

MINNESOTA LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT: 1984

by Jwalla P. Somwaru

The Assessment Section of the Division of Special Services, in collaboration with the Division of Instruction of the Minnesota Department of Education, is developing the following new instruments for assessment in English Language Skills during the spring of 1984:

Writing for grades 6, 9, and 11 (essays)

Language Skills for grades 6, 9, and 11 (objective tests)

The new Writing tests will replace the tests which are currently in use. Together with the Minnesota Reading tests for grades 4, 8, and 11, and the Minnesota Secondary Reading Inventories, these tests will comprise a substantial language arts package which will be available to schools and/or districts for local assessment during and after the statewide assessment in 1984.

The tests in Writing will enable the direct assessment of writing samples of Minnesota students in the following modes: narrating, describing, explaining, summarizing, persuading and analyzing. The model for the assessment is represented in Figure 1, while the details of the two dimensions to be assessed are presented in Tables 1 and 2. The objective tests in Language Skills are designed to be complementary to the tests in writing. These tests will assess students' knowledge, understanding and application of the rules and conventions of functional grammar and composition. A detailed list of the domains, areas, clusters, and outcomes is provided in Table 3. The content of this table should not give the impression that the state is returning to the teaching and testing of formal grammar as an end in itself. Rather, a knowledge and understanding of language structure is viewed as supplementary to the acquisition of writing skills. A demonstration project in which the study of language structure (functional grammar) is successfully integrated with the teaching of writing in elementary and high schools is the Weehawken Project of New Jersey (a Title IVC project validated as successful and cost-effective by the U.S. Office of Education in 1973).

The manual produced (or some version thereof) has been used effectively by many schools in several states, including Minnesota.

Several research studies have attempted to answer the question whether objective tests can be used as valid measures of writing ability. While significant correlations (ranging from low to moderate) have always been found between essay writing and objective tests in language skills, it cannot be said that the two kinds of tests measure the same skills and abilities. In the process of writing a student integrates linguistic, rhetorical, and cognitive skills to create a product, and there is no substitute for a writing sample for evaluating writing ability. An objective test in language skills assesses whether a student knows, understands and can apply linguistic rules and conventions of usage in a recognition mode. The significant correlations often found between performances in writing and language skills reflect the underlying competence students have acquired in the use of language. Knowledge and understanding of grammatical rules do not ensure that they would be effectively used in writing: they constitute a necessary but not sufficient condition for good writing. If the teaching of grammar is integrated with writing, as is done in the Weehawken Project, the chances are favorable that knowledge and understanding of language structure will enhance the writing ability of students in the intermediate and higher grades of school by helping them to develop improved patterns of expression.

In discussions of the merit of teaching grammar, the issue is often polarized by the perception of grammar as consisting of the memorization of formal rules and esoteric terms, while composition is viewed as the free creative expression of a person. These perceptions are unwarranted, as grammar also includes the intelligent use of words in various forms, the building of good sentences, and the effective joining of sentences. On the other hand, writing (or composition) includes the use of linguistic skills in the production of rhetorical effects such as narrating, describing and persuading. A comparison of the content of Tables 1, 2, and 3 would show the common ground that exists

between language skills and writing, as conceived in the Minnesota Language assessment. The language skills assessed are directed towards writing, while both linguistic and rhetorical elements are assessed in writing. Where does grammar end and where does writing begin? A student, who is a native speaker of English, comes to school with a working knowledge of the structure of the language, although he/she may not be conscious of the rules and their application. The teaching of grammar, when integrated with writing and speaking, would develop an awareness of the rules of the language, and possibly enhance the potential for extended use in the writing of better sentences.

An analytical approach is proposed for the assessment of writing (see Tables 1 and 2). In this approach, linguistic and rhetorical dimensions are scored separately, various elements being weighted differentially within each dimension. This approach will enable teachers to identify those linguistic and/or rhetorical elements in which students are weak, and to address them through appropriate instruction. The process can be continued, in that students could be re-tested in order to see the effects of instruction. It is the writer's opinion that a holistic approach to the assessment of writing has no diagnostic or instructional value. In several studies where performance in writing was correlated with knowledge and understanding of grammar, writing was generally evaluated by the holistic method, and this confounding of linguistic and rhetorical effects probably explains why low to moderate correlations have usually been found between writing and knowledge of grammar. It is hypothesized that a moderate to high correlation will be found in the Minnesota assessment between language skills and the linguistic dimension of writing. This is because linguistic and rhetorical elements will be evaluated separately, and one will not be allowed to overshadow the other.

