

The English Language as a Factor Influencing Foreign Students' Learning Outcomes in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

English language skills are an important factor that should be assessed in the context of foreign students studying for a degree in higher education in another country. Previous research has mainly been conducted in Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom, as these are global study destinations. The aim is to investigate whether English language skills affect foreign students' learning outcomes in Latvia. The research question intends to find out what the English proficiency is in class, determine the English test at the time of admission, and whether the previous learning of English at the general level of education affects the learning outcomes in higher education. The research sample involves South Asian and Central Asian students. In the first stage of the study, the focus group method was used with the academic staff to find out English proficiency in class. In the second stage, interviews were conducted with representatives of higher education institutions to determine the English test at the time of admission. In the third stage, interviews were conducted with nationals of India, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan to find out the English language training of their countries of origin in general education. As a result, it can be concluded – foreign students' use of English differs according to the school (public or private) where they have studied general education before. Lecturers and representatives of higher education institutions indicate that English is not the determining factor, but rather knowledge and understanding of the topic and content regarding learning outcomes, while nationals agree that English is the determining factor affecting learning outcomes.

Keywords: higher education, foreign students, teaching methods, English language, western education, support

Introduction

For foreign students studying full-time for a degree in another country, English is an important factor that could affect the learning outcomes. Students rely on their previous English language training as a foundation on which to build their higher education studies in another country. Language barriers can hinder socio-cultural adaptation, cause misunderstandings and affect the academic achievement of foreign students. Adjustment problems are mainly related to English language skills and culture (Ballard & Clanchy, 1991; Wu et al., 2015). Language barriers further exacerbate the difficulty of adapting to the local colloquial language (Robertsons et al., 2000; Sookrajh et al., 2005; Wang, 2003). English as a factor affecting learning outcomes is common among Australian researchers, as English is the mother tongue of local students in Australia, but English is not the mother tongue of foreign students who come to study, mainly from Asia. In Australia, problems arise due to the poor written and spoken English skills of incoming Asian students. Several authors have conducted research in higher education institutions in Australia and New Zealand focusing on the language aspect (Bayley et al., 2002; Bretag et al., 2002; Holmes, 2004, 2005; Johnson & Kumar, 2010; Kukatlapalli et al., 2020; Sawir, 2005).

There is extensive literature on the English proficiency of foreign students from East Asia, but there is little research on the English proficiency of students from South Asia and especially Central Asia. Each of these regions has its own historical background, which has influenced the course of the development of the English language. The novelty of this study is that the research sample is based on foreign students of South and Central Asian origin. Another novelty is that the research tends to investigate whether English training in general education in students' country of origin affects learning outcomes in higher education.

English in academia

This chapter will discuss other conclusions of the author regarding the importance of English in an academic study environment and the importance of language training in the students' country of origin.

In the academic environment, students feel a lack of confidence in their English. They have an incomplete understanding of what the lecturers say in class and feel dissatisfied with their ability to express themselves orally in the presence of other classmates. Several foreign students identified their lack of English language skills as a major source of learning difficulties (Hellsten & Prescott, 2004; Robertson, 2000; Wong, 2004). Students felt uncomfortable expressing themselves orally because of their accent and English language skills (Sanner et al., 2002). Foreign students at a Canadian university had difficulty with note-taking, vocabulary, understanding lecture content and heavy reading loads (Mendelsohn, 2002).

There are studies available on international students studying in Australia. Sawir (2005) finds that the poor English language skills of students in Vietnam, Japan, Hong Kong, Indonesia and Thailand are the cause of outdated pedagogical English didactics in the students' countries of origin. The learning difficulties faced by students studying in Australia are based on the shortcomings of students' previous learning experiences – overly focusing on grammar and reading in teacher-led classrooms rather than developing conversational skills. Sawir (2005) suggested that Australian academic and administrative staff should be more sensitive to the language difficulties faced by international students. Academic and administrative staff are responsible for foreign students; they should better understand the root causes of their language learning problems by getting to know the students' previous experiences and learning habits. In turn, this will allow lecturers to develop better programmes. Countries of origin need to develop better communicative teaching practices, using a variety of interesting methods that will create excitement in students, beyond just learning grammar and vocabulary. Most of the Indian students felt confident about their English skills, but generally suffered from a lack of confidence when interacting with Australians. Some students said that they have adapted well to understanding the Australian accent, but are very aware that they also have an English accent (Johnson & Kumar, 2010).

