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AESTRACT

FOUR PROJECT ENGLISH STUDIES, TWO IN CCMPOSITION AND TWC IN READING, REFLECTED THE FOLLOWING RESEARCH FINDINGS. THE FIRST STUDY IN COMPCSITICN FCUND NC CORRELATION BETWEEN KNOWLEDGE OF TRADITIONAL GRAMMAR AND PERFCRMANCE IN COMPOSITION AMONG COLLEGE FRESHMEN AS MEASURED BY THE STEP ESSAY TEST AND THE IOWA GRAMMAR INFORMATICN TEST, ALTHOUGH THE INVESTIGATOR QUESTIONED THE ADEQUACY OF THESE TESTS FOR HIS PURPOSES. THE SECOND COMPOSITION STUDY INDICATED THAT NEITHER MORE WRITING NOR INTENSIVE CORRECTION IMPROVES THE QUALITY OF STUDENT COMPCSITICN AND POINTED TO THE NEED FOR MORE RESEARCH INTO POSSIBLE FACTORS AFFECTING WRITING SKILLS. ONE READING STUDY INDICATED THAT AT LEAST 12 ABILITIES ARE INVOLVED IN READING FCR EITHER SPEED OR POWER, WHILE THE OTHER STUDY SHOWED THAT MENTALLY-RETARDED ADOLESCENTS COULD IMPROVE THEIR READING SKILLS WHEN THE TEACHER USED A WELL-DEFINED METHOD WITH CLEAR, ACHIEVABLE GOALS. (MF)

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Project English Notes

Edited by Sue M. Brett
U. S. Office of Education

Research Findings

A few Project English studies have now been completed and are reviewed here. The reports of these projects are not available for loan at the U. S. Office of Education, but they are accessible in the libraries which subscribe to the Library of Congress Documents Expediting Project. A list of these libraries is appended.

Composition

Does knowledge of grammar correlate significantly with ability in composition?

A new Project English investigation has failed to discover such a correlation.[1] The study was predicated on the assumption that the negative findings of earlier research were due to the tests employed, which measured knowledge of grammar rules and terminology as well as syntax. The hypotheses tested were "that there is a statistically significant correlation between ability in written composition and awareness of structural relationships in English, and that this correlation is significantly different from the correlation between ability in written composition and ability to verbalize knowledge of rules and terminology of traditional English grammar."

Data were gathered from 200 college freshmen. A STEP Essay Test measured their writing ability; the Iowa Grammar Information Test, their knowledge of traditional grammar; and a new test constructed by the investigator, their awareness of syntax. The syntax test provided for recognition of grammatical structures without involving terminology. Example: "*Roosevelt fought* in the Spanish-American War. A. The three *berls ergled* in the same fosile. B. She is the *alpest garsil* in the skaver. C. Our dalkoss was *mandering* his *barstles*." The student chose the nonsense structure most like the pattern, and his recognition that *berls* and *ergled* have the same relationship to each other as *Roosevelt* and *fought* was evidence that he was aware of the nature of the relationship.

The investigator feels that his negative findings will be no more acceptable to English teachers than the earlier ones. On the basis of sheer logic, "it seems impossible that a student who is unaware of the basic grammatical relationships of words could master the most elementary skills." He again questions the ability of the tests used to reveal the correlation which common sense tells him must exist. "Although the findings do not indicate a high degree of relationship between ability in written composition and various aspects of grammatical knowledge, they can hardly be interpreted as proof that such relationship does not exist," he concludes.

Does more writing produce better writing? Does more red ink yield better results than less?

The most recently completed research has found no evidence to warrant affirmative replies.[2] The weekly theme, again called on the carpet, has again failed to justify itself. The investigators' null hypotheses

[1]Mount Olive Junior College. *The Correlation of Awareness of Structural Relationships in English and Ability in Written Composition* (By Roy C. O'Donnell, Cooperative Research Project No. 1524, supported by the Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, United States Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). 1963. 45 pp.

