THE ROLE OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY ON STUDENT EVALUATION OF INSTRUCTOR

(İNGİLİZCE DİL YETERLİĞİNİN ÖĞRETİM ÜYESİ PERFORMANS DEĞERLENDİRME ÜZERİNDEKİ ROLÜ)

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ABSTRACT

This study aims at examining the relationship between English language proficiency and students' course and instructor evaluations. Data was collected via Faculty of Education Course and Teacher Questionnaire and through interviews with randomly selected students. Data analysis, including both descriptive and correlation statistics showed that there was a linear relationship between perceived level of proficiency and course evaluation, accounting for 97% of the variance in overall course evaluation scores. Interviews also confirmed this finding that students believed their language proficiency was an important factor in understanding the course and the teacher, in achieving reading and writing assignments and in participating class discussions.

Keywords: Language proficiency, student evaluation

ÖZ

Dünyanın birçok üniversitesinde öğretim üyelerinin performanslarını değerlendirmek için çalışmalar yapılmaktadır. Bu çalışma, öğrencilerin öğretim elemanlarının performanslarını değerlendirirken, İngilizce dil yeterliğinin etkisini incelemeyi amaçlamaktadır. Veriler araştırmacı tarafından geliştirilen Eğitim Fakültesi Ders Değerlendirme anketleri ve mülakat yolu ile toplanmıştır. Betimleyici ve korelasyon analizlerinden elde edilen bulgulara göre öğrencilerin algıladıkları kendi İngilizce yeterliklerinin ders ve öğretim elemanı değerlendirmelerinde etkisi olduğu ortaya çıkmıştır. Öğrenciler yapılan mülakatlarda, dersi anlamada İngilizcelerinin yeterli olmadığını, okuma ve yazma becerilerinin ödevleri yapmada yetersiz olduğunu ve derse aktif katılımlarında bir engel teşkil ettiklerini vurgulamışlardır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Dil yeterliği, öğrenci değerlendirmesi

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INTRODUCTION

Over the last several decades, universities have been interested in what students have to say about the quality of the education they received; therefore, "student evaluation of teaching (SETs) is now recognized as a legitimate and expected university activity" (Nuemann, 2000, p. 121) as a measure of teaching effectiveness. Accordingly, the subject of SETs becomes one of the most widely researched topics in education. Over 2000 studies (see Centra, 2003; Heckert, Latier, Ringwald and Silvey, 2006), have found that many factors were effective in influencing the student evaluations of teaching and teachers such as course workload, teacher's personality or students' grade expectations. Among these factors that are directly related to students' evaluations of teaching is their self-perceived level of their foreign language proficiency where the native language is not used as the medium of instruction in the courses. Therefore, university programs need to take foreign language proficiency into consideration while interpreting SETs results because these results would have important implications about assessing and improving the teacher/course quality in higher education. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to find out whether English language proficiency has an impact on students' teacher and course ratings.

RELATED LITERATURE

Student evaluations of teachings were used in universities to evaluate teaching effectiveness. Centra (1993) stated that effective teaching "produces beneficial and purposeful student learning through the use of appropriate procedures" (p. 42). Since SETs were the most common measure of teaching effectiveness, their influence on judging the quality of teaching was also questionable (Marsh and Roche, 2000). Therefore, in the literature, there were arguments for and against the use of SETs. Arguments in favor of student evaluations point to their credibility as a means of assessment to improve the quality of teaching and as a helpful feedback for supporting teachers' efforts to adjust their teaching practices to students' needs (Coffey and Gibbs, 2001; Obenchain, Abernathy and Wiest, 2001). Student evaluations also guide department heads in selecting appropriate teachers for particular courses and for faculty performance reviews, academic promotion, and salary increases (Arden, 2002; Harrison, Douglas and Burdsal, 2004; Hobson and Talbot, 2001; Richardson, 2005; Smith, 2007). Opponents of use of SETs, on the other hand, claimed that SETs actually measured teacher's popularity (Sproule, 2002), rather than the quality of teaching. Furthermore, they argued that students lack the ability or judgment to properly evaluate their teachers or the courses.

