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Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between the 9th grade students' High School Placement Score (OYP) (the score which combines students' SBS [Level Determination Examination in Turkey for eighth graders] results and end of the eighth grade year results) and English language proficiency (as measured by the English language placement test the 9th grade students took at the beginning of the term at Private Fatih High School). This study was conducted with 70 male 9th grade students of Private Fatih High School in Beylikdüzü, Istanbul, during the 2013-2014 academic year. Correlation analysis was used in order to determine the relationship between students' OYP scores and English placement test scores. The correlation revealed that the English placement test scores of students have significant positive relation with their OYP scores. In the light of this finding it is possible to put forward that academic achievement (as measured by OYP scores of students) is correlated with English achievement (as measured by English placement test scores of students).

Keywords: English Language Proficiency, Academic Achievement, English Placement Test, School Achievement, OYP Score, High School Students, Turkey

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İngilizce Yabancı Dil Yeterliliği ile Akademik Başarı Arasındaki İlişki

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ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı 9. Sınıf öğrencilerinin Ortaöğretim Yerleştirme Puanları (OYP) ile İngilizce Yerleştirme Puanları arasındaki ilişkiyi incelemektir. Bu çalışma 2013-2014 öğrenim yılında Beylikdüzü İstanbul'daki Özel Fatih Lisesi 9.sınıfta öğrenim gören 70 erkek öğrenci yürütülmüştür. OYP puanları ile İngilizce yerleştirme puanları arasındaki ilişki korelasyon analizi ile incelenmiştir. Analiz sonuçları OYP puanları ile İngilizce yerleştirme puanları arasındaki anlamlı bir ilişki olduğunu göstermektedir. Bu bilgiler ışığında akademik başarı (Öğrencilerin OYP puanları ile ölçülmüş olan) İngilizce başarıları (İngilizce yerleştirme puanları ile ölçülen) arasında anlamlı bir ilişki olduğu savunulabilir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngilizce Yabancı dil Yeterliliği, Akademik Başarı, İngilizce Yerleştirme Testi, Okul Başarısı, OYP puanı, Lise öğrencileri, Türkiye

1. Introduction

Almost everyone concedes that education has an indispensable importance in our social life. It is a must for the continuity of the society and therefore it is considered a priority by every community (Ayaz, 2004). For that reason too much attention is given to education and assessment.

Students are assessed by educators in order to make better decisions about the future of education and make known whether the education students receive is successful or not. Another aim of assessments or tests is how successfully students have achieved our intended curricular aims and evaluates academic achievements of students. As Popham (2011) stated, "Education is a decision-making enterprise, and educational measurement helps educators make better decisions. In short, we test our students so we can make more appropriate decisions about how to educate them".

Exams are used for different aims and needs throughout the world and also in Turkey. Turkey has a large variety of exams which have different purposes. Generally, the main purpose is that most of them are used as a tool of placement into a higher school such as Anatolian high schools, science high schools and universities. Students are taking exams of various kinds and are placed into educational institutions according to the result of such exams (MEB, 2014; ÖSYM, 2011). One important factor considered in the placement of the students in university departments, and by extension their future, is the type of high school from which they graduated. Success achieved by Anatolian and Science high schools in the placement of the students to universities make such schools charming and increases the importance of exams made for secondary school transition tests (Bal, 2011). To study at Turkey's top high schools is a key to get better education and study at Turkey's top universities. A good OYP (High School Placement Score) result is mandatory for getting a place in a good high school in Turkey (MEB, 2013). Students who complete eighth grade and seek placement in Turkey's top public high schools and private high schools are admitted based on their OYP score. The Ministry of Education in Turkey calculates High School Placement scores (OYP) for eighth graders by combining students' SBS (High School Entrance Examination in Turkey, abbreviated as "Seviye Belirleme Sınavı") results and their end of the year results (MEB, 2011). For this reason, before enrolling a high school after secondary school, eighth graders have to take the SBS to gain admission to study at Turkey's top high schools. The SBS has 100 questions which are to be answered within 120 minutes. The examination includes questions about the Turkish language (grammar and paragraph), mathematics and geometry, science (physics, chemistry and biology), social studies (history, geography and religion). It is easily concluded that almost every student, parent and teacher attach particular importance to the SBS results and OYP scores. They are considered an indicator of success for students in Turkey. Also this exam is referred to for evaluating students' achievements in

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school subjects. Because the OYP score combines students' SBS result and school subject achievements, it clearly represents a student's school achievement.

