The Effect of Teaching English as a Second Language on University Students

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ABSTRACT

Formal training in English as a second language is often an American university prerequisite to full academic work for entering foreign students. Questionable are the underlying assumptions that English proficiency norms have been established as predictors of academic success and that ESL programs are the best means of increasing English proficiency. With a control group of forty-eight subjects who took the compulsory University of Southern California American Language Institute (ALI) program for foreign students and an experimental group of forty-three subjects who were released from the placement test and allowed to follow their regular academic programs, the purpose of this study is to find out whether the students who met ALI’s standards are also academically competitive with or even better than the other international student groups. The result is that no significant differences are found. The implication is, at least for many lower proficiency students, the intensive ESL work may be effective for them.

(KEY WORDS: EFFECT : TESL)

I. INTRODUCTION

With the increased enrollment of foreign students in American universities, many of these universities have come to feel that they have a responsibility to provide effective training in English as a Second Language (ESL) for those students who need it. It has been taken for
granted that non-native speakers of English must have certain minimum skills in English to succeed in most American university programs. Hence, screening tests like the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) are used for admission decisions or proficiency tests are used for placement in ESL programs. If a student is admitted at all, an attempt is made to give him an even break in his academic competition with native speakers of English; he is given a chance to sharpen his language tools in preparation.

At the University of Southern California (USC), for instance, those international students who score less than 600 on TOEFL or who are not released by the placement test must take additional English classes in an ESL program (American Language Institute) because the University assumes those students may have not enough English proficiency to attain the required academic achievement. If this assumption is valid, the formal training for those students will be effective and necessary. On the contrary, if this assumption is not true, that formal ESL work may be a waste of time and money for most international students. The purpose of this study is to find out whether the students who met ALI's standards are also academically competitive with or even better than the other international student groups.

Assumptions

While it is admirable for universities to take on the burden of making available the prerequisites for academic success, the basic assumptions underlying university ESL programs are questionable. In the literature review that follows, these assumptions will be argued by several studies which will be considered in some details below.

We are thus considering these two assumptions:

1. English proficiency levels as measured by Upshur [1] have been established as predictors of ultimate success in academic programs.
2. English proficiency can best be gained through formal ESL training.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In regard to the first assumption, Upshur [1] suggests that predictions of academic success from proficiency test scores can be enhanced by considering the types of courses foreign students enroll in; that is, the kind of English demands made upon the students in
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conjunction with GPA. However, Spolsky [2] questions the predictive validity of English proficiency tests when this validity is based upon correlations between entrance test scores and success in the university. He reports on a number of studies that show little relationship between grade-point averages and English proficiency scores. Also, Plaister [3] illustrates that many current tests, like the TOEFL, can't measure students' proficiency or competency in aural comprehension. In his study, he claims that most of the TOEFL tests are not desirable and effective tests to evaluate students' aural comprehension.

The second assumption is that special ESL training is required for upgrading English proficiency. There is evidence against this assumption. Upshur [4] conducted four experiments to find partial answers to several questions on the relation between foreign language teaching and learning, which included an attempt to answer the question "Is formal foreign language instruction useful for students living and working in that language environment?" Results support the hypothesis that English language learning is not related the amount of English language instruction for students in an English language environment. With some reservations, the study suggests that the ESL approach is not the best for language learning when the opportunities to use the second language in other activities are available.

Also, in a study by Mason [5], certain foreign students at the University of Hawaii were allowed to follow regular academic programs without extra ESL instruction, despite the fact that their English placement scores indicated that they should be enrolled in English for foreign student classes. Posttests given at the end of the semester showed no significant difference in increase in English proficiency between those excused from ESL and those students who took the required ESL classes.

In addition, as part of an effort to assess the City University of New York's ESL program, Gerardi [6] conducted a study to determine if the ESL course protocol promoted positive academic outcomes among new immigrant students within the regular curricula. Using scores from standardized assessment examinations and measures of college performance from a sample of 717 freshman from 1990, results revealed that those immigrant students generally earned lower GPAs (after 10 semesters of study) compared to mainstream students.

To contrast, Eskey, Lacy, and Kraft [7] argue that students who succeed in the ESL program also tend to succeed in their academic work. They took 274 American Language Institute (ALI) undergraduate students at University of Southern California who were released
in fall 1979 and followed their progress in the university at large. This sample group achieved a reasonably high overall "GPA success rate" of 85 percent; the mean GPA for the group was 2.46 (about a "C+") (p. 46).

