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ABSTRACT

The program described in this paper proposes individual, programed instruction of operations for sentence manipulation and word group frames, addressing the most frequent usage problems faced by college students. Serving as an aid to the student who needs particular reinforcement in one or more areas in composition, the program utilizes a self-paced and self-testing multimedia framework consisting of modular work booklets, tapes, and slides. Written materials are intended to be supplemented by tutorial assistance. A demonstration transcript of units on run-on sentences, comma splices, sentence combining and transitional devices is included. (KS)

SOME MODELS FOR A MULTIMEDIA ENGLISH USAGE PROGRAM

by

Jo Ann M. Sipple

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The media continues to spread the news that writing difficulties among college students are increasing significantly. For the last two years The Chronicle of Higher Education has used its September issues to highlight the crises in English writing and to point out the drop in verbal aptitude test scores of college students and graduates.[1] The popular version of this alarm appears in national news magazines, in articles like Newsweek's "Why Johnny Can't Write."[2] In response to the growing national concern both in and out of our profession, colleges and universities are pushing to build basic skills centers or charging English Departments to establish adjunct services which will answer these cries. And we English teachers who feel the pressures of accountability and concern for our students take our positions anywhere between these two extremes: Either we turn back to a number of drill exercises, sometimes teaching grammar in the classroom in the hopes of improving student writing, or we reject what we call the false alarms of the reactionaries and continue with "our own thing" even if the so-called "basic skills" are noticeably absent in student writing. The culmination of this concern has resulted in a national conference like this one in which the "What's Really Basic?" theme forces us to confront the real issues and offer, if we can, some reasonable solutions to the problem.

There is a fundamental attitude among contemporary English teachers of composition that alerts us to be sensitive to language in a variety of spoken

and written forms. In the teaching of writing this attitude implies that students must somehow develop a language awareness that will increase their writing ability, allow them to respect their own dialects as well as the dialects of others, and enable them to communicate in the dialect of business and the professions--the dialect that does not distinguish itself by regional features but carries the social mark of "educated edited English." Communication in this dialect requires users to employ the features of formal standard usage; and because it is written, this dialect requires particular conventions of graphemes, syntax, and punctuation.

William Labov, among a number of other linguists, asserts that all users of the language are multidimensional and that the features which distinguish the individual styles of speakers similarly distinguish one dialect from another.[3] S. I Hayakawa wrote in 1950: "It is tragic that most Americans suffer, with respect to the use of their own language, especially in formal or semi-formal situations, a discomfort or malaise that can only be described as a mild form of anxiety neurosis."[4] What Hayakawa observed in 1950 still applies today, perhaps as a result of the numerous prescriptions and prejudices about usage. Labov, who has conducted studies in the inner city comparing the dialect features of standard and nonstandard speakers, supports a position called functional bidialectalism or biloquialism. Labov outlines six stages by which speakers may acquire the full range of language usage for a variety of occasions or social situations. After the childhood steps of using a basic grammar to speak a local dialect, the user begins to adapt to stylistic variation by continually modifying his speech according to the requirements of prestige standards. As social perceptions deepen, the user begins to maintain the standard for conducting business in formal situations.[5]

With respect for bidialectal or multidialectal approaches to teaching usage, I have developed an experimental usage program to help students communicate

through the conventions of formal standard writing. The materials are not for the classroom but for individual students outside of class. The usage program focuses upon frequent usage problems students discover when they write in formal standard prose--problems in sentence fragments, run-on sentences and comma splices or problems in modification, verb tense, subject-verb agreement, pronouns, possessives, and the like. By isolating each of the problems, these materials enable students to develop an awareness of the conventional features expected in standard formal writing. Through a method of syntactic reinforcement, the materials also enable students to acquire alternate patterns of expression for the formal standard written variety of the language. The focus on this variety does not attempt to eradicate any other dialect but with full acceptance of the policy adopted by the four C's Students' Right To Their Own Language (1974), the materials "affirm the students' right to their own patterns and varieties of the language"[6] in the process of offering methods for writing competence in standard formal prose.

Some studies in standard and nonstandard dialect features make valuable contributions to the teaching of formal edited writing. Among these is Marilyn Sternglass's publication in College Composition and Communication (October 1974) called "Dialect Features in the Composition of Black and White College Students."[7] Marilyn's study finds that most nonstandard features produced by black and white students are essentially the same. The value of this discovery contains implications for teaching standard formal prose to students of various dialectal backgrounds. Since college students with heterogeneous backgrounds (standard and nonstandard speakers) experience similar problems in producing the features of standard formal writing, it follows that the design of writing programs can make practical use of those similarities.

