

A MODEL FOR A SUCCESSFUL ORGANIZATION OF A UNIVERSITY-LEVEL ENGLISH PHONETICS COURSE

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Resumen

El propósito de este artículo es describir y analizar una experiencia docente llevada a cabo en la Universidad de Sevilla durante tres años académicos (2000/01; 2002/03; 2003/04). El autor organizó e implementó un curso de fonética inglesa en el primero año de la licenciatura de Filología Inglesa, efectuando una serie de cambios procedimentales y metodológicos tanto en el enfoque metodológico como en la evaluación del trabajo de los alumnos. Se demuestra, con datos de las notas finales de tres cursos académicos, que los cambios aplicados resultaron en un incremento muy significativo de las calificaciones de los estudiantes y su satisfacción académica con el curso.

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to describe and analyze a teaching experience carried out in the Universidad de Sevilla during three academic years (2000/01; 2002/03; 2003/04). The author organized and implemented an English phonetics course taught in the first year of the English Philology BA, effecting a number of procedural and methodological adjustments in both the teaching approach and the assessment of the students' work. It is shown, with data from the final grades from three academic courses, that the changes applied resulted in a very significant increase in the students' grades and their overall academic satisfaction with the course.

INTRODUCTION

This study describes a methodological and instructional experience carried out in the Universidad de Sevilla during the academic courses 2000-2001, 2002-2003, and 2003-2004. The author of the paper and instructor of the courses modified an

English phonetics course that had been taught in the English Philology program following a strict lecture system, with an evaluation system consisting of one final exam. The syllabus of the course was for the most part maintained, but some crucial organizational and methodological changes were implemented. To achieve this, the au-

thor did some background work consulting methodological sources in the linguistics and higher education areas. This preparation permitted the author to adjust his teaching approach and the structure of the course to a more updated and better quality design. This paper describes the modifications applied and analyzes them in the light of the results obtained by the learners, also taking as an indicator of quality teaching the course evaluations produced by the learners in the three academic years under examination.

HISTORY OF THE COURSE

A course in English phonetics is mandatory in any English Philology BA degree offered in Spanish universities. In some institutions it is taught in the first year of studies, in some others in the second year and in a few programs it is offered in the third year. In the English Philology curriculum at the Universidad de Sevilla it has been offered since the beginning of the program, dating back to the mid seventies. Until the year 1997, when a new program of studies was initiated, this course was taught in the third year. The author of the paper has been teaching English phonetics courses since 1991, in three different Spanish universities (Universidad de Sevilla, Universidad de Huelva, Universidad de Vigo). In the Universidad de Sevilla, the English phonetics course was taught in the third year until 1997, when the new program was implemented. In this new program, the phonetics course was relocated to the first year of studies. The author taught the course in the third year at the Universidad de Sevilla in the academic courses 1996-1997 and 1997-1998, and in the first year beginning in the

academic course 1997-1998 until the present academic course (2004-2005).

The success rate of the course is historically varied, but when it was transferred to the first year of the program of studies the proportion of students passing the course never exceeded 60%, and in at least one academic course the percentage of failing students rose up to 50%. These figures prompted the author to design a new methodological approach to the subject together with a new evaluation system. The next section offers an overview of the organization of the courses taught in the preceding academic years.

ORGANIZATION AND METHODOLOGY OF THE OLD COURSES

Traditionally, the English phonetics course at the Universidad de Sevilla was taught by means of a relatively strict lecture system. This means that much of the class time was spent on lecturing by the teacher and note taking by the students. Given the nature of the subject, some time was allowed for doing exercises relevant to the subject matter, for instance transcriptions. There was no assigned homework or any extra activities apart from those done in class during the lecture time. The evaluation system consisted of a final exam covering all the material presented in class; the students' final grade was worth 100% of the grade obtained in this final exam. Different instructors taught the course, but this layout and organization were fixed and in fact adopted by all instructors.

There were two main objectives in these courses: to present the theory and description of the English sound system, and to practice the skill of phonetic transcription.

The latter comprises a means to represent with a special graphic code the pronunciation of the language. For instance, the pronunciation of the word “face” is represented /feIs/. The final exam, the only representative grade obtained by the students, therefore contained questions devoted to the description and theory of English phonetics and exercises in phonetic transcription. As indicated above, when the course was transferred from the third year to the first year in the new program, the failure rate was between 40 and 50%. The average grade was around 5 (out of 10 possible points). The contents of the third-year course were somewhat adapted to the first-year students taking it now, but the core subject matter was not changed significantly.

