Writing as a second language

from experience to story to prose

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Writing as a Second Language

PART ONE

Developing a Workable Model for Language

A New Look at Teaching Language

It all started on a very hot day in September. School had been in session for less than two weeks, and, as visiting author and storyteller, I was already making my third visit of the year. The school was in Georgia, and the temperature inside the building, one of those dinosaurs from the days when no one could imagine air conditioning in schools, was at least in the high 80s, with ample humidity to hold the heat firmly in place.

I checked in at the main office and had my preliminary meeting with the school principal. We reviewed the schedule for the day, the principal apologized for the heat, and we left the office together to walk to the library where I would be turned over to the librarian, my host and guide for Visiting Author's Day.

Because of the heat, every window and door of the school was propped open, and every available fan had been pressed into service. As the principal and I walked down the long hall, we could overhear everything that was happening in the classrooms along the way.

As we approached one particular fifth-grade room, more than the usual amount of talking seemed to be coming through the open door. Suddenly, from inside the classroom, we heard the teacher take charge.

"Stop talking!" Her voice rolled out from the door. "Stop talking...you're supposed to be working on *language!*"

The principal and I both stopped in our tracks and laughed. Then we quickly went on to the library, and I fulfilled my residency for the day.

Later in the evening, I was talking with friends about what had happened that day. When I remembered the "working on language" incident, it hit me more deeply than before. Suddenly I realized that what the school principal and I had overheard was somehow deeper than a momentary joke.

Over time, I continued to reflect on my many experiences visiting schools. As I thought through my work as a traveling "school watcher," what had happened that day bored deeply into my mind. I soon realized that though we talk about teaching *language arts* in school, we do not often teach the wholeness of our language arts. No, over and over, I see people actually teaching only *reading and writing* instead of nurturing the whole sweep of the rich oral and kinesthetic package that is our most beautiful, most utilitarian language.

What I had experienced on that day—"Stop talking, you're supposed to be working on

language"—hit me in the head. And the concussion has lingered. Through my work in schools, I see more and more a strong emphasis on the written *product* as sole measure of language development. With equal frequency, I hear teachers and administrators complain about their difficulty in pulling writing from their students. I am asked again and again to talk with students about writing and about how they might get ideas for their own writing. These requests are usually accompanied by teachers' laments over their failures to inspire writing in their students.

After that September day in the Georgia school, I began to wonder if our difficulty in teaching *writing* could come from our failure to acknowledge and work with the wholeness of our language. When we teach writing *directly* and *separately* from that wholeness, are we just patching holes in the visible roof of our house of language while crumbling foundations threaten to topple the house itself?

In thinking about this subject, I have begun to ask several questions, not theoretically, but through my own observations and work with thousands of students: What is language, anyway? How is it developed, nurtured, and maintained through the course of perpetual and lifelong growth? What are the roles of writing in the overall shape of our language package? Can writing be approached separately, or must it be part of a more holistic treatment of our language-development process? Dozens of other questions have followed, and this

book documents my grappling with them.

The real point of this work is to thaw frozen writers, but the process is one that begins with understanding our functional language itself. My goal is to see a remodeling of basic approaches, not a bandaging of old ones.

In short, we will be getting to a new model for teaching that views writing as the final stage of life-language development. But we will not start there. First we will look at definitions: what language is as a whole and how it is born, developed, and nurtured. Then we will come to the purpose for it all—a new and more holistic way to *do the write thing!*

A New Look at Functional Language Development

Humans come into the world as incomplete creations. We arrive in this life in "kit form," and much of our lives is spent in being put (and putting ourselves) together. One part of humanness that we come into the world *without* is our functional language. Acquiring it takes time.

The process of language development continues throughout our entire lives. Yet we often divide it artificially into several distinct "steps" or acquisition levels.

The "step" metaphor is problematic in and of itself. No matter how much we try to talk our way out of it, the visual metaphor of "steps in the development process" contains an inherent danger. When we walk up steps, we leave each behind forever as we ascend to the next. No one can stand on each and every step all at once, yet that is exactly what we must do in effective language development. For that reason we will not speak here of "steps" or "stages" but rather try a different visual model that seems more appropriate in understanding how language develops.

