The Relationship between Fist Year English Major Students' Preparatory School Performance, College Entrance Exam Scores, and their Gender and Communicative English Performance: Bahir Dar University in Focus

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Abstract: The study examines the relationship between students' preparatory school performances, entrance exam scores and gender and communicative English performance. It also explores gender differences in the variables treated. The subjects of the study were 162 students. The students were selected using systematic random and purposive sampling techniques. To gather data, document analysis and tests were used. Inferential statistics such as t-test, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient and multiple regressions were the major statistical techniques applied to analyze the data. The results reveal that male students surpass female students in all the variables treated. It is also found that all the variables are interrelated positively. Moreover, the output of the multiple regressions shows that 41% of the variance in communicative English performance is accounted for by the group contribution of the predictors. Among these, gender and college entrance English exam scores were found to be the best predictors. The findings seem to suggest the need to pay attention to the correlates of students' verbal skills and/or design possible strategies that would enhance students' communicative English performances.

Introduction

The economic, social, cultural, political and scientific advancement of any country depends on its education system. This means that educational institutions have a prime duty to successfully promote academic excellence. Thus, a thorough investigation of the predictors of academic achievement is one of the initial steps towards achieving academic improvement. In order to meet the goal of education and maximize students' academic performances, studies on the correlates of academic performance (such as students' results of national examination, high school record, gender, personality factors, etc.)

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should be conducted as their implications (especially for educators and policy makers) are of paramount importance (Mohan, 1993; Sinn, 1985).

Whittla (1972) suggests that to predict college grades, one can and should find out the multiple correlations of test scores, secondary school records, and other non-cognitive variables (e.g. gender and self concept) as predictors of college grade point average. By the same token, scholars (e.g. Thondike, 1949, cited in Belay, 1990) argue that any examination that is used for the purpose of selection or prediction must be checked with some comparable forms of follow-up study. For this reason, the prediction of academic achievement at both the school and university level has been the primary concern of many researchers (Khan, 1969). In connection with this, Rower (1988) and Tyler (1970) argue that a timely evaluation of the predictive validity of examinations and other predictors should be a pre- requisite if they are to serve the intended purpose.

In the Ethiopian context, however, this very rarely holds true. Supporting this, Belay (1990) in his study of the predictive validity of admission criteria for teachers training institutes in Ethiopia, points out that there is no constant evaluation of the predictive validity of tests. Merhatibeb (1993) also states that even ESLCE, which was the main screening mechanism for further education, was not adequately evaluated. Some researchers (e.g. King and King, 1972, and Merhatibeb, 1993), in fact, conducted research on the relationship of ESLCE and college achievement. The findings of their studies noted a very low relationship between ESLCE and students' college achievements. As a result, they recommended that ESLCE be restricted to its limited role as an achievement test. The studies pointed out the need for college entrance examination.

Currently, college entrance examination is being given at the end of preparatory school education. However, the relationship between college entrance examination and other possible predictor variables; for instance, preparatory school achievements and gender to communicative English performance of first year students has not yet been researched. This is the objective this study has been designed to achieve.

In the 1990s, one of the major educational problems that was creating worry among university instructors was learners' failure to communicate in English- a language used as a medium of instruction (Tibebe, 1992). This is still a baffling problem, especially in Bahir Dar University. It is now common to hear complaints from English language instructors at the university that the communicative English performance of a large number of English majors is very poor. It should be noted, however, that these students will become English language teachers after a certain period of training at the University. The inability to use English to communicate is more serious among female students even though they are supposed to excel males in verbal skills. Such issues seem, obviously, paradoxical. Of course, the paradox could be put down to various factors; for instance, the mechanism used to select & place students students' background knowledge, gender, etc. This writer is, therefore, initiated to investigate the relationships of preparatory school performance, college entrance examination scores and gender to first year English students' communicative English performance. This is because the study of correlates of academic achievement is an initial step to help students improve their academic performance, including language performance (Mohan, 1993). To this end, the following research questions were formulated:

- Are there significant relationships among students' preparatory school performance, college entrance examination results, gender and communicative English performance?

- Are there gender differences in preparatory school performances, college entrance exam scores, and communicative English performance?

- What are the independent and group contributions of the predicators (preparatory school performance, college entrance examination results and gender) in predicting first year English majoring students' communicative English performances?

