

Periodic Quizzes and Student Response
Research in LA203, Basic Standard Arabic

Master Teacher Program

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I. Introduction

During the course of LA203-204 (Basic Standard Arabic), we noticed a definite lack of cadet attention to the assigned homework. Most cadets did not complete the assigned exercises within the textbook in preparation for each day's lessons. From that observation, we began to realize that cadets were not committed to regular completion of out of class assignments. Within the foreign language instruction community, immersion is recognized as one of the most effective methods of learning a new language. Placing a student in a constant or near-constant environment in which the foreign language is the focus of conversation and comprehension has demonstrated benefits to the student's learning. Homework from a foreign language class, though imperfect, is a form of immersion. It provides the student the opportunity to work within the immersive environment left behind in the classroom. While homework assignments are often regarded as a useful learning tool in most disciplines, because of the immersion factor, they are especially important in beginning language courses. Homework assignments at the basic level of language often reinforce concepts that form the foundation of the language. Students with a strong foundation in these concepts will be able to continue with confidence in higher level language courses. If cadets were not completing their homework assignments, then they were missing out on this opportunity for learning, and essentially failing to build a strong foundation to set the stage for future success in the language.

Our goal was to devise a change in the course of instruction that would encourage cadets to spend more time on homework in preparation for each class meeting. To

accomplish our goal, we did three things. First, we redesigned the quizzes to more closely resemble the homework assignment for a particular lesson and increased the number of quizzes. Second, we measured the amount of time cadets spent in preparation for class both before and after the change in the course syllabus. Finally, we determined if the frequency of homework-based quizzes achieved the goal of increased devotion of time to homework preparation.

II. Methodology

The basic change to the syllabus involved increasing the number of quizzes presented to the cadets and modeling the quizzes very closely after the homework assigned for each class attendance. While the number of quizzes increased, the total percentage of course points assigned to quizzes remained unchanged, therefore, we reduced the number of points assigned to each quiz.

At the beginning of the semester, the syllabus stated that there would be 10 quizzes throughout the semester, roughly half before the first Written/Oral Partial Review (WOPR). Each quiz was worth 15 points (1.5% of the course grade). In the second half of the course, when 5 quizzes remained (75 points total) we increased the number of quizzes and reduced the points for each quiz so that 10 quizzes remained, each worth 7.5 points. In order to encourage cadets to spend more time on the assigned homework exercises, the quizzes were redesigned to reflect the homework exercises assigned for each class attendance. The quizzes were not directly copied from the exercises; rather they were closely modeled from them. In other words, we designed the quizzes to measure the same concepts using the same structure used in the homework, but changed

some information in the quiz so that it was not exactly the same as the homework assignment. While the questions were not identical to the homework, they bore a close enough resemblance to the homework so that a cadet who completed the homework before class would have a distinct advantage over those who did not do the homework.

Cadet Course Perception and Reporting:

In order to better understand how much time students were using to prepare for class and to establish a baseline for this study, we distributed and administered a questionnaire to the entire course (160 cadets) both before and after the change in frequency of the quizzes. The questionnaire consisted of the following questions:

1. How do you find the pace of the course (circle one)?

about right too slow too fast

2. What are we doing in class that helps you learn that you want to see more of?

3. What are we not doing in class that would help you learn?

4. How much time on average do you prepare for each lesson?

5. What is your plan to achieve success in this course?

6. Comments?

The students completed the first iteration of surveys anonymously during a class period before the first mid-term WOPR. While the questionnaire was designed to provide some basic feedback on how we could best improve the course as a whole, questions number one and number four in particular were of primary concern to our research. Question number one was important because the pace of the course was probably a factor in determining how long cadets would spend outside of class doing their homework. Question number four was at the crux of our research as it provided us an approximate amount of time that each cadet invested in preparing for each lesson, according to self-reports. Near the end of the course, after cadets had experienced the change in the number of quizzes and course structure for four weeks, we surveyed the course a second time using the same questionnaire to evaluate whether or not preparation time for class had increased or decreased with an increase in the frequency and structure of the quizzes.

We had anticipated that the cadets would notice the change in the quiz structure and realize that the quizzes were modeled very closely to the homework for each attendance. Some instructors even prompted the cadets to notice the relationship. Since cadets are extremely performance-oriented, we thought that they would modify their study habits and focus more closely on the assigned homework. This attention to the homework should have led to increased study times in preparation for each class meeting, however as we outlined in the results section below, it had the opposite effect.

