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## THE COMP-LAB PROJECT: AN EXPERIMENTAL BASIC WRITING COURSE

The COMP-LAB Project, now in its third year of operation at York College of The City University of New York, is an experimental program in basic writing. In the course, two classroom hours are systematically coordinated with a flexible schedule of work in an autotutorial writing laboratory, where students work on their own, not in a one-to-one relationship with a tutor. The Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education has funded the development of the course, and the Exxon Education Foundation is underwriting its evaluation. At present the program has been adopted experimentally at two other sites, Metropolitan Community College in Minneapolis, and South Central Community College in New Haven.

We developed this program in response to a dual need, namely, to find (1) a *better* way to solve the most serious writing problems of nontraditional students at CUNY and elsewhere, and (2) a *cheaper* way to do that in face of shrinking budgets for remedial courses.

### FOR WHOM THE PROGRAM IS DESIGNED

The population for which we developed the program is well-represented by Jerry Richards,<sup>1</sup> who wrote this paper on the first day of his English 100 class at York College:

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1. Although the author's name is not real, his paper is, and it is reproduced here exactly as he wrote it; nothing has been deleted, changed, or added, except the numbers preceding each group of words punctuated as a sentence.

<sup>1</sup> Poverty is a source of loneliness, sickness and even death, loneliness to mean a big suffering for children without freinds. <sup>2</sup> A child who want to go to the movies or to the circus but there parent's dosen't make enough money So he have to sit on the stairs of the house and people go by. <sup>3</sup> Because the park is 5 miles away loneliness is a little boy who mother and father work all day and start arguing at each other and not knowing that they have a child, or they feel sorry for even having it. <sup>4</sup> Sickness and death have a big effect on poverty childrens. <sup>5</sup> Some die because they don't got enough to eat they too many in the family to feed. <sup>6</sup> The clothing the children wear are not warm enough. <sup>7</sup> The poor housing the window are broke and radiator are not working. <sup>8</sup> Babies catch amonia and die little children starve so bad and start eating the chips off the wall. <sup>9</sup> The family don't get a examination every year. <sup>10</sup> Poverty in these to sources loneliness and sickness and death are have a very bad effect on children.

There are probably many instructors who would try to help Jerry by marking every error in this paper in red, with precise references to 2b, 6a(4), 9f, etc., in the *Harbrace College Handbook*. Let us hypothesize that Jerry has such an instructor, who returns the bloody paper to him at the next class meeting. So Jerry stares at it for a couple of minutes, smiles ruefully, mumbles, "I always was a terrible speller" (actually Jerry is quite a good speller), and stuffs it into his notebook. The likelihood that he will look at it again is remote.

Even though Jerry doesn't want to see his paper again, let's take another look at it. It may not be obvious that, for a basic writing student, Jerry has superior rhetorical skills. Below is an outline of the paper's rhetorical structure:

Poverty is a source of loneliness, sickness, and even death [My topic is poverty and its psychological and physical effects on small children.] loneliness to mean a big suffering for children without freinds. [I begin by defining a major psychological effect, loneliness.] A child who want to go to the movies or to the circus but there parent's dosen't make enough money So he have to sit on the stairs of the house and people go by. Because the park is 5 miles away loneliness is a little boy who mother and father work all day and start arguing at each other and not knowing that they have a child, or they feel sorry for even having it. [I give three examples of the loneliness caused by poverty.]

Sickness and death have a very big effect on poverty childrens. [In my second paragraph I deal with the physical effects of poverty on small children; I begin with some obvious examples.] Some die because they

don't got enough to eat they too many in the family to feed. The clothing the children wear are not warm enough. The poor housing the window are broke and radiator are not working. Babies catch amonia and die little children starve so bad and start eating the chips off the wall. The family don't get a examination every year. [Under the general heading of poor housing, I mention some particularly pathetic consequences of poverty for small children; I have saved the most affecting for the last. (*Note: The intrusion of yet one more obvious example somewhat spoils this effect.*)] Poverty in these to sources loneliness and sickness and death are have a very bad effect on children. [As a conclusion, I recapitulate my main idea.]

Inexperienced readers of the writing of nontraditional students are unlikely to notice these solid virtues of Jerry's paper. For, despite his fine sense of rhetorical structure, he has sinned against two common scribal conventions (writing *So* for *so* and *5* for *five*), misspelled three words, made twenty word-form errors, and, in six out of ten attempts, failed to produce a syntactically correct or complete sentence. Many of these problems would seem to be related to nonstandard speech habits.

