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## EDUCATION

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### **SEVENTH AND NINTH GRADE**

### **WRITING EXERCISES:**

SALLY MILLER\* ***Candy, Biographies, and E-Prime***

I HAVE DEVELOPED two writing lessons that students seem to enjoy. One involves candy. The other includes the writing of illustrated autobiographies.

#### **The Seventh Grade Class**

I begin my seventh grade writing exercise by giving each student a piece of candy, not as a reward, but as an object to observe. We then explore how observing *before* writing and the use of E-Prime relates to more precise language use. I have found that this presentation often generates enthusiastic and excited class discussions — students learn to improve their writing, and they have fun.

I discovered E-Prime (writing and speaking English without employing the verb *to be*) while at graduate school. I felt

\* Sally Miller has an M.A. from South Dakota State University and teaches high school English in Belle Fourche, South Dakota. She recently became a member of the Board of Directors of ISGS.

so enthusiastic about this semantic tool, I used it in developing my Master's thesis, which examined if E-Prime could aid freshman composition students at South Dakota State University at Brookings. (Miller, 1997a, 1997b)

After graduating with an MA in English in 1997, I began teaching high school English in Belle Fourche, South Dakota. I felt excited about wanting to share the benefits of E-Prime with other teachers, and especially with my students. While teaching E-Prime to college freshmen between 1995 and 1997, I had also presented a substantial amount of the underlying theory. Now, I would teach E-Prime to younger students without giving them much theory.

At my first Belle Fourche English curriculum meeting, I mentioned that I use E-Prime in my formal writing. During a break, some teachers asked if I would give an in-service presentation on E-Prime, but at that time other work prevented me from doing so.

A few months later, the seventh grade language arts teachers and classes read *The Giver*, by Lois Lowry. Parts of this novel draw attention to extremely careful use of language. These teachers remembered that I had spoken of E-Prime, and they felt that E-Prime would possibly blend well with the aspect of "precise" language discussed in that novel. They asked me if I would give presentations on E-Prime to the seventh graders. How ecstatic I felt! This time I made sure that I had the time.

The seventh grade language arts teachers took turns auditing my presentations to their classes, because they too wanted to hear about the advantages of using E-Prime. I gave these presentations to four classes, about 100 students altogether.

I began by giving each student a "Starburst" candy. I asked the students to unwrap the candy carefully and observe the piece of candy through their five senses.

"Observe what you see, hear, smell, taste, or touch," I said. "Then write a paragraph or two, describing the candy."

I had the students write for five minutes. I based this exercise on a principle articulated by educational consultant and writer Ralph Fletcher that a writer *needs to write from experience and familiarity*. (Fletcher, 1993; p.46) This activity also helps students examine facts *before* verbalizing, to develop an *extensional orientation* by giving attention to the Object Level ("facts") first, then dealing with the related structures on the symbol level ("words," writing, etc.).

After the students had written for about five minutes, I asked them to read aloud some of their sentences. On an overhead transparency, I wrote some of their sentences which contained the verb *to be*. In my request for readings, I had said nothing about the verb *to be*. I had just asked them to give me some of their "best" sentences. Consequently, some of the students offered several sentences which did not contain the verb *to be*, although these students had not intentionally written them in E-Prime.

Nevertheless, we had plenty of non-E-Prime sentences (containing the verb *to be*) to work with. Directing attention to the *to be* sentences displayed by the overhead projector, I briefly discussed the "precise use of language," in the context of E-Prime, precise language, and the novel *The Giver*. I pointed out that if we avoid passive verbs such as *be, been, is, was, am, were*, we will write more specific and precise descriptions.

We discussed the students' reading of *The Giver*, and the novel's utopia where people value precise language use and the importance of speaking and writing in a way that describes more "exactly" what a person "means." We explored the clarity of this type of language.

These student discussions often became excited and enthusiastic. I would then describe some theory underlying E-Prime, as I thought appropriate for students of this age. (When I discuss these matters with thirteen-year-old students, I do not go too deeply into the epistemological background of E-Prime.)

I have found that E-Prime helps improve writing, even when the writer knows little about the underlying theory. (I often remember that night of my graduate course in general semantics when my teacher, Dr. John Taylor, told us simply to omit the *to be* verbs. He gave us no theory when introducing us to E-Prime.) For this reason, I do not want thirteen-year-old students to become excessively concerned with theoretical matters and become distracted from experiencing the advantages of writing in E-Prime.

I told my students that E-Prime serves as a practical tool for better writing because it increases clarity. I gave them a little background: on Korzybski's work, and on how his student, D. David Bourland, Jr., in 1965 first proposed the method. (See Bourland, 1965; Kellogg, 1987; Kellogg & Bourland, 1990; Bourland & Johnston, 1997; etc.)

In this presentation I wrote *to be* verbs *be, been, being, is, are, was, am, and were* on the blackboard and told the students that, when writing in E-Prime, we do not use those words. Writing in this manner, I said, would help them to state their ideas with greater specificity.