In the process of developing the instruments for assessment in Writing and Language Skills, the need for a systematic and comprehensive model for written language expression became obvious. Such a model would specify the components and their relationships

to each other, and allow for appropriate weighting in the process of assessment. We do not know that such a model exists. The model described below will serve as a basis for the assessment.

A THREE DIMENSIONAL MODEL FOR EVALUATING WRITTEN LANGUAGE EXPRESSION

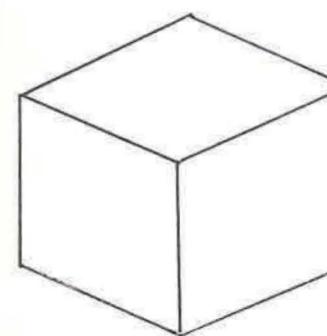
RHETORICAL ELEMENTS: Effectiveness in writing to achieve objectives: narrating, describing, explaining, summarizing, persuading, and analyzing.

LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS: Appropriate use of words and word forms, correct sentence structure, effective joining of sentences, appropriate use of idioms, correct spelling of words, correct use of punctuation, and correct use of capitalization.

CONVENTIONAL ELEMENTS: Accepted conventions for writing letters, dialogs and reports.

FIGURE 1

The rhetorical and linguistic dimensions are defined in greater detail in Tables 1 and 2. In the proposed assessment for 1984, the conventional dimension of writing will not be assessed. Attention will be focused on the rhetorical and linguistic dimensions only. Table 1 shows the weights which will be allocated to the various elements in the six modes of writing. In each mode, these weights add up to 100. Comparative weighting thus exists across the modes. In the statewide assessment, a limited sample of students in grades 6, 9 and 11 would be required to do one mode of writing (one package) and a package of tests in language skills. It would thus be possible to do correlation studies between the two dimensions of writing and language skills. After the statewide assessment, all of the tests in writing and language skills, together with their administration and scoring manuals, would be available to schools and districts for local



use. All users will have the privilege of changing or adjusting the weights to suit their own purposes, and the scoring guides for composition should be considered as presenting only some possible and workable schemes.

The instruments for writing and language skills are now going through the process of development. Last fall, English teachers were asked to review lists of key rhetorical elements in the 6 modes of writing, and to indicate whether they were addressing these in their teaching of writing. Their responses generally confirmed the outlines sent out, but some modifications were made on the basis of these responses. Table 1 shows the final list of rhetorical elements arrived at through this process. Currently (April-May, 1983) selected teachers in various parts of the state are field testing the complete set of 16 items for writing and 600 items for language skills. These items will be scored and analyzed, and appropriate modifications will be made in the instruments and manuals before their final use in the spring of 1984.

TABLE 1
WRITING: RHETORICAL ELEMENTS

MODES OF WRITING	RHETORICAL ELEMENTS	WEIGHTS
1. NARRATING (Essentially telling a story)	Coherence Shows a well developed sequence of events. Shows a controlled point of view. Contains conflict and conflict resolution. Style: Character development . . . 5 Use of dialogue 5 A sense of drama 5 Use of appropriate verbs . 5 Originality Defined qualities 5 Underdefined qualities . . . 5	20 points 20 points 15 points 15 points 20 points 10 points (TOTAL = 100)
2. DESCRIBING (Giving a verbal picture of an object or event)	Coherence Contains adequate details and facts. Contains suitable adjectives and adverbs to make the description vivid. Contains suitable nouns and verbs to make the description vivid. Shows clear spatial and temporal relationships. Style Originality	20 points 20 points 20 points 10 points 10 points 10 points
3. EXPLAINING (Providing a set of directions on how to do something)	Coherence Contains an ordered sequence from beginning to end. Contains sufficient detail to allow replicability. Shows good organization of details for clarity. Style	20 points 20 points 20 points 20 points 20 points