1.1. Learning English and Evaluating English Language Proficiency Level

In today's globalized world, knowing a language, especially English, is very essential. Learning a language is often difficult and always takes time and commitment. Every school in Turkey gives a special importance to teaching English and at least tries to do it. Most students try to learn it, as well. It is obvious that not every student has at the same level of English. Some of them are better than others. According to Grass and Selinker (2008), it is known that some individuals are better learners than others. The same is true for students in Turkey. This is the starting point for this study and answers were sought for the following questions: Which students are better learners of English? Whose English is better? If they are good at English, are they good at other school subjects and vice versa?

It is also very important to determine one's English proficiency level. There are plenty of methods or exams which are available to evaluate an individual's English proficiency level such as TOEFL, IELTS and Cambridge ESOL exam levels. Another evaluation tool is an English placement test. A lot of different English placement tests are widely used to determine the English proficiency level of students by English teachers, schools and courses in Turkey.

1.2. Aim of the Study

For the plenty of years, the SBS has attracted the attention of many researchers; the success of a particular course at school was compared with the results of a subtest in the SBS, and the factors that affect success were discussed in Turkey.

The aim of this study was to investigate the relationship between the 9th grade students' High School Placement Scores (OYP) (the score which combines students' SBS results and their end of the eight grade year results) and English language proficiency (as measured by the English language placement test the student took at the beginning of the term at Private Fatih High School).

1.3. Research Questions

The following research questions are on the basis of the study:

- Does the overall academic success of students have a significant impact on learning English?
- Are students who are successful in other courses successful in English at the same time?
- If a student is good at English, is she/he good at other school subjects and vice versa?

2. Literature Review

Wilson and Komba (2012) investigated whether there is a relationship between English language proficiency and academic performance in Tanzanian secondary schools. The study revealed that there is a weak positive relationship between English language proficiency and students' academic achievement.

Another study was made in the USA by Richard L. Light, Ming Xu and Jonathan Mossop (1987). In this article, the records of 376 international graduate students at the State University of New York at Albany were analyzed for relationships among Their TOEFL score, grade point average, graduate credits earned, and academic major. TOEFL score was not found to be an effective predictor of academic success, as measured by grade point average, for this group of graduate students. However, there was a significant correlation between TOEFL score and graduate credits earned, and there were substantial differences among academic majors in the correlation between TOEFL score and grade point average.

Graham (1987), in her article, discusses the relationship between English language proficiency and academic success in universities and colleges in which English is the language of instruction. She points out some of the difficulties associated with determining this relationship and summarizes previous investigations of the issue. She argues that while the research clearly shows that many factors other than English proficiency are important to academic success, there may be for each institution, or even for each program within an institution, a minimum level below which lack of sufficient proficiency in English

contributes significantly to lack of academic success. Such a level can be determined by each institution individually, but until it is determined, a number of steps can be taken for establishing reasonable English language proficiency requirements.

In the study of Sahragard, et al. (2011), they tried to find out the relationship between Iranian college students' language proficiency and their academic achievement selecting a sample of 151 college students majoring in English literature at Shiraz University in Iran. They found the existence of a significant positive relationship between academic achievement and language proficiency.

According to a study made by Patricia Johnson (1988), when English proficiency is relatively low, TOEFL scores can predict academic performance. Even though basic academic requirements for admission must be met, sufficient language proficiency to undertake the academic program at the institution should be given foremost consideration.

In the studies mentioned above, students use English to follow their lessons because school subjects were given in English. English wasn't considered as a school subject. Students need English to study their university courses.

Kazazoğlu (2013) has examined the effect of 8th and 9th grade secondary school students' attitudes towards English and Turkish on academic achievement. According to the findings obtained in this study, a significant relationship was determined between students' attitudes towards English and academic achievement. However, there wasn't any significant relationship between students' attitudes towards Turkish and academic achievement. In addition, attitudes towards Turkish and English are not related to each other among the detected data. In addition to this, a significant relationship was found between English and Turkish grades of students.

In the study of Ocağ and Karakuş (2014), they described students' readiness level and attitude and to find the relationship between students' readiness and attitudes towards English. The study was carried out in a high school with 298 9th and 11th grade students in Afyonkarahisar during the academic year of 2012-2013. It was found that the relationship between students' attitudes and readiness was positive.

