

## A comparison of basic English skills in 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> grade

*This text is a presentation of results from two studies, conducted in 2006 and 2009. In 2006 texts from 7<sup>th</sup> grade pupils in one local council area were collected and three years later the same pupils wrote a new text. This longitudinal study is an attempt to find out whether pupils learn to master basic spelling, concord and use of progressive forms in their three years in lower secondary. The results from 2006 are based on all the texts in the survey, whereas the results from grade 10 are based on a pilot study conducted in the spring of 2009, where only a limited number of texts were examined.*

### Introduction

My initial plan was not to do a longitudinal study, but simply to get a better overview of basic written competence in 7<sup>th</sup> grade. In meetings with lower secondary school teachers one often heard complaints over the poor and not least varying competence in written English when their pupils started lower secondary. On practice visits in primary school I had been able to observe this variation in competence myself. Another reason for my interest in written English in primary school was my work with teacher trainer students. I had been witnessing a gradual decline in their written English formal skills and my hypothesis was that some of the basic mistakes they were making had been allowed to settle at an early stage. This decline has been thoroughly documented many times (Lehmann, 1999; Hellekjær, 2005), and is often a debated topic (Hagtvedt, 2007).

The results from my survey of texts from 7<sup>th</sup> grade are included in this article, and they can serve as further documentation of pupils' lack of basic skills in written English. Since the results were poorer than I had expected, I became interested in seeing what would happen to their written English competence in the course of three years in lower secondary. Would the pupils have learnt to master basic written skills or had some of the basic errors become resistant to change?

The fact that these pupils would have met a new plan in 8<sup>th</sup> grade made it even more interesting to follow them over a longer period of time (Utdanningsdirektoratet, 2006). The new curriculum has more focus on basic English skills and more pronounced formal requirements, and is thus a reflection of a slightly more positive attitude to formal language instruction. I have in a previous article (Raaen, 2009) referred to research which documents that form-focused instruction has an effect, and it is worth noting that even Krashen, always an ardent spokesman against formal language instruction, now carefully admits that not all problems are solved by reading only. In the context of this study it is interesting to see that he uses subject-verb agreement as one

convention of writing that might not develop automatically, and he also states that some spelling demons are hard to get rid of. But conscious learning like this “needs to be used with caution – and any such teaching should not take place until high school” (Krashen, 2004, p. 131). Another study of spelling suggests that “... explicit instruction and systematic training are helpful in the case of pupils with learning disabilities” (Berkel, 2004, p. 256).

No other Norwegian studies have followed the same pupils over a period of three years. There are interesting ongoing studies, however, so this is truly an area under development (Drew & Hasselgreen, 2008). One might in this context regret that the national tests in written English were discontinued, since these tests, had they been allowed to continue, would have provided ample material for contrastive studies.

If one looks at studies of languages other than English, there is a comparative study which looks at German exam papers at university level in 1966 and 2000, where it is found that the 1966 cohort made fewer mistakes and had a richer vocabulary (Feigs, 2003). This is of course an interesting contribution to the debate over a possible decline in basic skills in English, where one often accepts a decline in accuracy, because the pupils have a richer vocabulary. If one goes to research on L1 language, one finds that there is solid documentation of spelling proficiency over time. I am here referring to a survey made by the National Foundation for Educational Research, where L1 learners’ spelling was investigated at the two ages 11 and 15 (Brooks, Gorman & Kendall, 1993).

## **Method**

As previously mentioned, the pupils have been tested at two stages in their compulsory education, at the end of 7<sup>th</sup> grade (2006) and 10<sup>th</sup> grade (2009). 172 texts were collected in 2006, but this number had been reduced to 148 in 2009. 15 of the missing 24 can be explained, since two small primary schools were not asked to take the second test. As far as the remaining discrepancy between 2006 and 2009 figures are concerned, I do not know whether the pupils had been excused from English or whether the absence rates were higher in 2009 than in 2006. Both tests consisted of free writing, where the pupils described pictures and/or wrote a story. All the texts were handwritten and have later been transcribed electronically. The texts were handed in anonymously, but in 2009 the pupils were asked about gender and name of primary school.

