

**THE CAUSES OF POOR COMMAND OF ENGLISH
LANGUAGE AND ITS IMPACT ON THE ACADEMIC
ACHIEVEMENTS OF FIRST YEAR STUDENTS OF ADAMA
SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY UNIVERSITY**

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Abstract

The objective of this study was to investigate the causes of poor command of English language and its impact on the academic achievement of first year students of Adama science and Technology University. Both quantitative and qualitative method of research is applied. The sample of the data is selected using simple random sampling method so that all the participants of the study can have equal chance of being selected. After the necessary data is gathered using questionnaire it was coded, organized and analyzed using software called SPSS for the information gathered through questionnaire. The data gathered by using interview is descriptively analyzed in such a way that all the gathered information is thematically categorized.

The result of the study shows that factors such as poor exposure to language schools, English teachers use of and shift to their mother tongue during English language classes, the approach of teaching English language which is not attractive or not motivating, students wrong attitude about English language itself , etc. are the major reasons for poor command of English language.

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The data gathered depicted that there is a strong link between English language proficiency and academic achievement. The better the students are good at English language; the better is their academic records.

The possible recommendations that can be forwarded here is that since English language proficiency has a direct link with the students success in academics, teachers, schools administrators, curriculum designers and all concerned bodies should pay attention to the way English language is being taught.

1. Introduction

Many countries have been using English as their medium of instruction both at secondary and tertiary level education. The English language is widely spoken globally and could be regarded as the *lingua franca* of the modern world (Walter 1996). Although there are different reasons why countries are using English as the medium of teaching, this study will focus on the fact that English language is considered as language of science and technology, language of research and innovation, language in which many academic books are published and disseminated across the world. The English language of today reflects many centuries of development. It means that the English language has gone through a number of changes. 'The political and social events that have in the course of English history so profoundly affected the English people in their national life have generally had a recognizable effect on their language' (Routledge 2002).

As a matter of fact this language has been used as a medium of instruction in Ethiopian tertiary level education system where this study is being conducted. English language is used for the teaching and learning process, for doing research, publications, etc.

Besides using English as a medium of instruction, English language proficiency is one of the most important factors in the success or failure of many Ethiopian higher education students even to get better employment after they leave school. This is because, English language is used as a medium of instruction and therefore, the success of those students are mainly based on their proficiency. Bachman (1990) defines language Proficiency as the language ability or ability in language use. The

ability of the students to use English language to their fullest satisfaction where they can speak with fluency depends on different factors.

The relationship between students overall academic achievement in the content areas and their language proficiency has been examined by many scholars in which their study revealed a strong connection between language proficiency and academic achievement. For instance, Butler and Castellon – Wellington (2000) as cited by Nitshingila 2006 compared students' performance in content areas to concurrent performance on a language proficiency test and found a correlation between the two.

The current research attempted to investigate the major causes of poor command of English language of first year students of Adama science and Technology University and its impact on their academic achievements. It is true that English language is a medium of instruction virtually in all Ethiopian high schools and tertiary level education as aforementioned. Even though, English language is given as one independent subject since elementary school for the students in Ethiopian education system, still many of them feel awful about their proficiency of English language. This paper has investigated those causes for poor command of the language and its impact on the academic achievement of students. The researcher suggested some constructive recommendations so as to minimize the magnitude of the problem.

1.1 Statement of the Problem

The purpose of this study was to investigate the causes of poor command of English language proficiency and its impact on the academic achievement of students. It is also meant to forward possible solutions of improving the language proficiency of students so as to advance the learners achievements in the future. It is estimated that many researchers have undergone a study on the causes of poor command of English language in different contexts. However, the problem is still continuing until today. Most English teachers would agree that their students need to practice using English outside the classroom if they are to increase their communicative competence, but “practice” can consist of many different types of English language use (Chapelle 2003). Knowing the approach that helps students to improve their communicative competence in various

contexts of learning English language requires research. Doing this research will help students succeed in their academic achievements.

