

Alan Duff:

## LETTER WRITING AS A FORM OF GUIDED COMPOSITION

Many people, with some justification, feel that they are unlikely ever to write in a foreign language and therefore consider the written exercises as a mere formality. This is a mistake. Written exercises need not be a routine matter, especially if they are linked to material already handled in the lessons devoted to oral drill — there is no reason why oral and written work should not be linked in a more creative way than, for instance, exercises involving »questions based on the text«. Miho Skljarov even goes so far as to say:

*»...govorne vježbe s nekim jezičnim materijalom prethode pismenim vježbama s tim istim jezičnim materijalom... Pismeno sporazumijevanje gradi se na bazi usmenog sporazumijevanja i ne može bez njega postojati.«<sup>1</sup>*

One of the great drawbacks of free composition in a foreign language is that the student's model is none other than *his own* concept of an acceptable sentence in that tongue. His concept may be based on sound knowledge but it will be instinctively influenced by the mother tongue. In analysing the nature of the mistakes made by Novi Sad students in their written exercises I found that at least 2 out of 3 sentences which I judged to be incorrect were directly influenced by the mother tongue. I say that this influence is instinctive because frequently the sentence is grammatically acceptable but idiomatically unsound, e. g. »I met Vesna. She is very fine. She goes every Sunday to dance in Šaregradska street.« Occasionally it must be admitted that a foreign student constructs a sentence which adds a new dimension to the language. Such discoveries usually offend the rules of grammar rather than those of logic, as in the following pithy sentence: »the world is so big but money is so little«.

Imaginative writing in a foreign language is by no means impossible but, especially with younger students, one must be careful not to penalise lack of imagination when the purpose of the exercise is to test the practical ability to write.

Why is it that apparently interesting composition subjects so often fail to stimulate the student? Often it is because the teacher has set a subject which he himself finds interesting or which he believes the student *ought* to find interesting. Topics such as »Describe the most exciting moment

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<sup>1</sup> »Jezično znanje i govorno umijeće u nastavi stranih jezika«. *Strani jezici*, I, 2, 1972. str. 98.

of your holidays« frequently cause frustration. Even if the student has had an interesting holiday he may be unable to organise his thoughts because the composition question has been too loosely worded. He does not know how to begin or where to end. What seemed like an exciting event at the time, becomes a dull duty when it has to be transferred to paper:

»Dear Dorothea,

*It has been five months since I saw you in Bač and during this time a lot of things happened.*

*I heard about Your traffic accident and I hope that You are feeling better now.*

*I am very sorry because You didn't visit me during Your stay in Yugoslavia in August...*

The writer of this letter jumps from one idea to another. She leaves us wondering what is meant by »a lot of things happened«. Her writing lacks form and feeling. Why? The answer is, I feel, that she had no *incentive* to write and her only *purpose* in writing was to answer the question. This happens all too frequently and so it is up to the teacher to provide the student with incentive (the stimulus to write) and purpose (the knowledge that one is writing for a particular reason).

Guided composition, in any form, does offer an incentive by providing a situation in which nearly all the elements are known. The student need not be restricted to this framework although his answer will be based upon it. Alexander, at the end of *Practise and Progress*, shows how a set of already known »points« may be connected in several different ways. This is far from being a mechanical exercise; the incentive is real because the student will recognise that this kind of re-ordering of events constantly occurs in everyday speech. In fact, the oral and written skills are so closely linked here that the exercise can be done by the whole class, orally, with the teacher writing up the best solutions on the blackboard. If the guided composition is done as a written exercise at home the purpose will clearly be to practise vocabulary and structures which are already familiar to the student. This kind of exercise is far more stimulating and of far greater practical use than, for instance, rewriting sentences in which only the tenses have to be changed.

In teaching writing skills the advantages of the letter are obvious. It is the least formal of the traditional techniques and one with which most students are familiar in their private lives, it links the spoken and written languages, it covers a wide variety of situations and may be of any length. Unfortunately, however, most teachers prefer to spend their time in teaching the correct way to begin and end the letter, the punctuation and lay-out of the address and the various ways of writing the date. The student is then free to fill in the space between »Dear X« and »Yours sincerely« in whatever way he likes. Letters written by students devolve into little more than a string of sentences, each beginning with »I«:

»I buy some new books for archeology, and I read them. I have two kinds of old money. I've got many new napkins and I collect some for you. I met Vesna...«

If the advantages of the letter are to be properly appreciated the student must be given a framework. Preferably every stage of the letter should be outlined and the situation should be described fully in three or four sentences. This can, and often should be done orally first but the teacher will find it necessary to write the various stages up on the board. At the elementary level a letter might be developed on the following lines:

*Situation:* On Thursday night the father of one of your friends gave you a lift home from school in his car. When you got home you discovered that your diary, which you *thought* you were carrying with your other books, was missing. Ask your friend to look for it (on the back-seat of her father's car) and to send it back to you if she finds it.