I led our discussions on clarity into the subject of general semantics. We talked about how E-Prime facilitates the application of the *gs* formulation that our verbal "maps" need to more accurately reflect the non-verbal "territory." We explored how everything changes — sometimes constantly (or smoothly) and sometimes by fits and starts — and so our writing needs to accommodate the process of change.

We considered the false permanence reflected in sentences such as "The candy is yellow," "I am cold," and "John is sad" — permanence suggested by *to be* verbs.

Students often hear teachers telling them not to use passive constructions. "Using E-Prime, you will find it difficult to produce passive constructions," I said. (See Note 1.)

Finally I showed how E-Prime encourages us to use more active, colorful verbs. "Instead of writing 'The plant is dying,' you could write 'The plant looks wilted and its leaves have fallen off.' "

I did not discuss any more theory. These seventh grade students had seen the benefits of E-Prime and now they wanted to try it. We turned back to the non-E-Prime sentences that they had written earlier. When I projected those sentences on the screen, the students raised their hands wildly and clamored to rewrite the sentences in E-Prime. Some tried to fix non-E-Prime sentences with non-E-Prime sentences. But other students caught the mistakes and said, "No, you can't use that verb."

My students had earlier written such non-E-Prime sentences as "My candy is yellow"; "While I was opening my candy wrapper I heard it crunch"; "I am hungry so I want to eat the candy"; and "The candy will be hard if I do not eat it." We transformed these sentences into, "The Starburst Company created a yellow piece of candy"; "While I opened my candy wrapper, I heard it crunch"; "I feel so hungry that I want to eat the candy"; and "The candy will harden if I do not eat it." (See Note 2.) The students and the auditing instructors grew excited over the more vivid imagery, and they vied to produce more colorful demonstrations of E-Prime in action. We moved on to other linking verbs, such as *grow*, *remain*, *stay*, *sound*, *smell*, and the other verbs related to the senses which can clarify writing by steering the writer away from the sterile *to be* verbs to more specific and active verbs. (See Bourland, 1989; pp.202-211.)

I put some familiar non-E-Prime phrases on the overhead projector, such as "My name is Harry," and "I was born on December 2." I asked students to suggest how to rewrite those sentences in E-Prime, and they amazed me with, "My parents named me Harold, but my friends call me Harry"; "My parents named me Harry"; "My mother had me on December 2"; and "I came into the world on December 2."

As the presentation drew to a close, I concluded that these young writers really had learned to use another practical writing tool. I concluded by showing a picture of a cat burying *to be* verbs in its litter box which I'd found in *Squirrely Semantics*. (Bourland & Bourland, 1993; p.17.) I told the stu-

dents jokingly, "I have a new cat, and my cat *really* hates to be verbs!"

During the remaining time, the students rewrote their candy description paragraphs in E-Prime. Their language arts teachers asked them to turn in their E-Prime revisions later in the week. The teachers also informed me that they had assigned the students to write in their journals in E-Prime and also to rewrite one other writing assignment in E-Prime. Although the resulting student papers did exhibit other writing inadequacies, such as repetition and indentation errors, these students had clearly experienced some of the benefits E-Prime can offer. They had, ultimately, experienced the excitement and the satisfaction of writing papers with *clarity*.

### The Ninth Grade Class

In my high school freshman grammar and composition class, I tried another approach. Each student wrote an autobiography in E-Prime.

By the end of the first few weeks of the semester, we had completed the grammar exercises required by the curriculum. We then worked on a writing unit, beginning with discussions of writing as a *process*, including *prewriting*, *drafting*, *revising*, *editing*, and *publishing*. Next, I introduced E-Prime. My material resembled that which I'd given earlier to the seventh graders. However, I now added more theoretical background and I explained some dangers of using the "Is of Identity" and the "Is of Predication."

I had these students complete the assignment describing a piece of candy. We also revised non-E-Prime sentences to E-Prime sentences as I had done with the younger students.

I wanted my freshman students to undertake a longer writing project which would include problems encountered in both English grammar and in the writing process. I hoped students would enjoy the project in which they could incorporate correct grammatical constructions, appropriate writ-

ing procedures, and, ultimately, E-Prime. Writing an autobiography seemed a good choice. We would work on it over a period of two months. (See Note 4.)

At first, some students seemed insecure about writing an autobiography. They thought they had not lived long enough and acquired enough experience to produce an appropriate, interesting autobiography. I believed that with help, these students could write substantial biographies and I had reason to want them to do so. An instructor at Teachers' College, Columbia University, Lucy McCormick Calkins (1990), maintains that children should learn to write memoirs just as adults do, that they can think like adults and put the pieces of their lives together as adults do, that they should start writing these memoirs, or collections of memories and events, while still children. (Calkins, 1990; p.166.) Willa Cather once declared, "Most of the basic material a writer works with is acquired before the age of fifteen." (Quoted in Murray, 1991; p.67.)

