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Is Remediation an Articulation Issue?

Recent recommendations and proposals[1] at various levels of education throughout the state and country have been based on the assumption that students should be "prepared" before entering a particular segment of the educational system, that no level should provide remediation. These proposals claim that students are underprepared largely because their previous education did not prepare them; in other words, their teachers failed to give them the skills and knowledge necessary for education at the next level. Inherent in all these arguments is the belief that if we could just articulate what outcomes students need to enter each level, then we could hold educators (and their students) accountable through assessment. Those that do not measure up will not proceed. However, if we examine the assumptions about learners and the teaching/learning dialectic on which these proposals are based, we come to a different conclusion. The cause is not in the victims (students and teachers), but in the very process of acquiring academic literacy within the educational infrastructure. This paper will examine the assumptions underlying current proposals to reduce or eliminate remedial education and the directions for future articulation. I will confine the discussion to the teaching of reading and writing and mostly to articulation between K–12 and the California State University (CSU) and Community Colleges and the CSU since that is my own area of greatest knowledge. However, much of the argument is applicable to other segments and other fields (such as mathematics), and articulation between other segments of the educational system.

Assumptions Underlying Remediation

Myth 1: Remedial Needs Are New

If we examine remedial education in the United States, we find that it has a long history. In the early 19th century and before, U.S. university curricula focused on language, usually the classics. By the late 19th century,

science, engineering and business were being incorporated into the undergraduate curriculum. At the same time, students entering the universities came from a wider range of high schools and possessed less intimate knowledge of the texts that were then considered necessary for an educated American. In other words, the universities considered the students unprepared for the reading and writing expected for university entrance. University educators responded by blaming the high schools:

> Attention has been directed of late to the lamentable condition of English instruction in the secondary schools. ... That English is difficult to teach follows from the ese [sic] with which both teacher and pupil may shirk the English lesson. The instructor has a smattering of the subject; the pupil thinks that he knows all about it. Each is prone to contemn [sic] what appears to be easy.
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> But the community in general is awakening to the fact that the young do not speak, write, and read their mother-tongue correctly; that they neither know nor appreciate English literature: and the Universities are convinced that better training in secondary English studies is demanded by the interests of higher education. (Gayley & Bradley, 1894, p. 5)

In establishing college entrance examination standards, the universities further instructed schools about just what they should teach:

> At its conference in 1892, the Committee of Ten recommended that "a total of five periods a week for four years be devoted to the various aspects of English studies." ... The Committee reasserted what was becoming the popular view of educators, that the study of English could become "the equal of any other studies in disciplinary or developing power." In 1894, representatives to the National Conference on Uniform Entrance Requirements drafted a list of texts to be set for college entrance examinations in English ... The lists of books drafted by the conference not only gave definition to college English as a literary enterprise, but compelled the secondary schools to conform to that definition. The topics for the entrance examinations "were announced in advance and had a way of dictating the preparatory school curriculum for the year." (Graff, 1987, p. 99)

With an increase in entrance standards, universities quickly realized that they would need placement examinations and remedial courses. Francis J. Child, for whom Harvard created the first Professorship of English "...bitterly resented the time he had to spend correcting student compositions" (Bizzell & Herzberg, 1987, p. 2), despite the rigorous entrance requirement in English composition. The Harvard model of freshman composition was born—with its focus on literary examples as models for student texts. The University of California established the Examination in Subject A in 1898 and by 1902 a course in Subject A was established for those who failed the exam, initially for special students and then for engineering and commerce students, and ultimately, as it is today, for all undergraduates in 1907.

Within the CSU, the liberalization of the undergraduate curriculum in the 1970s, especially general education, resulted in concerns about students' preparedness in reading, writing and mathematics—both at entrance to the CSU and at graduation. Thus, after lengthy debate, the CSU trustees instituted the English Placement Test (EPT) in fall 1977 and the Graduation Writing Assessment Requirement (GWAR) in 1978. Since history showed that instituting a test did not guarantee that students met the entrance requirement, the legislature also provided a supplement to campus budgets to provide additional help to students who did not demonstrate mastery of basic writing skills. This special allocation, Basic Writing Skills, which is still provided to campuses, was designed to reduce class size and so provide greater personal attention to meet students' developmental writing needs.

