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Spontaneous Literacy: A Portrait of First Year Faculty of Education Students at Two Canadian Universities

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Objectives of the Research (carried out and completed in 2005/2006)

1. To survey the current spontaneous literacy skills (spelling; grammar/usage; and writing abilities) of all first year faculty of education students at two Canadian universities.
2. To identify patterns of strengths and weaknesses in the areas tested.
3. To inform admissions requirements and procedures.

Perspectives

Teaching is the most publicly scrutinized of professions and it remains an unwavering expectation of the education community, and the general public, that teachers' conventional use of spoken and written language be exemplary and provides accurate modeling for the pupils in their charge.

This research project examined the presenting literacy skills of 230 first year education students in the areas of spelling (25 common words dictated in context); grammar/usage (10 multiple choice items); and a timed written submission on a specified prompt.

Based on the tenets of personal, practical knowledge (Clandinin and Connelly); reflective practice (Schön); and metacognition, the test instruments developed were based on the researcher's observations over the past 10 years of university teaching and supervisory practice.

Methods, techniques

All first year education students at two Canadian universities were invited to participate in the study. A scripted introduction was read aloud and participants were assured of their anonymity. A cover sheet requested non-identifying information: gender; program route (elementary, middle school; secondary); and previous university degrees (if any). The completed test packages were handed in to a volunteer student and placed immediately in sealed envelopes. If students elected not

to participate, they were asked to hand in their test package along with the participants at the end of the 20 minute test session.

The spontaneous literacy survey consisted of 3 segments:

1. a 25 word spelling test with words dictated in context
2. a 10 item grammar/usage multiple choice test
3. a timed 10 minute written submission on a specified prompt

Faculty colleagues at each of the universities administered the survey.

Data sources

Data sources included:

spelling scores: number of correctly spelled words out of 25

grammar/usage: number of correct responses out of 10

written submission: scored out of 10, with scoring based on content and mechanical errors

Scores were tabulated quantitatively for each of the three areas. Mean, median and mode were established based on overall scores; university; gender; program route; and previous degrees.

Qualitative analysis included an examination of the types of errors; patterns of errors; and evidence of self-corrections.

Results, conclusions

Wide variations in spontaneous literacy competencies were evident amongst the participants. Results speak to possible implications for: the need for an explicit understanding of the literacy responsibilities/demands/expectations of a teaching career; metacognition of one's literacy strengths and weaknesses; admissions screening; and awareness of the nuances of language register.

The spelling survey provided the most concrete results and the widest range of scores. Spelling scores ranged from 3/25 to 25/25.

An analysis was performed on each of the 25 words, with the following examples to illustrate:

The word **privilege** (It is a **privilege** to teach this class) was incorrectly spelled by 64% and 81% (each faculty scored separately) of the participants, with 22 spelling variations.

Similarly, **cello** was incorrectly spelled by 20% and 46% of the participants.

The most obvious violation of a common spelling rule (i before e) was the word **thief**, misspelled by 31% of the participants.

The grammar usage survey consisted of a limited number of items and was not comprehensive in scope. Test items were reflective of the most obvious and common errors noted in the researcher's professional experience. Items focused on the correct contextual use of me and I; plural possessive case; contractions; and homonyms.

Grammar usage scores ranged from 6/10 to 10/10.

The following example is used to illustrate:

Choose the correct statement:

a) Please join Paula and me for supper.

b) Please join Paula and I for supper.

64% of the participants answered incorrectly.

Writing prompt: **School uniforms should be required for all public school students.**

The writing survey scores ranged from 3/10 to 10/10. The content of the written submissions attested to the fact that almost all participants expressed their views in a comprehensive manner and took the task seriously. Spelling and usage violations were recorded and analyzed for patterns.

The written submission task proved to be a less clear cut instrument; the results primarily reflected spelling errors; variations in the lengths a submissions skewed results; instructions to participants were too open-ended; and unexpected language register anomalies proved difficult to score.

Of particular note is the issue of language register with the following examples to illustrate: "I say that's bull..." and "...that would be really shitty..."

Educational importance of the study

This research study speaks directly to the responsibilities of future teachers and their teaching. The ability to provide modeling in the conventional use of standard written and spoken English is critical. A need for heightened awareness of the teacher's responsibility in all spoken and written communications within the classroom would appear to be an undeniable implication of this research study.