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A STUDY TO DETERMINE WHETHER THE TEACHING OF BASIC GRAMMAR SKILLS IN BUSINESS COMMUNICATION CLASSES IMPROVES STUDENTS BUSINESS LETTER WRITING

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to determine whether students write better business letters as a result of studying basic grammar in a university business communication class. Two hundred eighty-nine students participated in this study. Five or six 50-minute periods of basic grammar were taught to the 1980 Fall semester classes, whereas no grammar was taught to the 1981 Spring semester classes. A pre-test and post-test business writing letter problem was given to both groups. Pre-test and post-test mean scores for students who studied basic grammar were compared to the pre-test mean scores for students who did not study basic grammar. In both comparisons the difference was not significant. A major recommendation is that a specified period of time should not be spent on teaching basic grammar to students studying letter writing in business communication classes.

INTRODUCTION

There seems to be some controversy as to whether business communication students do in fact write better business letters when basic grammar is included in their business communication classes. Presently, each semester five or six 50-minute business communication classes at Boise State University (Boise, Idaho) are devoted to teaching basic grammar skills.

PURPOSE

The purpose of this independent study is to determine whether students write better business letters as a result of studying basic grammar in a university business communication class. The hypothesis is that students do not write better business letters as a result of studying basic grammar.

DEFINITION OF TERMS

The terms used in this report which need definition are business communication class, business letter, and basic grammar.

Business communication class. The general objectives of the business communication class at Boise State University are:

1. To learn how the communication function is a vital link in the processing of information in a business organization.
2. To learn how to distinguish between effective and ineffective business communication.
3. To review and refine the use of technical and mechanical aspects of communication.

4. To learn how to write specific types of business communications, both internal and external.

Business letter. Teaching business letter writing is part of each business communication class at Boise State University. Students receive instruction on how to correctly write several kinds of business letters such as acknowledgement, application, bad news, claims, collection, complaint, conciliatory, credit, and the resume. Teaching business letter writing includes instruction in letter format, sentence structure, paragraph structure, grammar, and logic.

Basic grammar. For the purpose of this study, basic grammar is defined as instruction in kinds of sentences, agreement of parts of speech, agreement of antecedent and pronouns, agreement by case, and verb tense.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

No studies were found that dealt specifically with the issue of whether university students write better business letters as a result of studying basic grammar. However, a few studies offered recommendations regarding the content of the business communication curriculum, along with recommendations for business communication skills that business people prefer.

In an article written by A. M. Tibbetts [3], "Do Your Students Need Grammar," the following statements were made:

1. Avoid the theoretical study of grammar. Textbooks tend to lead us all astray on this point. Even the best give more theoretical work than is necessary. I have yet to see a business writing student who improved his papers by learning to identify, say, participial phrases. However, books are definitely useful as reference works.
2. Where avoid the technical terms of grammar. Clause, phrases gerund, absolutes conjunctive adverb--if such stuff has not sunk into students heads by now, it probably never will.
3. Try to improve writing at the SENTENCE LEVEL of grammar. I believe that this is unusually important. Grammar texts-- any many books on writing--tend to be atomistic.
4. Make a short list of students major errors in "non-statement grammar" and work on them.
5. Ignore those problems in grammar seem to make no difference. For example, the distinctions between who and whom, shall and will. You might also consider ignoring the grammar of logical purity.

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6. Ignore of these suggestions “sooner than anything outright barbarous.” The quoted words are George Orwell's, from “Politics and the English Language.” Students should always be ready to break our rules and suggestions on grammar, as we should be ready to break our own.

Tibbetts indicated that we teachers of business writing sometimes fall into an either/or fallacy; that grammar does not matter, or that it matters hugely. He feels it does matter, but mainly as the support or bony structure of decent writing.