It should be concluded that the available literature should also be viewed in the cultural aspect of the country in which the research was conducted. To date, most research has been developed in Australia. Considering this, it should be borne in mind that in Australia, English also has its own specific pronunciation, which is an aggravating factor in that students who learn and understand English suddenly do not understand it.

Academic staff also criticised foreign students' poor writing and critical thinking skills (Robertson, 2000). Bretag et al. (2002) and Bayley et al. (2002) found that, according to academic staff, foreign students from non-native English speaking countries were unable to participate effectively in the training discussion as required and their papers were often difficult to read and assess due to poor grammar.

Holmes (2004) concluded that the opinions of foreign students and lecturers did not always coincide. The professors' language accents, idiomatic expressions, humour and choice of examples in the lectures caused problems (Holmes, 2004). This was also found in the study of Ramsay (1999) where first-year foreign students at an Australian university had difficulty understanding lecture content. Lecturers spoke too quickly or gave insufficient information. Foreign students find the staff unfriendly, and say that they give poor directions in the courses (Dandy, 2009; Wang, 2003). Students say that foreign students tend to 'ask more questions' due to their poor understanding of English, but teachers

and other students perceive them as 'stupid'. The lecturers do not understand the accent of the students, so they lose patience and become easily irritated. Incomplete knowledge of English was associated with a lack of intelligence. It creates fear in students, as well as a desire not to participate in discussions (Naidoo, 2018).

In recent years, students from China have had to face more complicated visa processes and students have had to meet relatively high requirements for English language skills, which is carried out with the aim of reducing the number of students with poor language skills, although this does not solve the problem itself (Townsend & Poh, 2008). Compared to students from China, Indian students have a better command of English, as English is an official language in India due to the historical ties with Britain (Levis et al., 2012).

There have been many studies asking students to self-assess their English language skills. For example, students' self-assessed writing and speaking skills were rated lower than reading and listening skills. Most (88%) indicated little difficulty in expressing themselves in English, but some (12%) found it moderately or very difficult. Students clearly indicated difficulties with writing, often related to paraphrasing, referencing, avoiding plagiarism and argumentation skills. Having never been asked to reference or cite sources before, students found that they could not write critically, which was highly expected (Gourlay, 2009; Holmes, 2005). Students acknowledged that university staff took it for granted that students would know what was expected of academic English writing (Kukatlapalli et al., 2020).

The aspect of the English language is not directed only towards the students, but also towards the lecturers, where the interaction of the parties should achieve the highest desired result.

English language and learning outcomes

Some studies have looked for a correlation between English language skills and learning outcomes. Learning outcomes refer to the measurable, demonstrable results of how a student has learnt. They can be assessed by the successful completion of course requirements, and grade point average.

Ramburuth (2001) concluded that the stronger the proficiency in written English, the higher the academic achievement among both domestic and international students in Australia. 76% of non-native foreign students were identified as requiring intensive support in English based on their written application. Additionally, another study showed that students with higher TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) scores experienced less adjustment difficulties, had more positive experiences, and felt more satisfied than those with lower scores. Beasley (1990) indicated that foreign students faced challenges in reading

and writing, as well as difficulties adapting to Western educational traditions consisting of independent learning, critical analysis, and idea generation. These factors contribute to the reasons why international students do not achieve learning outcomes (Andrade, 2006; Beasley, 1990; Holmes, 2004). A study in New Zealand found that working hard does not necessarily mean good grades for foreign students from China. Students lacked discussion skills and had insufficient listening comprehension in lectures (Holmes, 2004). While students learnt from their mistakes, it affected student grades and learning outcomes (Kukatlapalli et al., 2020).

Few studies show that foreign students are academically successful and generally satisfied with their experience at English-speaking universities (Andrade, 2006; Berman & Cheng, 2001).

It can be concluded that in the studies so far, the negative influence is revealed in more cases, that is, the English language affects the learning outcomes in a negative way.

Background

The role of foreign students in Latvia

The Republic of Latvia is a country in the Baltic region of Northern Europe. The Bologna Process in Latvia was launched on 19 June 1999. Higher education in Latvia has three levels – bachelor's, master's and doctoral (Ministry of Education and Science, 2020). In 2020, 9,342 foreign students, which is 14% of all students, studied in Latvian higher education for the purpose of obtaining a degree. In the case of Latvia, the largest education importing regions are East Asia – India, Central Asia – Uzbekistan, followed by Central Europe – Germany, Sweden and Eastern Europe – Russia. 68% of foreign students come from countries outside the European Union (Overview of Latvian higher education in 2020, 2021).

