

TEACHING STRATEGIES AND RATING CRITERIA: AN INTERNATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

Speakers: *Sauli Takala*, University of Jvaskyla,
Finland

R. Elaine Degenhart, University of
Jvaskyla, Finland

Introducer/

Recorder: *Robin Murie*, University of Minnesota

This session reported on data gathered in the IEA (International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement) study of Written Composition. The IEA study, now in its eighth year, is a large-scale examination of student writing in 14 countries (Chile, England, Finland, Hungary, Indonesia, Italy, the Netherlands, Nigeria, New Zealand, Sweden, Thailand, the USA, Wales, W. Germany). An internationally developed scoring system was used to rate the writing tasks in terms of organization, content, style, tone, mechanics, and handwriting. In addition, students, teachers, and schools filled out questionnaires. These data are now being examined in a number of ways.

Sauli Takala, one of the coordinators of this study, described patterns of agreement and disagreement among raters application of a five-point rating scale (which included the criterion "off the topic"). He found that raters behaved in a uniform manner. Most of the time, two readers were within one point of being in full agreement with each other. Beyond a one-point discrepancy on the rating scale, there was a significant drop in frequency (2 points off: 5-12%; "off the topic": 2.5-7.5%, 3 points off:

2.5-5%). He then discussed where on the scale these discrepancies were occurring. Agreement was greatest at the high end of the scale and least likely in the low-middle range of scores.

Takala then discussed where the rating of "off topic" appeared. In early discussions with colleagues, it was anticipated that this rating would pair up with ratings at the high end of the scale (an essay would be so creative as to elicit either "very good" or "off topic".) In fact, just the opposite was true: "off topic." appeared at the low end of the scale with "poor." Surprisingly, it also occurred in the middle range. Takala noted that perhaps some raters were unsure of how to score such essays and so chose a middle ground. In general, similarities between raters outweighed differences, lending credibility to further comparisons.

Elaine Degenhart, another coordinator of the IEA Study of Written Communication, looked at relationships between writing instruction and student performance, using data from the teacher questionnaires, and questionnaires on the background and curriculum of the schools involved in the IEA study. The purpose of her work was to identify some patterns in instructional approaches and to determine how well the variable that show these approaches discriminate between low, middle, and high achieving classes. The four main approaches that emerged were product, process, reading-literature, and a less well defined skills-oriented approach with emphasis on product. Based on mean scores on the writing tasks, classes were divided into achievement levels: 25% high, 50% middle, 25% low. The top two instructional approaches for each country were then examined in terms of how well they discriminate for the three levels of classes. Degenhart reported on findings from four of the countries: Chile, Finland, New Zealand, and the U.S.

The top two teaching strategies found for Chile were (1) a strongly student-centered approach with a process orientation and (2) a stronger product orientation. Here it appeared that low-achieving students had more process-centered teaching, whereas the product-centered approach distinguished well for the middle group. In Finland, the top two teaching strategies were (1) a reading-literature approach and (2) a process approach. The process approach did not distinguish between the top and bottom groups; the reading-literature approach was positive for low-achieving students. In New Zealand, the top two were (1) a teacher centered reading/literature approach and (2) a less clearly defined approach leaning toward process. Both discriminated between all three levels. In the United States, the top two approaches were (1) a structured reading/literature approach and (2) a strong student-centered product orientation. The product orientation was high for the low-level students.

Questions centered around possible interpretations of

these findings. Degenhart was careful not to draw premature conclusions or make quick generalizations. From the discussion it became clear that a greater understanding of the background situation in each country would help with the interpretation of why classes were receiving a particular type of writing instruction.