Students with such severe writing problems have little chance of surviving in college, no matter how basically intelligent their papers may be. But in our experience, students like Jerry can finish the COMP-LAB course writing almost error-free papers. And other students with comparable word-form and syntactic problems, but less rhetorical sophistication, can also make big gains both in correctness and fluency. The evaluation now in progress is designed to assess the overall success of the program.<sup>2</sup>

## THE LABORATORY COMPONENT

*The Self-Instructional Method.* Jerry's writing problems fall under three headings—word-form correctness, syntax, and rhetoric. In the latter, he happens to have a flying start, but of course most basic writing students do write much more disorganized or underdeveloped papers. And so all three needs must be addressed in a basic writing program. The genesis of the COMP-LAB program was in the intuition, which over the past three

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2. We had thought of reproducing here one of Jerry's later papers. But any claims based on isolated examples are misleading, however gratifying they might be. Our purpose in this article is simply to describe what the COMP-LAB program is designed to do. Later we will report on what, as a matter of fact, it does do.

years has grown into a conviction, that the first of these needs, word-form error, is best dealt with in a laboratory setting, where each student works by himself on self-instructional materials. (We'll discuss instruction in syntax and rhetoric later in this paper.)

At York College, English 100 has consisted of five instructional hours. In experimental sections using the COMP-LAB program, classroom hours have been reduced to two, and students go to the lab any time between 9 AM and 9 PM, Monday through Friday, to work on grammatical problems for as long as necessary to complete the weekly assignment; for most students, this is about four hours a week. A lab supervisor supplies materials and occasionally answers questions about content or procedure.

Each module, or weekly unit of work, focuses on a single grammatical feature. Students first listen to a brief audiocassette tape, and do accompanying practice exercises which deal with the elementary conceptual material of the module. Students then work their way through a series of written exercises of ever-increasing complexity. They themselves check each exercise against an answer sheet before they go on to the next.

Why is this self-instructional, self-paced learning method, employing audiotapes and written exercises, a better way to deal with students' word-form error than the traditional classroom approach? There are at least five reasons, related both to the kind of material being learned and the kind of student learning it. Conceptually, this grammatical material is easy; but for basic writing students, it is above all this "easy" material which they find enormously difficult to internalize and apply.

The five reasons for the success of this learning method with this material for these students are: (1) Students in college basic writing courses have encountered some of the course material as far back as the third grade. But some remember one thing, some another; some learn quickly, some slowly. When a grammar lesson is presented to a group, individual students are variously confused, bored, or even embarrassed. In the lab, students can replay a tape as often as necessary and spend as little or as much time on a written exercise as they wish. The lab thus provides a dignified and flexible environment for remedial instruction in grammar. (2) Many, if not most, of the biggest problems of basic writing students seem to be caused by their nonstandard speech habits. Audiotapes, coordinated with printed exercises, enable students to simultaneously *hear, see, pronounce, and write* grammatical forms. This process draws their attention to the grammatical forms required in

standard written English, and to the differences between what they may say and what they are expected to write. In the privacy of a carrel, students can profit from this experience without embarrassment. (3) While cognitive grasp of the rules is essential, students do not arrive at this understanding by listening to abstract formulations. In the classroom, the instructor must choose between presenting such formulations, or leading the class, step by step, to discovering a rule. Either way—even if the teacher resists the teacherly temptation to tell more than his students need to know—there is little chance for them to internalize the rule through practice. In the lab, only the most elementary formulations are presented initially, with an absolute minimum of technical language. Understanding comes partly through applying the rule over and over, manipulating forms in varied and increasingly difficult contexts. Understanding comes also through students' checking their own performance against answer sheets, thus learning to recognize both correct and incorrect forms. (4) Students working on their own can do much more work than could be assigned for homework. Even if a classroom instructor were to assign as large a quantity of homework as students can do in the lab, he probably could not mark all of it. Furthermore, students would lose the immediate feedback which comes from checking their own work. In the lab, students are constantly and instantly aware of what they have learned and what they have not yet learned. (5) In the classroom, especially if the material is technical, learning tends to be passive; the teacher is the fountainhead, students the receptacles, of wisdom. In the lab, students are active. They get a tiny piece of information and a concise instruction. Then immediately they must *do* something to prove they have understood. If they don't pay attention all the time, they quickly realize they are wasting their own precious time.