Finally, the course taught to third-year students was annual; in the new curriculum, when it was transferred to the first year, the course was split in two ‘cuatrimestres’, roughly equivalent to a semester in the American college system. The first semester took up the first half of the old course, and the second semester the second half. Each semester was obviously considered as a full course, with separate evaluations, and sometimes different teachers for each semester. The data presented in this paper refers to the first semester in the three academic years mentioned above.

BACKGROUND WORK

When the course was moved to the first year, and the failure rate soared to 40-50%, the author decided to adapt the course content and format to the new educational situation. It was evident that the teaching approach in the course was not yielding

very positive results. Given the complexity of any educational situation, the explanation for this high failure rate could not be reduced to a single cause; there were surely a host of reasons that had to be tackled separately. This was essential if the true nature of the undesirable situation was to be fully understood.

The author decided to approach the problem from two perspectives. First, it was evident that the subject content was too difficult or perhaps not clearly presented to the students. After analyzing the problem, it was rather apparent that both factors affected the situation. There was in consequence a need for presenting the contents of the course in a different way and to adapt them as much as possible to the expected proficiency level of the students. This meant that the linguistics aspects of the course had to be presented and explained differently from what had been done until then. Second, and more generally, it was also obvious that the instructor’s methodology had to be modified substantially, since this factor seemed to affect the teaching situation negatively. In consequence the author tackled the problem of preparing the new course from two perspectives, summarized in the next two sections.

LINGUISTIC METHODOLOGICAL SOURCES

There are an increasing number of pronunciation methodological resources that respond to the needs of teachers who want to update their methodology. These resources offer a wealth of specific teaching suggestions and many materials that can be incorporated into the teaching practice. Although the focus of the English phonetics course is not pronunciation *per se*, that

is, the objective of the course is not to improve the learners' pronunciation, these methodological resources offer recommendations that can effectively be integrated in any English phonetics course. The main resources consulted by the author are Brown (1992), Burgess and Spencer (2000), Celce-Murcia, Brinton and Goodwin (1996), Fraser (2001), Hancock (1995), Kenworthy (1987), Larsen-Freeman (2000), Omaggio (2000), and Pennington (1996), among a few others. These materials were used mainly to create new opportunities for presenting the phonetics material to the first-year students, to create a 'data bank' of examples and illustrations that could generate students' interest in the subject matter, and finally to adopt a different teaching style in presenting the linguistic content of the course. All these resources have a focus on communicative and interactional knowledge, and provide many opportunities for presenting the material to students in a well-organized, attractive approach. For instance, the collection of activities compiled by Hancock (1995) can be used to generate and maintain the interest of the students, since these exercises are playful but linguistically sound.

In sum, consulting and studying these resources was essential in helping the instructor of the first-year English phonetics course try a new linguistic approach.

HIGHER EDUCATION METHODOLOGICAL SOURCES

More generally, it seemed that, as stated above, the methodology and structure of the lecture system was a serious hindrance in two different but complementary ways: it affected negatively the presentation of the material and it was detrimental for

the learners' understanding of the lessons. The author decided to improve his teaching in these two areas. The sources consulted include resources in higher education teaching and resources that respond to the needs of presenting material in higher education; these sources are Álvarez Rojo (1999), Álvarez Rojo (2000), Beaver (1998), Bowman (1998), Brown and Atkins (1988), Olson (1997), Smith and Laslett (1993), and Villar Angulo (1998). The author also attended a seminar titled "Comunicación para profesores", promoted by the Instituto de Ciencias de la Educación of the Universidad de Sevilla, another seminar held in the Universidad de Granada, "Técnicas de comunicación educativa", and a three-week course, "Managing and creativity in the language classroom", held at the Norwich Institute for Language Education. These three workshops had a clear focus on communicative strategies to develop a satisfactory instructor-learner relationship, and were particularly useful in determining the weak areas in the lecturing of the author.

On the whole, seeking advice from these resources permitted the author to fine-tune several aspects of his overall methodology to the perceived needs of his students. It was as well fundamental in the reorganization and improvement of the English phonetics course, a description of which follows in the next section.

