

Academic Success in a Pre-Degree Programme: A Study of Students in the Faculty of Education, Universiti Teknologi MARA

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between pre-admission scores, including interview and placement test results, and academic performance, indicated by Cumulative Grade Point Average, of students in a pre-degree TESL programme. It was found that the correlation between pre-admission scores and academic performance was very slight, in part perhaps because of the restricted range of the CGPA scores. However, it was noted that accuracy and clarity of voice, and SPM scores for chemistry were modestly predictive of academic success and of marginal statistical significance. It is likely, therefore, that communication skills in English and general cognitive ability spanning arts and science subjects make the greatest contribution to success in this programme.

Introduction

The performance of Malaysian university students, especially those in Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) programmes, has become a cause of great concern in recent years. It is particularly important that ESL teachers attain high levels of linguistic and professional competence so that they do not perpetuate language problems among their students (Gaudart, 1988). Teacher Education programmes such as pre-Teaching

English as a Second Language (pre-TESL) and Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) courses have an obligation to ensure that prospective English language teachers are as competent as possible. The competency of ESL teachers might be related to aptitude for teaching, English language ability, academic performance and personality.

The Pre-Degree TESL Programme, UiTM

The pre-degree TESL programme at the Faculty of Education, MARA University of Technology (UiTM) is a preparatory programme for a four year B. Ed. TESL degree programme. It aims to improve English proficiency and fluency. The minimum duration of this programme is one year and students are required to take several core English language components, including Reading, Writing, Listening and Speaking, Grammar and Literature. Students also take non-core subjects such as College Study Skills, Computer Literacy, Basic Principles in Education, Malaysian Studies, Islamic Education Studies, Language and Drama, Social Skills and Critical Thinking. The minimum qualification for students to apply for the pre-degree TESL programme in UiTM is Grade 2 in Sijil Pelajaran Malaysia (SPM). They must obtain a minimum of 3B for English and credits for Bahasa Malaysia, mathematics and two other subjects.

The pre-degree TESL programme is conducted at three branches in Kuantan, Melaka and Shah Alam. Each branch has its own coordinator with the main coordinator in Shah Alam overseeing the entire programme. The syllabus and final examination for all branches are standardized. A workshop is conducted every year to ensure the uniformity of all three branches.

The UiTM pre-degree TESL programme has a complex admission procedure. Students are selected on the basis of SPM examination results and also on their performance at an interview and a placement test.

Basically, the aim of this study is to determine the association between pre-admission criteria (interview and placement test) and the academic performance of students at the end of the pre-degree TESL programme in UiTM.

Literature Review

Several studies have found a strong association between academic performance in secondary school and academic success in universities.

(Rowe, Higley, Larson & Bills, 1984; Zeegers, 2004; McKenzie and Schweitzer, 2001; McKenzie, Gow and Schweitzer, 2004).

However, performance on school examinations may not predict all aspects of excellence in tertiary education, especially performance in the practical components of professional or vocational courses. McManus et al. (1998) observed that A-level grades did not correlate with strategic and deep learning styles needed by medical students.

Nevertheless, in the United Kingdom, A-levels grades are still used to select students for universities, although there are widespread concerns that they do not discriminate sufficiently among the more able candidates. In the United States, a combination of scores on the national standardised Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) and high-school GPA is the primary mode of selection. In the UiTM pre-degree TESL programme, although prospective students undergo an initial screening based on SPM results, they are also required to attend a placement test and an interview. Lecturers and administrators believe that TESL students should display a high level of oral proficiency in English and that the interview and placement test are valid methods of ensuring that they do.

It has also been claimed that interest, aptitude and understanding of the course should be important factors in the selection process and that an interview can assess these accurately. It has been suggested that students often drop out from a course because of factors such as poor choice of course and field or failure to define career goals (Watson, Johnson & Austin, 2004).

With regard to the relationship between selection interviews and the performance of students in higher education, there is some evidence that interviews under certain circumstances can have some predictive validity, particularly with regard to the practical components of professional or vocational courses. Meredith, Baker and Dunlap (1982) found evidence that comments made by interviewers could predict medical clerkship performance although not clinical knowledge. Confer, Turnwald and Wollenburg (1995) found that subjective factors assessed at an interview could contribute to the prediction of the first-year academic performance of veterinary students.