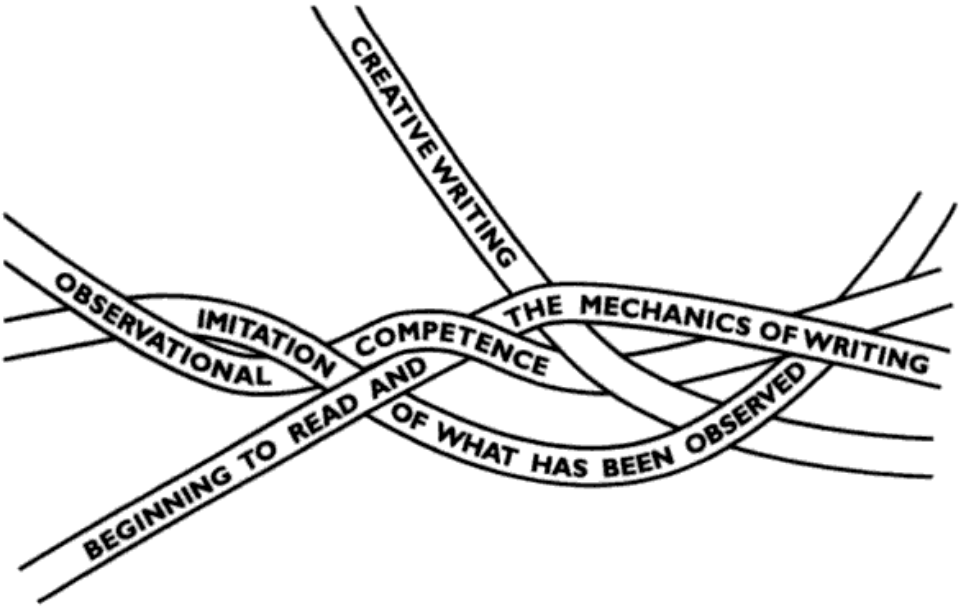
We will be looking at four sequentially added dimensions of functional language development. But since each dimension *must be maintained* rather than left behind as we move along, "braiding the cable" will be our metaphor for picturing language development.

In "braiding" anything, we begin with a single strand that is not used and left behind, but instead is strengthened by having an additional strand *added to it*. After that, a third strand may be added and, with our language model, a fourth.

For a cable to hang together, the first strand must run the full length along with each and every strand as it gets added. In fact, if any one strand is allowed to drop out, the entire cable falls apart and fails to function.

This visual image is very important as we look at language development. We are *not* looking at sequentially attained and then abandoned steps, but rather at added dimensions that must always be maintained. With this metaphor strongly in mind, let us proceed to examine the four progressive dimensions of functional language development.

The Progressively Braided Cable of Functional Language



The Initial Dimension (first strand): Observational Competence

All language growth (and perhaps all learning of every sort) is based on modeling. Modeling cannot work effectively, however, until the learner acquires a competent level of observational fluency.

Sometimes what we are discussing here has been called "listening skill." However, it goes far beyond mere listening. Observational competence does involve good listening, but it also requires careful, analytical watching, attention to the senses of taste and smell, and developed tactile contact with the world. All five of our observational senses must be well exercised to the extent of our physical abilities. If, for example, hearing is missing from our observational arsenal,

other senses must compensate.

Observational competence also involves one's own feelings toward the information taken in. Such interpretive feelings as love and hate, fear and safety, and liking and disliking modify both the form and content of the information our senses detect.

Besides feelings, our deductive and inductive reasoning skills modify and interpret the relationship between what the senses take in and the flowing course of life around us. All these things go together to make up an observational package that begins developing at birth and never stops nurturing our language.

Let us look at a simple example of observational competence in the very young child. He or she is constantly surrounded by sensory input, most of which seems at first to be random and unorganized. However, as observational skill becomes greater, patterns start to emerge. For example, something in the child's mind begins to notice that his or her crying often provokes the caretaking adult to make the same sound: "Bottle?" Then, what is later labeled as "bottle" gets offered to the baby's mouth, and the crying stops. This activity often is accompanied by pleasant touching and cuddling, and the "bottle" contains something satisfying both in its taste and in its bulk!

