Chapter 9

Teaching English Grammar in a Hybrid Academic ESL Course

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates whether hybrid instruction has a positive effect on the development of students’ knowledge of English grammar and editing skills, as well as whether learners have positive perceptions of the hybrid design. The study was conducted in two sections of an English grammar and editing skills class. One section was designed as a hybrid course, while the other was a traditional face-to-face (f2f) class. To determine the effectiveness of hybrid instruction, a quasi-experimental design with a pre- and posttest was employed. To investigate learner perceptions of the hybrid design, learners completed a questionnaire and participated in a focus group. The results indicate that there was no significant difference between the two groups in terms of their knowledge of English grammar and editing skills after the treatment. The learners had positive perceptions of the hybrid design and also offered some suggestions for improving course effectiveness.

INTRODUCTION

According to the Institute for International Education (IIE), there are currently 1,043,839 international students studying in institutions of higher education (IHE) in the United States, and this number represents an increase of almost 100% from the 554,766 students from a decade ago in Academic Year 2005-06 (IIE, 2015). The trend is not unique to the United States but is consistent with other BANA countries (i.e., Britain, Australasia, and North America). The presence of an increasing number of second language (L2) users of English has impacted IHE in significant ways. Because most international students are second language (L2) academic English users, IHEs have found it necessary to develop specific courses to assist them in improving their academic English skills. The ability to use English effectively in academic settings demands advanced language proficiency (Hinkel, 2011, 2013; Weigle,
Teaching English Grammar in a Hybrid Academic ESL Course

2002), and achieving this level of proficiency requires “focused instruction and concerted effort from both teachers and learners” (Hinkel, 2013, p. 4). Research has established strong positive correlations between students’ abilities to perform well in academic environments and their proficiencies in grammar and writing (Byrd & Reid, 1998; Johns, 1997; Zhou, 2009). Furthermore, Celce-Murcia (1991) states that grammar instruction is essential for academic learners if they are to achieve their educational and professional goals in academic contexts. A high frequency of grammatical errors in L2 student writing makes the writing unacceptable to most university faculty, so it is critical that L2 English users develop effective skills in editing their academic writing.

Most English language teaching programs in IHE include courses in grammar and academic writing to help English learners achieve their professional goals; however, there are a number of different ways in which grammar courses are conceptualized and included in the curriculum. Grammar courses can be conceptualized as stand-alone courses very much like the four skills (i.e., reading, writing, speaking, and listening). In this type of approach to teaching grammar, there is a focus-on-forms or the deliberate teaching of grammar to produce an understanding of grammatical forms with the hope that it will lead L2 learners to use the forms correctly (Doughty, 2003). Another approach to teaching grammar is conceptualized as deriving from specific content, such as chemistry or engineering, as in content-based instruction (CBI) or content and language-integrated learning (CLIL). In such an approach the focus on grammatical structures is based on their use in written texts that are discipline specific. Another approach is called an integrated approach, as grammar is integrated into one of the four skills, such as writing. In the latter, the focus for grammar instruction is on the development of editing skills (i.e., the ability to correct grammatical errors in the context of one’s own academic writing). The approach for teaching grammar that is the focus of the research in this chapter is the integrated approach.

The focus for the delivery of academic English courses has been the traditional face-to-face (f2f) model of teaching; however, with the increasing number of individuals worldwide who are interested in studying academic English at the tertiary level, English language teaching programs and other units that oversee academic English requirements in IHE are looking for more effective and efficient course delivery options, such as exploring the uses of computer technology. Computer technology has been used in education for more than two decades in language learning. The overarching term for talking about the use of computer technology to promote language learning is CALL (computer-assisted language learning). The term was defined by Levy (1997) as “the search for and study of applications of the computer in language teaching and learning” (p. 1). It embraces a wide-range of applications and approaches to teaching and learning foreign language (see Dudeney & Hockly, 2012 for a brief history of CALL). A combination of f2f teaching and CALL is most often referred to as blended learning, and the courses that result from this blending are called hybrid courses. In hybrid courses the f2f teaching time is reduced and replaced by online learning. Hybrid courses have been reported to be as effective as f2f language courses (Rubio & Thoms, 2012); however, little research is available to date that specifically focuses on academic English as a second language (ESL) hybrid courses, especially ESL hybrid courses for teaching English grammar using an integrated approach.

In addition to the scant research on hybrid courses in academic ESL contexts, there is a dearth of research on academic English learners’ perceptions of hybrid courses in general and specifically relative to teaching English grammar using an integrated approach. Gage and Berliner (1992) refer to all the ways in which people think as cognition. As can be inferred from this definition, cognition includes a broad range of constructs that can affect learning, and in particular language learning (Borg, 2003). The term learner cognition is used to refer to the unobservable and cognitive dimensions of language...