There is one additional reason why we feel our autotutorial laboratory method is good for nontraditional students: it develops their self-reliance in two important ways. (1) In a classroom, the teacher assumes most of the responsibility for students' learning. But in our lab, both the materials and the procedures place the responsibility for learning squarely on the students themselves. The COMP-LAB exercises are so constructed that students who do the modules with care can almost always do them successfully. And lab procedures are designed to bring home to students their own responsibility for this learning. In the lab, students punch in and out on a time clock. Lab attendance is not required, but every Monday, each student gets a weekly report: he spent

so many hours in the lab, *it* says; he did or did not finish the assigned work; he did or did not score it accurately (it is spot-checked by the lab supervisors). These are facts: he knows them, and he knows his teacher knows them. There can be no evasion of responsibility. This weekly report documents students' efforts in the lab. Students are rightly gratified by this recognition, and are encouraged to keep up those efforts. It is particularly important for these nontraditional students to feel, for perhaps the first time, in control of their own learning. (2) And these students need to learn how to read, understand, and follow instructions by themselves. The COMP-LAB procedures and materials demand that students develop these basic skills quickly; at the same time, they foster the development of these skills, by providing a structure in which students are moved forward by such tiny incremental steps that virtually all of them can experience success.

*The Laboratory Materials.* Over the last three years, we have developed all the audiotape and written materials used in the lab. We have focussed each module on a separate and distinct grammatical feature, though the last exercises in any module always review previous learning. At this time, the modules are assigned in the following order:

- Module 1: Scribal Conventions [very basic conventions about the arrangement of words on paper—indenting, capitalization, abbreviating, etc.]
- Module 2: Wrong Words [common homonyms and word-class errors]
- Module 3: Noun Plural Forms
- Module 4: Verb Agreement [simple present-tense verbs, exclusive of BE]
- Module 5: The verb BE [present and past tenses]
- Module 6: Past-tense Verb Forms [the simple past tense]
- Module 7: Sentence Construction [the sentence kernel, plus expansion]
- Module 8: Verb Phrases with HAVE
- Module 9: Verb Phrases with BE
- Module 10: Other Verb Phrases [with DO and modals]
- Module 11: Sentence Punctuation [avoiding fragments, comma splices, and run-ons]
- Module 12: Pronouns
- Module 13: Noun Possessives

Within each module, the majority of exercises ask students to use the feature in sentence and paragraph contexts. Only the first few exercises use the standard fill-in-the-blanks method, and then only as a check on

students' basic understanding of the rule. The students begin to use the feature in increasingly difficult contexts. They progress from writing words, to writing sentences, and finally to writing entire paragraphs. The final exercise in each module, the only one marked by the instructor, requires students to demonstrate their control over the feature in a paper of their own composing; the instructions are such that students cannot avoid using the feature they have been studying all week.

Each individual exercise demands just *one* thing; each moves students one exquisitely small step (so small that they can hardly fail to take it successfully) along their journey from mere cognitive grasp of the rule to its habitual application in their own writing. And each exercise is incremental; that is, it functions as the necessary bridge between the preceding and the following exercises.

The techniques employed in these exercises are drawn from a wide variety of sources: the most successful ESL techniques, like controlled composition and contrastive learning approaches; sentence combining; X-word grammar; and the discoveries of individual classroom teachers.<sup>3</sup> We have frequently adapted these methods to new purposes, perhaps not anticipated by their inventors. For example, we use sentence combining techniques to reinforce word-form correctness, not to develop stylistic variation. If students learn to write more gracefully and concisely, as well as more correctly, that is a bonus.

Most important of all, we have, in all our exercises, adapted successful classroom techniques to the autotutorial method, in which it is essential that students be able to check their own work. For example, we have refined the technique of controlled composition to the point where we can isolate a single feature or group of features for specific manipulations which yield one invariant response.

In working their way through the COMP-LAB exercises, students produce reams of transformed phrases, sentences, and paragraphs, all in service of word-form correctness and basic syntax. In this process, they are inevitably absorbing much about paragraph organization, development, and style. They may even be learning how to read.

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3. We wish to acknowledge our debt to experimenters like Linda Kunz, Sarah D'Eloia, Patricia Laurence, David Davidson, and many other CUNY teachers, and to Ruth Otto and William Jones of Rutgers University. We are particularly indebted to Carolyn Gilboa of Lehman College, CUNY, for sharing her linguistic insights with us.

