English Language Proficiency and the Prediction of Academic Success of First-Year Students of English

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Introduction

This paper arises from my intent to explore English language proficiency as an indicator of future academic performance of first-year English majors at a Hungarian university. This issue is discussed from a practical point of view of teaching a changing and diverse student population and the need to respond to their academic success and failure. I also aim to overview the key issues from a more theoretical aspect, including educational policy planning, curriculum design, language testing, academic assessment and retention in higher education. I begin by identifying changes in the Hungarian higher education system that had a direct impact on the student population that are the focus of this paper, mainly English majors, and by identifying and discussing the academic literacy demands of the study program they go through. Then I discuss the complex notion of academic retention in higher education and the situation at the University of Szeged. From here I move to analyze data gained from two English language tests taken at the beginning of the first semester and the grades students received at the end of the same semester.

Academic requirements: An example of English majors in Szeged

The Hungarian education system has been characterized by constant changes in terms of degree programs, prerequisites, number of students accepted, and funding. This is not a unique Hungarian situation, but rather reflects European and world-wide tendencies (Coleman, 2006). What is, however, very much characteristic to Hungary is the lack of a systematic assessment of the impact that the changes have or would have on the higher education institutes, the students and the job market. When taking a closer look at the Faculties of Arts at major Hungarian universities, we see, for example, that the recent turn to the Bologna system and the change in the entrance requirements, combined with the drop in funding, have had a dramatic effect on both smaller and larger institutions. Most of them are struggling for survival, and, therefore, are forced to accept even the less prepared students. Moreover, college-level and university-level degrees have been merged into 3+2-year bachelor and master degree programs. From this comes that all students in a chosen field of studies enter the same BA program, regardless of their level of preparation or intention to continue their studies in a specific MA program or not.

Foreign language BA programs are now suffering the consequences of the above mentioned changes. They can be considered bilingual programs in which a large proportion of the students' academic life is conducted in or spent with the target language. A lack in the readiness for tertiary education of incoming student populations affects all programs, but those which are conducted in a foreign language suffer the most. To illustrate, starting from the first semester, English majors at the University of Szeged take the majority of their courses in English, therefore, are required to follow lectures and seminar discussions, be active participants in classes, do readings and other homework tasks mainly in English. It seems plausible to assume that, at least in some areas of their studies, less prepared students face disadvantages. If we accept the premise that English majors need to use the L2 on a daily basis, those who are not at an advanced proficiency level are behind their peers. One of the major challenges of the English studies program is that proficiency practice in general and academic English is offered parallel with the content classes in which students should already understand their instructors and peers, and use English. It comes as no surprise then that those who have no experience with target language medium education (and the majority do not) and have difficulty navigating through different forms of oral and written texts in English, feel lost already in the first weeks of their studies.

The results of previous studies conducted among first-year English majors, however, suggest that many start their undergraduate studies without a vision or understanding of the structure and demands of the chosen degree program (Doró, 2009c; 2010). They tend to overestimate their level of preparedness, even though many of them feel they have problems with the language and with the course requirements. English majors in Hungary have reported similar problems as international and immigrant students studying in English-speaking courtiers, where the medium of instruction and the course content are often foreign to them (Curry, 2004; Leki, 2007; Ramsay, Barker & Jones, 1999; Rosenthal, 2000). To illustrate the higher degree of challenge that academically and linguistically less prepared students face, Ramsay Barker and Jones (1999) explored the experiences of first-year international and local students at an Australian university. Their study found that non-local students had problems following lecturers and tutors, the main reason being the lack of vocabulary knowledge and the speed of the instructors' speech. These factors have also been reported by Hungarian students (Doró, 2009a; 2009b, 2010; Lehmann, 2006).

It is certainly true that a large proportion of incoming students lack the academic preparation required to be active participants of the academic discourse community (Doró, 2009b; 2009c; 2010). I concluded these studies by claiming that there is an immediate need for awareness raising among students about the requirements of the program and their own responsibility and role in success or failure. For this purpose good assessment tools and methods are to be used that provide instructors and students with feedback on how well each student is progressing.

Measures of academic preparedness and academic performance

Entrance exams have been replaced by a higher level school leaving examination that students need to take if they wish to continue their studies at a tertiary level. To illustrate, future English majors must take a higher level exam in English. These exams, however, have proven to be inadequate in screening the students in terms of readiness for English studies. First, to get access to higher education, it is enough to show a medium or low level language performance at this exam, which language proficiency then does not equal to a strong B2 C1 level of the Common European Framework of Reference. Second, students do not meet future instructors, and therefore are not asked

on content knowledge, interests or motivation equally important for future success. They often start their studies thinking that the mere fact of having been good students in secondary school and having passed this language exam guarantees them good grades at the university or, if not, they will have plenty of time to improve. What they do not take into consideration is the fact that the English program is neither a general language course nor a slow-pace language learning program that many of them used to have at the secondary school.

