

Examining Language as a Crucial Factor in Determining Academic Performance: A Case of Business Education in Hong Kong

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Abstract : I. INTRODUCTION: Educators have always been interested in exploring factors that contribute to students' academic success. It is beyond question that language, as a medium of instruction, will affect student learning. This paper tries to investigate whether language is a crucial factor in determining students' achievement in their studies. II. BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE OF STUDY: The issue of using English as a medium of instruction in Hong Kong is a special topic because Hong Kong is a post-colonial and international city which a British colony. In such a specific language environment, researchers in the education field have always been interested in investigating students' language proficiency and its relation to academic achievement and other related educational indicators such as motivation to learn, self-esteem, learning effectiveness, self-efficacy, etc. Along this line of thought, this study specifically focused on business education. III. METHODOLOGY: The methodology in this study involved two sequential stages, namely, a focus group interview and a data analysis. The whole study was directed towards both qualitative and quantitative aspects. The subjects of the study were divided into two groups. For the first group participating in the interview, a total of ten high school students were invited. They studied Business Studies, and their English standard was varied. The theme of the discussion was "Does English affect your learning and examination results of Business Studies?" The students were facilitated to discuss the extent to which English standard affected their learning of Business subjects and requested to rate the correlation between English and performance of Business Studies on a five-point scale. The second stage of the study involved another group of students. They were high school graduates who had taken the public examination for entering universities. A database containing their public examination results for different subjects has been obtained for the purpose of statistical analysis. Hypotheses were tested and evidence was obtained from the focus group interview to triangulate the findings. V. MAJOR FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION: By sharing of personal experience, the discussion of focus group interviews indicated that higher English standards could help the students achieve better learning and examination performance. In order to end the interview, the students were asked to indicate the correlation between English proficiency and performance of Business Studies on a five-point scale. With point one meant least correlated, ninety percent of the students gave point four for the correlation. The preliminary results illustrated that English plays an important role in students' learning of Business Studies, or at least this was what the students perceived, which set the hypotheses for the study. After conducting the focus group interview, further evidence had to be gathered to support the hypotheses. The data analysis part tried to find out the relationship by correlating the students' public examination results of Business Studies and levels of English standard. The results indicated a positive correlation between their English standard and Business Studies examination performance. In order to highlight the importance of the English language to the study of Business Studies, the correlation between the public examination results of other non-business subjects was also tested. Statistical results showed that language does play a role in affecting students' performance in studying Business subjects than the other subjects. The explanation includes the dynamic subject nature, examination format and study requirements, the specialist language used, etc. Unlike Science and Geography, students in their learning process might find it more difficult to relate business concepts or terminologies to their own experience, and there are not many obvious physical or practical activities or visual aids to serve as evidence or experiments. It is well-researched in Hong Kong that English proficiency is a determinant of academic success. Other research studies verified such a notion. For example, research revealed that the more enriched the language experience, the better the cognitive performance in conceptual tasks. The ability to perform this kind of task is particularly important to students taking Business subjects. Another research was carried out in the UK, which was geared towards identifying and analyzing the reasons for underachievement across a cohort of GCSE students taking Business Studies. Results showed that weak language ability was the main barrier to raising students' performance levels. It seemed that the interview result was successfully triangulated with data findings. Although education failure cannot be restricted to linguistic failure and language is just one of the variables to play in determining academic achievement, it is generally accepted that language does affect students' academic performance. It is just a matter of extent. This paper provides recommendations for business educators on students' language training and sheds light on more research possibilities in this area.

Keywords : academic performance, language, learning, medium of instruction

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