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ABSTRACT

Concern over the reading and writing programs in Vancouver, British Columbia Schools culminated in the establishment in June 1974 of a Task Force on English. In response to the request from the Task Force for a survey of the writing ability of Grade 11 students, a committee of English Department Heads assisted in developing an instrument and the testing procedures. The committee prepared instructions for teachers and a suggested rating scale. A covering letter was sent to the Principals of all secondary schools. The Composition Test was written by a ten percent, randomly selected sample of the students in Grade 11. The papers were marked by a team of five English teachers recruited from the ranks of substitutes and retired teachers. Various techniques were employed to test the reliability of marking including the marking of papers, selected at intervals, by all markers on the team. Blind duplicates of 28 papers were added at random and the marks of the originals and their copies were compared. The correlation was moderately high. (MV)

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**SURVEY OF ACHIEVEMENT IN COMPOSITION IN GRADE 11
OF VANCOUVER SCHOOLS, FEBRUARY 18, 1975**

Research Report 75-12

April, 1975

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH,
EDUCATION & WELFARE
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A B S T R A C T

This report explains the reasons for the survey and describes the development of the testing procedures. The report summarizes the results. While the median mark was "C," there were one-half as many more students with marks below "C" as those with marks above "C." For the non-English students the ratings clustered at the "D" - "E" levels; there were no marks above "C." As the test was a locally-developed instrument without any previous standardization, there were no norms available. It was not possible to report the results in terms of grade equivalent scores or percentiles. The report includes specimens of student writing and a report from the marking team. It points out the strengths and weaknesses of student performance and lists five recommendations for strengthening in the instructional program of secondary schools in English composition.

SURVEY OF ACHIEVEMENT IN COMPOSITION IN GRADE 11
OF VANCOUVER SCHOOLS, FEBRUARY 18, 1975

INTRODUCTION

Concern over the reading and writing programs in Vancouver Schools culminated in the establishment in June, 1974 of a Task Force on English with the following terms of reference:

"To determine whether the reading and writing program (K-12) meets the needs of the students in the context of today's society, and more specifically to determine whether the current reading and writing program is adequate to prepare the student to achieve his social and economic goals, and to make recommendations thereon."

The Task Force called for surveys of reading achievement at four levels (Grades 3, 5, 7 and 10) and surveys of composition in Grades 6 and 11.

TESTING PROCEDURES

In response to the request from the Task Force on English for a survey of the writing ability of Grade 11 students, a committee of English Department Heads assisted in developing an instrument and the testing procedures, (See Appendix A). The committee prepared instructions for teachers (Appendix B) and a suggested rating scale (Appendix C). A covering letter was sent to the Principals of all secondary schools, (Appendix D).

The Composition Test was written by ten percent, randomly selected, of the students in Grade 11. (In a few schools, all students wrote the test - but only 10% of the papers, randomly selected, were submitted to the marking team). Teachers put notes on the test papers of students from non-English speaking homes who had been in Canada less than one year.

The papers were marked by a team of five English teachers recruited from the ranks of substitutes and retired teachers. The team was supervised by Mr. D. Martin, Chairman of the English Department Heads. A scoring guide (See Appendix E) was employed and checks were made systematically to maintain consistency in marking. Various techniques were employed to test the reliability of marking including the marking of papers, selected at intervals, by all markers on the team. Blind duplicates of 28 papers were added at random and the marks of the originals and their copies were compared, (See Appendix F). The correlation was moderately high, $r = +0.76$.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS

The test instrument was developed locally and has not been standardized. It was not possible to report results in terms of percentiles or grade-equivalent scores.

SUMMARY OF RESULTS (continued)

The marks assigned to the 481 papers in the sample are summarized in Appendix G. While the median mark was "C," there were one-half as many more students with marks below "C" as those with marks above "C." For the "non-English" students, there were no marks above "C" and almost three-quarters of them were given "D" or "E." One specimen of writing at each level, "A," "C" and "E," is included in Appendix H to illustrate the range of quality in performance.