Research indicated that various variables acted as confounding effects influencing the student evaluations of teaching and teachers (see Centra, 2003). These variables can be classified into three categories: Course

characteristics such as class size (Algozzine, Beattie, Bray, Flowers, Gretes and Howley, 2004), course workload (Griffin, 2004; Remedios and Lieberman, 2008), type of course (Beran and Violato, 2005; DaRosa, Kolm, Follmer, Pemberton, Pearce, and Leapman, 1991), difficulty level of the course (Addison, Best, and Warrington, 2006) were found to be influential on student evaluations of teaching and teacher. Teacher characteristics such as teacher's race (Smith, 2007, 2009; Smith and Anderson, 2005), teacher's proximity in the classroom (Safer, Farmer, Segalla and Elhoubi, 2005), teacher's easiness (Felton, Mitchell, & Stinson, 2004), teacher's professionalism (Spooren and Mortelmans, 2006; Simpson and Siguaw, 2000) and teacher's gender (Anderson and Smith, 2005) also played important role in SETs. For example, teachers who were perceived as warm, funny, or entertaining may receive higher student ratings, regardless of their level of knowledge in the subject being taught (Adamson, O'Kane and Shevlin 2005; Ahmadi, Helms and Raiszadeh 2001; Best and Addison, 2000). Another teacher characteristic, which may also influence student ratings of teaching, is the teacher's language background. For example, Finegan and Siegfried (2000) and Ogier (2005) found that teachers' English language proficiency has also influenced student ratings of the course. Finally, student characteristics such as interest to the course, student's understanding of the use of course evaluations (Chen and Hoshower, 2003; Worthington, 2002) were also influential on SETs. Among student characteristics, course grades and grade expectations were investigated a great deal (Eiszler, 2002; Sojka, Ashok and Dawn, 2002; Stark-Wroblewski, Ahlering and Brill, 2007; Wendorf, 2002; Wright and Palmer, 2006). For example, Millea and Grimes (2002) analyzed the correlation of 149 university students' course evaluations with their both expected and current grades, and found that current grades positively affected evaluations, while pessimistic attitudes toward future grades negatively influence evaluations.

One of the student characteristics that is related to students' evaluation of teaching and teacher is the students' perceived level of their foreign language proficiency where the native language is not used as the medium of instruction in the courses.

Foreign Language Proficiency

Students have hard time to master the academic content if the content is given in a foreign language (Gottlieb, 2006). Their English proficiency standards measure their progress in acquiring the English language, and academic content standards measure their progress on tests of academic achievement. English is taught as a foreign language in Turkish educational system. Mandatory English courses start in primary school, at third grade, and continue to middle and high school years in public schools. In some private schools, English teaching start at kindergarten level. Even though Turkish

English language curricula emphasize teaching all language skills and areas, greater emphasis is on grammar and vocabulary. Reading, writing and speaking are the most ignored skills to be taught. Therefore, academically, most Turkish students studying English-medium universities faced with language-based problems especially with those ignored skills. Accordingly, their foreign language proficiency level had the most significant influence on their estimation of the stressfulness of *the classroom environment (Miller, 2007) because language anxiety inhibit*s the degree to which students participate in-class activities and make classroom assignments (Cheng, 2000) such as listening to teachers, writing essays, taking exams, working on reading assignments and participating oral discussions. In return, students' English language proficiency may also highly correlate with their ratings of course evaluations because university students self-reported that they were extremely anxious and resistant in participating to classes where the medium of instruction is English, in writing academic papers in English, in following lectures and taking notes in English. Consequently, in university classrooms, anxious students who worry about their English experience anxiety and this anxiety may correlate with their performance, which in turn is related negatively to their evaluations of teaching and teacher. In other words, the higher the proficiency level, the more favorable the student rated the course and vice versa. However, this confounding effect has not been investigated up to this time. Specifically, the researcher expected to find that student evaluations of the course and teacher would be negatively affected if the student believed that his/her foreign language, namely English, was not enough to follow the course and achieve the course requirements. Therefore, the present study aimed to fulfill the gap in research by examining the effect of language proficiency belief on students' teacher and course evaluation scores.