*Notice:* It is important to give specific details, such as the day of the week (Thursday) and the exact place (the back-seat). In the description of the situation one should try not to mention everything i. e. a certain amount of freedom must be left to the student. In this case, for instance, she might tell the girl *not* to ask her father if he has seen the diary as she does not want him to feel embarrassed if it is not found.

If one wants to test a certain grammatical element one should try to do so without telling the student directly. He should be first made to feel the need of a particular structure (in this case the polite imperative: »please could you...« etc.) and only later be given the »correct« version.

*Points:* The teacher should not write up the points before asking the pupils what they would say at each stage of the letter. Several suggestions may be given; the teacher will write up whichever seems most suitable to him. In this way the whole class will participate in the letter as a form of oral composition.

1. The opening.

2.a) You must be surprised at getting a letter from me.

b) I am writing because I will not be able to see you before Monday (going away for the weekend).

3. Your father gave me a lift home from school. (Last Thursday/yesterday/on Thursday evening...)

4.a) I was carrying my schoolbooks and *I think* I had my diary with me.

b) It is a small, black book with...

5. Please see if you can find it on the back seat.

6. If you find it, send it to me. (I'd be very grateful if...)

7. Apologize for the trouble caused.

8. The final greeting.

*Notice:* These points are not necessarily the sentences the students will use, they only serve to mark the various stages of the letter. With a good class the teacher can add in points not mentioned in the Situation, e. g. points 2a, b. With a weak class he can offer suggestions for sentence openings, e. g. no. 3, 4b and 6.

A letter based on these points would look something like this:

»Dear Barbara,

No doubt you're wondering why I'm writing to you when we saw each other only yesterday. The reason is that I'm going away for the weekend

and I want to ask you to *do me a favour*. Last Thursday, if you remember, your father *gave me a lift* home from school. I know I was carrying three books, (my dictionary, a History book and a drawing book), but I may have also had my diary with me. At any rate, I can't find it now and I know I had it with me on Thursday morning. Please, could you look on the back seat of your father's car to see if it's there, (I'm sure it is). If you find it, I'd be very grateful if you could send it to me (as soon as possible) because it's full of important addresses.

I'm sorry to give you so much trouble but I'm sure you understand how I feel.

Please give my regards to your father,

Love,

Maria.

Three phrases in this letter are heavily underlined to indicate that the teacher might have wanted to teach them in context, either by giving them in brackets in the list of points or by suggesting them after the students had written their letters. Certain details are added to show that the framework is elastic and that there is no reason why the student should feel cramped. Two phrases are marked with a broken line — these are the constructions which the teacher wants to practise.

Because this is a simple personal letter, related to only *one* topic, there is no need to insist on paragraphing. The letter falls naturally into a single paragraph. Later on the student can be taught to arrange his thoughts over several paragraphs. However, no matter how simple or complex the letter, by setting out the letter systematically one can ensure that at each stage all the students will be thinking of the same problem. This makes the correction of written work far easier since one then has a valid standard of comparison.

In devising letter writing exercises it is fairly easy to find situations which lead the student naturally into using whatever construction the teacher may wish to practise, e. g. the simple imperative could be drilled in a personal letter, as follows:

*Situation* — You have invited a friend to stay with you for three days. He is arriving on the 2 o'clock train next Friday. You had originally promised to meet him at the station but now, as you have a dentist appointment at the same time, you will have to ask him to find his own way to your flat. Give him simple directions, telling him which bus to take, where to get off, how far he has to walk etc. You have left the key with the lady in the flat above yours. Tell him to get the key from her and to make himself comfortable until you get home.

Here the student could even be asked to make his own points or the points could be given in note form (if the class is capable of handling this technique):

#### *Points*

1. Looking forward to seeing friend on Friday but... (I'm afraid...)
2. Bus no. 6 from station ... five stops then get off ...
3. Flat is opposite garage one minute from bus stop ...
4. Key is with Mrs. Blake, flat 37 ... (Ask Mrs. Blake for the key ...)