Admission of foreign students in the context of English

The Ministry of Education and Science has defined the principles of good practice on attracting foreign students and delivering studies. If the previous education of the potential foreign student was obtained in other language, either an internationally recognised certificate is necessary or the higher education institution shall organise a test of the foreign language which certifies knowledge of the language in which the study programme is implemented, and the level of knowledge set by the higher education institution (Agreement on Good Practice of Attracting International Students and Delivering Studies has been signed between the Ministry and higher education institutions, 2017). Besides Cabinet Regulation No. 846 *Regulations Regarding the Requirements, Criteria and*

Procedures for Admission to Study Programmes, universities and colleges check the foreigner's language proficiency of the relevant study programme to at least the B2 level according to approved methodology set by the regulations (Rules on requirements, criteria and procedures for admission to study programmes, 2006).

Foreign students are an important segment for higher education institutions and higher education internationalisation in Latvia. In order to improve the English language admission tests and the overall quality, improvements are constantly being made, which are reflected in the Agreement and in the Cabinet Regulation.

Methodology

Focus group method

In the first stage of the study, the focus group method was used by the academic staff-lecturers. Lecturers were selected and invited to participate according to the following criteria:

- 1) work with foreign students,
- 2) work experience of at least 10 years directly with foreign students,
- 3) work with students from different countries like (India, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Belarus, and Russia).

The purpose of the focus group discussion was to determine the English proficiency in class and whether English affects learning outcomes. 7 lecturers took part in it, with 5 lecturers representing the private education institution *Turība University* and 2 participants representing the state university *The EKA University of Applied Sciences*, and the state university *The University of Latvia*. Participation was voluntary, and prior informed consent was given regarding the purpose and confidentiality. The focus group took place once in December 2021, online on the *Webex* platform. The length of the focus group discussion was 90 minutes. In the beginning of the focus group discussion, the respondents were introduced to the research aim and focus group discussion. The focus group was conducted in Latvian. At the end of the focus group, the moderator provided a summary and feedback on the answers received from the respondents. Then respondents reflected, confirmed or added to the content of their answers. After the focus group discussion, the moderator prepared a detailed interview transcript. This study used the thematic analysis approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (Braun Clarke, 2006). After the discussion, the researcher read the transcripts of the focus groups to gain an overall idea about the answers. The first step was to encode the obtained data, while in the second step the researcher organised the data in a meaningful and logical order. The researcher coded each segment of data related to it and also noted if something interesting and meaningful came up according to the research question. The researcher

compared the codes and modified them if necessary before moving on to the rest of the transcripts. After generating the codes, the researchers moved to search for themes. The final step involved combining the analytical narrative and data extracts.

Interviews with higher education institutions

In the second stage, interviews were conducted with representatives of higher education institutions ($n = 10$) to determine English proficiency at the time of admission and whether English affects foreign students' learning outcomes. The representatives were chosen from universities where foreign students are most represented. 7 represented state universities, and 3 private. Interviews took place in Spring 2022 online, individually on the *Zoom* platform and by mobile phone. Respondents were informed that confidentiality would be respected and the results would only be available in aggregated form. The interviews were conducted in Latvian.

Interviews with nationals

In the third stage, interviews were conducted with nationals (same as the students) of India, Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan ($n = 3$) to determine the English language training of their countries of origin in their previous education and whether English affects the learning outcomes. The Indian national is a lecturer at Turiba University, the nationals from Sri Lanka and Uzbekistan are students. These representatives were chosen because they represent different countries and different positions.

Interviews took place in Spring 2022 online, individually on the *Zoom* platform. Participation was voluntary, and prior informed consent was given regarding the purpose and confidentiality. The interviews were conducted in English. An interview transcript was compiled for each interview as the first step. Each interview transcript was sent to the respondent to confirm that the opinion was accurate. After receiving the clarifications and approval, analysis of the interviews was carried out. The analysis included:

- 1) breaking down data into thematic codes,
- 2) drawing related codes into categories,
- 3) movement towards conceptualising meaning: exploring thematic relationships in response to research question (Galletta & Cross, 2013).