Besides, to evaluate the implementation of the bilingual education and ESL programs, the Houston Independent School District (Texas) studied the academic achievement of limited English proficient (LEP) students who participated in these programs in the 1995-96 school year. In general, achievement scores of LEP students in English increased over the scores of the previous year in reading (58.4% to 58.9%) [8]. Gonzalez’s [9] study also indicated that LEP students at the Austin Independent School District (Texas) participating in and exiting ESL programs showed better academic progress, dropped out less often, and had fewer disciplinary problems than others.

In spite of the many uncontrolled variables inherent in such a study, "doubts were cast on the efficacy of special work in English as a means of improving proficiency when, perhaps, the same or greater gains could be made by foreign students who simply pursued their regular academic programs, regardless of placement test scores" [5, p. 199]. In addition, the larger question remained as to whether or not intensive work in English, regardless of its effectiveness in improving over-all language proficiency, is really necessary for the foreign student's ultimate success in the academic program of the university. Here, the research studies reported probed the following question: Are there significant differences in the degree of success in the university academic program between students who follow the standard ESL program and the other group of students including those who were released by the placement test, and who don't need to attend it but simply take a full load of regular university academic work?

III. RESEARCH METHODS

Overview of Research Method

In order to test these two assumptions, the GPAs of two groups of students in regular university work were measured and compared in this study. One group was those international students who were required to attend the ALI (American Language Institute) at USC (University of Southern California) because of their lower scores on TOEFL (from 599 or
lower) and who were not released by the placement test. The other group was those who had been released by the placement test, so they didn't need to take additional English classes. The purpose of this study is to find out whether the students who met ALI's standards are also academically competitive with or even better than the other international student groups.

If the result of this study shows that there are no differences between the mean GPAs of these two groups of students, we may assume that the intensive training in ESL program is therefore effective and necessary for most international students to attend it because after short term of intensive training in the ESL program, those lower-level English proficiency students can perform as competitively and successfully as the other group of students in the regular university studies.

**Subjects**

Subjects were selected from a population of foreign students who took English classes in the ALI program and completed them in the Spring, 1994.

The second research effort with this group focused on GPA as the measure of academic success. More importantly, this second effort broadened the scope of the comparisons. First, both graduate and undergraduate populations among ALI students were considered. Further, both of these groups were compared to the other part of international student population, including those undergraduate and graduate students who were released from the ISE test in the Fall, 1994. Thus, these two major groups started their regular academic work in the Fall semester of 1994. Then, their GPAs would be recorded and compared after one school year.

**Instrumentation**

In this study, the methods of stratified and systematic random samples were combined and used in the sample selection. First of all, the population of students was divided into two subgroups: (1) those new students who took additional English classes in the ALI program, and (2) those who were released from the placement test, so they didn't need to attend ALI program. Their GPAs after one year of the university studies were measured and compared in this study.
Procedure

Subjects were then randomly selected from this population to form an experimental group, consisting of students who did not attend the ESL program but simply took the regular university academic classes at USC. A control group of students had to follow the traditional sequence of ESL courses consistent with their needs. In order to increase the probability of having a random sample be more reflective of the population, the samples were selected from these two strata by using the method of systematic random sample which a random starting point "2" was selected, and then every other member of each stratum was selected for the sample. In this study, there were forty-three experimental subjects and forty-eight control subjects. In the experimental group, there were one undergraduate and forty-two graduates; the control group had seven undergraduates and forty-one graduates. All subjects were beginning their first semester of enrollment at USC in the Fall semester of 1994.

Here, the independent variables were these two comparing groups: ALI program students and released students. The dependent variables were their mean GPA scores. The null hypothesis (Ho) was that there was no difference in the population means of GPAs between the experimental and control groups. Since two sample means were drawn from normally distributed populations and also the sample size was not large, the t-test procedure was applied to determine whether there were statistically significant differences between these two groups' mean GPA scores.

Analysis

The null hypothesis was either rejected or failed to be rejected on the basis of the probability associated with the computed statistic resulting from the appropriate analysis. The size of the confidence interval (CI) and its corresponding alpha value were related to whether or not a null hypothesis was rejected: The larger the CI (or smaller the alpha), the more difficult it became to reject the null hypothesis.

Here, the 0.05 level of alpha value was chosen. If the null hypothesis was rejected in this study (p < 0.05), that meant there were differences in these two groups' mean GPAs. On the contrary, if the null hypothesis failed to be rejected, there were no significant differences in these two groups' mean GPA scores. In other words, we might assume that the formal training
in ALI program was therefore necessary and effective for those lower English proficiency students to attend it, in order to achieve academic success in their regular university studies.