It may not be possible for the younger child (or indeed the adult) to verbalize the content of all observations. These are, however, needed in order

for the next developmental dimension (strand) to be braided into our cable of language.

It already has been noted, but should be stressed, that children who lack one or more operating senses will compensate by increasing the competence of the observational abilities of their other senses. The memorable language acquisition accomplishments of Helen Keller, who was blind and deaf from the age of nineteen months, began with her ability to achieve observational competence through the senses of touch, taste, and smell because sight and hearing, usually those most easily accessed, were not available to her. Part of the genius of her teacher, Anne Sullivan, was her recognition of touch, taste, and smell as powerful observational tools.

As language itself begins to develop, exposure to storytelling may be one of best ways to keep these observational skills sharp and growing. Unlike activities that involve multiple forms of media, storytelling calls on the observer's senses to create stories in the interior mind. No pictures are shown. The integrity and creative power of the observer's own imagination are respected. No artificial smells or tastes are incorporated, and there are no "hands on" activities. No, all of this is mental exercise in the storytelling observer's own imagination.

For the parent or teacher who says, "But I can't tell stories," reading aloud—either from books that have no illustrations or without showing the

illustrations—can offer many of the same observational exercises.

The Second Dimension (strand two): Imitation of What Has Been Observed

At some point along the way, that very baby who has observed that the strange sound "bottle" is regularly made by adults when a certain set of observed circumstances occur together, and that the action which accompanies the sound (the plugging of the bottle itself into his or her waiting mouth) produces satisfaction and pleasure, will undertake a mimetic experiment. Next time hunger occurs, instead of crying, the baby tries imitating the strange sound "bottle," and, lo and behold, the bottle appears and he or she is fed! A usable working word has been added to functional vocabulary.

Very quickly, other words come rushing into use as competent observation of the circumstances that call forth these sounds defines them, and as repeated imitation tests the definitions and incorporates them into functional use.

Note that it is listening that marks out the sound of the word, and observation of surrounding activity through the *other* senses which defines its meaning. When one sense is not functional, language development not only is much more difficult, but language itself is more remotely symbolic and less immediately functional than with five functional senses.

In pedestrian terminology, the imitation step might quickly be called "talking." I have chosen not to use this word, however, because imitation involves much more than is contained in the usual definition of talking. Imitation is not a consciously studied process but one of immersion in language as it is juggled back and forth between real, living people in negotiated communication with each another.

This observation and imitation soon start to entail not only vocabulary but also syntax, style, structure, and other elements of language at a rapidly accelerating rate during the first four or five years of life. Such growth depends on being able through imitation to try out what has been observed. If the opportunity to try it out is not there, growth stops.

Enter . . . school! All too often the imitation step is seen as bad behavior when children start to school. It is almost as if we say: "You have talked for five years. Now it is time to stop talking and be quiet!"

If language development is to be kept flowing, there must be opportunities after entry into school to try out language orally and kinesthetically (more about this later). In fact, a good writing model will recognize talking as the basic creative language with which our children arrive at the door.

Just as storytelling helps build observational skill, it is a powerful medium for *imitation of what*

is observed. As a young child growing up in an oral story culture, I well remember returning from my grandmother's house and retelling to my brother or to schoolmates the traditional stories she had told to me and my cousins. In retelling, I imitated her language in form and content and used words and structures that I myself could not have generated. I am sure that the opportunity and expectation to do this helped build my observation skills as they provided an arena to try out what was observed in my own retelling. Later we will have specific suggestions for incorporating storytelling from a child's own experiences in the creative writing process.

The Third Dimension (strand three): Beginning to Read and the Mechanics of Writing

As we examine a new strand, it is important to state again that the cable works only if the first strands remain strong while the later strands are added. So dimension three is not just "Beginning to Read and the Mechanics of Writing" but must also include strong, actively practiced *observing* and *oral imitation and experimentation.* If the first-acquired dimensions are allowed to slip, the entire language cable fails. This danger increases as we add more steps.

This third dimension is often paralleled by a child's starting to school, though not necessarily so. Some children learn to read on their own, somehow, and are reading before any formal instruction ever

begins. Others learn very slowly and with great difficulty even after years of schooling. For most of us, however, learning to read and write coincides with the start of school at age five or six.