By working within a contrastive framework of demonstrating features appropriate for informal varieties of casual conversation, a number of syntactic, phonetic, and punctuation procedures can become useful to the student. Without surveying the numerous grammatical models that creep into the teaching of writing, let me touch on a few devices that can be used in a usage program such as the one I have designed. Sometimes, even traditional word-paradigms are helpful to students in acquiring certain conventions in formal standard writing. For example, the English pronoun system, which preserves the features of Latin declensions, that is, the features of inflected languages, can make use of the paradigm to cluster sets of pronouns according to their case forms and functions. The structuralist devices of inflections, derivational suffixes, sentence patterns, function words, and phonetic patterns all contribute to the manipulation of syntax in standard sentences. And the transformational-generative theories built on what Chomsky refers to as "models of perception and learning"[9] can offer sentence generating devices that show students how to perform syntactic manipulations at the sentence level--resulting in an indefinite variety of surface structures.

Therefore, by relying on a number of grammar ~~and dialect~~ models, the usage materials I am proposing extract operations for sentence manipulation and word group frames to address the most frequent usage problems faced by college students in formal writing and to present some alternate patterns for the unconventional writing features which interfere with their smooth communication in formal situations. I have approached the limited area of usage in standard formal writing as another dialect to be acquired by the educated adult who is already a native user of the language. The designs of the program encourage a language awareness that utilizes techniques from traditional, structural, and transformational grammars; that adopts writing exercises that have increased syntactic fluency in student writing; that respects all dialectal varieties

including the student's own; and that fosters appropriate sentence patterns in writing "educated edited English."

The form of the experimental program is a multimedia collection of nine nonsequential units, which offer students methods for translating dialect features of the spoken informal varieties into the conventions and features of standard formal writing. As students recognize the features of formal writing through an inductive cumulative process of viewing selected models and rewriting sentences in patterns suitable for standard formal writing, they begin to acquire the conscious application of a number of syntactic operations on sentences that result in several kinds of surface structures all appropriate for standard formal prose. In each unit the directions for these syntactic operations are at first extremely explicit, but the rewriting and editing practices gradually progress so that the student level of independence increases from beginning to end. Each unit consists of an integrated combination of slides, tape cassettes, and writing work booklets.

I have chosen to set the usage program in a multimedia form because I feel that the educational format for materials outside the classroom is as important as the writing models used. This multimedia program uses an individualized method of instruction that combines particular behavioral procedures (that is, conditioned writing practices) and cognitive processes (that is, applying specific sentence manipulations and editing devices). Research in teaching composition offers many positive theories about individualized instruction that can advance our ultimate humanistic aims and not work, as so many people assume, in a counter-productive way. A recent article in support of individualized instructional settings for English redefines the role of teacher-student in that kind of environment: "Individualizing instruction can allow teachers to respond humanistically to the needs of students absorbed

in an often-depersonalized society, to challenge the potential of each student, and to encourage students to learn how to learn."[10] Our professional concerns in teaching writing should aim at increasing student writing skills without sacrificing these humanistic claims. And the adoption of a behavioral or individualized approach as one of the means to that end should not arouse our suspicions. As one composition teacher puts it, "global and specific objectives are complementary rather than incompatible."[11]

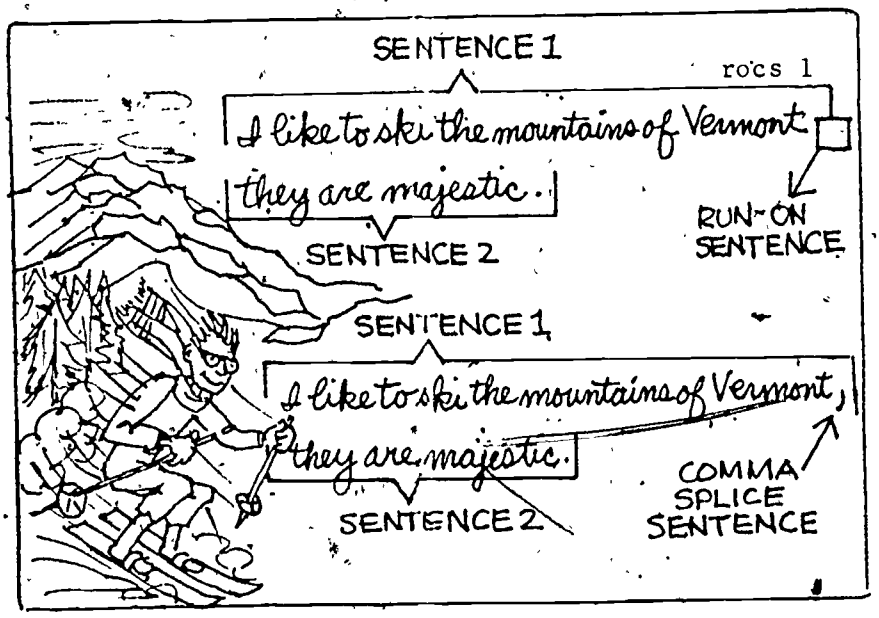
The choice of individualization and multimedia instruction for the supplemental nature of the usage program seems to be the most appropriate educational setting. The form of this program offers particular students with varying needs a workable system that does not limit them to the level of general class instruction. Although the materials are dependent in part on the machinery of individualized instruction, the design of these usage materials requires that students receive professional tutorial assistance while they use the self-paced, self-testing materials.

