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Innovation in English Grammar Instruction – Phase II

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January 9, 2008

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Project overview

The research undertaken with the support of this Pilot Innovation Fund (PIF) grant was part of a larger, two-phase project. Phase I, supported by a Curriculum Innovation Fund (CIF) grant in the Winter Term of 2006, consisted of a literature review and the creation of alternative grammar instructional materials. Phase II of the project consisted of implementing and testing the alternative materials in a pilot-control study conducted during the 2006 fall term.

Traditional types of grammar study materials were used for the control group. These control materials consisted, as grammar study materials typically do, of standard sentences and passages on various everyday topics. The experimental grammar materials, created under the CIF grant, were intended to be humorous and entertaining for students to read and work with, but otherwise needed to correspond with control materials in terms of the content tested and level of difficulty.

The study was conducted using students enrolled in three sections of a first-year Business Communications course, COMM 1023, each section having about 45 students. The study specifically focused on the lab portion of the course, which is delivered through FanshaweOnline (FOL). Implementation included a number of steps:

- Reviewing the alternative teaching materials to ensure they adhered to the necessary criteria, i.e. that readers considered them to be more interesting or entertaining to read than traditional grammar materials.
- Making the alternative materials available in an e-learning context (FOL Lab Quizzes)
- Surveying students to gather information about attitudes in the control and experimental groups toward studying English, communications and grammar (surveys were conducted at the beginning and end of the course in the sections taking part in the study).
- Tracking and comparing behavior and performance in the control and experimental groups.

Evaluation of control and experimental materials

It was necessary to confirm that the alternative materials were, in fact, considered to be more humorous or interesting by students than traditional materials. To do so, selections of control and experimental materials were presented to students side by side on a survey form. About 30 students enrolled in COMM 1023 during the summer of 2006, and in COMM 1030 during the fall of 2006, were asked to indicate which of two similar sentences they would prefer to read. For the several side-by-side examples provided, students indicated a strong preference for the alternative materials, even when the alternative sentences contained more words and therefore would have taken longer to read.

The materials evaluation survey also included lists of adjectives students could use to apply to both the alternative materials and the traditional ones. Students typically chose words like “interesting,” “fresh,” “entertaining,” “funny” and “silly” to describe the content of the alternative sentences. Students were more likely to choose words such as “boring,” “dull” and “horrible” to describe the content of the traditional grammar material sentences. From the above procedure, it was concluded that the alternative grammar teaching materials were, in fact, what they were intended to be.

Measures of behaviour and performance

It is possible to generate reports on a number of dimensions of student behaviour and performance in course-related activities on FOL, including completion and non-completion of assignments, time spent using the system, quiz scores, etc. This study compared the control and experimental groups for the following indicators:

- **Levels of participation in optional practice exercises.** Each of the four grammar lab assignments for COMM 1023 consisted of an optional practice quiz as well as the graded quiz that would count toward the student’s overall lab mark. Levels of participation in optional activities could be interpreted as an indicator of student engagement.
- **Numbers of attempts.** Each online quiz, practice and graded quizzes alike, gave students the opportunity to make up to three attempts. The highest of the three attempts on the graded quizzes would be the only score that would count toward the students’ grades. Again, students’ willingness to make multiple attempts at an activity would provide an indication of their level of involvement in the learning process.
- **Quiz scores.** Quiz score comparisons for both the practice and graded quizzes provide a key performance measure.
- **Final grammar quiz scores.** The control and experimental groups took a common final grammar quiz at the end of the course, and these scores offer an additional measure of student performance.

FOL data for control and experimental groups

The charts below provide an overview of the differences seen in FOL reports between the control and experimental groups in terms of student behaviour and performance.