[2]The Florida State University. *Effects of Frequency of Writing and Intensity of Teacher Evaluation Upon High School Students' Performance in Written Composition* (By Dwight L. Burton and Lois V. Arnold, Cooperative Research Project No. 1523, supported by the Cooperative Research Program of the Office of Education, U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare) 1963. 99 pp.

that there are no significant differences in the writing performance of high school students which can be associated with frequency of writing, or with intensity of teacher evaluation, or with ability levels of pupils, or with any combination of these factors have been sustained by their findings.

For the testing of these hypotheses, a tenth-grade teacher in each of two Florida high schools taught for a year one control class and three experimental classes. The students, average in ability, were identified within their groups as high, middle, and low on the basis of their verbal skills. The control class in each school wrote themes *infrequently*—actually six weeks apart—and the teacher evaluated them *moderately*. The report defines moderate evaluation as "that kind of marking in which the teacher selects only an occasional paper to grade or corrects only those errors pertaining to skills which students are studying at a particular time." In each school one experimental class wrote *infrequently*, but the teacher evaluated *intensively*—that is, corrected all errors and liberally commented on the papers; another wrote *frequently*—specifically, a 250-300-word theme once a week (or shorter pieces on four days of the week)—and the teacher evaluated *moderately;* the fourth class wrote *frequently* and the teacher evaluated *intensively*. At the end of the school year no significant differences in progress were found, regardless of the kind of writing program administered or the ability of the students involved.

The findings of this experiment tend to strengthen the doubts that had been planted by previous research. Here is new evidence that our anxious efforts for more writing, more correcting, more revision, while certain to consume our teachers, may fail even to spark our students. It appears that we must find new information about how writing skills are learned. Are there factors conditioning one's ability to write which we have not taken sufficiently into account? For instance, is it possible that extensive experience with superior writings of others, and perhaps even a touch of talent, are essentials for which no amount of writing practice and teacher evaluation can substitute? Can the relationship between maturity and writing abilities be identified? Might not basic research to discover the mental factors in writing a composition produce new information for our guidance in teaching?

Though the findings of this study are by no means definitive, they are consistent with the results of several previous studies and point to the need for broader and deeper investigation.

Reading

What abilities are involved in reading?

Recent research has found that the mental factors which account for 55 percent of the differences in *speed* of reading at the high school level are the following, arranged in order of descending influence:[3] visual verbal meaning, auding (the understanding of spoken English), homonymic meaning, inductive reasoning, computational interest, and literary interest. The factors accounting for 75 percent of the differences in reading *power* are verbal analysis, auding, vocabulary in context, vocabulary in isolation, visual verbal meaning, tone intensity, effective study planning, and mechanical interests. Computational interest and mechanical interest, however, appear to be "suppressor variables" tending to hold back speed and power respectively.

These discoveries, and others, were made in the testing of a new theory of reading. The theory holds that when one begins the reading process, many kinds of abilities and sets of information stored in the brain are quickly linked into networks to support the action. One network aids reading speed and a different one aids reading power. The theory holds also that the components of the networks may be different for different persons and different from time to time for the same person; furthermore, that the relative influence of each factor in the network can be determined with a reasonable degree of accuracy. This last facet of the theory has special promise

[3]The University of California, Berkeley. *The Substrata-Factor Theory: Substrata Factor Differences Underlying Reading Ability in Known-Groups at the High School Level* (By Jack A. Holmes and Harry Singer, pursuant to Contract Nos. 538, SAE-8176, and 538A, SAE-8660, with the U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). 1961. 317 pp.

for the reading teacher, for on the basis of the information it would yield, he could design a teaching program to emphasize the factors in proportion to their importance.

The theory had already been tested with college students, fourth-grade pupils, and groups from the Armed Forces, and in every case had been supported by the findings. This new study employed a high school population to test the hypotheses (1) that different groups, namely, boys vs. girls, bright students vs. dull students, fast readers vs. slow readers, and powerful readers vs. non-powerful readers, mobilize different networks to support their reading; and (2) that a reader must mobilize the supporting networks that make maximum use of his strong powers and minimum use of his weak ones. Four hundred students were tested for reading speed and power, and then for 54 independent variables which were thought to be related to reading.