It is true that knowing a language specially the one used as a medium of instruction for a student is just like a fish and water relationship. The fish cannot survive without water. Similarly, a student who is unable to use the language use for the academic purpose cannot survive in the education institution. Even if he /she survives, it can be estimated that there will be low academic achievement.

‘While language as the medium of thought may be compared to air as the medium of the sun's influence, it is like the skin of the body; a scurvy skin shows bad blood within, and a scurvy language shows inaccurate thought and a confused mind’(Cody 1903).

Therefore, this study is believed to add knowledge in the advancement of better command of poor English language that makes the education system of many Ethiopian students very challenging and ineffective. This paper ; therefore, has scrutinized the extent to which Adama science and technology university first year Students’ proficiency in English language predicts their overall academic achievements.

1.2 Objective of the Study

1.2.1 The General Objective of the study is to investigate the causes of poor command of English language and its Impact on the academic achievement of students.

1.2.2 The specific objectives

1.2.2.1 To study if poor proficiency of English language has a negative impact on the academic achievements of first year students of Adama science and Technology University.

1.2.2.2 Whether English language as a medium of instruction in higher education and the poor command of English language make the study of many Ethiopian students tough.

1.2.2.3 To explore if the low performance of most Ethiopian students in various school subjects has a relationship with poor English language proficiency.

In order to address the questions as explained in the introduction and following sections, the research questions are designed below.

1. What are the causes for poor command of English language among first year students of Adama Science and Technology University and what is the level of proficiency of the students?
2. Does poor proficiency of English language have a negative impact on the academic achievements of first year students of Adama science and Technology University?
3. Does English language as a medium of instruction in higher education and the poor command of English language make the study of many Ethiopian students tough?
4. Does the low performance of most Ethiopian students in various school subjects have a relationship with poor English language proficiency?

1.3 Significance of the Study

As mentioned in the earlier sections of this paper including the literature review, it is true that researchers have contributed a lot in studying about the causes for poor command of English language. They have also recommended ways out for the reduction of problems that arise due to poor command of English language and its impact on the academic achievements of many higher education institution students where English is used as second language. This paper will add knowledge to the already existing contributions of what scholars have said about the causes of the problem. The researcher is very optimistic that this study will bring a significant change if proper strategies are designed and close follow-ups are made. Teachers can understand that there is a big problem about using English as a medium of instruction and the poor academic achievements of many students due to that but most of them are not concerned in the method of solving this challenge (Park 1991).

Knowing the right approach of teaching English language can minimize the risk of fearing to learn the language. 'Making your classroom English Language Learner friendly will keep your students on track, too. A good classroom setup saves you time by

making resources and supplies readily available for you and your students' (Danoff 2008). Therefore, this study will be a model accomplishment that can initiate teachers to play their own lion share in reducing this problem. Solving this problem indirectly or directly helps teachers in improving their relationship with their students. This study is believed to be a greater input for the success and quality of education that has a significant impact on the academic achievements and development of many Ethiopian students. The researcher believes that the finding of the study is very useful for students who are the immediate victims of the problems. Teachers who are expected to play a major role in the attainment of quality education and who are expected to have repeated exposures with students will also be benefited. The university that has been training students will benefit a lot in achieving quality education that leads in the production of self-confident and competent students for the country by including the right approaches in the curriculum. Policy makers related to education development can refer the finding of the study. Finally the study can be used as a spring board for other researchers who are willing to conduct their own further studies.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants and Methods of Sample Selection

The participants of this study were 1,200 first year students of Adama science and Technology University. It is believed that there are students of different educational, social, economic, and cultural backgrounds. Since those students are coming from different places, they will have different language proficiencies. Some of them have attended schools where English language is taught with well experienced and proficient English language teachers while some are not. The level of awareness of the students about English language proficiency and its association with their academic achievement can definitely affect the students' command of English language. The fact that those students come from different educational sites can be used as a good indicator about the problem related to the study which can be helpful for the findings of the study.