In the early 1980s, once again the public and legislators were concerned about the "problems afflicting American Education" (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983, p. iii). This concern resulted in the federal government's report "Nation at Risk" (1983), and, in California, in the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC) 1984 report "Promises to Keep: Remedial Education in California's Public Colleges and Universities." The report made recommendations designed to reduce remedial instruction during the period of 1985 to 1990. The CSU's plan to reduce the need for remedial education included additional funding to provide intensive instruction for first-time freshmen with serious developmental needs in writing and mathematics, a program called the Intensive learning Experience (ILE).

Thus, we can see that the current claim that students are underprepared is one that educators and politicians have made for decades. The question is not so much one of whether students are less prepared than in previous generations but more what they are unprepared for and whether the segments they are entering are prepared for them.

Myth 2: Most Underprepared Students Need Remediation

Remediation is usually defined as "instruction below the level appropriate for the educational level of the student. It is distinguished from 'developmental' instruction, defined as classes for students who arrive at CSU without full exposure to instruction in preparatory college English and mathematics due to disadvantaged backgrounds and in need of first-time instruction in the necessary skills" (Community College League of California, 1995, p. 1). With the growing number of language minority students in California, both those for whom English is not a first language and those who speak a dialect other than standard academic English, more students are entering each segment with language proficiencies "below the appropriate level." However, these students are developmental, not remedial. They are still acquiring new knowledge and skills in a new variety of English—academic English. For example, English is not the native language of many students entering the CSU as freshmen and transfer students (conservatively 40–50%). The entering freshmen have graduated in the top third of their high schools because they have mastery over the content areas, yet their English language skills are still developing. Research indicates it takes from seven to 10 years (Collier, 1989) for such ESL students to acquire the academic language to reach parity with their native English-speaking peers. Many of them have simply not had the time or exposure to learn academic English before they graduate from high school. Others arrive as young adults, without high school graduation in this country but with varying levels of education from their home countries, and take classes at community colleges, where they learn both content and the English language. But again, most have simply not been in an English-speaking environment for sufficient time to develop the academic English they need for a four-year degree (Murray, Nichols, & Heisch, 1992). Additionally, many have not become members of a literacy community that supports and extends their literacy (Murray & Nichols, 1992).

In addition to the ESL issue, other factors create a cohort of developmental students at various segments. Many students are the first in their family to attend college, for example, often coming from minority populations that are under-represented in higher education. While English is their primary language, they may speak a dialect different from that of the schools. Much as African-American English represents an automonous dialect of English, the nonstandard varieties of English used by many immigrant children and youth are characterized by their own linguistic rules and conventions. These students will also need assistance if they are to acquire academic English.

For both ESL and dialect students, because of different cultural assumptions and experiences, the university and its ways of thought are new. The university is unprepared for what these students bring with them. The difficulty of bridging this gap is addressed in Heath's (1983) seminal study of three Piedmont communities, which demonstrated how students whose home language practices differed from those of the middle-class school were excluded from the academic literacy community. This exclusion is particularly evident in the examinations we use as gatekeepers. Students who do well in their chosen field of study may fail to meet the standards we have set to measure their writing proficiency, standards that reflect only one set of values (Johns, 1991); we then label them as remedial. "We owe it to our culturally and linguistically diverse students to recognize the values that permeate our tests and to decide which of these values are basic—and which are not—to determining writing competency" (Johns, 1991, p. 396).

Thus, what many of these students need is not remediation but full access to the developmental process of learning to read and write for academic purposes.

Myth 3: In Previous Generations, Immigrants Learned English Quickly

One of the most frequently heard myths about the rate at which ESL students acquire English is that previous generations of immigrants learned English much more quickly that do current immigrants. Histories of immigration clearly show that previous immigrants also took many years to acquire English. But, in previous generations, jobs that did not require a high level of English skills were plentiful. (For example, Califorina fed and clothed miners and built railroads using Chinese immigrant labor.) So, then-recent immigrants could quickly fit into the workplace—albeit mostly in low paying, manual labor (TESOL, 1996), or, at a time when corner stores were the norm rather than discount warehouses, in their own businesses.

