

10 Factors linked to Success on the BA Educational Studies (TESOL) in Oman

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1 INTRODUCTION

It is of obvious value to educational planners and institutions to know who is succeeding on their courses, not least so support can be better targeted at those who are not doing so well. Research on undergraduate programmes in western institutions have identified a number of academic and non-academic factors which seem to be linked to success. In different studies, the successful student has found to be someone who has done well at school (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001), who has good study skills (Abbott-Chapman, Hughes, & Wyld, 1992), who is socially well integrated into the institution (Tinto, 1975) who has strong social support (Gerdes & Mallinckrodt, 1994), who has a high level of self-efficacy (LeCompte et al., 1983) and does not have to work too much for financial reasons (McKenzie & Schweitzer, 2001). Certain demographic factors have also been related to success, including gender (Dayio?lu & Türüt-A?ik, 2007) and age (McInnes, James & McNaught, 1995).

As McKenzie & Schweitzer (2001) acknowledge, there will always be a combination of variables influencing academic success, and it is important for researchers to identify those which are salient in particular contexts. In adult part-time distance education, the format which the Oman BA TESOL Programme perhaps most resembles, it might be expected that home and employment factors play a larger role in determining success than they do in traditional school-leaver undergraduate courses. Sataporn & Lamb (2005), for example, found that success in a distance English course in Thailand depended on the participants finding an 'accommodation zone' between the many different components in their lives, including their preferred learning styles, the course materials and the time available from home and work commitments. Furthermore, where the students are learning in an L2, language proficiency has not surprisingly been found to influence their academic achievement (Graham, 1987).

2 RESEARCH AIMS AND METHODOLOGY

Our aims in this research were to identify which students were successful on the BA Programme and to investigate the factors lying behind their success, defined both in absolute terms (i.e. their final result) and also in terms of their improvement over the 3-year course. No study can hope to investigate all possible factors, and in this study we were restricted to investigating those for which there was available existing data. Students in Cohorts 1 & 2 had been given a baseline questionnaire to complete which was part of a larger-scale research project conducted by the School of Education at the University of Leeds investigating the attitudes and beliefs of student teachers in other educational contexts around the world. In addition the questionnaire provided background data on the students including gender, age, marital status, and the level of school in which they taught. Meanwhile, the university was able to provide the students' ultimate degree classification, and their marks at Levels 2 (which was completed during the first 18 months) and Level 3 (the final 18 months).

The questionnaire responses and marks were entered into the same SPSS database. Once a preliminary analysis of this data had been carried out, a survey was designed specifically for this study and sent to the students who had improved the most during the course, that is, students whose grades at Level 3 were significantly higher than those at Level 2. The purpose of this survey was to elicit the students' own views on how and why they were successful. Six open items targeted students' views on the following topics:

- difficulties faced during the first part of the BA Programme
- personal factors which helped them improve
- new abilities developed on the BA Programme
- new understandings or insights developed
- help provided by tutors
- any other aspects of the BA course provision which was helpful.

It was anticipated that this qualitative data would allow us to build a more detailed description of the personal characteristics and contexts of the more successful students. 26 out of 32 questionnaires were returned, a response rate of over 80%. Results from both the baseline data and the survey instrument are presented in the next section.

3 RESULTS

3.1 Baseline Questionnaires

Analysis of Cohort 1 & 2 students' performance by average marks on all modules shows a roughly normal distribution, with a mean score of 5.05 and standard deviation of 0.66. Cohort 1 posted a slightly higher mean score (5.19) than Cohort 2 (5.01). Analysed by class, a large majority obtained either a Third or a 2.2. These results show a quite different pattern to those on regular British undergraduate programmes, such as the School of Education's BA Childhood Studies, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Comparison of degree classifications on the Oman BA programme and the BA Childhood Studies

Degree Awarded	BA TESOL in Oman Cohs 1 & 2		BA Childhood Studies 2004	
	No. of cases	%	No. of cases	%
1st Hons	1	0.5	5	9
2.1 Hons	27	10	32	56
2.2 Hons	128	45.5	15	26
3rd Hons	98	35	1	2
Ordinary	13	5	0	0
Diploma	7	2.5	0	0
Fail/Pending	7	2.5	4	7
Total	281	100	57	100

The performances were then analysed by a number of different student variables. Females scored significantly higher than males, though as Table 2 shows, the gap had narrowed at Level 3. Younger students did better than older students, with those in their 20s significantly out-performing those in their 30s. However the very small number over 40 (4) did much better than either younger group. In contrast to age and gender, only a very small difference was found for marital status, while differences in performance of students teaching at different school levels were not statistically significant except for the very low number of students teaching adults or at tertiary level, who performed far above average.