3.2. Data Collection and Instrumentation

In order to find the required information, the researcher has used primary sources of information gathering techniques. Accordingly the researcher used interview and questionnaire in order to obtain the desired outcome.

3.3. Procedures

The researcher has followed and included the necessary research tools that were helpful in obtaining the desired out come for the study.

4. Analysis of Data

4.1. Data Organization

First of all, the necessary data has been collected and coded in order to simplify it for analysis. After that, the coded data has been calculated and analyzed using software called statistical packages for social sciences (SPSS).

In order to make the work easier and summarize the data, the researcher used tables.

4.2. Statistical Procedures

Using the questionnaire, and interview as a tool for gathering the required information regarding the causes of poor command of English language and its impact on the academic achievement of students, the researcher examined the case of 1200 first year students. By doing that the researcher tried to evaluate if proficiency in English is associated with academic achievement and if it ultimately predicts their overall success in the university.

4.3. Analysis and Interpretations of data gathered through Interview

This part of the study presents data analysis and presentations, based on the various data collection tools. The researcher has applied SPSS in order to analyze the data that has been collected through questionnaire. The researcher have collected and coded all

the data so that it will be easier for analysis. Then the researcher has applied statistical package for social sciences (SPSS 16.0) Software in order to analyze the coded data.

The researcher has used questionnaires and interviews so as to cross check the data being gathered.

Accordingly, the data that has been collected through the questionnaire is analyzed as follows:

The data collected through the questionnaire regarding the proficiency level of the students for English showed that 33.3% of the respondents have said that their English language proficiency is poor, 22.2% very good, 21% average, 16% good and 7.4% excellent. The majority of the students' response shows that they have poor English language proficiency level.

Students are also requested to tell their attitude about the Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement. Among the total sample 43.2% of the respondents strongly agree that there is a strong relationship between English language proficiency and academic success, 39.2% agree, 9.9% disagree, 4.9% undecided and 2.5% strongly disagree. From this data one can observe that the majority of the respondents believe that there is a strong relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement. Only a few respondents feel that there is no relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievements.

Question about the relationship between school location (here school location means whether the students have attended their studies in urban or rural schools or in places where they have better access to English language and no access at all) and English language proficiency, the respondents gave the following witness.

Accordingly, 42% of the respondents agreed that school location has an impact on English language skill, 27.2% strongly agreed, 16% undecided, 9.9% disagree and 4.9% strongly disagree. One can observe from the response that majority of them have a

belief that there is a strong relationship between English language proficiency and school location. That means students who are coming from the urban located schools where there are many options of finding different English language schools are better in their English language command than students who are coming from rural or remote areas who have very little option of joining language schools.

Usually there are different causes that hinder students improve their English language proficiency. From the data gathered it was learnt that more than 50% (51.9%) said that method of teaching makes their study hard, 33.3% said language skill, economy 13.6% and culture 1.2% respectively. Here it needs further research and investigation in order to solve the problem of methods of teaching which many respondents mentioned as a big obstacle to their study next to language skill. Language skill has a substantial place in making the respondents study tough as compared to the other factors mentioned as possible causes affecting students' way of learning.

In order to know whether the students are practicing or not practicing English outside their class, a question was asked. The summary of the frequency of the student's language practice outside the classroom shows that 42% of the respondents rarely practice their English language outside the classroom. That means they use English only for class purpose, 37 % occasionally practice, 8.6 % never or frequently practice and only 3.7% practice very frequently. As one can see from the data, the majority of the respondents do not have the culture of practicing English language outside their classroom. One can see the fact that inability to practice language will have a negative impact on the development of language skill. It is true that the more the students practice their skill the better will be their language proficiency. This is due to the fact that language is a skill something that can be learned through practice.

With the intention to know whether students have attended extra language schools or not apart from the normal school schedule, 75.3% of the respondents confirmed that they did not attend any extra language school while only 24.3 % attended some extra language schools. The researcher believes that attending extra language school will help improve the students English language skill.