The results sustained the first hypothesis, for the different groups *did* mobilize different systems of subfactors to achieve the same degree of success in reading. This finding was interpreted as proof that there is more than one way to accomplish the complex act of reading. The second hypothesis, however, was denied. The bright and dull groups gave evidence that a reader cannot draw maximally upon his strong factors and minimally upon his weak; the basic core of abilities must be used by all readers. One denial of this hypothesis was made by the fast readers, who, after reaching their maximal speed by use of the basic abilities, attained even greater speed by depending upon their mechanical aptitudes which were among their weakest abilities.

Some of the researchers' comments and observations have curriculum implications:

The order in which information is received by the learner may have an important effect upon the nature of the learning product. For instance, whether phonics is taught early or late may make an appreciable difference in the development of the reader. (The report, however, offers no sequence chart.)

Girls and boys read with comparable power, but girls read somewhat faster than boys. The difference may be attributed to the fact that spelling is of key importance in speed of reading, and girls are good spellers. Boys are rated by the investigators as "notoriously poor spellers."

For fast reading at the high school level the most important factor is "a sense of what a writer is trying to say, and basic to this is a 'feel' for the meanings of words."

Since the elements of musical ability appear to be fundamental to the reading process, music should not be considered a frill in grade school.

Mechanical abilities have been found to enable a fast reader to become super-fast; therefore, the fast reader would do well to include some mechanical training in his school program.

Can mentally retarded adolescents improve their reading skills?

Definitely yes, if their learning program emphasizes reading skills.

In a recent study, the researcher, working with over 400 mentally retarded adolescents, tested the hypothesis that a renewed emphasis on reading would stimulate achievement far beyond that resulting from the the usual school program for retardates.[4] She tried two teaching programs, an experience approach, in which reading was a means, and the traditional reading lesson approach, in which reading was an end. She also noted the reliability of the usual measures of reading level expectancy when applied to the retarded, and the relationship between reading achievement and certain background factors.

The results of this experiment supported the hypothesis and revealed other important information. They indicated that, contrary to expectation, the traditional lesson-teaching method had produced as good results as the experience method; and that what appeared to be most important for learning was that the teacher use a well-defined method with clear, achievable goals. The results showed further that the commonly employed measures of reading level expectancy, namely, mental age and the

[4]Newark State College. *How Can Reading Be Taught To Educable Adolescents Who Have Not Learned To Read?* (By Ruth E. Boyle, pursuant to Contract SAE-6903 with the U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). 1959. 170 pp.

Horn Index, were inadequate to predict the reading achievement of these adolescent retardates; and that girls exceeded boys in achievement by as much as a year both at the beginning and at the end of the experiment. Background factors, though not highly significant, did show a few notable relationships to reading: among high achievers, the girls were significantly above the boys in reading grade level; there were more high-achieving Negroes of both sexes than high-achieving whites; nonverbal intelligence was greater among high achievers than among low achievers; more high achievers had both parents at home than did low achievers; and high achievers entered special classes at an older age and had more regular class experiences than did low achievers. But neither high nor low achievers exhibited any special interest in reading either at the beginning or at the end of the experiment. The investigator concluded that reading should be taught to adolescent educables as an addition to vocational competence rather than as a source of pleasure. Her general conclusion from this study is that the mentally retarded can learn more than is usually expected.

An earlier study made at Syracuse University had compared the reading achievement of mental retardates who were brain damaged and those who were not. The results showed no significant differences in the achievement of the two groups, either in silent or oral reading.[5]

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Oklahoma—Oklahoma State University Library (Stillwater); Oklahoma State Library (Oklahoma City)

Pennsylvania—Lehigh University Library (Bethlehem); Pennsylvania State University Library (University Park); Free Library of Phila-

[5]Syracuse University Research Institute. *Quantitative and Qualitative Analyses of Exogenous and Endogenous Children in Some Reading Processes* (By Rudolph J. Capobianco and Donald Y. Miller pursuant to Contract No. SAE-6418 with the U. S. Office of Education, Department of Health, Education, and Welfare). 1956. 61 pp.