

## “Now You Know” — A Mini-Research Project

The experiment described here started more as an afterthought than as a result of a carefully planned course of action. Confronted with the question in one of my classes this semester, as to how learning grammar was going to help them, I decided to ask my Engl-914 and Engl-015 students to really help me ascertain if the students taking higher level English classes at the College really knew better grammar compared to those at their own level. Part of me was also curious of course, as I have been through all my professional life, to reaffirm that a formal but subconscious, and therefore contextual, learning of grammar accelerates the students' acquisition of linguistic skills. This line of enquiry is also consistent with the current focus on basic skills, more so because empirical research as well as Chomsky's arguments about our innate linguistic skills had provided strong support to the once consensus view (e.g., Thompson, 1969) that conscious teaching and learning of grammar restricted the learner's imagination and creativity. Instead, the current view is that formal teaching of grammar can actually help the students' writing skills (e.g., McCleary, 1995). Unfortunately, the evidence that grammatical instruction is the panacea for students' compositional limitations is hardly categorical. As Hudson's (2001) recent survey shows, results of the research supporting benefits of teaching grammar (e.g., Barton, 1997; Bryant et al., 2000; Nunes et al., 1997; Widdowson, 1992) need to be balanced against the ones that showed no benefits whatever (e.g., Elley, 1994; Hudson, 1998).

The survey was simple and straightforward. I asked my students to respond to the survey themselves and/or administer to their friends. Many did, most enthusiastically, except that, not having initially planned to conduct the survey, I had just given a passage in which each respondent as asked to identify nouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositions. The reports I received from the students prompted me to design a formal questionnaire that I then asked them to administer to their friends and acquaintances. Thus began this formal survey.

Despite the loss of the initial data, as the process had started as an informal one, the results replicate the oral reports my students had given me earlier.

Each anonymous volunteer taking the survey was

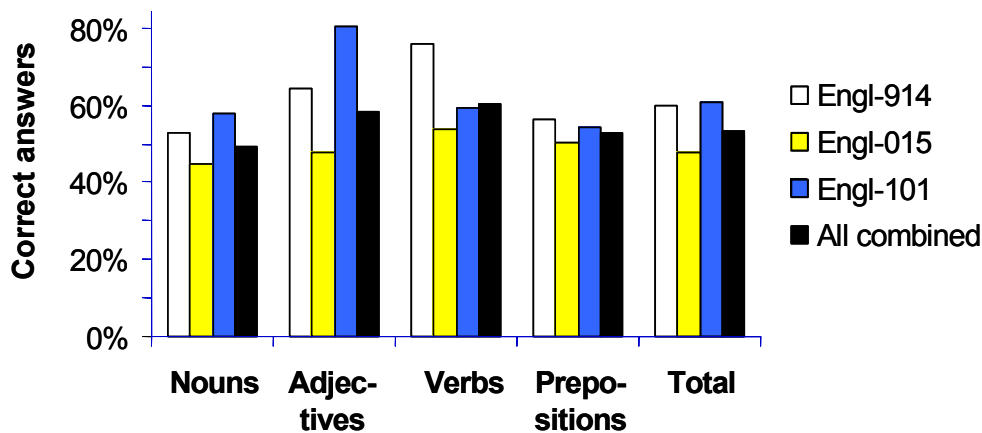
- asked to identify the level (Engl-914, Engl-015 or Engl-101) that person was in,
- told that nouns, pronouns, verbs, adjectives and articles, adverbs, prepositions, conjunctions and interjections are parts of a speech and then
- required to find nouns, adjectives, verbs and prepositions in the following passage:

**“On the top floor lived the maid. He name was Alice. Once in a while my brother and I would glimpse her stroking her hair at a little pine vanity. With her long locks down around her face, I thought she looked like the Mona Lisa, the painting that seemed to be in every calendar in 1913.”**

In all, I received a total of 56 survey sheets: 14 from Engl-914 students, 31 from Engl-015 students and 11 from Engl-101 students. The passage itself had 19 nouns, 6 adjectives, 8 verbs and 7 prepositions. Overall, therefore, the maximum possible number of correct answers was 40. Table 1 and Figure 1 below summarize the overall results while Table 2 provides the detailed breakdown of these data.