This period is one of the greatest danger points for interrupting the natural and overall flow of language development. There is often a tendency when formal education begins to see language instruction and learning as *the same as* learning to read and write. It is almost as though our test-centered education structures give no language-acquisition credit to the oral and kinesthetic language growth that already has been occurring for five or six years. It is also a time when active practice and maintenance of the first two steps often end—and are sometimes even purposely cut off.

Sometimes, as noted earlier, teachers seem to say, "OK, children, you've been talking for five years now. That's enough talking. Let's all get quiet so that we can learn to read and write!"

While it is true that reading and writing may be learned simultaneously, I am placing them in two separate strands on our language-development cable. Our reading level always outruns our writing level. Children can read much harder material than they can ever write (the same is true for adults). As we first learn reading, we are simultaneously acquiring the first mechanics of writing. Later, we will move to an entirely different level, doing what might be called *creative* writing.

Let's look at some of the other dangers that

often interfere with language development at the early reading level. When we spend all our time stressing the importance of reading, there is a strong tendency to downplay stories and oral literature. If we define "literate" as being able to read and write, we ignore thousands of years of important oral literature that carried world cultures through generations of ordered and meaningful life.

There is a parallel tendency to define the "real word" as the written word, leaving children with both their own talk and their own stories devalued. It is easy for a child so taught to think that stories are found only in books and that they are created only by professional writers. I find children today who actually think that books (and, therefore, the stories in them) are made by machines and associate no human activity with this process. Some of them cannot believe that I have written the books I show them.

Soaking in stories is very difficult when all of one's language instruction time is spent reading to and for yourself slowly, one word at a time.

Of course we want children to be readers, but when we turn reading over to them totally or prematurely, we cause two problems. The first is that we deprive them of the modeling that occurs when they are read to by adults. When children read for themselves, they skip words they do not know, and they often read as fast as they can instead of savoring and soaking in the language. When we

tell stories to children and adults, we model grammar and style, introduce new words that are understood by context and oral shaping, and slow listeners down so that they can imagine, interact, and visualize. We must forever read aloud and tell stories if we want people's observational powers to remain strong and grow.

The second thing we do when we turn reading completely over to new readers is limit the literature they see to an elementary style, syntax, and vocabulary. Conversely, when we tell stories and when we read aloud, we can keep children in a growing mode with stories and literature much more complex and mature than anything they can read alone.

One more problem that occurs at this level is the likelihood that a child's own oral language growth will slow or stop. When do school children have opportunities to work on their oral language development? When do they get to practice-"talking"? The answer is that talking happens mostly when they are in free-time situations with their peers: lunch, recess, and on the school bus. In such settings where peers model for peers, language levels stagnate at best—and erode at worst—rather than being raised through real and significant oral practice and modeling.

While children are learning to read, they should be telling and retelling stories at the same time. They should be telling their own experiences and retelling in their own ways (and with their own

words) what they have read and heard. "Saying it to learn how to say it" in language development is like practicing music. No one learns to be a musician simply by listening to notes!

So, to wrap up this important step, we must *continue* to build growing observational skills and oral self-expression skills, and add to these beginning reading and the first mechanics of writing.

The Fourth Dimension (strand four): Creative Writing

There is a sense in which the very term "creative writing" is odd. For most of us, writing remains a *documentation* medium rather than a *creative* one; it can be brought into meaningful play only *after* prior creative steps have been effectively exercised in our more primary, and therefore more competent, oral and kinesthetic language.

More simply put, for most of us, even into adulthood, writing is a foreign language. The best we usually do is to *translate* into it, but we rarely create within it. And what do we have inside us that can be translated? We have what has been created by our most basic language toolset—the oral and kinesthetic package we absorbed in our earliest childhood.

I am not, at this point, interested in that one rare person out of dozens, or even hundreds, who loves to write and out of whom words naturally flow. No, my real interest is in coming to understand people who simply cannot write and, because of this

inability to handle the medium mislabeled "creative writing," have come to believe that they have no content, no stories, within them.

