The self-concept on English language and employability skills among the graduate students in management

ABSTRACT

Business schools organize non-academic activities in English language and employment seeking skills on the premise that they would improve the employability of students in the corporate world. Based on the self-concept of the students, the present study found positive relationship between English language ability and employability skills. Educational background of the families and gender were used as predictors to analyze the differences in the self-concept of English language ability and employability skills. Females performed better in English language. The students hailing from families with no higher educational background fared poorer in English language ability than those from families with higher educational background. Longitudinal analysis was used in order to ascertain the change in the self-concept of the students.

Key words: Self-concept, English language ability, employability skills, educational background, gender, longitudinal analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The importance of non-academic resources in higher education has been emphasized in the earlier studies. Appreciating the significance of employability skills for a successful career in management, the institutions imparting management education train their students in writing, speaking and comprehending skills of English language as well as conduct sessions on effective communication, mock interviews, group discussions, and employability skills such as business quiz contests. Language skills improved the personality of an individual. Mahapatra and Khan (2007) included employability skills in his scale to measure the effectiveness of technical education. It is imperative that studies relating linguistic skills and employability skills are essential to understand their role in shaping up the students of management. While most of the previous literature dealt with the relationship between English language ability and the performance in mathematics and arithmetic, there are no studies on the relationship between English language ability and employability skills. De Fraine et al. (2003) suggested that studies on students’ academic self-concept and language achievement were critical in educational research. In the present study, the students pursuing graduate program in management (MBA) were selected to ascertain the relationship between the ability in the English language and employability skills based on their self-concept. To investigate the relationship further, family educational background (first generation student or not) and family income of the respondents were employed as predictor variables. Since the measurement of change in student performance is a topic of continued interest in educational research (Fischer, 1995), longitudinal analysis was employed in the present study.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Self-concept

According to Zanobini and Usai (2002) and, Valentine et al. (2004), self-concept comprised of self-descriptions and
self-evaluations. Self-concept reflected the subjective judgment of perceived competence in the students' view of themselves in a given domain such as social, physical and academic and, widely used in educational research (Bong and Skaalvik, 2003; Cole et al., 2001; Young and Mroczek, 2003; De Fraine et al., 2003). Ireson and Hallam (2009) emphasized the importance of self-concept and observed that self-concept affected the future intention of the students more than their previous achievement. The causal relationship between self-concept and achievement had been explained by three different models, namely, skill development model, self-enhancement model and, reciprocal effects model. This study followed the self-enhancement model. According to Valentine et al. (2004), the self-enhancement model explained self-concept as a significant determinant of academic achievement. Marsh et al. (2004) found stronger impact of the academic self-concept on subsequent achievement. Taylor and Todd (1995) suggested that a person's perception might be influenced by the opinion of other people, superiors, and peers. Further, social influence had been used widely in many models dealing with human behavior (Agarwal and Karahanna, 2000; Wang et al., 2009).

Non-academic resources in educational research

Soutar and McNeil (1996) utilized academic and non-academic dimensions for measuring the quality of higher education. Hill (1995) and Lagrosen et al. (2004) observed that non-academic resources such as industry exposure, support facilities, inter-personal relationships, and non-academic activities and, campus atmosphere were used in the literature dealing with higher education. Zineldin (2006) included the quality of interaction and communication in his technical-functional quality model. Abdullah (2006) included non-academic aspects, academic aspects, reputation, access, program issues and, understanding as the dimensions in the context of higher education. Further, Rajani et al. (2013) suggested non-academic processes as one of the seven items in the scale for measuring the service quality in higher education.

Hypothesis development

English language ability and employability skills

Causal relationship had been found between English language ability and achievement in mathematics (Jordan and Levine, 2009; Jordan et al., 2009; Locuniak and Jordan, 2008; Adams and Lowery, 2007; Schlepppegrell, 2007). Vukovic and Lesaux (2013) found that general verbal ability and phonological skills affected how children were able to comprehend and solve mathematical problems.

Though the outcome in mathematics was related to ability in English language by many studies in the earlier literature, there are no studies on the relationship between English language ability and employability skills. Mahapatra and Khan (2007) included personality development in their scale along with learning outcomes, responsiveness, physical facilities, and, academics in their 'EduQual' scale to measure the service quality of technical education. All-round skills, including ability in the language used and personality traits, apart from academic achievements, were emphasized for the success of an MBA (Masters in Business Administration) graduate in the corporate world (MBAinfo.com). Based on this literature, the following hypotheses are formed:

Hypothesis 1: The self-concept of the management students with higher level of English language ability is higher in the employability skills at the commencement of the program.

Hypothesis 2: The management students perceiving higher growth in English language ability perceive higher growth in the employability skills at the end of the two terms.

