STUDENTS' ENGLISH EXPRESSION AT THE UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE

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Introduction

Frequent criticisms of university students and of recent graduates are that they cannot write or that they are not articulate speakers. The University of Adelaide decided to investigate thoroughly one of these complaints (the standard of students' written work) and to gather some information on the other.

The University's investigation took place in two stages. In 1973, after an initiative from the Faculty of Architecture and Town Planning, the University of Adelaide appointed a committee to investigate and report on the standard of English on entry to the University and later; to consider the problem of students for whom English was a second language; and to suggest what action, if any, the University ought to take.

The committee in its report based its findings on replies it received from almost all departments: letters asking for comments on the standard of English and on the examples of students' written work provided by a number of departments.

In 1974 a University-wide survey was conducted to investigate more precisely the nature and the scale of the problems. Twenty-two departments were experiencing difficulty in following lectures and in written exams. Three or so years of tickling is generally accepted as the reverse of what was expected, and even hoped, that the University should offer help in the form of pressure.

The survey indicated that approximately one-third of the students were non-native speakers of English, that almost half of those experiencing difficulties had mechanical difficulties in writing essays: faulty punctuation and syntax. More important, perhaps, was the finding that one department was satisfied with its students on entry from the schools.

Generalley, the common observation was that the standard of English varied, as one department put it 'from the doggy and undialomatic to the fluent and pleasing' — and that muddled thinking was as much to blame as linguistic incompetence for such writing. The result had been the formation of those performing active participation in politics to combine their efforts in the form of pressure groups, when interviewed on television to utter coherent sentences free from a rash of you know's and 'sort of' is put to shame by many older people, without benefit of university education, who state simply and clearly what they have to say with a biblical directness.

The committee's report disappointed those who, it appeared to us, hoped that we would declare that the vast majority of students were either semi-literate or worse, that schools had failed lamentably in their work; that there was no health in Adelaide University students. Indeed, one newspaper, for whatever reasons, absolved to English-speaking students the comments we had made about Asian and migrant students! Standards are, of course, always relative — and in this case, clearly by a distinguished science professor who dared not answer us by letter lest his English should be bad. In a selected population of some eight to nine thousand, it is statistically almost certain that some will be found wanting. The committee found no evidence, however, to support sensational headlines about illiterate university students. Since few of us would dare to say we had achieved complete mastery of our mother tongue, it is hardly likely that we shall ever be satisfied with our students' English — and that, perhaps, is a very good thing.

Sadly, but hardly unexpectedly, most departments reported that all students had some native language. English was not English, both Asian students and some migrants, had difficulty in coping with their courses. This percentage was much higher for each department: all departments and all departments also told us that such students were often a problem and industrious. The committee recommended that the University should provide help for such students. The Survey: A questionnaire to be completed by academic staff was distributed jointly by the Department of English in the form of pressure groups, when interviewed on television to utter coherent sentences free from a rash of you know's and 'sort of' is put to shame by many older people, without benefit of university education, who state simply and clearly what they have to say with a biblical directness.

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A student version of the questionnaire was prepared and used by one major department.

One-third of all departments replied to the questionnaire. The following information and conclusions are based on the comments made in the form of pressure groups, when interviewed on television to utter coherent sentences free from a rash of you know's and 'sort of' is put to shame by many older people, without benefit of university education, who state simply and clearly what they have to say with a biblical directness.

Twenty-one students had stylistic difficulties but not mechanical difficulties. About one-third of these had mechanical difficulties but not stylistic difficulties. All other students had both types of difficulty.

For Year 1 only, for each difficulty (D), the following percentages were calculated:

No. of students experiencing D × 100
Total No. of students experiencing any kind of difficulty

This was done for replies from both departments and students. The results are shown in Table 2.

Replies from two large departments stated that although they believed there was a problem, they did not know students sufficiently well to be able to comment on it. One department, however, who completed their questionnaires were attending courses in one of these departments. Other departments which either did not return questionnaires, or which stated they had no problems, also had students attending their courses who returned questionnaires.

