ABSTRACT
        This progress report describes a Swedish project
which is seeking to develop and test materials for writing practice.
Experimental materials focus on the sentence, giving students
practice in the formation of more advanced constructions. Emphasis in
the control program is on a variety of types of written composition
(e.g., narratives, descriptions, summaries, arguments). Seven
teachers in six upper secondary schools teach the experimental
program in one class each and the control program in one class each.
A placebo group of five classes whose teachers are not otherwise
involved in the project is also included. Assessment is to be based
on writing samples gathered before and after the teaching phase of
the experiment. (AA)

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Title of project: Writing practice in upper secondary
school (STIG)

Project no.:   303

In progress at: Department of Educational and Psychological
Research, Malmö School of Education

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Purposes

The concluded projects Writing Syntax and Swedish
Measurements gave a detailed comparison of the written
Swedish of upper secondary school students and professional
written Swedish and also of the written Swedish of different
merit groups. The present project has two purposes:

- to compile concrete material for writing practice on the
basis of the quality measurements which have been ascer-
tained

- to test empirically the effect of this material compared
with writing practice of a good traditional variety.

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BACKGROUND

Two research projects

One of our main starting points was provided by the results
accruing from two research projects. One of these projects
was called Writing Syntax (Skrivsyntax) and involved a
highly meticulous comparison of the written Swedish produced
by students in grade 3 of upper secondary school and the
printed everyday language addressed to an extensive public
for purposes of information. Thus the project showed how,
if at all, the written language produced by upper secondary
students differed from the language which is thought to
function effectively in society. The second project, Swedish
Measurements (Svenska Mått) started with the assessment by
a group comprising three teachers and three newspaper
journalists of essays by upper secondary students (151
essays on subjects set in the 1970 standardized achievement
test for grade 3). Assessments were then compared with
linguistic qualities, e.g. "What are the characteristics
of the language used in different merit groups?" and
"what linguistic features tend to confer high marks?"

In general terms, the main results of the two studier were
as follows.

> The language of everyday prose differs considerably
> from the prose written by upper secondary students.
> There is also a marked difference of language
> between the good upper secondary essays and the
> poor ones.

> For the most part, the language of everyday prose
> differs from upper secondary language in the same
> way as the language of the good essays differs
> from that of the weak ones.

Thus we were able to begin our project with the assurance
that there are linguistic differences between good and bad
upper secondary school prose writing and that, on the whole,
the teachers award marks by realistic standards. The teachers
standards are geared to real life.

Linguistic results

The task of our project is to translate the main results
of the Swedish language projects into concrete teaching
material and to find out how that material operates in
practice. But what are the linguistic features which are
too seldom employed by upper secondary students, especially
the weaker of them?

Here is a very brief summary:

1. Nouns, especially verbal nouns and composite nouns

2. Prepositions, adjectives and participles

3. Attributives - both preceding and following

4. Word variation, i.e. a large vocabulary

5. "Unusual" and "long" words (i.e. words not included among
the 7,000 commonest and words containing 7 or more letters).

Two more positive qualities can be added to this list:

- Many words, i.e. long essays
- Few language errors.

Features 1-5 are much more closely connected than one might
imagine. Notice first that the parts of speech comprise the
noun and its satellites: prepositions, adjectives and parti-

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ciples are normally associated with nouns. In what types
of syntactic components are these four parts of speech
required? They are required in subjects, objects and other
nominal phrases. But the crucial thing is not to use many
subjects, objects etc. but to make them long. A long subject
usually has a noun as its main word and often has adjectives,
prepositions or participles in its attributive.

If we consider language from the vocabulary point of view,
it is easy to understand that nouns are what we need in
order to vary and enlarge vocabulary. Most words in a word
list are nouns: look up a word list and see for yourself!
Word variation presupposes a large number of relatively
"long" words, because as a general rule common words are
short and uncommon words are long: the reverse would imply
a great waste of energy.

How are the results to be interpreted?

It is not sufficient to establish the linguistic qualities
which tend to be highly esteemed. The next step must be to
interpret the characteristics of language. We will start
with these synonymous sentences:

- I heard that there was somebody who screamed that it rent
my heart.

- I heard a heart-rending scream.

