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THE EFFECT OF TEACHING SENTENCE PATTERNS ON THE WRITTEN SENTENCE STRUCTURES OF GRADE TWO CHILDREN

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THE EFFECT OF TEACHING SENTENCE PATTERNS ON THE WRITTEN SENTENCE STRUCTURES OF GRADE TWO CHILDREN

BY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if the ratio of capitalized and punctuated modified T-units to the total number of modified T-units (capitalized, punctuated, or otherwise), found in the narrations of grade two students, would differ between an experimental and control group as a result of teaching specific punctuated and capitalized noun-verb sentence patterns.

Two matched groups of nineteen students were formed, based on the analysis of modified T-units in the pre-experimental narrative writings of an open area classroom. The experimental group was taught combinations of the noun-verb pattern for six weeks. At the end of that time the narrative writings of the two groups were compared.

The results, analysed by means of a sign test, led to the conclusion that the teaching of punctuated and capitalized noun-verb sentence patterns did not seem to have a significant effect on children's narrative writings.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT ii

LIST OF TABLES v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vii

CHAPTER

I. INTRODUCTION 1

Significance of the Study 2
Statement of the Problem 3
Statement of the Hypothesis 3
Statement of Theoretical Framework 3
Limitations of the Study 5
Delimitations of the Study 7
Definition of Terms 9

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND RESEARCH 12

Introduction 12
Sentence Patterns 12
Oral and Written Language 14
Teaching Grammar 16
Oral Competency 18
Pattern Frequency 19
Modes of Writing 21
Common Syntactic Errors 22
Value of Formal Grammar 24
Sentence Combining 25
Syntactic Measurement 27
Concluding Statement 30

III. RESEARCH PROCEDURES 31

Introduction 31
Statement of the Hypothesis 31
Sources for Data 32
Limitations of the Sample 34
Collecting the Data 34
Analysis of the Data 36
Treatment of the Data 37
The Sign Test 38

METHOD 41

Time and Setting 41
Teaching Procedure 42
Learning Stages 42
Lesson Plan 43
Lesson Content 43

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION 45

Introduction 45
Sample 45
Content 46
Method 46
Rationale 47
Data 47
Sign Test 48
Results 49
Other Qualitative Data 51
Summary 65

V. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS 66

Introduction 66
Limitations of the Study 67
Discussion of Findings 70
Implications and Further Considerations 72
Summary and Conclusions 78

APPENDICES 81

Appendix A 82
Appendix B 84
Appendix C 98
Appendix D 100
Appendix E 114

BIBLIOGRAPHY 116

LIST OF TABLES

3.01 Matched T-unit ratio scores of pre-test written samples of both experimental and control groups ... 39

3.02 Post experiment T-unit ratio scores for each of the matched pairs 40

3.03 Comparison of pre- and post-test T-unit ratio scores of both the control and experimental groups 41

4.01 Post-experiment T-unit ratio scores and accompanying sign test values for each of the matched pairs 50

4.02 Pre-test raw scores of the ratio of T_1's to the combined numbers of T_1's and T_2's 52

4.03 Post-test raw scores of the ratio of T_1's to the combined numbers of T_1's and T_2's 52

4.04 Relationship of reading group placement of experimental students to their performance on T-unit ratio scores 54

4.05 Relationship of reading group placement of control students to their performance on T-unit ratio scores 55

4.06 Relationship of reading group placement to plus or minus value of T-unit ratio scores 56

4.07 Number of T_1's found in experimental group's pre- and post-tests 57

4.08 Number of T_1's found in control group's pre- and post-tests 58

4.09 Number of T_2's found in the experimental group's pre- and post-tests 59

4.10 Number of T_2's found in the control group's pre- and post-tests 60

4.11 Mean number of T_1's and T_2's per student 61

4.12 Data showing whether students' T_1 and T_2 units have increased or decreased during the experimental period 61

4.13 Percent of T_1's for both the groups' number of T's before and after the experiment 62

4.14 Comparison of pre- and post-test T-unit ratio scores for the experimental group based on the sex of the student 63

4.15 Comparison of pre- and post-test T-unit ratio scores for the control group based on the sex of the student 64

4.16 Total number of fragmented sentences found in pre- and post-test samples of experimental and control groups 64

4.17 Total number of other sentence patterns found in pre- and post-test writing samples of both experimental and control groups 65

