DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 101 357 CS 201 811

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TITLE Language Skills for Job Entry.
PUB DATE Oct 74
NOTE 14p.; Paper presented at the Northeast Regional Conference on English in the Two-Year College (Cranston, Rhode Island, October 1974)

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.76 HC-$1.58 PLUS POSTAGE
DESCRIPTORS *Business Skills; Communication Skills; *Composition (Literary); Curriculum Development; *English Instruction; English Programs; *Job Skills; Junior Colleges; *Language Skills

ABSTRACT

The most important factor in the teaching of English is the establishment of a philosophy which serves as a guide for determining course content. At the two-year college level, there is a need to develop English programs and courses which are essential not only to the students but also to the business community in which a majority of the students--graduates and nongraduates--will enter. Modeling communication and language instruction after the needs of business is an obligation of education, especially two-year college education where the primary objective is to equip students with the skills necessary to enter the job market. Developing a curriculum modeled after the needs of employers would result in instruction that is consistent with current needs, increased economy for both education and business, and decreased duplication of courses that are taught by both colleges and business. (RB)

Language Skills for Job Entry

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Northeast Regional Conference on
English in the Two-year College.

Cranston, R.I.
24 October 1974

Each of us has some insight into what will make our teaching more interesting, more effective, more meaningful to our students, and perhaps easier to accomplish. Unfortunately, I do not offer a panacea for the teaching of English. I have been at it since 1948, and I still find it a difficult task, a time-consuming task, and sometimes mind-boggling experience to present a coherent, useful, efficient course in English composition or literature. However, through the years of midnight evaluations of papers and the daylight hours of consultations and the cajoling of students to read more closely a more carefully, I have come to realize that the most important thing about the teaching of English is the establishment of a philosophy which serves as the "skeleton" upon which the course content may be hung. (My "English" closet contains several such skeletons.) Here I plan to reveal one of those skeletons--the need in most two-year colleges for the development of English programs or courses which are essential not only to the students but also to the business communities into which nearly all of our students--graduates or non-graduates--enter.

As a field of academic study, English has a relatively brief history. The first college course in English was conducted at Harvard as "English A" (a remedial course) in 1885. Eight years later, in 1893, the Committee of Ten (a Carnegie-sponsored group) recommended English instruction in grammar, rhetoric, composition, and literature for all college-bound high school students. The committee's recommendations gave rise to the Carnegie Units still used in most public high schools. Most high school students <u>didn't</u> and <u>don't</u> go on to college; and, in 1917, the Hosic Report recommended that English instruction place emphasis upon the personal and the social aspect of English usage. The personal application of English led to emphasis being placed upon creative expression, extracurricular activities, and discussion in the Experience Curriculum movement of the 1930's. Then, after World War II, emphasis upon the thematic approaches to English, both in composition and in literature, was encouraged as a result of NCTE's Language Arts Curriculum series of the 1950's. By 1965, with the publication of <u>Freedom and Discipline</u>, English educators sought a separation and a limitation of the English subject matter,

specifically separate areas of literature, language, and composition. From then on, English has been fragmented into "schools" and "factions" of linguistics, dialectology, ethnic language, social literature, personal literature, films as literature, and a host of related aspects of English. This trend was illustrated recently when a colleague suggested that I organize a committee representing the various philosophies of English instruction in our department. My response to him was "In this department? With twenty-two members in the department, the committee would have to include twenty-two representatives."

Regardless of the philosophy or the methodology, each instructor should offer instruction and training in those areas which are English; for, contrary to some wags, the discipline has been defined and delimited. The instructor needs to establish clear objectives for his instruction; then, he needs to devise those activities which will accomplish his goals--he must create his skeleton; then, he must flesh it out. The goals of the instructor and the concerns of the instructors, however, must be directed to the educational needs of the students.

Based upon the 1970 census reports, secondary education or less is terminal education for nearly seventy-five percent of the population of this country.(1) As English instructors at two-year colleges, we can do little or nothing for these people. We can, however, deal with the students who reach us. These students constitute about thirty percent of population who enter higher education. However, we dare not be optimistic about the number who complete the two-year college programs. Statistically, on a national basis, nearly fifty percent of students entering two-year colleges do not complete the course of study and elect to enter the work force.(2) Even the majority of those who do graduate go directly into the business work force; only about thirty percent of two-year college graduates enter other institutions of higher education. Thus, our impact, if any, must be made for the majority--those students entering the world of business--the work force. My "English" skeleton on display at this time is the need for training in language skills for job-entry.

