

A PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF SPELLING AND
COMPOSITION RESEARCH:
JOINING RESEARCH TO PRACTICE

FRANCES WEAVER
University of Cincinnati

Teachers of elementary composition who participated in the summer institute studied the findings of major research studies and applied them to sample compositions written by students in their own school district early and late in the school year.

Early in the institute the findings of the research of Arthur Applebee were presented to the group. Applebee found that students writing in response to experience exhibit differing degrees of abstraction. The least mature writer concretely retells the story or experience, making no attempt to create any kind of framework. In the next stage of development, the writer gives a synopsis of the story or experience. Usually the account begins with "It is about..." and is a report of ongoing events. Later the writer uses summary in which the experience is encapsulated and categorized as "exciting," "funny," "nice," etc. The bases for the categories are specific incidents.

The initial efforts at categorizing lead to the next stage in which unsubstantiated evaluation is the mode of writing. In this stage the student evaluates the experience as "exciting," "funny," "nice," etc. without reference to specific incidents. He or she has left behind the details of the experience but writes global and circular judgments. When he or she substantiates the judgments, the stage of critical analysis has been reached. This stage is characterized by an explanation of how the experience has cause and effect relationships. Generalization is the sixth stage characterized by a concern for theme or message resulting in an understanding of life as a result of the experience. An examination of compositions written by the students convinced the teachers that such stages realistically distinguish the maturity of writers.

A second activity engaged in was an examination of syntactic maturity defined as the expression of subordinate relationships among ideas within one unit of communication called a

T-unit. This quantifiable trait was developed and validated by Kellogg Hunt and can be used as a ball-park indicator to progress in the expression of ideas. Although individual pre and post T-units scores are not to be given too much credence, a comparison of early with late scores provides some clue to the instructional activities that may be needed.

Two ways of achieving syntactic maturity were explained and practiced. The first method is sentence-combining, recommended by John Mellon, Frank O'Hare, and others. The writer focuses on a series of previously constructed sentences in which relationships are not clearly expressed and attempts to condense the pertinent information of multiple sentences into one "mature" sentence.

A second way to increase syntactic maturity has been described by Francis Christensen as the four principles of rhetorical analysis: addition, direction of movement, level of generality, and texture. Writers are encouraged to state a basic idea such as

I saw my brother coming down the street.

By "backtracking" over the same idea they see more and express what they see in additions which provide more specific information that enhances the reader's awareness.

I saw my brother coming down the street,
his arms raised above his head,
waving a paper which I realized
was his new contract.

The final task of the first week was to understand and apply the four ways of tailoring prose: adding, cutting, moving, and replacing.

On the fifth day teachers, working in small groups, completed an activity sheet, which pulled together the work of the first week.

During the second week teachers examined primary trait analysis, the rating method used by the National Assessment of Educational Progress. The primary trait is the particular task that needs to be done in order to achieve a precisely defined purpose for writing. In a factual report about safety, for example, the primary trait is explanation through selecting and organizing facts. In a letter attempting to persuade the program director of the local television channel to schedule a certain program, the primary trait is to devise arguments and appeals appropriate to the situation. In a composition sharing personal ideas and emotions with others, the primary trait may be expressing feeling, depending upon the assignment, through elaboration of a point of view or through role elaboration. Achievement of purpose is rated on a score of one through four. Each category has several precisely articulated criteria.

Teachers learned how to use primary trait rating scales to assess student strengths and weaknesses and to determine what instructional comments were appropriate. They also practiced constructing a primary trait scale appropriate to "creative" writing. The final activity of the workshop consisted of an examination of their curriculum scope and sequence, by grade level, with the intention of integrating their new knowledge and skills with the prescribed program.

As a result of the workshop teachers were more articulate about the characteristics that distinguish one piece of writing from another, had a clear understanding of writing as process, and felt confident about their ability to provide pertinent information and practice to students in the difficult process of communicating through writing.