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ABSTRACT

Tentative results from a study of the writing improvement of college freshmen indicate that underlying linguistic competence can be released by exercises that allow students to use what they already know, that syntactic competence increases with maturity, and that complex pedagogic variables contribute to writing growth. Although a number of studies have found that sentence-combining groups display greater writing improvement than control groups, perhaps sentence-combining should be viewed as a helpful device to overcome the effects of large classes, rather than as necessary to improved writing. Gains in syntactic and usage skills may result from very small classes, constant feedback, constant rewriting, and a focus on levels smaller than the essay. (AEA)

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SOME DIFFICULTIES IN INTERPRETING WRITING GROWTH

In communicating professionally with each other or in setting up programs and syllabi in isolation, we are hampered by knowing little about the applicability of others' theories or research findings to the particular student populations we ourselves may be teaching, and we have no standards of comparison. We have quantitative entrance scores like the SAT's, but no widely accepted measurements of student achievement at the end of the freshman year or thereafter, and our holistic scores only measure students relative to each other on the same campus and relative to their own earlier achievement. Consequently, we have little way even of talking about our students' growth in comparison to that of different student populations taught in different programs at other colleges. As Mina Shaughnessy has reminded us, for example, we know little about the stages of growth of the adult beginning writer or whether "remedial" writers on one campus resemble those on another campus.[1] And yet program directors and teachers constantly must make leaps in the dark in deciding about the relative merits of different programs, teaching methods, or texts. Outside influences like budget cuts or faculty loads often limit our options and force us to choose between two options when we would prefer to have both. Until we know with much greater certainty how writers learn, until composition teachers have much greater prestige both within our profession and without, and until we find our way out of recurring economic crises, we are likely to have to live with reduced options and painful choices.

Though our leaps in the dark must ultimately be informed by the sort of basic, exploratory research done by a Mina Shaughnessy or Janet Emig, when we come to make practical decisions, we often need a second kind of research. While the first kind asks an open-ended, exploratory question (such as, what is the nature of the basic writing student's errors?), the second kind asks questions like, will my students profit more from X or Y, given that I cannot choose both? This sort of research might be characterized by the recent studies of sentence-combining that compare the progress of a control group and an experimental group in order to decide upon the merit of the experimental method. I would like to describe some of the difficult choices I have been involved in, how my own and others' research does and does not help inform those decisions, and some theories and questions I am left with.

In 1972 we at Eastern Connecticut State College dropped our required freshman composition course in response to annual budget cuts, a growing student body, and limited staff. We reinstated a required course in 1975 by making a trade-off: we teach seven-week rather than full semester courses, but we have no more than fifteen students per course with a student intern in each class to help provide feedback to the freshmen writers. Each instructor thus has an average student load of 26 to 30 students a semester without ever having more than 13 to 15 at one time. Each week we have one large lecture-demonstration section on very basic rhetorical skills (teaching by example the topic sentence, etc.) and two small sections for writing, immediate feedback, and rewriting. Individual instructors are free to replace the small group meetings with tutorials and often do so at least once a week. We restrict ourselves to the paragraph, but ask students to rewrite their paragraphs as many times as it takes for them to be acceptable. Though we at first required and later

merely recommended that they read a brief handbook, we have not formally spent time on grammar, preferring instead to deal individually with problems as they arise. More recently we have squeezed in some sentence-combining practice, but only irregularly and eclectically. Our one large class per week and weekly staff meetings insure a great degree of uniformity in subject material, though not in teaching style.

Our student average is below the national average in quantifiable language skills but above the kind of remedial group likely to be found in an urban, open-admissions class. (Students enrolling in the freshman class of 1977-78 had a mean SAT-Verbal score of 397 and a TSWE of 40.9.) In the first week of class after being shown what a topic sentence is, students are likely to write a paragraph like the following (an actual sample with spelling errors, etc. removed):

> When I arrived at Eastern, my first impression of the school was that it was unorganized. Everywhere I walked I noticed long lines of people waiting to be served, then being told to go to another office because they were in the wrong line for all this time. Even the people working in the offices were unsure where the line of people should go to be helped. All of this confusion sent students wandering all over the halls. When I think of that first day now, I realize that it was the beginning of school and usually there is much confusion on the first day.

Though the typical first paragraph contains a sprinkling of spelling, punctuation, or syntactical problems, the more striking problems are usually lack of focus or specificity. After fairly basic and simple rhetorical instruction (the topic sentence, an understanding of the difference between generalization and specifics, some concept of order, some knowledge of transition devices) and constant writing and rewriting, our students do seem to improve in seven weeks.