Table 2: Mean scores of students at each level, by category.

		n	Level 2	Level 3	Overall average score	Difference in overall av. score
Gender	Male	189	5.02	4.92	4.99	
	Female	93	5.29	5.01	5.15	0.16*
Age	20s	168	5.19	5.03	5.12	
	30s	110	4.95	4.75	4.86	0.26**
	Over 40s	4	5.58	5.40	5.49	
Marital status	Single	55	5.19	4.93	5.03	
	Married	225	5.08	4.93	5.02	0.01
School level taught	Elementary only	220	5.06	4.89	4.99	
	Secondary	57	5.21	5.06	5.14	
	Tertiary/adult	6	5.66	5.45	5.57	0.58*

**differences significant at $p < 0.01$,

* differences significant at $p < 0.05$

Students' language level was assessed by categorizing the qualifications obtained prior to entry to the programme into four ability bands. Not surprisingly a positive correlation was obtained ($r = 0.34$) between language level and overall average score. Table 3 shows the distribution of the different language levels in the top and bottom quartiles.

Table 3: Distribution of students by language level and overall performance

Language level	n	Top quartile	Bottom quartile
1	133	17	48
2	99	28	17
3	37	17	4
4	7	5	0
unclassifiable	7	2	0

Finally, multiple regression analysis was carried out on these 5 factors. Language level was found to be the most powerful predictor of success, followed by age, school level taught and gender.

On entry to the programme, students assessed their own strengths and weaknesses. They assessed themselves highly on motivation and confidence to study on the BA Programme, and lowest on opportunities to practise the language. Of the language skills and knowledge, students assessed their reading ability highest and grammar and vocabulary knowledge lowest (Table 4). When analysed against their eventual performance on the degree programme (i.e. by comparing the mean self-assessments of students finishing in the top and bottom quartiles), only two factors had a significant positive relationship with their average score: self-assessment of grammar knowledge and of motivation.

Table 4: Students' self-assessment mean scores, overall and by performance.

Area	Mean self-assessment overall	... In top quartile	... In bottom quartile
Speaking	3.7	3.71	3.85
Listening	3.7	4.01	3.62
Reading	3.9	3.92	3.94
Writing	3.2	3.32	2.91
Vocabulary	3.1	3.19	3.04
Grammar	3.1	3.51	2.86**
Confidence	4.3	4.49	4.31
Motivation	4.7	5.06	4.56*
Opportunity to practise	3.9	3.91	3.73

** differences significant at $p < 0.01$,

* differences significant at $p < 0.05$

It is also noteworthy that men tended to self-assess higher than women, particularly on their knowledge of grammar and vocabulary, despite the fact that their language qualifications were equivalent overall and that the women performed better on the programme.

The baseline questionnaire also elicited students' attitudes on the characteristics of good teachers, on the problems they had experienced as teachers, how they thought the BA Programme would help them as teachers, and what they anticipated would be difficult about the course. In considering what constitutes a good teacher (Table 5) students appear to value personal characteristics such as enjoyment of the job, understanding of children, patience and experience (the top 4 items chosen) over knowledge and skill in the language.

Table 5: Students' views of the characteristics of a good teacher of English to young learners.

	Characteristics of a good teacher of EYL	% of students who chose it
1	Enjoys teaching	81
2	Understands children	69
3	Patient & doesn't get angry easily	50
4	Lot of experience	42
5	Knows a lot about textbooks & materials	37
6	Highly motivated	35
7	Good knowledge of grammar	28
8	Uses English fluently	25
9	Good vocabulary	17
10	Marks written work regularly	9
11	Makes sure pupils are well-behaved	4

There is some agreement in their view of problems they face in teaching – nearly all students view the lack of practice opportunities as a problem, while class size and insufficient hours for learners to make progress are other commonly perceived problems (Table 6).

Table 6: Students' views of the main problems facing English teachers.