Specifically, in the field of education, Byrnes, Kiger and Schechtman (2000) evaluated the use of group assessment interviews to predict the performance of students on teaching practice. They found that such interviews could predict the teaching performance of students better than GPA.

It has also been suggested that only structured interviews should be used (Santamaria and Clayton, 2000; Campion, 2005). In structured interviews, the “job” analysis is clearly defined, the same or similar questions in the same order are asked, multiple rating scales are clearly described, a 30-60 minute duration is provided to interview an applicant, and training is given to interviewers. It is debatable whether fully-structured interviews are appropriate or even possible for a university selection process. Marshall et al. (2003) point out that the predictive validity of structured interviews is much higher than that of unstructured interviews, which are prone to interviewers’ bias towards age, race, appearance, and sex.

As for placement tests, there are mixed results on their effectiveness as a predictor of academic performance in higher education. Armstrong (1994) in his research in the San Diego Community College District found that the combined Assessment and Placement Services (APS) reading and writing tests score strongly predicted students’ English course performance. Lee (1998) evaluated the effectiveness of the placement test that was administered to first-year students at Saint Michael’s College, Vermont, USA, found that this test could indicate the performance of students during their college years.

On the other hand, Christopher (1993) obtained mixed results in her study on predicting the academic success of ESL students in secondary and university programs through placement tests. Meanwhile, Armstrong (2001a) detected a weak relationship between placement test scores and final course grades in English and mathematics classes. Possible reasons for such conflicting results are the “grading variability” of instructors (Armstrong, 1995) and the need to ensure a better alignment between the content of a pre-enrolment placement test and the curriculum of a course (Armstrong, 2001b).

Methods

Subjects

The subjects of this study were 41 Pre-TESL students from Melaka and Kuantan branches. These students were in semester one pre-degree TESL from November 2003 to March 2004 and semester two from June 2004 to October 2004.

Data

The data for this paper were the records kept by the Faculty of Education, UiTM. They include students' SPM results, students' pre-admission scores and students' pre-degree TESL results indicated by their Cumulative Grade Point Average (CGPA). Only the CGPA for semester two was used as it was deemed fit to reflect the knowledge and abilities that students should have acquired after having completed their pre-degree TESL programme. Thus, it was considered a fair indicator of academic performance.

Students' pre-admission scores were obtained in the following manner. There were two main sections in the pre-admission scores; interview scores (70%) and placement test scores (30%). Two lecturers/interviewers were allocated to each interview panel. The interviewers were given interview forms with a number of items on which they based their questions and awarded marks. The interview covered three basic categories: communicative ability (30%), general knowledge (20%) and personality (20%). Communicative ability covered items such as understanding, accuracy, fluency, clarity of voice, and language use. General knowledge consisted of two items; current issues and education. The five personality items evaluated were leadership, confidence, sensitivity, politeness, and motivation. Interviewers rated the applicants on a scale of one mark (lowest) to ten marks (highest) for these areas. 9-10 marks were considered an A, 7-8 marks a B, 5-6 marks a C, 3-4 marks a D, and 1-2 marks an E.

The other section in the pre-admission scores was the placement test scores totaling (30%), derived from the writing and the reading tests. The writing test was a one-page essay that was assessed holistically and the mark was supposedly agreed on by the two interviewers. The reading test was marked according to the given answer key. Both of these tests had been vetted for their suitability with regard to the applicants' level of maturity and language ability. Students took this placement test before they were interviewed. They were given an hour to complete the test under supervision.

The total marks that a student received as a result of the interview was derived from the consensus of the two interviewers based on the performance of the student during the interview and his placement test scores. The pre-admission scores were divided into four categories: successful candidates (70-100 marks), keep in view (KIV) candidates

(60-69 marks), unsuccessful candidates (59 marks and below) and candidates who did not attend the interview.

Analysis

This study looks at the relationship between pre-admission scores and academic performance. The data for pre-admission scores include SPM results and interview scores. The data for academic performance consists of students' CGPA after completing their two-semester Pre-Degree TESL course. Correlation coefficients and other statistics were calculated.

