

Effects of English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Instruction In College Business Communication Classes

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The purpose of this investigation was to assess the effect of ten to fifteen-minute English usage exercises presented for twelve weeks to two sections of Business Communication. Pretest and posttest comparisons of the two groups consisting of 51 subjects were evaluated according to the criteria of an English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test. Repeated measure analysis of variance was performed on the data. All statistical tests were insignificant at the .05 level of confidence. It was concluded that the ten to fifteen-minute English usage exercises presented in class for twelve weeks were ineffective in significantly changing students' pretest and posttest scores on an English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test. One of the recommendations made in the study is that administrators and educators in the schools and colleges of business incorporate a policy requiring students who are pursuing a business-related degree to take a diagnostic test that measures their English grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling skills and to earn a grade of "Average" or "Above Average" in order to graduate with a degree from their institution of business. For students failing to meet the "Average" score, they would be required to enroll in a course designed to teach basic English communication skills needed by business professional adults.

Institutions of higher learning encourage their graduates to enter the job market projecting a positive and professional image. A mainstay of upholding this image is one's ability to communicate effectively through written formats such as business memos, letters, proposals, reports, and presentations. Effective communication allows the sender to achieve receiver understanding and obtain receiver feedback by removing barriers that can potentially interfere with the communication process. Some common barriers may be lack of substance, improper word choice, abstract language, inappropriate message type, unattractive appearance of a message, and incorrect language usage (Krizan, Merrier, and Jones 2002, 17-22). This paper investigates the barrier of incorrect language usage in the specific contexts of spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation.

The major purpose of this investigation was to assess the effect of ten to fifteen-minute written mechanic exercises presented once a week for a period of twelve weeks to two college sections of Business Communication. Pretest and posttest comparisons of the two groups were evaluated according to the criteria of an English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test which included test items in the four context areas of spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation. A secondary purpose was to compare the pretest and posttest scores by gender, college ranking, and grade point average.

Hypotheses

This study examined the following null hypotheses:

Ho1: There will be no statistically significant difference between the

pretest and posttest means of students enrolled in the Business Communication section taught in the day and the students enrolled in the Business Communication section taught in the evening, as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Ho2: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest means of combined students enrolled in two sections of Business Communication, as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Ho3a: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest means in the sample groupings by gender among the combined students enrolled in two sections of Business Communication, as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Ho3b: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest means in the sample groupings by college ranking among the combined students enrolled in two sections of Business Communication, as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Ho3c: There will be no statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest means in the sample groupings by college grade point average among the combined students enrolled in two sections of Business Communication, as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Ho4: There will be no statistically significant relationship between college grade point average and the following variables: (1) pretest mean for combined sections and (2) posttest mean for combined sections.

Review of Related Literature

The misuse of spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation begins to be a barrier to effective writing in the elementary grades and continues to hinder students in the middle school and high school grades. The National Assessment of Educational Progress Report measures several basic skills, one of which is the writing ability of students in grades 4, 8, and 12. Some of the selected contexts are form, content, language, analytical/critical/evaluative thinking, organization, use of transitional elements, voice, and the mechanics of spelling, grammar, punctuation, and capitalization. According to the 1998 National Assessment of Educational Progress Report on students' writing skills, there was approximately only one-fourth of students in Grades 4, 8, and 12 met "proficient" achievement level. A mere one percent acquired the "advanced" level, and an estimate of 6 out of 10 students just attained the "basic" level of writing skills. The report further indicated 16 percent of students in Grade 4 and 22 percent in Grade 12 failed to meet the "basic" level. Upon reflection of the report's outcome assessment, Gary Phillips, the former commissioner of education statistics, attributes students' weak-performance reading levels to their poor writing skills (Wildavsky 1999). The concern of the barrier of the misuse of spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation and its interference with clear and concise writing continues into the college and adult years of students.