Regarding the relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement (GPA), 39.5% agree that there is strong relationship between English language proficiency and GPA, 25.9% strongly agree, 23.5 undecided, 8.6 disagree and 2.5 strongly disagree. From the data gathered, there is sufficient evidence that can help us to link English language proficiency and GPA.

4.2. Analysis and interpretation of data gathered through Interview

The data gathered through interview is summarized and analyzed below in such a way that it substantiates the information gathered through questionnaire.

The respondents were asked to list down their own reasons that they feel is the major cause for poor English language command. The points listed by the students and the possible solutions are proposed in the analysis and explanation given below.

- Majority of the respondents mentioned that they have not been given sufficient time to practice English during their elementary schools. Students must practice English language since their primary education, English teachers should give students chances for presentations, dialogues and conversation assignments, and students on their side should try to practice their language outside their classroom. They have to think and convince themselves that English is not only for classroom purpose.
- Personal factors such as stress, lack of concentration during class and the method of teaching has an impact on learners' academic success besides poor command of English language.
- Attending extra language development programs can improve students' language proficiency. Teachers of English should also use only English language all the time while teaching.
- The students also recommended the possibility of learning English language by native speakers of English. This will help in many different ways. For one thing students will not shift to their first language as they have only one chance of

communicating with their teacher using English language. Native speakers may apply best teaching approaches so that students can be motivated to improve their language proficiency.

- Creating a conducive environment and sufficient time for learners to practice their language is one method of improving the students' English language. This is because the respondents mentioned that conducive environment is one cause for poor language command.
- Developing more knowledge of vocabularies. The students mentioned that their limited vocabularies led them to poor command of English language.
- Practice reading should start at the child hood and children should develop reading habit. The respondents also mentioned that they do not have a culture of reading habit from the beginning they joined classes.
- The respondents commented that most of the time classes are teacher dominated. It is teacher talking time. Therefore, making a student centered classes will solve this problem.
- The respondents pointed out that language classes are not that much encouraging. Teachers do not motivate them to practice their English language mostly the low learners. In order to curve the situation, encouraging students to participate in English language classes is vital.
- Some respondents criticized that some teachers are not qualified in teaching English language. There should be highly qualified and experienced English teachers.
- Respondents mentioned that the time given to practice English language is very short. Therefore, sufficient time must be allocated so that students can get sufficient time to practice their English language.

- The respondents also recommended that teaching method must be revised starting from elementary classes, Reading more books written in English, Watching movies in English, Avoiding fear to speak in front of the public, improving Personal effort to learn language and adequate teacher support as points that need attention in English language improvement.

5. Conclusions

The finding of the study shows that there is a strong link between English language command and academic achievement. The data shows that students' poor English command has been associated with teachers' poor command in using the language in the most easiest and attractive way. The fact that English teachers themselves are not native speakers of the language has a detrimental impact on the students English language proficiency. The wrong attitude of students against English language and the first language interference are the major causes of poor command of English language. The fact that students do not practice English from the time they joined elementary schools affected the student's command of English. The teachers' teaching approach and the way the curriculum is designed has its own negative impact on the students English language command. This can be associated with the statement given by Hyland 'course providers have recognized that teaching those who are using English for their studies differs from teaching those who are learning English for other purposes' (2006).

Recommendation and Implications for further Research

Based on the finding of the study and the evidence gathered through the questionnaire and the interview, the researcher would like to recommend that right approaches of teaching English language should be applied. If the students are not taught English language from the time they join school and if English continues to be the medium of instruction, it will be difficult for many students to achieve their dreams only due to poor command of English language. In order to understand their lectures they must have good command of English language. Teachers starting from the elementary schools and administrators should create awareness about the possible challenges the students may face if they do not improve their English language proficiency.

The study is confined to a single university in Ethiopia. For the sake of better generalizability and research replication, the researcher recommends that additional studies should be conducted by increasing the setting of the study to international level where English is used as a second language. By doing that the association between English language proficiency and academic achievement can be better generalized.

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