Traditionally, Americans have considered education to have two major goals: "One has

been the preparation of students for living; the second has been the preparation of students for making a living.(3) Educators, including guidance personnel and the faculty of liberal arts departments, have tended to emphasize the traditional academic programs with little regard to those skills, competencies, or behavioral traits which are essential to the business of making a living. Although not more than seven percent of the pupils who enter the education stream complete a bachelor's degree program, most curricula are designed to prepare students for the traditional college sequence--not the immediate job market.(4) In addition to the academic tilt of the curricula designs, minority students--Negroes, Spanish-American, Chicano, and Native Americans--suffer a handicap as a result of their distinctive communication skills.(5) For example, New York users of Appalachian language patterns suffer discrimination when they try to enter the job market. Employers are known to suggest at pre-employment and at termination interviews that these individuals go back to school for more "English" instruction.(6)

The great majority, then, need training in communication skills which will prepare them for, and be consistent with, the requirements of the business which they enter. They need communications skills which are appropriate to their specific vocational area. For example, such courses as literature, poetry, film-making, or drama would be less helpful to a future secretary than business English, letter and report writing, speech, telephone manners, and common courtesy. (At this time, I will not argue the points for cultural enrichment or for personal awareness. My skeleton, you will remember, is the need for job-entry language skills.)

The utility of a course in the business world can be identified only by the businesses operating in a given area. The requirements of business may vary from one geographic or cultural area to another; so, surveys to identify what businesses in a given area consider important communications skills and competencies are needed.

While the requirements of business and the priorities business places upon these requirements may vary as a result of changing conditions and technologies, educators have clung to "ivory-tower thinking,"(7) which advocates faulty hypotheses in the presence of damning evidence to the contrary, long past their alleged usefulness, merely maintaining

the status quo. Such resistance to change has affected education from top to bottom. Even graduate schools are discovering that producing graduates who appeal to business requires "modeling...instruction after the needs of business and not vague, ivory-tower thinking."(8)

Modeling communication and language instruction after the needs of business is an obligation of education, especially two-year college education whose primary objective is of equipping youth with the knowledge and skills necessary to get and hold existing jobs.(9) Modeling English instruction on the needs of the job market would permit identification of "common problems of employee training."(10) Education, like organized religion, is being forced to "commercialize the product,"(11) and to "commercialize the product," the curricula, to approximately the same degree and in about the same priority, must include the attitudes, accomplishments, and abilities which are revered in the market place.

To build a product which will be in demand requires that the product be constructed in accordance with certain pre-determined specifications. Only after knowing the specifications can the design be made. The product which I have in mind is a student who, upon graduation or completion of a course, is equipped with job-entry usable skills.

A study designed to identify the priorities of communication or language skills modeled after the needs of employers would indicate curriculum changes which would coincide with current practices, permit identification of areas of instruction which could be best accomplished by business and those areas more effectively taught in the classroom, and lead to a reduction in duplicated services, which would (a) increase economy, (b) increase effeciency, and (c) permit insertion of other needed courses in place of duplications which might be eliminated.

Such a study has been made in western New York.(12) Before designing the survey questionnaire, several employers were asked for suggestions based upon their respective needs. Because these representatives included "courtesy" among the essential communication skills and because they rated "courtesy" as indispensable, "courtesy" was included among the communication-related skills in the survey. Courtesy is the awareness and the sensitivity both to others and to what is being said.

The final list of employers included representatives from government, education at all

levels, manufacturers, banks, automotive dealers, hospitals, finance, social agencies, and public utilities.

As a result of the survey, the work world of employees is long in service and limited in size. The average business had a life of 33.9 years; the average number of full-time employees was 6.5; the average number of part-time employees was 2.8. The average employee, then, has a community of peers which is less than seven, and he has the potential of more than thirty years with his employer.