My focus was on basic skills, like grammar and spelling, and I initially tried to use those parts of the CEFR level descriptions (adapted for the Norwegian national tests) that dealt with grammar/sentence types and spelling (Raaen, 2006). After a long trial and error phase, I landed on the following points/items that I wanted to focus on: *Length – Spelling – Concord between subject and verb – Use of progressive forms*

My decision to use simple, objective criteria was based on the fact that I had a large number of texts and also limited time at my disposal. My main goal has been to see how much the pupils have progressed and not why they have made progress or not, but I will to some extent comment on this aspect when the data results are discussed.

## Data presentation and Discussion

### *Length*

In 7<sup>th</sup> grade, average length was 133 words, whereas the 10<sup>th</sup> grade essays had an average of 279. Since 60 minutes were set aside for the test both times, this means that the pupils were able to produce twice as much text in grade 10. One of my finds in grade 7 was that there were substantial variations in length from class to class, which I took as proof of the fact that writing had been stressed differently in the various classrooms. Since the pupils in 10<sup>th</sup> grade were asked to write which school they had previously attended, it will be possible to see whether these internal variations are as marked at the end of grade 10, but this has to wait until all the results are available.

An average length of 279 words for a 60-minute task is perhaps not a bad result, when compared with another study from 10<sup>th</sup> grade (Ward, 2006, p.56), where the mean total word count for one school was 457 and the other 266. Here the pupils had written two texts, one at home and one at school, where they had had approximately 3 hours at their disposal.

### *Spelling*

“It’s a damn poor mind that can think of only one way to spell a word.”

Under spelling, I have looked at two aspects: ratio between correct and misspelt words, and the spelling of a selection of high frequency function words. Since my students are having difficulties using apostrophes correctly, I also decided to include the use of the **genitive + s**. I did not expect the 7<sup>th</sup> grade pupils to master this, but perhaps it could be expected by the end of lower secondary?

The headline refers to Andrew Jackson (Cook, V., 2004a), and I was often reminded of his tolerant attitude to spelling when I was working on the texts in grade 7. I looked at the spelling of the high frequency words **with – two/three – his/her – who**, and there were indeed many different suggestions: The preposition **with** may serve as an example:

I can see a lady sit **whit** a coputer/I can see a åld woman sitting **wic** a pc.

Oh the lady has.. **whid** black clouts/I can see a teef -- **white** a pears.

They has a football to play **vid**/And **wid** her is a ark.

They play football. **Weet** a ball.

The same examples could be found for the other words. In grade 7, it was quite obvious that the pupils were insecure about how to spell these words. The results from grade 7 and grade 10 are found below:

Word	Use	Correctly spelt	Misspelt
Numerals (two/three)	241	178	63
With	136	98	38
Because	48	23	25
Who	235	167	68
Possessive pronouns	264	189	75
Genitivs-s	100	42	58

Table 1: Correct and incorrect spellings of selected function words in grade 7

Word	Use	Correctly spelt	Misspelt
Numerals (two/three)	68	63	5
With	41	36	5
Because	32	22	10
Who	30	27	3
Possessive pronouns	52	49	3
Genitive + s	9	7	2

Table 2: Correct and incorrect spellings of selected function words in grade 10.  
(Based on pilot study of 40 texts)

Even though these results are based on 40 of the texts only, my initial reaction was that the pupils had improved more than I had expected. My expectations were based on my everyday work with teacher trainer students, where basic spelling mistakes are quite common.

As far as **because** and the **genitive s** are concerned, error rates have gone down – from 52% to 31% for **because** and from 58% to 22 % for the **genitive**. This shows us that some improvement has taken place, but the two language items are still problematic.

The more I look at the results, however, the more difficult it becomes to interpret them. There are admittedly few mistakes, but the words are so rarely used. If you look at **with**, for example, the word occurs 41 times in altogether 40

texts. Since this is a high frequency word, the results baffle me. The same goes for **who**, where there are 30 findings in 40 texts. The absence of **who** may of course be explained as an example of a language without relative clauses, but **with** is another matter. Could it be that pupils avoid words they know are difficult, or is this just a coincidence?

