E-Prime as a Revision Strategy

A simple, systematic editing technique offers access to dynamics of language ordinarily subliminal.

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Seven years ago, I learned about E-Prime – a dialect of English using no forms of the verb to be – as a technique to clarify thinking. Looking through drafts and final copies of my own prose – papers, news articles, reports, speeches, video scripts – I found, in every case, many fewer be forms in successive drafts, though I had not especially tried to reduce their incidence. Of course, teachers and handbooks have long – and ineffectually – suggested that writers seek stronger alternatives to this overused verb, but E-Prime advocates like E. W. Kellogg III insist on its extirpation. In a National Public Radio interview with All Things Considered's Robert Siegle, he mentioned a book on the subject, To Be or Not; I eventually located a copy in the Omaha Public Library. Meanwhile, I decided to try E-Prime in my Individualized English classes.

While grading papers, I circled each form of to be, provided students with a list of all the forms, and asked them to eliminate them in their revisions. The first student arrived – haggard, complaining about the difficulty of the assignment, but proud that she had finally expunged the verb from her paper. As I read through the paper with her, her eyes widened in disbelief, her face grew pale, her breath came in gasps and groans: fourteen forms of to be appeared on the first page alone. After ruling out narcolepsy, we began to appreciate and examine I. A. Richards' caveat that "[o]f all the snares in language, those set for us by “be” are (sic) without doubt the sliest" (162). Still, be forms continued to appear in most students' second and even third revisions, much to their chagrin.

Much to my chagrin, I quickly discovered, first, that many attempts to translate Standard English to E-Prime revealed appalling failures to grasp English sentence structure; second, that the instrument we used to test for sentence structure often failed to identify some important weaknesses in fluency and, third, that such weaknesses function at an unconscious level, reinforced by reliance on be-form patternings.

It seems axiomatic that a reader who cannot paraphrase a text cannot demonstrate an understanding of it; most students acknowledge that principle for assigned readings, but balk at applying it to their own writing. Using E-Prime, I require students to paraphrase about half their sentences – admittedly, in a special way, but using as stylistic models the best of the rest of their sentences, already written in 'native' E-Prime. The more gracefully and effectively they learn to do this, the more they begin to sound like themselves as writers, rather than like all the other writers around them sound about half the time. However, the first stage of mastering E-Prime usually bristles with infelicities, and so provides a handy diagnostic tool to determine each student's specific suite of weaknesses. Barbarisms of diverse etiology characterize this stage; for example:
Both ESL and native speakers sometimes resort to creolization when translating into E-Prime, doing without be as both copula and auxiliary:

She a fine scholar." (Todd & Hancock 498)
We going to Miami for spring break.

They may fail to recognize the transitivity or intransitivity of a 'replacement' verb:

\textit{not} \textbf{John is tall.}  \\
\textit{but} \textbf{John exists tall;}

\textit{not} \textbf{The laws are upheld due only to fear.}  \\
\textit{but} \textbf{The laws uphold due only to fear.}

Sometimes they switch degrees of ostensive reality or certainty:

\textit{not} \textbf{Helen is dressed.}  \\
\textit{but} \textbf{Helen seems dressed.}

Sometimes the attempt produces a dangling modifier:

\textit{not} \textbf{While he is dedicated to his work, his family comes first.}  \\
\textit{but} \textbf{While dedicated to his work, his family comes first.}

A hasty choice may warp the context:

\textit{not} \textbf{Bill is bleeding.}  \\
\textit{but} \textbf{Bill appears bleeding.}

We have all seen writers commit errors like these naïvely – errors most would never say. Here, however, a revision technique consciously (?) applied elicits them, suggesting that the misunderstandings which permit such errors run deep, papered over with formulaic, be-ridden, 'safe' structural choices or, better, reflexes. This first stage of E-Prime usage invites intervention where the usual assessment instruments have failed to detect problems. Like therapy for stuttering, this stage focuses on remediating 'production errors.'

