

CS saves freshmen from English I & II

"Few people," a not particularly wise but loquacious old man once said, "go through life without having to do at least one thing they don't want to." Had the man been referring to Carolina students, he would have said they do at least two things: English I and English II.

Fortunately there is now an alternative to freshman English, the infamous twin courses which have traditionally had a reputation for turning students away from the subject, if not the language, altogether.

The alternative is Communications Skills I and II, and the teacher is not an inexperienced graduate student, but a vivacious young woman named Sara Claytor with a Masters degree in both English and Speech.

Communication Skills is designed primarily for students with writing problems. It follows the syllabus of English I and II in terms of writing assignments: students keep a daily journal and must complete the dozen or so written reports required of all freshman. Classes are small (25 students each), and the two graduate students and five student teachers who assist Claytor provide individual attention to the class members.

The novelty of the course, and probably to a large extent the success of the course, is a result of Claytor's attempt to link literary skills with oral-listening skills. Students conduct interviews, prepare oral reports from these interviews and also prepare

written reports, thereby learning composition skills through participating in oral activities.

This approach, with emphasis on the oral aspects of communication, is by no means original, but it is new for Carolina's English Department. The theory behind it centers around the fact that all communication

Communications Skills classes for the fall will meet at 1 p.m. or 3 p.m. on Mondays, Wednesday and Friday. Interested students should contact Sara Claytor at her office in Bingham Hall.

skills, including reading and writing, are based on the oral skills learned by children.

Claytor points out that very often, people with writing problems are highly verbal and are excellent speakers. The key to overcoming their difficulties, she feels, is to show them how to organize their writing in the same way they organize their speech. She does this by exposing her students to all forms of communication: film, theatre, lecture, interview, etc.; and by showing how all these interrelate.

The students not only observe, they become actively involved. Class members form groups to perform reader's theatre productions, make films and present oral reports. They become physically as well as mentally involved, and this, according to Sara Claytor, is essential for the learning

process. It also makes the course a great deal more stimulating for students than the dull routine of most regular sections of English I and II.

Although oral-listening skills are emphasized, the improvement of writing skills is the goal of the course. "I'm a realist," Claytor says, "and realistically these people must deal with the university system. The system emphasizes the written word."

The Communications Skills course was started last year in response to an observed decline in the reading and writing skills of entering freshmen. This trend is not peculiar to UNC; it has been observed at colleges from Harvard to Berkeley, and has received extensive national publicity over the past few years.

Claytor, for the most part, does not decry this phenomenon as signaling the decline of civilization, nor does she hail it as indicating a new era when the visual and audio media will dominate. She merely recognized its existence and notes that it causes a problem in the university system where reading and writing are fundamental. The purpose of her course is to help alleviate this problem.

Claytor offers only two sections of her course, which limits enrollment to 50 students. Students enroll voluntarily, although often other English teachers recommend students with particular writing problems for the course; and all students with verbal SAT scores below 500 are encouraged to take it. Two teaching assistants, Glenn Williams and Doug Riev,

both graduate students in English, and five student tutors, consisting of both graduates and undergraduates, assist Claytor. This results in a student-teacher ratio of approximately 3 to 1 for each class.

Claytor emphatically rejects the designation of her class as a "remedial course" or a "dummy course". She points out that several of her students last year were on the honor roll, and one ended his first semester with four A's and two B's. "You can't assume," she insists, "that because a person is accepted at this university, has 600 SAT Verbal and is number one in his high school class that he doesn't have writing problems."

In fact, Claytor would like everyone to be able to take her course. The cost of this, however, would be prohibitive; so she does her best to accept as many students as possible from a long waiting list. Her modest hope is that the success of Communication Skills will convince the English department to adopt her oral approach to the language and use it in all sections of freshman English.



Debra Bryan makes her point with the spoken word in a Communications Skills class.

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