Objectives

The major objective of this study was to make critical examinations of the associations of preparatory school performance, college entrance exam scores, and gender with communicative English performance. The study also aimed at investigating gender differences in preparatory school performances, college entrance exam scores and communicative English performance. In addition, the study scrutinized the independent and group contributions of the independent variables (preparatory school performance, college entrance exam scores, and gender) in predicting students' Communicative English performance.

Significance

The findings of this study are hoped to be significant in providing the concerned bodies (e.g. Department of English at Bahir Dar University) with information about the relationship between college admission criterion and other predictors treated in this study (i.e. preparatory school achievements and gender) and first year English majoring students' communicative English performance.

Besides, the results of this study will play a great role in making us aware of the degree of effectiveness of college admission criteria, and other predictors treated in this study in projecting students' communicative English performances at university. This is also expected to initiate all the concerned parties to strive for improvement.

Moreover, this study might serve as a stepping-stone for further investigations related to this area of research. More specifically, the study could serve as a basis for studies that aim at treating variables that could be related to students' academic achievements in general and communicative English performances in particular.

Scope of the Study

The study is delimited to the investigation of the relationship between first year English majoring students' preparatory school achievements, college entrance examination results, the student gender and their communicative English performance with particular reference to Bahir Dar University.

Literature Review

The Relationship of Past Experiences to Present Learning

The relationship of one's past experience to the present learning can be observed through a process in which the learning outcome in one task or situation is demonstrated in a different condition or when it influences performance in the present learning situation (Borich and Tombari, 1995). In this connection, Sprinthall (1994) maintains that a relationship of a former learning to the present one can be observed in three forms: Positive, negative, and zero. When the past learning facilitates the present learning, the relationship between the two is said to be positive. On the contrary, if performance in the former learning situation hinders the process of the present learning, the relationship between the two is said to be negative. And when the former learning neither facilitates nor hinders the present learning, the relationship between the two is said to be zero.

Borich and Tombari (1995) contend that regardless of the instructional method a teacher uses or the goal of instruction, effective prior learning should enable learners to learn effectively and efficiently at present and in a new situation .In other words, they note that the former learning should help learners cope with the new learning context.

The Prediction of Academic Performance in Higher Education

According to Fishman (1980), as cited in Whittla (1981), if there is useful information for the prediction of students' success in their future learning, it is necessary to use much of that available information in the process of admission and prediction.

Most of the emphasis in the process of admission to higher institutes, prior to the present attention to minorities and the disadvantaged, has been on cognitive evidence: previous grade, high school ranks, test scores and so forth. High school grades or ranks generally have somewhat higher correlation with college grades than have any other data. Academic aptitude tests and achievement tests run a close second, and the combination of grades and test scores, which are independent of variations in schools yield somewhat better predictions than either taken alone (Fishman, 1980, cited in Whittla ,1981; Dressel, 1976). There have been continuous studies in researching the correlation between scores of national examinations and secondary school performance to college grades in defferent research contexts. Based on reviews of studies by Henry (1969) and Cronbach (1959), cited in Whittla (1981), national test scores were found to correlate ranging from 0.35 to 0.55 with college grade average.

Astin (1971) also notes that the relationship between academic subjects is about 0.5. He further states that the relationship between two subjects tends to be slightly higher if both courses emphasize quantitative ability; for instance, math and physics courses, or if both emphasize verbal ability, English and social science courses for example. Besides, Whittla (1981) maintains that if one adds measures of secondary school performance to scores of national examinations, the multiple correlations run into the range of 0.50 to 0.80, and an average of about 0.60.In the Ethiopian context, however, this seems an issue which has not been checked major issue in this study with particular emphasis on first year English majoring students' communicative English performance at a university.

Gender Differences in Academic Performance

One of the differences among students that demonstrate demarcations of social status and environmental role expectations is the difference of gender (Marshall, 1984).

According to Maccoby and Jacklin (1974), cited in Sprinthall (1994), females surpass males in elementary schools, but when they join high school and universities, male students reach the same level, and in the post academic world males move ahead of females in every field of study. In Sprinthall's view (1994), this happens due to cultural influence, rather than genetic reasons.

Doyle (1998) pointed out that there are several areas in which there are gender differences: girls have greater language skills than boys, and boys excel in visio-spatial and mathematical ability. In this context, one fundamental question seems worth asking. That is, do girls surpass boys in English language performance in the Ethiopian context, where the culture has been encouraging male dominance? This question clearly needs to be answered based on research. It is, therefore, desirable to examine the relationship of gender and language performance in the Ethiopian context; an issue that seems to have received little attention from language researchers.