Results

The first paragraph of the chapter presents the results of the focus group on the lecturers' vision regarding foreign students' English proficiency in class. The second paragraph of the chapter reflects the results of university representatives

regarding English at admission and during studies. The third paragraph reflects English training of students' countries of origin in general education.

Results of the focus group on the lecturers' vision regarding foreign students' English proficiency in class

Proficiency of the English language is divided into oral, written knowledge and comprehension. The opinions of the lecturers generally indicate that there are very different levels of English within the same group with regard to students' oral expression in English. Students from South Asia are more difficult to understand because of the accent, but their language skills are better in general. Students from Central Asia still have poor language skills. 7 out of 7 lecturers agreed that it is difficult for students to express themselves orally, when students have not prepared, have not read, and have not learnt. Students experience great difficulty speaking in complete sentences rather than just phrases. It is often necessary to address students verbally in order to develop a discussion. 7 out of 7 lecturers agreed that knowledge is the main factor regarding whether students will make an effort to express themselves or not. It is more difficult for many students to express themselves in writing than in speaking. Students will use the copy-paste function at the first opportunity, regardless of the region they belong to, because it is easier and students have this unchangeable belief that in this way the text will be understandable, correct and mistake-free (7 out of 7 lecturers agreed). The lecturers indicate that a great deal of explanatory work is invested so that the students are aware that neither grammar nor sentence construction will be evaluated, but answers to their own words are expected. Discussing comprehension, lecturers indicate that students from South Asia fall into two groups – those who are not shy to speak because of their accent or lack of English, and those who speak, but not always on topic. 4 lecturers point out that the fast speaking of Indian students is difficult for the lecturer to understand, but it is possible to get used to it over the years. 5 lecturers emphasise there are often situations when the student even gives an answer 3 times, but it is still difficult to understand the student's thoughts, and then both parties remain in an awkward situation. It is true that students sit next to each other and help translate. 3 lecturers state that students also come along to consultations and support each other. All 7 lecturers stress that most often, students do not understand the lecturers when there is a defence of study/practice papers, which contain specific knowledge of terminology. The student does not know the term due to a lack of knowledge, and not because of the English language as such.

The results of university representatives regarding English at admission and during studies

All 10 representatives agree that all students must successfully pass the admission requirements when applying for studies, including the English language test, so that students are admitted with a sufficient knowledge of English to study

successfully. Students must have B2 level in English. An international English language certificate alone is not considered. An oral virtual interview in English is held with each student in the case of most education institutions. Even if the certificate has a high level, but practically no knowledge is shown at the oral virtual interview, then the student is not admitted (with particular emphasis on the quality aspect – 5 out of 10 representatives point out). In addition to the general English language test, the admission also require a comprehension test about global processes in the world in English, which is a good way of demonstrating the student's judgement and English language skills. This depends on which country the student comes from. There are countries such as India where the English language is at a high level, but unfortunately there are many strong accents and dialects, which affects the result. 10 out of 10 representatives point out that the lecturers get used to the accent of the students through experience and the students get used to the accent of the lecturers. Only 4 representatives out of 10 state that the lecturers and the administration regularly have English language courses. It is more difficult with guest lecturers, because they change more often. For the first couple of months at the beginning of the semester, it is more difficult for students while they get used to the lecturers' accent, new system and English in general, but despite this, students adapt quickly. And this is why 10 out of 10 representatives agreed that globally, English is not a factor affecting the learning outcomes.

Results of English training of students' countries of origin in general education

In India, primary education is compulsory from class 1–8. It is available in public schools for free and in private schools for a fee. In private educational institutions, lessons are immediately conducted in English, which provides students with early English language skills. In public schools, English is taught as one of the subjects. When students from India enter higher education in Latvia, the lecturers have to face the fact that the students have different accents and dialects, and depending on the school where the students studied basic education, public or private, English language skills also vary. The lecturers complain that they do not understand the students, and it is not easy for the English lecturer to understand the English language of students from India. Students complain that they also do not understand what the lecturer says, as they also have a different English accent. In Sri Lanka International (private) schools, all subjects are taught through the medium of English. English is one of the core subjects included in the Ordinary Level Examination and Advanced Level Examination, in which a student would not receive entry to university without at least an S (satisfactory) Pass for English. In State schools, English is taught orally from grade one onwards. Nevertheless, it is obvious that the English knowledge of students who study at state schools is considerably less than the students who

