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Visiting The Robert Bly's At Odin House, Madison, Minnesota

The big man comes down from upstairs with the gun
and the barrel is smoking furiously.

Alarm. There is real
alarm in us. The wife.
Only the wife can
speak.

"Robert?"

The reply struts out of his mouth.

"A sonneteer. I got another one."

He sits down,
satisfied.

Ronald Swanson
Love Library
University of Nebraska

A Comprehensive Approach To Remedial Reading And Writing Problems

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In The Anatomy of College English Thomas H. Wilcox joined other administrators of English departments in expressing a pessimistic view of remedial English programs. He describes these courses as an assortment of stopgap measures, lacking "intellectual substance." He notes that few English faculty willingly teach such classes. Further, he questions the degree to which the objectives of such classes are realized. A few bleak statistics are cited; for example, less than five per cent of the remedial English students at one state university have ultimately received a degree.[1]

Perhaps students who arrive on campus without the necessary skills for doing academic work are unable to bridge this gap; it may well be that children must develop their verbal skills at certain stages of life if they are ever to develop them fully. In his renowned call for discontinuing traditional freshman English courses, Warner Rice argued, "If good habits of reading, writing, and speaking have not been inculcated before the student is of college age, it is unlikely that he will be greatly benefitted by two semesters of Freshman English."[2]

On the other hand, one might argue that these skills can indeed be acquired in the late teen years or even later and that the high rate of attrition of high-risk students may be an indication of ineffective instruction. This problem is related to the larger question of the effectiveness of instruction in college composition generally. Rice, for example, questioned whether the traditional college composition class could be justified.[3] The late Francis Christensen observed that as teachers of English "we do not really teach our captive charges to

write better--we merely expect them to."[4] A number of interesting alternatives to the traditional course in freshman English have been devised for average or superior students. But whether English departments have sufficiently tapped available resources or encouraged creative approaches to remedial English is questionable.

Despite its lackluster history, remedial English has not disappeared from the college curriculum, as some predicted over a decade ago. A somewhat altered attitude toward remedial English has resulted, largely from changing admissions policies of colleges and universities across the country. Demands by minorities for equal opportunity in education and the desire of administrators to bolster declining enrollments have resulted in the presence of many students on our campuses who would have been refused admission earlier. Apparently a sincere effort is being made to keep these students rather than weed them out. For most of them, the development of mature communications skills is prerequisite for success in higher education. These new attitudes toward high-risk students would seem to demand a reconsideration of the role of remedial English. We wish to discuss several considerations, based on both pertinent literature and our experience with such courses, that seem especially important in providing a fresh approach to remedial programs.

One of the most serious deficiencies in the remedial student's academic background is in the area of reading skills. The need for intensive instruction in reading for many students in the City University of New York (CUNY) system has been discussed by Theresa Miller.[5] At Concordia College in September, 1972, forty-two students were enrolled in a remedial English course for high-risk students. These students had been tested for reading proficiency on the Cooperative English examination.[6] While the college did not officially adhere to an open admissions policy, a number of students were admitted in the 1972-1973 school year without regard to entrance test scores or high school performance. On the vocabulary subtest, forty-eight per cent of these students placed between the zero and twentieth percentiles of college-bound high school seniors; fifty per cent placed in the same range on the measure of reading comprehension skills. Thus it seemed that many of these freshmen hoped to succeed in college courses with a repertoire of reading skills barely adequate for success in most high schools.

Inadequate reading skills must be taken into account in any English course for the remedial student. Obviously these students will read normal college-level assignments only with extreme difficulty. Furthermore, severe reading deficiencies also have rather clear implications for the teaching of writing. The reader who is unable to grasp the structure of the paragraph and trace the development of ideas as he reads the writings of others is unlikely to appropriately organize and develop his own ideas in writing. With an inadequate vocabulary, a student is unlikely to express himself effectively in writing. Directions to improve diction cannot be heeded by those with such limitations. The close correlation--perhaps it is even partly a casual relationship--between proficiency in reading and mastery of writing skills prompted John Weber's recommendation that remedial reading precede courses in writing for the remedial student.[7] For students with severe reading deficiencies, a writing program, no matter how carefully planned, seems doomed to failure.

Many colleges and universities, following the lead of Ivy League institutions in the 1950's, have offered reading improvement and study skills courses for their students. In many institutions the high-risk student is routinely assigned to such a class. But this instruction, typically designed to refine comprehension skills and introduce speed-reading to students with fairly adequate preparation, is of questionable efficacy for the student who lacks basic vocabulary and comprehension skills.