The Importance of Evaluating College Admission Criteria

Educators believe that the criteria for student admission, classification and placement are crucial in determining the quality of an educational program. An evaluation of college admission criteria, therefore, is of paramount importance in various ways. For example, institutions or departments make decisions about admitting individuals. These decisions usually require evidence or justifications based on continuous evaluation (Dressel, 1976).

Concurrently with or after selection, the problem of classification usually occurs. This is because a student may not have a definite discipline in mind or may choose one for which prior preparations or aptitudes are inappropriate. If prerequisites are lacking for certain fields, extra or remedial work may be required (ibid). It is, therefore, very important to give emphasis to place students in different fields of study screening mechanisms used. To sum up, then, it seems desirable to spell out the idea of Thorndike (1949) cited in Belay (1990) which reads: several possible criteria for student admission must be subject to evaluation upon a rational basis because it is necessary to examine each possible criterion critically and judge the relevance of that criterion to the ultimate goal of the admission.

Methodology

Subjects

The size of the population used in this study was 242 first year students who were in the degree program in English Department, Bahir Dar University in the 2005/6 academic year. Among these, 180 students were selected randomly using both systematic random sampling and purposive sampling techniques. However, 15 students with incomplete information (e.g. students who did not take all of the tests administered to measure students' communicative English performance), were excluded from the sample. In addition, one student who attended private high school, and two advanced standing students were excluded from the sample. The exclusion was made to minimize background differences among the subjects. The actual number of students who participated in the study was, therefore, 162.

The purposive sampling method was employed to increase the number of female students in the sample population. This meant that all female students were deliberately included in the study.

Instruments

Students' preparatory school academic scores, entrance exam results and their personal data (e.g. sex), were collected from the office of the registrar of the target university.

To measure students' communicative English performance, the researcher prepared comprehensive test of basic communication skills based on the guiding principles and techniques of language testing, (e.g. Heaton, 1979; Madsen, 1983). Then, piloting was conducted on students other than those selected for the actual study. The purpose of the pilot was to check the reliability of the data gathering tools. The improved test items were used to collect data that was used in the study.

Two writing tests were administered to test the students' writing skill. In both tests, the students were required to write paragraphs. In test I, the students were asked to write a paragraph on the topic "The person I like most". The time given to write the paragraph was 30 minutes. A similar paragraph writing test was administered three days after the administration of the first test. The topic of the second writing test was "The Beauties of Bahir Dar Town". The writing topics were selected on the assumption that they were familiar enough to the students. Familiarity of writing topics minimizes the difficulty to be faced in generating ideas to write. Besides, these topics were assumed to be motivating (regardless of students' differences in background, sex etc.).

To reduce subjectivity, the paragraphs were marked by two markers who were experienced in teaching writing courses at the university. Most importantly, the markers were oriented towards analytic and multiple marking techniques with some marking criteria such as organization, accuracy, clarity and so forth. Each criterion had 4-point (3, 2, 1, 0 with appropriate descriptions). There was a maximum of 15 and a minimum 0 score of writing in each test. The average score of the two tests for each student was taken as a measure of writing. The consistency of the two markers was calculated

and found to be 0.84 and 0.86 respectively. These fall with in the range of inter rater consistency values found for holistic scoring (0.68 to 0.89) when adequate methods are applied (White, 1985 cited in Pajares, Miller and Johnson, 1999).

To measure their speaking skills, students were asked some oral questions about themselves and their hobbies. To reduce subjectivity, two experienced English instructors assessed the speaking skill. The assessors were oriented to use the analytic marking technique with some marking criteria such as accuracy, fluency and the relevance of idea to the task. Each criterion had 4-point scales (3, 2, 1,0 with appropriate descriptions). There is a maximum of 15 and a minimum 0 score of speaking in each test. The average score of the two tests for each student was taken as a measure of the students' speaking skill.   The consistency between the two markers was calculated and found to be 0.85.

In order to measure students' listening skills, two listening tests that focused on recognizing words and sentences, and understanding a gist of a listening text were prepared. Then, three experienced English instructors commented on the contents, difficulty level, and clarity of the items. Based on the comments given, the items were revised, and piloted for their effectiveness. The refined items were administered with the help of assistants. The tests were marked by the researcher. The listening tests were objective type. This minimized the subjectivity in marking. The average score of the two tests for each student was taken as a measure of listening, which is one facet of communicative English performance. The reliability of the tests were calculated (using split half method) and found to be 0.84 and 0.88 respectively.