Influence of family background

An individual's educational achievement was significantly influenced by his or her parents' education (Dryer, 1998; Buchmann and Di Prete, 2006). Family background influenced a person's perception regarding the usefulness of his action (Venkatesh et al., 2003). Pruett et al. (2009) utilized family experience and support in their study on entrepreneurship. Joensuu et al. (2013) found that family members did not play a significant role in the development of entrepreneurial intention among students in higher education. Haney (2001) found that dealing with social class background had been one of the main issues in educational reform. Lee et al. (1997) found that socioeconomic status and minority status differentiated a student’s rate of learning of mathematics and science. Shin et al. (2013) observed that children having poor family background commenced their school education less well-prepared and stayed behind. Many earlier studies (Davison et al. 2004; Lee and Burkham, 2002) supported this observation. Also the so-called Mathew effect predicted the gap widening between the low performing and the high performing students as time progressed. Based on this literature, the following hypotheses are formulated in this study:

Hypothesis 3a: The self-concept of the management students coming from families with no higher educational background is lower in English language ability and employability skills than those coming from families having
higher educational background

**Hypothesis 3b:** The management students coming from families with no higher educational background perceive lower growth in English language ability and employability skills at the end of the two terms than those coming from families having higher educational background.

**Influence of gender**

Kaenzig et al. (2007) and Young and Mroczek (2003) found that men and women differed in learning styles. While some studies found absence of any difference between males and females in domain-general academic self-concept (Hergovich, Sirsch, and Felinger, 2004), some other studies found that males did better than females (Jackson et al., 1994). De Fraine et al. (2003) found that girls did better than boys in language learning but the growth in their academic self-concept was not commensurate. Buchmann and Di Prete (2006) found female advantage in college completion. Based on this literature, the following hypotheses are formed:

**Hypothesis 4a:** The self-concept of the female management students is lower in English language ability and employability skills than the male management students.

**Hypothesis 4b:** The female management students perceive higher growth in English language ability and employability skills at the end of the two terms than the male management students.

**METHODOLOGY**

**Measurement scale**

A questionnaire was designed to elicit the self-concept of the students on their English language ability and employability skills. The respondents were asked to rate themselves by assigning scores out of 10 for the following items on the English language ability: English writing ability, English spoken ability and, English comprehension ability. Similarly, they were asked to rate themselves by assigning scores out of 10 for the following items on the employability skills: Communication, Business understanding, Group discussion and interview skills and, Confidence over employment acquisition and growth. The respondents were encouraged to mark their scores up to two decimal places in order to make them think a while before stating their scores in the questionnaire. Questions on gender and educational background of the family were also included in the questionnaire. Regarding family background, respondents coming from the families with no member in the family having higher education (first generation respondents) were coded as 1. Respondents, coming from the families where anyone was having higher education were coded as 2. Males were coded as 1 and females were coded as 2. A pilot study was carried out with twenty respondents to ensure that the statements were self-explanatory.

**Details of the survey**

A survey was conducted during 2014 and 2015 among the students pursuing graduate program in management in a University in India. The respondents were asked to rate themselves for their English writing ability, English spoken ability and, English comprehension ability. Similarly, they were asked to rate themselves on their Communication, Business understanding, Group discussion and interview skills and, Confidence over employment acquisition and growth. Measurements were taken at three time intervals, one at the beginning of the program, the second at the end of the first term and the third at the end of the second term. Responses were obtained from two hundred and twenty-nine students (from the batch size of two hundred and forty students). Eighteen students either did not respond or were absent for the survey. Two hundred and eleven students were identified to be the same individuals from the beginning till the end of their second term. These two hundred and eleven responses were considered for further analysis.

**Details of the respondents**

The respondents were in the age group of 20-24 years pursuing their graduate program in management after completing their basic degrees in arts, commerce and, engineering disciplines. Out of the 211 valid responses, 87 respondents were males (41%) and 124 respondents were females (59%). As far as the family educational background of the respondents concerned, 35% of them belonged to first generation families (none of the member having higher education) and 65% of them came from families with higher educational background.

**Data analysis methods**

Mean values of the three scores were calculated for the construct of English language ability and mean values for the four scores were calculated for the construct of employability skills for each of the three time periods, resulting in a total of six latent constructs, three for English language ability for the three time periods and three for employability skills for the three time periods. The mean values of the scales were, English language ability at commencement 6.8 (SD 1.3), English language ability at the end of the first term 7.3 (SD 1.3), English language ability at the end of the second term 7.6 (SD 1.3), Employability skills...
on commencement 6.6 (SD 1.8), Employability skills at the end of the first term 7.0 (SD 1.2) and Employability skills at the end of the second term 7.4 (SD 1.1). Cronbach’s Alpha value of the measurement scale measured 0.88 and hence reliable.

