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English Prime AS AN Instructional Tool IN Writing Classes

Accomplished teachers of English composition can offer a variety of ways to guide students through the writing process, ranging from mind maps to peer critiques with numerous pre-writing, writing, and post-writing activities in between. For students, one of the more challenging and useful steps in the revision stage of the writing process surfaces in the removal of prosaic sentence formations that include clichés, simple narration, and vague expressions. Despite their efforts to cleanse students' essays of ambiguous and trite language, many students and teachers overlook the lack of originality and clarity inherent in an over-reliance on the verb *to be*. An introduction to English Prime, commonly referred to as E-Prime, can remedy this oversight and can compel ESL and EFL students to improve their language learning within the process of writing.

What does E-Prime entail?

The conceptualization of E-Prime first came about within the field of general semantics as a means of promoting the removal of Aristotelian logic from the English language (see Bourland and Johnston 1991; Bourland and Johnston 1997; Johnston, Bourland and Klein 1994). Advocates of E-Prime claim that Aristotelian logic, which induces English speakers and writers to report beliefs as true or false, or "black-or-white," through the use of the verb *to be,* creates false absolutes (Kellogg and Bourland 1990). E-Prime eliminates the use of the verb *to be* from both written and spoken forms of English and, in its most complete form, requires the writer or speaker to make a reference to the person or entity that claims credibility in a given statement. For example, in reference to someone labeled by the police as a "criminal," the direct accusation "He is a criminal," when translated into E-Prime, might appear more subtly restated as, "According to the police, he exhibits criminal behavior." Some people would probably agree with the former statement; however, everyone else, including the "criminal" himself, would agree with the latter. As such, E-Prime offers a more accurate representation of reality.

In particular, E-Prime aims to rid the English language of the identity use (noun phrase + be + noun phrase) and the predicate use (noun phrase + be + adjective phrase) of the verb *to be* (Scorpio 2003). Strict E-Prime guidelines call for the deletion of all forms of the verb *to be,* including the very common existential, passive, and progressive forms, as well as idiomatic and other fixed forms, such as "to be into (something)" and "to be supposed to." By removing all forms of the verb *to be* from their writing, students can refine their writing to exhibit greater achievement and clearer, more elaborate descriptions of reality. In turn, preventing writing students from using the verb *to be* forces them to seek new vocabulary. E-Prime also activates the use of known vocabulary that students might otherwise leave dormant, or perhaps even forget altogether, under the shadow of the verb *to be.*

Applications of E-Prime in writing classrooms

The origins of E-Prime described above may seem deeply philosophical to most English speakers; and, at first, the application of E-Prime guidelines to writing assignments may appear somewhat questionable to ESL and EFL composition teachers. After all, the verb *to be* does play a significant role in sentence construction as perhaps one of the most frequently used verbs in the English language across most registers. However, under closer scrutiny, the benefits that E-Prime has to offer writing students refute any possible skepticism or objection that a teacher might have over E-Prime's value as an instructional tool.

Furthermore, writing teachers can find a variety of ways to incorporate E-Prime guidelines in their writing assignments from beginning-level sentence writing to advanced-level essay writing. Sentence-level translation exercises, paraphrasing tasks, and revision activities for entire essays make up some of the more practical techniques teachers can use to show students the rewards of E-Prime. By translating standard English into E-Prime, even low-intermediate level students can acquire new vocabulary and grammatical structures. Likewise, when using E-Prime to paraphrase readings that contain the verb *to be,* intermediate and higher level students might find ways to state comments more clearly, as well as more fairly. In addition, teachers may consider asking for "English Double Prime," which requires avoiding the verbs *to be* and *to have,* in these paraphrasing activities. The Web-based article *Make Your Paraphrasing Plagiarism Proof with a Coat of E-Prime* (Maas 2003) provides noteworthy and photocopiable materials for introducing students to E-Prime through paraphrasing. Finally, regarding essay revisions, teachers may ask their high intermediate and advanced students to either make their revisions during the writing stage or as sentence-by-sentence translations in the post-writing stage.

The next section of this article demonstrates only one of the many ways an English composition teacher might incorporate E-Prime guidelines into a descriptive essay assignment. In this particular assignment, the students should not receive encouragement to qualify each descriptive statement with a point-of-view phrase, such as "In my mind..." or "In my opinion...." In this way, students can avoid redundancy and maintain their stance on how they want their readers to perceive descriptions

without hedging. Therefore, the final products of the students' writings should display basic E-Prime, English without the verb *to be,* and should not reflect what semanticists refer to as practical or "pure" E-Prime, which includes point-of-view expressions (Kellogg and Bourland 1990; Scorpio 2003).