IV. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS

Statistical Presentation

According to Table 1, the mean grade-point averages of both undergraduate and graduate control groups (3.4840) were slightly higher than those of the experimental groups (3.4344), but these differences were not statistically significant (Mean Difference = .0495). Also, because the probability was .131 which was greater than .05, that meant that the null hypothesis (Ho) was accepted and there were no significant differences between these two groups' mean GPA scores, after one year of the academic studies. (With df = 89, SE of Difference = .111, and 95% CI for Difference = -.170, .269.)

Besides, with df = 89, the critical values for the 0.05 level were + 1.984 and - 1.984. According to Table 1, the computed t value was .45, which fell in the region between ± 1.984. Therefore, the null hypothesis was also accepted at the 0.05 level of significance. In other words, there was no difference in the population means from which the two samples were drawn; that is, \( \mu_1 = \mu_2 \). If there were any differences between the two means, it was probably a result of sampling error.

| TABLE 1 |
| T-Test for Comparing and Analyzing the Samples |

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>SE of Mean</th>
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</thead>
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<tr>
<td>Control Group</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>3.4840</td>
<td>.449</td>
<td>.065</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experimental Group</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>3.4344</td>
<td>.602</td>
<td>.092</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Mean Difference = .0495

Levene's Test for Equality of Variance: \( F = 2.323 \) \( P = .131 \)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>t-test for Equality of Means</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Variances</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unequal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
V. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Within the limits of sample size and ability level of the subjects used in this study, results suggest that the null hypothesis (Ho) is accepted; namely, there is no difference between the mean GPA scores of (1) the international students who were required to take the ALI classes, and (2) those who were released from the ISE test. However, several things should be noted:

(1). In accepting the null hypothesis, we are actually saying that our sample data do not allow us to reject the null hypothesis. We therefore assume that the null hypothesis is true. However, we do not prove beyond doubt that Ho is true. The only way to prove beyond any doubt is to take a 100 percent sample which is often not feasible to do.

(2). The null hypothesis is accepted at the 0.05 level. It could have been biased by not initially selecting the 0.05 level.

Implications

The results that I obtained in this study have the following implications:

(1). They provide that we can validate program effectiveness in terms of an academic measure such as GPA that is broadly validated by user acceptance [7].

(2). They also provide that those students who took the ALI classes and completed them even have higher GPA means than those who were released from ISE test.

(3). The GPA results show that students who succeeded in ALI are competitive academically with those released students, thus providing a strong validation of the effectiveness of the ALI program.

However, the request of students' English proficiency for each department is totally different. For example, the request of English Department would be higher than that of the Engineering Department. Therefore, the result of GPAs can't validly measure students' overall English proficiency as well as program effectiveness. Also, we still question whether the standardized test such as TOEFL can validly measure students' overall English proficiency.

In addition, most foreign students have had more than four years of English training in their own countries. While they may recognize their need for greater proficiency in English, they are probably ready psychologically for immersion in the second language environment and acceptance of the consequences of their language handicaps. Also, these students may be
reluctant to accept the idea that their English proficiency level is such that they must take intensive English work similar in teaching methods, materials, and difficulty level to the type of English training they have had at home. As a result, prescribing compulsory intensive ESL work instead of the regular program of the university appears unsound and uneconomical in terms of both time and money.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

Many people argue that intensive ESL work may be a waste of time and money for most international students. They further claim that the formal foreign language instruction is not useful for students because English proficiency can not be gained through formal ESL training. At the same time, English proficiency levels can not be predictors of ultimate success in academic programs. Even though in this study we can not find whether ALI students really get English proficiency improvement, yet, at least we find that those lower English proficiency students, after successfully completed the ALI program in a short period, their mean GPA (3.4840) indeed exceeds the university's minimum requirements -- a cumulative GPA of 2.00 [7]. Therefore, we can now provide statistical evidence that students who succeed in the ALI program also tend to succeed in their academic work. In order to validly evaluate students' overall English proficiency including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, we still need to develop appropriate assessment instruments and performance standards.

Suggestions for Future Research

Although the result of this study shows that there is no difference between the mean GPAs of these two groups -- one group took the ALI classes and the other released from the placement test, we can not still conclude that formal ESL training is very effective for all lower English proficiency students to compete successfully with the other major part of international students, such as those new students who score on TOEFL more than 600 as well as those transfer students. Therefore, I would suggest to apply these two additional groups' GPAs to the future research. More comparisons, experiments, and future studies such as analysis of inferences about treatment of means and analysis of correlating should be
conducted in order to have a more valid and reliable conclusion: Formal training in English as a second language is effective for university students.

REFERENCES


