



LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND PERCEIVED DRAWBACKS AMONG UNDERGRADUATE DENTAL STUDENTS IN A SOUTH INDIAN DENTAL COLLEGE

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ABSTRACT

Aim: To investigate whether dental students perceive drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their lack of language proficiency.

Objectives: 1) To investigate whether dental students who were educated in schools in which English was not the only medium of instruction, perceive drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their language background and lack of language proficiency. 2) To analyze any change in this perception as the students progress through the undergraduate course.

Materials and Methods: A cross-sectional study was carried out among 500 undergraduate dental students (n=500) and were asked to complete a questionnaire. The questionnaire comprised of 14 questions related to their language background, medium of instruction at school and their perceived academic drawbacks with respect to language proficiency.

Result: Dental students who were educated in schools in which English was not the only medium of instruction, perceived drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their language background and lack of language proficiency.

Conclusion: Language skills, communication skills and Behavioral science must be an integral part of dental education to ease the transition from school to dental college.

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INTRODUCTION

Language is an essential part of our existence in society and it has strong influence in education. India is a country of multilingualism. Often, Indian students go to schools in which the medium of instruction is a language other than English.^[1] According to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) – 2016, India exhibits moderate level of English Proficiency (EF English Proficiency Index 2016, www.ef.com/epi). The Proficiency in English remains low for students who study English as one of their subjects at school. The medium of instruction in dental education at undergraduate and postgraduate level is English only. Students' academic performance largely depends on reading, writing, analytical and verbal communication skills.^[1,2,3] Since the dental curriculum is delivered in English only, students with low English Proficiency face difficulties in achieving academic excellence.^[1,4] This study concentrates on the relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance in south Indian dental students since they project varying degree of English Proficiency.

Brief review of Literature

English and its Importance

English is becoming a basic skill for the entire globe. English is a key component of competitiveness at both individual and national levels. Proficiency in English plays a central role in determining academic and professional success and it also correlates with higher income, better quality of life and more innovations.^[2] On the individual level, English has the potential to generate opportunities. English is critical to research and education that enables connectivity across the globe. English skill also allows innovators to understand scientific research, participate in conferences and form international collaborations. Moreover it enables scholars to expand their scientific knowledge that is needed for innovations.^[6]

English Proficiency in India

India is one of the most linguistically diverse countries and moreover 75 languages are being used in our educational system.^[1] Globally, India ranks 22nd position with a score of

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57.30, according to the English Proficiency Index (EPI) – 2016. India exhibits moderate level of English Proficiency. [2]

Fear among Dental Students

The academic competition is intense in professional courses. Dental students often experience high level of stress. Few of the major perceived sources of stress among dental students in India are:

- Examinations and Grades
- Fear of failing the course or year
- Difficulty in understanding lectures
- Language barrier
- Difficulty in learning clinical procedures

The most important source of stress among Indian dental students is the academic component of the course, especially when it comes to examination and grading. [4, 6]

Stress tends to manifest as fatigue, tension, dizziness, sleeplessness etc. Above all, a negative association has been found between academic performance and stress level in dental students. [7]

Language Proficiency and Academic Performance

According to literature, there is a significant positive relationship between English language proficiency and academic excellence. Linguistic intelligence is the ability to use language to accomplish certain goals. [8] A student who is not proficient in English may face significant difficulties in completing ordinary classroom works in English. The entire content of the dental curriculum is delivered in English and academic achievement is commonly measured by examinations. [3, 9] Hence, limited language proficiency acts as a barrier to academic success. [10]

The Study

Aim and Objectives of the Study

Aim: To investigate whether dental students perceive drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their lack of language proficiency.

Objectives

1. To investigate whether dental students who were educated in schools in which English was not the only medium of instruction, perceive drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their language background and lack of language proficiency.
2. To analyze any change in this perception as the students progress through the undergraduate course.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Design and Sampling

This cross-sectional study was carried out among 500 undergraduate dental students (n=500); 100 students from each academic year (First year, second year, third year, final year and CRRI). Approval from the Institutional Ethical Committee was obtained. Participation was on a voluntary basis. Dental students who had completed their respective academic year's dental course work and have appeared for the university exams with published results were included in the study. Informed verbal consents were obtained and students from each year

were asked to complete a questionnaire concerning their language background.