**Table 1: Summary of the “Now You Know” survey results**

|          | Nouns  | Adjectives | Verbs  | Prepositions | Total  |
|----------|--------|------------|--------|--------------|--------|
| Engl-914 | 52.63% | 64.29%     | 75.89% | 56.12%       | 59.64% |
| Engl-015 | 44.65% | 47.85%     | 53.63% | 50.23%       | 47.90% |
| Engl-101 | 57.89% | 80.30%     | 59.09% | 54.55%       | 60.91% |
| Overall  | 49.25% | 58.33%     | 60.27% | 52.55%       | 53.39% |



**Figure 1:**  
A graphic visualization of the survey results summarized in Table 1.

Two interesting patterns are apparent from the data in Table 1 and Figure 1:

- No matter what the level, the students found verbs and adjectives easier to identify than nouns and prepositions. As for the overall results, only 53.39% of the identifications were correct, with the class totals ranging from 47.90% for Engl-015 to 59.64% for Engl-914 and 60.91% for Engl-101.
- Despite the differences in their levels, Engl-914 students did almost as well as the Engl-015 students whereas the performance of Engl-101 students, who are in the middle in this hierarchy of English language skill levels, turned out to be the poorest. Indeed, Engl-914 students were significantly better than all at identifying the verbs and Engl-101 students surpassed all the others in identifying the adjectives.

The detailed results of this word identification survey are presented in Table 2 below.

**Table 2: Detailed results of the “Now You Know” survey**

|  | Nouns       | Adjectives  | Verbs       | Prepositions | Total        |
|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|--------------|
| Maximum number of correct answers possible | 19          | 6           | 8           | 7            | 40           |
| (a) Engl-914:                              |             |             |             |              |              |
| Number                                     |             |             |             |              | 14           |
| Mean                                       | 10.00       | 3.86        | 6.07        | 3.93         | 23.86        |
| Standard Dev                               | 2.86        | 1.56        | 2.20        | 2.13         | 6.14         |
| (b) Engl-015:                              |             |             |             |              |              |
| Number                                     |             |             |             |              | 31           |
| Mean                                       | 8.48        | 2.87        | 4.29        | 3.52         | 19.16        |
| Standard Dev                               | 3.09        | 1.57        | 2.10        | 1.93         | 6.26         |
| (c) Engl-101:                              |             |             |             |              |              |
| Number                                     |             |             |             |              | 11           |
| Mean                                       | 11.00       | 4.82        | 4.73        | 3.82         | 24.36        |
| Standard Dev                               | 2.49        | 1.40        | 1.49        | 1.72         | 5.07         |
| <b>All combined</b>                        |             |             |             |              |              |
| <b>Number</b>                              |             |             |             |              | <b>56</b>    |
| <b>Mean</b>                                | <b>9.36</b> | <b>3.50</b> | <b>4.82</b> | <b>3.68</b>  | <b>21.36</b> |
| <b>Standard Dev</b>                        | <b>3.05</b> | <b>1.69</b> | <b>2.12</b> | <b>1.92</b>  | <b>6.41</b>  |

The comparable performances of Engl-914 and Engl-101 students suggest that the specific grammatical instruction that Engl-914 students receive is relevant and appropriate. Note that grammatical items are not specifically taught

in the Engl-101 class. These students are taught composition and are apparently able to recall the grammar they have learnt in the context of these compositions. Most of them have already gone through the equivalent of their Engl-914 instruction.

But so has the Engl-015 class. Their relatively poor overall performance clearly merits a careful scrutiny, therefore. One possibility is that these students, focused as they are on the development of the paragraph and the short essay, have not as yet had the opportunity to recall and use in context the word identification skills they had presumably acquired in their Engl-914 class. Clearly, the reviews of grammar, sentence structure, and punctuation that are included in the Engl-015 curriculum are too brief and their exposure to writing passages is too recent to enable the needed sharpening of their word identification skills.

This survey thus opens a new avenue to examine the deficiencies in our Engl-015 students' language skills that we need to address. Indeed, it points to the possibility that an enhanced focus on grammar may well enhance the composition skills of these students.

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