McCannon and Crews (1999) conducted a study that ranked 123 business communication professors' top five choices of their students' most common grammatical and punctuation errors. The survey revealed the top five grammatical errors: subject-verb agreement, sentence fragment, subject-pronoun agreement, parallel structure, and word choice. The five most common punctuation errors included the following: run-on sentence, comma splice, introductory phrase, possessive apostrophe, and compound sentence. Fifty-three percent of the professors indicated that students' grammatical errors had remained the same over the past five years, while 33 percent believed that students' grammatical errors

had increased during that time. Researchers McCannon and Crews did not specify the perceptions of the remaining 20 percent of professors. The professors may have either chosen to express no opinion about the grammatical errors made by students and/or perceived students' grammatical errors had decreased during the time period of five years. Fifty-one percent of the professors responded that they perceived students' punctuation errors had remained the same during that time period, while 39 percent reported that punctuation errors had increased. Once again, the researchers did not clarify the perceptions of the remaining 10 percent of professors. Professors may have either chosen to offer no opinion regarding the punctuation errors made by students and/or believed the punctuation errors had decreased during the five-year time frame.

Sloan (1990) looked at the frequency of errors in grammar usage, punctuation, mechanics, structural ambiguity, verbiage, and triteness along with other errors in two batches of essays—one set written by college freshmen at the end of a semester of writing and the second written by professional writers of newspapers and magazines such as *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, *Chronicle of Higher Education*, *Newsweek*, and *Time*. His findings suggested that both students and professionals equally tend to make errors. However, a noted difference was that the professionals did better in their use of mechanics and spelling than did students, which could possibly be attributed to the professional writers' editors who correct these errors prior to publication of the essays.

Best (1990) found that because some adult students lack confidence in their grammar and spelling skills that they are reluctant to write for fear of the instructor's markings of errors. Best recommended several steps for teachers to follow in order to lessen these fears: (1) present writing assignments in a non-threatening and constructive manner by first allowing students to write about familiar topics; (2) make no corrections on the first few assignments; (3) later, after students have gained more confidence, begin to point out one type of

error that repeatedly occurs in their writing; and (4) allow students to find their own errors and correct them.

The practice of peer review has been noted in some research to improve students' writings. MacLeod (1999) suggested the common technique of peer review can be enhanced by students exchanging writing assignments identified by unique codes, then posting positive feedback and corrections of grammar errors from the peers' papers to computer newsgroups or through a Netmeeting[®] session, which is an Internet connection that permits an electronic conference to be established among individuals physically located in different areas.

In the College of Business at Arizona State University, Murranka and Lynch (1999) reported on the teaching and testing of grammar and mechanics in one of four modules recently developed for a competency-based course of Fundamentals of Management Communication. The Business Writing Fundamentals Module was taught through lectures, question-and-answer sessions, and review sessions. Students were allowed three attempts on an objective test to correctly identify 70 percent or more of the questions related to selected grammar and punctuation. They knew in advance the requirements to meet for an "A," "B," and "C" composition. The faculty found that students appreciated knowing the exact competencies needed for the course.

Campbell, Brammer, and Ervin (1999) who wrote, "Style is important in business communication because the style of a business message must match the strategic objective of its author for that message to be effective and appropriate," (72) conducted a study among college students to determine whether style instruction had any effects on students' quality of writing. At the beginning of the semester prior to any style instruction, 29 business communication students were asked to write a memo arguing for a specific solution to a posed problem. During the semester, teachers allotted approximately 20 percent of class to style instruction during which time they helped students learn how to strategically use conciseness, word choice, parallelism, active/passive voice usage, and directness to

convey clear and effective business correspondence. At the end of the semester, the 29 students again were asked to write a memo in response to the same problem that they had addressed at the beginning of the semester. A qualified panel of six scored the pre-instruction and post-instruction memos. Results showed that the quality of the memos had improved following the style instruction. Strategic use of conciseness was found to be of the greatest improvement.

The barrier of incorrect use of English mechanics may continue to hinder individuals after they have graduated from college. For example, Grazian (1996) enumerated a list of troublesome word pairs such as bring/take, continual/continuous, and imply/infer. He advised that incorrect usage on certain occasions could pose a threat to someone's career development. He quotes, "My faculty colleagues and I were set to hire a Ph.D. to teach communications until she sent us a thank-you letter for granting her an interview and misused two words. She lost the job" (41).

