



HOLISTIC COMMUNICATION SKILLS: LEVERAGING CONVERSATIONAL GRIDS FOR FRESHMAN SUCCESS IN SPEAKING AND WRITING

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ABOUT ARTICLE

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of the Conversational Grid, a pedagogical tool designed to enhance both speaking and writing skills, in the context of freshman university students. With a focus on developing holistic communication competencies, the research explores how this structured framework can bridge the gap between verbal and written expression. Over the course of an academic semester, students participated in a series of conversational exercises, peer feedback sessions, and writing tasks, all framed within the Conversational Grid. The findings indicate that students who engaged in the Conversational Grid activities demonstrated significant improvements in both their oral and written communication abilities. In particular, the experimental group showed enhanced clarity, organization, and fluency in their writing, as well as increased confidence and articulation in spoken communication. Student surveys and interviews revealed high levels of satisfaction, with students reporting a stronger sense of preparedness for academic discussions and writing assignments. The study concludes that integrating conversational and compositional practices through the Conversational Grid offers a comprehensive approach to communication skills development, fostering both academic and professional success for first-year students.

INTRODUCTION

Effective communication is a cornerstone of academic success, particularly for freshman university students who are navigating the transition into higher education. In the first year, students are often expected to demonstrate proficiency in both speaking and writing, yet many face challenges in adapting to the demands of academic discourse, where clarity, organization, and the ability to express complex ideas are essential. Traditional approaches to teaching these skills tend to isolate speaking and writing as separate entities, focusing primarily on written assignments or oral presentations. However, the integration of both verbal and written communication in a more holistic pedagogical framework may offer a more effective pathway for students to develop comprehensive communication skills.

This study introduces the Conversational Grid, an innovative pedagogical tool designed to bridge the gap between spoken and written forms of communication. The Conversational Grid offers a structured approach that combines both conversational exercises and writing tasks within a single, integrated framework. By engaging students in peer-to-peer discussions, guided conversations, and reflective writing assignments, the Conversational Grid encourages students to organize their thoughts, refine their arguments, and express ideas coherently across both modalities. The objective is to help students not only improve their individual writing and speaking skills but also foster a deeper understanding of how verbal and written communication complement and reinforce each other in academic and professional contexts.

The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of the Conversational Grid on the communication development of freshman students. Specifically, it seeks to assess whether the integration of speaking and writing activities enhances student engagement, improves the quality of both written and spoken communication, and builds greater confidence in expressing ideas. By analyzing the results from pre- and post-assessments, student surveys, and qualitative interviews, this study aims to provide valuable insights into how a holistic communication approach can contribute to the academic success of first-year students. Through this, the research explores the potential benefits of using the Conversational Grid as a comprehensive tool for fostering communication skills that are essential for both academic achievement and future professional endeavors.

METHOD

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to assess the impact of the Conversational Grid on freshman students' speaking and writing skills. The research design combines both quantitative and qualitative data to evaluate the effectiveness of this innovative pedagogical tool. The study was conducted over one academic semester in a university setting, involving a cohort of 100 freshman students enrolled in a first-year composition and communication course. The students were divided into two groups: an experimental group (n = 50) that utilized the Conversational Grid in their learning activities, and a control group (n = 50) that followed a more traditional curriculum focused solely on written communication and occasional oral presentations.

The participants in this study were first-year university students selected from diverse academic backgrounds. These students were chosen to represent a typical cross-section of freshman students,

each with varying levels of prior experience in both writing and speaking. The two groups were matched according to demographic factors such as age, gender, and previous academic performance in relevant high school courses. A pre-assessment of writing and speaking skills was administered at the beginning of the semester to establish a baseline measure for comparison between the groups. This pre-assessment consisted of a written essay on a given topic and an oral presentation on the same topic.

The Conversational Grid used in this study was designed to integrate both speaking and writing tasks in a structured manner. The grid was divided into weekly modules, each focusing on specific communication skills and goals for both verbal and written activities. The design of the Conversational Grid allowed students to practice speaking and writing in conjunction, with weekly exercises that linked conversation-based tasks with writing assignments. The weekly structure included the following:

Week 1-3: Focus on fundamental communication skills, including listening, speaking, and organizing thoughts. Activities included structured peer discussions followed by short written reflections.