METHODOLOGY

Subjects

Faculty of Education students (total 599) of a particular Turkish University participated to the study. They were all Turkish students, with Turkish as their first language. Among them, 114 were Math Education students, 185 Counseling students, 186 Turkish Literature students and 114 English education students, within the age range of 18-20.

Instrument

Faculty of Education of this particular Turkish university developed its own Teacher and Course Evaluation Questionnaire (henceforth, TCEQ) to measure teaching ratings because 'homemade' measures of teaching effectiveness are more prone to bias than highly examined, reliable and valid measures (Arreola, 2000). This 15-items survey requested evaluation on

various aspects of teaching, teacher's behavior and the course itself. The questionnaire items are presented in Table 1. The first ten items of the survey were the instructor and course evaluation items to which students respond with a Likert-scale through 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Item 11 was an overall teacher rating item and item 12 was an overall course effectiveness item. The overall questionnaire composite score was used as the criterion variable.

The predictor variable was item 13 through which the student's perceived belief of his/her proficiency level in English to follow the courses was asked in a scale of 1 (very poor) to 5 (very good). The evaluation questionnaire also included demographic questions about the department student enrolled in (math, counseling, English language teaching - item 14) and student's class standing (first, second, third and fourth year of study – item 15). This information was obtained to determine whether the assumed relationship between course/instructor evaluation and language proficiency was comparable in all three departments and in all four years of class standing.

The number of the surveys completed and analyzed was 1122. These surveys provided data in 33 courses. All surveys submitted were in Turkish and used in the data analyses. The largest proportion of questionnaire was completed by second year students (43.7%), followed by first (24.3%) and third year (22.4%), and lastly fourth year students (9.6%). English Language Teaching Department students completed 49.9%, Math Education students 31.7%, Counseling students 18.4% of the questionnaire.

Furthermore, for the data triangulation purposes, interviews were conducted among randomly selected students from each department. The interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim. After ''unitizing'' (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), or looking at the text in terms of units of information that are the basis for defining categories, data were ''categorized.'' Through constantly comparing data there was shift from comparing incidents to categorizing incidents, which exhibit similar properties.

Procedure
Teacher and Course Evaluation Questionnaire was administered in the last week of classes at the end of academic year of 2008-2009, either before or after the final examination was given. Students were assured that they would not write their names, and evaluations would not affect their performance in the course.

Data analysis
Descriptive and correlation statistics including regression analysis were conducted to examine possible relationship between language proficiency and students' ratings of course and instructor.

RESULTS

To assess internal consistency among twelve items measuring teaching, course and teacher, reliability analysis was conducted to measure whether or not the items in the survey were investigating what they were supposed to be focusing on. Cronbach's alpha coefficients yielded high internal consistency ($r = 0.943$), indicating a very good reliability. Validity analysis was also conducted on the same twelve items by conducting factor analysis using a varimax rotation, eigenvalue cutoff >1.0, and factor loadings >0.50. All ten items loaded on a single factor, with an eigenvalue =5.73 explaining 57.3% of the variance.

The questionnaire items were shown in Table 1, including means and standard deviations. Likert scale measured the rating toward almost never (1) to almost always (5). The higher the number in items, the higher the evaluation score according to students' responses. Thus, means scored higher than the midpoint of 3.0 in this questionnaire were considered to be high. These high means are identified in bold face.