To measure students' reading skills, two comprehensive reading tests were prepared. Then, three experienced instructors commented on the contents, difficulty level, and clarity of the items. Based on the instructors' comments the items were revised and pre-tested for their effectiveness. The refined items were administered with the help of assistants. The tests were marked

by the researcher. The average score of the two tests for each student was taken as a measure of reading. The reliability of the two tests were calculated (applying split half method), and found to be 0.86 and 0.88 respectively.

Finally, the sum of each of the students' results in the different tests was taken as the communicative English performance of each of the subjects. The major purpose of all of the tests was to measure students' communicative English performance, which is the criterion variable.

Variables

Independent Variables: Students' preparatory school performances (GRA 11 ENG, GRA 12 ENG, GRA 11 AV, GRA 12 AV), national examination scores (ENT ENG, ENT AV), and their gender are the independent variables.

Dependent Variable: Students' communicative English Performance (COM ENG PER) is the dependent variable.

Methods of Data Analysis

During data analysis descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviations were calculated. Then, t-test was applied to check if there are gender differences in preparatory school performance, entrance exam scores and communicative English performance. And then, Pearson product moment correlation coefficient was used to examine the interrelationships of all the variables treated in the study. Finally, multiple regression analysis was employed to scrutinize the independent and group contributions of the predictor variables in predicting students' communicative English performance.

All of the statistical tasks in this study were accomplished using SPSS (statistical package for social sciences).

Results & Discussion

Results

The section begins with a descriptive statistics. Then, the results of the t- test are presented, followed by the correlation matrix of the variables. The remaining part pertains to the multiple regression analysis that identified the proportion of students' communicative English performance accounted for by the major predictors independently as well as in-group.

Table1: Descriptive Statistics for All Subjects (N= 162)

Variables	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
GRA 11 ENG	29.50	88	58.16	11.60
GRA 12 ENG	22.00	86	59.81	10.77
GRA 11 AV	28.50	83	60.51	9.62
GRA 12 AV	33.50	85	61.06	11.11
ENT ENG	20.50	68	45.58	12.68
ENT AV	121.00	274	209.64	29.05
COM ENG PER	22.00	68	37.20	10.25

Note: GRA 11ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

As indicated in Table 1, the mean score of students' grade 11 English score (58.16), grade 12 English score (59.81), grade 11 average score (60.5), and grade 12 average score (61.06) are greater than the expected average score (50) for each. This seems to show that most students scored above average at preparatory school. However, the mean score of students' performance in the college entrance examination (209.64) is lower than the expected mean score (250). The mean score of students' college entrance English examination (45.58) is lower than the expected mean score (50). From this, one could say that most students scored below average in college

entrance English Exam. Similarly, students' communicative English Performance is below average.

Table 2: Descriptive Statistics for Males (n=120)

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
GRA 11 ENG	42	88	62.63	9.90
GRA 12 ENG	22	86	62.53	10.86
GRA 11 AV	43	83	63.16	8.07
GRA 12 AV	42	85	65.87	8.04
ENT ENG	28	68	50.56	11.59
ENT AV	121	274	211.00	26.80
COM ENG PER	24	68	41.61	9.18

Note: GRA11ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

Table 3: Descriptive Statistics for Females (n=42)

Variable	Min	Max	Mean	Std. Dev.
GRA 11 ENG	29.50	66	48.0	8.98
GRA 12 ENG	34.00	68	53.73	8.64
GRA 11 AV	28.50	76	54.69	10.09
GRA 12 AV	33.50	73	50.98	9.87
ENT ENG	20.50	52	34.52	6.52
ENT AV	121.00	269	204.15	33.06
COM ENG PER	22.00	42.5	27.96	4.71

Note: GRA 11 ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

As one can understand from Table 2, which shows descriptive statistics for males, and Table 3, which shows descriptive statistics for females, both the minimum and maximum scores of female students were lower than that of male students in all of the variables treated. This resulted in higher mean scores of male students than that of female students in all of the variables. This seems to indicate gender differences in the variables: both predictors and criterion variable. However, the significance of the differences needs to be statistically checked. Table 4 presents this.

