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A Study to Examine the Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement of Students in Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract: English language proficiency is an important indicator for better academic achievement of students, where the English is second language. The current study aims to identify the relationship between English language proficiency and the academic performance of students enrolled in higher education institutions. The data was collected from three hundred respondents enrolled in undergraduate programs in two higher education institutions. The data was collected through an English proficiency test developed by the British council. The data was analyzed through descriptive statistics and correlation analysis, the results indicate that there is a significant positive relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. Thus led to the recommendation to arrange more trainings/ courses for language proficiency of students at the undergraduate level.

Key Words: English Language Proficiency, Language Assessment Test, Academic Performance

Introduction

Pakistan's English roots may be traced back to the colonial period, when British colonial rulers introduced the language and incorporated it into the educational system. Urdu is Pakistan's native language; however, English is the official language, which means that government transactions are conducted in English. The importance of English in teaching and learning has grown in Pakistan over the last decade, owing in part to the country's growing higher education sector. The higher education sector is growing with the passage of time, however, the issues of quality, good teaching practices, significant skill development, and development

of communication skills among graduates are still a challenge. From the aforementioned issues, the language serve a major barrier in the development of communication skills, and cast a considerable influence on the academic performance of students (Rivera, 2007). In order to fill the gap, multiple times the, policies are announced about using English as a medium of instruction, particularly at the higher education level (Mahboob, 2017). Using English as a medium of instruction benefits to a fraction of people who have been educated bilingually since during their schooling (Shamim & Rashid, 2019). Contrary to this, the children from lower-income families who were raised speaking languages other than English,

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on the other hand, confront an additional challenge in surviving at university. Many students from Urdu-medium schools find significant difficulties adjusting to the shift in the medium of instruction at the university level ([Shaheen & Tariq, 2012](#)).

There are a variety of challenges faced by students when taught in a second language i.e., English at a higher education level as they are working both of understanding the concept and developing vocabulary. This struggle leads to demotivation among hard working students, ultimately affecting their academic performance in terms of grades ([Shamim & Rashid, 2019](#)). This phenomenon is prevalent in those parts of the globe where English is the second language and the local context is not an exception. However, this scenario is more critical in the local context, as the medium of instruction till the secondary level is Urdu (at least in practice, if not in the policy). These students when entering into higher education studies, the language barrier is the first shock they face (personal observation). They struggle hard to understand the language, that in turn hamper their academic performance. As a result, it would not be incorrect to say that proficiency in the English language has become one of the required factors for students' academic success ([Dev & Oiqieh, 2016](#); [Rudd & Honkiss, 2020](#)).

There are empirical evidences available presenting the relationship between English language proficiency and student's academic performance ([Maleki & Zangani 2007](#); [Addow, Abubakar, & Abuka, 2013](#); [Martirosyan, Hwang & Wanjohi, 2015](#); [Ghenghesh, 2015](#); Din & Saeed, 2018). One of the most essential aspects of a student's academic performance has been demonstrated to be language. Other research in this area has discovered that English language competency has a considerable impact on student's overall academic performance (Haydar & Uyar, 2011; [Nasirudeen & Xiao, 2020](#)). As a result, students' overall performance in the English language shapes their academic performance in a greater way (Savignon, 1983). For example, the scores on IELTS (that serve as an indicator of

language proficiency) serve as an indicator of a student's performance at the university level (Feast, 2002). The current study focuses on establishing the possibility of this relation in a local context with the help of empirical evidence. Language proficiency is greatly influenced by multiple factors, including their institute type, their prior training in the English language, their socio-economic status, type of schooling or their intelligence, etc. In order to control the variance these factors may cause; the gender of the students and their institute type has been made a part of this research. Other variables such as the prior English language training, socio-economic status, and type of schooling or the intelligence of the students may influence the result of the study.

Objectives of the Study

Based on above mentioned aim of the study, the objectives are;

1. to examine the level of English language proficiency of students at the university level.
2. to examine the academic performance of the students enrolled in undergraduate programs in higher education institutions.
3. to find out the correlation between language proficiency and academic performance of the undergraduate students
4. to explore the influence of demographic variables on language proficiency.

Research Questions

- RQ 1:** What is the level of English language proficiency of students at the university level?
- RQ 2:** What is the academic performance of the students at the university level?
- RQ 3:** What is the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance?
- RQ 4:** Is there any significant difference regarding English language proficiency

and academic performance of students with reference demographic variables?

Literature Review

Language proficiency refers to the capability to comprehend and communicate in a language. Proficient users are likely to use language efficiently in diverse settings ([Pinheiro & Marques, 2018](#)). It can be measured through pre-established criteria of the ability of a person to read, write, listen, comprehend and respond (Stern, 1983). The level of proficiency of an individual can be measured through tests, the most popular framework used for this purpose is the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). It is divided into three categories of expertise ranging from the proficient user (level C) to the basic user (Level A).

