DOES USING AN INTERNET BASED PROGRAM FOR IMPROVING STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN GRAMMAR AND PUNCTUATION REALLY WORK IN A COLLEGE COMPOSITION COURSE?

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This study investigated the impact of an Internet based program designed to improve basic writing skills on grammar and punctuation scores on an English Competency Test. Three groups in a small Midwestern university’s freshmen composition class were tested: a control group (Test Group 1), which did not use the program; and two treatment groups: treatment group 1 (Test Group 2), which used the program on its own, and treatment group 2 (Test Group 3), which used the program in conjunction with correcting rough drafts of assigned papers. Results did not indicate a statistically significant difference among the groups; however, because Test Group 3 had higher scores than the other two groups and because students surveyed believed that the program had improved their skills, more research on the effect of these types of programs is warranted.

English teachers at both secondary and postsecondary levels have long labored to teach students not only to compose organized, logical, and interesting essays, but also to speak and write in prescribed standard English. For years this latter area, that of basic writing skills, was taught in a rigorous and mechanical fashion with strict rules being emphasized regarding punctuation and grammar. Under the more traditional way of correcting student mistakes in punctuation and grammar, teachers characteristically marked errors in a complex and often distant manner. The large number of written comments made by teachers, often done in a technical sort of shorthand, may have confused students and created a negative feeling about the assignment (Osternolm, 1986; Dvorak; Zamel, 1985; Raimes, 1983). Semke (1984), in her well titled article, “Effects of the Red Pen,” found that the typical heavy mark ups made by teachers were not effective and, in many cases, had a negative effect. Research by Weaver, 1996, on the topic even suggested the teaching of grammar and punctuation as a formal system, divorced of context, “does not serve any practical purpose” (15). Earlier studies by Hillock and Smith, 1991, and McQuade, 1980, concurred. Barnett, 1989, especially lamented of this problem, observing,

Research on first and second language writing is documenting what we already know as teachers: students are frustrated by seeing compositions marked up, and they rarely incorporate all our suggestions or corrections even when we ask them to rewrite (or is it recopy?) their papers. No matter how we correct student work, succeeding compositions do not seem appreciably better. Meager results after so much time spent correcting frustrates us, too (p. 9).
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Rosen’s ideas (1987) about more effective ways to improve student punctuation and grammar reflected an important shift in teaching basic writing skills. In this approach the focus was placed on content rather than form. Specifically, five essential assumptions were stressed regarding the nature of the composing process. These assumptions provided the underlying rationale for this shift.

1. Writing is a complex process, recursive rather than linear in nature, involving thinking, planning, discovering what to say, drafting, and re-drafting.

2. Learning to use the correct mechanical and grammatical forms of written language is a developmental process and as such is slow, unique to each student, and does not progress in an even uphill pattern.

3. The mechanical and grammatical skills of writing are learned when a writer needs to use them for real purposes to produce writing that communicates a message he or she wants someone else to receive.

4. Responsibility for the correctness of any given piece of writing should fall mainly on the student, not the teacher.

5. Students learn to write by writing, and they learn to write correctly by writing, revising, and proofreading their own work—with some help or direction from the teacher when necessary (pp. 63-64).

The idea of teaching basic writing skills by emphasizing content was developed even further by Greg Bowe (Twigg, 2006). Bowe, formerly the director of the Florida International University undergraduate writing program, instituted what he called “writing circles” in the remedial course, entitled Basic Writing. Under this program, composition classes of 25 students were divided into five groups of five writing circles. Each group met with the professor one hour per week to discuss the group’s writing, getting feedback from others in the group as well as from the instructor. The other two hours of weekly class time students used a computer program which provided prewriting exercises. Both students and teachers believed students’ writing was improved both in content and form with this arrangement. Participants felt that more direct time with the teacher was a help, and teachers felt that they did not have to spend as much time grading the papers once editing within the group was finished. The system, however, was never strictly tested in terms of actual effectiveness, and the program was dropped when Bowe moved to another position.

One of the biggest problems with models such as Rosen’s and Bowe’s is that they are expensive processes requiring more time and more instructors than traditional methods of teaching basic writing. Occasionally, colleges and universities have hired more adjunct faculty to teach remedial courses as a way to alleviate the problem of poor student writing. However, this has been a cost prohibitive practice for smaller schools, as well as larger universities in hard financial times. Thus English departments and instructors, under pressure to meet college financial realities, often still seek to find the magic bullet of a quicker, more technical way to...
improve basic writing skills. Recently some computer software programs seemed to at last offer that silver bullet.