go to international schools. There are also different clubs and associations in both schools such as the English Literary Association as well as zonal, provincial and state level English language competitions organised under categories such as creative writing, copywriting, impromptu speaking, drama etc. Students in Latvia usually do not have problems in English. The English language is taught in Uzbekistan, but the emphasis is on grammar and not on the oral part, so the English language training is inferior. Similar results were expressed by Sawir (2005), in that when students come to Latvia, they don't understand what the teachers are saying and requesting, and the students cannot fulfil the request or answer. It creates great problems expressing oneself orally in the classroom, asking questions to teachers, and presenting presentations. There was a big barrier and feeling of shame trying to express myself – recalls one student. When asked if the English accent has been an obstacle, the student replies that in the beginning there were so many problems with the English language that teachers were not understood regardless of whether they spoke with or without an accent.

Discussion

Knowledge of the content of the course is the main factor regarding whether students make an effort to express themselves or not. Even if the student knows the answer but is not strong in English, it has been observed that students try to show that they know the answer in various ways, for example asking other classmates for words. It is one thing to talk about everyday subjects, which students will certainly understand in different contexts, talking about terms and content in study courses, where there are difficulties understanding, even with perfect English pronunciation, is more problematic.

Lecturers' thoughts are divided; it is disturbing when students help the next student with translations during the lecture. They also come along to consultations and support each other, although some lecturers do not support this practice. Students have to be independent. Other lecturers agree and admit that they invite students to help each other with English, without condemning it. The lecturers also point out cases when they themselves ask for help with words that have suddenly been forgotten, and this is how mutual cooperation and understanding is formed, rather than condemning someone for having worse or better English skills.

The lecturers admit that perhaps the lecturers themselves speak too fast and some students have also even reprimanded the lecturers. The lecturers state that they themselves do not feel their accent in English. There were many complaints from students in the very beginning about the lecturers' ability to speak English, when foreign students started studying full time in Latvia, but now there are almost no such complaints. In order for students to better understand what

the lecturer said, it is preferable to duplicate the information on slides in the presentation.

Students state that the English language tests at admission are too standardised and overly lenient. Students usually already know what the questions will be. Agents are already preparing students for what the requirements will be and what questions the educational institution will ask for the English language test.

During the interviews with representatives of higher education institutions, it was pointed out that there are other more important factors that affect the results of studies. For example, learning approach, ability to study independently, time management, methodology used by students, self-control and self-motivation. Previous learning experience and the use of different learning approaches is important. In future studies, more emphasis should be placed on study methods as an influencing factor. University representatives emphasised that foreign students often delay the start of the semester, which is affected by obtaining a visa in the student's home country and which can lead to affecting learning outcomes. This aspect should be raised for further research.

Conclusions

- The aim was to determine whether knowledge of the English language affects the learning outcomes among foreign students. Lecturers and representatives of higher education institutions indicate that English is not the determining factor, but knowledge and understanding of the topic and content is the determining factor for the learning outcomes, while nationals agree that English is the determining factor affecting learning outcomes.
- The use of English by foreign students in class differs by country of origin. Students from South Asia are more difficult to understand because of the accent, but their language skills are better in general, while students from Central Asia still have poor language skills.
- If the knowledge of the study content (terminology) is understandable then there are no problems for the student expressing themselves in English.
- The use of English by foreign students differs by the school (public or private) where they have studied general education before. Students who studied in private schools have a much better command of English than students who studied in public schools. Learning English in general education in the student's country of origin affects the learning outcomes.
- English language tests at admission are too standardised and overly lenient. English admission control should be made stricter in every higher education institution. The unfair practice of commercial agents preparing students for English language tests must be eradicated.

- Academic and administrative staff should be more sensitive to the language difficulties faced by foreign students. International offices in higher education institutions should educate and provide information (especially new lecturers and guest lecturers) about the needs of foreign students regarding the English language.
- Since English is not the native language of the lecturers in Latvia, the lecturers are therefore more sensitive and understanding towards the students' accent and language skills.
- There is too much reliance on experience (the lecturers get used to the accent of the students through experience and the students get used to the accent of the lecturers). There is a lack of methodical, systematic English language training for academic staff. New lecturers and guest lecturers suffer due to this.

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