

Preparing undergraduate students to be successful writers: Exploring the Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation skills of students identified as potentially ‘at risk’

Keith McNaught^a and Geoffrey Shaw^b

a. Institute for Ethics and Society, University of Notre Dame Australia

b. Academic Enabling and Support Centre, University of Notre Dame Australia

Email: keith.mcnaught@nd.edu.au and geoff.shaw@nd.edu.au

The utility of direct instruction in the mechanics of language for improving students’ writing has long been a topic of debate among linguists and learning advisers. The research recounted here arose from concerns of staff working with enabling program students on the Fremantle Campus of the University of Notre Dame Australia (UNDA). Students were frustrated with their limited knowledge about spelling, punctuation, and grammar, and staff wondered whether this gap was in fact responsible for students’ poor performance in writing tasks. To explore this, the authors analysed Post Entrance Literacy Assessments (PELAs) of 94 commencing students identified as ‘below benchmark’ in writing to determine the extent and nature of errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. Finding correlations between errors in these skills and low-scoring PELAs, the authors infer that direct instruction in these skills would be worth offering to ‘at risk’ students. They examine the historical reasons why this has been neglected in Australian education, and argue that the anti-prescriptivist ideology which has prevailed in Linguistics for past decades should not dominate the teaching of English to the detriment of students’ development of writing skills.

1. Introduction

Universities allocate considerable resources to identifying new students whose literacy skill deficiencies render them at risk, and then intervening so as to rectify the deficiencies. The intervention strategies are many and varied. Staff members who worked with these at-risk students at UNDA reported, anecdotally, that their writing frequently showed a lack of understanding of the basic mechanics. This project sought to examine how basic the deficiencies are amongst these students: specifically, are elementary punctuation, grammar, spelling and idiomatic usage deficient? If these areas revealed unsatisfactory standards, it would seem useful to target them directly as a basis for intervention.

For this project, the authors closely analysed PELAs of 94 commencing students identified as ‘below benchmark’ in writing to determine the extent and nature of errors in spelling, punctuation and grammar. This paper discusses the findings of this research, and the implications for what should be covered in an enabling program. The discussion will place these implications in the context of beliefs about language which have shaped the teaching of its mechanics in recent decades.

2. Overview

Post Entrance Literacy Assessment (PELA) tasks were implemented on the Fremantle campus in Semester 2, 2010, with a collaboratively planned trial for the Schools of Arts & Sciences,

Business, Education, Health Sciences, and Nursing & Midwifery. The Schools of Physiotherapy and Law participated from 2011 onwards, but with Law using its own testing materials.

The PELA assessment comprised two parts, a reading comprehension section (ten multiple-choice questions on a non-fiction text, with a mark of 7 out of 10 required to pass), and a writing task. The writing task is the subject of this study. For the writing task, students were provided with data in the form of a graph, relating to commonly understood topics (e.g. the nutritional analysis of a food product; world obesity rates; public health information).

The students were advised that, to achieve the minimum benchmark, they needed to:

- write two paragraphs, each of a minimum of approximately one hundred words;
- utilise the given data;
- write in formal language;
- write concisely, clearly and coherently, and
- have minimal Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar errors.

Since Semester 2, 2011, support workshops for students identified as ‘below benchmark’ have been compulsory. This was a direct outcome of the students with the greatest need having been found to be the least likely to voluntarily engage. Students identified as ‘below benchmark’ in earlier cohorts, who did not complete the workshops, demonstrated higher rates of attrition, and poorer course completion rates. Separate to this paper, research in progress is tracking student responses to the compulsory workshops, and overall, there are positive perceptions of the value of the workshops. Other institution-specific published work (e.g. McNaught & Beal, 2012) and research in progress demonstrate the positive impacts on both retention and successful course completion for participants. The support workshops, from 2011–2014, had focused primarily on the structure of academic writing and the processes of planning, pre-writing, writing, drafting and editing. There was little focus on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar. For this reason, it was decided to conduct research designed to identify whether deficiencies in these skills might argue for a greater focus on them within the workshops.

The marking of PELA writing tests was undertaken by one staff member, a trained marker, with cross-institutional experience in marking different PELA papers. While the marker used a rubric of the criteria listed above, the essence of the assessment was a global determination of whether attendance in a compulsorily required course would be of likely benefit for the student. The criteria were not applied individually to each paper. For example, if the student had not made reference to the data (a stated requirement), but the overall standard of writing was strong, the student would be marked as ‘at benchmark’. In these cases, the usual practice was for the marker to provide an alert for the student and/or unit coordinator, who received the results. Additionally, it was standard practice for the marker to refer a paper on which there was an element of indecision, to the Enabling Centre Director, who would countermark the paper. There was an expectation that this process would be as effective as the discrete use of individual criteria in achieving the PELA test’s sole purpose: to help students succeed in their studies, by linking those needing support to appropriate courses and programs.