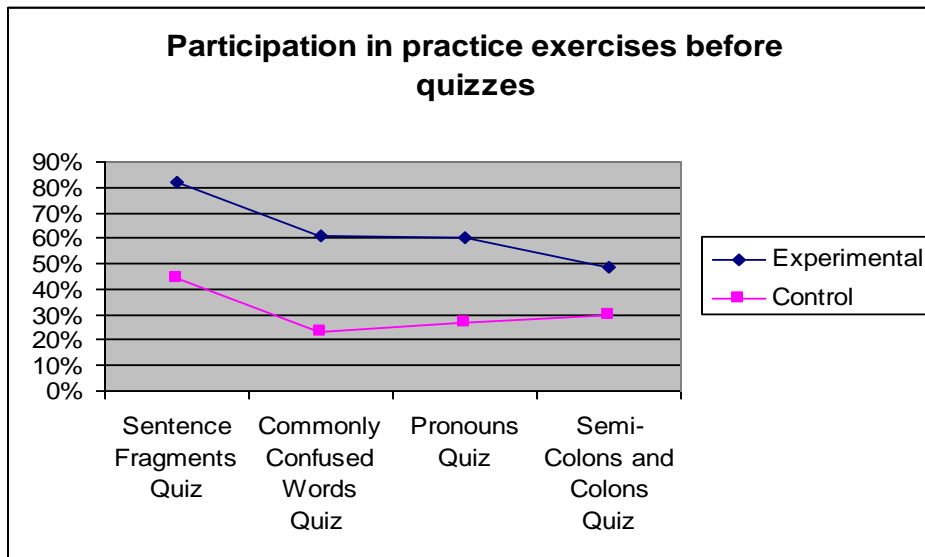


Figure 1 As seen in Figure 1 above, students in the experimental group were much more likely to have completed optional practice exercises before tackling the graded quizzes. Although the difference in this level of optional activity shrank as the course progressed, it remained noticeable throughout.

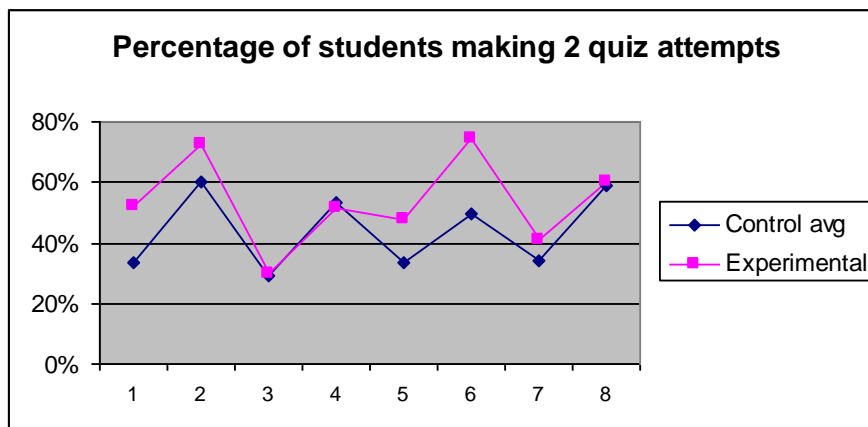


Figure 2 Although students are told that they can make up to three attempts before their grammar quiz grade will be recorded, many do not take full advantage of this opportunity. However, Figure 2 demonstrates that students in the experimental group were more likely, on the whole, to make a second attempt.

