DETERMINING THE DIFFICULTY OF ESSAY EXAMINATIONS AND WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Carol Peterson Haviland and Milton Clark,
California State University, San Bernardino

The three speakers described research on difficulty of essay examination questions and writing assignments. Noting that research on essay examination questions has largely ignored what student writers themselves might be able to reveal about the difficulty of essay questions posed, we reported on a two-year study in which students evaluated questions used on midterm and final examinations. We gathered data at the end of several examination writing sessions as well as in class sessions in which students responded to collections of typical questions. We received varied and revealing responses. For example, many ESL students reported that when given a choice of two questions, the topics almost were inconsequential; they elected the question that required the fewest departures from present tense verbs. Other students reminded instructors of some learning theory basics, noting that combining a difficult task (writing) with a negative personal experience was depressing, not enabling. They preferred questions that did not ask them to write about failures, bad decisions, or regrettable incidents. Students also noted preferences about other elements such as number of questions, use of prayer or quotations, and structure of prompts.

We concluded by cautioning that rather than rushing to follow all of students' directives, question writers must mesh their suggestions with testing objectives.

A LARGE-SCALE ASSESSMENT MODEL THAT WORKS: THE ALBERTA EXPERIENCE

Elana Scraba, Alberta Ministry of Education

The presentation outlined the principles used in Alberta for developing written response tests and examinations in English and French Language Arts and Social Studies (Grades 3, 6, 9, 12). The discussion focused on principles and procedures that are used for scoring the written work of large numbers of students. This included a description of procedures for setting standards, training markers, ensuring consistent and reliable scoring.

We reviewed the model used for framing scoring descriptors and such long-standing issues as evaluating personal responses and the effects of exam situations on students' work. The presentation concluded with a discussion of what we have learned about students' writing and what our observation suggest for classroom and for research.

ELEMENTARY STUDENTS' FIRST-LANGUAGE NARRATIVE WRITING: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

Lynn Senecal, Richelleu Valley School Commission

The presentation described preliminary findings of a longitudinal study of Canadian English-stream and French-immersion students' narrative writing with emphasis on the results of semantic and syntactic analyses of first-draft and revised texts at grade 3, 4, and 5 levels. I used sample texts drawn from the assessment files of high, average, and low achieving students to illustrate grade-by-program developmental trends, and described techniques for narrative writing assessment and instructional implications of the study's findings.

The primary objectives of the longitudinal study were: description (i.e., the delineation of developmental trends in English-stream and French-immersion students' narrative writing), and comparisons (i.e., establishment of the presence/absence of significant differences among grade, achievement, and program subgroups). These objectives were introduced through reference to the literature regarding English-stream/French-immersion writing development, and examination of a variety of student texts at the grade 1 to 6 levels. We discussed the development of criterion-based guidelines for teacher evaluation of narratives, as well as the design of more detailed semantic analyses (e.g., procedural frame analyses): we offered analyzed texts to illustrate use of these techniques. Finally, we presented preliminary findings regarding English-stream and French-immersion
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Carol Peterson Haviland and Milton Clark
California State University, San Bernardino

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Lynn Senecal, Richelieu Valley School Commission

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