THE REFORMED ENGLISH PHONETICS COURSE

Taking into account the information outlined in sections 3.1 and 3.2, and analyzing the weak areas of the courses taught in preceding years, in the academic course

2000-2001 the author determined to set up a new course, differing from the previous courses in both its contents and format. In the next sections a detailed description of the new course follows.

SCOPE

Fonética Inglesa F101 (the official title of the English phonetics course) is an introduction to the sound system of English, focusing mainly on the description and identification of English phonemes (vowels and consonants). The phonemic system presented makes reference to British English pronunciation, but depending on the instructor's linguistic background, American English may also be the pronunciation model. The scope of the new course differs from the previous courses mainly in a redefinition of the material to be presented; given that the course has been transferred from the third year of the curriculum to the first year, the subject matter had to be adapted to this particular learner population. The syllabus hence was simplified and only essential aspects of English phonetics were introduced to the students. In this respect the guiding principle was to preserve in the syllabus the basics of a description of the sound system of English. The skill of phonetic transcription was maintained in the syllabus, but much more time was devoted to practicing it than in the third-year courses.

GOALS

The course therefore aims at training learners in the fundamentals of the sound system of English, from a descriptive and theoretical perspective. By the end of the course students are expected to have mastered the basic aspects of English phonetics.

A more practical objective is to acquire the necessary skills to do phonetic transcription of English, to master this special code with which the pronunciation of utterances is represented.

Another practical objective of the course is to train the students in the discrimination and identification of English consonants and vowels that cause most difficulty for Spanish-speaking learners. A number of language laboratory sessions were arranged to achieve this practical goal; the students are required to attend at least one hour per week these language laboratory sessions.

MATERIALS

The students were recommended to obtain a textbook (Roach, 1991) as a resource for the descriptive and theoretical aspects of the subject. In addition, a transcription manual (López Soto and Barrera Pardo, 2000) was used for the practice of transcription. A booklet was also prepared. This booklet contained the syllabus, exam samples, evaluation system, and bibliography of the course. It also had more or less detailed outlines of the lessons, together with the written assignments the students had to turn in during the course (see section 4.5 below).

The materials used in presenting the subject are drawn from the linguistic resources dealt with in section 3.1. These resources included many different types of exercises, including structural drills, discrimination tasks, and listening activities, among a few others.

METHODOLOGY

The theoretical and descriptive component of the course is presented in class in the form of lectures. Students are expected to

attend these lectures, answer any questions asked by the instructor, and participate actively in the class (participation is recorded and taken into account in the learner's final grade; see next section). Students are also expected to come prepared to class when a reading or an exercise is assigned.

Because the contents of the course are learned gradually, a number of quizzes (short tests) are done during the semester. Students also do a number of short assignments on a weekly basis, in order to show familiarity with the contents of the course. Ongoing work is therefore an essential component of the course.

Acquiring a background in phonetics and learning to use phonemic transcription is a gradual process. For these reasons, students were strongly encouraged to do the assigned work and exercises.

The presentation of the subject content was done mainly through an inductive approach, that is, making use of the learners' existing knowledge to arrive to new facts and rules. For instance, the English vowel system was presented taking the Spanish vowel system as a point of departure. Going from the known to the unknown was not always possible, but effort was made as much as possible to take advantage of what students already know. Phonetics is a physical science and in consequence students were often required to apply their knowledge in real language situations.

The routine of the course was to introduce and present a topic (a lesson), to describe it and then to do some exercises related to the topic. Then, as explained in the next section, students turned in an assignment and took a quiz on the contents explained.

ASSESSMENT

This is the aspect of the new course that differs the most from the previous courses. Recall that in the old phonetics course there was only a final written exam, that is, students only had one chance to be evaluated, at the end of the course. This evaluation system only promotes cumulative knowledge; with respect to second-language teaching Allan (1996) makes the following remark:

tests are instruments of evaluation, one of the ways in which we try to measure learner performance [...] seeking to make accurate predictions on the basis of relatively small samples of performance in the case of such an enormously complex thing as language (p. 8).

It seems that part of the problem posed by Allan could be resolved if we recourse to some form of continuous assessment. This is precisely what the author did in the English phonetics course. Instead of evaluating students at the end of the semester, evaluation started from the beginning. The final grade (100%) was broken up as shown in table 1.

The final exam (the 'Theory test') counts now only 40% of the final grade. The rest of the points are distributed among

Table 1. The new evaluation system.

