

LORAIN COUNTY EECAP: ASSESSING THE WRITING COMPETENCY OF HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS

Speakers: Marilyn Valentino, Lorain County Community College, Ohio
Donald Palumbo, Lorain County Community College, Ohio
Charmaine Szanyi, North Ridgeville High School, Ohio
Introducer/Recorder: Jane Ann Zaharias, Cleveland State University, Ohio

Marilyn Valentino began by reporting that Ohio's Early English Composition Assessment Program (EECAP) is well into its second biennium. Initially funded in 1983 through an appropriation made by the Ohio General Assembly, this program's primary aim has been the detection and remediation of students' writing difficulties prior to college enrollment. A second objective of the program has been the promotion of stronger relationships between high school and college English instructors for the purpose of establishing a mutually agreed upon set of minimum writing competencies.

In Lorain County, Ohio, where EECAP has been carried out under the direction of faculty at Lorain County Community College, writing samples from three groups of local high school juniors—totaling over 7,000 students—have been collected, scored, and analyzed during the past three years. In addition, the writing skills of the first group of juniors to participate in the program have been reassessed to determine what, if any, growth in writing occurred between the administration of the first assessment measure in February of their junior year and their graduation from high school. All of the students who participated in Lorain County's EECAP were given forty minutes to select and respond to an essay topic similar to the following:

1. Describe an important choice or decision you had to make. Explain why you decided as you did, and discuss the effects of your choice.
2. Describe a goal you have set for yourself. Explain why you want to reach that goal, and discuss the plan you have for achieving it.

All topics employed were collaboratively chosen by a steering committee. Further, Valentino noted, students were given a copy of the criteria that would be utilized in evaluating their essays prior to the administration of the assessment measure.

Each essay was evaluated by both a college and a high school English teacher who had received training in the use of EECAP evaluation procedures. Essays were scored twice by each reader—first holistically, using a four-point scale, and then analytically. For the purpose of the analytic evaluation, the following levels of proficiency were defined: (a) highly competent, (b) reasonably competent, (c) could be raised to a level of reasonable com-

petency through some remediation, (d) could be raised to a level of reasonable competency only through extensive remediation.

Donald Palumbo discussed the results obtained from an analysis of essays written by the first group of students to have participated in Lorain County's Early English Composition Assessment Program. Palumbo noted that 35.3 percent of the students in this group were judged to be competent writers at the time of the pre-test administered during their junior year, 64.6 percent evidenced some need of remediation, and 10 percent appeared in need of extensive remediation.

As might be expected, detection of trait weaknesses on the analytic scale correlated with less favorable holistic scores. This correlation was found to be higher for traits involving macro aspects of composition (e.g., evidence of a thesis and paragraphing) than for traits associated with the more detailed aspects of writing (e.g., pronoun usage and capitalization). Furthermore, as reported by Palumbo, the correlation between observed weaknesses on the analytic scale for traits associated with the intermediate level of sentence development (e.g., awkward construction) and low holistic scores was especially high. Of the four traits in which the greatest amount of weakness was observed (i.e., paragraphing, thesis development, sentence structure, and use of specific detail), all but specific detail proved to be highly correlated with the need for remediation. Finally, a comparison of the pre- and post-test measures indicated a general deterioration in the writing ability of students who did not enroll in an English course during their senior year in high school. Most dramatic was a decline in thesis development, use of specific detail, and spelling. Conversely, enrollment in senior English resulted in an overall gain in students' ability to produce a well-written essay. Here the degree of improvement ranged from substantial (in sentence construction, apostrophe usage, and specific detail) to marginal (in thesis development, diction, and other grammatical points).

In discussing these and other findings, Palumbo noted that, although continued coursework in English does appear to have a positive impact on students' writing ability, the majority of the graduating high school seniors sampled had not attained the level of writing proficiency required of college freshmen. As a result, he recommended that more attention be given to the following skills in high school composition instruction: paragraphing, thesis formulation, use of specific detail, and construction of effective sentences that are grammatically correct.

In concluding the session, Charmaine Szanyi reported that the dissemination of the initial findings of Lorain County's EECAP within her school district provided the necessary impetus for: (a) curriculum revision, (b) the development and implementation of a writing lab in her high school, (c) a reduction in English teachers' workloads, and (d) the allocation of monies to support staff development efforts. ■