At this point I would like to present a brief demonstration of the matter and method of instruction in a multimedia unit which addresses both run-on sentences and comma-splices. After the demonstration, I will describe the writing models used. But for now I ask you to become a student who continually writes run-ons in composition. You have come to a writing lab where you use your own modular work booklet and proceed through two, forty-five minute sessions of integrated tape and slide presentations to help you with the writing tasks in the work booklet.

DEMONSTRATION TRANSCRIPT

RUN-ON SENTENCE AND COMMA SPLICE
SESSION I

This unit on run-on sentences and comma splices contains techniques for avoiding these habits in your writing. The run-on sentence deviates from the conventions of sentence punctuation in that two full sentences follow one another without any punctuation between them. The joining of two full sentences with a comma is called a comma splice. In writing, the comma is a punctuation mark usually not strong enough to combine two separate sentences. The convention of avoiding run-on sentences and comma splices is especially adhered to in formal writing. (Sound tone; read rocs 1.)



Here, the run-on sentence obviously departs from the conventions of sentence punctuation by not containing any punctuation mark between the sentences. And the comma is not strong enough to hold

together the separate, full sentences. Each sentence contains its own noun phrase and verb phrase. The noun phrase in sentence one is the subject "I," and the verb phrase is "like to ski the mountains of Vermont." In sentence two, the noun phrase is the subject "they" --referring to the mountains--and the verb phrase is "are majestic."

One technique for separating one sentence from another is to read the words aloud and notice the drop in the pitch of your voice at the end of each sentence. Read the sentences aloud after me. (Read rocs 1 and leave space on tape for student repetition.) (Sound tone; flash rocs 2 but wait to read.)

rocs 2

SEPARATED SENTENCES

▼

I like to ski the mountains of Vermont.
They are majestic.

COMBINED SENTENCES

▼

I like to ski the mountains of Vermont;
they are majestic.

Here are two ways to rewrite the sentences using acceptable punctuation. You can place a period between the two full sentences, or you can combine the sentences by placing a semi-colon between them. The semicolon shows a closer connection between the state-

ments than the separate sentences, and the semicolon is stronger than the comma. (Read rocs 2 with punctuation.)

Now rewrite the sentences containing the comma splice in your work booklet page 1. After you have finished, turn on the recorder and check your answers on the screen. (Pause.) (Sound tone; read rocs 3.)

rocs 3

ANSWERS TO WORK BOOK--p. 1.

1. I like this painting job. It is easy.
2. I like this painting job; it is easy.

(Sound [illegible]; flash rocs 4 but wait to read.)

rocs 4

SENTENCE 1

Music is an especially appealing art form
I can listen to it all day.

SENTENCE 2

RUN-ON SENTENCE

Now look at this run-on sentence, which can be rewritten as two separate sentences or combined into one by the semicolon method. Each sentence contains its independent noun phrase and verb phrase. Sentence one contains the noun "Music," which functions as the subject, and the verb phrase "is an especially appealing art form," which functions as the predicate. Sentence two contains the pronoun "I," which functions as the subject, and the verb phrase "can listen to it all day," which functions as the predicate.

Again, notice the drop in the pitch of your voice at the end of each sentence. Listen to my reading, and then repeat the sentences after me: (Read rocs 4; leave room on tape for student repetition.)

Now you rewrite the sentences in acceptable forms in your work booklet page 2. After you have finished, turn on the recorder and check your answers on the screen. (Pause.) (Sound tone; read rocs 5.)

rocs 5

ANSWERS TO WORK BOOK--p. 2.