3. Approach and research questions

The study received ethics approval from the Human Ethics Research Committee in 2014, Reference #014129F.

This research was conceived to determine the degree to which the broad-brush identification of literacy at-risk students would correlate with deficiencies in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and to see whether this offered any indications about useful content for the workshops.

From the Semester 1, 2014 test papers, 94 papers were newly analysed, this time by another party, now specifically assessing the skills and competencies of the students in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar. The goal was, first, to determine whether the students originally identified as sub-threshold in the writing task were sub-threshold in the basic skills of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar. Secondly, the research would investigate whether particular elements of

Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar could be identified as problematic for these students, and could have a negative impact on the overall quality of their writing.

The 94 papers represented a cross-section of students, entering a range of Schools (faculties). All students had completed formal schooling to Year 12. All 94 had English as a first language; none had registered with the University's Disability Support Office.

In the context of the compulsory workshops, the goal was to identify how Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar competencies may impact on 'below benchmark' students, and thus whether support mechanisms should be developed for those competencies.

Four key research questions emerged:

1. Does the literature support a focus on these skills as a means of increasing writing competence?
2. Is there a relationship between weaker skills in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and the PELA's original identification of 'below benchmark' students from the Semester 1, 2014 PELA testing program?
3. Are there patterns in the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar issues in the writing of students identified as 'below benchmark'?
4. Do the data suggest that it would be productive to provide learning opportunities for further skill development in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar?

4. Pedagogy and historical attitudes to formal grammar instruction

The answer to our first question proved to be both yes and no. Fundamentally, there is strong disagreement about the structure of language, about syntax as a part of that structure, and about the learning processes applying to language. Within this disagreement, there are disagreements about what grammar is and how it might be used. There are competing versions of grammar. Presenting various perspectives on these matters are academic linguists, academic educators, classroom practitioners, business representatives, politicians and commentators (Mulroy, 2003). To appreciate the issues around the teaching of Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation, in the context of current university entrants, a brief explanation of the history of teaching English is necessary.

Early schools in England taught Latin and Greek, perhaps Mathematics, and not much else (Tompson & Price, 1966; Armytage, 1964). The early primacy of the Classics in English-speaking schools, supported by the close connection between the Church and education, and by the Church's long-standing fervent identification with classical Roman and Greek culture, meant that grammar rules were Latin rules.

During the Eighteenth and Nineteenth Centuries, English schools gradually included new subjects, among them, English. However, at that time, the study of English focused on literature rather than on language structure. Hudson and Walmsley (2005) describe how, while English was gaining traction as a new area of academic endeavour, there was a battle between those who believed it should be based on the study of literature (subsequently articulated in F. R. Leavis's arguments that the canon of English literature could arrest the decline of society's moral and aesthetic standards), and the philologists who would have concentrated on composition and textual analysis (Leavis, 1960). The proto-Leavisite perspective won the battle, and the study of language dwindled to a lesser, and less-respected, role.

Even when English-focused schools began to outnumber their Classics-focused siblings, Latin remained the reference-point for descriptions of language use. This was so, despite the fact that, over the centuries since Roman departure, England's language had been moving further and further away from Latin/Greek in structure, gradually losing its inflected endings denoting gender, number, case, tense and voice. Rules which had clear and direct application to Classical languages with their clear representations of gender, number, case, tense and voice, were still applied to an English language of very mixed parentage, including Anglo-Saxon, which did not have these structural inflections.

During the latter half of the Nineteenth Century, the university study of linguistics gathered momentum. Amongst other things, this emphasised the inadequacy of Latin syntactical rules for prescribing and describing correct English constructions. One of the mantras of linguistics was that the prescription of "correct", rule-compliant expression was inappropriate since language was constantly evolving and there was, therefore, no constantly correct form. Linguistic philologists reject what they call the "prescriptivism" of Structural Grammar, that is, the perspective that language has rules which indicate whether expression is correct or incorrect according to its compliance with the rules (Tucker, 2011).

In the Twentieth Century, Noam Chomsky developed Transformational Grammar which sought to drill down to an understanding of the mechanics of complex and subtle distinctions of meaning (Olson, Faigley and Chomsky, 1991). Michael Halliday developed Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG) which explained how people exchange meanings with language, through analysis of the text and the context (Davies, 2014). These approaches were clearly and deliberately Descriptive – of the way language is actually used – rather than Prescriptive.