I suspect that multiple choice, identification and short answer tests bear much of the responsibility for the valorization of the copula, as do the slogans so dear to our hearts \textit{e.g.}, "Writing \textit{is} discovery." To experienced writers, this means something; to the inexperienced,
no doubt, something considerably less – a mere advertisement for an overpriced luxury item. However, E-Prime can open the conceptual horizons within such a statement, much as developing a roll of film allows others to appreciate it more than perusing it fresh from the camera, rolled tight as a bud. We might begin by asking whether the "is" here means "equals" and, if so, whether it implies commutativity: does "Writing is discovery" mean the same thing as "Discovery is writing"? If not – and most students agree that it does not – what scalar relationship(s) might we predicate between the terms? Does writing (weakly) allow discovery, or (more strongly) produce discovery? Does writing (weakly) use discovery, or (more strongly) require discovery? Do all four verbs apply? Under what circumstances? I urge my students to use the strongest verb(s) they can justify. Such questions can reveal the cognitive opacities which creolization, transitivity mistakes and other errors signal. This approach offers a systematic, focused technique to explore the shorthand of be-fogged ideas, and to generate thoughtful, wiry paragraphs from flaccid sentences.

Beyond the revision of their own writing, E-Prime can also help students determine whether to quote a source directly or to paraphrase. In an essay called "Who Shall I Be?" (sic), freelance writer Jennifer Crichton, commenting on the transient condition of students away at college, writes that "Moving is the American way, after all" (216). An inescapable false corollary haunts this sentence, even if the writer never intended it or if she remains unaware of it: "Not moving is not the American way." It also unnecessarily links 'moving' with the patriotic phrase "the American way," suggesting that, for instance, someone whose family has lived in the same New England saltbox since the Mayflower qualifies as 'less American' than a nomad seeing the USA in a Winnebago. More objectively, E-Prime might say:

**Americans tend to change their residences often.**
Describing a particularly demanding class, a student wrote:

"By the time we were ready to take the final exam, most of us were worried that we would fail the course. . ." (Bobnack 57)

As a teacher, I immediately saw this as both self-deceptive and self-exculpatory: self-deceptive because students truly prepared for a test would not fear failing it, and self-exculpatory because it shifts the blame for the anticipated failure from the students (who, after all, "were" ready) to (guess who?) the teacher. E-Prime avoids both traps:

**When the time came to take the test, we all feared failing.**

In a piece called "Being a Man," novelist and travel writer Paul Theroux complains:

"The youth who is subverted, as most are, into believing in the masculine ideal is effectively separated from women and spends the rest of his life finding women a riddle and a nuisance" (428).

A student eager to quote this sentence in a research paper on "Masculinity in America" because of its reference to "finding women a riddle and a nuisance" will pass on to the reader the sentence's failure (due to the passive "is subverted") to indicate who does the subverting – information which the student might have determined from the context, and ought to have passed on to the reader by paraphrasing most of the sentence and quoting only the phrase "finding women a riddle and a nuisance." In this and similar cases, E-Prime offers a specific way to test whether to paraphrase or to quote.
Many advocates tout E-Prime as an epistemological panacea; my ambitions for it remain more modest, my enthusiasm deriving more from practice than from promise. As a permanent feature of revision assignments, E-Prime offers students an unambiguous technique that they already use spontaneously in half their sentences and, by comparing rewrites with originals, the teacher can see exactly how often and how well each student has applied it. Students gain measurable, definite senses of mastery, dispelling self-hobbling rationalizations that see the assignment as 'impossible.' They can also learn how to develop genuinely individual 'voices' after seeing kneejerk alternatives (like using seem, exist or appear ten times on a page) prove awkward or unworkable.

After seven years of experience with this technique, I must agree with Dr. Kellogg (who even speaks in E-Prime) that, to work effectively, E-Prime requires the total elimination of be forms, since we use them addictively, even compulsively, as their subliminal residuum even in third drafts attests. On a recent foray into cyberspace, for instance, I found a Web Page featuring four sentences 'rewritten' in E-Prime--two of them containing be forms! Old habits of attribution and predication die hard, as my student with fourteen be forms on her first page also demonstrated.