Univariate and multivariate kurtosis of the data were examined in Amos to check the normality of the data. Univariate kurtosis values of 7 and above 7 reveal non-normality (Kline, 2005). The highest univariate kurtosis value of the data in the present study measured 3.4, which was well below 7. The standardized multivariate kurtosis value computed for the data in the study was 37.8, exceeding the value of 5 suggested by Bentler (2005). Though this multivariate kurtosis value indicated multivariate non-normality, Byrne (2010) applied robust ML estimation suggested by Satorra and Bentler (1994) and found that the difference in the results of data analysis was not significant for the standardized multivariate kurtosis value of 37.9 obtained in his study. Hence, the results of the analysis in the present study were reliable for drawing inferences.

For the purpose of analysis of the data collected, a logistic growth curve model was formed with three measurement waves (Figure 1) in Amos. With logistic growth curve analysis, both within person and between persons variance were calculated and compared. The model used an intercept parameter and a growth parameter for the constructs of English language ability and employability skills. The intercept parameter measured a student’s score at the commencement of the program and the growth parameter measured his rate of change over the time period of two terms (Beckett et al., 2004; Ma, 2005; Byrne, 2010). A student’s initial level of perception (intercept means) and individual differences at the commencement of the program (intercept variances) were described by the intercept factor. As the intercept is constant for individuals across time, the factor loadings for the intercepts were set at 1 for each term. The slope mean and the slope variance measured the rate of change and the individual differences in English language ability and employability skills. The factor loadings for the slopes were set at 0, 0.5 and 1 to represent 6 months for each of the term. To investigate the inter-individual differences, gender and the educational background of the family of the respondents were used as predictors in the model. This investigation helped to find answers to the hypotheses 3a, 3b, 4a and, 4b of the present study.

ANALYSIS OF THE RESULTS

The basic model

The basic latent growth curve model of the study is shown in Figure 1. Wheaton (1987) recommended that in order to check the goodness-of-fit, more than one measure of model goodness-of-fit was required. CFI and RMSEA values of the model were checked to confirm the model fit. The values obtained for these measures were CFI=0.97 and, RMSEA=0.09. A model exhibits good fit when CFI is greater than 0.90 (Byrne, 2010; Hair et al., 2006). Regarding RMSEA, Browne and Cudeck (1993) advocated that a close fit was represented by an RMSEA value of less than 0.05 and a fair fit was represented by values between 0.05 and 0.10. The model fit of the model for the present study was adequate for drawing inferences. The factor co-variance between the intercepts of English language ability and employability skills (p=0.0) as well as the factor co-variance between the slopes of English language and employability skills were significant (p=0.0).

The model estimated various measures required for the study, namely, regression weights, both unstandardized and standardized, mean values for the intercepts and slopes of English language and employability skills, estimates for the co-variances between the intercepts of English language ability and employability skills as well as for slopes, estimates for the correlations between the intercepts of English language ability and employability skills as well as slopes and, variances for English language ability intercept, English language ability slope, Employability intercept and Employability slope.

The average values measured for the intercepts of English language and employability skills were 6.88 (p=0.0) and 6.65 (p=0.0), respectively. The co-variance between those two intercepts measured 0.81 (p=0.0). The model also measured a high correlation between the two intercepts at 0.72. The result revealed the students perceiving higher English language ability at the commencement of the program also perceived possessing higher level of employability skills. Hence, hypothesis 1 is supported.

The average scores for the slopes of English language ability and employability skills respectively were measured at 0.78 (p=0.0) and 0.81 (p=0.0). The students assessed their growth in both English language ability and employability skills at the end of the second term as positive. The co-variance between those two slopes measured low at 0.17 (p=0.0) and the correlation among the slopes was 0.70. Though there was moderate relationship, as the result suggested, the positive co-variance confirmed the hypothesis 2 that the students with higher growth in English language ability perceived higher growth in employability skills at the end of the two terms.

Also the variances measured: English language ability intercept (1.26, p=0.00), employability skills intercept (0.99, p=0.00), English language slope (0.27, p=0.07) and employability skills slope (0.21, p=0.11). These variances reflected strong inter-individual differences in English language and the level of employability skills at the commencement of the program and, moderate inter-
individual differences in the growth of English language and employability skills at the end of the two terms.

The modified model with educational background and gender as predictors

The model (Figure 1) of the study was modified by incorporating the two predictors of the study, namely, the educational background of the family and gender of the respondents (Figure 2) to investigate the role of educational background and gender. The modified model is shown in Figure 2.

The model fitness of the above model was found adequate (CFI=0.96 and RMSEA=0.09). The regression paths and their weights related to the educational background and gender of the respondents are shown in Table 1.

Educational background

Educational background was significant for English language ability at the commencement of the program (β = 0.33, p=0.07). As we have coded students coming from first generation families as 1 and students coming from families with higher educational background as 2, this meant that the students from families with no higher educational background commenced the program with lower perception of English language ability when compared with those from families having higher educational background.