An illustration of the gulf that developed between academic linguists and the writers and commentators from the classical languages background can be provided by a comment, possibly partly mischievous, from a Chomsky interview: "Much of it (standard language) is a violation of natural law. In fact, a good deal of what's taught is taught because it's wrong. You don't have to teach people their native language because it grows in their minds, but if you want people to say, 'He and I were here' and not 'Him and me were here,' then you have to teach them because it's probably wrong." (Olson, Faigley, & Chomsky, 1991, p. 30)

As time went on, fewer people studied Latin, and the linguists' criticism of applying classical grammar to English composition gained greater penetration through the teaching profession. Some teachers did still resist the trend and teach a formal grammar at schools but, in a post-modernist world, they were losing ground. Myhill and Watson (2014) explain that:

The Dartmouth Conference in the USA in 1966 signalled a turning point in educational thinking about grammar in the curriculum. ... The conference was prompted by growing dissatisfaction with classroom practice in grammar teaching, which was largely characterized by drills and exercises in labelling and identifying word classes and syntactical structures, and which to many education professionals had no educational relevance and no impact on language development ... As a consequence of the Dartmouth Conference, many educational jurisdictions in the USA, the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada moved to exclude formal grammar teaching from the English curriculum, although, of course, there will always have been those teachers who continued to teach grammar, despite changed policy mandates. (p. 42)

Within this period, research was consistently negative about the teaching of a formal grammar. Hudson (2004) pointedly names "traditional grammar" as "a term that I shall use but with the strong caveat that it applies only to the degenerate relics of the historical tradition", and adds "we linguists all agree in rejecting prescriptivism" (p. 109). Andrews et al. (2006, p. 39) state that "there is little evidence to indicate that the teaching of formal grammar is effective (in improving the quality and accuracy of writing)". Wyse (2001) cites many papers to the same effect, their conclusions ranging from "every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed" (p. 415) to "the study of grammar has no impact on writing quality" (p. 416), to "formal grammar should not be taught in the primary school, as it appears to be time wasted" (p. 416), to "The grammar lesson ... was unreliable as a means of securing a greater mastery and control in children's writing than could be secured with the entire neglect of grammar in English lessons" (p. 418). The National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) in the U.S. is reported as stating that "the teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing." (Mulroy, 2004, p. 52).

However, in contrast to the studies which assert that formal grammar is pointless as a tool for literacy development, there is now a growing opus of studies with a differing viewpoint. Rogers and Graham (2008) carried out a rigorous meta-analysis of 88 writing intervention research projects. Their results throw some real doubt on the earlier assumption that teaching formal grammar is unhelpful in strengthening literacy skills. Myhill and Watson (2014) note “recent international developments that appear to be re-introducing grammar to the language curriculum.” (p. 42). One of the developments would be the appearance of a grammar test in Australia’s National Assessment Program – Literacy and Numeracy (NAPLAN) which, along with the publication of school NAPLAN results, has focused attention on students’ skills in this area. Complementary to the NAPLAN changes has come the development of a national Australian Curriculum for Australian schools.

The Australian Curriculum now, for example, refers to the need to “Understand the uses of commas to separate clauses”; “Investigate how complex sentences can be used in a variety of ways to elaborate, extend and explain ideas”; “Understand how ideas can be expanded and sharpened through careful choice of verbs, elaborated tenses and a range of adverb groups/phrases”; “Understand how to use knowledge of known words, word origins including some Latin and Greek roots, base words, prefixes, suffixes, letter patterns and spelling generalisations to spell new words including technical words”, at Level 6. At Level 7, pupils are to be taught to “Understand the use of punctuation to support meaning in complex sentences with prepositional phrases and embedded clauses”; “Recognise and understand that subordinate clauses embedded within noun groups/phrases are a common feature of written sentence structures and increase the density of information”; and “Understand how modality is achieved through discriminating choices in modal verbs, adverbs, adjectives and nouns” (Australian Curriculum, 2015).

Regardless of the grammar one believes in and regardless of linguists’ views, these are the metalinguistic concepts now being taught to Australian primary and secondary students; they are, also, by and large, concepts which were not taught to students who completed their secondary studies a few years ago. By the 1970s and 1980s, curriculum guides for English, used in Australian schools, virtually excluded grammar, and this was paralleled in like nations, including New Zealand and Canada (Locke, 2009). Notably many current Australian teachers completed their own education without exposure to grammar, and may therefore lack the necessary skills and knowledge to confidently teach this area.