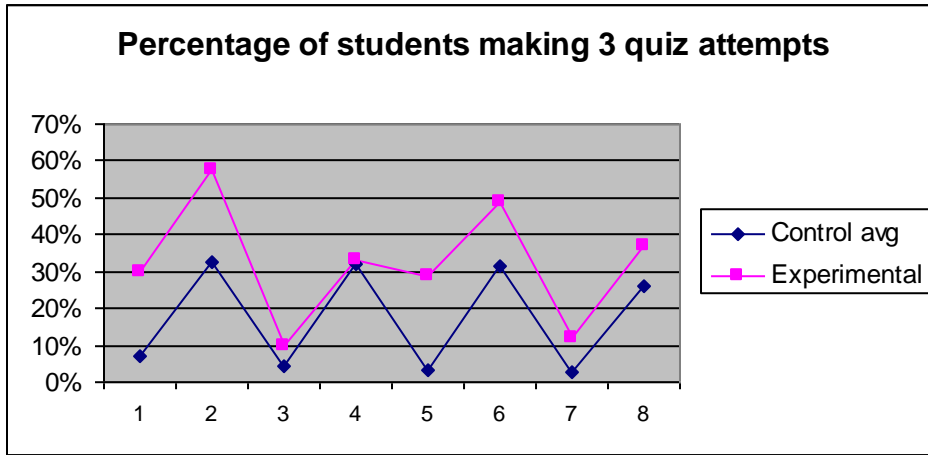


Figure 3 Although we see more students in the experimental group making second attempts, we also see in Figure 3 that experimental group students were much more likely to make a third attempt.

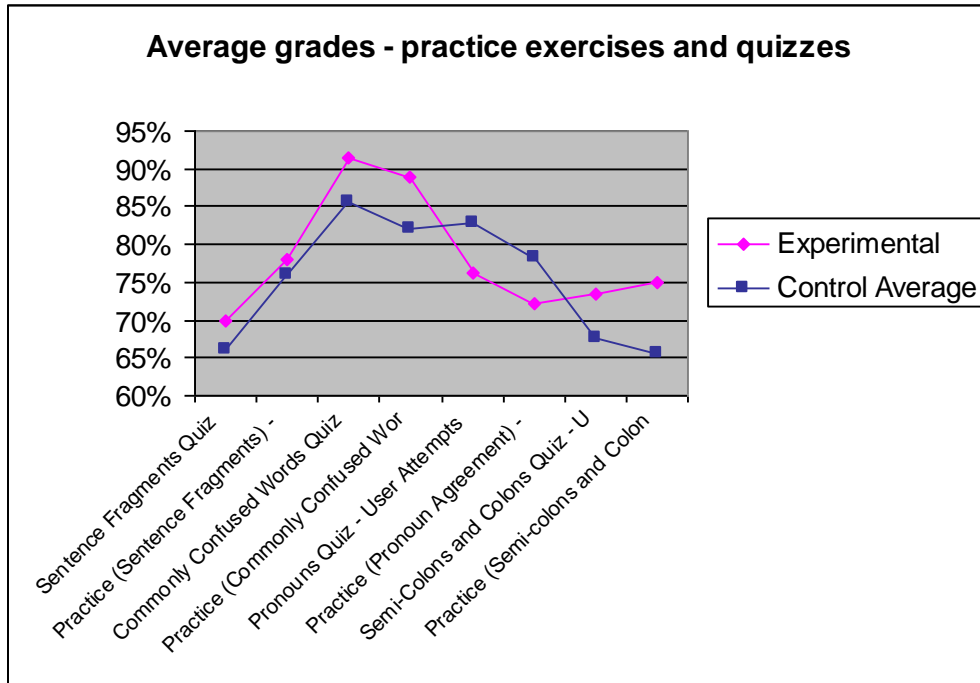


Figure 4 Although as educators, we typically care about student behaviour, performance, or grade scores, is the measure most readily identified as proof of learning. As we see in Figure 4 above, student performance in the experimental group is higher on the whole on both the practice exercises and the graded quizzes. One exception emerges: the topic of pronouns shows the opposite trend. See the section below entitled “The second pilot” for a further discussion on this topic.