## THE CLASSROOM COMPONENT

In spite of all we have said about the benefits of the autotutorial laboratory, we know that the classroom is equally important—or even more important. Every learner needs to know that there is some person who knows and cares about what he is learning, and who can tell him with a human voice that he is in fact learning it. Even though there is little need to mention grammar in the classroom, and we seldom do, the word-form exercises would probably be much less effective if the classroom did not exist.

In the lab, what students learn are essentially editing skills.<sup>4</sup> There they develop and sharpen these skills on materials we provide. But before students can apply their editing skills to their own writing, they must first learn to compose, to create their own materials; and, of course, this is best done under the guidance of a teacher in the classroom. The difficulty is convincing students that composing and editing are entirely different processes, so different, in fact, that they tend to derail each other when performed simultaneously. Learning them in two separate arenas helps students to understand this difference.

So does free writing. Free writing may be described as the writing students, or any writers, do for themselves. They may or may not wish to show it to someone, but their main motivation, at the time of writing, is simply to get ideas from their heads onto paper. They are not concerned about an audience or the form of what they write, but just about getting their thoughts down on the page. Free writing gives students confidence that they can do this, helps them enjoy the process of doing it, and develops their ability to do it quickly and spontaneously; in other words, it develops fluent writing, as distinct from correct writing.<sup>5</sup>

Free writing has an important part to play in a course like this one, with its heavy stress on correctness. It helps students learn that writing is not merely a means of communicating with others, but also an expressive vehicle for ideas and emotions which are in themselves significant to the writer. This is the kind of writing that students can care about; and when they care, they can begin to care about writing correctly.

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4. Readers need to bear in mind that what for them may be mere proofreading is truly editing for the basic writing student.

5. For readers unfamiliar with free writing, we think the best two sources are Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1973), and Michael G. Southwell's "Free Writing in the Composition Class," *College English*, 38 (1977), 676-81.



When drafting ideas for papers, students are urged to free write at first and then edit later. We try to convince students that free writing can help them get good ideas on paper fast, even though these ideas may need a lot of reorganizing and editing. Hence, emphasis on free writing can help students distinguish between the composing and the editing processes.

The second emphasis in the classroom is, of course, elementary rhetoric: isolating main ideas, supporting and developing them. Instructors are free to use whatever methods work best for them with basic writing students, but should resist any temptation to teach more advanced rhetorical concepts, like inductive versus deductive techniques of argumentation. It should be noted, though, that instructors actually have more opportunity to focus students' attention on content, since the burden of explaining grammatical concepts has been removed to the lab.

The third element of the classroom curriculum is syntax. Our model for sentence analysis is based on the approach used in the CUNY-SUNY videotape and workbook series, *The English Modules*:<sup>6</sup> every sentence contains a sentence kernel—consisting of an unexpanded subject, an unexpanded verb, and perhaps a complement—plus expansion. Technical vocabulary is thus reduced to a minimum. With a thorough understanding of these few concepts, students are able to recognize and correct fragments, comma splices and run-ons, and confused sentences. Sentence exercises in the lab reinforce this classroom work. We discuss our use of this model of sentence analysis later, at the end of the section entitled “The Design of the Laboratory Materials.”

## COORDINATION OF CLASSROOM AND LABORATORY: PAPER-MAKING AND GRADING

The course works as a whole only because students understand the close coordination between the lab and the classroom. They see the two parts of the course, composing and editing, come together in their own writing, which is the only thing that counts ultimately anyway. Instructors tell students on day one, and remind them frequently during the course, that doing the lab work is only a means to an end: unless what they are learning improves their own writing sufficiently, they cannot pass.

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6. Sarah D'Eloia, Barbara Gray, Mina Shaughnessy, Blanche Skurnick, and Alice Trillin, *The English Modules* (New York: The State University of New York, 1976).