Questionnaire Development and Analysis

The questionnaire comprised of 14 questions and is divided into three sections. (Section A, B and C). Section A consists of 5 questions regarding their ethnicity; Section B consists of 5 questions relating to school background and Section C consists of 4 questions relating to language proficiency and perceived drawback. Demographic data was included in the questionnaire but the privacy and confidentiality of the students were guaranteed. The questions were related to their language background, bilingualism, medium of instruction at school and their perceived academic drawbacks with respect to language proficiency. Likert scale was used to assess the perceived drawback in dental education, with a scale from 1 (no drawback) to 5 (Serious drawback). The students' own perception of their perceived drawback in relation to language proficiency was assessed and their lack of language proficiency was not tested. The questionnaires were assessed to identify the perceived drawback in relation to language proficiency.

The Questionnaire

Demographic data

Candidate number-

Name -

Age -

Gender – M / F

Please answer the following questions concerning your language background:

Section-A

(Please circle the most appropriate answer)

Question 1. Where were you born?

- a. Tamil Nadu b. Other state

Question 2. Which language do you normally speak at home?

- a. Tamil b. English c. Hindi d. Others

Question 3. Were you being raised bi-lingual?

- a. Yes b. No

Question 4. Which languages did you speak at home as a child?

- a. Tamil b. Others

Question 5. What is the educational background of your parents?

- a. Nil b. $\leq 10^{\text{th}}$ std c. $\leq 12^{\text{th}}$ std
d. Graduate e. Post graduate

Section-B

Question 6. What was the official medium of instruction in your school(s)?

- a. Tamil b. English c. Others
(Specify _____)

Question 7. What language was used for teaching in your school(s)?

- a. Tamil b. English c. Others (Specify _____)
d. Mixed (Specify _____)

Question 8. What language did you use to speak to your classmates at school?

- a. Tamil
- b. English
- c. Others (Specify _____)
- d. Mixed (Specify _____)

(Please circle the number most appropriate)

Question 9. What is the nature of administration of your school?

- a. Government
- b. Government aided
- c. Private
- d. Others (specify)

Question 10. What is the academic board operative in your school?

- a. CBSE
- b. ISCE
- c. State board
- d. Matriculation
- e. others (specify)

Section-C

Question 11. Do you feel restricted by your language understanding and language ability in dental education? (Please circle the number most appropriate)

- | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | | | | Very much |

Question 12. Do you think you are negatively affected because of your language ability, when taking exams? (Please circle the number most appropriate)

- | | | | | |
|----|---|---|---|-----------|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 |
| No | | | | Very much |

Question 13. How many exams in the completed academic year's course did you pass in 1st attempt?

- a. 1st yr (___/3)
- b. 2nd yr (___/5)
- c. 3rd yr (___/3)
- d. 4th yr (___/8)

Question 14. Do you feel that your language proficiency is improving compared to the previous academic year(s)?

- a. Yes
- b. No

RESULTS

Among the 500 dental students, 92.6% were born in Tamil Nadu. The language commonly spoken at home was Tamil (91%), followed by other languages (5.6%), Hindi (2.2%) and English (1.2%). 55.2% students were raised bilingual. 89.2% of students reported that they spoke Tamil at home as a child. The educational background of their parents was: Nil (5.6%), ≤ 10th std (18.2%), ≤ 12th std (22.4%), graduate (27.2%) and post graduate (26.6%). 83% of students were from schools in which the official medium of instruction was English (Figure 1). However, Tamil was used for teaching at schools in 72.4% students. Only 14% of students were from schools, where English was used for teaching. 84.4% of students were from private schools, 5.6% from Government and 9.4% from Government aided schools. Also among the 500 students, 54.4% of students were from matriculation board; 34% from State board; 9.8% from CBSE and 1.8% from ISCE.

Analysis of Perceived Drawback

On the whole, 50.6% of the students agree that they feel restricted in dental education because of their language understanding and ability. Regarding examinations, 39.2% of the students feel that they are negatively affected during exams

because of language proficiency and among them 11.6% strongly feel they are negatively affected. (Figure 2)

With regard to the second objective of the study, analysis of any change in this perception as the students progress through the undergraduate course was performed. 75.2% of the students felt that their language proficiency has improved, when compared with the previous academic year(s).

