

Freshman and Preparatory Complete Students: Do they Exhibit Difference in their Reading Achievement?

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Abstract: A study was conducted to see if Addis Ababa University students from the freshman complete and preparatory complete perform differently on a reading comprehension test. Two groups, one of freshman and another of preparatory complete from the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, were randomly selected and took a reading comprehension test consisting of different kinds of questions. The test papers written by these students were marked and scores achieved were put to an independent samples t-test to compare performances of both groups. Results showed that freshman complete students performed significantly higher than the preparatory complete ones. This signals that schools should pay special attention to the preparatory programmes and see to it that the students are given the necessary support required to prepare them for tertiary level academic demands.

Introduction

The fact that education is one of the major driving forces of development in any society is unlikely to be questioned. However, the sheer presence of some form of education running in a particular country cannot by itself guarantee progress. That is why nations, from time to time, conduct evaluation with regard to how well the system is achieving perceived goals.

What this implies is that the development of a society would be arrested to a significant degree if the quality of its education is called to question. Probably, one of the factors that contributed to the poor socio-economic development of Ethiopia is one related to the educational quality. In this country, scholars in the sector have from time to time made warning signals alerting the concerned that situations have deteriorated and that the quality of education is on the decline. McNab (1989) writes that students at all levels of education in the country are so weak that they could not come up to expectations in terms of understanding and processing contents of

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subjects taught to them. Ascribing the problem to the inadequacy the school community has in using the English language, Stoddart (1986) also expresses worries about Ethiopian education hitting the target. Tekeste (1990), in a more direct and lucid way, indicates that the country is running an inefficient educational system which can be damaging to the process of nation building.

Stating the Problem Studied

Two academic semesters have now lapsed since the first intake of preparatory complete students to the institutes of higher learning in the country. The first intake of this group of students created a situation where universities/colleges had to simultaneously treat two groups of learners at a second year level – one, the *freshman complete*, and the other, *preparatory complete* groups. This very same situation prevailed in Addis Ababa University as it did in other institutes of higher education.

Although preparatory complete students, because they came late in the semester, do not attend the same lecture sessions with the freshman complete ones, instructors offering courses to both groups are in majority of the cases the same. However, quite a significant number of these instructors, apparently based on their experience, complain that preparatory complete students were not as good in their academic performance as their freshman counterparts. The investigator of this problem also shares the same view.

One of the specific areas in which the problem becomes seriously vivid is in the students' knowledge and skill of using the English language for academic purposes. When compared with freshman complete students, preparatory completes have been widely criticised for poorer ability in expressing themselves as well as in understanding what is put to them in the classrooms. If this is true, it will obviously have a detrimental effect on the possibility of their success in the academic career. But how valid is the claim?

Objectives of the Study

The general objective being to see if differences exist in the academic performance of freshman and preparatory complete students, specifically the study attempts to investigate if both groups perform differently on a reading comprehension test.

Methodology

Subjects

The study was conducted on two randomly selected groups of students (one freshman and the other preparatory complete) taking the course *Reading Skills* in the Department of Foreign Languages and Literature, Addis Ababa University.

Instruments

Test and interview were the research instruments used. The test was based on the reading comprehension component of the first semester College English (FLEn 101) mid-semester examination used four years ago. It consisted of a reading passage from which comprehension questions of different kinds were constructed. Analysis of readability index of the text suggested that the material is on the easy side for the groups under study (Table 1 below).

In addition to the test, an interview was carried out with a sample of ten students to gather data on how well the schools prepared them for tasks awaiting them at institutions of higher learning.

Procedure

One *Reading Skills* lecture hour for each of the groups was used to administer the test. The fact that administration took place in consecutive periods, helped to avoid the possibility of spreading around questions and answers that may possibly be recalled.

Finally, the test papers were collected and marked using an answer key. Following that, the scores for both groups were statistically compared using independent t-test.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Although the text used in the study was taken from the actual test previously used at the freshman level, the readability index would give the reader a better picture of how simple or difficult the material is. This is shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Readability Index of the Text

Text	Index
Word Count	747
Sentence Count	42
Words per Sentence	17.7
Flesch Reading Ease	50.8
Flesch Kincaid Grade Level	10.5

As can be seen from Table 1, one can understand that the text is not as such difficult for college level students. In terms of length, it has 747 words that made 42 sentences each of which consists of about 18 words on the average. Flesch reading ease and Flesch Kincaid grade level suggest that the text is rather simple for tertiary level students. The reading ease for college entrants is normally expected to be around 34 but the index in the table (50.8) suggests that this is rather easy. It appears that this might be more appropriate for learners of lower grade level (roughly grade 10 or 11).

However, it should be noted that there is in general a lot of doubt about how valid readability formulae are. For one thing, the formulae seem to have been set by the US standard but one should not expect the reading performance of a grade 10 native American student in the US school system to be the same as a grade 10 African or Asian student in the school system of his/her own country. It is thus very unlikely that the formulae apply across the board. The other problem associated with readability formulae is that

they “fail to take account of the structural and rhetorical features of a text, and also ignore such factors as the skills and interests that the reader brings to the text” (Clapham 1996:92). Nevertheless, they at least “provide a pseudo-objective standard against which to compare subjective intuitions” (Ridgway, 1997:157).

In general, though not neatly, readability index of the text shows that the text used was not beyond what someone at the educational level of the participants is expected to understand.

With this background information on the kind of text the groups were made to read, it would be important to see the distribution statistics of scores for each of the groups. Table 2 shows this.

Table 2: Distribution Statistics for the Reading Comprehension Test Scores (in %) between the Groups

Group	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mode	Median	Mean	SD
FrEng	44	50	90	80	75	72.73	11.18
PrEng	29	10	70	50	50	43.45	17.17

As can be seen from the above table, the scores range from 10%, which was rather too low, to a high score of 90%. The former was achieved by a preparatory complete student while the latter was scored by one from the freshman complete. Such a range indicates that there is a good spread of scores and that the test was somehow a good one in discriminating between strong and weak students. However, the differences in the mode, median and mean for the two groups indicate that the freshman complete group performed much better than their counterparts. But the main question is whether or not such differences, and particularly the mean difference, was statistically significant.

To find this out, a comparison of the scores achieved by each group was made using independent samples t-test. The results are shown in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Performance by Group on the Reading Comprehension Test

Group	N	Reading Comprehension Test Scores			
		Mean	SD	t-value	P-value
FrEng	44	72.73	11.18	8.84	<.001
PrEng	29	43.45	17.17		

From Table 3 above, one can see that the freshman complete group significantly outperformed the preparatory complete one ($t=8.84$, $p<.001$).

One main reason might be accountable for such differences. It seems that preparatory complete students were not given adequate preparation in terms of academic demands that may be put to them by institutions of higher learning. Results from the interview made with a sample of such students supports this view. They expressed that the kind of education they took during the two preparatory years was very much the same as what they had before. The difference, they said, was perhaps only in the topics to be covered, i. e., like the difference that one encounters when promoted from one grade to the next higher grade.

Implications and Recommendations

In universities/colleges where English as a second language serves as a medium of instruction, competence in the language is closely linked with academic success. It has particularly been argued that learners weak in their reading skills are unlikely to perform well in their academic activities (for example, Gebenedio, 1986; Yorkey, 1970).

This shows that preparatory complete students could be at a disadvantage if the condition is left neglected. Therefore, a re-visiting of the preparatory programmes may be necessary to ensure that it really addresses the future needs of the target population. This should be followed by close supervision so as to make sure the programme is put into practice properly.

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