Method

This investigation included two sections of a course entitled "Business Communication", a course requirement for all students whose major or area is in business. The course was taught in a regional, public university with its College of Business accredited by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business.

Participants

At the beginning of the fall semester, of the total 66 college undergraduates enrolled in two combined sections of a Business Communication course, 65 students completed the pretest. The enrollment in the Day Section was 32 subjects—22 males and 10 females. All 32 subjects completed the pretest of English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test. The enrollment in the Evening Section was 34 subjects with 33 of those subjects—13 males and 20 females completing the same pretest. One subject was absent.

At the end of the twelve-week period, 26 subjects—18 males and 8

females—in the Day Section, completed the posttest and the Student Profile Sheet. In the Evening Section, 25 subjects—9 males and 16 females—completed the posttest of English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test along with a Student Profile Sheet. Pretest and posttest scores were matched for 51 subjects, leaving no match for 14 subjects. In the Day Section, there was no match for six subjects—four were male and two were female. One male subject had dropped the course, two male subjects did not complete the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test, and one male subject was absent. Of the two female subjects, one did not complete the instrument and one was absent. In the Evening Section, there was no match for eight subjects—four were male and four were female. One male subject had dropped the course and three male subjects were absent. Of the four female subjects, one had dropped the course and three were absent.

Instrumentation

The Student Profile Sheet was composed by the author and consisted of items of an inventory nature. Responses to the following items were provided by subjects marking an "X" in the appropriate box: gender, cultural group, business major or area, college ranking, and cumulative college grade point average. The English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test was constructed by the university's Faculty Resource Center. The test is composed of 50 statements which are divided into four areas. The first area having 15 items measured subjects' spelling ability. A second area having 10 items measured subjects' recognition of mistakes found in sentence structures. The third area having 17 items measured subjects' recognition of grammatical errors. The last area having 8 items measured subjects' knowledge about punctuation and related mechanics. The items found on the BPA 215 Diagnostic Writing Skills Test were representative in type and proportion to the instructional material taught in the fifteen-minute written mini-lessons during the last twelve weeks of the semester.

Design

The design used to test the null hypotheses Ho1 through Ho3c was a repeated measure analysis of variance. This design was utilized to determine the effectiveness of the weekly ten to fifteen-minute written grammar exercises for the Day Section and for the Evening Section of Business Communication.

Procedure

At the beginning of the fall semester, the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test was administered to all students in two sections of Business Communication—a Day Section which met twice a week and an Evening Section which met one night per week. Upon approval by the university’s Institutional Review Board to conduct the research, the pretest was administered by the same instructor in the two sections of Business Communication. (The pretest is traditionally a requirement for enrollment in the course.) At the end of the semester, the test administrator, being the author of this study, read an oral script at the end of the fall semester to each of the two sections of business communication informing the subjects of their rights to decide whether to participate in completing the posttest of the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test and the Student Profile Sheet. The results constitute the pretest and posttest scores as well as some of the responses from the Student Profile Sheets for two class sections and, combined, provided the data necessary to address the null hypotheses of this investigation. The instructor of these sections has been teaching the Business Communication course for 20 years. Subjects had approximately 45 minutes at the beginning of the fall semester to complete the pretest and 50 minutes at the end of the semester to complete the same test along with the Student Profile.

For twelve weeks of the semester, all students received ten to fifteen-minute written grammar exercises either at the beginning or at the end of each class meeting. The exercises were taught from McDougal Littell’s (2001) workbook entitled *Language Network: Grammar, Usage, and Mechanics*

Workbook, Grade Level 12 along with additional exercises designed by the instructor. The exercises used for in-class instruction were similar to the test items in the pretest and posttest in terms of content, level of difficulty, and format of questioning. For the remaining period of class time, the traditional textbook topics of business communication were addressed such as the writing of resumes, application letters, proposals, and business reports.

