

RESEARCH OF 9TH GRADE STUDENTS' ESSAYS (ORTHOGRAPHY AND PUNCTUATION)

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The components of orthography and punctuation have great influence on the quality of students' text production and communication, as well as on their comprehension. Mother-tongue education in Hungary uses much energy for the teaching of orthography and punctuation, but we only have a few data about its effectiveness. The results of the last Hungarian study of independently created texts suggested that each student makes errors in orthography and/or punctuation (Orosz, 1974), and this result has been confirmed in more recent studies based on dictated texts (Nyitrai, 1984, 1985; Orosz and Vidákvich, 1988; Vidákvich and Cs. Czachesz, 2001; Bakonyiné, 2007). For the targeted development of orthography it is indispensable to regularly assess the students' skills, and to diagnose the most common difficulties. Here, the first results of an ongoing research project are presented, which examines the orthography and punctuation of compositions created by a 9th grade sample (N=1,415).

The aims of this research are (1) to analyze data from a 2009 survey of text comprehension and production regarding orthography and punctuation; (2) to give a detailed diagnosis of the most serious and common current difficulties, and (3) to diagnose the differences between school types. The rate and type of the mistakes are assessed in eight main categories: 1. the spelling of consonants and vowels; 2. initials; 3. word division; 4. word elements; 5. punctuation; 6. numerals and dates; 7. traditional spellings; and 8. abbreviations and acronyms. Some of the categories are further divided into specific sub-categories. Background variables include school type and overall characteristics of the texts produced, as well as reading performance.

The average text length is expected to show systematic differences by school type. Students make more mistakes in the cases where there is no one general rule to guide spelling. Further expected results include the dominance of the punctuation mistakes over the orthographic mistakes; the number of mistakes per 100 words to show systematic differences by school type; and the negative correlation of these with reading performance.

The students in sample are at the age when marked development has been found for orthography (Orosz, 1974; Vidákvich and Cs. Czachesz, 2001). The identification of the problems during this period of change can specify needs in different ability groups and thus facilitate targeted intervention. Highlighting the differences between school types opens up developmental opportunities for educators and developers of instructional materials.

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