Table 4: Gender Differences in the Predictor and Criterion Variables

Variable	Male (n=120)		Female (n=42)		t	Sig.
	M	SD	M	SD		
GRA 11 ENG	62.63	9.96	48.80	8.98	7.91	0.00
GRA 12 Eng	62.53	10.86	54.11	8.08	4.94	0.00
GRA 11 AV	63.29	8.07	54.69	10.09	4.83	0.00
GRA 12 AV	65.87	8.04	50.98	9.87	8.51	0.00
ENT ENG	50.56	11.59	34.54	6.52	10.06	0.00
ENT AV	211.86	26.80	204.45	39.06	1.26	0.00
COM ENG PER	41.61	9.18	27.96	4.71	11.19	0.00

Note: GRA 11 ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

As shown in Table 4, male students had higher mean scores than female students in the variables treated. The t-test also reveals significant gender differences (favoring male students) in all the variables studied (t= 7.91, p< 0.00; t= 4.94; p< 0.00; t=4.83, p< 0.00; t= 8.5, p<0.00; t= 10.06, p<0.00; t= 11.19, p<0.00) except in ENT AV that does not reach statistical significance (t= 1.26, .20). In other words, males seem to outperform females in almost all variables treated.

Table 5: Correlation Matrix (for All Variables Treated in the Study (N=162)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
GEN	1							
GRA 11 ENG	0.55**	1						
GRA 12 ENG	0.36**	0.47**	1					
GRA 11 AV	0.42**	0.32**	0.16	1				
GRA 12 AV	0.62**	0.37**	22*	0.56**	1			
ENT ENG	0.59**	0.33**	0.26**	0.24**	46**	1		
ENT AV	0.12	0.05	0.09	0.23**	0.14	0.10	1	
COM ENG PER	0.62**	0.33**	0.22**	0.28**	0.43**	0.50**	0.23**	1

** $P< 0.01$ (two tailed)   * $P<0.05$ (two tailed)

Note: GEN= gender; GRA11ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

As depicted in Table 5, the relationship of the entire predictor variables to students' communicative English performance found to be statistically significant. However, the relationship of students' communicative English performance to gender (r= 0.62, p< 0.01) and its relation to college entrance English score (r= 0.50, p< 0.01) are stronger compared to its link with the other predictors. This seems to show that gender and college entrance English exam score are good predictors of English majoring students' communicative English performance at university. However, it seems logical to examine the independent and group contributions of all the independent variables in projecting English majoring students communicative English performance at university. All of the variables were found to be statistically significant correlates even though most of them seem weak predictors.

Table 6: Independent and Group Contributions of Predictors variables to Communicative English Performance

Multiple R=0.666	Analysis of Variance		
R square = 0.411	Regression	df	Mean square
Standard error =		7	858.374
7.86	Residual	154	61.892
	F= 13.869		Sig. F = 0.000

Variable	SEB	Beta	T	Sig. T
GEN	2.331	0.494**	4.631	0.000
GRA 11 ENG	0.077	-0.011	-0.127	0.899
GRA 12 ENG	0.074	-0.025	-0.321	749
GRA 11 AV	0.090	-0.011	-0.126	0.900
GRA 12 AV	0.090	-0.021	-0.216	0.829
ENT ENG	0.069	0.205*	2.352	0.020
ENT AV	0.025	0.153*	2.200	0.030
(Constant)				

** P< 0.00   *P< 0.05

Note: GEN= gender; GRA11ENG= grade 11 English average score; GRA 12 ENG= grade 12 English average score; GRA 11 AV= grade11average score; GRA 12 AV= grade12 average score; ENT ENG= College entrance English exam score; ENT AV= College entrance exam average score; COM ENG PER= Communicative English performance

As depicted in Table 6, 41% of the variance in students' communicative English performance in the freshman year is accounted for by the combination of predictor variables R=0.66, R^2 = 0.41, $F_{(7,154)}$ = 13.86, p< 0.00. This is likely to show the importance of the predictor variables treated for the improvement of students' communicative English performance and/or it could be an indication of the need to focus on (and/or take into account) the predictors in screening students for admission (especially in the department of English). When the independent contributions of the correlates were scrutinized, gender (B= 0.49, t= 4.63, sig. t= 0.00) and

college Entrance English exam score (B= 0.20, t= 2.35, sig. t= 0.02) were found to be good predictors.