A large Arts Faculty department only listed serious cases, but wrote that almost one-half of their students have minor (but not negligible) difficulties, e.g. faulty pronunciation and spelling, and occasional lack of clarity of written expression.

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According to figures provided by departments, only a small percentage of those students experiencing difficulties were having difficulty with either formal or informal oral expression. This percentage was much higher when based on the students' own estimates of their deficiencies. The difference is possibly due to the fact that there is little formal assessment of oral expression and so staff are not fully aware of the problem. The major problems arose in the writing of essays and the problems were both stylistic and mechanical in nature.

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Only one department was able to identify difficulties experienced by students in following lectures or in writing lecture notes. One-half of the students who claimed to be experiencing difficulties with English expression stated that following lectures or writing lecture notes were areas of concern to them. It is clear that the first year students were more critical (and, perhaps, more knowledgeable?) of their deficiencies.

Remedial English Classes
As a result of the committee’s investigation and survey results, the Committee of Deans formed a sub-committee that decided to conduct four pilot studies during 1976 into the teaching of English expression. Funding for these came from some University departmental, the State’s Department of Further Education and the Students’ Association. The four studies were labelled:

- Tutor process
- Specific tutoring process
- Booklet process
- Non-native speakers’ tutoring

All four studies were to be administered and evaluated by the Advisory Centre for University Education.

Tutor Process
Work by Mr. W. Goodenough at the Torrens College of Advanced Education had impressed the Committee of Deans sub-committee. (This work is reported in English in Australia, No. 33, November, 1975.) Goodenough is a critic of the usual ways of the remedial teaching of writing:

“Why do we wait for the messy, unstructured, ill-spelt, illiterate hotchpotch to come to us before we start to teach about writing? Why start at the wrong end? This approach has been wasteful, inefficient and inhibiting for students. Yet it happens in most subjects. Teachers who themselves can hardly write a Christmas greeting, assess ‘correct’ students’ writing. Teachers who have little idea how an essay is constructed, set and mark them without questioning whether or not they are competent to do so.”

What is true at primary and secondary levels is equally true at tertiary levels, where teachers are usually older and more conservative. How many academics in C.A.E. and universities write with the ‘fundamental clarity and coherence’ that Thea Astley requires? How many can separate content from style and correctness from form?"

He has developed a course that demands four hours of teaching, one hour a week for four weeks. It recognises that:

“Most things which tertiary teachers regard as ‘errors’ result from:

a. lack of understanding of the subject matter.
b. lack of ability to structure an essay.

c. attempts by students to use sentence structures which they cannot yet perform in writing, though they can read such structures.”

Tutors and lecturers from volunteer departments who normally teach, mark and discuss essays are using the Goodenough approach to provide help to those students in their own groups as written expression problems arise. The Departments of Economics, Commerce, Law and English are involved in this. Training sessions have been held for the tutors and a descriptive evaluation of the tutoring is being undertaken.

Specific Tutoring
Groups of students (6-10 members per group) are being provided with four hours of tutoring by six part-time tutors who have been trained for that task. All tutorials are being held in the Student Counselling Service and are available to all students. An evaluation similar to that for the Tutor Process investigation is being done.

Booklet Process
The Committee of Deans sub-committee examined many of the books on essay writing. It produced a list of recommended texts for students. At the top of the list came Mitchell, J., 1974, How to write reports, Fontana.

Selected students in the Departments of Mathematical Physics, Psychiatry, Politics and Entomology were given the list of recommended books and their opinions on the use of these books are being sought.

Non-native Speakers Tutoring
The Department of Further Education through its Migrant Education Centre generously agreed to finance tutorial classes for non-native speakers. Two tutors are being employed for 20 weeks. They are providing a total of 16 hours teaching per week in an attempt to help students to cope with lecture notes, prepare essays and answer examination papers. Once again, a descriptive evaluation of the tutoring is being done.

At the end of 1976 the University should be able to decide whether to make remedial English classes a permanent feature of undergraduate teaching. Already one important fact has emerged: The University of Adelaide is not pretending that teaching problems do not exist but is attempting to overcome them in one important area.