Ünal and Özdemir's (2008) study, called the effect of cognitive readiness on the academic success of the students taking foreign language courses at faculties of education, was held with 176 first grade students who were randomly chosen from among the ones studying in Kırşehir Faculty of Education. There was a significant relationship between the readiness level and the academic success of the students. The difference was found in favor of the students who had higher readiness level.

Selma Güleç and Seçil Alkış (2003) have examined whether there is a relationship among the course performance levels of the primary school students, and if there is, to determine its meaning, its direction and its degree. The course performance data used in this study were gathered from the 1st, 2nd and 3rd grade students of a primary school in Bursa in their Turkish, maths and social sciences courses and from the 4th and 5th grade students of the same school in their Turkish, maths, social sciences and science courses. All course grades were collected from their school reports of the 2000-2001 school year. The study was limited to a total of 1000 students, sample group consisting of 200 students from each grade. The results indicate that there are strong and positive relations among the course performances of students.

3. Methodology

3.1. Research Design

This research is a predictive correlation study which examines the relationship between students' English language proficiency level and OYP scores to give an idea about the overall academic success of students. So in this study, students' OYP scores were used to indicate students' academic achievements. The study was conducted with all of the 9th grade students (70 male students) at Private Fatih High School in Beylikdüzü, Istanbul, during the 2013-2014 academic year. Research data were obtained from the aforementioned students who took the SBS exam in June, 2013 and most recently enrolled in Private Fatih High School. These students were used because they were representative of all students in general and easy to obtain (Leary, 2001: 117). In this study the Oxford Solution Course Book placement test was

administered to determine the students' English proficiency level in September, 2013. The placement test consists of grammar, vocabulary, reading and writing.

Data collected were analyzed using Pearson Correlation Analysis to examine the relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement. The Pearson correlation coefficient is the most commonly used measure of correlation. The numerical value of a correlation coefficient always ranges between -1.00 and +1.00. The sign of a correlation coefficient (+ or -) shows the direction of the relationship between the two variables. Variables may be either positively or negatively correlated. A positive correlation indicates a direct, positive relationship between the two variables. A negative correlation indicates an absent or weak relationship between the two variables. If the correlation is positive, scores on one variable tend to increase as scores on the other variable increase. If the correlation is negative, scores on one variable tend to increase as scores on the other variable decrease. If the coefficient is close to one, it indicates the perfection of the relationship, while close to zero it indicates the weakness or absence of relationship (Leary, 2001).

3.2. Data Analysis

The Pearson correlation (r) analysis was used to analyze the data to describe the relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement. The data for both of the exam scores was processed using SPSS software.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1. The Relationship between English Language Proficiency and Academic Achievement

Table 1 and graph 1 reveal that there is a significant positive relationship between OYP scores and Placement Test Scores of students ($r = 0.777$; $P < .01$). The results show that there is a strong positive relationship between these two variables. The positive relationship implies that if students are good at school subjects, they are more likely to be good at English. Thus, these findings support the view that there is relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement. Students' English language proficiency levels are correlated with their OYP scores which mean academic achievements.

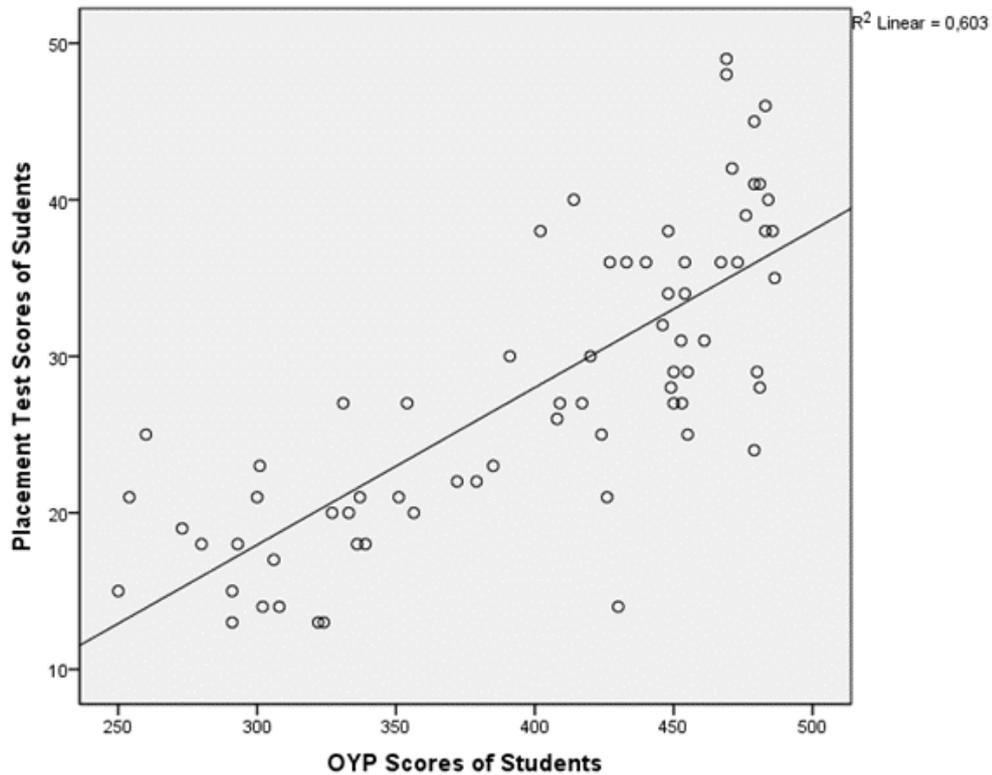
Tablo 1
English Language Proficiency and The Academic Achievement