The marking team submitted a report (See Appendix I) on the validity of the test, student performance and recommendations. The clear indication of the strengths and weaknesses of students' abilities in composition has implications for all teachers of English. The team recommended that:

- more time be devoted to the teaching of organizational skills such as outlining, proofreading and paragraphing.
- a sequence of skills in language and composition be delineated and that units of time be scheduled for intensive instruction in composition.
- consideration be given to the division of English courses into Composition and Literature and that composition classes be kept small to enable teachers to individualize instruction.
- students who are learning English as a second language be required to take a more intensive program in English than is normally possible.
- markers included as an integral part of the secondary school team to establish contact with students and that the amount of marker time be substantially increased.

Copies of the summary of results and the report of the marking team were sent to all secondary schools.

====

APPENDIX A

INSTRUCTIONS FOR STUDENTS FOR THE GRADE 11 COMPOSITION TEST

The purpose of this test is to find out how well you can write a composition.

1. Time 1½ hours -- this should allow time for revision.
2. You may work in pencil but the revised final copy must be written in ink.
3. Work on ONE side of the foolscap.
4. DOUBLE space your work.
5. Dictionaries are NOT to be used.
6. Put your name on EACH of the five sheets of foolscap.
7. Write a short composition (approximately 300 words) on the topic suggested in the following passage:

Man has created many machines or tools to help him. Select one modern invention which has had significant influence on our civilization and discuss whether its influence has been good or bad. Such inventions as the printing press, television, automobile or telephone could be used.

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APPENDIX B

WRITING TEST FOR STUDENTS IN GRADE 11

February 18, 1975

INSTRUCTIONS FOR TEACHERS WHO WILL ADMINISTER THE GRADE 11 COMPOSITION SURVEY

1. Time Limit: One and one-half hours.
2. No dictionaries.
3. Give five sheets of foolscap to each student.
4. Students work on one side of the paper.
5. All five sheets must be handed in at the end of the exam.
6. Time allotment must be strictly adhered to.
7. Final copy should be in ink.
8. The student should be sure that his Name, School Code Number and English Block are at the top of the final copy. With the final copy on top, the pages of each student's work should be stapled together.
9. The English Department Head is asked to put a note on the top of the test paper of any student who comes from a non-English-speaking home and has been in Canada less than one year. (Both criteria must be met.)
10. The completed test papers should be bundled and be SENT OR DELIVERED by FEBRUARY 21st, 1975 to:

Mr. D. Martin,
Chairman, English Department Heads
c/o Teacher Centre
123 East 6th Avenue
VANCOUVER, B. C. V5T 1J6

APPENDIX C

RATING SCALE* (AS PROPOSED BY THE COMMITTEE OF DEPARTMENT HEADS.)

STUDENT'S NAME _____

SCHOOL _____ GRADE _____

A. CONTENT (What is said?) 50%

	Excellent	Fair	Poor
Topic Sentence			
Unity			
Coherence			
Transition			
Conclusion			

B. FORM (How it has been said) 50%

	Excellent	Fair	Poor
Title			
Spelling			
Grammar			
Sentence Structure			
Word Usage			
Punctuation			
Vocabulary			

Percentage Achieved _____ Grade _____
(A, B, C+, C-, D, E)

***Note:** This rating scale was subsequently modified. The team of markers used the scoring guide that appears in Appendix E.

APPENDIX D

LETTER TO PRINCIPALS

EVALUATION AND RESEARCH
VANCOUVER SCHOOL BOARD
VANCOUVER, B. C.

February 7, 1975

TO PRINCIPALS OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS:

RE: WRITING TEST FOR STUDENTS IN GRADE 11

A test in expository writing is to be written by a 10% sampling of students in Grade 11 of all secondary schools in Vancouver. The purpose is to provide information to the Task Force on English about the writing abilities of students in Grade 11.

