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Navigating the Development of English Language Skills in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

Academic English proficiency is essential for success in higher education, especially for non-native speakers of English. This review paper aims to discuss how academic English proficiency contributes to successful academic performance and integration within the academic community. Challenges experienced by non-native speakers—such as language barriers, cultural differences and strategies to improve proficiency in the English language, for instance, through academic language courses, support services, and technology hand-in-hand, were also discussed. Overall findings from recent studies were synthesized in the paper to reveal the critical importance of English proficiency to academic performance and recommend practicable measures by higher education institutions for supporting their students. Finally, the review points to existing gaps in research, suggesting directions for future investigation that are likely to contribute to improving academic English proficiency and hence its impact on success in higher education.

Keywords: Academic, English, university, students, proficiency

1 Introduction

The rigors of academic English are conducive to one's success in higher education, as regards both academic performance and social integration within the academic community. Beyond comprehension of lectures, reading from academic texts, and writing in assignments, mastering academic English for many students, especially those whose first language is not English, often serves to enable them to participate fully in class discussions and collaborative working. The diversity created in higher learning institutions as they become increasingly populated with international students could make obvious the need to address their language needs as part of realization for academic success and enculturation.

In higher education, academic English means understanding through many instruments; these would include reading, writing, listening, and speaking. It allows students to read very complex academic content, articulate ideas, and interact in scholarly discourse. In addition, proficiency in academic English is necessary for students to meet the high demands on writing in academia, since they need to be very good at grammar, vocabulary, and style.

Nonetheless, many non-native English speakers suffer from the major handicap of dealing with academic English. Language hinders them from understanding lectures, participating in discussions, and even completing assignments efficiently. Cultural differences can make barriers even thicker and more persistent in performance. This could lead to frustration and a corresponding decrease in confidence

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coupled with low academic achievements.

Higher education institutions are introducing various strategies to help students improve their academic English capabilities. Academic language courses, writing centers, and tutoring courses are among such strategies, together with educational technology and tools that supplement the process of learning languages. Such resources enable students to build the language competencies they need to prepare for success and integrate them into their academic surroundings. This review is written to stress the importance of academic English proficiency in higher education with an analysis of the challenges posed to non-native speakers, in addition to the coping strategies intended to support them in improving their language proficiency. This review is meant to provide a synthesis of findings across the recent studies toward a comprehensive understanding of how academic English proficiency contributes to academic achievement with useful suggestions for higher education institutions.

2 The importance of Academic English in Higher Education

Academic English proficiency is a considerable need in higher education for those who are non-native individuals speaking in English. Such proficiency avails the students for communicating complex ideas to lectures, participating in discussions, and engaging in the use of academic texts. As per Martirosyan, Hwang, and Wanjohi (2015), it has been found that higher levels of English proficiency are directly correlated to better academic performance among international students. The inference that can therefore be drawn is that the importance of language skills is enormous in determining the success of students in their academics. Academic English also allows students to exercise their critical thinking by evaluating the argument, synthesizing, and writing well-structured, coherent essays and research papers. This linguistic competence is an essential component of all academic work as well as navigating the wider academic culture, which, more often than not, uses language with subtlety and sophistication (Swales, 1990; Swales & Feak, 2004).

Academic performance is not the only benefactor of academic English proficiency. In addition, it enhances social integration and cultural adaptation. Inevitably, non-native English speakers also become acquainted with cultural differences and social isolation, which sting the overall academic experience (Ramsay, Barker, & Jones, 1999). Effective communication helps the students to connect with other peers and teachers and avail several activities on and off-campus to integrate life on campus more fully. This type of social integration is extremely important for mental well-being and academic success. Academic writing, Hyland (2018) prescribes, is not merely writing informative writing but also fosters an engaging relationship with the academic community. Therefore, development in academic English would be important for building a feeling of belonging and for achieving success in higher education.

3 Challenges Faced by Non-Native English Speakers in Higher Education

3.1 Language barriers

Language proficiency directly influences academic performance, as noted by Martirosyan, Hwang, and Wanjohi (2015). Their study found that the more proficient the students are in English, the better they perform academically. It was found that non-native speakers of English find it difficult to listen to lectures, take part in discussions, or understand and interpret reading texts, which hinders them from achieving their academic goals.

The cumulative effect of these barriers can lead to reduced academic performance, added stress, and feelings of isolation. It necessitates institutions to provide targeted language support and resources to help overcome these challenges experienced by students.

3.2 Cultural differences

Another problem comes from cultural differences. According to Ramsay, Barker, and Jones (1999), international students typically experience the successful transition to such new cultural norms with problems affecting their social integration and academic performance. The culture in question creates isolation and stress, complicating the whole experience of non-native English speakers academically.

A lack of knowledge regarding citation styles and definitions of academic integrity as part of the academic conventions can also lend serious challenges. Such cultural differences justify extensive and continuous orientation programs to enable international students to fit into and excel in all their new academic settings. The institutions must recognize and help these cultural barriers in order to institute an environment of inclusive and supportive learning for all students.

3.3 Academic writing

Mastering academic writing is particularly challenging for non-native English speakers. Swales (1990) and Swales and Feak (2004) emphasized the importance of understanding the conventions and rhetorical structures of academic texts. Weissberg and Buker (1990) pointed out that non-native speakers often struggle with advanced vocabulary, grammatical structures, and citation practices, which are critical for producing high-quality academic writing.

The process of learning to write academically would entail knowing the community's expectations and developing the writing skills to meet the concerns therein. Besides, such people will usually need to unlearn many of the habits acquired back in school because whatever they learnt might not have applied much in English, considering that they come from non-native backgrounds. The result is that without competent writing, academic students are going to end up failing because they isolate their ideas, break them down with regard to subject material, and tend to disseminate them into the larger scholarly discussions. Which means that they would otherwise need to have particularized support, resources, and services to grow their academic writing skills, indispensable in both academic success and community integration.