Both reading skills and writing skills might most effectively be taught in the English class. Barbara Kaplan has called for an end to the separation of the two mediums in teaching remedial students, suggesting greater coordination between reading assignments and writing assignments.[8] Various possibilities exist for integrating reading and writing instruction. Knowledge of paragraph organization, methods of development, and use of transitions are important both in reading and in writing; these corresponding principles might be taught simultaneously in both mediums. The role of the topic sentence, for example, might first be considered in a series of reading exercises followed by student's composing a paragraph of his own, with special attention to the topic sentence. Vocabulary encountered in reading assignments can be effectively reinforced in writing assignments. But the best means of building vocabulary is probably through wide reading in materials of interest to the student; the English instructor would seem best qualified to give guidance in this area.

A second necessity for effectively teaching writing skills to students with serious verbal deficiencies is following a clear sequence of writing skills. Educational psychologists generally agree that effective learning is more likely to take place when objectives are pursued in a series of short steps, gradually increasing in difficulty. In the teaching of writing, the objective--ability to write a coherent composition--should be divided into smaller, more manageable units. Donald Knapp reports formulating a sequence of such units in teaching English as a second language, attempting to "isolate specific skills as units for focus so they can be taught efficiently."[9] In such a program one might initially focus on the topic sentence, for example, and proceed to methods of paragraph development, means of achieving paragraph unity, and use of transitional devices. Each student would practice one skill until he mastered it. Frequent review of skills would be essential and should be incorporated into such a program. Only when students had mastered a given skill in exercises and in compositions would the next skill be introduced. Focusing on one aspect of writing at a time should increase the chances of mastery of each skill and ultimately result in greater proficiency in writing skills generally.

The usual sequence of writing skills normally followed in composition classes and in composition textbooks moves from smaller to larger units--from sentence-level and word considerations to the paragraph and essay levels. However, in our experience with high-risk students, we have found it more effective to begin instruction in the larger units--the essay and the paragraph--and proceed to the smaller units--sentence structure, diction, and punctuation. Students typically master the principles of paragraph organization and development well before they consistently observe the multitudinous aspects of usage of the smaller units. Thus they are much more likely to experience success in writing at an earlier stage of instruction. Too, in beginning at the paragraph and essay levels, students are more likely to come to regard writing as a vehicle for expressing ideas rather than as a game of finding the exact word and avoiding ungrammatical constructions. The latter problems are, of course, important in composition, but their importance does not preclude the possibility that instruction in these areas can be justifiably postponed. Aspects of grammar and usage are probably best taken up later in exercises and in patterned drills rather than according to their random occurence in compositions. Furthermore, when instruction begins with organization and development skills, matters of dialect difference can be delayed to a later stage,

when these students have acquired some writing skill and confidence in their ability to communicate.

Adhering to a sequence of writing skills has implications for the marking of compositions. Rather than red-marking many errors or weaknesses, the instructor would be concerned mainly with evidence of mastery of the skills already taught. The result of this would be that a fused sentence, for example, would not be red-marked if sentence structure had not yet been taken up in class. Such a system of grading might cancel out the negative effects of evaluation. As Knapp points out, the comment'"fine improvement' on a composition covered with red marks is not very likely to reinforce those right choices the student did make, and the considerable effort of the teacher to find all the mistakes in the composition may be almost totally wasted, considering how efficient people are in forgetting or ignoring what they don't want to recognize."[10] He offers a "positive" correction scheme, which can be adapted to teaching remedial English: in place of negative markings, positive signs are given for skills properly applied.[11]

Finally, to insure that students are able to follow the sequence of skills, it seems necessary to provide extensive supervision of their writing; they need considerable guidance outside of class. Confusion and frustration are less likely to result when immediate feedback is offered on writing assignments. With the help of competent tutors, a student can learn to do an assignment correctly and thereby master the skill more rapidly. Because of a lack of student initiative, however, tutoring efforts have often been less than successful. Voluntary tutoring, according to Kaplan,

> fails to take into account the student's own insecurity and fear. Usually it is the stronger student who feels secure enough to ask for help, while the weaker students--those who really need such help--have shied away from it in an attempt to hide their inadequacies from others. Very often such students hide their problems from themselves, adopting a kind of reality-denying technique. In either case, the end result is that voluntary help is synonymous with no help.[12]

Thus the students who are in greatest need of tutoring are least likely to seek help.

We have attempted to overcome this problem through a highly structured approach to tutoring. All students in the freshman English classes for high-risk students are required to attend two two-hour workshop sessions per week. In these sessions students write the composition assignments for class under the direction of a tutor. Rather than being an additional time commitment for these students, the workshops serve as an opportunity for doing composition assignments with help readily available. Rather than initiating the contact with a tutor when they need help, students are able to obtain advice as they write the composition. When the composition is finished, the tutor evaluates it and suggests revisions. These workshops are staffed by English teaching majors who tutor as part of their course requirement for English methods class or for credit in independent study.