Academic performance is defined as the knowledge acquired through marks assigned by a teacher. Academic performance is also looked at in terms of the educational aims, goals, and objectives that are set the teachers to be met within a specific time period ([Abaidoo, 2018](#)). Formative assessment help in achieving these objectives through incessant assessment ([Narad & Abdullah, 2016](#)). Academic performance provides a measure of the outcome of the learning process of education mostly presented as a score of students attained during an assessment process (Bello, 2016). It expresses and measures the degree to which an educational institution, teachers, and students have attained their educational aims (Zaidi & Mahmood, 2015).

There are many research studies carried out to identify the relationship between two variables around the globe, for example, the research carried out by Garcia-Vasquez (1997) on Hispanic students presents a significantly positive relationship between two variables. A similar result was presented by Zangani and [Maleki \(2007\)](#) on the Iranian sample, presenting that the students perceive themselves as incapable of handling language barriers thus face difficulty in communication. In addition to the above studies, [Sahragard, \(2011\)](#) also conducted a research study that

intended to find out the relationship between Iranian college students' language proficiency and their academic success, the results presented by him indicate a positive relationship between the two variables. Similar results were reported by a research study carried out by Orgunsi & O (2009) on Nigerian students, presenting a positive correlation. Analogous results were presented by Kong (2012), indicating English language proficiency as an important predictor of future academic success.

In Pakistan, according to our limited knowledge, few studies have been carried out previously to identify the relationship between two variables. For example, a research study carried out as a doctoral thesis by [Idress \(2012\)](#), explored the relationship between language proficiency and motivation of students towards learning, presenting that there was a positive correlation between the two variables. Another study carried out [Shah et al., \(2021\)](#) was carried out on engineering students confirming the aforementioned results. Another study carried out by [Khan & Khan \(2019\)](#) presented results on the perceived level of English language proficiency of students and teachers, the results indicate the lower level of skills in language proficiency as perceived by students and teachers. Identical to this, a study was carried out by [Din & Saeed, \(2018\)](#) on perceived proficiency in the English language and satisfaction of students, the results indicate a lower level of language proficiency, thus low satisfaction of students. The abovementioned research studies indicate that though the research is carried out to identify the level of proficiency of students in language, and academic performance, however, other variables like motivation and satisfaction were focused more. This study targets only on exploring the relationship between language proficiency and academic performance.

Theoretical foundations of the study are enrooted to the Threshold Hypothesis (Cummins, 1980) presenting that students with low language proficiency will fall behind academically. He presented a theoretical

framework entitled “Theoretical Framework for Relating Language Proficiency to Academic Performance among Students’, this framework is enrooted into second language acquisition theory explaining the relationship between the above two variables. In the context of the aim of the current research study, these theoretical frameworks seems most suitable and were opted for it.

Methodology

This section of the research paper deals with research design, population, sample and sampling technique, and instrument and pilot testing of the instrument.

Research Design

A survey research design was used in due to its characteristic for collecting large scales data. A number of respondents here were more than a hundred, so this research design was considered as most suitable for achieving the objectives of the study.

Population, Sample, and Sampling Process

The population of the study comprised of all the students enrolled in undergraduate programs of public and private universities of Lahore. The data was lemmatized to Lahore for two reasons; one, the time and resource constraints, and secondly, a large proportion of higher education institutions is located in this city, thus making it possible to gather required diverse information. The data was collected from three hundred respondents of two universities; one public and one private university. The convenient sampling technique was used for this purpose, though this sampling technique does restrict the results of

quantitative analysis; however, this was the only option available due to covid restrictions.

Instrument of the Study

This study employed the British Council’s English assessment test to evaluate the English proficiency levels among students. A part of demographic statements was added into the test. A brief description of the test is as follows;

The British Council English Assessment test is an online English proficiency test that is readily available to everyone, and it gives an appropriate indication of the proficiency level of English to the individual taking it. This test is designed to assess one’s understanding of English grammar, vocabulary, and phrasing. Each question is in the format of multiple choices, and one will have a choice of three possible answers. The test can easily be completed within 20 minutes. It is based on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), assessing the proficiency on the basis of scores divided into levels ranging from basic to proficient ([Council of Europe, 2014](#)). This framework is widely used for examining language proficiency around the globe, so it was considered the best available option to assess students’ language proficiency to achieve the objective of the current research study ([Council, 2022](#)).

