources of teaching-related errors. One such source is oversimplicity. For example, teachers often teach comma splices by using simple examples and exercises composed of sentences such as these:

- a. John ate a cow, he got sick.
- b. Angelo got a sore throat, he stayed home from school.

But students are constantly exposed to much more complex sentences--sentences that stretch their analytical capacities to their limits:

- a. It is curious, I think, that with all the current interest in "basic writing," little attention has been paid to the most basic question: What is it?<sup>8</sup>
- b. What is "basic writing," that is, if the term is to refer to a phenomenon, an activity, something a writer does or has done, rather than to a course of instruction?<sup>9</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> David Bartholomae, "The Study of Error," *CCC*, 31 (1980), 253.

<sup>9</sup> Bartholomae, p. 253.

c. Any given student, for example, may be able to speak "class-room English," and at another time speak the near inarticulate language shared with one or two close friends (often single words or short phrases, where the friendship supplies the rest of the meaning), then at another time speak sports lingo and understand fully what "pick one out" or "hitting the seams" means, at still another time speak the cool, near-wit of the "Tonight Show," then at another time speak gently to a grandmother.<sup>10</sup>

By using such sentences, we can underscore the difficulties students have if their only strategies are simple ones like "look for main clauses that have subjects and contain complete thoughts" or "look for that part of a sentence that can stand alone." In the first sentence, for instance, if we ask, "What is the main clause?" our beginning teaching assistants will have no trouble recognizing it. But their students, working from simplified notions, might have considerable trouble choosing between "It is curious..." or "I think ..." or "...little attention has been paid...." Here, in fact, the third choice might seem to contain more of a "complete" thought than the other two, even though it is not the main clause.

We can further emphasize the difficulties beginning writers have with simple strategies that come from simple explanations by presenting examples of sentences such as these:

- a. The car began to appear lopsided, one wheel raised slightly off the pavement.
- b. You like warm weather, don't you?
- c. Experiment, you know what that's all about.
- d. The thought of the car's destruction made him so weak he was unable to move, his eyes watered, his stomach ached.
- e. Pro-gun lobbyists are a powerful force in Washington. Their stand is a simple one, let people own guns, as granted in the Bill of Rights, to defend themselves and to use for recreation without violating anyone's civil liberties.

Because our teaching assistants tend to have few problems understanding such sentences themselves and recognizing the ambiguities in some of them, they often tend to underestimate their students' misunderstandings. They often do not see the kinds of pitfalls these sentences can cause writers with limited or simplistic strategies for sentence analysis. For beginning writers, each sentence except for *c* could appear to contain at least two sets

---

<sup>10</sup> Jim W. Corder, *Contemporary Writing: Process and Practice* (Glenview, Ill.: Scott, Foresman, 1979), p. 169.

of subjects and verbs that are separated only by commas.

Finally, we point out that teaching related errors can be caused not only by oversimplicity, but also by overcomplexity. We might, for instance, ask our beginning teaching assistants to suggest ways to explain how comma splices can be used correctly for stylistic reasons. Our discussion might begin a couple of ways. We might begin with examples of comma splices by authors such as Wallace Stegner, Norman Mailer, or D.H. Lawrence. Or we might begin with an analysis of a rule such as Irene Brosnahan's:

Rule: The comma alone is used to separate independent clauses, without any accompanying conjunction under the following conditions:

1. *Syntax*--the clauses are short and usually parallel in structure though they can be in any combination of affirmative and negative clauses.
2. *Semantics*--the sentence cannot be potentially ambiguous, and the semantic relationship between the clauses is paraphrase, repetition, amplification, addition or summary.
3. *Style*--the usage level is General English or Informal English.
4. *Rhetorical*--the effect is rapidity of movement and/or emphasis.<sup>11</sup>

In either case, whether we begin with detailed descriptions of established practice or with rules for good comma splice usage, the difficulties describing such usage to students become immediately apparent. Using Brosnahan's rule, for instance, teachers would need to describe "parallel structure," "affirmative and negative clauses," "potential ambiguity," "paraphrase," "repetition," "amplification," "General English," "Informal English," and the notion of "rapidity of movement and/or emphasis."

Having introduced the issue of overcomplexity, we can introduce, then, questions of practicality. Is it possible to make complex issues such as the correct use of comma splices simple enough to teach to beginning writers? If so, how long will such explanations take? In a sixteen week session, will it be worth the time? At what point does complexity add unnecessarily to the burdens we impose on beginning writers?

By concentrating on a specific writing problem such as the comma splice, we can, through a series of increasingly complex encounters with that problem, explore the difficulties teachers often face if they choose to analyze student error with any kind of sensitivity. In addition to comma splices, we can introduce other topics throughout the semester, such as sentence fragments, notions of "restrictive" and "non-restrictive" elements,

---

<sup>11</sup> Irene Brosnahan, "A Few Good Words for the CS," *CE*, 38 (1977), 185.

and parallelism. Even the apostrophe has its problems. Beginning teachers often do not recognize that the notion of "possession" is not a simple one for beginning writers to recognize in constructions such as "John's winning first place in the beauty contest startled Marsha" or in constructions like "The battle of the books" (where students want to write *books*) or "The book was hers" (where students want to write *her's*). Problems with definite and indefinite articles, prepositions, and spelling can further complicate simplicity.

It is important, however, to keep in mind that the approach to sentence-level errors that I have outlined here is just one part of a total program in sensitizing beginning teachers to the range of writing problems they face in the classroom. The process of sensitizing beginning teaching assistants is a gradual one--one that allows teaching assistants to try things out, to make mistakes, to continue to ask questions. It is through their trials and growing understandings that, over a period of time, they can, in their own ways, learn a great deal about how to sharpen their perceptions, recognize options, and cope with the complexity of teaching composition.