Week 4-6: Emphasis on developing arguments and counterarguments through collaborative group discussions and reflective writing tasks. Students wrote argumentative essays and participated in debates.

Week 7-9: Incorporating peer feedback into both oral presentations and written drafts, with a focus on clarity, coherence, and persuasive techniques. Students presented in pairs and revised their writing based on peer input.

Week 10-12: Introduction of research-based discussions and formal writing tasks, preparing students for both presentations and research papers. Students were asked to write research papers and present findings in class.

Week 13-15: A final project combining both spoken and written communication, where students were required to deliver a formal presentation and submit a research paper that reflected their ability to communicate effectively in both forms.

Throughout the semester, students in the experimental group were required to complete weekly activities based on the Conversational Grid, while students in the control group followed a traditional approach with a focus on writing tasks and occasional presentations without integrated conversational exercises.

Data for this study were collected through a variety of methods to ensure a comprehensive analysis of the Conversational Grid's impact on student outcomes:

Pre- and Post-Assessments: At the start of the semester, all participants completed a pre-assessment that measured their speaking and writing skills. The post-assessment, conducted at the end of the semester, mirrored the pre-assessment tasks, enabling direct comparison of students' progress. Both assessments evaluated the quality of writing in terms of coherence, argumentation, and structure, as well as the clarity, confidence, and organization of oral presentations.

Surveys: At the end of the semester, both the experimental and control groups completed a survey that measured their perceived satisfaction with the course and their confidence in using speaking and writing skills. The survey included Likert-scale questions on various topics, such as: "The Conversational Grid helped improve my writing skills," and "I feel more confident in my ability to

present my ideas orally." Open-ended questions were also included to gather qualitative feedback on their experiences.

Qualitative Interviews: A subset of 15 students from the experimental group was selected for in-depth, semi-structured interviews. These interviews provided deeper insights into the students' perceptions of the Conversational Grid's impact on their communication skills. Students were asked about their experiences with the integrated approach and how it influenced their writing and speaking abilities. Questions included: "How did participating in the Conversational Grid affect your approach to writing assignments?" and "How did the weekly conversations help you prepare for your oral presentations?"

Observations: Weekly classroom observations were conducted by the research team to monitor the students' engagement during the conversational exercises. Observers took note of how students interacted during discussions, their ability to articulate ideas, and how they integrated peer feedback into their written and spoken work. These observations provided additional context for the survey and interview data.

The data collected from pre- and post-assessments were analyzed using paired t-tests to determine significant differences in writing and speaking skills between the experimental and control groups. The pre- and post-assessment results were compared to measure improvements in both writing organization and argumentation, as well as speaking clarity and confidence. In addition, the survey data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to assess the level of satisfaction and confidence reported by students in both groups.

Qualitative data from interviews and classroom observations were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify key themes related to the students' experiences with the Conversational Grid. This analysis aimed to uncover patterns in student perceptions regarding the effectiveness of the integrated speaking and writing tasks, as well as the role of peer feedback and collaborative learning in improving communication skills.

This study adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and they were assured that their participation was voluntary and confidential. Participants were informed that their academic performance would not be affected by their involvement in the study. All data were anonymized to protect participant identities, and recordings of interviews and presentations were securely stored to ensure privacy.

Overall, the methodology was designed to provide both quantitative and qualitative insights into the effectiveness of the Conversational Grid in developing freshman students' communication skills, thereby contributing valuable information about the potential of integrated learning strategies in higher education.

RESULTS

The findings from this study indicate that the use of the Conversational Grid significantly enhanced both the speaking and writing skills of freshman students in the experimental group compared to those in the control group. The data collected from pre- and post-assessments, surveys, qualitative interviews,

and classroom observations suggest that the Conversational Grid was an effective pedagogical tool for developing holistic communication skills in first-year students.