Let us use Jerry Richards' paper as an example of how the paper-making process integrates the work of the classroom and the work of the lab. This is Jerry's first formal paper. (He'll write ten over the semester.) When Jerry gets it back, the only errors marked on it will be spelling errors (*freinds*, *sory*, and *amonia*), as these are the only mistakes he can be expected, at this point, to know how to avoid. (Students are always permitted to use dictionaries.) In our system, errors like *there* for *their* and *to* for *two* are classified as wrong words, that is, words correctly spelled but misused in context. By the time Jerry writes Paper #3 he will have completed modules 1, 2, and 3. He will have learned about wrong words, about certain scribal conventions, and about noun plural forms. If he had submitted this paper as Paper #3, then, along with the spelling errors, these wrong words would be marked, as well as the scribal errors (like 5 for *five*), and noun plural errors (like *childrens* and *window*). A student as intelligent as Jerry, after doing the modules with care, might have eliminated these errors in the editing process before he handed in his paper. But if he did make them, he could understand every mistake marked on his paper. He would no longer feel helpless in the face of his own errors, but could correct them. And he is expected to correct them, by rewriting all sentences with errors and explaining each correction, using the rules he learned in the modules.

At all times students are keenly aware of the relationship between lab work and papers, and know that as soon as the deadline for completion of a module passes, they become responsible for editing their work for the feature covered. If a student is absent and falls behind in his lab work, an outcropping of errors marked on his next paper may spur him to catch up.

Students also understand that correctness is only a part of good writing. Their papers are marked not just for errors, but also for main ideas, development, clarity, and other points stressed in the classroom.

In our system, we distinguish between *marking* papers and *grading* them. Marking gives students feedback about their errors and the effectiveness of their writing. But they do not receive grades, which are an objective evaluation of their work against the standard of the course, until their last three papers. These are the grades on which the final grade in the course is based.

## THE DESIGN OF THE LABORATORY MATERIALS

Without effective laboratory exercises dealing with students' actual problems, and dealing with them in the right order, this system could not

work. Students must understand certain word forms before they can do anything useful about their syntactic problems. Accordingly, after a brief introduction to scribal conventions, we begin with noun and verb forms, and only then address syntax.

Perhaps the best way to illustrate the pertinence of the laboratory exercises is to refer again to Jerry's paper. The number over each italicized word-form error corresponds to the module in which he will learn to correct it. Errors in spelling and syntax, dealt with in other ways, are not marked here in the interest of clarity. An X over a word indicates that the word-form error is not dealt with specifically in the modules, either because it is not common in the writing of students in this course, or because it is not enough to be taught to the whole group. These errors would be explained individually, or ignored.

<sup>1</sup>Poverty is a source of loneliness, sickness and even death, loneliness to mean a big suffering for children without freinds. <sup>2</sup>A child who *want* to go to the movies or to the circus but *there*<sup>12</sup> *parent's*<sup>3</sup> *doesn't*<sup>4</sup> make enough money *So*<sup>1</sup> *he*<sup>4</sup> *have* to sit on the stairs of the house and people go by. <sup>3</sup>Because the park is <sup>5</sup> miles away loneliness is a little boy *who* mother and father work all day and start arguing at each other and not knowing that they have a child, or they feel sory for ever having it.

<sup>4</sup>Sickness and death have a very big effect on *poverty* *childrens*. <sup>5</sup>Some die because they don't *got*<sup>10</sup> enough to eat *they*<sup>5</sup> too many in the family to feed. <sup>6</sup>The clothing the children wear *are* not warm enough. <sup>7</sup>The poor housing the *window* are *broke* and *radiator* are not working. <sup>8</sup>Babies catch amonia and die little children starve so *bad* and start eating the chips off the wall. <sup>9</sup>The family *don't* get *a* examination every year. <sup>10</sup>Poverty in these *to* sources loneliness and sickness and death are *have* a very bad effect on children.

Module 2, Wrong Words, will help Jerry to correct errors like *to* for *two*. This relatively easy module is, to the student, a credible introduction to the necessity for word-form correction.

Making nouns plural may seem superficially easier, but it is much more difficult for students to do. Jerry's uncertain control over this Module 3 feature points to some anomalies which are entirely characteristic of basic writing students: he writes some difficult plurals correctly—*movies*, *babies*, *people*—and yet drops the -s from *window* and *radiator*; in word-group 1 he writes *children*, in word-group 4 the hypercorrect form *childrens*, and then *children* again in word-group 6; and in word-group 2 he includes a gratuitous apostrophe—immediately before a word in which he uses the apostrophe correctly. Clearly, the

grapholect has had a strong impact on Jerry's writing, but not strong enough to prevent dialect features from taking over when he is writing about down-home things (*window, radiator*), nor for him to distinguish consistently between correct and hypercorrect forms. What Jerry needs, and will get from Module 3, is not merely rules for pluralizing, which he plainly already knows, but a stronger sense of *noun-ness*. An exercise which asks him to rewrite sentences, by changing each noun from singular to plural, will help him to find nouns and learn to pluralize them correctly:

The man bought a guitar.<sup>7</sup>

The men bought guitars.

