EFL STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND THEIR ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Md. Kamrul Hasan[1] and Mohd. Moniruzzaman Akhand[2]

Abstract

The major problem Bangladeshi students at the undergraduate level face in their field of study is their inability to understand the English of the prescribed text books and the failure to write properly in examinations to achieve good grades while they aspire to graduate; as a result, they are assumed to not be successful because they are unable to get good jobs. This problem is due to their weakness in general English, which influences their academic success. The purpose of the present study is to explore the built-in strength of the relationship between English language proficiency and the academic achievement of Bangladeshi EFL students. For this purpose, the correlation between English Language proficiency and academic achievement is delved into in this study, and a significant connection is found between Language proficiency and cumulative grade point averages which indicate academic achievement.

Keywords: Language Proficiency, General English, EFL, Correlations

INTRODUCTION

The recent trend is that many students are taking up courses, such as BBA (Bachelor in Business Administration), Bachelor in Science and Engineering Courses, etc., for their undergraduate study at either public or private universities. In keeping pace with the English standard in the public universities, private universities are providing well-equipped language laboratories and highly trained teachers. In reality, we observe that those students who aspire to become graduates have chosen their respective fields of study with little degree of capability in English language use in terms of four skills (reading, writing, listening, and speaking). In other words, they

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[1]Md. Kamrul Hasan holds M. Phil and M.A in Linguistics and B.A (Hons) in English from University of Delhi, India. He is currently working as an assistant professor in English Language Institute at United International University, Dhanmondi, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has been teaching English, Linguistics at different private universities for more than seven years. He has got seven international conference papers under his belt. His interests cover ELT, Sociolinguistics and SLA.

[2]Mohd. Moniruzzaman Akhand holds M.A in Applied Linguistics & ELT from the University of Dhaka, Bangladesh. He is currently working as an assistant professor in the Department of English of Eastern University, Dhanmondi, Dhaka, Bangladesh. He has been teaching English, Applied Linguistics and ELT for more than four years. He has presented papers in two international conferences. His interests cover ELT, SLA and issues of Teacher Development.

have low ability or proficiency in English language usage when they start working on their majors. The students face the uphill task of grasping fully the content and concepts of the course prescribed to them by the authority or the respective teachers as most of the students have come from a medium of instruction where the use of English is minimal. The reason for this would be due to their weakness in general English, lack of exposure to both English itself, and, expert, well-trained English teachers in their school/college level study. This pathetic situation of the students' weakness in English may have a drastic impact on their academic success. Most of the students who aspire to earn a degree, in general, seem not to be proficient or qualified in English language use. In other words, they fail to understand fully the context of discourse using the language use or the contexts of many situations involving the language. Savignon (1983) states that communication takes place in an indefinite variety of situations and success in a particular role depends on one's understanding of the context and on prior experiences of a similar kind; therefore, the overall performance of EFL students in English language use shapes students' academic success in a greater way. To determine whether the proficiency in English affects the academic achievement of the EFL students, we decided to conduct the present research. The purpose of the study is to examine whether a greater connection between English language proficiency and the academic achievement of Bangladeshi EFL students exits.

STATUS OF ENGLISH IN BANGLADESH

Since the enactment of the Private University Act of 1992, Bangladesh has witnessed a significant growth in the number of private universities, especially in the cities, for example, Dhaka. Though there was no clear indication about the choice of the medium of instruction; interestingly, in all private universities, the medium of instruction is inevitably English. The language syllabi in the private universities are essentially need-based, and aim to develop the skills of reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Students of these universities go through Basic English and Communication courses along with the core courses. The design of language courses in these universities are more or less uniform, and the objective of these courses is to sharpen students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking skills to compete in the job market.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

According to Stern (1983), proficiency can be looked at as a goal; thus, it can be defined in terms of objectives or standards. These can serve as criteria by which to assess proficiency as an empirical fact, that is, the actual performance of given individual learners or groups of learners. He mentions that "proficiency ranges from zero to native-like proficiency. The zero is not absolute because the second language learner as the speaker of at least one other language, his first language, knows language and how it functions". Bachman (1990) defines language proficiency as lan-

guage ability or ability in language use. Oller (1983) states that language proficiency is not a single unitary ability, but it consists of several distinct but related constructs, in addition to a general construct of language proficiency. Farhady, et al. (1983) state that the term "proficiency" refers to the examinees' ability in a particular area of competency in order to determine the extent to which they can function in a real language use situation. Best and Kahn (1989) mention that, generally, achievement tests are measurement scales, which show what an individual has learned. In recent years, researchers have examined the relationship between language proficiency and various areas, such as aptitude, intelligence, and language skills. A study done by Rahman (2005) showcases that Bangladeshi students learn a foreign language mainly for its utilitarian value (instrumental orientation) rather than for an integrative motivation. His study is solely (besides a bit of semi-structured interview) based on a questionnaire. The mentioned study does not aim to find out the link between varieties of motivational orientations and the language proficiency of the learners. A study done by Noon-ura (2008) aimed at exploring the results of an intervention designed to improve the listening and speaking skills of Thai students with low English proficiency for 60 hours over three weeks. Her study showed that the scores and the students' readiness, interests, and confidence in learning and using English significantly increased. Maleki & Zangani (2007) showed that there was a positive correlation between the two variables, namely English language proficiency and academic achievement (GPA) of Ira-

nian EFL students. Feast (2002) found a significant and positive relationship between English language proficiency as measured by IELTS test scores, and performance at university as measured by Grade Point Average (GPA). Liu's (2007) study revealed that Chinese students at the tertiary level had positive attitudes toward learning English and were highly motivated to study it, and the students were more instrumentally than integratively motivated to learn English; moreover, the students' attitudes and motivation were positively correlated with their English proficiency.