On analysis, the influence of language proficiency in academic success in south Indian dental population was found to be significant. A positive relationship exists between English language proficiency and academic excellence. Dental students who were educated in schools in which English was not the only medium of instruction, perceived drawbacks in their education and examination experience because of their language background and lack of language proficiency. Also a significant percent (75.2%) of students felt their language proficiency has improved, as they progressed through the undergraduate course.

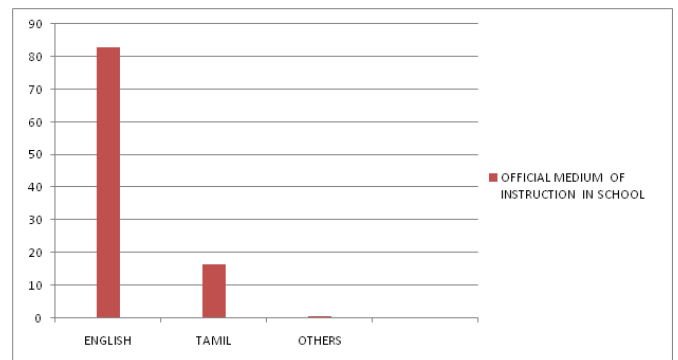


Figure 1 Official medium of instruction in school

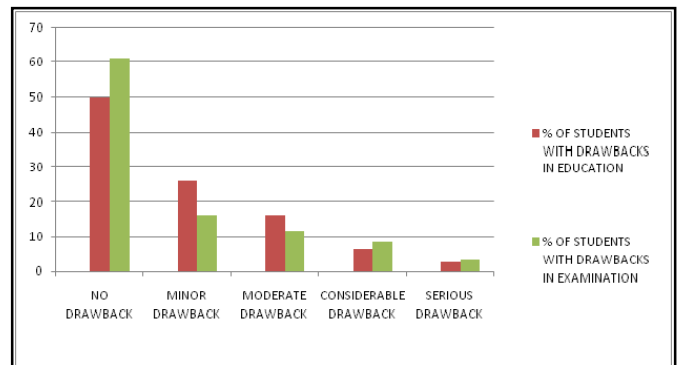


Figure 2 Percentage of students perceiving drawbacks in a) Education b) Examination

DISCUSSION

The study aims to identify the relationship between English proficiency and academic performance among south Indian dental students. The questionnaire was customized to accomplish the goal of the study. The questionnaire was split into three sections to cover three dimensions. The three aspects were regarding the students' language background, School education and perceived drawbacks due to language proficiency in undergraduate dental course.

Dental students from all academic years were involved in the study and hence students' change in perception regarding drawbacks and language proficiency were identified.

All students actively participated in the study. The sequence of questions in the questionnaire was designed to initially assess

the language background, followed by school education and finally the difficulties faced in current undergraduate course due to language proficiency.

Likert scale was conveniently used to assess the students' perception towards dental education and examination. The privacy and confidentiality of the students' identity was guaranteed that enabled modest responses from students. Literature states that a positive relationship exists between English proficiency and academic performance. Moreover language proficiency may also act as a predictor to academic excellence.

The study has found that dental students who were educated in schools in which English was not the only medium of instruction, perceived drawbacks in their education and examination due to lack of language proficiency. The ultimate objective of language education is the ability to communicate with others in the language. Therefore, effective English instruction prioritizes communication over grammatical correctness or the reproduction of native speaker accents. The link between English workforce and professional excellence in the current century is tremendous.

The drawbacks perceived by the students due to language proficiency are academically significant. Students with low language proficiency need special attention and additional practice. Students with lack of English proficiency must be identified and additional training should be provided. In the current scenario, conventional clinical examination is being followed in our dental curriculum. The drawback of this conventional clinical examination is that it is very subjective which might lead to variations in the evaluation of students. In the future, Indian dental colleges will adopt OSCE – Objective Structured Clinical Examination, in which the assessment of students' clinical performance is objective. OSCE requires good English language proficiency. Also, English proficiency plays a vital role if a student wishes to pursue higher education abroad.

CONCLUSION

It is widely agreed that English language proficiency has a positive effect on academic success. Languages other than English are being used in school education. Those with low self-perceived English proficiency face a drawback in professional education setup and tend to project lower confidence. Efforts should be made to educate students during school and under graduation in English as a language skill. Aligning education system such that students leaving school are ready to enter professional education without difficulty is essential. Behavioral science, communication skills and language skills must be an integral part of dental education to ease the transition from school to dental profession.

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