	Percentage (%)
1 Laboratory test	10
1 Transcription test	25
1 Theory test	40
7 Quizzes	15
10 Assignments	10

another two exams held at the end of the course ('Laboratory test' and 'Transcription test'), seven quizzes and ten assignments. Students are required to pass each test, that is, get a minimum of 5% in the lab test, 12,5% in the transcription test, and 20% in the theory test. Although not reflected in table 1, class participation was recorded at the end of each lecture period and it was worth between 10 and 20% of the final grade; the purpose was to encourage students' active involvement in the lectures as much as possible.

The seven quizzes were short tests (two-pages long), normally done in twenty minutes, that reviewed the contents of the lesson just finished. They were done on a weekly basis. These quizzes were graded and returned, to be reviewed in class, to the students. The ten assignments also dealt with the material presented immediately before, and were graded and returned to be reviewed in class to the students. They contained a variety of exercises.

RESULTS

The outcome of the reformed course will be assessed from two perspectives: students' grades and students' course evaluations. It is felt that students are the ultimate beneficiaries from teaching; as a result, the quality of the course is for the most part reflected on their academic achievement (i.e. their grades) and on their satisfaction with the course (their course evaluations). The next two sections present relevant data in these two areas.

STUDENTS' GRADES

As it was explained above in section 4.5, the final exam system was replaced in the reformed course by a continuous assessment system. Figures 1, 2, and 3 below show graphically the results obtained in the quizzes by academic year. Each graph displays data concerning the average grade for each quiz and the number of students passing

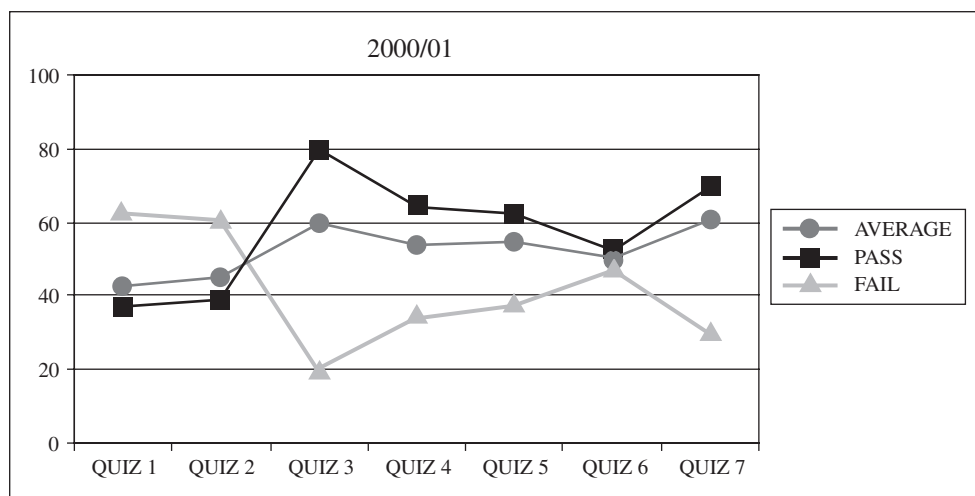


Figure 1. Quizzes 2000/2001.

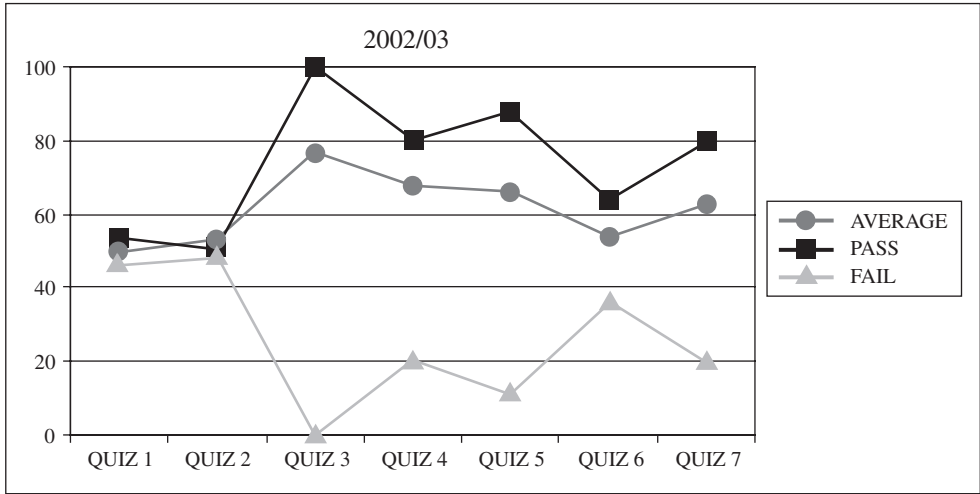


Figure 2. Quizzes 2002/2003.