Please select entirely at random a 10% sample of the Grade 11 population in your school. To do this, you may take every tenth name on a listing of students, use random numbers, or select students by lot. The English teachers should not be asked to make the selection.

Please arrange for the selected students to write the test on Tuesday, February 18th. The time required is 1½ hours.

The instructions for the teacher (copies enclosed) should be given to them on Monday, February 17 but the test item and instructions for students (also enclosed) should not be distributed until the time of the test.

Mr. Dave Martin, Chairman of the English Department Heads, will assign through your English Department Head a code number to identify your school.

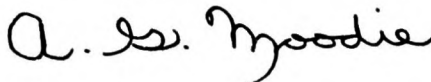
The English Department Head is asked to put a note on the top of the paper of any student who comes from a non-English-speaking home and has been in Canada less than one year. (Both criteria must be met.)

The English Department Head is asked to SEND OR DELIVER the completed test papers to:

Mr. D. Martin
Chairman, English Department Heads
c/o Teacher Centre
123 East 6th Avenue
VANCOUVER, B. C. V5T 1J6

The cooperation of the members of your staff is genuinely appreciated.

Very truly yours,



for E. N. ELLIS
Head, Evaluation and Research

cc - English Department Heads

Enc.

APPENDIX E

SCORING GUIDE FOR MARKERS

A - B PAPER

- i) Content
- ii) Organization
A definite and suitable plan clear throughout.
Transitions are smooth and appropriate.
Logical and effective paragraphs.
Sentences are well constructed and varied.
Words are used correctly and exactly.
- iii) Mechanics
Almost perfect mechanically.
A maximum of 2 to 3 mistakes per page.

C+ - C - C- PAPER

- i) Content
- ii) Organization
Plan evident but lacking in logic or suitability to the subject.
Simple and direct introduction and conclusion.
Two or more cases of mechanic and/or awkward transitions.
Prevailing simple, clear paragraphs but without adequate development.
- iii) Mechanics
Average number of minor errors, 8 - 10 errors per page.
Spelling maximum of 3.
Punctuation maximum of 2.
Never higher than 5 for spelling and punctuation.

D - E PAPER

- i) Content
- ii) Organization
Plan not evident on careful first reading.
Paper leaves no single impression.
Lacking unity and coherence.
The absence of ineffectual use of an introduction and conclusion.
Two or more cases of a lack of continuity between paragraphs.
Two or more pseudoparagraphs or ineffective paragraphs, fragments, or paragraphs containing irrelevant material.
- iii) Mechanics
Mechanics seriously interfere with an attempt to read the paper.

APPENDIX F

COMPARISON OF MARKS ASSIGNED TO 28 SELECTED PAPERS AND TO THEIR

BLIND DUPLICATES

ORIGINAL COPIES

PHOTOCOPIED PAPERS

	A	B	C+	C	C-	D	E	
A		1						1
B		1	1	1				3
C+		1	1	2	1			5
C				3				3
C-			3	4	1	2		10
D					1	2	1	4
E						2		2
	0	3	5	10	3	6	1	28

Contingency Coefficient $r = +0.76$

APPENDIX GFREQUENCY OF RATINGS GIVEN TO COMPOSITIONS WRITTEN BY GRADE 11 STUDENTS

<u>Letter Grade</u>	<u>"Non-English" Students</u>	<u>Other Students</u>	<u>All Students In The Sample</u>
A		28 (6.2%)	28 (5.8%)
B		57 (12.6%)	57 (11.9%)
C+		68 (15.0%)	68 (14.1%)
C	2 (6.9%)	91 (20.1%)	93 (19.3%)
C-	6 (20.7%)	95 (21.0%)	101 (21.0%)
D	10 (34.5%)	76 (16.8%)	86 (17.9%)
E	11 (37.9%)	37 (8.2%)	48 (10.0%)
Total	29 (100%)	452 (99.9%)	481 (100%)

The bases of evaluation for assigning letter grades to paragraphs was content (25%), organization of material (50%) and mechanics of writing (25%).