5. He should make himself at home ... (*Don't wait for me ... eat anything you can find in the kitchen ... play any records you like ... put your case in my bedroom etc.*)

6. Expect to be home by 5 o'clock. Looking forward to seeing him.

In point 2 the verb is deliberately left out. This is to see whether the student will come naturally to the construction »Take bus no. 6 from the station« or whether he will use some politer, and less appropriate constructions and suggestions. An element of uncertainty could be introduced — »I may not be able to meet you... if you don't see me at the station I suggest you take... If this doesn't suit you, you could wait in the restaurant ...« etc. If the teacher finds an exercise successful he may like to give the students greater freedom by asking them to reply to the letter they have just written. They will find this far easier than replying to an imaginary letter.

For experienced students one can introduce an interesting subsidiary exercise by setting up a parallel list of »shadow points«. These points reflect the hidden thoughts that are always in the writer's mind. Making these hidden thoughts explicit often helps the student to find the right tone and expression when writing a more complex letter such as the following:

*Situation* — You have written to a student employment agency in England asking them to find you a job in London for the summer. They write back saying that all they can offer you is a job in a small Kentish village picking fruit. You are naturally disappointed but are still willing to consider the offer. First, however, you would like to know more about the job. Write a letter to the agency based on the following points:

#### *Main Points*

1. Thank agency for quick reply.
2. Had hoped for job in London in order to improve your English.
3. Before taking job would like to know more details: working hours, pay, food and room, free time etc.
4. Want to know how far the farm is from London.
5. Apologize for asking so many questions. Hope to hear from them soon.

#### *Hidden Thoughts*

Fear that there will be many foreign students on fruit-farm — no language practise.

Hope to be able to travel. Important to earn enough money to get home. Do not want to spend all summer working etc.

Would still like to get away to London as often as possible.

Must not let your disappointment show too clearly.

A letter based on these points might run as follows:

Dear Sir,

Thank you very much for being so quick in answering my letter (concerning the possibility of summer employment in London). I was, naturally, disappointed to learn that all the London jobs have already been taken but I realize that you must have many applications from foreign students and that not everyone can be given exactly the job he wants.

*It was very kind of you to offer me the chance of working on a fruit farm in Kent and I hope you will not mind my asking for more detailed information before I make my decision. My main reason for coming to England is, of course, to improve my English and so I should like to know if I would be working with English students on this job. I should also be glad if you could tell me how long the working hours are and how much I could expect to earn. Last of all, I should like to ask if I would be able to get up to London for the weekend.*

Please excuse my asking so many questions but I am sure you will understand that I would not like to take on a job for which I was not suited.

I look forward to your reply,

Yours sincerely,

This letter is considerably more complex than the other two. It will be noticed here that there is no need to keep strictly to the order of points, provided everything is mentioned. Heavy (perhaps even too heavy) use is made of the conditional because the writer is asking questions about a job he has not yet taken. The list of questions under point 3 is very important as it provides an excellent test for the inverted question; most students will be tempted to use the word order for direct questions i. e. they are likely to write »how long are the working hours?« etc.

Only some of the ideas from the column of »hidden thoughts« are directly incorporated in the letter; other ideas are left as hints or unspoken suggestions. What is important, however, is that *all these ideas* should be clear in the writer's mind. No matter on what level one is writing letters it is essential that one should know *why* and to *whom* one is writing.

И. А. Марфунина:

## К ВОПРОСУ ИЗУЧЕНИЯ РУССКИХ ВОЗВРАТНЫХ ГЛАГОЛОВ ИНОСТРАННЫМИ УЧАЩИМИСЯ

Многие лингвисты обращали внимание на несоответствие образования в родственных славянских языках лексически близких или одинаковых глаголов, означающих действие, обращенное на субъект; в одних языках выступает возвратный глагол, в других — невозвратный. Напр., возвратному русскому глаголу *общаться* соответствует созвучный невозвратный хорватский *općiti*, напротив, русскому невозвратному *отдыхать* — хорватский возвратный *odmarati se*<sup>1</sup>.

Совершенно естественно, что формальные различия в образовании рефлексивных глаголов в двух языках ведут к ошибочному образованию глагольных форм при пользовании русским языком, причем допускаются ошибки двоякого типа: 1) невозвратную форму употребляют вместо возвратной («Начинают ленинградские белые ночи»); 2) возвратную форму ис-

<sup>1</sup> См., напр., F. Miklosich, *Vergleichende Grammatik der slavischen Sprachen*, Bd. 4, Syntax, Wien, 1883; Исаченко А. В., *Грамматический строй русского языка в сопоставлении со словацким*, Братислава, 1960; Обнорский С. П., *Очерки по морфологии русского глагола* М., 1953, и т. д.