

*Alan C. Purves and R. Elaine Degenhart, State
University of New York, Albany*

*Elena Chacon, University of Chile, Santiago,
Chile*

*Horst Lofgren, Lund University of Malmo,
Sweden*

The session began with a definition of a rhetorical community as a group that shares assumptions about what information texts should contain, how texts should be organized, and how texts should be presented in terms of tone and style. Such communities are often coterminous with academic disciplines or businesses. At times, however, they share broader cultural constituencies. The International Education Association (IEA) Written Composition Study sought to determine what were the characteristics of national or subnational communities by examining the shared assumptions of teachers and of students as to what constituted good writing, particularly good school writing. This was done through questionnaires and through a content and stylistic analysis of actual writing samples.

As a background for understanding these assumptions, we described the classroom in terms of its environment for literacy. Using data from Chile, Finland, Hungary, New Zealand, and the United States, we showed that most students do not spend much time reading for pleasure (except in Finland) but that in all countries most families have at least one newspaper in the home. School libraries were universally available in these countries and most (except Chile and New Zealand) reported having a school newspaper. Only in Finland was there a reported school policy of discouraging the use of multiple choice exams rather than essay exams. In Hungary and Finland, students tended to rate themselves as poor writers although this perception was not supported by their scores on these tasks. To determine if achievement in writing is related to the type of task assigned, a correlation of

(continued on page 28)

achievement on two of the tasks required by each student was taken. It showed that in New Zealand and in the United States (and to a certain extent in Hungary) the students write equally well (or equally badly) without regard to the task. In Chile and Finland achievement tends to be somewhat task related.

Chile entered the IEA Study of Written Composition in order to assess the existing curriculum and practice in writing in the Chilean school system against an international background. As a result of a series of reforms over a period of more than 25 years, education has become more accessible to a higher level for the majority of the population, but with resulting problems of overcrowded classrooms and teacher shortages. Over a period of time there was a perception of lowered student achievement, especially in the critical areas of reading and writing. At the same time, the level of students' writing ability was perceived as being not only an educational but a national concern. The availability of the verified valid evaluation and diagnostic instruments of the IEA international study was seen as an important fulcrum for the planning of further reforms. An international confrontation of results was thought to provide a more general rationale, not country or language specific, but pertinent to a moment or a historic-universal consequence in improving the quality of written communication teaching at primary and secondary school levels. Some results of the Chilean data were discussed.

In an attempt to explain differences between pupils' achievement in free writing in Sweden, the IEA used a Partial Least Squares program to test a theoretic causal model of factors of importance to pupils' proficiency in writing. The background data included, among other things, the pupils' sociocultural background, the teachers' experience and the classroom practices in writing instruction. They used pupils' marks on the argumentative composition to represent the standard of their achievement in writing. The theoretic model was verified showing the strongest correlation between background variables and writing achievement to be the sex of the student, especially as it related to the pupils' attitude toward freewriting. However, no relationships could be found between teaching in school (as represented by the variables in this study) and pupils' achievement.