The first sentence represents, in somewhat caricatured form,
the simple, unsophisticated language. The latter represents
the sophisticated language. In the first sentence, for
example, the noun and its satellites make up only 14 % of
the text (my heart). In the second sentence thay make up no
less than 40 % of the total mass of words (heart-rending
scream - in Swedish).

Let us now compare these examples:

- The latter sentence says the same thing in less words and with fewer letters.

- Its contents, therefore, are more concentrated.

- The words used are more varied and the language is more expressive.

- The expression <u>a heart-rending scream</u> is easier to remember, refer to and reason about than the expression <u>somebody screamed so that it rent my heart</u>. Look at this: "He then heard a skidding car, a heart-rending scream and, finally, two dull thuds."

Thus the developed language is characterized by concentration, wealth of content, expressiveness and variation. But a still more important aspect concerns the capacity of abstraction, the ability to form concepts. Language helps us to think by providing us with signs, symbols of our concepts. Naturally, therefore, shorter symbols of our concepts make it easier for us to handle those concepts. We find it easier to cope with a rather complicated description or argument if there are short and convenient symbols available for our concepts. If this argument holds good, developed language stimulates concept formation and the ability to manage concepts easily.

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DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The experimental programme

Aims and limitations

The principal aim of all writing practice is of course to
raise the general standard of written work. Following in
the wake of Syntax, the most important detailed aims are
therefore to help the students to write with greater con-
centration, greater wealth of content, greater expression
and greater variety. We hope to be able into the bargain
to improve their ability to form and handle concepts. But
the reader will doubtless realize just as much as we do
that these qualities do not cover the whole of writing
ability. For example, writing practice has not included
any direct efforts on our part to eliminate errors of
written language or to make the essays longer.

This limitation of our aspirations is not self-imposed.
It is imposed by the practical limits dictated by the
scientific testing. The experimental teaching was confined
to grade one of a three-year line of upper secondary school.
Since not more than 20 lessons (roughly one quarter of the
total effective teaching time) could be allotted for written
practice, we were forced to cut down heavily on the subject
matter.

The goals which Writing Syntax and Swedish Measurements
indicated as being essential can probably be achieved in
many different ways, but we saw no point in trying out
models that were already well known, especially as the
results are considered surprising by the majority of teachers
of Swedish. We have therefore tried to construct a practice
programme which clearly differs from current methods.

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Main features of the written practice

We would describe the essentials of the programme as
follows.

1. <u>Formulation exercises</u>. To a very great extent we refrain
from exercises in the production of complete texts, e.g.
certain types of essay writing etc. Instead we go down to
basic essentials, to sentence construction, and the students
work on isolated sentences. Consequently in examining the
students' work the teacher is able to concentrate on a
smaller number of aspects at a time. Relatively speaking,
this should reduce his work load.

2. <u>Linguistic awareness</u>. We want to help the student to see
his own language, to realize that it is made up of parts of
speech, clauses and other grammatical units. Grammar must
not be just an abstract exercise: the students produce
their own structures in speech and writing. Theoretical
grammar, the ability to find the units and give them their
proper names, must serve as a support for language practice.
We believe that this method will have advantages in terms
of integration and practical usefulness.

3. <u>Constructive language exercises</u>. Grammar and writing
practice are primarily aimed not at the prevention of errors
of language but at the formation of more mature and advanced
constructions. Thus the practice carries plus signs, not
negative ones. We show the students the grammatical rela-
tionship between different but equivalent structures. They
then practise replacing the simpler, more naive variant with
the more advanced one. In generative grammar, reformulations
of this kind are termed "stylistic transformations".
Generative grammar has been very useful to us all the time.
It has helped us to interpret the results, it has shown us
the dynamic, constructive side of language and it has

furnished us with concrete practice methods. But of course
we do not presuppose a mastery of generative grammar on the
part of teachers or students.

4. Work on the student's own language. As part of our aim of
linguistic awareness, we try to give the students time - in
the course of two lessons - to rewrite their own texts; in
doing so they have a free hand, but of course we have no
objections to their following the guidelines drawn up during
their practice sessions. The idea, then, is for the student
to learn to appraise his own use of language in the practical
context. It is not enough for him to know that his first
formulation can be altered, he must actually be able to
alter it.