III. Results

Pace of the Course

Illustrated below are the results for question number one on the questionnaire.

Figure 1 shows the pace of the course before the change in the number of quizzes. Figure 2 shows the pace of the course after we made the changes.

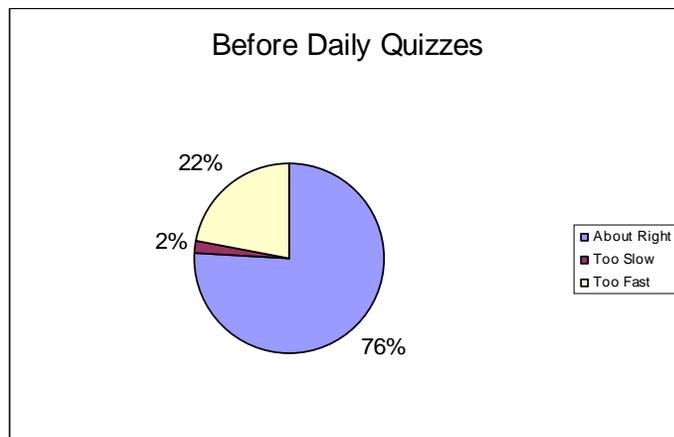


Figure 1

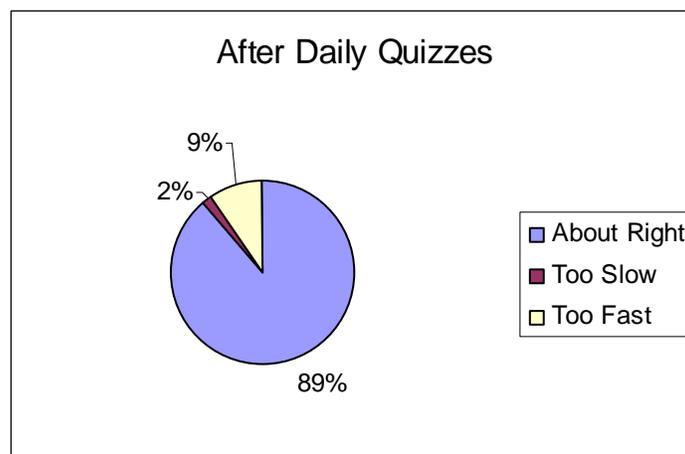


Figure 2

The results from the first question raise an important question: why did cadets feel that the pace was better after the changes to the course syllabus and quizzes were made? Answering this question is a daunting task as every cadet has his or her own reasoning for why the pace of the course was about right after the first WOPR; however we believe some generalities can be made that can perhaps answer this question.

It is important to preface our explanation by mentioning again that cadets are extremely performance-oriented. Most cadets appreciate knowing – or at least having some idea – of what will be expected from them on graded events. One possible reason for the increase in “about right” responses is that cadets felt there was more predictability in testing. Assuming that all cadets were aware of the similarity between the test and the homework, cadets would know exactly what to focus their time and efforts on in order to both minimize time on task and maximize their chances for a successful result on the quiz. Another possible explanation is that the material changed significantly from before the first WOPR and after. Before the first WOPR, cadets were learning about the phonetics and orthography of the 28 letters of the alphabet and other diacritical marks. This portion of the course had changed significantly from the previous years in that instead of taking 22 lessons to learn the alphabet as it did in 2006-1, the course was sped up to cover the same amount of material in 14 lessons in 2007-1; the same semester in which this research project was conducted. Since the overall material covered in the semester was the same from 2006 to 2007, the accelerated pace of the first 14 lessons in 2007 allowed for more time after WOPR I to cover the remaining material for the semester. This resulted in a slowing down of the rate of instruction in the second half of

the course. This could explain why the pace of the course seemed “about right” for an increased 89% of students compared to the results from the first survey before WOPR I. The fact that we were conducting research during this timeframe may have also inadvertently affected the results as the pace of the course was a topic of discussion during several weekly meetings. The fact that the “pace of course” issue was a topic of discussion may have spurred instructors to deliberately slow down the pace of their sections; although we believe the design of the course was more of a factor in why more students felt the course was “about right” after WOPR I.

Preparation Time

The following graphs depict cadet responses to question number four on the questionnaire (How much time on average do you prepare for each lesson?).