Analysis and Discussion

We should note first of all that the Cumulative GPA of the pre-TESL covers a very limited range with the lowest score being 2.70 and the highest 3.69. The mean was 3.24 and the standard deviation 0.26. The dispersion is much less than that noted for degree courses in previous years. This means that we should not expect very high correlations between GPA and factors that might contribute to academic success.

The correlation between CGPA and total admission scores was low (0.216) and not significant ($p = 0.205$). The placement test component, including reading comprehension and essay, also had low predictive validity (0.192). Furthermore, the general knowledge section, including current issues and education, and the personality sections of the interview have almost zero correlation (0.096 and 0.029 respectively) with CGPA. In fact, leadership, politeness and sensitivity actually showed a slightly negative (-0.053, -0.012 and -0.055 respectively), although insignificant, correlation with CGPA.

There are two possible conclusions that can be drawn from these very limited associations. One is that the selection process is an inadequate method of assessing the relevant qualities such as leadership, self-confidence, etc. Thus, leadership was typically defined by the interview panel as nothing more than being a prefect or an officer in a secondary school club. General knowledge was assessed on the basis of responses to one or two questions or sometimes none at all. Personality characteristics such as self-confidence and awareness were not explicitly defined. It is also possible that even if these characteristics were assessed accurately they would have little or nothing to do with academic

performance in the pre-degree programme, although it is possible that they might be regarded as desirable in themselves.

The sections of the interview that were concerned with communication skills such as accuracy, fluency, clarity of voice, and language use were easily the most predictive of the various components. The correlations between these and CGPA were 0.309 ($p = 0.080$), 0.269 ($p = 0.130$), 0.327 ($p = 0.068$) and 0.247 ($p = 0.166$) respectively. The correlations for accuracy and clarity of voice can be considered marginally significant and therefore worth further investigation. It seems, therefore, that success in the pre-degree programme is dependent on spoken communication skills in English. This might not, however, be necessarily true of the degree programme or teaching practice.

Overall, SPM results correlate slightly and with limited significance with CGPA (0.159 for the five best results). For some subjects such as English and Bahasa Melayu the correlation was low or very low (0.217 and 0.159 respectively). For chemistry and biology it was comparatively high, with values of 0.316 ($p = 0.083$) and 0.251 ($p = 0.237$). The correlation for chemistry and CGPA can be considered marginal but worth noting. We should not read too much into the limited predictive validity of the English SPM results since all candidates, as a result of pre-interview screening, had at least a grade 3 in English. There was therefore a drastic restriction of range, something that is well known to contribute to limited validity. It might be counter-intuitive that subjects such as chemistry and biology should predict success in a pre-degree TESL programme, particularly since they were taught and examined in Bahasa Melayu. It is, however, likely that one factor in academic performance in the pre-degree programme is general cognitive ability and that this is also crucial for success in scientific subjects in secondary school.

Conclusion

Overall, the findings suggest that there is a slight association between pre-admission scores and academic performance. Nevertheless, it needs to be pointed out that the range and standard deviation of the CGPA is very low, suggesting that it does not discriminate very much. It is possible that the pre-TESL programme is insufficiently rigorous, something that might explain the observed limited writing proficiency of a majority of degree-level students. It is also possible that the requirements of the

degree programme, teaching practice, and subsequent career development are different from those of the pre-degree programme. It might be advisable to see how these students perform in later semesters before coming to any firm conclusion about what contributes to being a successful TESL student, let alone a successful teacher.

The findings do suggest, however, that communication skills are a better predictor of academic success than anything else while personality is not a good predictor of academic success for the first year of tertiary education. Evaluating personality in a mere 20-25 minute interview might not indicate anything of someone's true personality. Nevertheless, it could also be argued that although things like politeness and sensitivity do not contribute to academic performance, it is better to have students who are polite and sensitive, or who can at least give a good appearance of being so, than students who are rude and insensitive.

In conclusion, there may be a need to fine-tune the pre-admission selection process to select academically able students, although we need to be aware that the pre-degree and degree programmes may present different challenges to students. This might mean dropping the general knowledge and personality sections in the interview or finding a more valid and reliable method of assessing them and also giving greater weighting to SPM science subject scores, and especially to spoken communication skills in English. A pre-admission process that is more predictive of academic performance may help to reduce the failure and attrition rates of TESL students of the faculty, and identify those who need remedial assistance or who might benefit from an accelerated programme.

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