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English Language Proficiency: Social and Academic Adjustment of Pakistani Postgraduate Students Abroad

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Abstract

Adjustment in an alien culture is one of the major problems all over the world. It becomes more concerned when young people with less exposure, experience and knowledge go to other countries to seek higher education. The prime objective of this study is to focus upon the role of the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) in the social as well as academic adjustment of Pakistani postgraduate students abroad. The uniqueness of this study is that the examination of Pakistani students' adjustment abroad has been highlighted for the first time. Data were collected from 225 postgraduate Pakistani students who studied in 20 various educational institutions in London with the help of a questionnaire. Chi-square test was applied to examine association between English Language proficiency Test and adjustment of the Pakistani postgraduate students abroad. Adjustment of the Pakistani postgraduate students was found to be high with respect to those students who obtained high IELTS score. In light of the study findings it is recommended that Pakistani students, while seeking higher education abroad, should acquaint themselves with the educational standards in the United Kingdom by having a mastery over the English language. This will help in the smooth adjustment in an English speaking country both socially as well academically.

Keywords: English Proficiency, Adjustment, Academic Performance, Students Sojourners, Social Relations and Social Interaction

Introduction

Language has to be assumed as one of the major barriers encountered by an international student while living in an alien land (Yieh, 1932; Fatima, 2001; Parker, 1999; Chen, 1996; Meyer, 2001; and Tomich, McWhirter, and King, 2000; Trice, 2003). A number of research studies have been carried out regarding language competency in respect of adjustment to both the academic settings and social integration. Regarding the importance of proficiency in a second language, Mallinckrodt & Leong (1992), Constantinides (1992), Antwi and Ziyati (1993), Wan et al. (1992), Surdam & Collins (1984), Chen (1996) and Ward & Kennedy (1999) widely considered language competency as one of the vital components for international students in their adjustment abroad. Poyrazli and Kavanaugh (2006) asserted that those international students in the United States of America (USA) who secured low grades in their academics were due to their insubstantial English competency and were struggling to adjust in social environment as well. According to Chen (1999) and Mori (2000), language limitations especially in the academic settings impede comprehending the lectures, writing assignments, verbal and written examination and capability and confidence to ask questions during the lectures. Zhai (2002) concluded that both, linguistic and communicative incompetency, were found to be one of the troublesome issues faced by the student sojourners in their cross-cultural transition.

While Barrat and Huba (1994) explicate that those student sojourners possessing high level of language proficiency, were more confident and positive in respect of establishing interpersonal relations with non-natives. The findings of Poyrazli et al., (2002) are congruent with the above as they describe that English language proficiency of student sojourners indicated their smooth adjustment, both socially as well as academically, and especially establishing relations with locals.

It is argued that the researchers mostly highlighted those international students (Non-native English speakers) who were intended to pursue their education in one of the prominent English speaking countries such as USA, the United Kingdom (UK) & Australia, or even in countries where the medium of instruction is English. They are agreed over the premise that lack of English language competency has been felt by almost all the student sojourners. As according to Andrade (2006) student expatriates academic adaptation has a major concern with the language issues. While, despite of the fact that most of these student sojourners have qualified English language proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL or IELTS) one of the standards for a language competency being a prerequisite to get admission in these colleges or universities, it is argued that majority still are encountering language proficiency (Suseela & Selan, 2011). Similarly, Andrade (2006) asserts that to

perform well in the academics by the student sojourners in respect of competing their class fellows, could not be associated with the TOEFL score. Despite the graduate student sojourners scored higher than their younger counterparts on TOEFL, speaking and writing were found hard to cope with by both these student cohort than listening and reading.

Contrary to the above conclusions, based on a premise that the academic achievement was not related to the language competency, adverse results have though been discovered by other researchers. As according to Stoyhoff (1997) a significant association was found between TOEFL score of the international undergraduate students and their academic performance. Johnson (1988) established that Grade Point Average (GPA) of international students in terms of proficiency level was being anticipated by the TOEFL score. Those student sojourners securing low TOEFL scores could not cope with the heavy workload in terms of extensive reading and writing assignments and thus were less successful than those securing high score. Though, some courses such as Mathematics and laboratory courses may not need language proficiency for their performing well academically. Senyshyn et al. (2000) concluded that international students who scored high on TOEFL indicated lesser adjustment problems and were contented and positive as compare to those who secured low score, and thus supporting the construe that the “English language proficiency is related to adjustment”.