Descriptive writing assignment requiring E-Prime

The following requirements for writing a descriptive essay suit any English composition students who have achieved at least a level of English proficiency necessary for writing narration. A former student, Yuko Hinoki, who granted permission to include her essay as an appendix to this article, followed the proposed guidelines closely with a few minor exceptions. The assignment called for a description of a place that the student writer knew well. The main focus of Yuko's essay centers on her room during a typical day. Aside from a couple of references to changes in time, Yuko's final draft models excellent adherence to the following writing criteria:

1. Do not tell a story about a special place with narration, but show the place through description.
2. Do not use first person *(I, we)* or second person *(you).*
3. Do not use any forms of the verb *to be,* including its auxiliary forms with progressive tenses and passive sentences.
4. Describe one place at a single point in time, using as many active simple present tense verbs as possible.
5. Focus on what you experience through the five senses and not on your actions in the place.

See the article *Seven and Ninth Grade Writing Exercises: Candy, Biographies and E-Prime* (Miller 1999) for other criteria for descriptive writing.

When student writers need to avoid narration, they have a tendency to rely heavily on the passive voice and other grammatical forms that include the verb *to be.* However, the guidelines above encourage writers to deviate from simplistic narration and the verb *to be* in a manner that enhances their focus on description. Guideline 5, in particular, moves the students toward using descriptive verbs,

like *smell, taste, feel, sound, look,* and their equivalents that can replace *to be* and sometimes even inspires students to use similes. For example, students could change "The room is musty" to "The room smells musty" or perhaps, "The room reeks like a musty athletic locker."

In order for intermediate-level English students to achieve the goals of a descriptive writing assignment written in E-Prime, teachers may want to consider having their students complete the following tasks:

1. Review action verbs that could replace the verb *to be* and use example sentences with revisions that exclude it.
2. Work in pairs or groups to remove the verb t*o be* plus first and second person pronouns from rough drafts.

Students can write their most challenging revisions on the board, and the teacher can turn those revisions into a classroom review.

Writing students may also want to consult the sample E-Prime translations and revisions in Table 1. However, teachers and students should know that other writing assignments, which employ different genres, may call for some adaptation of the examples presented. The *E-Prime Tutorial* Web site (Scorpio 2003) provides an excellent source of example sentences and also makes available a list of alternative action verbs that provide creative substitutions for the verb *to be.*

In some instances, Table 1 recommends alterations rather than direct translations because translating directly would result in awkward or seemingly incomplete statements of description. For example, the alteration of the first sample sentence transforms the object "hideout," into a definition that provides a slightly more detailed description. This revision presents a more appropriate transformation than an indecisive expression like "My room seems like a hideout." Likewise, a student could substitute "My stereo is a Sony" with "Sony made my stereo" but a focus on Sony as a manufacturer detracts from the description of the stereo itself. Therefore, "My Sony stereo (does something)" constitutes a better transformation.

Similarly, sentences with the predicate form of the verb *to be* seem to translate easily and directly into E-Prime because they often

E-Prime Translations and Revisions for a Descriptive Essay

Use of the verb *to be*	Example sentences in Standard English	Example translations and revisions in English Prime
Identity	My room is my hideout.	My room hides me from the outside world.
	The stereo is a Sony.	My Sony stereo entertains my guests.
Predicate	My bed is comfortable.	My bed feels comfortable.
	The music is loud.	The music plays loudly.
Existential	There is a chair in the corner.	A chair sits in the corner.
	Dirty clothes are all over the floor and furniture.	Dirty clothes clutter the floor and furniture.
Passive	The curtains have been sprayed with perfume.	The smell of perfume clings to the curtains.
	Post cards are sent to me every month by my friends.	My friends send post cards to me every month.
Progressive	The stereo is playing.	The stereo plays softly.
	It is raining.	Rain pours like a waterfall.
Idiomatic or Fixed	I am into classical music.	Classical music pleases me.
	I am supposed to clean my room.	My room needs cleaning.

Table 1
Sample E-Prime translations and revisons

only involve changing the copula, as seen in "My bed feels comfortable." Sometimes, translating the predicate form also warrants changing the predicative adjective to an adverb as seen in "The music plays loudly." Nonetheless, as with the identity uses above, the unwanted hedging indicated by the use of copula such as "seems" and "appears" should lead to further alteration and elaboration. Translations of the predicate use of the verb *to be* from standard English into E-Prime do not always motivate students to elaborate much. In such cases, both standard English versions and the E-Prime translations beg for the addition of similes and other descriptive devices. However, the E-Prime translations do promote the use of a wider range of vocabulary that reduce the redundancy of the overused verb *to be.*