In addition to looking at the spelling of selected function words, I have also mapped the ratio between correct and misspelt words. In 2006 I looked at the full texts, since they were relatively short (133 words). For the 2009 cohort I have only looked at the first 10 lines of each text. Titles, headlines and diary entries (Day 1, Day 2) were not counted in 2009. My count is based on tokens, not types, and this might have been a wrong decision, since especially the texts from 2006 had quite simple, repetitive language. The same criteria have been used for both groups:

1) Ortographical error/The word does not exist:

She [skriker] after help **beacuse** she has been robbed. (E 1 - 2006).

The man **runned** to ..”(D1 - 2006).

In a family **somwhere** on earth **ther** is people who **lik** to not listen to their parents. (2:POm – 2009)

2) Ortographical error/The word is misspelt in this context:

The police didn't **now** that. (E1 – 2006).

A lot of people where looking at them. (103:NBf - 2009).

3) Morphological errors are not counted as long as the first morpheme (base) is spelt correctly:

Emely has two **bullet** in her head. (E1).

He **shoot** Emely. (E1)

But the girl didn't **wanted** to be rich. (E7)

Two boys see a thief that **have broke** a window ....(105: NBm).

The second example under point 1 above could have been accepted under category 3), but I have made a distinction between morphological errors where the wrong grammatical form exists, and forms like *runned/thinked*, which are clearly misspelt. One may argue that *runned/thinked* are not traditional errors, but rather signs of development, since these are errors that children make when they learn to speak English as their first language (Lightbown & Spada, p. 85). In this connection, I have chosen to regard them as misspelt words.

Norwegian words are deducted from the word count. It was sometimes difficult to define whether the word was a Norwegian word or not, but most often it was quite clear that the Norwegian word was used deliberately because the pupil lacked the English counterpart.

I can se three **følk**. (C8).

We wasbathing and **solte oss** when we see a **lys** under wather... (107:Nbf – 2009).

One may of course assume that Norwegian words have been used because the writer has been insecure about spelling. With that aspect in mind, the results become more “generous” when these Norwegian words are deducted. They could have been counted as errors, and that would have increased the error rate, especially for the 7<sup>th</sup> grade pupils.

Finally, a word is never counted as more than one error, which produced the following results:

- In 2006, 2701 out of 22931 tokens were misspelt, which means an error rate of 11,77 %.
- In 2009, the mean error rate had decreased to 6,76%.

I have previously referred to the fact that I have not been able to find references to longitudinal studies in English as a foreign language. But Norwegian 13-year-olds make more formal errors in English than their Dutch counterparts (Drew, 2003, p.349). Also, a survey of spelling in 10<sup>th</sup> grade documents variations from one class to another. Interestingly enough, it was found that the pupils themselves were not concerned about writing orthographically correctly (Ward, 2006). In my pilot study, the two classes that have so far been examined reveal the same internal variation, from an error rate of 5,3% in one class to 7,67 % in the other.

When L1 learner’s spelling was investigated at the two ages 11 and 15, substantial improvement was found, but not for all pupils. There was still a significant minority who were making frequent errors (Brooks et.al., 1993). The finding here corresponds with my impression at this stage of my work. Spelling has improved, but there is a considerable minority who are still struggling with the spelling of basic words.

### *Concord*

When I looked at the ratio between correct and misspelt words, concord errors were not counted as errors. Nevertheless, it is interesting to see to what extent a pupil in 7<sup>th</sup> grade manages to achieve concord between subject and verb. This is one of the error types that have been most resistant to change as far as English teacher trainer students are concerned. It often looks as if these errors have become fossilised at some time before a student goes to college, and it is of interest to know more about this possible fossilisation.

When looking at the texts in 7<sup>th</sup> grade, I see that one has to be quite careful as to how to word the questions. The pupils were asked to describe what they could see in pictures which were presented to them, and pupils naturally used the same construction when they wrote their descriptions:

I can see a woman crying.

I was deliberately trying to avoid these constructions when I was designing a text for the 10th grade. This time I had another complicating factor. The pupils used the past tense to a degree that I had not anticipated. That means that at both levels the number of sentences where you can see whether there is concord between subject and verb is substantially reduced.

