

Correlation of Academic Excellence and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency at University Level

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Abstract

In recent years, many second and foreign language programs have recognized the importance of Academic language proficiency and consider it to be a central goal of language teaching programs. Students need to use their second language for demanding tasks, for business, science, politics, and in all aspects of their lives. This calls for a focus on identifying and measuring the linguistic knowledge and skills that students will need in order to meet the heavy demands that life places on them. English literacy is considered to be correlated with academic performance for both the foreign language learner and the second language learner. Language proficiency had been thought as one of the influential attribute of academic excellence in schools and colleges. Students with good knowledge of English were considered to be better equipped with deep understanding of the content subjects. The majority of them are well settled in the global market because of their superior thinking and communicative competence. Considerable research has been conducted on the relationship of English language proficiency and academic performance among non-native English speakers around the globe. Through a descriptive method, this paper, titled, "*Correlation of Academic Excellence and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency at University Level*" presents a set of assumptions and hypotheses premeditated to intensify the perceptive of academic proficiency in relation to academic performance.

Keywords: Academic language proficiency, academic performance, communicative competence, correlation.

1. Introduction

In higher education English is the most important language and it spreads its wings in all dimensions of work. Vinke and Jochems (1993) indicated that lower the level of English proficiency, the more important it becomes in defining academic achievements, while Barker (1988) indicates that while students may be able to speak English, they still do not operate at maximum capacity because of the language barrier. Bachman and Palmer (1981) debated whether learning languages involved a unitary set of skills and abilities. In response to Oller's (1979) claim that language was a unitary construct, Cummins (1979) said that two constructs were associated with language learning in schools Basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive language proficiency (CALP). Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) is a construct developed by linguists that distinguishes everyday. He also reported that everyone is able to acquire basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) in a first language regardless of IQ, or academic aptitude. BICS, then, can be described as a language's surface fluency, which is not cognitively demanding. CALP, on the other hand, is the cognitive linguistic competence which is closely related to academic ability and literacy skills Romaine, (1995). In light of such evidence, investigators have hypothesized that the cognitive academic aspects of a first language and the second language are interdependent, and as a result, the development in the proficiency of the second language is partially a function of the level of proficiency of the first language (Cummins, 1979a; Skutnabb-Kangas & Toukomaa, 1979). Considerable research has been conducted on the relationship of English language proficiency and academic performance among non-native English speakers around the globe. The relationship of language proficiency to academic achievement must be considered with a view to construct a bridge between the two. Thus, this paper outlines a set of assumptions and hypotheses premeditated to intensify our perceptive of academic proficiency in relation to academic performance.

Gottlieb (2003), Cummins (1992), expressed that there is a continuum of interrelated connections between language and cognition, moving from the development of 'social language proficiency' to 'academic language proficiency' and then to academic achievement. It is essential to ensure that the language education policy and its implementation take students along this continuum. The current language education policy in Ethiopia, which

has been in place since 1994, accords high practical status to the mother tongue as medium of instruction. The policy for most students, therefore, is multilingual based on the mother tongue, Amharic as a national language, and English as an international language. There are always special circumstances, attitudes and other impediments which need to be identified and dealt with in order for policy to work efficiently and get the best return on investment. One of these is clearly the issue of how English can be used effectively alongside Ethiopian languages to support good teaching and learning of the curriculum. English is predominantly used throughout the world and this is also the case with Ethiopia. English is extensively used in education and other sectors too. All Ethiopian universities use English as a medium of instruction, research and publication. Thus, it is incumbent that Ethiopian students' superior command of the language plays a noteworthy role in their academic success. However, the ground reality seems to be different because the practical dissemination of English in Ethiopia is limited to fewer purposeful domains than in many other African countries where the language enjoys similarly high status.

In the past twenty years, a number of researchers have addressed one area that recurrently surfaces as a disparity between high achieving and low achieving students. Language proficiency has been identified as a major factor. English literacy is considered to be correlated with academic performance. It had been thought as one of the influential attribute of academic excellence. Academic language acquisition isn't just the understanding of content area vocabulary. It includes skills such as comparing, classifying, synthesizing, evaluating, and inferring. Academic language tasks are context reduced. Information is read from a textbook or presented by the teacher. As a student gets older the context of academic tasks becomes more and more reduced. The language also becomes more cognitively demanding as it interacts with different behaviours. New ideas, concepts and language are presented to the students at the same time and the student is expected to deal with the underlying principles that would help carry out the necessary language functions.