With this assignment, students would have to analyze material from their lives that they wished to share in their autobiographies, and they'd need to think critically, a skill I often endeavor to teach. Calkins writes, "Caring thought about oneself that goes into memoir writing is important not only for adults but youngsters as well," (Calkins, 1990; p.167). She describes writing an autobiography as exploring the truths which underline a time line.

I have another reason for choosing the autobiography for a major writing assignment that introduces E-Prime. Beginning writing in E-Prime seems easier when writing in the first person. Writing in E-Prime usually requires an *agent* to take the responsibility for words, actions, etc. (See Ralph, 1980.) The first person provides that agent. Kellogg & Bourland (1990) recommended that beginners write personal letters or diaries, perhaps a form of autobiographical writing.

In my classes I do not *force* E-Prime on my students. I have them write one or more comparatively brief assignments in E-Prime. When the students have become aware of their

usual reliance on *to be* verbs, I allow them to write as they wish, and they soon realize how much better they like their writing when they use E-Prime. Consequently, many students enthusiastically make an extra effort to write in E-Prime, and only occasionally do they allow a few *to be* verbs to slip in.

Richard Beach (1987) concluded that young students, unlike adults, tend to *describe*, rather than *reflect*, in their autobiographies. I believe the tendency to describe encourages beginning E-Prime writers to avoid "*Is of Identity*" and "*Is of Predication*" constructions, the two major problems with non-E-Prime.

I gave the major autobiography assignment during our first week of writing. Then, for the next few weeks, I assigned specific short papers which the students could possibly use as chapters in their autobiographies. I used such prompts as "My most embarrassing incident," and "A trip I really enjoyed." I assigned the paper one day, and the students brought rough drafts back the following day. The majority of the students wrote furiously to complete these chapters. In fact, they expressed their positive feelings toward the assignment many times in class. Several of the students, who up to this time had only received D's and F's, showed great interest and progress on this project. They really enjoyed this writing. Once again, it showed that students enjoy writing about familiar experiences, as suggested by Fletcher. (1993)

The revision process involved two steps: first, in-class peer editing, then, teacher-student editing. On our first peer editing session, I showed a student's paper (without name) on the overhead projector and used it to illustrate problems they should look for in such areas as language, ideas, organization, and mechanics. After students edited one another's papers, they revised their own papers and re-submitted them to me. I then commented on their problems and successes, and returned their papers.

I helped the students change *to be* constructions into E-Prime in the first chapters they submitted. They needed



these examples to help them learn E-Prime, and they needed to apply E-Prime to something they knew, such as their personal stories. According to Kellogg, success in learning to use E-Prime hinges on its adoption by individuals who find it of practical value in their daily life. (Kellogg, 1992; p.211.)

After that first assignment, I circled *to be* verbs and returned the drafts, asking students to revise their own non-E-Prime material. As classes progressed, the frequency of *to be* verbs dwindled. I gave students extra points for submitting drafts and allowed them to revise any drafts they chose for the final autobiography.

I required students to submit at least two chapters of their autobiographies each week. Several of my students turned in 15 or more chapters for my revision comments before their final revising.

To add more "author ownership" to these projects, I had students include a photo and caption for each chapter of their autobiographies, as suggested by Nancie Atwell. (See Atwell, 1987.) As Calkins wrote, "all the magic wouldn't have to come from our sentences alone." (Calkins, 1990; p.138.)

Did my students *really* learn to write in E-Prime while completing with pride a writing project? After we had finished the project, one student said: "When I use a *to be* verb now, I feel like I've almost used a swear word."

As well as learning to write in E-Prime, students had created exciting autobiographies to keep, to show with pleasure and pride to their parents, perhaps even to their grandchildren many years from now. My freshman students learned and practiced E-Prime in the user-friendly environment of personal writing. As a bonus, they captured valuable memories in an illustrated keepsake document.

What about those seventh graders? I can't wait to have them in my freshman composition and grammar class. I expect great E-Prime writing!

## NOTES

1. Of course one *could* produce a passive construction in E-Prime, employing such verbs as *to get*, *to become*, *to remain*, etc. One rarely encounters such constructions in standard English. Bourland says, "So what?" (Personal Communication, September, 1998.)
2. The second group of sentences clearly provide statements related to the first set, but then they do not "mean" the "same." Most particularly, the second set of sentences include the Agent, reflect a more process orientation, etc.
3. Bourland has had a lot to say about the need to avoid the other uses of *to be*, including the elementalism fostered by the Auxiliary Use, through the passive voice (Bourland, 1997; p.6), and the the habitual use of supposedly benign applications of this verb can encourage the tendency for one to slip into the Identity and Predication uses. (Bourland, 1994; p.xxiii)
4. Other teachers of general semantics have also used the autobiographical approach to introducing E-Prime to students, most particularly Dr. Kenneth G. Johnson. However, the earlier exercises had a much more modest scope.

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