Much of the literature has, historically, argued against the teaching of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar; however, recent curriculum developments and research have countered that trend.

5. Data

We return to our next questions:

2. What is the relationship between weaker skills evidenced in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, and the PELA’s original identification of ‘below benchmark’ students from the Semester 1, 2014 PELA testing program?
3. Are there any patterns in the Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar issues in the writing of students identified as ‘below benchmark’?

The six criteria shown in Table 1 were used for this project’s detailed analysis of the writing tasks completed by 94 students, who had originally been identified as ‘below benchmark’ via the initial global assessments. Two features of our categories must be noted, for clarity: first, we treated “sentence construction” as encompassing grammar more generally, and also idiom; and secondly, we separated subject-verb agreement out from sentence construction, as we expected it to be a common problem that might warrant a particular focus.

Based on the results shown in Table 1, three areas were identified as especially relevant for this paper: Sentence construction; Punctuation; and Spelling. As this paper has focussed on Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar, the topics of Depth and Complexity of writing, and Vocabulary are intentionally not addressed, but warrant future research.

Table 1. Analysis of 94 sub-threshold writing tasks across six criteria.

Criteria \ Standard	Significantly below minimum standard	Below minimum standard	Borderline standard	Above minimum expected standard	Total
Sentences are correctly constructed and express a complete thought.	6	29	40	19	94
The writing demonstrates sufficient depth and complexity.	8	21	44	21	94
Vocabulary is correctly used and there is at least some sophisticated vocabulary present.	0	31	45	18	94
There is correct subject-verb agreement in all sentences.	0	2	36	56	94
Punctuation is correctly used, and there is at least some punctuation beyond just capital letters and full stops.	8	43	32	11	94
Spelling is correct for all commonly used words.	31	10	47	6	94

In relation to Question 2, it is clearly the case that the students identified as ‘below benchmark’ in the Semester 1, 2014 PELA testing program generally had weak skills in Spelling, Grammar and Punctuation.

Spelling presents as the most significant issue, with over 30% of students at the “significantly below minimum” standard and a mere 6% above the minimum.

Some observations can be made about the nature of the spelling issues. The great majority were errors in words which are common in moderately sophisticated discourse, and can be sorted into several spelling patterns. Sixteen per cent related to issues with the use of “i”, “e”, “ie”, “ei” and “ea” (for example, “BELEIVE”, “WIEGHT”, “INCRISING”, “DESTRIBUTE”, “CONVINIENT”). Ten percent showed confusion about what to do with a consonant-e-suffix construction (EXTREMLY, FACEING, LIKLY). Six percent involved the -ant, -ent, -ance, -ence suffixes (“AUDIANCE, “CONTINANT”, “DOMINENT”). A similar number related to the various means of creating the “s” sound (“DECENDING”, DICCUSS, EXERSISE”, “NECECI-TY”). About 30% of the errors show confusion with the basic morphology of everyday words (PERCENTAGE, IMPORANTANCE, LUXUARY). About 30% also confused similar pairs of words (LOSE/LOOSE; THEIR/THERE/THEY’RE).

These are not random misspellings but errors which reveal an uncertainty about the spelling conventions and patterns of the English language. They would all be common inclusions in spelling lists (nearly all were already included, and automatically rectified, in the *Microsoft Word* spellcheck facility).

Punctuation has the largest percentage, with over 50% of students, either below or significantly below minimum. Probably not surprisingly, the majority of errors (64%) involved misuse of apostrophes. These included every conceivable error: using an apostrophe to denote a plural (“the percentage of adult’s who”); the omission of possessive apostrophes (“parents decision”, “everyones life”); the omission of contraction apostrophes (“its quick”); misplacing contraction

apostrophes (“did’nt”) and insertion of an apostrophe in a situation where the letter pattern looks familiar (“earn’t”). The next highest frequency error, 17%, was in using a comma between two clauses instead of either a full stop or a conjunction (“The table shows some countries have very high obesity rates, they are usually rich countries.”). Semi-colons were often used instead of colons (7%); Question marks were omitted (6%) and capital letters were used randomly (“asian”, “World Health organisation”) (5%).

In terms of sentence construction, 30% of the errors were of idiomatic usage (“many of people”; “you never hardly see...”; “the poor the country, the smaller...”) The rest of the errors were evenly spread between confusion of number and quantity (“the amount of adults”); confusion of past and present participles (“Mexico is showing to be...” - instead of “is shown to be”); absence of a finite verb (“In the graph of obesity rates.”), and misuse of articles (There were several instances of “a” being used instead of “an” in front of a vowel).