2. Academic Language Proficiency

Academic success is not purely the application of intellectual capacity. Many factors directly or indirectly affect academic success. According to Chappelle (1998), academic language proficiency can be defined as the language knowledge together with the associated knowledge of the world and meta-cognitive strategies necessary to function effectively in the discourse domain of the school . . . Thus, in the context of schooling, discussions of greater or lesser degrees of language proficiency or 'adequacy' of an individual's proficiency refer only to the extent to which the individual's language proficiency (CALP) is functional within the context of typical academic tasks and activities. In the present context the construct of *academic language proficiency* refers not to any absolute notion of expertise in language but to the degree to which an individual has access to and expertise in understanding and using the specific kind of language that is employed in educational contexts and is required to complete academic tasks.

English is more of a foreign language than a second language in Ethiopia. According to Stoddart (1986), based on his field surveys in the mid- 1980s, he said that the English language ability of the vast majority of students in Ethiopia, "Students do not possess sufficient English even to understand what they hear from their teachers or read in their textbooks, let alone to participate actively through their own speaking and writing. . . as a result of the inability of students to function through English, the quality of teaching and learning in schools has been very adversely affected. At best, it means that mere rote learning often prevails, with no critical and creative participation of students, and little enough of even simple comprehension by them of what they are being told. And at worst it means that some – possibly many – students whose English is not sufficient even for rote-learning spend most of their class hours copying down notes that the teacher has written on the blackboard, and transforming them in the process into complete nonsense. In such a situation it is no longer appropriate to call English a medium of instruction; rather it has become a medium of obstruction"

As per (Wright & Kuehn, 1998; Chamot & O'Malley, 1994) Academic language, by contrast, demands, for the ability on the part of the student to understand and generate the complex syntax of Standard English in formal oral and written expression. 'English language proficiency' is the ability of students to use the English language to communicate meaning in spoken and written contexts while completing their university studies. Such uses may range from a simple task such as discussing work with fellow students, to complex tasks such as writing an academic paper or delivering a speech to a professional audience. This view of proficiency as the ability to organize language to carry out a variety of communication tasks distinguishes the use of 'English language proficiency' from a narrow focus on language as a formal system concerned only with correct use of grammar and sentence structure. The conversational English used in informal interpersonal communications (also advanced by Cummins, 1981) is not usually thought to require the higher level thinking skills associated with academic language, which is a specific and specialized classroom register.

3. Academic Performance

In educational institutions, success is measured by academic performance, or how well a student meets standards set out by local government and the institution itself. As career competition grows ever fiercer in the working world, the importance of students doing well in school has caught the attention of parents, legislators and government education departments alike. Academic achievement or (academic) performance is the outcome of education — the extent to which a student, teacher or institution has achieved their educational goals. Academic achievement is commonly measured by examinations or continuous assessment but there is no general agreement on how it is best tested or which aspects are most important — procedural knowledge such as skills or declarative knowledge such as facts. *“The world so called accidental billionaire Mark Zuckerberg, the inventor of face book became one due to the pressure of wanting to have a good academic career, he was in probation period in his university when he created face book, he knew the gravity of not having academic performance and strove to attain success in his academics which in return opened the door towards his success”*. A recent meta-analysis suggested that mental inquisitiveness has an important influence on academic achievement in addition to acumen and meticulousness.

Individual differences in academic performance have been linked to differences in intelligence and personality. Students with higher mental ability as demonstrated by IQ tests (quick learners) and those who are higher in conscientiousness (linked to effort and achievement motivation) tend to achieve highly in academic settings. Developing countries hold a low profile in all spheres of development and this is mainly attributed to their low educational achievement. As one of the least developed nations, Ethiopia suffers from a very low representation at all educational levels, especially at tertiary level. Although the growth rate in the enrolment of students has been satisfactory at secondary and elementary schools, higher education institutions do not experience such a growth in Ethiopia. File (1986), stated that “academic ability and performance are massively affected by class”, while Blacquiere (1989), hypothesizes that because of their academically deprived backgrounds, especially Ethiopian students, particularly in English language proficiency (specifically reading speeds and levels of understanding of subject content) “have missed out on the academic experiences which are necessary to develop some of the concepts and schema they need to deal with tertiary studies”.