APPENDIX H
SPECIMEN OF WORK "A"

In recent times, many controversial arguments have arisen concerning the damaging influence of the television, ~~more~~ more commonly known as "the boob-tube."

When first invented, this array of tubes and wires ~~spitto~~ spilling out images of people and animals, reconstructed from billions of little "electronic things" floating in the sky, dumb-founded all, and left many believing the black-box-in-the-corner as a thing of evil; something that steals the soul from a person; something that resembled Pandora's box.

For awhile, it was the toy of the rich; a luxury often related with spare time. However, as time passed, mass production and the public demand demand for the "better things in life", took its toll and soon in every house, there sat, in the center of the living room, the all too familiar square box; all too soon developing into the focal point of the house; the focal point of the family life.

Slowly, but surely, a new religion began to take root and grow.

APPENDIX H, SPECIMEN OF WORK "A" (continued)

The children, no longer satisfied with their "infantile games", (using sticks as guns and improvising brooms as horses), became more attached to "the tube", anxiously devouring such shows as "Cowboy Bob", "Davey Cockett", and "Buffalo Bill", where real-to-life situations were being portrayed; a bloody Indian massacre, and Captain Duxley of the RCMP, "always getting his men".

Even the adults were not spared from this onslaught as they too succumbed to the power of the TV, and became anchored firmly. No longer did they need to depend on their neighbours for "second hand information", or trudge down to the local grocery for a copy of the Daily News; instead, reaching inevitably for that familiar knob, watching as the hypnotic dot of light on the screen expand, and there, before his entranced eyes danced the ~~world~~ world in all its glory. The mythical slub in an armchair in front of the tube, a beer can in one hand, a cigar in the other, is not just a pigment of someone's vivid imagination.

APPENDIX H, SPECIMEN OF WORK "A" (continued)

The television became a god. People wanted big ones, something to design a house around. Others wanted smaller ones, the kind that they can take with them wherever they go. A portable crystal ball, keeping the people in a ~~an~~ constant state of melancholic daze.

With the coming of the colour T.V., a new height of ecstasy was reached. Now people could see their favorite hero in living colour, dazzling across the screen in an abstract mosaic of colour.

No one had any need to go out anymore, for at their finger tips were potholes to the world. Through the T.V., they could travel to the four corners of the world, do anything they wanted to with the flick of a switch. Or almost ----

The community broke down. Futile attempts were made to instruct the public on the proper use of the television. Though it had the ability to open new pathways to those who might otherwise never get the chance, it also marked the decline of many moral institutions, showing clearly the violent and disgusting nature of man.

APPENDIX H, SPECIMEN OF WORK "A" (continued)

Taking a cross-section of "prime time" T.V. - we find such popular shows as, "All in the family", "Police Story", "Sanford and Son", "Dan August", and many other shows based on prejudice and violence. Is this what all the technology and advancement of our scientific world has brought us to? Did we develop our mind only to find new ways of destroying it?

If the television is ever going to be used effectively, drastic changes will be needed in the scheduling and content of the present day "television schedule". Man can't go on living on a steady diet of debris and grotesque imagination. One, or the other, will ~~either~~ soon ~~come~~ come to a sudden and vicious ~~death~~ death.

Warning: Watching television can be hazardous to your health... to your life... to society... to our future.

SPECIMEN OF WORK "C"

In the following composition, I have chosen C automobiles as my topic. I will give examples of good and bad influences, on civilization, as I see them.

Some of the bad influences an automobile has on our civilization is costs. The price of purchasing, repairing, general up-keep, and fuel is very high. For example, gas, car fuel, you pay anywhere from (6-8) 60-80 cents per gallon, and most cars hold approximately 14-18 gallons. From fuel comes the problem of pollution, exhaust fumes in the air. These fumes can kill a person if taken in any amount. If increased use of cars continues, the amount of exhaust will increase, and civilization's lungs will be permanently damaged.