College entrance exam average score (B= 0.15, t= 2.20, sig. t= 0.03) was also found to be a significant predictor of students' communicative English performances. This implies that gender and college entrance English exam score, among others, determine to a great extent students' communicative English performance. The contribution of college entrance exam average score is also significant. However, the independent contribution of the other correlates (Preparatory school scores such as GRA 11 AV., GRA 12 AV., GRA 11AV, and GRA 12 ENG) seem statistically non-significant in predicting first year English majoring students' communicative English performances.

Discussion

The major purpose of the study was to investigate the relationship of preparatory school performance, college entrance exam scores and gender to communicative English performance. Hence, the relationship of the predictor variables to the criterion variable, and the independent and group contribution of the predictor variables to the criterion variable are discussed. Gender differences in the variables are discussed below.

Gender Differences in the Predictor and Criterion Variables

Gender differences in all of the variables treated: Preparatory school performance, college entrance exam scores, and communicative English performance, as portrayed in Table 4, suggest that male students surpass female students in each of the specific predictor variables such as GRA 11 ENG, GRA 12 ENG, GRA 11 AV, GRA 12 AV, ENT ENG & ENT AV (t= 7.91, p< 0.00; t= 4.94; p<0.00; t=4.83, p< 0.00; t= 8.52, p<0.00; t= 10.06, p< 0.00; t= 1.26, p< 0.00) respectively, and in communicative English performance, which is the criterion variable (t= 11.19, p< 0.00). These results could be supported by Doyle (1998) and Sprinthall (1994) who contend that gender differences in achievement can be observed especially at high school and

higher education settings. In connection with this, Maccoby and Jacklin (1974) in Sprinthall (1994) noted that females surpass males in elementary schools, but when they join high schools, males reach at the same level, and in the post academic world, males move ahead of females in every field of study. Sprinthall, argues that this happens mainly due to cultural influence rather than genetic or biological reasons. Males' higher performance both at preparatory school level and at university level in the present study could and should be attributed to the existing culture in the Ethiopian context. This is because different local studies (e.g. Emebet, 2003) note that "the Ethiopian culture" encourages male dominance, and restricts female students' activities, performances, movements and so forth.

It seems regrettable to find female students to be poorly performing in language areas in which they are supposed to be more successful than their male counterparts. In fact, different researchers and scholars (e.g. Maccoby and Jacklin, 1974 cited in Doyle, 1998) note that even in a male dominated developing countries, females outperform males in language skills just as males excel females in math and mechanical skills.

The Relationships of the Predictors to the Criterion Variable

As can be understood from Table 5, gender is found to be significantly related to the predictors and the criterion variable. This strong relationship of gender to the variables treated in this study, i.e., academic scores, seems to show that gender predicts achievement including communicative English performance at both preparatory level, and college level. This seems in agreement with the idea and/or findings of different scholars (e.g. Doyle, 1998; Sprinthall, 1994). Doyle and sprinthall argue that gender makes a difference in academic achievement (including language performance) especially at high school and college levels.

All the variables are found to be interrelated except ENT AV, which is not significantly related with all the variables except its relation to GRA 11 AV. (r= 0.23, P< 0.01). Even this positively significant relationship is weak. The non-significant relationship of ENT AV to other variables could be attributed to its nature (i.e. its content validity might have been very low or its difficulty level might have been very high), but it still seems worth exploring in depth.

The relationship of gender to communicative English performance is found to be statistically stronger (r=0.62, P<0.01) than its relation to other variables. The relationship of gender to ENT ENG   (r=0.59, P<0.01) is also strong. This can show the importance of taking gender into consideration in the process of forecasting students' language performance. It might be an indication for the need to give attention to gender issues especially in the process of helping students improve their English language skills.

All the variables are found to be interrelated except ENT AV. The significant relationships of the variables treated could be attributed to their nature except gender. This is because all the variables are academic scores except gender. Another point worth mentioning is that academic subjects usually relate significantly to each other (Whittla, 1981; Astin, 1975). The significant relationship of gender to variables could be attributed to the "Ethiopian culture" that has been encouraging male superiority in all facets of education. Tamire (2001) notes that the culture in Ethiopia encourages more the performance of males than that of females. Moreover, the present finding supports Doyle's (1998) and Sprinthall's (1994) point of view. These researchers contend that gender differences in academic achievement and/or in academic success or failure can be observed at high school and higher education settings for various reasons.

In this study, ENT AV is found to be unrelated to other variables but it is related with COM ENG PER. This relationship is in agreement with previous findings (e.g. Whittla, 1981), which show national test scores correlate ranging from 0.35 to 0.55 with college grade average.