Scholars have studied possible factors associated with students’ academic achievement. Language has been proven to be one of the most important factors in students’ academic performance. Teachers all over the globe agree with this relationship, but they undermine the status of language proficiency to the ESL and the EFL learners. They fail to perceive the equal need and tie up the academic side of language proficiency to schooling and accountability. For instance, according to the statistical results, English proficiency is the variable that correlates the most prominently with academic success. In addition, English first language students consistently outperform their English second language counterparts (Miller, Bradbury & Wessels, 1997). While the transition from school to higher education is fairly traumatic, it is probably more traumatic for Ethiopian and Asian students, as it represents a transition into a comparatively alien socio-economic environment (Fraser, 1992; Badenhorst, Foster & Lea, 1993); one in which the tuition, the text books, the tests and examinations are all in English. If a student has difficulty understanding the language of instruction, the potential for academic success is at best circumscribed.

Thus it is hypothesized that for Ethiopian students in higher education to succeed academically, higher levels of English language proficiency are required. Indeed, language proficiency pervades every area. Cummins (1984), said language proficiency is the most important single moderator of test performance. This indicates that many students have a low awareness of their specific problems in this regard. Based on the growing English language learner population and the evidence that many students with limited English language proficiency exhibit difficulties with academic achievement, it is important to find technically adequate assessments that can identify language proficiency and monitor the developing language skills of students with limited English language skills. The achievement dream still exists, and researchers are continuing to launch investigations of academic performance in the context of what affects it, how it can be achieved, and how it can be sustained (Astin, 1982; Graham, 1994; Hrabowski, 1991; Hrabowski & Maton, 1995; Nettles, 1991). These researchers reported that academic achievement is associated with non-cognitive variables as well as cognitive variables.

4. BICS and CALP

The Theory that has most influenced the teaching of English is one that focuses explicitly on language and content learning and pertains to the distinction made between learning a language socially and academically. Cummins, (1984) distinguished these language learning processes with the terms basic Interpersonal conversational skill (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) drawing attention to the different time frames required by ESL learners to gain conversational fluency as compared to academic

proficiency. It is easy to converse in our second and third language but might have difficulty listening to an academic lecture or writing a technical report. Learners typically become adept at conversational skills relatively quickly, and thus language support programs are often terminated too early also put forth the idea that BICS and CALP are affected by context and cognitive load. This has been elaborated into two intersecting continua that show the different level of cognitive demands on one hand and contextual help on the other that are associated with specific linguistic activities.

Cummins & Swain, (1986) presented a slightly different view of how different types of language tasks can be categorized, although the basic underlying principle remains the same. Language tasks can be characterized by the degree to which they are cognitively demanding/undemanding and context-embedded/context-reduced. The cognitive demands a task makes on learners depend largely on how much information it requires them to cope with at once; the extent to which it is context-embedded or reduced determines how much learners must rely on 'extra-lingual' clues or on their linguistic competence, to process the language with which they are confronted. This seems to tie up with the notion of BICS and CALP, in so far as BICS are called upon largely in cognitively undemanding, context-embedded tasks, CALP in cognitively demanding, context reduced ones. BICS is said to occur when there are contextual supports and props for language delivery. Face-to-face 'context embedded' situations provide, for example, nonverbal support to secure understanding. Actions with eyes and hands, instant feedback, cues and clues support verbal language. CALP, on the other hand, is said to occur in context reduced academic situations. Where higher order thinking skills (e.g. analysis, synthesis, evaluation) are required in the curriculum, language is 'disembodied' from a meaningful, supportive context. Where language is 'disembodied', the situation is often referred to as 'context reduced' (Baker, 2001, emphasis in original).

5. Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency Strategies

Language learning strategies are commonly defined as the operations or processes which are consciously selected and employed by the learner to learn the target language or facilitate a language task. Students must draw on knowledge of themselves as learners, of the learning task and of appropriate strategies to use in a given context, in order to develop a meaningful interface with the learning environment. Strategies were placed at a higher level than skills, the former acting as 'executive processes' that coordinate and apply skills. Thus learning strategies tend to be unobservable mental processes, while study skills are more overt techniques, such as keeping one's class notes in a logical order. Referring specifically to language learning, Ellis & Sinclair (1989) suggest that study skills are product oriented, learning strategies process oriented; study skills are often taught specifically to help students pass external examinations, while the aim of learning strategies is fundamentally one of self-examination and insight into and control over one's learning. According to Krashen (1985), there is a distinction between acquiring a language and learning a language. Acquisition is the subconscious process of attaining the subtleties of language and culture. Learning refers to the process by which learners become aware of the "rules" of the target language.

An added dimension of L2 acquisition is the use of strategies for acquiring language. The use of explicit strategies often characterizes L2 acquisition because English language learners are typically older and more mature than L1 learners and they already have competence in an L1. Thus, L2 acquisition does not call on exclusively implicit processes but can also entail conscious or explicit strategies. English language learners (ELL's) constantly have to function at high levels of cognition in order to participate and learn in the classroom environment. As a result, it is important that you have an awareness of the language acquisition stressors that ELL's confront on a daily basis and know how to support and promote the language and literacy development needs of these students. Adjustments can and must be made to classroom instruction in order to promote students' understanding of the content. Cummins (2000), proposes that learning "from experience and action" is substantially different from learning that takes place "from texts and teachers", because the latter relies heavily on the use of de-contextualized language: "language used in ways that eschew reliance on shared social and physical contexts in favour of reliance on a context created through the language itself" In other words, in "de-contextualized" language, there is no shared social context that one can rely upon in figuring out what something means, or what one should say. However, comprehension of how input and output impact the understanding and production of target forms and structures in L2 is a crucial issue in SLA research. Language learning strategies depend on the relative effects of input based instructional conditions as compared to output based conditions (Allen, 2000; Collentine, 1998; DeKeyser and Sokalski, 1996; Erlam, 2003; Nagata, 1998; Salaberry, 1997).

Van Patten's Processing Instruction (PI) (which is a type of Input-Based Instruction), is an input-based instructional technique which affects the acquisition of target forms by actively engaging learners in processing structured input, that is, input that has been manipulated to contain many instances of the same grammatical meaning-form relationship. Learners are compelled to change their existing processing strategies of using the

input data and this in turn would result in better intake.

Some strategies might be thought to be applicable mainly to language learning where emphasis is placed on formal correctness, for instance those relating to rational understanding of the language as a system. Scholars have emphasized that there are two declarations for strategies. The first, what are effective strategies by examining good language learners, and those with deep knowledge and accomplishment in areas of inquiry or performance. A second assumption is that on isolation of the strategies, they can be directly taught to the students. In other words assumption was made that, strategies can be taught directly and consciously learned. The method of examining the performance of experts is indeed a correct and useful method for discovering strategies that help develop academic proficiency. But this does not mean that all strategies should be taught directly. Krashen (2002), for second language acquirers, some of these strategies can be developed or taught either in the first language, with immediate or easy transfer or in the second language. Danskin and Burnett (1952) reported that excellent university students had poor “study habits” and did not do what “study skills” books advised. Instead of concluding that something might be wrong with the manuals, the authors, however, concluded that these highly successful students need to develop better study skills! What is more likely is that the successful students had mastered the real strategies for language development and problem-solving, and did not need strategies for “study.”

Any strategy that makes texts more comprehensible will aid in problem-solving, but some strategies are unique to problem-solving. These include strategies that make up “the composing process,” strategies that expert writers use to keep their place in their work and to come up with better ideas. The composing process deal, of course, with writing, but it is a powerful means of solving problems and thereby developing academic proficiency. Another category of counter productive strategies are those that attempt to teach strategies that are innate or developed naturally example prediction. Atwell (2007) argues that insisting that readers use certain strategies while reading interesting texts can disrupt the entire process: It can remove readers from “The Reading Zone,” the trance state that readers enter when they are absorbed in a text, or “lost in a book”. Krashen (2007) hypothesizes that being in this state is optimal for language acquisition and literacy development.