Immigrants today find themselves in considerably different circumstances. The United States now has more jobs in the service sector and in the information industry, in which high levels of English language skills are required. Low-paying manual jobs are becoming scarcer, and even recent immigrants require an education to develop the skills necessary for an independent life. Thus, we find large numbers of recent immigrants with still-developing English language skills entering our community college, adult school, and university classes seeking improved language and job-related skills.

The other aspect of this myth is the supposed reluctance of this generation of immigrants to learn English. This myth survives, despite the long waiting lists for ESL classes in almost every urban center in California. It

persists largely because these immigrants are attending our classes rather than remaining invisible at their work sites in a cannery or foundry earning the minimum wage. As they seek to acquire the English they need for higher skilled jobs, they become visible.

Myth 4: Oral Fluency Reflects Literacy

Another assumption that has a powerful negative effect on the literacy development of both ESL and dialect learners is that oral fluency is an indicator of academic literacy. Extensive research (see Collier 1989 for a summary of this research) shows that ESL learners take from five to 10 years to achieve the same levels of proficiency in academic English as native speakers, but acquire competence in oral language for everyday use in two to three years. Yet, K–12 schools often move students from ESL or bilingual programs based solely on oral language assessments (see Dunlap & Fields, this volume). Thus students with still-developing English literacy skills find themselves submerged in academic language. Their difficulties are compounded because, once mainstreamed, they are instructed by teachers with no background in how to teach ESL literacy. These students then enter the community college system or a four-year college with limited proficiency in academic literacy.

Future Directions

It is clear from the above discussion that students—immigrants and dialect speakers—will continue to arrive at the schoolhouse door needing instruction in English, and especially academic English. In the last century, colleges adopted instructional solutions that sought to impose standards on entering college students and thereby on the high schools. Ironically, what ultimately happened was the development of university English departments as we know them today—no longer considered remedial, but essential elements of a liberal education. If we learn anything from the past, it should be that we promote instructional solutions that neither blame the victim (the students) nor their previous education. If we want an educated workforce and citizenry, if we want a nation of information workers, if we want to be competitive in the global marketplace, then literacy education must be given as high a priority as science and math were in response to the Russian launching of Sputnik. This means acknowledging the language skills that all students bring with them to the classroom—in English and other languages. It means providing an educational infrastructure that supports English literacy acquisition. This obviously requires better articulation among different segments. However, articulation which truly addresses the language needs of California's (and the United States') diverse population must be based on an understanding of how people acquire languages and literacy, not on myths. Such an understanding includes considering the flawed assumptions I have discussed above, but it also requires an understanding of the institutional factors that impact student learning.

Our educational infrastructure is so flawed that teachers in all segments are asked to do the impossible—be parents, counselors, role models, and, perhaps, in the time remaining, educators—and with an increasingly diverse student population. Class sizes do not allow teachers to respond to student writing in the ways we know facilitate student learning. Writing instruction requires intensive practice writing to a variety of audiences in a variety of genres with extensive opportunities for feedback from the instructor and opportunities to revise (see Reid 1995). Language education does not occur in isolation; yet often language learners are taught English separately from content instruction, and ESL educators are marginalized, having little interaction with faculty in other disciplines. The English language education of students is a lifelong exercise and is the responsibility of all educators. ESL professionals have expertise that needs to be shared with colleagues, but our institutions provide little, if any, opportunity for such dialogue. Instead, ESL and English faculty are expected to "fix" students' English through one or two courses.

Articulation between different segments is important, but that alone will not help our students develop the knowledge and skills they need for study in another segment—at least, not if we define articulation as the setting of outcome standards across segments. Such articulation ignores the educational backgrounds of our students and the educational infrastructure where teaching and learning takes place. What we need is collaboration among segments to change the assumptions of policy makers. We need to educate policy makers so they understand what it is like to arrive in California at the age of 15, not speaking or writing English, but with other talents and skills that will allow the person to become an engineer or computer professional. We need to work together to explode the myths about second language learning and teaching. Then, we can work on articulating pedagogical practices and structures that maximize the potential for teaching and learning—across and within segments. ■

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