In lack of a common assessment tool that would compare students' language performance to that of other students or to previous student groups, other measures had to be found. At the University of Szeged first-year students undergo a language screening process in the first weeks. This is done to receive information on how students perform as a group compared to previous years and to what extent students' preparedness is similar to that of their peers.

As both advanced language proficiency and good vocabulary knowledge have been found to be key elements of engagement in foreign-language medium studies, two tests are administered: the Oxford placement test, use of English part (OPT) and the vocabulary levels test (VLT). The first requires students to read short texts in which each line contains a multiple choice grammar element. The second one is a test of receptive vocabulary size that measures students' knowledge at five different levels of difficulty, including academic vocabulary often met in academic texts. Both tests are done in a pen-and-paper format, independent of classroom work and are administered in large groups. For both tests students receive a maximum of 30 minutes, which has been found to be sufficient for most. Non-completion is also an indicator of students' lack of preparedness. Both tests have been used for years, so data is available for comparison purposes. Every year the results are made public for students, with tests scores discussed in class or with individual instructors upon request. Although most of these test data have remained for internal use only, they have proven to be good forms of feedback for students and instructors.

Other types of measurement tools of language and, in general, academic performance, are course grades. We need to take into consideration, however, that the grading system may change from course to course or instructor to instructor. There could be many reasons why a student receives a failing grade, including non-attendance, insufficient course work, problems with preparedness, and problems with the instructor. Nevertheless, it is informative whether a student is given all excellent grades, has sufficient grades or fails all courses.

For the purpose of this study, the results of the OPT and the VLT of an incoming undergraduate group and their first-year seminar grades will be explored.

Retention rates at universities

Student retention has been a major assessment factor in many higher education institutes throughout the word, however, with a considerable amount of variability and inconsistence in the use of terminology related to the student drop-out phenomenon (Dreaver, 2003). There is a large body of literature on student attrition in the US, the UK, Canada, Australia and New Zealand, just to mention some of the English-speaking countries. These countries have long realized that student retention is both an economic and an educational factor, and should be considered a form of outcome measure of a program or university similarly to enrolment numbers, the academic qualifications of instructors and research achievements.

In Hungarian higher education institutes much less attention has been given to the complex nature of the student attrition issue. At least this is the case at institutional levels. Nevertheless, on a daily basis, faculty members face the challenge that comes with the under-preparedness, the lacking motivation and the drop-in and drop-out patters of some students. There is often pressure from above to keep in the program the non-fitting students for the economic and job survival of departments, often by lowering the requirements, and, therefore, the academic standards. Even where this is not the case, instructors need to adjust the syllabi and offer individual counseling to students in order to help them survive. This can best be done if attrition rates, student performances and staff experiences are explored. Universities and specific programs need to determine the nature of their own students' performance and the extent of their own attrition problem, so that they can design retention programs for specific student populations. The present paper emerges from this need of understanding what language skills students come with, and how they perform academically in the first semester.

Attrition can often have interrelated causes. These can include personal factors, lack of support, financial issues, problems with integration into the new social and academic communities, non-matching expectations and requirements, inadequate pre-course information, lack of guidance, and various types of academic difficulties (Crosling, Thomas & Heagneyto, 2007). Hungarian students often have vague expectations about the programs they apply for, the requirement or their own level of preparedness (Doró, 2009c; Édes,

2008). Of course not all the above mentioned factors are visible to or under the control of the university. Some of the attrition literature differentiates between various types of attrition recognizing the fact that there could be several reasons and consequences of the drop-out phenomenon. Thompson (2005) and Polinsky (2003), for instance, talks about positive and negative attrition, taking into account whether the dropouts have completed personal goals or not. Sheldon (1982, cited in Dempsey 2009, p. 58) differentiates between three categories of attrition, namely positive, neutral and negative attrition. In his study those students fell in the positive attrition group who left college to transfer to another one or who had achieved their short-term academic and personal goals. Students in the neutral category had problems with scheduling and not with the academic programs or requirements. These students neither completed the degree program in question nor achieved personal goals. Those in the negative attrition group, however, showed lack of preparedness or motivation. Sheldon rightly claims that only students in the last group could be directly helped by the institution.