Inability to engage in creative writing no more indicates that we lack "content" than inability to speak French means that we can't speak English. No, writing is not some inscription of our oral language; it is a whole new language in and of itself. Moving into this final dimension of language development requires already braided (and strongly maintained) observational skills, oral self-expression skills, reading skills, and mechanical writing skills, to which we now add the entirely new strand of the written medium. It is working effectively at this final strand of the braid that will be our focus when we explore a new model for teaching "creative writing."

These, then, are the tools we all use in acquiring our primary language: observational skills, oral self-expression skills, reading skills (and the beginnings of mechanical writing skills), and creative writing skills. But what, exactly, is being developed through this braiding process? And what are we are finally calling "language"?

Recent literacy agendas too narrowly define language as "reading and writing," and so do many educational curricula. Now that we have seen one possible model of developmental process, let us look more deeply at the matter of language itself. Our goal is to discover the multiple dimensions of language at its fullest. We want to take advantage

of this wholeness in using language as a natural creative medium, and we want to see how much of it we can capture in the slender medium of the written word.

What is Language?

One might casually say that language at its highest and purest is made of words, those symbolic representations of both concrete realities and conceptual ideas, used for human communication. A lofty definition, yes...maybe. It all depends upon what is meant by the word *communication.*

In the contemporary and highly developed worlds of sales, marketing, and management, we often see "communication" used to mean "presentation." "Presentation" refers to the movement of a picture, thought, or idea from a *presenter* to a *target audience,* or receiver. This is a script-based model, and we see it used in the theater, by television and radio broadcasters (think of the word *broad-cast* for a moment!), in the university lecture hall, the criminal courtroom, and the church pulpit. In this model, the "fourth wall" that in classical theater separates the audience from the stage may just as well be the television screen in our living room. The television talks to us and shows us things, but we can neither talk back nor influence in any way (not even to altering speed of speech)

the message, information, or opinion that is being presented to us.

Presentation is a language medium that does *not* make full use of the language arsenal we have just described in this book. Presentation cannot, then, be a model that exercises our whole available language. Thus, in school, when drama and speech are studied, both can easily fall short of being "communications" fields, because they may be looked at in very scripted and one-sided ways.

To get a fuller grasp of the word "communication" and the scope of the language it uses, we must go to our Latin roots. Our English word *communication* comes from the Latin *communicare,* which also happens to be the parent word for such English words as *communicable, communion,* and *community.* All these words refer to conditions, activities, or places involving the participation of more than one person or more than "one side."

In short, "communication" is a function of relational language in all of its two-sidedness. A television broadcast can move information. But it cannot, by definition, "communicate" because the watcher or listener and the broadcaster do not simultaneously participate together in moving the pictures and ideas from one to the other, or in seeing that the broadcaster's intent matches the receiver's understanding.

With communication as our model, we are defining language as an entity larger and infinitely more complex and powerful than language viewed

as a presentation tool. At the same time, we are looking at an entity that, except for vocabulary, syntactical prowess, and ability to document (we call it "writing"), can usefully be mastered by the average five-year-old.

What, then, are the multiple dimensions of this thing we call our "language"?

Five Dimensions of the Oral and Kinesthetic Language Package

In an earlier book of mine entitled *Telling Your Own Stories* (August House, 1993), there is a brief discussion of the "Five Languages of Storytelling." After an additional half-dozen years of observation and refinement, I offer a much fuller treatment of that same dimensionality as we seek to understand our primary functional language. Doing this should help us tackle another language entirely, one we call writing.

Dimension One: The Language of Movement

Let us think for a moment of a baby who is too young to be talking at all, a baby who is only a few months old and has not yet acquired even her first word. No words...does that mean no language? Of course not! At least two or three, and probably four, of the language dimensions described next already are being competently developed in the pre-word-verbal child, and the first is the language of movement.

A great deal of what the young child observes

at that first level of observational competence discussed earlier is related to touch and body movement. Soon the pre-verbal child is learning that much can be communicated with others by body movement—the language of gesture.

Using this new language, the baby may either reach out to mama or turn away from her. She may rock and sway contentedly or lash out at the whole world with flailing arms, legs, and writhing torso. Very early, we begin to acquire and use a competent language of movement and gesture that remains available to us all our lives.