After the first three semesters of the program, we decided to evaluate what we were doing in order to decide whether our initial, economically motivated compromise between a full semester course and small class size

had worked. Our first testing device was the Test of Standard Written English which we decided to use because it is reported along with the entering SAT scores, thus providing an economical placement device for every student, and because a colleague had found the TSWE correlated highly with our holistic judgments of our students.[2] We found that, despite our lack of formal attention to Standard English, our students do improve on those skills measured by the Test of Standard Written English. Since we wanted to know what their growth showed about our program, however, I tried using as a standard of comparison the TSWE results reported by Hunter Breland in his study of TSWE reliability at four other colleges.[3]

Our TSWE results (see Table 1) when compared to those from five regular composition courses at Breland's four colleges look quite good. The ECSC students' average increase of over four points was statistically significant (t-test, $p < .001$), and in repeated testing with other groups (of over one hundred students each time) we have always found a gain of over four points. Moreover, our students' gains are greater than the gains ranging from +.92 to +2.48 at the other colleges.

However, since our students started further behind, they ought to gain faster, and the TSWE is not really meant to work so accurately in the upper ranges as in the lower.[4] But if ECSC students with entering TSWE scores of 45-49 and those with scores of 50-59 are separated from the rest, even their scores are respectable. Our group with a 47.21 pre-course average raised their average +2.68 in seven weeks while the group with a 53.33 entering average raised their average +1.07. Though Breland's data are not broken down in such a way as to allow comparison of the other groups with scores in these two ranges, the fact that colleges P, Q, and R -- with

entering means in the range of 44-52 -- all experienced gains lower than these suggests that the ECSC gains cannot be dismissed simply because we had more poor students. Even our abler students' scores rose.

The ECSC gains in TSWE scores are further substantiated by a second set of figures -- the gains in number of words per T-unit between pre- and post-essay exams. One set of T-unit counts for 117 students in a session without formal sentence-combining (all students writing on the same, fairly simple topic) showed an average gain of +1.39 words per T-unit, from 14.61 to 16.0 ($p < .005$). Another set of counts from a session in which we did some sentence-combining showed an average rise of +1.89 from 11.01 to 12.90 on Kellogg Hunt's Aluminum passage.

These gains indicate that something is going right with our program, but they do little to indicate what is going right, and they do not tell whether a seven-week program shortchanges our students or whether a fifteen-week program with larger classes would benefit them significantly more. Before theorizing about what these gains may indicate, however, I would like to explain another leap in the dark with similarly puzzling results.

After the first two years of our seven-week course, we seemed agreed that while seven weeks might be appropriate for some students, others needed a longer course. But which others? How many of them? And what sort of course? With no time to set up a new course and no new staff to teach it, I took on the task of finding a stop-gap measure to help the weakest students until we could decide how to set up a course really designed for them. I arranged for several groups of about ten students each, who had entered with TSWE scores from 20-29 (mean 23.78), to meet for an hour and a quarter one day a week for seven weeks before beginning the regular seven-week English 100 course. Under the supervision of a trained high school

teacher and two student interns who had worked with English 100, these students were to practice sentence-combining using William Strong's text Sentence Combining. After this very minimal help, they were retested and sent on to English 100, but their average TSWE scores had risen to 32.78, a gain of +9.00. Compared to the full remedial sequences at Breland's schools (see Table 2) where the gains after one semester were +3.90, 5.41, +1.73, and +2.06, our students' gains seem quite impressive, though the fact that our students started further behind would mean that they should gain faster. Two-thirds of them later passed English 100 while only one-third of a group with comparable scores who slipped past us or who could not attend the special help sessions passed English 100.[5] These facts are somewhat difficult to interpret because they could indicate the excellence of sentence-combining, the merits of tutorial sessions without real English department faculty, our students' readiness to grow, all these factors combined, or some other, perhaps non-academic, factors. The positive results need some interpretation, for with such students, any growth is of value, and if growth is to be had so easily, there may be something impeding growth in our usual treatment of these students.

From a practical standpoint, then, what are we to make of all this? Surely the comparisons of TSWE scores do not indicate that the longer the course the less improvement occurs, and they by no means prove that we could not do better -- or at least as well -- with a different course content or different instructional methods. I have come to two tentative conclusions. First, I suspect that a major unexplored variable is the developmental potential of different groups of student writers. Psychologists find that pre-school children who have been environmentally deprived tend to make impressive immediate gains in compensatory education programs, but that afterwards their gains are slower.[6] The middle of the road student

writers who enter college with scores in the 40-50 TSWE range may have an average, though not superior, aptitude which has developed normally after normal high school writing practice. My group of students with a mean of 23.8 who rose so rapidly and some of those with higher entrance scores may have average aptitude which was simply not developed in high school. One theoretical assumption underlying sentence-combining is that our students' underlying linguistic competence can be released by exercises that allow them to use what they already know; a second assumption is that syntactic competence increases with maturity. If both assumptions are correct, then rapid increases in syntactic maturity or in usage skills among college students may partially result from their being exposed to writing almost for the first time. Their high schools have simply not developed their latent competence. If so, we need to be communicating better with the high schools, and we need to find out whether some of the students we consider poor writers are merely late bloomers.