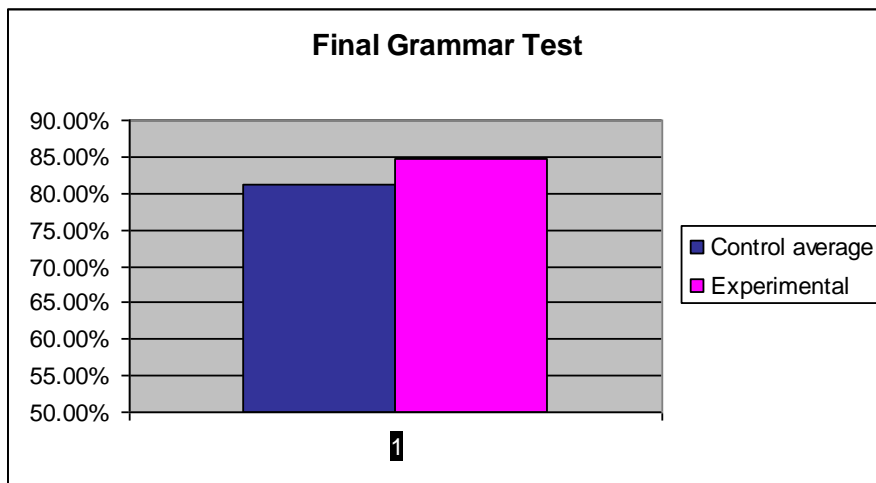


Figure 5 We can observe the same trend in Figure 5 as for Figure 4. In the Final Grammar Test, the experimental group shows higher average scores than the control group.

Survey data comparisons

The pilot sought to survey students at the beginning and end of the course to assess whether using the alternative grammar materials would have a measurable impact on their attitudes about taking English and Communications courses in general, and about taking courses that had a grammar component.

Pre-course surveys were completed by most students; unfortunately, the class schedule made it difficult to survey many of the students at the end of the course. As a result, a limited amount of post-course survey data makes it difficult to draw specific conclusions. However, the survey element is currently being repeated in a second pilot, along with all other aspects of the research study, to gather additional data (see the following section for details). It is hoped that more indicative data will result from this follow-up.

The second pilot

The research instruments and method have been fine-tuned somewhat for the purposes of the second pilot, which is currently underway. The second pilot has proceeded much as before, using two sections of COMM 1023. A few noteworthy differences with the second pilot are explained below:

Alternative grammar lab explanations for each topic. Although the control and experimental groups in the first pilot completed different practice and graded quizzes, the explanations of each grammar topic were identical between control and experimental sections. For the second pilot, alternative (funny) explanations of the grammar topics have been provided in addition to the alternative practice and graded quiz materials. It is hoped that the addition of this element may enhance the previously-observed differences between control and experimental behaviours and performance.

Pronoun materials. As observed above in conjunction with Figure 4, the topic of pronouns showed a distinct reversal of the overall trend observable in student performance between the control and experimental groups. A review revealed that the experimental pronoun materials did not correspond as well with the control materials or the explanations of the topic as was the

case for the other grammar topics. The experimental materials for this particular topic could be objectively observed to be more difficult in a general sense as well as somewhat confusing in comparison with the control materials. The experimental pronoun materials were revised prior to their re-implementation in the second pilot; there is now much better correspondence in relevance and level of difficulty between the control and experimental materials for pronouns.

Attitude surveys. As indicated above, the pre- and post-course survey from the first pilot was insufficient and inconclusive, making it difficult to draw solid conclusions about student attitudes. Efforts are currently underway to ensure this aspect of the second pilot provides sufficient data for comparison.

Interim conclusions

Current data suggest that the alternative grammar materials may positively influence student behaviour. This conclusion is based on the fact that students in the experimental group showed higher levels of participation in the learning activities, suggesting a greater level of engagement. Students in the experimental group also received somewhat higher test scores, which appears to indicate performance is improved through the use of the experimental materials. Although attitude survey data have proven inconclusive thus far, it will surely be of interest to study all further data produced by the second pilot.

Thanks and acknowledgements

The progress made thus far would not have been possible but for the assistance of a number of key individuals. I would like to thank Whitney Hoth for his support of this project from its inception; Ruth Rodgers and Deb Wilkin for their timely advice and encouragement with proposals and other administrative aspects of the project; Roger Fisher for his ongoing and multi-dimensional assistance; Erick Desjardins and Denise Blay for their contributions toward implementation; and Leslie McIntosh and Greg Weiler for their early input and for fostering a positive environment for innovation.