As regards employability skills, the negative regression weight (β = -0.15, p=0.38) showed that the students from families with no higher educational background commenced the program with higher perception level of employability skills when compared with those from families having higher educational background, but such perception could not find statistical support. Hence, hypothesis 3a is supported with regard to English language ability and not with employability skills.

Regarding change in the ability of English language at the end of the 2 terms, the regression weight of the educational background was β = -0.17 (p=0.20). Though, the negative relationship between the two groups of students showed that those coming from families with no higher educational background did better than those from families with higher educational background during the two terms, such difference was not statistically significant. As regard change in the employability skills during the two terms, the students coming from families with no higher educational background performed poorer than those from families with higher educational background (β = 0.29, p=0.05), as the study had coded the two groups with 1 and 2 respectively. Hence, hypothesis 3b is supported with regard to the employability skills and not with English language ability.

Gender

Gender of the respondents significantly affected the intercept of the English language (β = 0.29, p=0.10), as well
as the slope of the English language ($\beta = 0.39$, $p=0.00$). The gender of the respondents did not influence either the intercept ($\beta = 0.07$, $p=0.64$), or the change in the employability skills ($\beta = 0.19$, $p=0.18$). As the study coded male as 1 and female as 2, this meant that the female students commenced the program with higher perception of English language ability than the male students. For employability skills, the study did not find any difference between the female and male students ($\beta = 0.07$, $p=0.64$). Hence, hypothesis 4a is supported with regard to English language ability and not with employability skills.

Regarding the growth at the end of the two terms, gender affected English language ability ($\beta = 0.39$, $p=0.00$) but not the employability skills ($\beta = 0.19$, $p=0.18$). Hence, the present study found that the female students performed better in English language ability. However, there was no difference between females and males with regard to change in the employability skills. Hypothesis 4b is supported with regard to English language ability and not employability skills.

**DISCUSSION**

It has been proven that the practice of providing coaching activities in English language is useful to the students of management to build their employment skills. Hence, the schools imparting graduate program in management can continue to conduct English language ability programs to their students in order to prepare them for employment in the corporate world. Ability in English language facilitates effective communication with colleagues and the stakeholders of the organization where the graduate student joins for employment. The language enables him to
acquire and understand business related information and deploy them to perform his duties efficiently. Further, as language builds personality, the students will develop more confidence in dealing with the various partners of the organization employing them.

The students from poor educational background had lower self-concept on their level of English ability. This finding supported Shin et al. (2013) who observed that children having poor family background commenced their school education less well-prepared. They also perceived lower growth in employability skills at the end of the two terms. This necessitates the business schools to take additional care in coaching these students in English language and employability skills. The study confirmed Buchmann and Di Prete (2006) who observed that an individual's educational achievement was influenced by his or her parents' education. Mathew effect had been confirmed as the students hailing from families with no educational background fared poorer when compared with those from families with educational background.

Female students had higher self-concept of English language ability and also performed better than the male students at the end of the two terms in the language. This finding supported De Fraine et al. (2003) who found girls doing better than boys in language learning. The business schools shall appreciate the differing styles of learning by males and females and suitably structure the coaching activities in English language.

Conclusion

The study contributed to the literature on the linkage between English language ability and general achievement of adolescent students. Such studies are of continuing interest in educational psychology. The relationship between English language ability and employability skills of the students pursuing their graduate level program in management had been confirmed. The study made an interesting finding that English language ability significantly influenced the students' employability skills. For the students lagging behind in English language when they commenced the program, it was observed that their level of employability skills was also low. Also, the students with higher growth in English language ability perceived higher growth in the employability skills at the end of the two terms. Most of the business schools organize English language laboratories to the management students to improve their ability in the language on the belief that such ability in the language would help them to improve their employability. The study found such initiatives useful to the students. The findings contributed to the literature dealing with gender studies in education. Females performed better in English language as observed in the earlier literature. Another important contribution of the study is regarding the influence of educational background of the family on the respondents' performance in English language and the achievement in the employability skills. The students hailing from families with no higher educational background fared poorer in English language when compared with those from families with higher educational background.

Perhaps as this was the first attempt to study the relationship between English language ability and employability skills, further research is required in this area. It would be interesting to know the results of such studies from English speaking countries. This study considered the change in the employability skills as a result of the change in the ability in English language. Future studies may be attempted on the relationship between employability skills and subject-specific self-concept.

The limitation of the study is the number of respondents participating in the survey. More number of respondents would have enabled the investigation into the relationship between English language ability and the employability skills based on the respondents' discipline of the basic graduation degree, medium of instruction and performance at the school level and domicile. Another limitation is the present study has adopted a limited definition for the employability skills, considering the limited objective of finding an employment in the corporate world. The meaning of employability skills for the management students may be different in different geographies and cultures.

REFERENCES


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