In reference to language skills, 71.3 percent of the respondents to the survey equate speaking and writing skills. Only 18.4 percent maintain that writing is more important, and only 9.6 percent opted in favor of spoken language. Hence, the need for skills in writing comes out the winner by 8.8 percentage points.

In response to the importance of writing skill, 58.4 percent place emphasis upon "getting the idea across." This is reminiscnent of the Winston cigarette commercial: "Do you want good grammar or good taste?" In all cases, grammar, although important, took second place. From 268 responses, 99 percent of the surveyed population rated spelling as "necessary," and 28 percent rated it as the "most important" in writing skills. Neatness of appearance of work ranked next in importance to spelling; 95.7 percent of the target population considered neatness to be "essential."(13)

Punctuation followed spelling and neatness of appearance as ranked by the survey population. Punctuation was "necessary" to 78.9 percent of the respondents.

In spoken communication, courtesy to others took first place, followed by acceptable vocabulary, pleasantness of voice, and correct pronunciation, in that order.

Courtesy, that awareness and sensitivity to others and to what is said both in spoken and in written communication, was considered by 100 percent of the respondents to be "essential"--a landslide. Acceptable vocabulary was rated "essential" by 94.4 percent; pleasantness of voice was "essential" to 88.4 percent; willingness to respond was "essential" to 98.9 percent; and correct pronunciation to 71.7 percent.(14)

Courtesy seemed to be the most stable of the spoken language traits; it was "essential" to all the respondents. The other characteristics, although important to varying degrees,

probably depended upon the type of business involved and the needs of that particular business. Apparently, it matters not whether the business is large or small, profit or non-profit, government or private, educational or industrial; everybody places the highest priority on courtesy--that awareness and sensitivity to others and to what is said.

The most important language skill for employees in this survey is writing. In order to get an idea across in a persuasive, logical, and coherent manner, the style of writing used for letters, technical reports, and research-report writing should be taught as a part of the communications or English curriculum. The form of writing essential for business, then, is the expository writing. In addition to expository writing, the mechanics of layout, spelling, and punctuation are considered essential.

Based upon the results of such a survey, students who enter the work force should receive a firm foundation in the writing style essential in business--expository writing. The form and the criteria of expository writing place emphasis upon those qualities favored by employers responding to this survey--getting the idea across, use of grammar, spelling, acceptable punctuation, and organization of materials and ideas. The process of expository writing emphasizes logical thinking--an asset to anyone and a requirement by a majority of employers.

Also, personal mannerisms such as mumbling, gossiping, gum-chewing, tardiness, and poor personal appearance are indicated as distractions to business.(15) Training, therefore, in speech with emphasis upon enunciation, grooming and personal awareness, and protocol in conversation should be included in the training of potential employees. In addition, students should be made aware of the various levels of language usage, separating the use of slang, colloquialism, and taboo expressions from the more desired standard and professional forms both in written and in verbal language.

Although written expression is most often indicated as a desirable language skill, more than eighty percent of the respondents commented that verbal language skills, especially related to telephone usage and to client contact, were essential.

Of prime importance is the element of courtesy. The concepts of courtesy--awareness and sensitivity--must be brought to the attention of the potential employee by bringing it

into every possible situation--in the classroom and out of the classroom.

As a result of this survey, any course of communication or English, to be of value and of use to the work-bound student, should be aware of the business needs and the general needs of the community--what that community can use.

As I have said, other "English" skeletons haunt my closet, but, if the English skeleton of the two-year college is to fulfill the expectations and the needs of its users and employers, it must be fleshed out with expository writing, spelling, punctuation, and neatness in addition to courtesy, clarity, and accuracy in oral communication.

If your individual commitment has been to the "ivory tower," reconsider that commitment. However, if your commitment is to your students and to your community, keep up the good work and perhaps you, too, might survey the language needs of your business community, devise your own skeleton, and flesh it out with your findings, creating a highly usable and valuable tool for your students.

NOTES

[1]See Appendix I, p. 9.

[2]See Appendix I, p. 9.

[3]Kenneth B. Hoyt, "Vocational Aspects of School Guidance Programs," Modern Guidance in Business Education, XLIV (Sommerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1971), 33.

[4]Ibid.