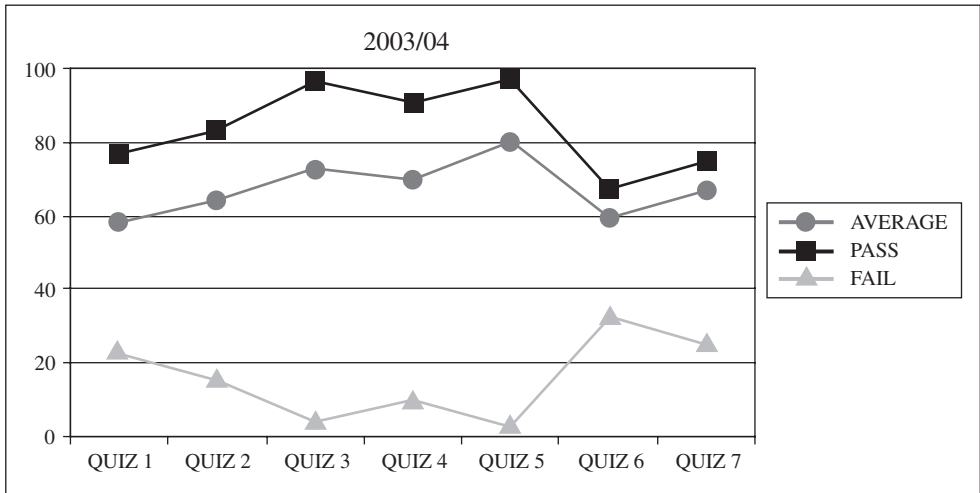


Figure 3. Quizzes 2003/2004.

and failing each quiz. All figures refer to percentages (%).

These results indicate that at the beginning of the course, in the first two academic years, the number of students passing and failing the quizzes is very similar, but as the

course makes headway, the number of students passing the quizzes greatly surpasses those failing them, especially in the second and third academic years. The average grade obtained shows a tendency to increase at the beginning of the course (roughly by

the second and third quizzes) to become stable as the course progresses.

Table 2 below shows the final grades obtained in the three academic courses; it displays the grades in percentages and the average grade. There is, as in the quizzes, a progression from the first academic year to the third. The percentage of failing students never exceeded 30%, and the average grade increases from 6 in the first two courses to 7, 8 in the third. It is also noteworthy that the number of 'Notable' always exceeds the number of 'Aprobado', in the three academic courses. In fact, in the third academic year the students receiving

a 'Notable' greatly surpass those obtaining 'Aprobado'.

STUDENTS' COURSE EVALUATIONS

The other measure of the accomplishment of the reformed phonetics course is the evaluation filled in by the students at the end of each academic course. The learners were asked to fill in a questionnaire with the questions displayed in tables 3, 4, and 5. They had to respond, using a five-point scale, to what extent they agreed with the statement, from 5 'completely agree' to 1 'completely disagree'. The first two questionnaires had eight statements, whereas the third had ten; the statements, however, were roughly equivalent across the three academic years.

It is obvious from these data that although there are areas where improvement can be made, the students seem to be fairly satisfied with the course and the instructor. There seems to be a progression from the first academic course to the third one, when the ratings are on the whole higher. The significance of these ratings is discussed in the next section.

Table 2. Final grades by academic year.

	2000-2001	2002-2003	2003-2004
Matrícula	2%	0%	12%
Sobresaliente	2%	2%	15%
Notable	40%	37%	54,5%
Aprobado	27%	30%	6,5%
Suspenseo	29%	30%	12%
Average grade	6	6	7,8

Table 3. Course evaluation 2000/2001. Number of respondents = 43.

	min 1 mid 3 max 5
1. The instructor explains the subject clearly	4,2
2. The instructor is friendly & supportive	3,8
3. I would rate the quality of this course as fairly good	3,6
4. I actively participate in class activities	2,6
5. I have learned a lot in this course	4
6. Course assignments/quizzes help in learning the subject	4,3
7. My instructor exposes us to a variety of styles/methods	3,5
8. The content of this course can be put into practice	4,2

Table 4. Course evaluation 2002/2003. Number of respondents = 36.