To get smooth and comfortable adaptation to both the academic and social environment of the host country, it is worthy for international students to be dexterous in both conversational and formal language of that country as well. According to the findings of Huntley (1993), one third of the international students evaluate their overall performance as non-subsistent while they embark to a new country. Despite getting good score on the TOEFL by the student sojourners, their English language proficiency does not meet the standards required by these educational institutions in the USA. Furthermore, to bring their language competency to a considerable standard, these student sojourners are expected to study an additional course of English language. While older students who are more susceptible to this situation rate their language competency of no use and this can be related to their background education back in home. Thus, this situation compels them to spend more money and time on the additional course of English language upon their arrival and hence they encounter stress and anxiety.

The objective of the study was to analyze the role of English Language Proficiency test in the social and academic adjustment of Pakistani postgraduate students abroad.

Delimitations of the Study

Focusing on the Pakistani Post graduate students as a subject, while exploring the phenomena of adjustment abroad in the context of social as well as academic adjustment, was conspicuous from the fact that most of the Pakistani students opt to go abroad for higher studies after acquiring Master degree (16 years education) in the home country. This also validates their justification to go abroad in terms of pursuing higher education which further helped in the data collection by consulting at least a considerable number of respondents in the study area as in the case of undergraduate students it would not be possible.

Materials and Methods

The present study was carried out in London to investigate into the role of the English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) in the social and academic adjustment of Pakistani postgraduate students in the UK. The reason to chose London as a universe of the study was conspicuous from a considerable number of educational institutions offering higher educational facilities in numerous fields of study. Due to the strict policies being followed in the higher educational institutions of the UK, it was impossible to get the exact figure of the Pakistani postgraduate students studying in various educational institutions in London. Therefore, for the unknown population, the yardstick devised by Casley & Kumar (1989) was adopted, as shown in the formula given below, to calculate sample size for the current investigation.

$$n = \frac{K^2 V^2}{D^2}$$

Whereas, K= The variable and nature of difficulty value determined by Mehdizadeh & Scott (2005):

$$V = \text{Variance i.e. , } (1.96)^2$$

$$D = \text{The required precision i.e. } (0.05)^2$$

$$n = 225$$

Snowball and accidental sampling procedures/techniques were adopted for data collection from the available respondents. A total of 225 respondents were interviewed through a prescribed questionnaire from the 20 higher educational institutions in London. The collected data was analyzed while applying the statistical techniques, viz. univariate and bivariate. Computer software known as Statistical Package for Social Sciences was utilized for the entire data analysis, including frequencies, percentage proportion as well as Chi-Square and Fisher Exact Test that were used in order to observe level of significance of association between dependent variable (socio-academic adjustment) and independent variables (English Language Proficiency).

The Chi-square test was adopted in respect of knowing the hypothetical association between dependent and independent variables following the procedure devised by McCall and Robert (1975).

$$\chi_{obs}^2 = \sum_{j=1}^r \sum_{k=1}^c \frac{(O_{jk} - E_{jk})^2}{E_{jk}}$$

Where “ O_{jk} ” are the observed frequencies in the cell corresponding to the intersection of the j th row and k -th column, “ E_{jk} ” are the expected frequencies in the cell corresponding to the intersection of the j -th row and k -th column, “ r ” indicates the number of rows while “ c ” reveals number of the columns.

The relationship developed by Fisher is presented in equation-II (Baily, 1982);

$$FisherExactTest\ Probability = \frac{(a+b)!(c+d)!(a+c)!(b+d)!}{N!a!b!c!d!}$$

Results and Discussion

Table 1 gives information about the sampled respondents who took English language proficiency test prior to their arrival in London for higher studies. Majority (96%) of the sampled respondents had taken the English proficiency test prior to their embarking on a study in London while only small proportion of the sampled respondents (4.0%) did not attempt the English language proficiency test. The above results indicate the true implication of the IELTS (as in the UK, IELTS is considered as an English language proficiency test) as a pre-requisite for international students to get admission in the UK, Pakistani students included. It can be understood from the current results that fulfilling the admission criteria, almost all the Pakistani postgraduate students took IELTS before getting admission in London Universities.

Table 2 shows levels of score the sampled respondents secured in IELTS. It is noticed that majority of the sampled respondents (57.4%) scored between 6 to 7 bands, 33.8% of the sampled respondents scored between 5 to 6 bands while 7% of the sampled respondents managed to score above 7 bands. Smaller was the proportion of the sampled respondents (0.4%) who scored below 5 bands in IELTS.

In Table 3, a positive (0.97) but non-significant (0.913) relation was found between attempting the English language proficiency test by the sampled respondents back in home country and their adjustment in the study area. It is worthy to mention that IELTS being a pre-requisite to get admission in the British educational institutions compel the international students to attempt this language proficiency test. It can be argued that the international students from the non-English speaking countries in general and Pakistan in particular strive a lot to secure the required grades in the IELTS to be eligible to get admission in the UK. It has been observed that most of the students in Pakistan attend IELTS coaching classes before attempting the test which indicates that these students lack the potentials to qualify the test without the assistance of these IELTS coaching centers. Supporting the current findings, Suseela & Selan (2001) asserted that despite of the fact that most of these student sojourners have qualified the English language proficiency test (i.e., TOEFL or IELTS) one of the standards for a language competency being a pre-requisite to get admission in these colleges or universities, it is argued that majority still are encountering the language proficiency. Thus, it can be inferred from the current findings that IELTS test could not contribute in the adjustment of the sampled respondents in the study area.