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

It has been well documented that school age children are competent in the use of oral language. "By the age of thirty-six months some children are so advanced in the construction process as to produce all of the major varieties of English sentences up to a length of ten or eleven words."[1]

However, these same school age children have not been shown to be as proficient as writers of the language. Although they are orally competent upon arrival at school, most must be taught how to express the English language in written form. It is the task of the school to help the child transfer his thoughts from the oral sphere to the written form. The majority of children require instruction in this task. In general, children need help in learning how to write sentences and this study explored one way of trying to facilitate the task by utilizing a sentence pattern which has been found to be in a high frequency paradigm in both the

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[1]Roger Brown and Ursula Bellugi, "Three Processes in the Child's Acquisition of Syntax," in Language and Learning: Investigations and Interpretations, ed. Dolores Burton (Cambridge: Harvard Educational Review, 1972), p.39.

oral and written syntactical patterns of grade two children.[2]

Significance of the Study

A great majority of primary children have been shown to have problems writing complete capitalized and punctuated sentences, as evidenced by Harris[3], Hunt[4] and Mazur[5]. The "Back to basics" movement which has surfaced in educational circles seems to be a reflection of a felt need that there must be a balance between viewing a discipline as art (a creative act) and as skill (mechanics and knowledge).

Because of the sentence-writing problem mentioned above, this study attempted to experiment with a method of teaching a specific capitalized and punctuated sentence pattern. Other studies, such as those by Hunt[6] and Loban[7], have experimented with maturity of sentence constructs; but

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[2]Roy C. O'Donnell, William J. Griffin and Raymond C. Norris, Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p.74.

[3]Richard Braddock, Richard Lloyd-Jones and Lowell Schoer, Research in Written Composition (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p.37.

[4]Kellogg W. Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels, (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1965), p.52.

[5]Chet Mazur, Young Writer's Error Tendency (-:ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 134 987, 1976).

[6]Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels.

[7]Walter Loban, Language Development: Kindergarten Through Grade Twelve, (Urbana: National Council of Teachers of English, 1976.

none have dealt with the surface structure correctness of sentences nor with narrative writing. It is these two features that made the present study different from others.

Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to ascertain if the teaching and practicing of sentence building, by means of teaching specific capitalized and punctuated noun-verb sentence patterns, would result in the increase of these sentence patterns in the written narrative compositions of a sample of second grade children.

Statement of the Hypothesis

The study was designed to answer the following question:

Will the ratio of the capitalized and punctuated modified T-units[8] to the total number of modified T-units (including those lacking capitalization or punctuation), found in the narrative writings of grade two students, differ significantly between the control and experimental groups as a result of teaching specific punctuated and capitalized sentence patterns?

Statement of Theoretical Framework

The study was based on four main premises. The first was that the noun-verb sentence patters used for instructional purposes would account for much of children's

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[8]Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels, p.21.

writing. Everttts[9] found that the most frequently used patterns in written syntax at all grade levels from grades two to six were the subject-verb-object pattern and the subject-verb pattern. O'Donnell[10], in a study of both oral and written syntax of children from grades kindergarten to seven, found that most of the main clauses in language production conform to the subject-verb to subject-verb-object patterns. In fact, these two patterns accounted for approximately eighty percent of all T-units of the three younger groups of children.