	Problems as a teacher of English	% of students who chose it
1	No chance to use English outside of class	93
2	Classes are too large	74
3	Not enough teaching hours of English	60
4	Children are not motivated to learn	46
5	Discipline problems	23
6	Conditions are too difficult	16
7	Takes a long time to prepare lessons	11
8	Not enough visual aids or other supports	11
9	Textbook is difficult to use	5

In thinking about the potential benefits of the BA Programme (Table 7), it is notable that 9 out of 10 students thought their English would improve, while there was less agreement on other benefits. Few expected to gain a higher status or salary, however.

Table 7: Students' views on how the BA would help them.

	How the BA degree will help	% of students who chose it
1	Help me to improve my English	89
2	Give me a good qualification	57
3	Make me improve as a teacher	57
4	Teach me the most modern methods	48
5	Make my professional life easier	35
6	Help me get to know the textbook better	10
7	Give me greater status	8
8	Give me a higher salary	1

Anticipating the challenges of the BA Programme (Table 8), assessment issues dominated, with written assignments and exams cited most commonly; by contrast, oral aspects of the programme such as lectures and group discussions were rarely mentioned as possible problems.

Table 8: Students' views on which aspects of the BA would be most difficult.

	Parts of the course that will be most difficult	% of students who chose it
1	Writing assignments	80
2	Answering exam questions	52
3	Carrying out projects by myself	45
4	Giving a demonstration or micro-teaching	37
5	Reading and taking notes	22
6	Understanding lectures	20
7	Giving your opinion in seminars	12
8	Taking part in group discussion in seminars	5

The data in Tables 6, 7 and 8 were also analysed against student performance. Using the Mann-Whitney test for differences between the top and bottom quartiles, only three significant relationships were found. Students who felt that their classroom teaching conditions were too difficult and believed they had discipline problems performed significantly below average. Likewise, lower scoring students believed that the BA would teach them the 'most modern methods' – perhaps they saw the BA as more of a teacher training course than an academic course.

3.2 Survey of 'Improvers'

The second part of the research project was a qualitative study of one particular group of students – those who had improved the most, in terms of their average scores at Level 2 and Level 3. In fact, a majority of students (61%) actually saw their

module scores decline – that is, the average score on their Level 3 modules was lower than their Level 2 module average – while 38% had improved their scores, and over 30 students had made very significant gains, increasing their average score from Level 2 to Level 3 by between 3 and 9 points.

We firstly applied the same statistical tests to the improvers as to the performance of the population as a whole. This time, the only significant category of difference found was that of gender. That is, language level, marital status, age and school level taught seemed to play no role in determining whether a student increased their scores or not. What was particularly interesting, however, was that this time the gender advantage was for male students – significantly more male students improved than would be expected by chance (Pearson Chi-Square = 0.18).

To explore the factors underlying these students' improved performance, we sent an open-item questionnaire to the 32 top 'improvers' (27 male, 5 female). Specifically, the questionnaire asked students to write about difficulties they had encountered during the first part of the course, and then to comment on how the following factors helped them improve their performance during the second part: personal factors, newly-developed abilities, new insights or understandings, Regional Tutor (RT) support. Finally they were asked to suggest any other factors which might have been important.

The most common difficulty that students faced, mentioned by 18 of the 26 respondents, was the system of assessment. One student wrote that there was "a big gap between what I have been studied for my Diploma in the Intermediate Teacher Training College and for my BA study in Leeds University regarding the number of modules and how they were assessed." Other students mentioned particular aspects of the assessment system which caused problems, for example: "It was really difficult to outline the assignment's structure and organize the ideas". The other main set of problems facing students, mentioned by over half, were school or family duties. One student, for instance, complained of a "heavy-loaded timetable [and] other duties such as teaching other subjects in addition to English, acting as a class teacher" while both male and female students said that family responsibilities had adversely affected their studies. A number of other difficulties were mentioned by a significant minority of students, notably particular problems in reading articles and in writing essays (e.g. summarizing, referencing), inadequate language skills, and poor personal time-management skills.

Turning to explanations of their relative success on the course, a number of personal factors were suggested. 15 of the 26 students said that their family circumstances had improved, enabling them to study harder; for instance many claimed their families had become more understanding of the course demands over the 3-year period (a more extreme solution was reported by another student, who sent his children to live with their grandparents). Over a third reported that their personal motivation had increased, for various reasons – some were spurred on by seeing other students do better, or by seeing their own efforts rewarded with a higher score; others found their intrinsic motivation increasing, like this student: "I also became more motivated and encouraged to do much better, because I liked the content of the modules which I studied". The other two personal factors mentioned

frequently by the improvers were a reduction in their school teaching hours (for example, because their headteacher became more understanding) and the help offered by their colleagues. One student stated: "We used to discuss the ideas of each essay together in the centre during the Day Release."