My second set of conclusions and questions involves the complexity of analyzing how pedagogic variables contribute to writing growth. The standard method for evaluating a variable is to run a controlled experiment of the sort being done on the effects of sentence-combining. A number of studies using a control group and an experimental sentence-combining group have found that the sentence-combining groups progressed farther than the control groups. Since the two sets of TSWE results I have described were not part of designed experiments, the loose ends are obvious, but even the seemingly controlled sentence-combining experiments present problems of interpretation. Four recent sentence-combining experiments with college freshmen at Miami University, the University of North Dakota, the University of New Brunswick, and Beaver College show a rather wide range of results (see Table 3).[7] Part

of the evidence of writing growth among the experimental groups at these schools are the following gains in words per T-unit: +0.74, +1.48, +4.25, and +5.30. The first three studies were done on a large scale with control groups whose gains were only: -0.05, -0.51, and +0.46. Though the experimental groups seem superior, how are we to explain the difference between the Miami gain of only +0.74 and the New Brunswick gain of +4.25 or the Beaver College gain of +5.30? The New Brunswick group did nothing but sentence-combining; the Beaver College sample was very small and was a two-semester experiment. So sentence-combining is a complex pedagogical device which may be used in a number of ways for quite different kinds of students with potentially quite varied results.

Frank O'Hare's study of seventh graders used Hunt's normative data to suggest that sentence-combining can speed up normal development and result in super-normal achievement.[8] Since we have no similar norms for college students, the results of sentence-combining are harder to interpret at the college level. If the minimal or negative gains of the control groups at Miami, North Dakota, and New Brunswick are taken as normal, then sentence-combining seems successful. But at Eastern Connecticut, we find gains in words per T-units among students not exposed to sentence-combining; in one typical seven-week session, students raised their scores +1.39 -- i.e., more than the Miami experimental group, nearly as much as the North Dakota experimental group, and more than all three control groups. I suspect that the control groups' progress should not be seen as normal at all and that their lack of success demonstrates the inefficiency -- or possibly the retarding effect -- of trying to teach writing to large classes who spend a great deal of time reading, rather than writing essays.

Syntactic maturity, I suspect, may be achieved by a number of routes. The Eastern Connecticut students' gains in syntactic and usage skills probably

both result from the very small classes (one reader for every seven to eight students), constant feedback, and constant rewriting. The experimental and control groups at Miami, North Dakota, New Brunswick, and Beaver had, respectively, 26, 21, 20, and 20 students. Perhaps in large groups where feedback is less frequent, sentence-combining is a suitable way of practicing directed writing. The Miami study, in fact, says that the experimental groups did a great deal of comparing and contrasting student exercises while their teachers made "extensive use of the blackboard, overhead projector, and handouts" -- all ways of increasing feedback and intensifying student participation in a large class.[9] So, perhaps sentence-combining should be viewed as a helpful device to overcome the effects of large classes, rather than a necessary condition of success. We still have a great deal to learn about college students' syntax, about the forms and effects of sentence-combining, and about its interaction with other variables such as class size, focus on reading essays, or kinds of students. And if we really want to understand syntactic maturity, we will have to replicate these experiments among different student groups and with different kinds of control groups.

Perhaps, also, some of the Eastern Connecticut students' gains can be attributed to our focus on the paragraph. If the syntactic successes of sentence-combining are attributable to intense focus on sentence syntax while the control groups spread their attention over whole essays, then it is understandable that our paragraph-writing students should show sentence maturity gains more comparable to those of the sentence-combining groups than to those of the control groups. Because our students rewrite their paragraphs at least two and more often three or four times, they have the chance to scrutinize and alter their own sentences many times. If that process alone without further sentence exercises can produce the kind of

growth we would like to see, then we should know it. If some kinds of students -- late-bloomers, for instance, or less able students -- are unable to improve their syntactic and usage skills by plunging into the essay, then we ought to understand that too.

The questions I am raising may have practical importance for the kind of decisions I have called leaps in the dark. If feedback, intensive rewriting, and focus on levels smaller than the essay are the major variables for my students' writing growth and if the same three variables -- feedback, intensive rewriting, and focus on a smaller level -- are key variables in the sentence-combining successes, then we may want to think about reducing class size -- even at the cost of reducing course length. We ought to be sceptical of the traditional formats which produce such unimpressive TSWE and syntactic maturity results. And we ought to recognize that we know very little about how growth patterns vary with different kinds of students and different kinds of programs.