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Or, in a paragraph:

A fashion design teacher recently sent her class to a local museum. In the portrait gallery one student saw a painting of a woman in an elaborate velvet dress and a hat as big as an umbrella. Another portrait showed a man wearing a huge white wig and a fancy ruffle from his neck to his waist. The student also found a picture of a baby dressed just like a little man, in a silk suit, a ruffled shirt, and a little white wig. The student decided that the overdressed man, woman, and child in that portrait gallery might be really interesting subject for her term paper.

Some fashion design teachers recently sent their classes to local museums. In the portrait galleries some. . .

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Now that Jerry can identify a noun and its number, he is ready for the concept of the subject of a sentence. Module 4 teaches him how to make verbs in the simple present tense agree with their subjects. Although the specific focus of this module is on word forms, Jerry is also being introduced to syntax. Many of the exercises in this module require sentence manipulation; for example:

They drink wine with every meal.

She drinks wine with every meal.

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7. All exercises or parts of exercises cited herein are Copyright © COMP-LAB 1978. Reprinted with permission. The COMP-LAB exercises will be published by Prentice-Hall in the fall of 1979.

Or:

Jesse and Butch rob banks.

Jesse robs banks.

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Butch robs banks.

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Or:

Lisa sings. She acts. She dances.

Lisa sings, acts, and dances.

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Contrastive exercises help Jerry not to confuse new learning with old. For example, he may be asked to put a circle around noun plural endings and put a square around verb endings:<sup>8</sup>

New Yorkers in European countries always admire the wonderful subway there. When a New Yorker enters the London tube or the Paris Metro, the cleanliness of the train startles him. He stops and stares at a maintenance man picking candy wrappers out of drains. With astonishment he watches a woman while she soaps down the tiled walls in the passageways, and polishes the brass railings in the stations. The comfort of the trains also seems strange. As he sinks into the cushioned seats, he thinks of the half-crushed straphangers back home. As he breathes the fresh air in the tunnels, he remembers the sweltering cars during New York summers. In the unfamiliar subways of Europe, with their excellent maps and directions, he never gets lost; but back home not even the conductor knows which train goes to Avenue S and which to Columbus Circle. Certainly, a New Yorker never gets homesick when he rides on European subways.

At this point Jerry probably needs some fence against incipient hypercorrection. Having learned not to write *he have to sit*, alas, like many basic writing students, he may begin to write *he has to sits*. So an exercise asks him to rewrite a paragraph in which all verbs appear in their

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8. Patricia Laurence's exercises for students at The City College, CUNY, called our attention to the value of this kind of contrastive approach.

base forms, in capital letters. (This convention is familiar to him from previous exercises.) He must distinguish between the verb forms which need the inflection, and those which don't:

Somebody MAKE plans to BREAK most world records as soon as someone else SET them. When an athlete RUN the mile in under four minutes, his rival immediately START training to BEAT his time. When a woman SWIM around Manhattan in the summer, another TRY to do it in the winter. It MAKE sense to TRY to BREAK records like these, but some other attempts SEEM ridiculous. We GRIEVE if someone DIE trying to FLY fast, but it LOOK silly for him to EAT or to DANCE himself to death. In contests like these, foolish people often REFUSE to STOP. If a person HAVE to KILL himself, he KILL himself. At that moment, he WANT to DO just one thing—to DANCE longer, or to EAT more, or to SCREAM louder than anyone else in the world.

Somebody makes plans to break most world records as soon as someone else sets them. An athlete runs the mile in. . .

Jerry's verb phrase errors are curious and wonderful: *the window are broke, sickness and death are have, they don't got*, and then, later, *the family don't get*. The latter variant forms (like Jerry's *childrens* and *children*) reflect the unsettling influence of either the standard forms or the grapholect, or both, on his own dialect, so that, at this stage of his growth as a writer, he is left without a consistent grammar to rely on. Jerry can begin to deal with this kind of problem only after he has single verb forms under control. But deal with it he must, for verb phrases, with their subtle and complex shades of meaning, are absolutely typical of the academic discourse which college students are learning to use. First, Jerry should work on the *forms* of verb phrases; an exercise which asks him to manipulate a sentence into different patterns starts him off:

William cooks manicotti every night.