Results

Repeated measure analysis of variance was performed on all the pretest and posttest data through the SAS program. Statistical tests were insignificant at the .05 level of confidence.

One result is failure to reject the Ho1. A repeated ANOVA indicated no significant difference between the pretest and posttest means of students enrolled in Day or Evening Sections ($p = 0.33$ for Day Section; $p = 1.00$ for Evening Section). Although not statistically different, it is noted in Table 1 that the posttest mean of 33.31 of the Day Section increased considerably from the pretest mean of 31.81, while the posttest

mean of 32.44 of the Evening Section remained unchanged from its pretest mean of 32.44. Perhaps students in the Day Section scored higher on the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test than did students in the Evening Section because they had received approximately 15 minutes of grammar instruction semiweekly, while students in the Evening Section received the 15 minutes of instruction only once per week. In addition to reporting the means, Table 1 also provides data relating to the standard deviations and the minimum and maximum scores for the Day and Evening Sections.

A second result is failure to reject the Ho2. A repeated ANOVA indicated no significant difference between the pretest and posttest means of combined students enrolled in Day or Evening sections ($p = 0.38$). It is noted in Table 1 that the pretest mean for the combined sections is 32.12, while the posttest mean is 32.88.

A third result is failure to reject the Ho3a, Ho3b, and Ho3c. A repeated ANOVA indicated no significant difference between the pretest and posttest means is found in the sample

TABLE 1
Scores on the English grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling test for day section, evening section, and combined sections

English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test	Mean		Standard Deviation		Minimum		Maximum	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Day Section (possible score range: 0 through 50)	31.81	33.31	6.19	5.55	11.00	22.00	43.00	44.00
Evening Section (possible score range: 0 through 50)	32.44	32.44	4.68	6.57	24.00	20.00	41.00	43.00
Combined Sections (possible score range: 0 through 50)	32.12	32.88	5.46	6.03	11.00	20.00	43.00	44.00

NOTE: N = 26 for day section
N = 25 for evening section
P = 1.00 for evening section

N = 51 for combined sections
P = 0.33 for day section
P = 0.38 for combined sections

TABLE 2
Scores on the English grammar, usage, mechanics,
and spelling test for gender by combined sections

English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test	Mean		Standard Deviation		Minimum		Maximum	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Gender-Male by Combined Sections (possible score range: 0 through 50)	33.00	34.04	3.79	5.38	27.00	22.00	43.00	43.00
Gender-Female by Combined Sections (possible score range: 0 through 50)	31.33	31.85	6.57	6.47	11.00	20.00	41.00	44.00

NOTE: N = 51 for combined sections P = 0.16 for combined sections

TABLE 3
Scores on the English grammar, usage, mechanics, and
spelling test for college ranking by combined sections

English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test	Mean		Standard Deviation		Minimum		Maximum	
	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post	Pre	Post
Sophomore (possible score range: 0 through 50)	31.71	30.28	4.34	5.58	20.00	20.00	37.00	38.00
Junior (possible score range: 0 through 50)	33.20	34.00	5.04	5.83	24.00	22.00	43.00	43.00
Senior (possible score range: 0 through 50)	28.86	33.86	8.19	7.22	11.00	22.00	35.00	44.00

NOTE: N = 51 for combined sections P = 0.19

TABLE 4
Scores on the English grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling test
for grade point average (GPA) by combined sections

Mean GPA	Standard Deviation	Minimum	Maximum
3.35	1.23	1.00	4.00

NOTE: Possible score range: 0.00 through 4.00 N = 51 combined sections

groupings among the combined students enrolled in two sections of the business communication by gender ($p = 0.16$), by college ranking ($p = 0.19$), or by grade point average. The statistics for the means, standard deviations, minimums, and maximums for gender by combined sections are found in Table 2, for college ranking by combined sections in Table 3, and for grade point average by combined sections in Table 4.