1. Music is an especially appealing art form.
   I can listen to it all day.

2. Music is an especially appealing art form;
   I can listen to it all day.

(Sound tone; flash rocs 6 but wait to read.)

rocs 6

COMBINED SENTENCES
WITH COMMA AND COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

SENTENCE 1

I like ice cream,
but I do not eat it often.

SENTENCE 2

COORDINATING
CONJUNCTION

It is also possible to combine sentences by using techniques other than the semicolon. Sentences can also be combined by using a comma and coordinating conjunction. In this kind of sentence, you place a comma and coordinating conjunction between the two full sentences. (Read sentence on rocs 6.) (Sound tone; read combined sentence on rocs 7.)

rocs 7

SENTENCE 1

Energy shortages are becoming more frequent,
people must learn to accept them.

SENTENCE 2

COMMA
SPLICE

COMBINED SENTENCES
WITH COMMA AND COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

Energy shortages are becoming more frequent,
and people must learn to accept them.

For example, this sentence containing the comma splice is rewritten by combining the two sentences with a comma and the coordinating conjunction "and." Now eliminate the comma splice and run-on sentences on pages 3 and 4 of your work booklet. When you are finished, turn on the recorder and check your answers on the screen. (Pause.) (Sound tone; read rocs 8. Sound tone; read rocs 9.)

rocs 8

ANSWERS TO WORK BOOK--p. 3.

1. The economy is suffering from the dual impact of inflation and recession. Economists have not found a solution.

2. The economy is suffering from the dual impact of inflation and recession; economists have not found a solution.

rocs 9

ANSWER TO WORK BOOK--p. 4.

3. The economy is suffering from the dual impact of inflation and recession, but economists have not found a solution.

(Sound tone; flash rocs 10.)

rocs 10

TRANSITIONAL MARKERS

EXAMPLES ▶ however
nevertheless
instead
consequently
also

Sentences can be combined not only by conjunctions but also by words called transitional markers or conjunctive adverbs. They function as adverbs and not as conjunctions because transitional markers, set off by commas, modify the whole sentence in which they appear. (Sound tone; read rocs 11.)

rocs 11

COORDINATING CONJUNCTION

A. The economy is suffering, but economists are optimistic.

B. The economy is suffering; nevertheless, economists are optimistic.

TRANSITIONAL MARKER

C. The economy is suffering. Nevertheless, economists are optimistic.

In sentence A, the comma and coordinating conjunction "but" can combine the two sentences into one. In B, the transitional marker "nevertheless" can be used with a semicolon for sentence combining. Or in C, the transitional marker "nevertheless" can be used as a logical connection at the beginning of the second sentence in the sequence. (Sound tone; read rocs 12.)

rocs 12

A. Cures for terminal diseases are discovered every day. Furthermore, research is continuing.

TRANSITIONAL MARKER

B. Cures for terminal diseases are discovered every day; furthermore, research is continuing.

TRANSITIONAL MARKER

Notice the use of the transitional marker "furthermore" in these two sequences. In A, the transitional marker is used in the second separate sentence as the logical transition between the two sentences. In B, the transitional marker is used after the semicolon and set off by a comma for sentence-combining. (Sound tone; flash rocs 13.)

Initially, this unit uses structural concepts of pitch, stress, and juncture as practical devices for having students read aloud and repeat after the reading voice on tape those sentences presented on the slides and in the work booklets. In The Structure of English (1952) Charles Carpenter Fries offered these phonological devices in order to see contrasting "patterns of forms . . . within the same primary intonation contours" of the sentence.[12] In his study Fries also determined that punctuation marks could "operate in a limited way as structural signals in written materials which lack such features as intonation, pause, and stress."[13] Hence, the student sees the translation from sound pattern to written sentence pattern. James W. Ney commented in his article "Lessons from the Language Teacher: Cognition, Conditioning, and Controlled Composition" (1973) that audio-lingual repetition of sentence patterns could increase a student's ability to produce conventional syntactic structures.[14] Besides containing the structural models for sound patterns in this unit, the audio-lingual devices on tape combined with the visual presentations of writing on the slides and in the workbooks give students real speaking and writing opportunities to self-test their sound and writing patterns through the feedback on tapes and slides. In addition, the student sees clusters of two kinds of function words: transitional markers and conjunctions. And he acquires sentence patterns for applying these function words as structural signals in standard syntactic patterns.