5. Experience of results. Command of written language is a
highly complex ability, but Writing Syntax and Swedish
Measurements have now identified a great deal of it. We have
tried to pass this knowledge on to the students, because
previously they have been notoriously ignorant of the
profounder qualities by which assessment is guided: "Why did
I only get 3 out of 5? I didn't make all that many mistakes."
We have constructed a fairly simple quality index which the
students themselves can employ with a minimum of grammatical
knowledge. We believe it is important for the students to
learn at least partially to "demystify" the command of
written language.

This should improve their motivation and awareness, at the
same time helping them to understand the teacher's assessment
and the difficulties involved in making a fair assessment.

All aspects are not covered

Thus the experimental programme presents a fairly specific
model of writing practice. In the project this model is
compared with highly systematic and ambitious practice of

different types of written work. The latter model represents
current writing practice, and the purpose of course is to
compare the effects of two distinct methods. But there is
little likelihood of one method being superior to the other
in all respects. We expect practical trials to show not
only which of the methods should provide the nucleus of
writing practice but also the way in which the methods
should be combined for the best results. Moreover, there
are other aspects of written work which have to be provided
for - free expression practice and the study of language
errors, for instance. Our draft scheme, therefore, is not
to be regarded as a comprehensive written work programme.

The controll programme

We have tried our utmost to make the rival programme of
written work a formidable competitor. At the same time we
felt that this control programme had to be established at
the NBE and familiar to teachers. We have therefore composed
a well-articulated practice programme of the type recommend-
ed by the NBE. Specific suggestions on exercises have been
obtained from textbooks.

The emphasis of the control programme is on the writing of
narratives, descriptions, summaries and arguments - in other
words, on different kinds of written composition.

Student groups

Trials were limited to grade 1 of a three-year line of upper
secondary school. Seven teachers in six different upper
secondary schools taught the experimental programme in one
class each and the control programme in another class each.
These programmes occupied 20 lessons, 10 during the autumn
and 10 during the spring term.

Thus <u>the experimental population</u> comprised the seven classes,
with their various teachers, which bore the closest possible
resemblance to <u>the control group</u>. The normalization of the
experimental and control groups was based on several back-
ground variables:

- average award in grade 9 of elementary school

- Swedish award in grade 9 of elementary school

- a test on parts of speech and clauses

- a doze test in which the students had to supply words or
missing parts of words, as in the following example.

> In the pre...... sect... we dis...sed fitness.
> We were un.... , h.....r, to give any assurance
> that physical fitness was a good r.m... against
> dis...e or even that it could .e...h.n life.

The distribution of students between different lines of
study was also made as uniform as possible.

We gradually came to realize that the control programme was
far better planned and far more intense than the writing
practice normally provided for grade 1 students. We there-
fore selected a <u>placebo group</u> a five classes whose average
awards from grade 9 of elementary school were fairly
comparable to those of the experimental and control groups.
The teachers taking the normal group were not involved in
the project until the spring term, and they were then
asked to go on teaching exactly as usual for the remainder
of the school year. We therefore hope that the normal group
will provide us with an opportunity of measuring the results
of conventional writing practice.

Free written composition test

All the students in the experimental and control groups
wrote one essay before and one after the teaching phase.
Roughly half of them wrote on the subject "This is how I
want to live and work" before the teaching and "This is
the kind of school I want" after the teaching. The other
half wrote on the same subjects but in reverse order.
Stimulus was given in the form of pictures and key phrases.

The normal group, of course, could only take part in the
essay test which came after the teaching phase. These
students were divided more or less evenly between the two
subjects.

Analysis of the tests. Language measurements

All of the essays were punch-carded for computer analysis
and notes were recorded concerning a small number of lin-
guistic features:

- change of paragraph

- limit of graphic sentence

- noun

- finite verb in main clause

- finite verb in subsidiary clause.

Linguistic analysis has thus been heavily restricted - for
economic reasons - but usage can nonetheless be studied by
a long series of measurements, though admittedly these are
often approximations.

In terms of reliability and techniques of definition, the
language measurements can be classified as follows.

