



Identifying academically at-risk students in an English-as-a-Lingua-Franca university setting



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ABSTRACT

This study examines the relationship between written academic English proficiency and academic achievement in an undergraduate English-medium university program in the Sultanate of Oman. The study aims to identify reliable measures for screening academically at-risk students in a time- and cost-effective manner. Three established measures of written English proficiency (academic writing, academic reading and recognition vocabulary) are examined as predictors of academic achievement as reflected in student grade-point average (GPA). Performance on the three tests by Year 1 ($N = 174$) Omani students in an English-as-a-Lingua-Franca (ELF) university program was correlated with their end of semester GPAs. The accuracy of the tests in classifying at-risk students was assessed with logit regression analyses and ROC curves using GPA cutscores. The best predictors of GPA were the academic writing and recognition vocabulary knowledge measures. The suitability of the latter as a screening tool in ELF higher-education settings is discussed. The study contributes to the growing interest in post-enrolment assessment as a practical means to ensure that admitted students have the linguistic resources needed to be successful academically.

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1. Introduction

Over the past decade there has been a significant increase in the number of universities offering English-medium programs in countries where English is traditionally considered a foreign language, or what is termed *English-as-a-Lingua-Franca* (ELF) settings (Jenkins, 2007; Kirkpatrick, 2011). English-medium programs tripled in Europe's universities between 2002 and 2007 (Wächter & Maiworm, 2008), and by 2011 a UNESCO report noted that English had become the most common language of instruction in universities globally (Tilak, 2011). This growth has been driven by powerful economic, technological and societal forces, including the growing emphasis on research publications and rankings, as well the perceived quality of universities from traditional English speaking countries. The latter has led Asian nations like Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Oman to develop in-country English-medium programs, often in partnership with traditional English-speaking universities (Bashir, 2007). Between 2000 and 2007 approximately 40 American, Australian and British universities opened branch campuses in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar alone (Weber, 2011).

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Adequate English proficiency is of course crucial for academic success in ELF university programs. The ability to read course materials, attend lectures, engage in class discussion, take tests and write papers all demand a significant level of skill in academic and communicative English (Baik & Greig, 2009; Evans & Morrison, 2011). In ELF university programs these skills must be developed, maintained, and used in settings where both students and large numbers of academic staff use English as a second/foreign language (L2), and where English often has restricted uses in the society in general. As a result, the level of students' English proficiency in these settings is often significantly lower than their L2 counterparts studying in English-speaking countries, a state reflected in typically lower English language requirements for EFL universities (Roche & Harrington, 2013). The absence of the linguistic skills needed for satisfactory academic outcomes can have significant negative effects. Students with inadequate English are at risk of academic failure in both individual courses and entire degree programs, with negative consequences for the individual student, the institution, and the larger society (Berman & Cheng, 2001; Coleman, 2006). The presence of a number of such at-risk students can also have a substantial impact on teaching and learning outcomes, both in programs where there is a mix of L1 and L2 users, and where students and teachers share the same native cultural and linguistic background (Cheng, Myles, & Curtis, 2004; Terraschke & Wahid, 2011). It is important to note that these at-risk students have typically met the entry requirements for English language proficiency, meaning that the institution has some responsibility for the language-related difficulties these individuals might encounter post-matriculation (Fox, 2005; Tonkyn, 1995).

The risks posed to academic success by inadequate English skills are being addressed with increasing urgency in non-ELF countries like Australia and New Zealand, where international students are a significant presence in all education sectors. Insufficient English proficiency by international students can affect not just academic outcomes, but visa decisions, employment prospects, student equity, and funding (Bradley, Noonan, Nugent, & Scales, 2008). One response to the problem has been the development of Post-Enrolment/Entry Language Assessment (PELA) schemes in which matriculated students undergo screening to identify linguistically at-risk students (Dunworth, 2009; Murray, 2010, 2011; Read, 2008). An example of one such test is the *Diagnostic English Language Needs Assessment* (DELNA) developed by Elder and her colleagues in Australia (Elder, Bright, & Bennett, 2007; Elder & Knoch, 2009). At entry students are screened using on-line vocabulary knowledge and text-correction tests that are quick to administer and generate instant results. Students who perform above a certain threshold are informed that their English language proficiency appears adequate to begin their studies and undergo no more testing. Students who fail to reach the threshold proceed to take a more extensive diagnostic battery to identify specific areas of weakness, with appropriate support then provided (Elder et al., 2007; Elder & von Randow, 2008).

This study examines diagnostic screening tools for potential use in an ELF university setting. It evaluates the reliability and effectiveness of three measures of English proficiency as predictors of overall academic performance, with a particular focus on identifying academically at-risk students. The three measures are recognition vocabulary skill, academic writing and academic reading. The measurement instruments are designed to be easy to administer, score, and interpret as part of a valid and reliable PELA scheme for use in these settings.

Recognition vocabulary skill as measured here combines size (Laufer & Nation, 1995; Nation, 2006), and speed of access (Harrington, 2006; Harrington & Carey, 2009; Shiotsu, 2009). Both aspects are essential to skilled L2 reading (Fender, 2001; Koda, 2007; Nassaji, 2003; Segalowitz, Segalowitz, & Wood, 1998) and writing (Snellings, Van Gelderen, & De Gloppe, 2002). Vocabulary size thresholds have been linked to different domains of L2 performance and used successfully for L2 vocabulary assessment and instruction (Milton, 2009; Nation, 2006). Interest in access speed has traditionally been confined to experimental settings but there is growing interest in speed as a measurable index of L2 proficiency in instruction and testing (Miralpeix and Meara, 2010; Pellicer-Sánchez & Schmitt, 2012). Of interest in this study is the extent to which discrete vocabulary size and speed measures can usefully predict academic performance outcomes for screening purposes.

Academic reading and writing skills are also measured here. Students in ELF settings regularly identify these areas to be of particular concern, with vocabulary skill a crucial element of both (Evans & Morrison, 2011; Kirkgöz, 2005; Lin & Morrison, 2010). Skill in written English can be a particular obstacle to the academic achievement for Arab readers, whose English reading skills at both the word and text levels appear to lag behind other L2 readers at similar levels of proficiency (Fender, 2008; Ryan & Meara, 1991). Writing and reading skills are measured here using tasks adapted from IELTS preparation materials. IELTS is a widely recognized international benchmark of academic English proficiency and is generally perceived as a valid measure of English proficiency by students, teachers, and educational administrators (Coleman, Starfield, & Hagan, 2003). It is also used as an English proficiency test at the site of this study. The writing and reading tests measure behaviours that overlap significantly in accounting for academic performance, and thus are expected to correlate, but also tap unique aspects of English proficiency. Of interest here is the relative contribution the measures make, both separately and in combination, to identifying at-risk students.

Academic performance is measured by the students' overall Grade Point Average (GPA) for the second semester of their 1st year of study. GPA is one of the most readily recognized and widely used indicators of academic achievement (Mulligan, Oliver, & Rochecouste, 2012) and has previously been used in PELA research (Elder et al., 2007). As a measure of academic achievement, though, it does have recognized limitations (Sadler, 2009). It can be affected by different courses of study, grading practices of particular professors, institutional policy and practice, learner background, and other sources of variability (Bayliss & Raymond, 2004). The study here examines a homogenous cohort of L1 Arab students from a single institution, thereby ensuring a degree of consistency in the GPAs used.

English language proficiency is generally assumed to play a role in GPA but evidence for the link is mixed. A number of studies have reported a substantial relationship (Barton & Neville-Barton, 2003; Laufer, 1992; Loewen & Ellis, 2004), while

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