In Table 3, it is seen that the pretest mean of 28.86 for the senior ranking is considerably lower than the pretest means of 31.71 for the sophomore or 33.20 for the junior rankings. Perhaps one explanation for the seniors' lower pretest mean is that the seniors were uninterested in the business communications course at the beginning of the course and only were enrolled in the course because it was a requisite for their attainment of a college business degree. However, after having experienced the instruction presented in the course, the seniors may have found it to be a positive use of their time; hence, they responded more favorably to the posttest, thereby increasing the mean score to 33.86.

In Table 4, it is noted that students' grade point averages were acquired from their Student Profile Sheets. This may suggest that the mean grade point average of 3.35, with a 4.00 being a perfect mean, may have been overstated by students.

A final result is failure to reject the H_0 . Correlation analysis was performed to analyze the relationships between college grade point average and two variables. These variables include pretest and posttest means for combined sections and differences in pretest and posttest means. Spearman correlation coefficients were calculated and none of the correlations are significant. See Table 5 for correlation coefficients and confidence levels.

Discussion

For the twelve weeks, students who were enrolled in two sections of Business Communication were exposed to fifteen-minute written exercises in the areas of grammar, usage, mechanics, and spelling. Pretest and posttest means of the English Grammar, Usage, Mechan-

TABLE 5
Correlation between GPA and other variables
described below for combined students
enrolled in day and evening sections

Variable	r	P
Pretest mean score	-0.08	0.54
Posttest mean score	-0.08	0.55
Differences in pretest and posttest mean score	-0.05	0.73

Note: r = spearman correlation coefficients

N = 51 for combined sections

*p < .05

ics, and Spelling Test were compared in this investigation. The instrument measured students' understanding of spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation. There was no significant difference between the pretest and posttest means. This finding indicated that the written grammar exercises were ineffective in increasing students' understanding of spelling, sentence structure, grammar, and punctuation. In addition, no relationships were found to exist between students' college grade point average in terms of students' pretest and posttest means for combined sections.

Conclusions and Recommendations

Conclusions

The evidence derived from analyses of the data supports the following conclusions.

1. Ten to fifteen-minute written grammar exercises at the beginning or end of each Business Communication class meeting during a twelve-week period yielded no significant increase in student knowledge in the areas of spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation as measured by the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test. The lack of improvement in the four context areas may be explained in several ways.

- (A) Students may have had insufficient instruction in these areas in their elementary, middle school, secondary, and prior college education at the time they enrolled in the Business Communication course. Thus, it is unlikely students could acquire the necessary skills and understanding in ten to fifteen-minute exercises for a twelve-week period to score a proficient grade on the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.
- (B) The ten to fifteen-minute exercises during a twelve-week time period may have been too short in duration for students to learn and apply their understanding in the four areas.
- (C) Students may lack interest in putting forth effort to perform well on the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test since there is no academic credit, grade, or reward associated with their attained scores.

2. Regardless of students' gender, college ranking, or college grade point average, it may be concluded from this study that the written grammar exercises contributed no significant increase to students' knowledge as measured by the

English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test.

Recommendations

Recommendations for further research and future attempts to increase students' knowledge in the four context areas of spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation are presented below, based on findings and conclusions in this study:

1. Since students in the Day and Evening Sections of Business Communication exhibited no increase in knowledge in the four context areas of spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation, it is important that administrators and educators in the schools and colleges of business to be aware of how proficient their students are in these four context areas. It is recommended that their institutions incorporate a policy requiring students pursuing a business-related degree to take a test similar to the English Grammar, Usage, Mechanics, and Spelling Test by which students should earn a grade of "Average" or "Above Average". Those failing to meet the "Average" or the "Above Average" score would be required to supplement their course load with a course designed to teach basic English communication skills in the areas of spelling, sentence construction, grammar, and punctuation needed by business professional adults, while those earning an acceptable grade would continue their pursuit of a business-related degree.
2. Because the students in this study did not report an increase in their knowledge of the four context areas, replication of this study implementing new approach to grammar instruction seems warranted.
3. Since 51 students may not be a substantive number of subjects for this investigation, it is recommended that the study be replicated using a greater number of students.

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