The second premise was that two of the most common errors found in children's writing (grades one through eight) were the omission of initial capital letters and the omission of terminal punctuation in their sentences.[11]

The third premise held that simple sentences are most common in narration. This premise was based on a study done with third grade children.[12] Therefore, narrative writing was the preferred mode of writing used for examining the use of simple sentence structures.

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[9]Eldonna Everttts, The Nebraska Study of the Syntax of Children's Writing (-:ERIC Document Reproduction Service, ED 013 814, 1967), p.40.

[10]Roy C. O'Donnell, William J. Griffin and Raymond C. Norris, Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1967), p.74.

[11]Chet Mazur, Young Writers' Error Tendency.

[12]Louis V. Johnson, "Children's Writing in Three Forms of Composition," Elementary English 44 (March 1967), p.267.

The fourth premise was the belief that the teaching of, and practice in using, particular sentence patterns would result in a greater production of these patterns in the children's narrative writings. This assumption was based on the studies done in sentence combining. Miller and Ney's study[13] with grade four students resulted in a greater use of the structures practiced in their writing. Mellon[14] and O'Hare[15] showed how the procedures practiced by their students were utilized in their written sentences. It was hoped that the patterns taught in the present study could be meaningfully tabulated by the means of a modified T-unit[16] ratio count.

Limitations of the Study

The study was limited to a very small sample (N=38) of grade two students, chosen from a second grade open area classroom. The sessions were short (twenty minutes) and

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[13]Barbara D. Miller and James W. Ney, "The Effect of Systematic Oral Exercises on the Writings of Fourth-Grade Students," Research in the Teaching of English 2 (Spring 1969).

[14]John C. Mellon, Transformational Sentence-Combining: A Method for Enhancing the Development of Syntactic Fluency in English Composition, (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1969).

[15]Frank O'Hare, Sentence Combining: Improving Student Writing Without Formal Grammar Instruction, (Champaign: National Council of Teachers of English, 1973).

[16]Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels, p.21.

lasted for a minimal period of time (six weeks). The results, therefore, were able only to suggest possible directions of exploration in the teaching of correctly punctuated and capitalized sentence structures.

No measurement of ability or achievement level was taken in the belief that the average classroom contains a wide variety of levels of achievement. If a method was to be viable, the author felt it should be applicable to the "average class".

Two matched groups were formed by pre-testing their narrative writings and analysing them for ratios of modified T-units. The experiment was also limited to a certain type of writing, the narrative mode. This restriction was placed on the experiment because narrative writings of primary aged children have been shown to contain the greatest number of simple sentences when compared to descriptive and expository writings.[17] Most other related experiments in syntax were not controlled for a specific mode of writing, or were expository.

The sentence pattern involved was the simple noun-verb pattern and its expansions. It was chosen first of all because Paul Roberts begins his programmes with this pattern.[18] Secondly, it is a pattern shown to be frequently

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[17]Johnson, "Children's Writing in Three Forms of Compositions", Elementary English, p.267.

[18]Paul Roberts, Understanding English, (New York: Harper and Row, Publishers, 1958), p.182.

used by young children.[19] As a result of this, for the purposes of evaluation, the structures involved were limited to a very definite pattern, as defined by the study.

The scope of the study did not allow for the evaluation of rhetorical effectiveness. As pointed out by Smith, ". . .there is a part of language that can neither be directly observed nor measured, and that is meaning. In contrast to surface structure, the meaning of language . . . can be referred to as deep structure."[20] The design of the study limited measurement to the physical surface structures of the patterns. The study was concerned with the correctness of syntax and mechanics, as one of the many steps in the composition process, as opposed to syntactical maturity and meaning.

Delimitations of the Study

The experiment was designed within the bounds of certain delimitations. First, due to timetabling of the classroom involved, the number of lessons and length of lessons was kept short. Second, a heterogeneous open area classroom was chosen to facilitate the choosing of two comparable groups. Third, only one sentence pattern, the noun-verb (subject-predicate) paradigm, was utilized in the study, necessitating an age group which most commonly used such a

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[19] O'Donnel, Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis, p.74.