3.4 Time management and social isolation

Selvadurai (1998) noted that immigrant students require more time to reach academic norms in a second language than to acquire interpersonal communication skills. Time spent learning another language has a tendency toward added stress and increased difficulty managing academic burden. Social isolation is a widespread phenomenon for non-native English speakers. Restricted language abilities may restrict socializing with their peers and participating fully in any extracurricular activities, negatively affecting their mental health and overall enjoyment of academic life (Hyland, 2018).

3.5 Strategies to improve academic English proficiency

The development of academic proficiency in English involves approaching the developing proficiency in a number of different approaches. Academic English courses are an important component of this progression. Academic English courses provide a structured learning environment in which students can learn the important skills such as how to write a thesis statement, develop their paragraphs, and coherence. According to Oshima and Hogue (1999), such courses are particularly valuable in helping students systematically improve their writing efforts and meet the standards of academia.

Writing centers and tutoring services give individualized feedback and support for academic writing. Glasman-Deal (2009) elaborates on the beneficial individualistic assistance, which majorly contributes to enhancing the students' writing proficiency and confidence. Such settings give students chances to seek targeted help on specific writing but insist that they produce excellent academic work.

Technological tools and resources enhance academic English proficiency. It personalizes feedback on grammar, syntax, and stylistic conventions through imaginative artificial intelligence (AI) tools and allows students to real-time refine the writing pieces. The aid from such tools is necessary for almost all students, particularly non-native English speakers, and for needing immediate help and practice.

Cultural integration programs promote international students' adjustment to their changes in academic surroundings. Ramsay, Barker, and Jones (1999) have recommended that such events keep all very understanding towards culture awareness and integration. Hence, these would associate students more as part of the academic community, leading to less isolation and better academic experience.

Peer support groups serve as the forum through which students may share experiences, involve practice in a language, and offer each other mutual support. Hyland (2018) asserts how social and interactive

contexts play important roles in academic writing and how peer support can develop both language skills and social integration. Such communities promote a learning environment where students learn from peers to develop their academic English proficiency collaboratively.

By combining these strategies—academic English courses, writing centers and tutoring services, technological tools, cultural integration programs, and peer support groups—higher education institutions can have a holistic approach to improvement in academic English proficiency. This comprehensive strategy is developed to ensure that non-native speakers learn all needed to be successful in their academic pursuit, as well as for integration into the academic community.

4 Results

Research findings universally show that academic English proficiency relates positively to academic performance. Such terms as Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) were popularized by Cummins, who argued that higher-level language skills for academic purposes are necessary. BICS refers to the basic conversational skills people need in their day-to-day interactions; CALP, on the other hand, refers to the advanced language skills required for academic tasks such as understanding complex texts, critically analyzing, and producing scholarly writing. This distinction underscores that academic achievement requires much more than fluency; it usually involves a substantive understanding of and proficiency in academic English.

As has been proven in various studies, students who score higher in English also get better credits. It is because, at the end of the day, a language library, the cases, study, repeat, and class study definitions, lecture or university transcript access, and the like all tend to benefit a more proficient individual. Therefore, such individuals have proved a capacity beyond such a student's participation in discussion or clarifications of assignments provided in written form. A higher level of skills in language study helps students process information considerably better and allows them to contribute meaningfully to academic debate activities, which would directly lead their overall performance in academics to higher levels. It is necessary to state that a student should be an articulate presenter of ideas boldly in both written and oral English—an important requirement for success in higher education, hence making language proficiency a key factor in academic achievement.

Case studies illustrate some particular and specific cases in which there are positive instances of academic English development strategies. The most outstanding instance is that of EAP Programs. They are used predominantly by graduate students in acquiring the various requisite writing skills. Their emphasis is more on what is specific to the needs of students who are not native English speakers, and these services include high-quality teaching in writing, reading, and oral communication for students. Such programs train students for the use of such skills in a variety of tasks required in the academic environment while addressing some of the following challenges: advanced vocabulary and grammar, writing conventions, and even spoken conventions.

The EAP programs have focused on creating a more organized and broad approach to language support for non-native speakers of English. The programs provide fantastic, but not gentler, journeys through which students trained in academic writing exert themselves in bettering their whole confidence and participation in academic endeavors. Students can, of course, breach language barriers and attain better academic heights with strategies like these that provide support and collaborative learning through which students overcome language barriers and attain better academic heights. They prove that there are positive outcomes from these programs because with appropriate support and resources, non-native English-speaking students can excel in higher education and through it become part of the academic community.

5 Conclusion

The studies repeat the need for academic mastery in English in higher education. Academic challenges such as language barriers and cultural differences, together with difficulties in writing, are faced by many non-native speakers of English. Strategies such as specialized courses, writing centers, technology, cultural integration programs, and peer support groups can go a long way in enhancing the language skills and academic performance of these target groups.

Future research should focus on data collection regarding the long-term impacts of these factors and how best to address non-native English speakers in higher education. Taking into consideration such measures, higher education would appropriate language support in transcending difficulties imposed on non-native English-speaking learners to achieving academic fruition and full participation into the academic community. Such an inclusive strategy would ensure that respondents benefit from being offered the resources and support to develop their academic English proficiency, through which better academic performance is enhanced and creates an academic culture that is more welcoming.

6 Statements

6.1 Conflict of Interest

It is stated that there is no conflict of interest in this study.

6.2. Contributions

It is stated that each author contributed equally.

6.3. Ethical Considerations

There is no need for ethical approval.

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