	<i>min 1</i> <i>mid 3</i> <i>max 5</i>
1. The instructor explains the subject clearly	4,2
2. The instructor is friendly & supportive	3,8
3. I would rate the quality of this course as fairly good	3,6
4. I actively participate in class activities	2,6
5. I have learned a lot in this course	4
6. Course assignments/quizzes help in learning the subject	4,3
7. My instructor exposes us to a variety of styles/methods	3,5
8. The content of this course can be put into practice	4,2

Table 5. Course evaluation 2003/2004. Number of respondents = 48.

	<i>min 1</i> <i>mid 3</i> <i>max 5</i>
1. The instructor explains the subject clearly	4,2
2. My instructor develops a good atmosphere in the class	4,2
3. The level of difficulty of this course is appropriate for me	4
4. I actively participate in class activities	3,7
5. I have learned a lot in this course	4,5
6. My instructor makes the subject interesting	4,2
7. My instructor communicates with the class clearly	4,2
8. The content of this course can be put into practice	4,3
9. My instructor encourages participation	4
10. My instructor is well prepared	4,6

DISCUSSION

The success of the reformed English phonetics course is evident: from an average of 40-50% students failing the course, the new course brandishes a 20-30 point gain in the percentage of passing students. Not only many more students are passing now, they also do it with an average grade that is

between 1 and 2 points higher than in the previous courses. The effectiveness of the course is also demonstrated by the attested progression from the first academic year in which the new system is implemented to the third academic course: in all measures, the learners of the third academic year do better than the students in the previous two courses. When the model was first applied

it underwent some adjustments, and by the third academic course the efficiency of the model started to manifest itself more clearly.

In the three courses, there seems to be a repeated pattern of improvement and deterioration in the quizzes, especially in the first and second academic years. It can be observed that in these academic years the number of students failing and passing the first two quizzes tends to be leveled out; by the third quiz, however, the number of those passing increases dramatically and this difference is maintained until the end of the course. The average grades, however, tend to increase steadily from the first academic year to the third, as shown in figures 1, 2, and 3.

More generally, it can be argued that the evaluation system applied resulted in better acquisition of knowledge by the students, given the decrease in the number of students failing the course (see Table 2). What aspects of the evaluation system contributed the improvements reported in this article? Part of the answer lies in the responses given by the students in the course evaluation questionnaires. In tables 3 and 4, responding to the statement 'course assignments/quizzes help in learning the subject', the students show an agreement percentage of 4,3 (in a 5-point scale); in the same way, the statement that 'the content of this course can be put into practice' has an agreement percentage of 4,2 and 4,3. This means that the continuous assessment component (the weekly quizzes and assignments) was perceived by the students as beneficial in their learning process. They also seem to acknowledge the practicality of the subject matter presented in the lectures; this is a token of the suitability of the linguistic

approach taken by the instructor (see section 3.1).

Pedagogically, it is very likely that the continuous feedback the students received in the reformed English phonetics course is the other part of the answer to the question posed above. Instructional feedback is essential, for example, in modern educational technology (see Neri, Cucchiarini and Strik, 2001). A course is by definition progressive and cyclical, so that continuous assessment and feedback are essential elements in its structure. Another advantage of this evaluation system is that by focusing on learner performance so closely, the students gain a sense of self-control over their learning process. This is an important factor in methodologies that are learner-centered, that is, in teaching approaches where the learner is at the center of the learning process (Tudor, 1996). Learner-centeredness is becoming a crucial aspect of modern language teaching, and experiences of the type reported in this study seem to be an example of its effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

This study has shown that courses taught at the university level can be substantially improved in their quality and degree of student satisfaction. It is obvious that the more traditional lecture type can be improved by making lectures more participative and interactional. In addition, the more traditional evaluation system in which students are assessed by means of a single final exam is one of the causes for student failure. Continuous assessment and feedback seems to ameliorate this aspect of the learning process.

It is quite possible that other courses taught at the university level will benefit from the findings reported in this study. In particular, implementing a structured ongoing assessment component within the evaluation system seems to have a significant impact on the learners' final performance. Note that in this pedagogical approach learners tend to experience a greater control over the learning process, since their final grade is crucially dependent on their whole performance along the course.

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