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics

Questionnaire items	Mean	Std. Dev.
1. The teacher knew the subject matter well.	2.71	.813
2. The teacher was well prepared for the class.	2.71	.659
3. I have been able to contact the instructor when I needed to.	3.73	.603
4. The teacher usually showed up for class on time and rarely misses without advanced notice.	2.80	.524
5. I would like to take another course with this instructor.	2.69	.638
6. A concise course syllabus was provided.	3.66	.638
7. The course was appropriate to the level at which class was taught.	2.75	.554
8. Teaching materials, the required texts and readings were appropriate and useful.	2.71	.649
9. Evaluation techniques (tests, papers, projects, presentations) were a good measure of my performance.	2.83	.470
10. The course was well organized and was running smoothly.	2.74	.616
11. Overall, I would rate the teacher as …….	2.66	.753
12. Overall, I would rate this course as …….	2.78	.717
Total questionnaire score	2.72	.639
Department	2.11	1.079

(1=ELT, 2=Math, 3=Counseling)

Class standing (1=freshman, 2=sophomore, 3=junior, 4=senior)		2.17	.907
English proficiency (1 = very poor, 2 = poor, 3= undecided, 4 = good and 5 = very good)		2.41	1.325

Notes:

N=1122 surveys

Items 1-12 are Likert type statements to which students respond with: 1 = almost never, 2 = infrequently, 3= occasionally, 4 = often and 5 = almost always

Results from student evaluations showed that teachers received a mean score 2.72 on the first 12 items of TCEQ, ranged from a low of 2.69 to a high of 2.83, with only two items, item 3 (I have been able to contact the instructor when I needed to) and item 6, (A concise course syllabus was provided) rated above 3.00. On the TCEQ form, the indicator for a rating of 2 is *infrequently* and for a rating of 3 is *occasionally*. Based on the overall mean score, students did not rate the courses and their teachers favorably. For the two items (3 and 6), mean scores for the faculty were 3.73 and 3.66 respectively, which indicated a rating of *often*. These two items were about the teacher's availability and his/her course syllabus.

English Language poficiency and SET ratings

In order to find out whether there was a relationship between students' perceived level of their English proficiency and their rating scores of course and instructor, a Pearson product-moment correlation was conducted (Table 2).

Table 2. Correlation between proficiency and student ratings

		prophecy	total score
English proficiency	Pearson Correlation	1	.076 (*)
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.	.011
	N	1122	1122
Evaluation scores	Pearson Correlation	.076 (*)	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.011	.
	N	1122	1122

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

The data showed no violation of normality, linearity or homoscedasticity. There was a strong, positive correlation between proficiency and ratings, which was statistically significant ($r = 0.076$, n = 1122, $p < 0.05$).

Further to examine the effect of language proficiency belief on students' teacher and course evaluation scores, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. The Model Summary table (Table 3) provides the R and R^2 value. The R value is 0.776, which represents the simple correlation and, therefore, indicates a high degree of correlation. The R^2 value indicates how much of the dependent variable, evaluation scores, can be explained by the independent variable, English proficiency. In this case, a bivariate linear regression analysis revealed that students'' perceived beliefs of their English language proficiency significantly predicted overall course and instructor evaluation scores. In other words, language proficiency belief explained a significant proportion of variance in overall course evaluation scores, $R^2 = .968$, $F (1, 1121) = 3090.711$, $p < .05$. This indicates that about 97 percent of the variation in overall course evaluation scores can be explained by taking students' perceived level of their English proficiency into account.

Table 3: R^2 table for proficiency as the predictor of student ratings

Model	Beta	R	R^2	F	*df*
proficiency belief	.147	.984	.968	3090.711*	1

* p< .05

This finding confirmed Finegan and Siegfried (2000) that "… the lower overall teaching effectiveness rating of ESL teachers is not attributable primarily to less proficiency in spoken English but, instead, can be accounted for mostly by student perceptions of less class preparation, less enthusiasm for teaching, a less interactive teaching style" (p. 26).

Interview results
To analyze the data further, the interviews were also conducted to find out students' concern about their English proficiency levels. Students' responses relating to English language proficiency fell into four categories: (1) understanding lectures, (2) participating class discussions, (3) reading the course materials and (4) writing assignments and homework.

