

FLESCH-KINCAID: A STUDENT WRITING EXPERIMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents the empirical results of an intervention designed to improve written student communication skills in business curriculums. AACSB Assurance of Learning initiatives have prompted nearly all colleges of business to adopt learning goals related to student communication abilities and present evidence as to how well students are meeting the learning goals. Literature addressing student writing skills deficiencies is abundant and numerous suggestions have been offered to improve student writing skills. This paper will review recent attempts to improve student writing skills and present the results of an intervention utilizing the Flesch-Kincaid readability measure.

BACKGROUND

The challenge for improving student communication skills has been an issue in higher education for many years. However, with the decline in preparation of acceptable writing skills of many students entering universities today, combined with assurance of learning pressures from AACSB, this challenge has been catapulted to the forefront of pedagogical concerns. A number of research efforts in various related areas have led to further examination of this issue. Such attempts are mentioned briefly here.

Two early attempts at improving student writing include Stevens, Stevens, and Stevens (1992) and Sorenson, Savage, and Hartman (1993). Stevens, et al. examine the differences among readability packages, e.g., Flesch-Kincaid and the cloze procedure, advocating that the latter may produce more valuable feedback information for business writers.

Sorenson, Savage, and Hartman (1993) provided an early attempt at investigating the motivation for students to improve their business writing. Their study examined the comparison between goal-based versus punishment-based grading systems. Findings indicate that although both goals-based and punishment-based grading systems improve students' writing, they are perceived differently and they influence student writing in different ways.

Following a different avenue of investigation, Walker (2009) investigated the effect that written comments have on student assignments. Walker's findings indicate that students find some types of comments considerably more usable than others. The findings are discussed in the light of the current state of assessment practice and possible future avenues for research are suggested. Walker's article also offers a comprehensive review of feedback on assignments' research.

Hershey (2007) describes the development of the 3D Writing Heuristic. This approach to improving student writing is a functional approach to writing that can be used with any standard method of organizations. Hershey argues that this approach provides benefits to students in terms of clear, functional directions on how to develop and improve writing context. Jameson (2009) points out that managing tone is a more complex ability than writing clearly and offers action steps writers can follow to improve tone.

One of the most readily available software for improving student writing skills is Flesch-Kincaid readability measure. While Flesch's early work, "A New Readability Yardstick," dates back to 1948 (Flesch, 1974), the modern version of the Flesch-Kincaid readability measure is found in MS Office 2007. Once a document has been produced in Word and MS Office Word has finished checking the spelling and grammar, an author can choose to display information about the reading level of the document, including readability scores according to the following tests: Flesch Reading Ease and Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level. The Flesch-Kincaid tool is powerful software that enables writers to control the readability of written documents. For example, most local newspapers are written near the ninth-grade reading level. Managers might need to provide employment tests or instructional information written at the grade school level for some employees, yet at other times will need to write at the high school or university level. Flesch-Kincaid also provides information on percentage of passive sentences. Jameson (2009) points out that "managing tone is a more complex ability than writing clearly" (p. 334).

Other authors, such as Semple and McGowan (2002), have examined how critical it is to write appropriately when providing information such as diagnostic results and information leaflets for patients with cancer. These authors review the advantages and limitations of several readability techniques, particularly as applied to patient understanding needs.

Possibly the greatest contribution Flesch-Kincaid can have for student writing skills is that it forces students to run spelling and grammar check and then check the grade level of the document produced. Some university students are surprised to discover they are writing at a grade school level. Additionally, having the information of the grade level at which the document was written delivered to the student by the computer software, as compared with by the professor, helps shift the "blame" to the student, deflecting some of the animosity away from the professor.

The impetus for this research is an attempt to discover if in fact implementing the use of the Flesch-Kincaid software can improve undergraduate student writing. In order to test this question, a research experiment was designed to assess undergraduate writing skills with and without the use of Flesch-Kincaid.

RESEARCH SAMPLE

The sample for this research consists of two sections of business ethics taught in fall 2008 and two sections of the same course taught in fall 2009. All variables have been held constant, with the exception of a *required* Flesch-Kincaid "extra credit writing assignment" intervention added to the beginning of the fall 2009 sections. The instructor, textbook, syllabus, class times, written case assignments, writing tips handout, and exams are identical in both semesters. At the end of fall 2009, the written communication artifacts from the fall 2008 sections will be compared to the written communication artifacts from fall 2009 sections. Comparisons will include number of writing errors and written assignment grades. More specifically, the data are being coded to include: errors in following writing tips, errors in following instructions, errors in proofreading, errors in spelling, and Flesch-Kincaid grade level (for fall 2009 only). Additional variables being collected include course GPA's and instructor student evaluations. All coding is being done by one graduate assistant to avoid any variations in counting errors that might occur if more than one person coded.

The timing for conducting this experiment in the authors' college of business is perfect before any pre-requisite or other catalog changes affect enrollments in this particular course, or other professors instruct the course in a different manner.

It is anticipated that the Flesch-Kincaid intervention will produce higher quality outcomes for the written case assignments in fall 2009 compared with fall 2008. At the time of this submission, however, these results are not yet available. Results will be available for presentation at WDSI in April.

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