In sum, the relationship between the predictors: students' gender, preparatory school performance scores, and entrance exam scores and their communicative English performance were found to be significant. It seems essential to discuss the independent and group contributions of the predictors in the prediction of first year English students' communicative English performance at college. The next section of this paper is, therefore, devoted to this.

The Prediction of Students' Communicative English Performance from the Predictors

Based on the multiple regression analysis, show in Table 6, the proportion of the variance that is contributed by gender is substantial and significant (B=0.49, t= 4.63, sig. t= 0.00). This seems to show the need to put a greater emphasis on gender and related issues, which are likely to jeopardize directly or indirectly female students' performance. One of the major issues associated with gender could be the culture that encourages male dominance and other sex stereotypes. In connection with this, Emebet (2003) notes that "Ethiopian culture" puts pressure on the movements and activities of female students. This obviously, affects directly or indirectly female students' academic performance. Similarly Amanuel (1996) in his study of gender differences in classroom discussions in English classes notes that the culture does not allow female students to properly use their talents in academic settings in general and in language classes in particular. Tamire (2001) also contends that the Ethiopian socio-economic condition seems to be in favor of the performance of male students.

College entrance English exam score is also the other most significant predictor of students' communicative English performance (B= 0.20, t= 2.35, Sig. t = 0.002). This seems to be an indication of the need to consider students' college entrance English exam scores in selecting students who join English department. English majoring students' failure in English courses in general and in communicative English in particular could be,

therefore, attributed at least partially, to students' poor background knowledge.

Moreover, students' average score of college entrance examinations is found to be the third significant predictor of students' English performance. From this, one can say that students who have good performance in the college entrance examination tend to perform better in English than students with low entrance exam scores on average. This seems to be in agreement with the findings of different scholars (e.g. Whitla, 1976; Khan, 1969), who observe that standardized tests like college entrance examination usually help to predict students' future performance. However, in this study the contribution of the performances of the subjects of this study at high school independently to their performance in communicative English skills at university is found to be insignificant. This seems to be contradictory to the findings of other scholars, who show the importance of high school scores in predicting students' college performance. Nevertheless, this contradiction might have resulted from problems associated with teacher made tests and mode of evaluation.

Above all, when the group contribution of the predictors is analyzed, 41% of the variance in students' communicative English performance (R= 0.66, R^2= 0.41, $F_{(7,154)}$ =13.86, p< 0.00) is found to be accounted for by all the predictors seen in the regression equation. This result is in agreement with the assumption that when we take into account various predictors including high school performance in the prediction of students' college grades, the predictability of success increases (Whittla, 1977). This could also be supported by Chahuan (1979) who stated that experiences of people obviously help them perform better in their later lives.

To sum up, one can say that without taking into account considerable non-cognitive variables like self-esteem, interest, effort, etc the observed substantial variations accounted for by the treated variables seem informative to the department of English, Bahir-Dar University.

Conclusion

In accordance with the results obtained, the following conclusions can be drawn:

- There are gender differences in all of the variables treated such as preparatory school performance, entrance exam scores, and communicative English performance, favoring male students in the existing socio- economic and cultural situations in which this study was conducted. But it should be noted that this may not always hold true due to the fact that even if one knows a child's sex/gender, s/he may face a difficulty to predict whether that particular boy or girl will be superior or inferior to another child of an opposite sex.

- Gender, college entrance exam (English) score, and college entrance exam average scores were found to be the best predictors of students' communicative English performance at university in the present research context.

- The predictor variables in combination strongly and significantly predict students' communicative English performance at university, but the independent contributions of preparatory school records were found to be non-significant in projecting students' communicative English performances at university level. In fact, this might be attributed to problems associated with the evaluation mechanisms employed at preparatory school.

- It can also be concluded that even though girls are supposed to outshine boys in language skills at any level, it seems difficult for many Ethiopian female students to surpass their male counterparts in the current social and cultural situations.

Implications

The results obtained and the conclusions drawn seem to have valuable implications for teachers, students, educators, counselors, policy makers etc. The implications seem to include the need to:

- o design some criteria (e.g. a reasonable proficiency in English) for selecting students who join English department or
- o select students with better knowledge of English (and /or with good grades in college entrance English exam)
- o design English improvement program especially for females probably at all levels.
- o conduct further studies taking into account such factors as students' rural-urban background, parental level of education, parental income level etc.

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