Butler and Castellon-Wellington (2000) compare student content performance on a language proficiency test. Stevens et al. (2000) investigate the relationship between the language and performance test and a standardized achievement test. They state that the correspondence between the languages of the two tests was limited. Bayliss and Raymond (2004) examine the link between academic success and second language proficiency in the context of two professional programs. Ulibarri et al. (1981) demonstrate that English language proficiency is the best predictor of English reading achievement for students with lower levels of English proficiency.

METHODOLOGY

For the study, 90 students (50 male and 40 female) aged 19-24 were randomly selected from United International University, Bangladesh. Out of 90 students, 60 students were from School of Business and the rest were from School of Science and

Engineering. The selection procedures yielded a sample of students, all in the last semester of their course of study.

PROCEDURE

We administered a 1.50 hour written question paper, which consists of grammar, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and paragraph/essay writing. It is worth mentioning that as a faculty member of the English Language Institute of United International University, the researcher had to examine the standard of passing students (last semester before their graduation) whether they should need any more advanced English course besides their Basic English (English-I) and Composition and Communication Skills (English-II) before they graduate and look for jobs. We had to see whether they were competent /fit enough for job markets. The last two courses (that is, Eng-I and Eng-II) the majoring students have taken up as credit courses in the first semester of their study. Our university has a well-equipped English language lab, so we took the same students there to test their English language in terms of listening. We took a listening extract from New Headway (Intermediate) by Liz and John Soars. Oxford: Oxford University Press. To test their speaking ability, we gave them one topic to make a presentation about followed by a question-answer session before their peers, and also we arranged a mock interview. Data on academic achievement was obtained from students' folders at the registrar's office. After administrating the written examination test, and the listening and speaking test, the re-

sults of the different parts of the test and the interviews were used, in total, as an indicator of each student's estimated English language proficiency score. The Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA) of the students was taken on the basis of the courses he/she has passed successfully so far during his or her study. Then the coefficient of the correlation between each students' CGPA and the results of their language proficiency test was calculated.

To decide whether the calculated proficiency scores have a significant impact on the students' achievement in terms of the speaking and writing skills, the authors computed two different CGPAs for each student. The first CGPA was comprised of oral content, that is, those subjects that had been assessed orally, such as, the presentation and interview. The second CGPA was restricted to the written language, that is, those subjects which had been evaluated in a written form. Later, the correlation analysis was used to determine the relations between scores on language proficiency and achievement in speaking and writing subjects.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at the Mean, Median, and Standard deviation, and others, the results of the descriptive analysis of the data show that the mean of the language proficiency score of the participating students was 15.49, and the standard deviation was 1.56. This indicates that the language ability of almost all students was reasonably good. The mean of the English speaking and writing subjects (lessons) scores were 13.58

and 12.43 while the standard deviations were 1.62 and 2.04 respectively. This demonstrates that these EFL students performed much better on English speaking subjects than on English writing subjects (see Table 1). The reasonably good results of the administered written examination indicates that the EFL students in the undergraduate programmes of United International University are adequately proficient and capable of using the English language. The reason behind this could be the emphasis on the overall learning of the four skills of English imposed by university authorities, and the stringent evaluation system of the university. Those who get low CGPA confirm that they are weak in their English language proficiency, and their weak overall language ability drastically affects the academic success of the students in subsequent semesters.

The result of the correlation reveals a significant relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement (GPA). The correlation coefficient of the two sets of scores was 0.58 at the 0.05 level of significance. This suggests that as English proficiency increases, so does academic success. Inevitably, this suggests that students with lower levels of proficiency in English will have low academic performance.

Significant correlations can also be seen between English proficiency and achievement in speaking and writing subjects. The results of the Pearson correlation reveal that the English language proficiency of Bangladeshi EFL students correlates positively with achievement in speaking subjects (0.41) and achievement in writing subjects (0.44) respectively at the 0.05 significance level (see Table 2). These findings indicate that proficiency in English influences achievement in the English writ-

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics of Data

Variable	N	Mean	Median	Tr Mean	St Deviation	SE Mean
Language proficiency	88	15.49	15.89	15.41	1.56	0.512
Speaking Subjects Score	88	13.58	13.66	13.48	1.63	0.214
Writing Subjects Score	88	12.43	12.88	12.38	2.04	0.28

Table 2: Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Analysis

	Language Proficiency
Academic Achievement	0.58
Writing Subjects	0.44
Speaking Subjects	0.41

N=90   Level of Significance   * .p≤0.05,   ** .p ≤).01

Table 3: Pearson's Product- Moment Correlation Analysis

Pearson's Product- Moment Correlations Coefficients (r)			
	Grammatical Structures	**Writing Composition**	**Reading and Listening Skills**
School of Business	0.33	0.425	0.867
School of Science and Engineering	0.225	0.402	0.851

N=90　　　Level of Level of Significance　　* .p ≤0.05,　　** .p ≤ 0.01

ing subjects of the students more than achievement in the English speaking subjects.

As shown in Table 3, the scores of the students of the Business school not only show more significance, but also more positive correlation with their English language proficiency than their Engineering counterparts.

CONCLUSION

Taking into consideration our discussion so far, we can conclude that English language proficiency proves to be a good indicator and predictor of academic achievement for those students who are aspiring to earn a degree in the context of Bangladesh. It also underlines the performance of EFL students in their written and spoken subjects respectively. The present study shows that EFL students with higher English proficiency perform better in writing subjects than speaking subjects; moreover, BBA students outperformed the students of Science and Engineering in their use of the four English language skills. This tells us that these students are more goal-oriented and focused in terms of job target and career building. This indicates that the

students of Science and Engineering pay more attention, relatively, to subjects other than English, and this aspect needs to be properly dealt with by giving it immediate attention.

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