Gesture is such a powerful language that it is even possible for totally deaf people to compensate by using a system of "organized gestures" or "sign language."

Still, for the hearing and non-hearing alike, it is our most *natural* gestures that provide key language tools for communication. Once, while being signed at a storytelling festival, I was told by a fine interpreter that she wanted to position herself so that the audience would see both of us at the same time. When I inquired about this, she said, "I don't want them to look away from you in order to watch me. You see, they already understand about half of the content of your stories from your *gestural language.* If I have them watching you, I can then fill in the rest."

After the event, our discussion of gestural language continued. Eventually I realized that in her work she metaphorically defines "sign language"

as "gestures organized to compensate for the inability to hear." This very powerful language dimension literally enables the speechless to speak.

Gestural language even has its own volume levels. Some of us have very low "gestural volume" as a matter of overall kinesthetic language. That is, we tend to communicate with very little body language. If our gestural volume is low, our hands tend to stay near a resting position, we do not use pronounced facial expressions, and we do not move about much when we are communicating. Others of us are "high volume" gestural communicators. We use our hands and arms wildly, our faces are like rubber, and our whole bodies are in motion all the time.

Some of these gestural volume differences may be personal habit, and some may be cultural. Two different friends of mine have reported on extensive work as storyteller and photographer among native peoples in the farthest northern parts of Alaska. My storyteller friend reported that, upon first arrival, she visited the school and told stories to the schoolchildren there. Her initial reaction to their reception was almost one of despair. "They just sat there and didn't move at all . . . I was totally convinced that they didn't get what I was talking about, and I really didn't want to go back again."

It was a great surprise to her when the report came that the children had loved the storytelling and wanted her to return and tell again as soon as possible. "How can this be?" she asked a new

acquaintance who taught at this same school.

The answer that came from the teacher was the same answer that came from my photographer friend, himself a northern Alaska native. "Do two things and you will understand. When you go to school tomorrow to tell stories, look only at their *faces* and, at the same time, remember how people in this climate have dressed for as long as there has been human habitation here!"

The next day the storyteller did just that and realized that the entire range of gestural language was present within the faces of her listeners. Traditionally, the rest of these people's bodies had been heavily covered up by clothing, so the face was the only available "gestural instrument" that developed as a physical communication tool.

As we consider this anecdote, we might also think of those cultures whose people we caricature as "talking with their hands." We realize that these are warm-climate cultures. Could it be that our entire body develops as a communication instrument to the extent that it is available (visible) to be put to such use? I make no defensible scientific assertions because there is not documentation to do so. But I do raise the question based on our common anecdotal observations.

Even though all of us have our own basic gestural volumes, we each make adjustments in the same way and for the same reasons that we adjust the volume level of our voices. When we are "talking" with only one person or a small group, our gestural

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Parenting/Education

"Stop talking! You're supposed to be working on language!"

—overheard in an elementary classroom by writer and storyteller Donald Davis

From the moment they are born, we encourage children to talk—that is, until they enter school, where the focus is on the written product as the sole measurement of language development. Many children fail to measure up to established standards. Why?

Because, Davis observes, for most of us writing functions as a "foreign language," and individuals are not capable of creating or thinking within a foreign language. We must step back into our familiar first language—the spoken word—as our creative medium and learn to "translate" into that new foreign language called writing. With enough success, writing will eventually become a second language, instead of a foreign language.

When we talk about language arts in our schools, we focus on reading and writing instead of nourishing the whole oral and kinesthetic package which is our spoken language. Davis argues that talking and writing need not be mutually exclusive in language development. In this book, he lays out the method he has used in countless residencies in schools across the United States, working with adults, teens, children, and teachers.

DONALD DAVIS grew up in a family of traditional storytellers in North Carolina. After twenty years' service as a United Methodist minister, Davis became a full—time storyteller, now giving more than three hundred performances each year. He has served as guest host of American Public Radio's "Good Evening," and appeared on CNN and "Nightline." He is the author of several books, including *Listening for the Crack of Dawn* and *Telling Your Own Stories*, as well as award-winning audiocassettes such as *The Big-Screen Drive-In Theater* and *The Grand Canyon*.

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