In order to increase the variety of sentence patterns he can use without writing run-ons and comma splices, the unit draws from the sentence-combining practices used in a series of school experiments beginning with Kellogg Hunt in the sixties and still going on in the seventies with the texts of Frank O'Hare and William Strong.[15] Sentence combining, which defines its models by calling on a number of transformations on sentences to generate

more varieties of surface sentences, is a practical tool used in several units of this usage program. Rather than working from right vs. wrong sentence models, the usage materials provide students with generating devices for producing a variety of sentence patterns which avoid run-on sentences or other unconventional features.

In conclusion, I would like to stress that these materials do not provide the total approach to teaching writing, nor do I claim to have the answer to all student writing problems. The usage program serves as an aid to composition for the student who needs particular reinforcement in one or more areas or usage. The program is an alternative to the reference handbook which, in many cases, does not provide enough generative reinforcement for the student who needs to develop alternate patterns in particular usage areas. However, the larger question of how to improve student writing still merits an answer from each one of us. In the final analysis, the total writing experience of the student is the responsibility of the creative classroom teacher who can moderate a variety of writing activities in several ways: in response-centered classes where students can analyze their language experiences, in writing workshops where student and teacher experience the on-going writing process, or in lecture and discussion classes where the strategies of rhetoric and audience are focal.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Malcolm G. Scully, "Crises in English Writing," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 23, 1974, pp. 1, 6. See also "The Drop in Aptitude Test Scores is the Largest on Record," The Chronicle of Higher Education, September 15, 1975, pp. 18-19.

[2]"Why Johnny Can't Write," Newsweek (December 8, 1975), pp. 58-65.

[3]William Labov, "Stages in the Acquisition of Standard English," (reprinted from Social Dialects and Language Learning (1964), ed. by Roger W. Shuy) in Readings in American Dialectology ed. by Harold B. Allen and Gary N. Underwood (New York: Appleton - Century Crofts, 1971), pp. 473-98.

[4]S. I. Hayakawa, "Linguistic Science and the Teaching of Composition," ETC.: A Review of General Semantics, VII (Winter, 1950), 97.

[5]Labov, pp. 485-87.

[6]"Students' Right to Their Own Language," CCC, XXV (Fall, 1974) Special Issue. See policy statement on inside front cover.

[7]Marilyn S. Sternglass, "Dialect Features in the Compositions of Black and White College Students: The Same or Different?" CCC, XXV (October, 1974), 259-63. See also Samuel Kirschner and G. Howard Poteet, "Non-Standard English Usage in the Writing of Black, White, and Hispanic Remedial English Students in an Urban Community College," Research in the Teaching of English, III (Fall, 1969), 481-95.

[8]See Otto Jespersen. Growth and Structure of the English Language (New York: Doubleday, 1905), pp. 204-05.

[9]Noam Chomsky, "Language and the Mind" (reprinted from an essay in Psychology Today, February, 1968) in Reading About Language, ed. by Charlton Laird and Robert M. Gorrell (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1971), pp. 77-86.

[10]Joan Kelleher, "Individualized English: New Roles for Teachers and Students," EJ, LXIV (November, 1975), 29.

[11]Karen M. Hess, "The Role of Objectives and the Teaching of Composition," CCC, XXVI (October, 1975), 274.

[12]Charles Carpenter Fries, The Structure of English (New York: Harcourt - Brace Jovanovich, 1952), pp. 143-45.

[13] Fries, p. 282.

[14] James W. Ney, "Lessons from the Language Teacher: Cognition, Conditioning, and Controlled Composition," XXIV (May, 1973), 182-87.

[15] A number of experiments have been conducted to demonstrate that teaching transformational rules and sentence combining manipulations does increase syntactic fluency in student writing. The experimental studies are these: Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels (NCTE, 1965) in which he taught transformational rules to students and tried to demonstrate that students could increase syntactic fluency as they acquired knowledge of the transformations; John C. Mellon, Transformational Sentence-Combining: A Method for the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition (NCTE, 1969) in which he broke from teaching grammar and concluded that students could increase syntactic fluency or ease the production of sentences by learning sentence combining practices; Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction (NCTE, 1973) in which he concluded that practice in sentence combining without formal grammar instruction increased syntactic maturity, that is, the complexity of sentences containing embeddings, and helped students acquire a variety of sentence patterns. See also two commercial writing texts that use sentence combining: Frank O'Hare's Sentencecraft (Ginn, 1974) and William Strong's Sentence Combining: A Composing Book (Random House, 1973).