With respect to existential and passive forms of the verb *to be,* students can easily translate many of the standard English examples into simple, sometimes narrative, E-Prime sentences with the first person pronoun *I* as in "I have a chair…," "I threw my dirty clothes…," or "I sprayed the curtains…." However, since the assignment criteria forbid the use of narration and first person pronouns, students often obligingly turn to the creative use of personification found in phrases like "A chair sits," "Clothes clutter," and "Smell clings." At this point, a thesaurus comes in very handy for helping students to decide whether or not words like *sit, clutter,* and *cling* truly capture the image they want their descriptions to portray. Alternately, students can transform other passive sentences, preferably those that do not hide a first person pronoun, to match an E-Prime format with the simple changes used to switch any passive sentence to an active one.

On the surface, when progressive forms undergo transformation into E-Prime, the necessary changes seem as easy as "The stereo is playing" equals "The stereo plays" and "It is raining" equals "It rains." On the contrary, these simple present tense verb constructions beg for elaboration as seen in "The stereo plays softly." Out of context, the use of the simple present tense may seem strange, but it does

serve its purpose for describing places and objects at a single moment in time, and may, in a descriptive writing, invite the use of similes as seen in "Rain pours like a waterfall."

The most complex alterations occasionally show up in the rearranging of sentences that contain idiomatic or fixed expressions with the verb *to be*. With the exclusion of first person pronouns and *to be,* these sentences sometimes demand near complete revisions and can easily lose their originally intended meanings or functions if a writer does not use caution. For example, with the first person pronoun, a student could change the idiomatic phrase "I am into classical music" to "I love classical music." However, without the first person pronoun, the student must ask, "Why do I love classical music?" The answer to this question should provide an appropriate transformation, as does "Classical music pleases me," but not necessarily the most accurate translation because the word *pleases* may not carry exactly the same meaning the student wants to convey with the idiom *to be into.* The student might find the sentence better off with a completely different verb, for example, "relaxes," "excites," or "entertains." Likewise, in the last example in Table 1, the fixed phrase "to be supposed to" presents the verb *to be* in its passive form. Therefore, the phrase can serve the function of concealing the supposer's identity. In contrast, a direct E-Prime translation would call for clarification of who expects the student to clean his or her room. In order to maintain the function of the original meaning, the student may feel more comfortable simply stating the fact that the room needs cleaning, rather than writing something like, "My mom told me to clean my room."

In summary, E-Prime shows great potential for transforming standard English sentences into more creative and clearer statements of description. In addition, E-Prime encourages frequent perusal of a thesaurus and experimentation with personification and similes. Furthermore, the process of converting standard English to E-Prime does not allow students to adhere to only familiar language patterns that they can easily compose the morning of the due date. This enhancement of the writing process teaches the students to teach themselves and to spend their essay writing time more reflectively and constructively.

Final comments

When applying the aforementioned ideas to any writing assignment, teachers must make sure their students know that the proposed set of guidelines represents only one means to an end and does not present an end in itself. Requiring students to avoid the verb *to be* on every assignment would deter students from developing other fundamental skills of fluent writing. However, introducing E-Prime restrictions for at least one assignment forces students to spend more time with their essays, to think critically about acceptable grammar and vocabulary, and to search for new, or nearly forgotten, vocabulary.

If you fear that essays without *to be* would sound too awkward to find a place in your writing classes, please notice that, excluding sample quotes, this article and the attached student essay both conform to the basic E-Prime guidelines. Do they read strangely to you?

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Recently new houses mushroom in my town. My condominium has stood here near the sea since 1991. My family has lived in this home, which has 4 rooms, a living room, dining room, and kitchen, for 10 years. Our house seems large. Although my room has only six-tatami, it gives me much comfort through sight, smell, touch, and sound.

From the entrance of my room, on the right, stands a desk. My grandparents gave me this desk 13 years ago. So the desk sometimes reminds me of my grandparents. My most important dictionaries and textbooks rest inside a bookshelf on the desk. Therefore, my desk provides a convenience place to study.

The window lights up my desk from the opposite side of the room. The rising sun sneaks through the window to wake me up every morning. Light fills my room until the sun sets in the west.

Near the window, the perfumed curtains emit the smell of peaches. This scent makes me relax.

My soft bed and warm linens tempt me to sleep. So my mattress and quilt always put me to sleep successfully.

Finally, my condominium also stands by the railroad so the noise of the train enters every room of my home. Moreover, my room has very thin walls. Therefore, music from the stereo usually fills not only the living room but my room as well. These sounds make me feel at home because of their common and familiar tones.

Consequently, the various articles in my room make me pleased. My family lives a happy life by virtue of these articles. As such, my room plays an integral role in my life!