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The Report of An Experimental Study Designed to Improve English Usage

By William H. M. Bowens, Ella W. Fisher,
Thelma M. Harmond, Walter Larkins
and R. Grann Lloyd

During the Winter Quarter of the 1955-56 school year, five members of the Savannah State College faculty conducted a concentrated experiment, designed to improve the English usage of students enrolled in their classes. The departments or areas represented by the experimental group were Economics, Education, Languages and Literature, and Physical Education. The two basic assumptions of the study were that: (1) the experiment was diffused widely enough to reveal the typical English usage errors committed by students at Savannah State College, and (2) the extent to which, if any, concentrated effort by teachers might improve English usage by students at the college.

The major purposes of the experiment were:

- 1) To determine the major errors in English usage—oral and written—committed by students enrolled in the experimenters' classes.
- 2) To concentrate on the improvement of English by students in the classes involved, with special emphasis on the correction and/or elimination of the basic errors discovered in their oral and written contributions.
- 3) To observe and record the results, if any, of the foregoing procedures.

Each instructor in the experimental group was asked to make a critical study of three written specimens of each class' work, or nine different sets of papers—since the normal load at Savannah State College is generally three five hour courses. The data compiled from the written specimens of students' work are as follows:

The total number of papers studied critically were 1,302 and contained a total of 11,818 English usage errors. Hence, the average number of errors per paper was 11.5. In the order of decreasing frequency these errors were distributed as follows: misspelled words, lack of subject-verb agreement, faulty sentence structure, misuse of possessives, misuse of single words, improper tense, and faulty end punctuation.

The most pronounced misuse of the English language by the students involved in this experiment was the mis-

spelling of words. This seems particularly unfortunate since spelling is an integral part of every writing activity which an individual undertakes. Furthermore, by the time the individual reaches college he should have command of a spelling vocabulary of several thousand of the most commonly used words in our language, plus many special and/or technical words. As the student attacks the more advanced content fields he has many more needs for writing, and correct spelling is of great importance. Hence, the teachers engaged in this experiment not only called attention to the misspelled words discovered in their students' writings and how to correct them, but sought to impress upon their students the importance of:

1. The ability to automatically spell correctly those basic words which will be used in writing, both as a student and as a member of society.
2. The ability to automatically spell correctly such special or technical words as recur frequently in classroom writing and other phases of one's experience.
3. The desire to spell correctly in order that one's written communications will be acceptable and intelligible to those reading them.

The second most frequent group of errors in English usage revealed by an examination of the writings of the students involved was the lack of subject and verb agreement. This is not surprising, since it is generally conceded that approximately 50 per cent of the grammatical errors made by students are mistakes in the use of the verb. Closely associated with this group of English usage errors was the plethora of instances of mis-usage of inflected forms of verbs. Hence, the teachers involved in this experiment not only called their students' attention to the many instances of lack of subject-verb agreement and the mis-usage of inflected forms of verbs and how to correct them, but sought to impress upon their students the importance of:

- (1) A thorough knowledge of the eight parts of speech and their inflections, including
 - (a) Correct use of troublesome verbs
 - (b) Agreement of verb and subject
- (2) The ability to recognize the verb or verb phrase as an essential part of every sentence.

Faulty sentence structure was the third most common error discovered in the writings of the students involved in the experiment. The discovery of two major lacks in sentence sense emphasize sharply the need for college-wide improvement of English usage. They were:

- (1) The large number of run-on sentences—a large

number of the sentences in the papers submitted by the students involved ended with no punctuation mark, or a comma. A lesser number, but still a formidable group, of sentences were begun with small letters.

(2) The large number of sentence fragments—in a large number of instances a period, and in a few instances a question mark, was placed after a group of words that did not express a complete thought.

Many of the students' sentences were awkward because of the use of the wrong grammatical element. Others were ambiguous and without variety. Hence, the teachers participating in the experiment not only called attention to faulty sentence structure and how such faults could be corrected, but sought to impress upon their students that:

- (1) Failure to use periods, question marks, exclamation points, and capital letters properly reveals one's inability to recognize a sentence, and is a major fault.
- (2) A sentence is a group of words expressing a complete thought; and a reliable way to test whether one has written a sentence is to locate the subject and the verb of the principal clause.
- (3) Sentences should be clear in order to convey one's exact thoughts to readers or hearers. Otherwise, they may be interpreted in various ways.

There were numerous instances of confusion of single words—accept-except; affect-effect; consul-council-counsel; beside-besides; and frequent misuse of possessives. Hence, the experimenting teachers not only called attention to these errors and how to correct them, but sought to impress upon their students that:

- (1) The ability to avoid confusion of single words, especially words of similar sound or spelling, will not only insure correctness but safeguard against much embarrassment.
- (2) Possession should not generally be attributed to inanimate objects.
- (3) Best usage requires that a noun or pronoun linked with a gerund should preferably be in the possessive case.

Provisions were made in the experiment for recording the observation of the teachers involved, regarding such factors as class attitude, progress, typicalness of findings, and so forth. The data are as follows:

1. In the overwhelming majority of the classes involved in the experiment, the initial attitude of the students

was either hostile or indifferent. In only a few classes was initial interest in the experiment reportedly observed among the students. However, the reports show that the students' attitude toward the project improved as the experiment proceeded. It appears that as the students became aware that it is not feasible to isolate satisfactory English usage from any part of one's social experience their attitudes improved, their interest increased, and their enthusiasm for the project heightened.

2. The experiment served to awaken in students a keener awareness and appreciation of correct English usage. As their awareness of what constitutes satisfactory English usage and its importance increased, their sensitivity toward it increased. Indeed, the data indicates that such sensitivity increased even among those students incapable of correcting their errors.

3. The data indicate that without exception, as the experiment proceeded the number and frequency of errors decreased. This was probably due to such factors as an improved and steadily improving attitude on the part of students, increased sensitivity relative to satisfactory English usage, effective teaching, and painstaking and deliberate efforts to improve themselves by students.

4. Practically all of the reports indicate that the findings are typical of the group. However, one teacher reports that, in one of the classes involved, "glaring errors were made eventually only by two very limited students."

The findings of this study seem to indicate that:

(1) It is possible to improve students' English usage if teachers are painstaking, intelligent, and unrelenting in their efforts.

(2) As students' sensitivity to clear, correct English increases their efforts to improve their use of English increase.

(3) Students need the help of all their teachers in their efforts to develop: (a) the ability to write clear, correct English; (b) the ability to recognize common errors in speech and writing and to correct them intelligently; and (c) the ability to speak before a group clearly, correctly, and with some degree of ease and assurance.*

*One phase of the experiment, to be reported later, was concerned with improving the oral English usage of students.