Students were asked about which of the skills or understandings that they had built up during the course were key to their improvement. Various reading and writing skills were commonly mentioned. For example, students commented on the value of learning to scan and skim academic texts at speed; particularly valued writing skills were paraphrasing and summarizing other writers' ideas, and organizing ideas into a logical essay structure. Clearly connected to these developing skills was the third most commonly mentioned factor – understanding of how to write assignments and take exams. Enhanced computer skills, including use of the Internet, were considered important by over a third of the students.

RTs were found to be particularly helpful in preparing students for assignments and exams. Perhaps it was predictable that students should cite this technical assistance as being valuable, but RTs are also praised for increasing students' motivation (8 comments) and their confidence (7 comments). A wide variety of other actions, such as providing useful readings and encouraging independent study, were also mentioned.

The final question in the survey asked students to suggest any other factors which may have helped them improve their scores. Over half the students mentioned specific modules which had made a good impression on them and given them important new insights; a number of different modules were cited, but the most common were those associated with language and academic skills development. Three other factors were mentioned by over a third of the students: the value of certain articles or books which they had read, discussion with peers, and the mostly helpful behaviour of Leeds lecturers and RTs. One student wrote, "I have noticed there was a close match between the understandable input I received from the lecturers and the high scores I got in the modules."

4 CONCLUSION

This study was very modest in scale and was constrained by the contents of the baseline questionnaire which was, as mentioned above, designed for other purposes. There may well be factors important in determining success on the BA Programme which were not identified here. For example, a recent study carried out by Mark Wyatt, while RT of Cohort 4 students in Batinah North, suggested that the distance a student lived from the regional training sector was a major correlate of performance, particularly at Level 3; that is, the further away the student lived, the more their performance deteriorated over the programme. Possible explanations for this finding are that more distant students had less opportunity to use the materials in the resource centre or to seek informal advice from their RT.

The overall results confirm those of previous studies which have indicated that language proficiency is important in programmes where an L2 is a medium of study, that female students (for whatever reason) tend to outperform males in humanities and social science subjects and that more mature students are also

academically superior. It would therefore be tempting to conclude that students who are female, aged in their 40s, teaching adults, and with an IELTS score of 6 or above have the best chance of achieving academic success on the BA Programme. However, there are two important qualifications that should be made regarding this statement. Firstly, these figures are averages only – it is still perfectly possible for a younger male student teaching at primary school with a moderate language qualification to get a First Class degree. In fact, this is the profile of the only student who obtained a First Class degree in the first three cohorts.

Secondly, there is another way of looking at success on the BA Programme – not as ultimate mean score but as improvement over the whole course. When the data was examined again to see whether there was a relationship between students' background data and the change in their average scores between Level 2 and Level 3, the only significant correlation found was between gender and improvement. But there was a surprise – it was the male students who were showing greater improvements than their female counterparts. We can only speculate about why this might be so, especially as it contradicts recent findings from a study of university students in Turkey, where female students were found to improve more than males (Dayio?lu & T?r?t-A?ik, 2007). Possibly on the BA Programme male students started out at a lower academic ability level than female students and so had further to catch up. On the other hand, students highlight the importance of family support and it is possible that males, not having primary childcare responsibilities in the home, actually had more time available to devote to the programme; another cultural explanation is that slightly more male students than female saw the programme as integral to their career aspirations and so were ready to invest more effort into it – though as the country continues to develop and change this would be an interesting line of future research.

There are few surprises in terms of what the successful students found most helpful and challenging on the BA Programme. Overall, the study reinforced the importance of further training in English for Academic Purposes (EAP), particularly as there is no foundation programme preceding the BA degree. This was provided to later cohorts both through University materials (e.g. the Pre-session course and dedicated EAP sessions) and, perhaps more significantly, through the support provided by RTs for students working on their assignments in the regions. The nature of this support was of course circumscribed by the Guidelines for Support issued to RTs by the Ministry, but tutors had all already built up extensive experience working with Omani BA students and were able to target possible weaknesses in advance. Mainly for this reason we remained optimistic that the later cohorts, though their initial qualifications may not have been as strong as those of students in the Cohorts studied here, could at least equal them in their results - as proved true.

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