THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE ABILITY OF FOURTH YEAR MEDICAL STUDENTS AND THEIR PERFORMANCE IN THE ESSAY COMPONENT OF THE FORENSIC MEDICINE PAPER

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The central issue that led to this investigation is the concern among academic staff of the Department of Forensic medicine that the average fourth year student completing the relevant MBBS examination is unable to demonstrate his/her knowledge of the discipline in a satisfactory or convincing manner in English. Literature review revealed that previous research addressing this issue had reported a significant association between English language ability and the performance in different stages of the MBBS course.

The objective of this study was to find out whether there was any significant correlation between the written communicative competence in English (ELA) and performance in Forensic Medicine of fourth year medical students.

The Linguistic analysis of the ELA and the performance in Forensic Medicine were evaluated independently by respective content experts on the basis of answers students had produced for selected questions in the Forensic Medicine II, April 2000 examination paper. These questions were selected on the basis that critical analysis and communicative competence were required to formulate a satisfactory answer. The study sample consisted of 177 students sitting for the examination for the first time.
The gravity chart scale used to determine the ELA was based on semantic, syntactic and morphological criteria. At the lowest end of the scale, **1** and **2** were assigned to scripts that contained sentences that failed to make sense and showed a *poor* and *weak* grasp of the language. The language level of scripts categorized as **3 & 4** showed *bare competence* and *competence* in performance, respectively. Scripts classified as **5** reflected ELA categorized as *good.*

Of the 177 scripts subjected to the analysis, 6 were classified as poor, 89 as weak, 63 as barely competent/competent and 19 as good. Despite such dismal expressions of language surprisingly 90% of the students were successful in obtaining passes in Forensic Medicine at the examination. There was no significant relationship between the ELA and the scores obtained for the essay component of the Forensic Medicine paper
($\chi 2 = 2.2, P < .05$).

On the basis of what we observed it is clear that competence in English writing is not a requirement to be successful in certain questions of the essay paper that were thought to require a high degree of English language ability.

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