[5]Edward B. Brower, "Office Employment Expectations of Business Students," The Delta Pi Epsilon Journal, 1971), 1.

[6]Jack E. Weller, Yesterday's People: Life in Contemporary Appalachia (Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1966), pp. 108-09.

[7]James L. Sheard and Lonnie L. Ostrom, "The M.B.A.'s of Old: Why Prince Valiant never got the top job." Management Review LXXX, 8 (December, 1971), 1.

[8]Ibid.

[9]Jerome I. Levanthal, "Summary and Implications for Secondary Education," Modern Guidance in Business Education, XLV (Somerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1972), 213.

[10]Lean B. Prewitt, "Research in Office Practice," The Office Practice Program in Business Education, XLII (Somerville: The Eastern Business Teachers Association, 1969), 33.

[11]Tom Lehrer, "Vatican Rag," That Was the Year That Was. (Recording, Reprise RS:6179, n.d.

[12]Jeane L. Dille, "Communication-Related Skills and Competencies of Clerical Employees as Viewed by Business," Hornell, N.Y. (unpublished paper), December, 1973.

[13]See Appendix II, pp. 10-11.

[14]See Appendix II, pp. 10-11.

[15]See Appendix III, p. 12.

APPENDIX I

Educational Levels of General Population (1970)

100%	Total Population
98%	Enter school
94%	Reach Grade 5
91%	Reach Grade 9
79%	Reach Grade 11
59%	Graduate from High School
25%	Enter Higher Education
7.6%	Enter Two-Year Colleges
3.5%	Graduate from Two-Year Colleges
17.5%	Enter Four-Year Colleges
4%	Graduate from Four-Year Colleges

--Based upon articles in American Education (July, 1973) and Our Education (June, 1973).

APPENDIX II

Summary of Business Community Questionnaire

Question	Percentage of Responses
Language skill is	
highly important	29.9
generally important	40.2
needed, but not essential	16.1
not essential	13.8
Writing is	
more important than speaking	18.4
of equal importance to speaking	71.3
less important than speaking	10.3
The most important writing skill is	
good grammar	41.6
ability to get an idea across	58.4
The following is important in writing	
spelling	28.0
punctuation	20.1
neatness of appearance	23.5
proofreading	13.1
making neat corrections	15.3
Spelling is	
highly important	60.4
generally important	36.6
needed, but not essential	2.0
not essential	1.0
Punctuation is	
highly important	33.0
generally important	50.5
needed, but not essential	15.4
not essential	1.1
Neatness of appearance is	
highly important	65.3
generally important	30.4
needed, but not essential	4.3
not essential	0

APPENDIX II (Cont'd.)

Question	Percentage of Responses
Proofreading is	
highly important	46.8
generally important	32.6
needed, but not essential	14.1
not essential	6.5
Making neat correction is	
highly important	52.7
generally important	34.1
needed, but not essential	13.2
not essential	0
In SPOKEN COMMUNICATION, the following are important:	
correct pronunciation	14.0
acceptable vocabulary	20.9
pleasantness of voice	19.8
courtesy to others	28.8
willingness to respond	16.5
Correct pronunciation is	
highly important	30.2
generally important	61.5
needed, but not essential	7.3
not essential	1.0
Acceptable vocabulary is	
highly important	39.2
generally important	55.7
needed, but not essential	5.1
not essential	0
Pleasantness of voice is	
highly important	42.8
generally important	45.6
needed, but not essential	9.7
not essential	1.9

APPENDIX III

Employers' Laments

Related to written communication	Percentage of Responses
Careless or sloppy handwriting	6.3
Poor spelling	3.1
Incomplete sentences	1.5
Incomplete headings	1.5
Lack of organization in writing	4.7
Lack of neatness of material	3.1
Personal qualities	
Poor personal appearance	4.7
Lack of promptness and dependability	4.7
Lack of pride in doing the job well	9.5
Gum-chewing	4.7
Gossiping	3.1
Mumbling	4.7
Lack of courtesy	9.5
Lack of loyalty to employer or business	6.3
Lack of telephone courtesy	20.6
Use of slang	6.3
Other	
Inability to fill out application forms	1.5
Praise of clerical employees	1.5
Comments on other students	1.5