In the sentences where concord is a matter, the error rate in 7<sup>th</sup> grade was 31%. It was quite obvious and also quite expected that this was too difficult for them. They were obviously experimenting with endings:

The **boys sis** a men rabiin a copp (B3)

But Thor escape from him, and the married couple been put in prison (B1)

It was therefore interesting to start looking at the texts written 3 years later. Were the pupils still at an experimental level? It is obvious that this is still a difficult matter for many of them, and a matter where they seem to be guessing. The text below may be an example of that:

The **are** some cids som **see** a tyv som steling juwel. First he knuser the window and **take** juwel and **run** away.

But the cids **follow** after him and the tyv **see** very afraid out. And he **miss** the murrock

The cids took him and slår him and the **are** som peole som looking at the tyv and smailing.

The cids took wrong becose they **are** lager a movie and the director **are** very angry on the cids. The policeman kjefter on the cids becose they **have** distroid the movie

This example is not representative, though. In three years, the error rate had been reduced from 31% to 15%, which is a substantial reduction. An error rate of 15 % is not irrelevant, of course, and it is quite clear that this is an error type that pupils will still need to work on in upper secondary. Still, the pupils have been able to halve the number of mistakes in their years in lower secondary and that is no small achievement. It would be interesting to know whether the teachers have stressed this topic or not. If one believes in a natural order in the language acquisition process (Krashen, 1988, p. 28) then it is clear that for many of my respondents, lower secondary has been a time when they have acquired this knowledge. A consequence of the natural order theory must be that teachers “need not insist on immediate accuracy” (Thornbury, 1999, p. 10). Concord is perhaps an item that primary school teachers may safely leave for the teachers in lower secondary, or will die-hard habits then have been formed?

### *Simple and Progressive Forms*

Finally, I have mapped the use of simple and progressive forms in the texts, and the results from grade 7 are illustrated in Figure 1 below. When I looked at spelling errors I had to disregard errors of this category, since they are not

spelling errors. I have listed the sentences with progressive forms into categories:

Category	Example	Figures
1) Correct progressive form, and concord between subject and verb	The lady is sitting	273
2) Correct progressive form, but no concord between subject and verb	The boys is running	63
3) Wrong progressive form, but concord between subject and verb	The boys are run	37
4) Wrong progressive form, and no concord between subject and verb	The boys is run	19
5) Wrong progressive form (no auxiliary)	Boys running	127

Figure 1: Use of simple and progressive forms

The figures show that we have 273 correct forms, and 250 incorrect forms. If these figures are at all relevant for this age group, they document that there is considerable confusion over progressive forms at the end of grade 7. It is especially category 5 that is higher than expected.

I had also planned to find out whether progressive forms were overused. However, the first test opened up for progressive forms, since they needed to tell what was happening right now, and this issue is therefore not relevant here.

Overuse of progressive forms was certainly not an issue when I looked at texts from 10<sup>th</sup> grade. In spite of the fact that average length of the so far examined 40 texts was 273 words, there were only 152 findings of progressive forms. Of these, 142 were correct, and only 9 instances were of the type that was so frequently found in grade 7, namely sentences where the auxiliary is left out. There are two alternative explanations, either that this is a form that pupils master, or that only those who master the forms use them. It is to be hoped that the first assumption is correct.

### Concluding remarks

As previously mentioned, my goal has been to document possible changes from 7<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> grade. It must be kept in mind that the results from 10<sup>th</sup> grade are based on a pilot study only. Still, the results are to some extent encouraging. At least as far as concord and use of progressive forms are concerned, progress is



quite evident. My initial results in spelling can document improvement, too, but there is a clear minority that struggle with spelling. Perhaps some of these learners would have profited from more explicit instruction and systematic training, as the study referred to in the introduction suggests (Berkel, p.256).

It remains to be seen whether this positive impression is still prevalent after all the texts have been examined. If that is the case, one may perhaps conclude that new curriculum guides with more explicit competence levels have been a step in the right direction.

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Merknad [A1]: "Riktig" stavet

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**Merknad [A2]:** Skal p. være med her?

**Formatert:** Engelsk (Storbritannia)

**Formatert:** Skrift: 13 pkt

**Feltkode endret**

**Formatert:** Skrift: 13 pkt

**Formatert:** Skrift: 13 pkt, Ingen understreking, Skriftfarge: Svart