Footnotes

1 CCC 28 (December, 1977), pp. 317-320 and "Basic Writing" in Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Forth Worth, Texas: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 137-167.

2 Thomas Salter, unpublished research.

3 Hunter M. Breland, A Study of College English Placement and the Test of Standard Written English (Princeton, New Jersey: Educational Testing Services, 1977).

4 Breland says the TSWE "discriminates best among students of relatively low writing ability" (p. 25).

5 I am indebted to Marcia Orcutt (teacher of the course) for the information about how many of these students later passed English 100 and how many who should have been in this group did not pass English 100. After they took English 100, we retested these 18 students who received extra help. By that time their TSWE scores had risen again to an average of 37.79 (or a gain of +14.01) from their entering scores, but unfortunately this second, post-English 100, test administration used the same TSWE form they had seen only seven weeks earlier. We cannot therefore know how much of the second increase came from test familiarity.

6 Urie Bronfenbrenner, "A Report on Longitudinal Evaluations of Pre-school Programs," vol. 2, Is Early Intervention Effective? (DHEW Publ. No. OHD 74-25), Washington, D.C., 1974.

7 The studies at these four schools are: (1) Miami University -- Max Morenberg, Donald Daiker, and Andrew Kerek, "Sentence Combining at the College Level: An Experimental Study," Research in the Teaching of English 12 (1978), 245-256; (2) The University of North Dakota -- Lester Faigley, "Generative Rhetoric as a Way of Increasing Syntactic Fluency," to appear in CCC, May 1970; (3) The University of New Brunswick -- Murray F. Stewart,

"Freshman Sentence Combining: A Canadian Project," RTE 12 (1978), 257-268; and (4) Beaver College -- Elaine P. Maimon and Barbara F. Nodine, "Measuring Syntactic Growth: Errors and Expectations in Sentence-Combining Practice with College Freshmen," RTE 12 (1978), 233-244.

8 Frank O'Hare, Sentence-Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction, Research Report No. 15, Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 1973.

9 Morenberg et al., RTE, p. 247.

Table 1

	Entering SAT-V	Entering TSWE	SD	Post-course TSWE	SD	Average First Course Increase on TSWE
ECSC, English 100 n = 117	39.7	40.21	11.71	44.79	11.45	+4.57
College P n = 67	45.5	47.87	7.05	46.25	8.99	-1.62
College Q n = 112	44.1	45.20	8.71	46.68	8.55	+1.48
College R (Sequence #1) n = 62	51.2	56.21	4.40	57.13	3.48	+0.92
College R (Sequence #2) n = 152	51.2	51.64	6.22	53.32	5.87	+1.68
College S n = 96	42.3	43.97	8.78	46.45	8.76	+2.48
ECSC students in 45-47 TSWE range		47.21		49.87		+2.68
ECSC students in 50-59 TSWE range		53.33		54.40		+1.07

Table 2

	Entering TSWE	Post-course TSWE	Average First Course TSWE gain
ECSC remedial help session n = 18	23.78	32.78	+9.00
College P n = 50	29.56	33.46	+3.90
College Q n = 81	33.65	39.06	+5.41
College R n = 30	39.90	41.63	+1.73
College S n = 77	32.06	34.10	+2.06

Table 3

Words Per T-Unit

		n =	Pre-test	SD	Post-test	SD	Gain
Sentence-Combining Experimental Groups	Beaver College (2 semesters)	14	17.68	----	22.98	----	+5.30
	Miami University (1 semester)	151	15.31	2.59	16.05	2.92	+0.74
	U. of North Dakota (1 semester)		14.22	----	15.70	----	+1.48
	U. of New Brunswick (6 wks)	30	13.77	2.76	18.02	4.24	+4.25
Control or Non-Experimental Groups	Eastern Conn. State College (7 weeks)	117	14.61	3.99	16.00	5.26	+1.39
	Miami University (1 semester)	139	15.00	2.80	14.95	2.61	-0.05
	U. of North Dakota (1 semester)		13.99	----	13.48	----	-0.51
	U. of New Brunswick (6 wks)	30	14.54	3.10	15.01	2.73	+0.46

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1 Mina Shaughnessy, CCC 28 (December, 1977), pp. 317-320 and "Basic Writing" in Teaching Composition: 10 Bibliographical Essays, ed. Gary Tate (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), pp. 137-167.

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Combining: A Canadian Project," RTE 12 (1978), 257-268; and (4) Beaver College -- Elaine P. Maimon and Barbara F. Nodine, "Measuring Syntactic Growth: Errors and Expectations in Sentence-Combining Practice with College Freshmen," RTE 12 (1978), 233-244.

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9 Morenberg et al., RTE, p. 247.