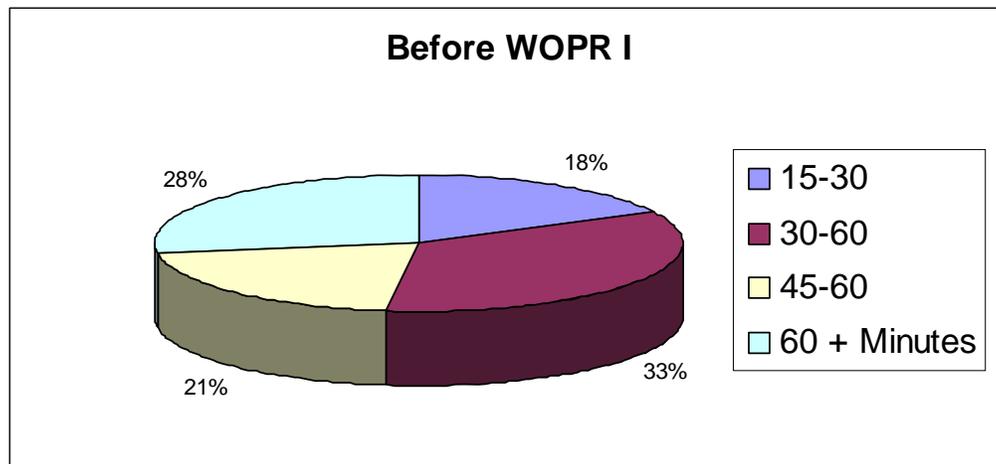


Figure 3

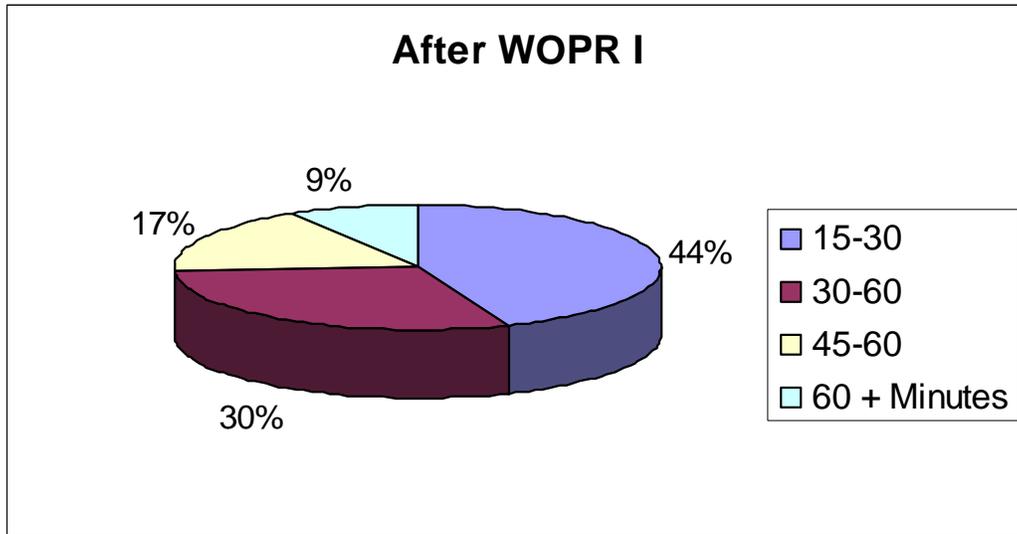


Figure 4

Figure 3 and Figure 4 both illustrate the amount of time that cadets reported they spent on homework prior to each lesson in minutes. The legend shows four time brackets ranging from 15-30 minutes at the low end to 60 + Minutes on the high end. These brackets are not random. These are the actual time brackets provided by some cadets in their answers to question number four on the survey. These time brackets show some overlap, however we decided to use them as a basis to organize our data. Despite the overlap, the majority of cadets indicated that they spend either between 15-30 minutes or 30-60 minutes before every lesson completing the homework. Despite the obvious focus of the quizzes on the assigned homework, the amount of time that cadets reported spending in preparation for each class meeting *decreased* with the number of cadets spending more than 60 minutes in preparation dropping from 44 to 12.