The workshop approach has several advantages which make it effective for teaching students with severe verbal deficiencies. First, there is the advantage of immediate feedback. Comments and criticisms given verbally while the composition is yet in process have considerably more meaning for the student then do red-ink marks and notations on a paper written five days previously. Immediate reinforcement of what the student is doing well is also more effective than delayed positive comments. Too, criticisms and suggestions given "on the spot" are more likely to be understood. Also, with a three-to-one or four-to-one student-tutor ratio, more attention can be given to each student's individual problems. Inadequacies become evident earlier and are therefore likely to be dealt with immediately. Furthermore, a comeraderie develops between the students as they work together with the tutor. The benefits of "cohesiveness" in the composition class have been discussed by Jack Welch.[13]

A recently developed approach to providing individualized instruction is computer-assisted instruction. Application of the computer to remedial English is discussed by Anna Marie Thames, who has constructed computer programs on various aspects of written communication--paragraph unity, transitions, sentence transformations, and spelling. She reports numerous advantages of computer instruction in writing. Because of the large variety of possible programs, students can easily be assigned work on the appropriate writing skills at the appropriate level of competence. Like the tutoring workshop described above, computers provide immediate feedback. A correct response triggers positive

reinforcement; for an incorrect response the computer provides an explanation and a series of additional exercises. Thanks to the judicious use of computers, Thames notes, class discussions need not be taken up with the mechanical facets of writing.[14] Thus many of the advantages of tutoring may be realized in this highly innovative approach.

A successful remedial English program begins with a sincere belief that many high-risk students can indeed be helped. We then must recognize that the primary weakness may well be reading skill rather then writing skill, with regard to success both in English and in other courses. Thus the remedial program must include intensive work in vocabulary development and reading comprehension, as well as in writing. Progress of high-risk students should be made through a realistic sequence of tasks reinforced with positive evaluation. Finally, to insure that students are able to follow the sequence and acquire the skills, it is essential to provide supplementary assistance. Tutoring workshops and computer-assisted instruction are possible means of offering such assistance. Not all of these students will succeed; but a high-risk program should meet the needs of some students if we are willing to devote the resources to make it work.

FOOTNOTES

[1]Thomas W. Wilcox, The Anatomy of College English (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1973), pp. 67-69.

[2]Warner Rice, "A Proposal for the Abolition of Freshman English, as It Is Now Commonly Taught, from the Curriculum" College English, XXI (April, 1960), 361.

[3]Rice, pp. 361-363.

[4]Francis Christensen, Notes Toward a New Rhetoric (New York: Harper-Row, 1967), p. 8.

[5]Theresa Miller, "The Open Door versus the Revolving Door," Journal of Higher Education, XLIV (November, 1972), 643.

[6]Cooperative English Tests: Reading Comprehension (Princeton, N.J.: Educational Testing Service, 1960).

[7]John Weber, "Recommendations for Better English Instruction," Junior College Journal, XXXVIII (February, 1968), 32.

[8]Barbara Kaplan, "Open Admissions: A Critique," Liberal Education, LVIII (May, 1972), 215-216.

[9]Donald Knapp, "A Focused, Efficient Method to Relate Composition Correction to Teaching Aims," Teaching English as a Second Language, ed. Harold B. Allen and Russel N. Campbell (New York: McGraw-Hill International Book Company, 1972), p. 215.

[10]Knapp, p. 215.

[11]Knapp, p. 217.

[12]Barbara Kaplan, pp. 212-213.

[13]Jack Welch, "On the Importance of Cohesiveness in Writing Classes, College Composition and Communication, XXIV (October, 1973), 291-294.

[14]Anna Marie Thames, "CAI and English: A Tentative Relationship," Proceedings of the 1972 Conference on Computers in Undergraduate Curricula (Atlanta, Ga., 1972), pp. 305-310.

Haiku

Summer's red orchards
barreled in field stone cellars.
A gibbous moon glides!

Chet Corey
Worthington Junior College

Improving Student Diction

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This paper outlines a few simple teaching methods to improve student writing whether or not the student has a grasp of basic English grammar. The guidelines listed will immediately require a student to think more about words, yet concurrently, provide exact steps to develop clear writing. The guidelines are easily taught and depend upon student practice.

Numerous English students unused to scrutinizing their work are baffled by corrections on their papers. They approach composition as they do conversation and fail to express themselves specifically. These students endlessly have been told the definition of a verb, but do not properly understand the relationship of this definition to composition. An effective means to improve student verb diction is to utilize this relationship by illustrating that verbs originate in "to be" and that "to be" verbs are the most general of verbs. "To be" verbs alone, then, should be used sparingly. To illustrate that verbs originate with "to be," have students suggest a verb--for example, "go." (There is no particular concern if some students do not recognize a verb--they will still be able to utilize the conclusion of the exercise.)

Step by step, have students note verbs that are forms of going, but progressively are more specific--run, trot, prance, canter. Then have students give verbs more general than "go": "move," "be." After considering a number of verbs, the conclusion is inevitable: all verbs originate in "be" and become more exact as they move away from "be." Students who need to learn better diction can start by virtually eliminating "to be" verb forms used alone. For students who cannot recognize verbs, list these forms.