TABLE 1 CONTINUED

MODES OF WRITING	RHETORICAL ELEMENTS	WEIGHTS
4. SUMMARIZING (Condensing a longer piece of writing)	Retains essential ideas and facts, and leaves out non-essential details.	40 points
	Contains a restatement of ideas in writer's own words.	30 points
	Shows coherence.	30 points
5. PERSUADING (Taking a position on an issue and defending it)	Coherence	20 points
	States a position clearly.	20 points
	Contains arguments supporting position taken.	20 points
	Shows disadvantage of the opposite point of view.	20 points
	Style and originality. (Includes effective use of rhetorical devices, e.g., repetition, humor, figurative language)	20 points
6. ANALYZING (Inquiry into the nature of an issue, a situation, or character)	Coherence	20 points
	Shows cause and effect relationships.	20 points
	Identifies significant relationships.	20 points
	Takes ideas to their logical conclusions.	20 points
	Presents a non-judgemental view.	20 points

TABLE 2

II. LINGUISTIC ELEMENTS

1. Use appropriate forms of words.
2. Use words with appropriate meaning.
3. Construct simple sentences.
 - Use essential parts - noun and verb phrase.
 - Use other parts - determiners, qualifiers, prepositions, etc.
4. Distinguish among sentence, fragment, run-on.
5. Construct questions correctly.
6. Use passive transformation.
7. Join sentences effectively.
 - Construct compound sentences.
 - Construct complex sentences.
 - Join sentences for effect.
 - Expand sentences.
8. Compose paragraphs effectively.
 - Use topic sentence; thesis sentence.
 - Relate other sentences to topic.
 - Order sentences appropriately.
 - Use appropriate transitions.
 - Use techniques to develop paragraph.
9. Use idioms appropriately.
10. Spell words correctly.
11. Punctuate sentences according to rules and usage.
12. Use capital letters according to rules and usage.

TABLE 3 (CONDENSED VERSION)
LANGUAGE SKILLS (OBJECTIVE TESTS)

DOMAIN 1: LANGUAGE COMPREHENSION AND EXPRESSION

AREA 1: WORDS AND SENTENCES /

CLUSTER 1: USING CORRECT FORMS OF WORDS (4 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 2: USING WORDS WITH APPROPRIATE MEANING (2 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 3: CONSTRUCTING SIMPLE SENTENCES (6 Outcomes)

AREA 2: COMPOSITION

CLUSTER 1: JOINING SENTENCES (5 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 2: COMPOSING PARAGRAPHS (5 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 3: USING IDIOMS (2 Outcomes)

DOMAIN 2: MECHANICS OF LANGUAGE

AREA 1: SPELLING

CLUSTER 1: SPELLING BY APPLYING RULES (3 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 2: SPELLING IRREGULAR AND DERIVED WORDS (2 Outcomes)

AREA 2: PUNCTUATION AND CAPITALIZATION

CLUSTER 1: PUNCTUATION (6 Outcomes)

CLUSTER 2: CAPITALIZATION (3 Outcomes)



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Theoretical or Critical:

- a discussion that advances our understanding of the study of language arts (reading, writing, speaking, listening) or literature (or a particular work), or of the teaching of language and literature, or of the relationship of the study of language and literature to life and culture.

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MINNESOTA COUNCIL OF TEACHERS OF ENGLISH

I 'VE ALWAYS WANTED TO READ

by Jeannine Bohlmeier

April may be the cruelest month, but a January interim is the most fun for teaching. Last January I taught a course called "I've Always Wanted to Read ____." The blank was for a lifetime reading plan in great literature. Students made long lists of the great literature they'd like to read and then spent about thirty hours a week working on that reading list. Class time--the other ten or twelve hours a week for the course--involved the reading in common of some short pieces from To Read Literature edited by Donald Hall. We used the common readings as a basis for discussion of techniques for reading and analysis of literature. We also read and discussed supplementary materials from Reading Slowly by James Sire, How to Read a Book by Mortimer Adler, and Good Reading edited by J. Sherwood Weber. On some days we listened to literature, especially poetry, and heard reports from