
IDENTIFYING THE WRITING STRATEGIES USED BY BLACK STUDENTS IN NAEP AND NJHSPT

Speaker: Miriam Chaplin, NAEP Visiting Scholar,
Educational Testing Service

Introducer/Recorder: Judith Angona, Ocean County
College, N.J.

In this workshop, Miriam Chaplin described the construction and application of a rubric for analysis of writing strategies used by black students taking the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) and the New Jersey High School Proficiency Test (NJHSPT). The project was designed to provide Chaplin with sufficient data to design a writing curriculum geared specifically to black junior high school students.

Chaplin began by explaining that black students, despite a small surge in test scores during the early 1970's, have scored consistently lower than their white counterparts on the NAEP. Since black students generally demonstrate strong oral language skills, Chaplin concluded that they need a specifically designed writing curriculum that teaches them to translate these oral skills into productive strategies for academic writing. She posed three questions as she began her study: (1) Are there characteristics in black students' writing that impede successful communication? (2) Are there identifiable characteristics in black students' writing that reflect a particular learning style or cognitive approach to verbal problem solving? (3) Can weaknesses in black students' writing be transferred into strengths through the process of classroom instruction?

Three readers, in addition to Chaplin, participated in the first round of essay readings. All were black, held advanced degrees, had experience working with black students, and were conducting research projects of their own in writing. Sample essays were randomly chosen from sets of NAEP and NJHSPT papers (1983-84). Although the NAEP samples listed students' race, the readers were not permitted to see this information. Instead, they were asked to classify writers as "black" or "white" by observing stylistic features of the essays. Then they were asked to make written observations about what they perceived to be racially significant variations in student writing strategies. For the NJHSPT sample essays, all written by black students, the readers were asked only to record all probable racially significant variations in writing style.

Combining their written observations, the readers next developed a rubric designed to demonstrate the varying use of strategies by black and white writers. Broad categories, which included "Rhetorical Devices," "Organization," "Task Perception," and "Cultural Influence," were formulated and then subdivided into "Connectives," "Descriptive Language," "Ellipses," "Repetition," "Sentence Sense," "Tense Markers," "Conversational Tone," "Unity," "Focus," "Cultural Vocabulary," and "Black Vernacular English." The rubric was then used to chart a rereading of the essays, and the resulting chart of responses demonstrated that, in general, black writers do not use successful writing strategies as frequently or as effectively as their white

counterparts. Of interest, however, is the fact that the gap between black and white students narrowed on the NJHSPT, probably because this test, a prerequisite for high school graduation, motivated students to perform well and because the topic called for a narrative essay--an accessible format.

At this point in the study, Chaplin conducted a reliability study of the consistency of the reader responses, with resulting positive correlations of between 0.6 and 0.8. After the rubric had been tested in the preliminary reading, Chaplin used it in a solitary reading of several hundred additional essays by both black and white students. Using the rubric, she was able to identify race correctly in a substantial percentage of cases--ranging from 65% to 85%, depending on the test and writing mode.

According to Chaplin, there are several important implications of this study for curriculum development. To begin with, black writers need to learn logical reasoning skills (especially higher-level thinking patterns). They need to build upon their strong oral skills by learning to speak logically and then transferring this strategy to written work. Black students need to be taught to place the conversational mode in its proper context and not to confuse it with the appropriate strategies for formal written assignments. These goals can best be achieved in a structured classroom environment; however, there should not be so much structure that students are intimidated about participating and giving of themselves. Furthermore, an effective writing curriculum will minimize the "drill approach," since students generally have been exposed to a great deal of this type of instruction already, with little effect on writing proficiency.

Chaplin concluded by stating that although all writers need to be taught similar writing strategies, black writers may require specific emphasis and instructional techniques. This study will provide valuable information to help schools offer black students the writing instruction they need.◊