Since cadet behavior did not meet the expectations of the experiment, it is important to examine why. One possible reason is that, according to other questions on

the survey, cadets sensed that the pace of the course slowed down later in the semester. If cadets felt that the course was more manageable in the second half of the semester, then it may follow that they felt that they could afford to spend less time preparing for each attendance without risking falling too far behind. Cadets are exceptional practitioners of time reallocation as a tool to balance the work loads between different courses and they may have felt that other courses demanded more attention than Arabic.

A second reason for the decline in class preparation time may be within the content that is presented in the first semester of Arabic. In LA203, we use the *Ahlan wa Sahlan* textbook by Dr. Mahdi Alish. *Ahlan wa Sahlan* differs from most beginning Arabic texts in that it presents the Arabic alphabet to the students at the same time that they are exposed to their first Arabic vocabulary. One of the greatest hurdles in learning Arabic is mastering the script of the new language. Since it is handwritten from right to left and shares no letters with English, new learners must make a significant time investment in order to handle the basic structures of the language. The cadets completed the first survey as they approached the end of this stage of their learning. Soon after the survey, they finished learning the last letter of their new alphabet. Since so much time is spent learning the letters and developing the ability to draw those letters, it is not surprising that the amount of homework time dropped off as the cadets felt a sense of relief at the end of the course introduction and perceived a lightening of the course load.

Perhaps most disturbing is the possibility that the change in the quizzes may have actually *encouraged* the cadets to spend less time on homework. We had hoped that the close alignment of the quizzes to the assigned exercises in the textbook would have increased cadet attention and time spent on the homework. This may have had the

opposite affect if cadets began to believe that the path to success lay in completing *only* the assigned exercises. The answers to every exercise in the textbook are listed in the appendices. Cadets desiring to ensure only that they would do well on the quizzes may have determined that it would be far easier to refer to the answers to each exercise rather than struggle through to explore possible answers through careful study of the material provided. In this case the cadet would simply turn to the end of the book and copy the answers to each exercise on the appropriate page. Doing this would give the cadet only a cursory understanding of the material provided but would help his or her performance on the quizzes. This explanation would be disturbing as it would indicate that our attempt to improve cadet learning actually had the reverse effect and instead became a distraction to the learning process.

IV. Recommendations and Conclusion

It was our intention during this study to see if an increase in quizzes and a modification of their content would result in an increase in preparation time. The results indicated that the change to the quizzes actually resulted in a decrease in preparation time throughout the course as a whole. While this certainly will not lead us to the conclusion that quizzes are an ineffective tool in motivating students to adequately prepare of classes and therefore should be removed from all course syllabi from this point forward, it does shed some light on our thought process and is a good starting point for how we can proceed in the future to get the most out of our students. There are a few things that we could have done in our methodology that may have yielded the results that we desired.

First, we should have clearly stated to every student in the course that the daily quizzes following WOPR I would closely *resemble* the homework. This would ensure that students will do the homework for the purpose of learning and practicing the concepts, rather than just going through the motion of completing the homework assignment just to get a good grade on the quiz. As stated in the methodology section, only some instructors made the relationship between quizzes and homework clear.

We should also have considered finding a better way to more adequately measure preparation time than by solely using self-reports. Our data had some overlap, and the self-reports collected in our study may have only reflected how much time the cadets think they spent on preparing for class instead of measuring their actual preparation time. One possible solution to address this issue would be to design web-based homework exercises – like Rosetta Stone – that can accurately measure time on task. This web-based design would allow the instructor to log on and check the time that each student spent on preparing for the day’s lesson.

Another potential solution that could address the issue of decreased preparation time is to increase the amount of points that each quiz is worth. Since we increased the number of quizzes without adjusting the total points for the course, the remaining quizzes after WOPR I were actually worth less than the quizzes before WOPR I. As stated previously, the quizzes went from being worth 15 points to 7.5 points. Students may have viewed this change with the mindset that they could afford to spend less time on homework since the quizzes were worth less points than before.

As students at the United States Military Academy at West Point wrestle with academics and prioritize the allocation of their time to homework, academic departments

will continue to compete for cadet time outside of the classroom. As our study demonstrates, an increase in preparation time is not simply achieved by increasing the number of quizzes given in a particular course, but the careful consideration of how these quizzes are crafted in combination with factors like how the pace of the course and course material affect comprehension. Although the results in our study did not reflect what we had anticipated, we learned a great deal about how to better construct and administer quizzes so that we can produce the intended result.

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