They also reported difficulties with speech rate and academic vocabulary used by the teachers:

> Last year, I had a British teacher. She talked very fast, very British English. I cannot follow her courses; I could not take notes in her class.
> When the class is noisy and big, I cannot understand the teacher. Maybe it is my second language. That is why. It is difficult to catch the words.

In addition, they also reported that they had problems in taking lecture notes:

> I cannot listen when I write what the teacher says. I have to concentrate on her lecture, and then I sometimes got lost.
> I understand the lecture, but it is very difficult to write in English at the same time.

The students indeed had linguistic difficulty both in participating class discussion and asking questions:

> I am very scared to make mistakes in front of my friends. I can mispronounce a word, or I cannot say what I want to say, it is shameful to me.
> I think I am shy to speak in English. I usually listen. However, my teacher thinks me, as I do not know the subject because I do not speak.

Several students indicated the difficulty in understanding course readings due to lack of necessary vocabulary:

> I believe for our course, the reading assignments are very hard to read. If I do not use dictionary, I did not understand them. But it is so bring to look at the dictionary for every reading.

Even though, all the students had English writing instruction at the beginning of their education – whether in preparatory school or in freshmen years – they still had difficulties in writing in English:

> I know how to write an essay theoretically, topic sentence or development part. But when I try to write in the classroom, I still had difficulties.

In summary, understanding, reading and writing in English seemed to be the biggest challenge for many of the students. Accordingly, these difficulties affected their teacher and course evaluation scores.

CONCLUSION

It was interesting to conduct this study because most of the research conducted on teacher and course evaluation investigated the relationship between course evaluation ratings and gender, expected grade, class type, class difficulty and so forth. However, the present study was the only study done on analyzing the impact of foreign/second language proficiency on SETs. The underlying principle behind this study was that students would evaluate their teachers positively and rated him/her as effective teacher if they had not difficulties in understanding the lecture given in another language. Therefore, the researcher seeks to answer whether there is any relationship between perceived level of English proficiency and the course evaluation ratings of the students. The results revealed that language proficiency belief significantly affected overall course and teacher evaluation ratings.

The most important finding from the results of the present study was that when students estimated their proficiency level to be high to follow the courses, they would rate their teachers high too. That could be because they indeed felt they have understood the lectures and received a good quality of teaching. This finding would also mean that student learning is indeed related

to quality of lecturing. Ogier (2005), for instance, indicated that overall student ratings of English as a second language (ESL) lecturers are, on average, 0.4 points lower on a five-point scale than student ratings of native English speaking lecturers. In other words, the teaching surveys are measuring "lecturing" rather than "teaching" (Ogier, 2005:487). Miller's (2007) study also supported this finding in that "the level of concentration required to follow a lecture is taxing in one's first language; far more in a second/foreign language" (p. 747). Therefore, when evaluating the quality of teaching, the educational institutions must consider the constraints students might have in following the lectures such as language proficiency. Teaching effectiveness should be assessed through multiple means and data upon which to base decisions about teaching, tenure track or promotions.

Even though the concept of quality of teaching can have many meanings, ultimately it is academics that are held responsible for the performance of the university, and students' evaluations are one source of feedback for the faculty to tell them how well they are meeting their goals. Feldman (1993) (as cited in Obenchain, Abernathy, and Wiest, 2001) concluded that "what students perceive as effective teaching may not correspond with what the institution perceives as effective teaching" (p.153).

Although the sample size of surveys used in the present study was adequate, there were still some limitations. One major limitation of this study was that the survey was rather short. A more inclusive survey might produce more specific and suggestive results. In addition, not all students enrolled for a class completed the survey. Also, it was possible that one student might have completed a course evaluation in more than one course. However, this was not an important limitation since results were analyzed for overall course evaluation across all classes, not on individual bases.

In the present study, there was no consideration of other factors that might possibly influence course evaluation ratings such as gender of the student and the teacher, class size, and grade level and department the student enrolled in. Future research is needed to take into consideration of these factors.

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