*Computer Software and Basic Writing Skills*

In the last two decades a number of software programs have appeared which purported to be able to improve student writing, including grammar and punctuation. Vernon (2000) carried out an extensive study concerning the use of word processing software programs in education and the way teachers perceived the effectiveness of these programs. He specifically looked at the Microsoft Word 2000 and Corel Word Perfect 9.0 programs in regard to improving student writers’ punctuation and grammar. These programs typically pointed out errors such as sentence fragments, run-on sentences, non-parallel or incorrect sentence structure, overuse of conjunctions, and incorrect shifts in sentence structure. Surprisingly, Vernon found many writing instructors were uncomfortable with these correction systems. The researcher then pointed out several ways negative concerns about using such software programs might be lessened. Vernon failed, however, to actually try to measure the effectiveness of these kinds of software packages. More recent research concerning the effectiveness of such software has focused upon improving content as opposed to improving basic writing skills. Messineo and Deollos (2005); Moyano (2005); Hueneus (2003); Moore (2005); and Katzir (1994); failed to give a clear indication of whether or not grammar checkers, for example, actually improved students’ writing form.

Several on-line programs have been developed in recent years to assess writing skills of students and provide them with individually dictated remediation in their areas of need. The program chosen for this study provided an individualized assessment of students’ skills in grammar, punctuation, and mechanics, in which the majority of college students have needed some improvement. After the assessment, the program assigned students lessons and exercises according to their diagnosed areas of need. This study sought to determine whether a particular on-line program of this type improved English Competency Test scores of Composition II students in the areas of grammar and punctuation.

*Methodology*

English Competency Test scores were compared between a Control Group (Test Group 1), which did not use the online program, and a Treatment Group 1 (Test Group 2), which did use the program. A separate comparison of scores was made between the Control Group (Test Group 1), which did not use the program, and Treatment Group 2 (Test Group 3), which used the program in conjunction with correcting rough drafts of their papers. Calculations were used to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in the grammar and punctuation scores between the Control Group and both Treatment Groups. In addition, participants who used the program completed a Likert scale survey and answered two open ended questions to measure their perceptions of how using the program affected their grammar and punctuation skills. Treatment
Group 2 had an added question concerning the use of the program along with identification of errors in its rough drafts.

Findings and Discussion

No statistical difference in English Competency Test scores in grammar and punctuation was shown when the Control Group (Test Group 1) and Treatment Group 1 (Test Group 2) were compared. No statistical difference in English Competency Test scores in grammar and punctuation was shown when the Control Group (Test Group 1) and Treatment Group 2 (Test Group 3) were compared. Finally, no statistical difference in English Competency Test scores in grammar and punctuation was shown when the Treatment Group 1 (Test Group 2) and Treatment Group 2 (Test Group 3) were compared. Without a statistically significant difference in the English Competency Test grammar and punctuation scores between the Control Group and Treatment Groups 1 and 2, this study appeared to add still another report on a particular method of teaching form which failed to reveal definitively positive findings. However, some factors in the study should be examined in the light of practical implications for composition teachers.

Although the study did not show a statistically significant difference in the grammar and punctuation scores of students who used the program, it did show an increase in Test Group 3. In addition, the positive response of the students to the program, especially those who used it in conjunction with correcting errors in their papers, suggested that the program could still have potential benefits for students. Twenty-one Likert scale surveys were completed by students in Treatment Group 1, (Test Group 2). Two questions on the survey were designed to determine whether or not the null hypothesis would be rejected. Question 13 stated, “Using the online program improved my grammar and punctuation skills.” Out of the twenty-one students surveyed in Treatment Group 1, nineteen, or 90%, gave positive responses. Question 16 stated, “Using the program will give me more confidence on the English Competency Test.” On this question, eighteen, or 86%, gave positive responses.

In Treatment Group 2, twenty-one students filled out surveys; however, one student did not answer Questions 13 and 16, so that survey was not used, and only twenty were analyzed. In this second treatment group, nineteen out of twenty surveys utilized, or 95%, gave positive responses to the statement that using the program had improved their grammar and punctuation skills, and all twenty, or 100%, gave a positive response to the statement that indicated they would feel more confident taking the English Competency Test because of using the program.

Recommendations

Because of the improvement of scores in Test Group 3 and because of the positive responses of students to the program, especially those who used the online program in conjunction with errors in their rough drafts, additional research is warranted. Such studies should be conducted with a larger sample group regarding the
effect of this program, or similar programs, on the grammar and punctuation skills of freshman composition students. Further studies might consider using a paired sample study or a pre- and post- test methodology with an instrument that students are required to take as part of the course. Since Treatment Group 2 gave a 95% positive response to the benefits of using the program in conjunction with their papers, this approach could be incorporated throughout the treatment. Further studies might also examine control variables, such as age, gender, major, socio-economic level, and English as a second language status.

References