So Question 4 has a fairly clear answer, that the errors do show patterns, clustered about fundamental understanding of spelling orthography and conventions of punctuation and grammar.

6. Discussion

It is notable that subject-verb agreement was found to be surprisingly strong. However, it seems possible that relatively simple, unsophisticated writing may not display the nuance of language which depends upon more subtle levels of agreement. At this level, the writing might be found to contain no contravention of number rules even though the writer is unsure of how to achieve agreement.

Students who were originally identified by a global assessment as needing literacy support revealed, on closer scrutiny, a high level of uncertainty about particular formal features of the English language. The clear conclusion from this is that such features need to be presented in support workshops. It is clear from our earlier cursory investigation of the history of teaching English that most members of a generation or two of students have had very little school exposure to these areas and this needs to be recognised in the construction of literacy enhancement courses.

Discussion around Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar can be derailed by an ideological discourse which can dominate, and be decidedly unhelpful in making any progress. The polarisation between polemical opposition to formal grammar, and insistence upon it, is decidedly unhelpful, whereas a middle-ground is potentially a valuable space. If faculties offering enabling programs, and staff working with first-year students, are to progress student skills, it seems essential that the ideological debate needs to be acknowledged, but then left aside. There is a need to find parameters for practical interventions and support to assist students to become proficient and confident writers, which necessarily involves competence and skill with Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar.

There is obviously little merit in intensive teaching of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar for their own sake; these are useful only as tools. A fundamental goal of enabling programs, and first-year studies more broadly, is to have students develop the essential skills to write well. In the local context, Standard Australian English (SAE) is expected and will be, at some level, a criterion in the assessment of scholarly writing. Furthermore, automaticity with basic skills is surely likely to enable a student to engage more effectively in the higher order thinking skills which will be the major criteria. In addition, assessment tasks which appear straight-forward may be disproportionately time consuming and laborious for a student lacking confidence in the necessary fundamental skills.

There are distinct dangers in teaching staff working from the notion of implied or expected knowledge levels which are unrealistic. The start of a tertiary education is, for the vast majority of students, a writing apprenticeship both for their discipline-specific area, and also for tertiary studies more generally. Students need to learn to construct a written argument, which is evidence-based and uses appropriate sources. For many first-year students, this is an exciting part of the learning, that they can argue any point of view, provided it can be appropriately validated.

However, many students require specific information and background knowledge in order to understand these expectations. An instruction to use peer-reviewed sources is unlikely to be followed if students do not understand what it is they are being asked to do. Likewise, directions specific to disciplines (e.g. science reports; laboratory reports) essentially require training. Similarly, expectations of correct Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar will only be met if students understand these fundamentals. The role of both enabling programs and first-year units in developing tertiary level writing skills and discipline-specific skills should not be underestimated. At least some students will enter with Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar skill levels which will be insufficient to write well; support for these students is essential, and may be provided through centrally-operated or faculty-based programs.

7. Conclusion

In this paper, we have not sought to examine any methodologies for the teaching of Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar and the difficulty in doing so is not under-estimated. However, from the history of students receiving little instruction in these matters and from a recognition that ideological polemics have created ambiguity, it is proposed that there is scope for direct instruction focused on the patterns that are found to be difficult for students:

1. This project has shown that borderline-literacy students have a consistent need for stronger skills in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar;
2. The weaknesses are not random but are clustered around particular patterns of usage in these areas;
3. The analysis undertaken in this project suggests that, rather than a full scale, all-inclusive grammar course, a more sensible approach might be to target *ad hoc* common errors. This would require some initial scaffold of technical terminology ("finite verb", "clause", "parts of speech", "number" and so on). However, history suggests it is wise to avoid a rigorously taxonomic approach.
4. The history of the teaching of English provides some insight into why these deficiencies exist and indicates the necessity of moving forward without ideology but with a pragmatic focus on developing essential skills.

Most importantly, we want our students to be proficient writers, able to engage with higher order thinking around concepts and ideas, where the mechanical aspects of writing are largely automatized skills. For students who need assistance to be proficient writers, programs need to meet their needs in effective ways, and they need to see the value of having a writing toolkit which enables them to achieve their academic potential.

This research demonstrated that errors in Spelling, Punctuation and Grammar were an issue for students identified as potentially 'at risk'. An immediate outcome of this research project was an increased focus on these skills within existing units of study, designed to both embed and make specific these skills as tools for effective writing. Processes have been put in place to identify if these changes can better support students, and will be a potential future research topic.

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