[20] Frank Smith, Understanding Reading, 2nd ed. (U.S.A." Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), p.71.

pattern in its writings. The primary area provided an appropriate age level. This particular pattern was chosen because it had been shown to account for much of young children's writing.[21] Pilot work on the study also substantiated such a claim.

To facilitate the optimal use of the above sentence pattern a written mode which would encourage usage of the noun-verb pattern was employed. Lois Johnson's study of third grade children[22] suggested that narration would be a suitable mode. Therefore, narration was the mode of writing utilized by the children in the experiment.

A fifth delimitation was that variables such as I.Q., reading ability, sex and socioeconomic status were not controlled. The grouping of the sample was based solely on scores derived from pre-test written samples.

Sixth, a very simple analysis of the data, a sign test, was applied, which indicated if a significant difference existed between the control and experimental groups.

Because this study was considered as being only a first step in learning to write correctly written sentence structures complete with capitalization and punctuation, two more delimitations were applied. One was concerned with the act of composing. The author recognized that sentences

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[21] O'Donnell, Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis, p.74.

[22] Johnson, "Children's Writing in Three Forms of Composition", p.267.

are not composed in a vacuum. However, for purposes of the study, evaluation had to be confined to the performance of the children in producing a mechanically correct structure. The rhetorical aspect and processes involved in composing were ignored. According to Roulet, "For the same reason you cannot hope to extract an atom from a piece of wood by cutting it into ever smaller pieces."[23] so you cannot get deep structures by ever analysing a surface structure entity. Therefore, the study was limited to an analysis of surface structure.

Definition of Terms

1. Modified T-units. The term T-unit or "minimal terminable unit" was used by Hunt as an index of the level of maturity in children's writing. He used it to refer to sentence-type units, having only one main clause, which ". . . would be minimal as to length, and each would be grammatically capable of being terminated with a capital letter and a period"[24] For purposes of the following study, the term T-unit, as defined by Hunt, has been limited to exclude all but those units having a noun-verb pattern, in a subject-predicate order. It may or may not have a subordinate clause attached to it. Because of these restrictions, the T-units have been referred to as modified T-units.

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[23]Eddy Roulet, Linguistic Theory, Linguistic Description and Language Teaching, Trans. C.N. Candlin (London: Longman Group Ltd., 1975, p.41.

[24]Hunt, Grammatical Structures Written at Three Grade Levels, p.21.

As this is one of the more common patterns used at this age level, the modified T-unit should account for a large majority of the children's written sentences. The studies of Everttts[25] and O'Donnell[26] provided reason to believe that this would be true.

2. T_1 unit. For the purposes of this study, this term referred to modified T-units which were complete with initial capitalization and end punctuation.

3. T_2 unit. This term referred to modified T-units which were either not capitalized, not punctuated with end punctuation, or were missing both capitalization and punctuation.

4. T-unit ratio scores. This term referred to the ratio of capitalized and punctuated modified T-units (T_1) to the total of all the modified T-units, whether capitalized and punctuated, or otherwise ($T_1 + T_2$).

$$\frac{T_1}{T_1 + T_2} = \text{T-unit ratio scores}$$

5. Sentence pattern. This referred to a modified T-unit pattern, containing at least a noun and verb, in a subject-predicate order.

6. Fragments. This referred to incomplete sentences, with either the noun or verb left out.

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[25]Everttts, The Nebraska Study of the Syntax of Children's Writing, p.40.

[26]O'Donnell, Syntax of Kindergarten and Elementary School Children: A Transformational Analysis, p.74.

7. Other sentence patterns. This term was used to refer to the other types of sentence structures in the children's written samples, such as exclamations and questions.

8. Teaching. In the context of this study this term referred to the whole method used in teaching the experimental group. It included both oral and written practice on the part of the students, plus some direct teaching on the part of the instructor.