However, a positive (65.28) and highly significant (0.000) relation was found between IELTS score of the sampled respondents and their adjustment in the study area on Table 1V. Higher score in an English language test depicts competency level of those who have a profound insight on the English language and thus is an obvious indicator of feeling comfortable in an English speaking country on their exile in terms of communication in the social environment in general and academic settings in particular and hence, is helpful in smooth adjustment to an alien settings. It is to be asserted on the basis of the above findings that IELTS score contributed in the adjustment of the sampled respondents in the study area. The current findings were in line with Senyshyn et al. (2000) who discovered that the satisfaction and high level of adjustment was found in those international students securing high score in TOEFL as compared their cohorts with low score in TOEFL. Johnson (1988) observed in his research that the GPA of international students regarding proficiency level was being anticipated by the TOEFL score. The student sojourners who scored low TOEFL scores did not manage to cope with the heavy workload in terms of extensive reading and writing assignments and thus were less successful than those securing high score. Messner & Lin (1995) also maintained that the graduate student sojourners getting “A” grades had secured high score on TOEFL and those having “B” grades in their academics had low TOEFL score. Thus, more the higher score one secures in an English language test; easier is going to be the adjustment in the new academic environment.

Table 1: Frequency Distribution and Proportion of the Respondents who took English Language Proficiency Test prior to their Arrival in the UK

Attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	216	96.0
No	9	4.0
Total	225	100

Source: Field Survey, 2013

Table 2: Frequency Distribution and Proportion of the Respondents' various IELTS Scores

Attribute	Frequency	Percentage
Below the 5 Bands	1	0.4
Between 5 to 6 Bands	73	33.8
Between 6 to 7 Bands	124	57.4
Above 7 Bands	15	7
No response	3	1.4
Total	216	100

Source: Field Survey, 2013

Table 3: Association between Attempting the English Language Proficiency Test by the Pakistani Postgraduate Student back in Home Country and Pakistani Students' Adjustment in the UK

Statement	Response	Pakistani Students' Adjusting in the UK					Total	Statistics
		Most of the time	Sometime	Don't know	Not really	Not at all		
Have you taken an English Language Proficiency Test? (such as IELTS or TOEFL)	Yes	5 (100 %)	58 (95.1%)	138 (95.8%)	14 (100 %)	1 (100 %)	216 (96 %)	$\chi^2 = .978$ $p = .913$
	No	0 (0 %)	3 (4.9%)	6 (4.2%)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	9 (4 %)	

Note: Values in the table present frequency while values in the parenthesis represent percentage proportion of the respondents.

Table 4: Association between IELTS Score of the Pakistani Postgraduate Students and Pakistani students' Adjustment in the UK

Statement	Response	Pakistani Students' Adjusting in the UK					Total	Statistics
		Most of the time	Sometime	Don't know	Not really	Not at all		
If you took the IELTS, what was your score	Below the 5 Band	1 (20 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	0 (0 %)	1 (0.5%)	$\chi^2 = 65.289$ $p = .000$
	Between 5 to 6 Band	3 (60 %)	25 (43.9%)	44 (32.1%)	1 (7.7%)	0 (0 %)	73 (34.3%)	
	Between 6 to 7 Band	1 (20 %)	30 (52.6%)	83 (60.6%)	10 (76.9%)	0 (0 %)	124 (58.2%)	
	Above 7 Band	0 (0 %)	2 (3.5%)	10 (7.3%)	2 (15.4%)	1 (100 %)	15 (7.0%)	

Note: Values in the table present frequency while values in the parenthesis represent percentage proportion of the respondents

Conclusions and Recommendations

The study focused to discover association between the English Language Proficiency and social and academic adjustment of Pakistani students abroad. About 96% of the sampled respondents attempted English Language Proficiency Test but yet they found it hard to utilize the language at their best in the academic as well as social environment due to the lack of ample proficiency essential for the UK standards. However, it is noticed that adjustment of the Pakistani postgraduate students was found high with respect to those students who got high IELTS score. English proficiency is one of the vital problems encountered by most of the international students having English as a second language. It is suggested that Pakistani students should acquaint themselves with the educational standards in the UK by having mastery over the language. More the higher score they achieve in IELTS; easier will be there adjustment in a new educational environment and will help them to proceed with their studies without any hesitation.

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