I find that E-Prime works best when supported by real-time tutorial instruction, even though (or perhaps because) most writers use it without thinking half the time already. Teaching the elusive and largely grammatical rules underlying the graceful transformation of Standard English into E-Prime to students woefully undereducated in the vocabulary of grammar requires them to rely on abstract, memorized rules; E-Prime invites them to use imagination in concrete instances. My individualized classes allow me to edit sentences silently which students have failed to convert from Standard English, letting them figure out the principles on their own – which they often do. If they do not recognize the E-Prime version I propose as an adequate paraphrase of their originals, I ask them to clarify their objections, then incorporate the terms of their explanations in new versions until they feel better about the E-Prime versions than they did about the originals. Only after we have arrived together at a concrete instance of improvement via E-Prime do I decide whether to discuss the grammatical principle involved or to go on to another instance of concrete problem solving.

Also, to encourage students to use E-Prime as a technique to move their thoughts forward, rather than as an exercise in backward looking error correction, I ask that they find at least two E-Prime alternatives to each of their target sentences, then choose the best one or combine two to produce an even more appropriate sentence. Such choices often involve distinguishing between the best 'standalone' sentence and the one which best fits the context of a paragraph, and the attention to thinking in paragraphs further dissociates E-Prime from mechanical error correction.

- We can sometimes translate Standard English into E-Prime by simple cancellation:

  not

  "A practical man is a man who practices the errors of his forefathers" (Disraeli),

  but

  "A practical man practices the errors of his forefathers."
• Often, a metamorphosis proves most rewarding:

not
"A rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" (Stein),

but
"Each rose incarnates every other."

• Substitution, too, can work wonders:

not
"It's amazing!"

but
"It makes my hair stand up and my heart sprout wings."

• Somewhat less majestically, though no less usefully, contextualization may serve:

not
"John is tall" (Who cares? Why waste a sentence to establish a mere – and accidental – fact?)

but
"Because of his height, John reached the fire extinguisher on the top shelf fast enough to save twenty people."

Replying to skeptics in his "Introduction" to More E-Prime: To Be or Not II, D. David Bourland, Jr., the semanticist who coined the term, writes that "[w]hen one really gets down to it, I believe that we cannot hope to go beyond saying, with Dr. Albert Ellis, that E-Prime, like [his] Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, 'becomes and remains effective with many (not all) people much (not all) of the time.' This probably will not satisfy some people. Sorry about that" (xxvii). Recognizing the limitations of the technique, I do not require or even encourage students to use E-Prime for first drafts or in-class exams; recognizing its benefits and the reluctance of some students to expend the necessary effort I weigh their success in its employment for revisions more heavily as the course progresses, and extend my office hours as necessary to assist them. The technique should not squelch spontaneity, but invite students to extend, refine, and build upon their initial formulations.

Like Dolby™ or the FM band, E-Prime filters noise; it helps to bridge the gap between private notation and public communication. It can catalyze a permanent boost in its practitioners' attention to language, allowing writers to construct their own filters and discover their own strategies, rather than to ape and clone 'inherited' and, frequently, maladaptive predilections. "He who will not write," says novelist Phillipe Sollers, "shall be written" (qtd. in Roudiez 71); that means, writes Leon Roudiez, who quotes then paraphrases him, "[the reader] must write the text as much as possible in order to avoid being written by the text's ideology" (75). As a revision technique, E-Prime encourages students to do just that: it prompts them, both as readers and as writers, to uncover and evaluate the unstated assumptions, questionable corollaries, and imprecisions of excessive abstraction or excessive literalism which threaten to "write" them and do in fact "write" them dozens of times daily via the automatisms of be form usage alone. It provides a technique to avoid "being written" by the language's unconscious ideology, tenaciously present in first drafts. Even more importantly, it invites students to discover that they, like other writers, have more to say and can say more than they may have expected.
Works Cited


Roudiez, Leon S. "Notes on the Reader as Subject." semiotext(e) 1.3 (1975): 69-80.


See also D. David Bourland's essay "TO BE OR NOT TO BE: E-Prime as a Tool for Critical Thinking" at http://www.crl.com/~isgs/tobecrit.htm

Forms of to be:

- be
- am
- are
- is
- was
- were
- been
- being
- maybe
- albeit

(as well as colloquial ain't and the sandhi forms: 'm, 're, 's).