In order to pinpoint risk groups who are more prone to failure and drop-out, it is, therefore, of crucial importance to know how much students are prepared and motivated for their studies. Research has identified the first year, and within this time the first few weeks, as being the most critical period for students to withdraw from or slow down with their studies in higher education (see, e.g., Cuseo 2003, Moxey et al., 2001). Students should be given warning signs right from the beginning if major academic performance problems are seen by the instructors. However, course work does not always give early enough warning for students, as many are unwilling to admit that they are unlikely to meet the requirements (see Doró, 2009c). End-of-semester grades often come too late for future dropouts as they have little time left of the first year to start working extra hard and compensate for their failure. Test scores at the beginning of the first semester could be better used to give an early warning sign to students and instructors.

A large body of literature has evaluated the predictive nature of specific test scores, including language exams and entrance exams in various fields of studies (Yen & Kuzma, 2009; Al-Musari & Al-Ansari, 1999; Sandow, Jones, Peek, Courts & Watson, 2002). These studies have shown different degrees of prediction for the different measurement tools. These could be explained by the test choice, the way academic success is understood and the fact that academic success or failure may have a number of interrelated causes.

Purpose

The main purpose of this study was to determine to what degree the Oxford Placement Test and the Vocabulary Levels Test can predict academic success of first-year undergraduate English majors at the University of Szeged. Success was understood as completing all courses with a passing grade. Passing grades are often the only short-term goals of students and are also prerequisites for further studies (see Newman, 2001). Within this broad aim, the first purpose was to explore the relationship between beginning-of-the-semester language test scores and the number of failed courses. The second purpose was to investigate whether it was possible to identify a threshold level for test scores in order to determine which students can be considered members of a risk group and given early warning.

The following research questions were formulated:

1. Do early language test results demonstrate a strong correlation with (un)successful academic performance?
2. Do failing students have significantly lower test results in September than successful students?
3. To what extent can test results predict early academic success or failure?
4. Is it possible to find cut-off scores in order to identify risk groups?

Research methods

The study population consisted of 115 first-year incoming students enrolled in the English studies program at the University of Szeged. Part-time students, English minors and remedial students with failed courses in their records were excluded as they had slightly different academic schedules, fewer courses and would have probably shown different results. Students' academic progress was monitored through departmental records and the electronic system of the university. For each student, scores of the OPT and the VLT were retrieved, indicating 96 students who took the OPT and 108 who took the VLT in September 2009. Those who did not take the tests in early September were excluded from the analysis. Class performance was limited to failure or non-failure regardless of the type of passing grade students received at the end of the first semester. This means that students with a 1 as a final grade failed the

course in question and were treated as non-successful, whereas those with a 2, 3, 4 or 5 passed the course and were treated as successful.

In terms of academic performance, the language seminar grades of the participating students were monitored. Each student took an average of three language seminars in the first semester, one of them being a mandatory introductory course in English grammar, more precisely sentence and phrase structures with both theoretical and practical orientation. The other two seminars were students' choices from communication skills, reading skill, writing skills and use of English. All these seminars have the purpose of helping students in improving their general and academic English and in preparing them for the end-of-the-year comprehensive exam. Seminar grades were chosen over lecture grades, as they provide better assessment of students' progress. Seminars require them to do continuous work, and the final grade is given based on tests, homework assignments and classroom participation. Lectures, on contrary, are given in large groups and assessment is based on one written exam. The specific reasons for failing the classes were not investigated. These could range from insufficient class work to attendance problems.

The two tests administered in September were chosen for a number of reasons. First: because they had been used for years with similar student populations at this university and had proven to work well. The OPT had been designed and piloted to be used with large groups of non-English speaking students as a placement test. It consists of a hundred multiple-choice grammar questions embedded in sentences, some of which are part of longer texts, others are single sentences. It is also easy to administer and score, therefore, it is time and cost efficient (for validity issues, see Harrison, 1994; Wistner Sakai & Abe, 2009).

The VLT is considered one of the best and most widely used tests of receptive vocabulary size (Schmitt, 2010, pp. 197 198). This test had been found to give a good profile of students' receptive vocabulary for diagnostic, placement or achievement purposes. It gives scores on five different bands, including the academic vocabulary. For the pen-and-paper version of the two tests the students received a maximum of 30 minutes each.

Group means and standard deviations for both tests were calculated. The predictive validity of the test scores was expressed as a bivariate correlation coefficient of test scores and class grades. Predictive validity refers to the efficiency of placement test scores in forecasting any measure of academic performance. The higher the correlation coefficient, the more confident we can be that the placement test is a valid predictor of academic success. Statistical analyses were done using SPSS 11.0.

