

STUDENTS' ATTITUDES TOWARDS LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND THEIR ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE

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Introduction

Research in education has well recognized that the language proficiency of undergraduate students influences their academic performance, when teaching is conducted in a second language. The language proficiency is found to have a direct influence on academic performance while several other factors have confounding effects (Hunter, 1965; Fraser and Roy, 2005).

The aim of the present study was to investigate whether the students' perception of their own level of proficiency in different language sub-skills influence their academic performance.

Materials and Methods

One hundred and ninety six undergraduates of four different first year batches of the Faculty of Dental Sciences, University of Peradeniya took part in the study as captive participants. Data were collected using a questionnaire specifically designed for that purpose. Their confidence / perception of their own proficiency levels in different language sub-skills were evaluated using Visual Analogue Scales. The students were properly instructed on rating Visual Analogue Scales by the same investigator for all the batches. Data were collected in the middle of

the second semester of the first year academic program. The marks of the test conducted by the English Language Teaching Unit (ELTU marks) at the end of the English language course were used as the objective indicator to their level of English skills. Grade Point Average (GPA) of the first year academic program was used as the objective indicator for their academic performance at the end of one year in the academic program. The Z-score obtained at the GCE (A/L) examination by the student to enter the Faculty of Dental Sciences was also recorded. Data were analyzed using SPSS version 11.5 for Windows. Spearman Correlation Co-efficients were calculated to explore associations and Multiple Linear Regression procedure was employed to test the value of predictive variables on students' GPA.

Results

All parameters that evaluated students' confidence in different sub-skills of English Language exhibited strong negative associations with GPA (Speaking, $\gamma = -0.25$, $P=0.001$; Writing, $\gamma = -0.21$, $P=0.01$; Listening $\gamma = -0.22$, $P=0.01$; Reading, $\gamma = -0.28$, $P=0.001$) and with ELTU marks (Speaking, $\gamma = -0.39$, $P=0.001$; Writing, $\gamma = -0.38$, $P=0.01$; Listening

$\gamma = -0.39$, $P=0.001$; Reading, $\gamma = -0.43$, $P=0.001$).

Their perceived difficulty of the academic course in general and English language in general too had strong negative associations with the GPA as well as with the ELTU marks. GPA was used as the outcome variable in a Multiple Linear Regression Model where students' perceived difficulty of the course, perceived difficulty in English, their ELTU marks and Z-score were used as predictors. The model was significant ($R^2=0.33$, $F=23.67$, $P=0.001$) and the English marks ($\beta = 0.45$, $P=0.001$) and the Z score ($\beta = 0.21$, $P=0.001$) were the only significant predictors.

Discussion

The results of the present study reveals that both students' language proficiency and attributes measured in terms of Z-score influence the academic performance of the first year dental students. Although, their perceived difficulty in different sub-skills too shows strong negative association with the academic performance, perhaps, the true language proficiency is a confounding factor in these associations. The strong negative associations of their perceived difficulty in all sub-skills of English with ELTU marks could be a true reflection of their difficulty in language.

A similar study conducted using the same populations, i.e., first year dental students (Pallegama et al., 1999) did not reveal a strong association of their GCE Advance Level (GCE A/L) performance to first year academic performance. As found in that study,

the language proficiency was the only factor that had an impact on the academic performance of the first year students. But after a decade both language proficiency and GCE A/L performance show an impact on the academic performance of first year dental students. This observation may be attributed to changes in the exam system in the first BDS program where the measures were taken to reduce the influence of language. With the reduced influence of language on the academic performance, the influence of the attributes assessed with Z-score probably showed more impact on the first year academic performance.

Conclusions

The academic performance of first year dental undergraduate students is significantly affected by their language proficiency and the attributes of students assessed in terms of the Z-score of (GCE A/L) examination.

References

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