Some strategies, hypothesizes should be taught to students who have not discovered them:

- Those that make input more comprehensible, e.g. narrow reading, obtaining background knowledge.
- Those that help content learning. These are strategies that aid in problem-solving, such as aspects of the composing process.

Strategies that should not be taught, or taught but used rarely, only under certain conditions:

- Those that lead to language learning, not acquisition.
- “Study skills” that lead to deliberate memorization. Strategies that should not be taught: Strategies that everyone develops naturally and whose use disrupts language acquisition and content learning.

One of the most vital factors is the need for strategy training to be 'informed' 'integrated' (O'Malley & Chamot, 1990), and to involve a high level of 'self-control' (Brown & Palincsar, 1982). That is to say, students need to aware of the purpose and utility of strategy training, activities should be integrated into language learning tasks, and students should be encouraged to monitor, evaluate and control their use of strategies. Thus they should engage in a large degree of meta-cognitive reflection. Strategy training, above all the meta-cognitive lament, should also be an on-going process.

6. Student Learning Preferences

Mackinnon (1978) has noted the implications of differing student learning preferences. He states, the wide range of individual differences should be considered and this tells us that there is no single method for nurturing creativity. Ideally the experiences we provide should be tailor – made, if not for individual students, at least for different types of students. Many ESL teachers experience students’ resistance when they introduce an instructional activity in the classroom. Some of them want more opportunities to practice in free conversation; on the other hand there are those who would prefer more emphasis on teaching of grammar (Bada and Okan, 2000).

In deciding the type of activities, teachers should take into account learners’ diversities. This will initiate the learners to be more conscious of their learning preferences. When this happens, their language proficiency would be enhanced. Thus, knowledge about the influence of ethnicity on student’s language learning preferences is acutely useful in today’s multicultural EFL classrooms, because most of the classes include different learners with different cultural background.

Negeow, (1999) claims that learners who are more conscious of their learning preferences make better use of learning opportunities. He mentions that a key to keep students actively involved in learning lies in understanding learning preferences, which can positively or negatively affect the students' performance. Hence, considering individual learning preferences are crucial for effective language learning and academic achievement.

7. Conclusion

English language proficiency and academic achievement are partners in the education of English language learners. Teachers who are aware of their students' social and academic language proficiency in English and their academic achievement in English or their native language are better prepared to provide a systematic, continuous, and appropriate, content-grounded education. In bridging language proficiency to academic achievement, we are able to provide enhanced educational opportunities, practices, and academic challenges for second language learners. We have created the stepping-stones for English language learners to reach academic parity with their proficient English-speaking peers. Most important, we have energized the educational community to act on behalf of our students.

Ethiopian language education policy is within the parameters of "best policy" in terms of multilingual developing countries. However, as is the case in many other countries, implementation is not always aligned with actual MOE policy. But, the circumstances, attitudes and other hindrances need to be highlighted. One of these is clearly the issue of how English can be used effectively alongside Ethiopian languages to support good teaching and learning of the curriculum. In language proficiency assessment, we focus on language, whereas content provides the context for communicating the message. In the assessment of academic achievement, the roles are reversed; the skills and knowledge associated with content take precedence and the language demands are adjusted according to the students' language proficiency levels. Academic content standards serve as guideposts for assessment of both language proficiency and academic achievement.

A system-wide intervention in improving English language proficiency is inevitable in Ethiopian context. The quality of teaching English as an international language should be enhanced and all students provided with a wider scope to use their newly found communicative competence. However, this should be implemented and practiced in all earnestness from the primary to the tertiary levels of education. Thus, English language learners who travel along the pathway of English language development are able to access the language of the content areas in a systematic way. Ultimately, at the highest level of English language proficiency, students will seamlessly bridge into grade-level content. Whereas academic content standards help shape English language proficiency assessment, they are the exclusive source and anchor for measures of academic achievement. Assessments of English language proficiency and academic achievement need to be aligned with academic content standards to yield valid results. Academic language proficiency is a lengthy process and is often literacy dependent. As such, it may take more than a decade for some English language learners to reach that goal (Thomas & Collier, 2002).

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