Not only is cost and pollution bad, but man is far too dependant on a car. Just jump in the car and drive here or there isn't good enough. Man

APPENDIX H, SPECIMEN OF WORK "C" (continued)

needs exercise, and (a) that short walk from the house to the car is not good enough. A ~~poor~~ person should walk that few blocks to the store, and not depend on his car so much.

Although cars do had a bad influence on civilization, they do have some good influence too. For example, traveling long distances would not be possible without an automobile. Or, in a case of an emergency, automobiles are used for speed. Many lives would be lost if speed to medical facilities was not possible. However, I can not ~~the~~ help but thinking that if man had more exercise, and was physically healthy, there wouldn't be as many medical emergencies.

I'm not saying automobiles should be done away with, but man could save himself, his bank account, and the world from a lot of grief, by not depending on that car so much.

APPENDIX HSPECIMEN OF WORK "E"*The Telephone.*

Human civilization created the telephone, which remains a significant influence on the modern world. The telephone enabled speedy, communications around the globe. Which influenced human's views on ~~ideas of~~ the remaining world, prejudice turned to understanding; education, religion and medical care improved, and grew with help of the telephone. The effects on modern civilization induced by the telephone, generally, was the industrial growth causing fluctuation in population and immigration increases. The media, another form of communication, benefitted from the telephone; the information and news or even fashion stories improved and were updated. It is true that

APPENDIX H, SPECIMEN OF WORK "E" (continued)

without quicker transportation many things did not improve nearly so fast, but without this wonderful invention, tool, these things might never have improved at all.

APPENDIX I

REPORT FROM THE MARKING TEAM

I. The Validity of the Examination

The marking team agreed that the examination topic was well chosen as it permitted the student considerable scope without giving particular individuals an unfair advantage. Pupils expressed many good ideas, evidenced an awareness of current problems, and wrote with concern and feeling.

The examination was given to a ten percent randomly-selected sample of the grade eleven students in secondary schools. The circumstance of having some students write while others did not may have generated some resentment among a few of those who wrote. Markers also felt that students should have been instructed to write an essay of "at least 300 words" rather than "approximately 300 words". Some concern was expressed for the need to establish a suitable atmosphere for writing before students began the examination.

II. Areas Where Improvement is Needed

A. Organization

1. Fewer than ten percent of the students who wrote took time to develop an adequate outline. In most cases, students simply neatly recopied their rough draft.
2. Many papers lacked logic and clarity. Paragraph development was generally inadequate.
3. Concluding statements in most papers were either very mechanical or simply omitted entirely.
4. Students need to be taught proofreading skills.

B. Vocabulary and Spelling

1. Students showed evidence of a good "passive" vocabulary, but failed to use words with accuracy and precision, frequently lapsing into cliché.
2. Spelling was generally acceptable although some students confused homonyms such as "to", "too", "two", and "their", "there", "they're".

C. Mechanics

1. Perhaps the most obvious mechanical error was a lack of sentence sense. The papers contained many run-on sentences and fragments.
2. Further work in coordination and subordination of ideas is necessary.

APPENDIX I: REPORT FROM THE MARKING TEAM (continued)

III. Recommendations

- A. More time should be devoted to the teaching of organizational skills such as outlining, proofreading, and paragraphing.
- B. A definite sequence of skills in language and composition should be delineated, and units of time should be scheduled for intensive instruction in composition.
- C. The marking team recommends that consideration be given to the division of English courses into Composition and Literature. They felt strongly that class size in composition must be kept small to enable teachers to individualize instruction.
- D. A large percentage of the failing papers contained the type of error common with students who are learning English as a second language. The marking team recommends that such students be required to take a more intensive program in English than is possible in the normal classroom.
- E. To alleviate the present situation the marking team recommends a substantial increase in the amount of marker time available in secondary schools. Markers should be included as an integral part of the school team so that contact with students can be established.