A study done by Hilda F. Allred and Joseph F. Clark [1] indicated that the areas in which beginning employees who were college graduates and undergraduate business students had most difficulty were: conciseness, making meaning clear, making message accomplish purpose, spelling, sentence construction, organization, and paragraph construction. Their findings indicate a need for a college business communication course to stress the planning and organizing processes as well as the syntax and grammar-related activities.

Maxine Barton Hart [2] conducted a study to determine which of two different approaches should be taught to best meet the objectives of the business communication class. An experimental group received formal instruction in theory and a reduction in writing assignments. A control group received no formal instruction in theory and had 32 percent more writing assignments. Results of tests indicated a significant difference in knowledge of theory and analytical ability in favor of the experimental group. No significant differences were found in scores on objective tests on principles and on writing ability.

METHODOLOGY

One hundred forty-two students from six 1980 Fall semester business communication classes at Boise State University, and 147 students from six 1981 Spring semester communication classes at Boise State University participated in this study. All students completed the course. Six classes from the 1980 Fall semester were selected from 12 classes of business communication, and six classes from the 1981 Spring semester were selected from 12 classes of business communication. The business communication classes had approximately 25 students in each class.

Most students participating in this study were freshmen and sophomores. All students in the College of Business at Boise State University are required to take business communication. The College of Business at Boise State University offers majors in the Departments of Accounting, Economics, Information/Decision Sciences and Finance, Management, and Marketing and Administrative Services.

Four teachers taught either one or two of these classes each semester. Five or six 50-minute periods of basic grammar were taught to the 1980 Fall semester classes, whereas no structured time periods of basic grammar were taught to the 1981 Spring semester classes. All students who participated in the study were given a pre-test at the beginning of the semester, and a post-test at the end of the semester to measure their business letter writing skills. The pre-test and post-test were a business writing letter problem. Teachers

who teach business communication read the pre-tests and post-tests. Each letter was read by two teachers, and the scores averaged for each letter. The maximum score a letter could receive was 30 points. The letters were graded on letter format, sentence structure, paragraph structure, grammar, and logic. The readers did not know whether they were reading pre-test or post-test letters or which semester the letters were written. The readers read no letters of students who were in their classes. T-tests were used to determine if the difference of the two means was significant.

FINDINGS

The following table compares the pre-test and post-test scores for students who studied basic grammar to the pre-test mean scores for students who did not study basic grammar. The t-test was used to determine if the difference of the two means is significant.

TABLE 1

	Students Who Studied Basic Grammar	Students Who Did Not Study Basic Grammar	t-Value
Pre-Test Mean Scores	20.97	20.57	1.39*
Post-Test Mean Scores	22.31	22.11	.70*

*The above table shows that the t-value is not significant at the .95 level.

The mean inter-rater score spread was 2.13.

CONCLUSIONS

Three conclusions were drawn from this study.

First, both groups did as well on the pre-test and as well on the post-test. A reason for this might be that students entered the class with sufficient grammar skills to write business letters.

Second, students who did not study grammar did as well on the post-test as students who did study grammar. A reason for this might be that more time was devoted to other areas such as letter format, kinds of letters, logic, etc.

Third, the hypothesis of this study was met.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Since the purpose of this study was to determine whether university students write better business letters as a result of studying basic grammar in university business communication classes, the results have been given to the business communication teachers at Boise State University. It is hoped that the results and the awareness of this study will help them when planning the curriculum of future business communication classes. The results of this study can be applied to business letter writing only. It is recommended that a specified period of time should not be spent on teaching basic grammar to students studying

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letter writing in business communication classes.

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, it is felt that further studies are needed to:

1. Determine students basic grammar skills at the beginning and at the end of the semester when they study basic grammar and when they do not study basic grammar.
2. Determine how students perform on letter writing with good grammar skills vs. poor grammar skills based on a grammar test.
3. Determine if teaching basic grammar improves writing skills in other written communications.

REFERENCES

- [1] Allred, Hilda F. and Joseph F. Clark, "Written Communications, Problems and Priorities," The Journal of Business Communication, XV-11, Winter 1976, p. 31.
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