Results and Findings

The data was analyzed according to the objectives of the study, using both descriptive and inferential statistics as per demand. The results are presented in the following section. The first objective of the study was to identify the perceived level of proficiency of students in English language, for this purpose, a test developed by the British council was used. The scores based on descriptive statistical analysis are as follows;

Table 1. Scores on English Proficiency Test of Students at University Level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
English Test Score	215	10	99	63.81

The results in table 1 show that the scores ranged from a minimum of 10 to a maximum of 99, with an average score of 63.81%. This shows that the student's English language proficiency

is average at the university level. In order to explore further about level of each student on CEFR, the percentage of students on each level was explored, presenting following results;

Table 2. Level of English Language Proficiency According to CEFR Scale in Students

	N	Score percentage
C1	24	11.2%
B2	104	48.4%
B1	76	35.3%
A2	9	4.2%
A1	2	0.9%

The results of table 3 indicate that majority of the students belonged to B1 (35.3%) and B2 (48.4%) level of English proficiency which suggests that they were independent users of English. Nearly 5% of the students belonged to the Basic Level (A1 = .9%, A2 = 4.2%) and only 11.2% students were categorized as

Proficient Users of English (C1 = 11.2%). No student reached the highest proficiency level i.e. C2.

The second objective of the study was to identify the academic performance of students, following table presents the results;

Table 3. Academic Performance of Students at University Level

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean
CGPA	215	2.01	4.00	3.355

Table 3 indicates that the CGPA of students ranged from a minimum of 2.01 to a maximum of 4.00 with an average of 3.35.

performance and English language proficiency of students. The Pearson correlation was carried out to achieve the target, the results are presented in the following table;

The third objective of the study was to identify the relationship between academic

Table 4. Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Academic Performance of Students at University Level

	N	Pearson Correlation r	Sig
CGPA			
English test score	215	.603**	.001

* $p < .05$ and ** $p < .001$

Table 4 indicates that there is a significant relationship between both variables (English Language Proficiency and Academic Performance) i.e., $r = .603^{**}$, $p < .001$.

The fourth objective of the study was to identify the role of demographics (gender and type of institution) in language proficiency. The t-test was applied for this purpose, the results are presented in the following table;

Table 5. Mean difference between Gender and Type of Institute on the Score of Language Proficiency Test

	N	M	SD	t-value	Sig.(2-tailed)
Type of institution					
Public	147	63.43	11.19	.655	.513
Private	68	64.65	15.44		
Gender					
Male	69	64.14	13.61	.263	.793
Female	146	63.66	12.24		

df = 2

An independent-samples t-test was conducted to compare institute type scores for public and private institutes. Table 5 showed there was no significant difference in scores for public ($M = 63.43$, $SD = 11.19$) and private ($M = 64.65$, $SD = 15.44$); $t (-.655) = 213$, $p = .513$, regarding the English Language proficiency and Academic Performance of the students.

The table also present mean difference on the basis of gender on the language proficiency test. The results indicate that there was no significant difference in scores for males ($M = 64.14$, $SD = 13.61$) and females ($M = 63.66$, $SD = 12.24$); $t (.263) = 213$, $p = .793$, regarding the English Language Proficiency and Academic Performance of the students.

Discussion

The results of this study showed that there exists a strong positive relationship between English language proficiency and the academic performance of students at the university level. These results are in consent with previous studies ([Shah, et al., 2021](#); [Din & Saeed, 2018](#); [Khan & Khan, 2019](#); Kong, 2012; Orgunsiji & O, 2009). The results are also aligned with the theoretical foundations of the study, proving the assumption of Second Language Acquisition Theory (Cummins, 2001) that posited that there is a connection between learners' language proficiency and academic performance. The same results were presented by [Butler & Wellington \(2000\)](#), [Zangani & Maleki \(2007\)](#) and [Sahragard \(2011\)](#).

There are several other studies whose results do not present positive relation between

the above two variables, for example, Bayliss and Raymond (2004) presented that there was no relationship between language proficiency and academic performance. Similar results were presented by Wayne (2006). The results of quantitative surveys are more likely dependent on the time of data collection and the demographic features of the respondents. The current study also has described previously about the confounding factors that might influence on results. So based on a finding of the study and literature review, the following recommendations can be presented for future research. Further research can be carried out with larger sample size, this can be a cross-sectional survey presenting a more clear picture of student's proficiency. A large range of demographic variables, particularly the subject (as students from natural sciences might have better proficiency than students from arts and humanities), financial status, types of schooling and medium of instruction during schooling, a language course (including IELTS/ TOEFL etc) can present a more clear picture on relationship between two variables.

Conclusion

At the end of this research, we came to the conclusion that English Language proficiency plays an important role in determining the academic performance of the students. The more proficient the student will be in the English language, the better he/she will be able to perform academically. Hence greater attention should be given to the development of English language proficiency in students for improved academic performance.

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