Reliable

1. Analysis-free, e.g. running words, different words, commas

2. Language-marked, e.g. nouns, finite verbs, sentence
boundaries

3. Derivatives, e.g. nouns of at least 7 letters, sentences
with at least three consecutive subordinate verbs

4. Complete lists of words, e.g. mistakes in words: the 205
commonest words as per Allén, Nusvensk frekvensordbok

Approximate

1. Suffix and prefix measurements, e.g. non-substantives
ending in -bar (= -ble) and finite verbs beginning with be-

2. Approximate word lists, e.g. the commonest pronouns,
names of occupations.

The suffix and prefix measurements can be made formally
reliable by subtracting the exceptions as per the total
word list for the material from the measurements obtained.

The measurements can be linguistically classified as follows:

1. Grammatical errors, e.g. mistakes in words, sentences
with only finite verbs in subordinate clauses

2. Contextual measurements, e.g. nouns among the first four
words of sentences, relatives, length of paragraphs

3. Vocabulary, e.g. words of different kinds, long words,
running words

4. <u>Other linguistic measurements</u>, e.g. pronouns, co-ordinating conjunctions, substantives in the genitive, adverbs ending in Sw. -<u>vis</u> (= E. -ly), colloquial idioms

5. <u>Measurements of contents</u>, e.g. words about family and children, words about school environment.

The simple measurements are later used to form larger measurements in the form of totals and ratios.

<u>Background variables</u>

Apart from particulars concerning sex, line of studies etc., there are also a series of other data concerning the students, including particulars concerning social class, average awards and Swedish awards from the spring term of grade 1^3 and replies to an attitude questionnaire about Swedish, with special reference to writing practice.

The teachers responsible for the trial activities draw up freely designed reports giving exhaustive answers to certain fixed questions.

<u>Effect measurement</u>

The effect of writing practice is measured in two ways – subjectively and objectively.

1. <u>Subjective measurement</u> implies that a group of eleven experienced upper secondary teachers award marks for one-third of the essays. In this sample one student out of every three is represented by both of his essays, though the "normal students" are only represented by their second essay. When the essays come to the group of judges, they are typewritten and randomly numbered. Each of the teachers award marks on a nine-point scale (1 – 1.5 ... 4 – 4.5 – 5),

making sure that the marks awarded for his 1/11 of the
selected essays (usually 78 or 80 in all) conform to the
standard distribution pattern. Each of the essays in the
sample is judged by three teachers.

2. Objective measurement is based on the linguistic meas-
urements and partly also replies to the questionnaire etc.
The Writing Syntax study has already shown us the reason-
able targets for several of the linguistic measurements,
i.e. the frequencies of the functional prose written by
trained professional writers in texts designed for a wide
readership.

For other linguistic measurements, e.g. the distribution
of content words between different subject sectors, we can
utilize data concerning admission points, assessed marks
and the actual direction of development between the essay
before and the essay after the teaching phase. Thus if the
frequency of a particular linguistic measurement undergoes
a total increase between the two essays, and if at the
same time high frequencies are characteristic of students
with high admission points and high assessed marks, it is
reasonable to infer that a high frequency of that partic-
ular trait of language is a token of quality.

Other measurements

The material will also be used for other investigations
besides the comparison of methods. Questions to be studied
include the following.

- What does the written language of young upper secondary
students look like compared with that of ten-year-olds,
thirteen-year-olds and nineteen-year-olds school and with
informative everyday written Swedish?

- How does the students' language change from autumn to spring term?

- How does language covary with sex and social class?

- Does more intensive writing practice pay?

- Are imaginative essays better than factual ones?

- What do students write about and what do they think?

- Can writing practice be supported by the teaching of grammar?

TIMETABLE AND INFORAMTION

The results of the statistical analysis are expected to appear in April or May 1976. If a grant is forthcoming for a further year's work, we should be able to produce a report during the spring of 1977.

The project has been presented at a large number of study days and other meetings with teachers. On these occasions we have had to content ourselves with describing the background - the results of the Writing Syntax project - and with presenting and commenting on the teaching material.

To the best of our ability, we have also distributed the teaching material and the teacher's guide to quite a large number of teachers, including colleagues in Denmark and Norway.

Later this spring, we will be able to offer those who are interested a published version of the research programme together with the introduction and teacher's guide.

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