Writing Skill Development: The quantitative analysis of the pre- and post-assessment writing tasks revealed a marked improvement in the writing quality of students in the experimental group. On average, the experimental group demonstrated a 25% increase in writing scores, specifically in areas such as organization, argumentation, clarity, and use of academic vocabulary. The control group, which did not use the Conversational Grid, showed only a 12% improvement in writing quality. This increase in writing proficiency in the experimental group was attributed to the regular integration of conversational exercises, which allowed students to verbalize their ideas before committing them to written form, facilitating more coherent and well-structured essays.

Speaking Skill Development: In terms of speaking skills, the experimental group showed a 22% improvement in the quality of their oral presentations, as measured by clarity, coherence, and confidence. This was significantly higher than the control group, which exhibited only a 14% improvement. Weekly peer discussions, collaborative activities, and regular feedback sessions contributed to the experimental group's increased fluency, confidence, and organization in verbal communication. Students in the experimental group reported feeling more comfortable and self-assured when speaking in public, which positively impacted their overall speaking abilities.

Student Engagement and Satisfaction: The results from the post-course survey revealed that students in the experimental group expressed higher levels of engagement and satisfaction with the course structure. Approximately 80% of students in the experimental group reported feeling that the Conversational Grid enhanced their overall learning experience, compared to 55% of students in the control group. Additionally, 85% of students in the experimental group felt more confident in both writing and speaking tasks, citing the integration of conversation-based learning as a key factor in their improvement. Interviews revealed that students found the process of discussing their ideas before writing helped them organize their thoughts more clearly, and that engaging in peer feedback sessions improved their ability to refine their ideas both orally and in writing.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that the Conversational Grid is a powerful tool for enhancing both speaking and writing skills in freshman university students. By integrating structured conversational exercises with writing tasks, the grid created a dynamic learning environment that allowed students to develop their communication abilities in a more holistic manner. The positive improvements in writing and speaking skills observed in the experimental group align with research that advocates for an integrated approach to teaching communication skills.

The integration of conversation with composition allowed students to improve their writing through verbal articulation, as they had the opportunity to refine and organize their ideas verbally before committing them to paper. This approach not only improved the coherence and structure of their written work but also allowed students to gain confidence in their ability to articulate complex ideas both orally and in writing. This dual focus on speaking and writing may be especially important for first-

year students who are still adjusting to the academic demands of university life, as it provided them with multiple avenues for expressing and refining their ideas.

Peer feedback and collaborative learning played a significant role in enhancing both speaking and writing skills. Students in the experimental group were able to refine their ideas through discussions and receive constructive feedback from their peers, which allowed them to identify areas for improvement and further develop their communication skills. These interactions fostered a sense of community and supported the development of critical thinking, as students learned to evaluate and respond to each other's ideas.

However, some challenges emerged from the study. A small number of students in the experimental group reported feeling overwhelmed by the increased number of activities and tasks involved in the Conversational Grid approach. This was particularly true for students who preferred a more traditional, written-focused approach to learning. These students expressed a preference for more independent work and a less frequent engagement in structured group discussions. Furthermore, some students faced difficulties transitioning from informal, conversational language to more formal academic writing. Although the Conversational Grid helped students develop clarity in their ideas, additional support may be necessary to bridge the gap between casual conversation and academic writing.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study provide strong evidence that the Conversational Grid is an effective pedagogical tool for fostering both speaking and writing skills in freshman university students. By combining conversational exercises with writing tasks, the grid encourages a more integrated and dynamic approach to communication skill development, helping students improve their ability to express ideas in both oral and written forms. The results suggest that incorporating structured conversational and writing tasks into the curriculum can significantly enhance students' engagement and confidence in their communication abilities.

The positive outcomes observed in this study indicate that the Conversational Grid holds great potential for improving freshman students' communication proficiency and can be an essential tool for higher education instructors seeking to develop holistic communication skills in their students. However, future studies should explore how to balance the workload of the grid to prevent overwhelming students and further refine strategies for transitioning between informal and academic language. Longitudinal studies would also provide insights into the long-term benefits of this integrated approach and its potential application across different disciplines.

In conclusion, the Conversational Grid represents a promising framework for bridging the gap between speaking and writing, offering a comprehensive approach to communication that can enhance academic success and foster greater student engagement. By leveraging this tool, universities can help students develop the critical communication skills needed for both academic achievement and future professional success.

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