NEGATIVE: William doesn't cook manicotti every night.

EMPHATIC: William does cook manicotti every night.

QUESTION: Does William cook manicotti every night?

A later exercise asks him to rewrite an entire paragraph in the negative, contracting each *not*:

Mickey has been a very satisfactory child. As an infant, he would eat his cereal. At two, he could feed himself. At four, he could tie his shoe laces. Now at six, Mickey is the star pupil in the first grade. He reads well and is very good at arithmetic. His teacher pastes gold stars on his papers. Furthermore, he can draw, he can sing, and he knows when to keep quiet. Mickey is a winner, and he even seems to know it. His parents are pleased with him. Mention his name. They will beam with pride.

*Mickey hasn't been a very satisfactory child. As an infant, he wouldn't eat his cereal. At two, he couldn't feed. . .*

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Next, Jerry needs to understand the *meanings* residing in different kinds of verb phrases. And so he is asked to rewrite a short paragraph, changing tenses in accord with contextual clues:

#### WHAT DOES DUKE DO EVERY NIGHT?

Every night Duke makes dinner. As he tosses the salad, he drinks scotch. As he cooks the meat, he sips the cooking sherry. As he sets the table, he drinks half the wine.

#### WHAT DID DUKE DO LAST NIGHT?

*Last night Duke made dinner. As he tossed the salad, he drank scotch. As he cooked the meat, . . .*

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#### WHILE I WAS WATCHING TV LAST NIGHT, WHAT WAS DUKE DOING?

*While I was watching TV last night, Duke was making dinner. As he was tossing the salad, he was drinking. . .*

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#### WHILE I'VE BEEN WATCHING TV, WHAT HAS DUKE BEEN DOING?

*While I've been watching TV, Duke has been making dinner. As he has been tossing the salad, he has been. . .*

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Although syntax is primarily classroom work, certain important syntactic concepts are reinforced at strategic points throughout the lab

exercises. Jerry's problem with adjective clauses,<sup>9</sup> for example, is typical (*A child who want to go to the movies or to the circus but. . .*). Jerry needs first to recognize adjective clauses as groups of words which expand nouns, and so an early exercise asks him simply to put parentheses around such groups of words, and draw arrows to the nouns they expand:

Players  (who hesitate) miss their shots.

Next, when he has learned about verb agreement, Jerry needs to apply what he has learned both within and without the adjective clause. An exercise asks him to control verbs in the main clause:

HAVE      The band ( which plays for these dances )      has  
                 either five or six members.

Another requires the same control inside the expansion:

LEAVE      A teenager ( who leaves home ) often has financial  
                 problems.

Still later, mostly in the classroom, Jerry moves on to dealing directly with adjective clauses as a source of syntactic problems. He is led to understand that a noun plus an adjective clause does not constitute a sentence, but a fragment, and this is reinforced by lab exercises like this one, which asks him to identify this kind of expansion, and to label groups of words as sentences or fragments:<sup>10</sup>

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9. It should be remembered that technical vocabulary is kept to a minimum; the words "adjective clause" would never be used with a student.

10. It's important to recognize the limits of the lab approach: lab exercises can help Jerry learn how to correct syntactic problems like these, by providing practice in using this model for sentence analysis. But he must apply it to *his own* sentences, and he can do this only with the help of a teacher.



<sup>1</sup> Animals have elaborate systems of movements and sounds (which resemble human communication.)	1. ...S .....
<sup>2</sup> Systems (which may or may not deserve the name language.)	2. ...F .....
<sup>3</sup> Most animals certainly can communicate fear, pleasure, or sexual desire.	3. ...S .....
<sup>4</sup> For example, the songs (which birds sing.)	4. ...F .....
<sup>5</sup> Songs which have some of the qualities of human speech.	5. ....
<sup>6</sup> Each melody which we hear signals food, danger, or a sense of territory.	6. ....
<sup>7</sup> A man has studied the sounds which dolphins make.	6. ....
<sup>8</sup> Curious underwater vibrations which are like the pulses of navy sonar equipment.	7. ....
<sup>9</sup> This scientist considers these sounds the equivalent of human speech.	8. ....
<sup>10</sup> And the complicated dance which bees perform.	9. ....
<sup>11</sup> These intricate movements tell other bees about sources of nectar.	10. ....
<sup>12</sup> Scientists who study animal communication are trying to find out if animals can learn actual human language.	11. ....
<sup>13</sup> A woman who has devised a signal system which resembles the finger talk of deaf mutes.	12. ....
<sup>14</sup> She taught it to a chimpanzee that now has a vocabulary of over 100 words.	13. ....
<sup>15</sup> But no animal has used sounds or signals which are exactly like human language.	14. ....
<sup>16</sup> Sounds which can express general and original ideas.	15. ....
	16. ....