	Placement Test Scores	
	OYP Scores of Students	of Students
OYP Scores of Students	Pearson Correlation	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,777*
	N	70
Placement Test Scores of Students	Pearson Correlation	,777*
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000
	N	70

* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed)

The result of the study is parallel with the results of the study made by Kazazoğlu (2013). S. Kazazoğlu found a significant relationship between the English and Turkish grades of students in her study.

Kazazoğlu (2013), Ocak and Karakuş (2014), Ünal and Özdemir's (2008) studies revealed that there is a positive relationship between students' attitudes towards school subjects, readiness levels, and their English proficiency levels. Furthermore, those studies range from primary education to higher education with different student groups.



Graph1. English Language Proficiency and the Academic Achievement

In other studies, Sahragard, et al. (2011) and Patricia Johnson (1988) found out that a significant positive relationship between academic achievement and language proficiency.

It is obviously deduced from the studies mentioned above that there is a relationship between English language proficiency and academic achievement. They all support the findings in this study at Private Fatih Collage High School.

5. Conclusion

The study concluded that English placement test scores of students have significant positive relation with their OYP scores. In light of this finding it is possible to put forward that academic achievement (as measured by OYP scores of students) and English language proficiency levels (as measured by English placement test scores of students) are positively correlated.

If students' academic achievements are boosted, their English language proficiency levels will be higher because of the positive correlation cited above. For that reason, students' academic achievements must be considered closely. Students face a number of difficulties throughout their education. Some difficulties arise from students themselves (Keskin, & Sezgin, 2009), and some of them are caused by external factors. There are a number of factors which affect students' academic achievements, such as attitude, gender, socioeconomic status, parents, peers, teachers, self-efficacy, motivation, ability, and learning environment, test anxiety etc. (Wright, 1997; Farooq, et al. 2011; Pascarella, & Terenzini, 1991; Hanushek, et al. 2003; Ames, 1992; Noguera, 2003; Bandura, 1993; Culler, & Holahan, 1980; Sapp, 1999; Hill, & Wigfield, 1984). All of the factors, which were mentioned or not, are important and they should be paid careful attention by teachers, educators, parents, government, in short all of the parties of education. New theories and approaches to learning and teaching processes can help to solve the problems students face in their education (Saban, 2004).

It is well known that the foreign language teaching and learning, especially teaching and learning English, is a significant problem in Turkey. If the impairments are solved in the factors which affect students' academic achievements, a big step would be taken towards to improving students' English language proficiency levels.

All in all, education doesn't consist of individual components in different places. It is like a jigsaw puzzle. All components should collaborate with each other and should be in the right place to complete it perfectly. To achieve good results, all of the factors or components should be levelled off. The ultimate success of education requires the external support, careful planning and committed partnership of all involved (MEB, 2003).

5.1. Limitations of Study and Implications for Future Studies

In this study, limited numbers of students who study at the same school were used. Future studies might focus on using a large numbers of students from different schools and different parts of Turkey.

In addition, to extend the study conveyed, a survey or a questionnaire may be conducted with students in order to determine if their learning habits have any impact on their achievements. Also aptitude could be another issue to study.

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