Results and discussion

1. Do these test results demonstrate a strong correlation with (un)successful academic performance?

The mean for the 96 students who took the OPT is 72.43 (SD=11.16) with the lowest score being 41 and the highest 96. The mean for the 108 students who took the VLT is 72.69 (SD=14.68), scores ranging between 34 and 97. The bivariate correlation coefficients of the two tests with course failure are of high magnitude ($p<0.01$). The OPT with the seminar grades shows $r=-0.36$, whereas the VLT has $r=-0.55$. This means that the higher the scores obtained on the test indicate, the less likelihood there is that students fail their seminars. The VLT seems to have a stronger predictive nature in this respect than the OPT.

2. Do failing students have significantly lower test results in September than successful students?

Students who failed at least one seminar in the first semester had a group mean of 68.22 on the OPT (n=45, SD=10.91) and a group mean of 64.37 on the VLT (n=51, SD=13.72). The same analyses done for non-failing students indicate a mean of 76.14 on the OPT (n=51, SD=10.09) and 80.12 on the VLT (n=57, SD=11.41). Independent samples t-tests show significant difference between the mean scores of failing and non-failing students ($p<0.01$). It could be argued that an approximately 16 or 18 mean point difference is not very high, therefore something else other than language proficiency should also have a role in student failure. This will be further discussed when treating research question number three.

3. To what extent can test results predict early academic success or failure?

Ordinary least regression models were used to consider the effect of test scores on class grades. VLT scores explained more of the variation in the number of failed seminars than the OPT scores ($r^2=.28$ and .12, respectively). This is moderate to low prediction. The F-statistic was significant in each instance (F=42.39 and 13.64, respectively). Results suggest that test scores accounted for around one-third and one-sixth of the variation in the seminar grades, respectively. This indicates that even though language proficiency and vocabulary knowledge in particular are not the only indicators of or prerequisite for good achievement in higher education, they can be considered as leading aspects. In other words, excellent language proficiency in itself does not guarantee success, as many other factors such as low motivation, lack of

commitment, wrong academic choice, social or economic problems can push students to leave the program or fall behind with their studies. Nevertheless, good motivation, commitment and support from the outside world cannot compensate enough for the above factors if a student lacks the language proficiency skills that are a major prerequisite for survival in a bilingual education program.

4. Is it possible to find cut-off scores in order to identify risk groups?

Test results show variability within groups of failing and non-failing students. The test scores in themselves can only be interpreted as signs of possible success or failure. Based on the test data we can state that lower scores predict more likelihood of academic failure. Although high scores are no guarantee for academic success and students with lower scores can still work hard and achieve passing grades, very low scores require students extra dedication on the students' part or indicate that they are fit to drop out early.

Nevertheless, a 70% cut-off point can be suggested for both tests as a threshold below which test takers can expect to face much more difficulty in doing coursework and be at great risk of failure in the first semester, and, most probably, in their entire course of studies. When comparing the academic performance of students who scored above 70% with those who did not, we find statistically significant differences.

Conclusion

While the findings of this study confirm the significant connection between early test scores and academic performance, there are other factors that could be used to predict students' academic success, such as the individual's adaptability to a new academic environment, study demands, speed of acculturation and their personal goals and ambition. However, while language proficiency can be quickly checked at entrance, the other factors are usually out of the control of the institution. Language proficiency was found to be a partial predicting factor in and a prerequisite for undergraduate studies conducted mainly in English as a foreign language.

It would be useful for any higher education institution to be able to pinpoint at the beginning which students are more likely to fail courses, drop out or withdraw from their studies. Although high test scores should not be viewed as guarantee for successful academic career, lower test scores should be indicators to both students and instructors that a student is likely to have

more difficulty in following courses. An early feedback given to students is hoped to serve as a form of encouragement or warning to students who should reflect on their readiness for their chosen field of studies and reaffirm their commitment to achieve good results.

The observation that language proficiency plays a crucial role in the achievement in foreign language medium educational settings is not a new one. However, this paper has grounded this observation in data, and I hope that it will inspire participants of similar programs to reflect on their own situation. A follow-up on students' overall academic performance should be carried out to see the predictive degree of the two tests concerning student achieve over time. Moreover, it was beyond the scope of this paper to investigate other factors that could influence students' success or failure in classes, but future research is recommended to identify other predictive factors that may still be under the control of the university and could be modified or influenced by instructors and curriculum designers.

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