The sequential and incremental quality of the COMP-LAB exercises is impossible to demonstrate in the space available to us here. But these few examples may serve to suggest the general principles underlying them all: isolating particular problems or pieces of information; crafty sequencing; and reinforcement of previous learning. We have borrowed techniques freely and widely. But our refinement of these techniques, combining and sequencing them, adapting them to the autotutorial method, and using them for new purposes, is, so far as we know, our own.

## COST-SAVINGS

We hope to establish that the COMP-LAB course, with two hours of classroom instruction plus relatively inexpensive supervised lab work, can save instructional dollars for our college and others which may choose to adopt it. The amount of such savings depends, of course, on the number of classroom hours now devoted to basic writing, current

staffing patterns, and a variety of other factors. More important, though less obvious, are possible indirect institutional savings: the course provides considerable administrative and staffing flexibility, and it may produce higher student retention and pass rates.

## CONCLUSION

The Exxon Education Foundation is supporting a thorough evaluation of the COMP-LAB Project by a team of outside evaluators. Students' writings will be measured holistically for overall quality and rates of errors will be counted. A conventional comparison-group experimental design has been set up, by means of which it will be possible to compare the performance of students in COMP-LAB sections with that of students in control sections at York and at the other two schools where this course has been adopted experimentally. In addition, students' and teachers' attitudes toward the experimental course, changes in students' attitudes toward writing, the adequacy of the transfer procedures, grade and retention data, and the cost of the course, will be measured. This evaluation is at least partially exploratory, since very little work has been done on the assessment of entire writing programs. Nevertheless, we do hope to be able to reach some reliable conclusions about the strengths and weaknesses of the COMP-LAB program.

In particular, we hope to show that a semester of intensive work on grammatical correctness need not harm, but rather can foster, students' rhetorical development. This is why students' writings will be evaluated by a holistic reading as well as by an error count. The notion that teaching standard written English to speakers of nonstandard dialects is harmful, both psychologically and educationally, has not died with the sixties. But we believe that our head-on assault on error has the opposite effect, a liberating one, on students who fear to put pen to paper, knowing that the *way* they write, regardless of *what* they write, exposes them to instant if unspoken derision.

And in some quarters, it *is* being spoken—loudly. Last winter, under the headline "Illiterates in the thousands passing through City College," a *New York Post* reporter contrasted two types of students, the "illiterates" and the "bright" students, and he cited the following passage from a student's history paper to show how the "illiterates" differ from the "bright" students:

At first feudalism may have worked to the Kings advantages but as generations passed the new lords or vassals must have seen no reason to obey a king they possibly never saw. When the Duke of Normandy (William) in 1066 took England the King of France not only had a powerful lord breathing down his neck but now a country to deal with.

The French King dealt with it by not dealing with it. They just sat and took the crumbs from the Dukes. Then came a man named Phillip II. He did something. He attacked. Crushed all resistance in the north and drove his Norman vassal and now King of England into the sea.<sup>11</sup>

Illiterate the writer of this paper may be; but he is obviously neither stupid nor uninformed: he gives a clear and convincing example of the breakdown of feudalism in France in the eleventh century.

This confounding of illiteracy with stupidity by the so-called educated public will not go away today or tomorrow or, perhaps, ever. The Conference on College Composition and Communication may advocate students' "right to their own language," but it's necessary to define the difference between spoken and written language. No one has the "right" to be scorned because he can't write in standard English, the medium through which our culture transmits so much of value to all. In the COMP-LAB program, we hope to demonstrate that at least the basics of this skill may be acquired by many students in one semester, and within current budgetary restrictions on remedial education.<sup>12</sup>

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11. *New York Post*, 28 February 1978, p. 5.

12. The influence of Mina Shaughnessy has been everywhere present in these pages. For all we have learned from her and for her interest in our work, we are grateful.