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A cross-sectional survey in progress on factors affecting students' academic performance at a Turkish university

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Abstract

The present cross-sectional survey concerns the factors affecting students' academic performance at Middle East Technical University in Ankara in Turkey. According to their cumulative grade point average, the students have been categorized as high, average or low achievers. The main research question is: What are the differences between high- and low-achieving students' academic study skills, habits and perceptions as regards the factors affecting their academic performance? The researcher-designed questionnaire was empirically pretested. The quantitative data have been analyzed by Chi-square independence test, and a significant relationship was found between students' achievement and factors such as preparatory school attendance, high school graduated from, father's education level, and class attendance.

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Keywords: cross-sectional survey; student-centered approach; student perceptions and opinions; academic performance; academic achievement; high-achievers; low-achievers; focus-groups

1. Introduction

Schools and scholars have been concerned with questions related to some ways for improving schools and making their schools innovative in their fields. Among some general standards for an institution or a program, Kells (1992) not only covers the dimensions related to the mission, goals, and objectives, adequate library, other academic services, and appropriate student services but also students who are

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appropriately selected and qualified to pursue the instructional programs and who fulfill the requirements of the degree at appropriate levels (p. 85).

Similarly, Tyler (1981) suggests “Curriculum development is a practical enterprise not a theoretical study. It endeavors to design a system to achieve an educational end and is not primarily attempting to explain an existential phenomenon.” He refers to the effective operation of the educational system where a number of constraints are available and it addresses human beings who all have purposes and preferences. For this reason, “an essential step in curriculum development is to examine and analyze significant conditions that influence the construction and operation of curriculum”(p.18).

Middle East Technical University (METU) located in Ankara comprises of five main faculties and it is keen on reaching its educational objectives in the three domains suggested by Bloom (1956), namely cognitive, affective and psycho-motor. The present research study has been supported and funded by the METU Rectorate for a variety of interrelated purposes. Its main purpose is to find out students’ own perceptions related to the academic and non-academic factors which have some positive and/or negative impacts on their own academic performance level. Another is to draw the students’ attention to the influential factors on their academic achievement levels so that they can consider their own performances with a critical eye, and try to improve their learning styles as well their attitudes to learning. One other is to provide the university administration at all levels with some quantitative data in order to contribute to the on-going mechanisms which are designed to further improve the high quality of education the university offers.

2. Method

2.1. Research question

The main research question of the present study is as follows: What are the differences between high-achieving and low-achieving students related to the factors affecting their academic performance such as their academic study skills and habits?

2.2. Sampling

Modern Languages Department offers both compulsory and elective courses in a variety of languages such as English, German, Japanese, and Spanish to students across the university at all levels, namely freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior. For the random selection purposes, students taking both the compulsory and elective courses have been used in the Spring Term and the Summer Term of the Academic Year 2012-2011.

Table 1. The breakdown of the sections and participants

Course code	Total section number	Randomly Selected section no.	Participant number
1) ENG 102	115	36	540 (36 x 15 stds)
2) ENG 211	33	16	240 (16 x 15 stds)
3) ENG 311	12	12	180 (12 x 15 stds)
4) OTHER	79	40	600 (40 x 15 stds)
*SUMMER (Eng102+211+311)	53 (16+32+5)	10	157 (10 x 15 stds)
	Total = 292	Total no. of sections: 114	Total = 1717 (1717 - 29) N= 1688

2.3. Participants

The design of the present study is cross-sectional. For this reason, data was collected from the groups of students who took elective or compulsory courses offered by the MLD during the Spring 2011 Term. In other words, all level students, namely the freshman, sophomore, junior, and senior students, who have been studying at all the department across the university. The overall number of participants is 1717. During the stage of data sorting, 29 instruments were extracted/excluded due to inconsistencies, and the final number of the participants is 1668 (See Fig 1).

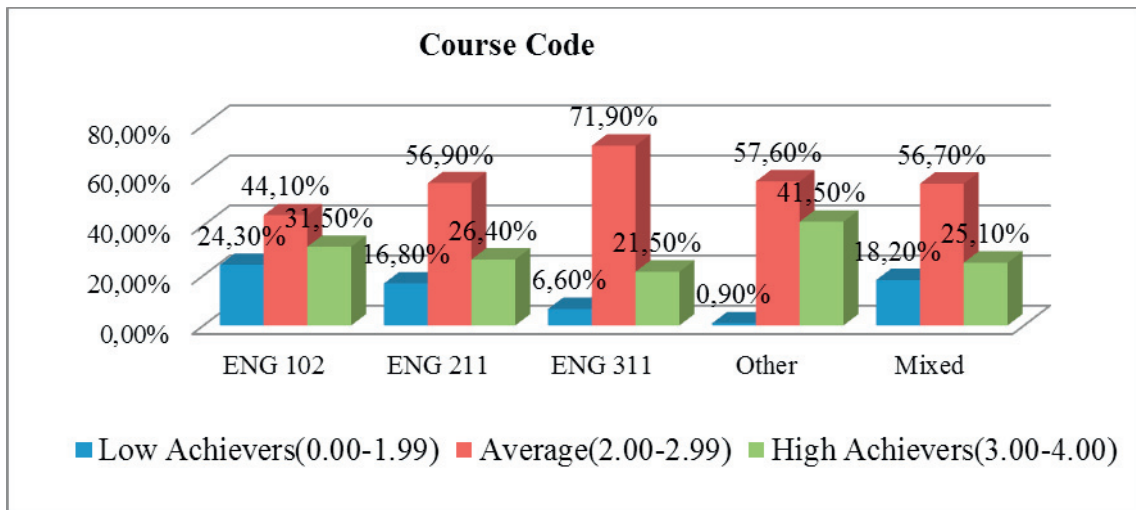


Fig. 1. The breakdown of participants according to the offered courses.

2.4. Instrument

Fink (2006) suggests “a survey can be a self-administered questionnaire or an interview done in person, on the telephone, or via teleconference”, and the large-scale researcher-designed instrument went through the following formative improvement stages for three academic terms:

- a) A preliminary list of sub-topics was prepared and a draft version of the questionnaire was prepared; its first section consisted of ten preliminary demographic profile items, and the second section included 32 Yes/No and open-ended questions with comments columns as well. It was piloted on 52 randomly selected students for improvement purposes. Besides, three successive focus group interviews (Kruger and Casey, 2000) with 12 students from different departments were held on voluntary basis. Moreover, initial feedback was obtained from two experts.
- b) After the first version was modified and updated based on the received feedback, a second draft copy was prepared, and three successive focus group interviews with 46 students were conducted. Apart from the focus group interviews, 12 individual semi-structured interviews were held, and expert opinion from five METU and one Minnesota University professor was obtained.
- c) Similar to the four broad types of subject matter in surveys suggested by Moser and Calton (1972, p. 5), the final version of the questionnaire includes items related to the following dimensions:
 - a. the demographic characteristics of METU students
 - b. their social and academic environment
 - c. their academic activities like study skills and habits
 - d. their self-regulated learning skills
 - e. their extra-curricular activities
 - f. their opinions and attitudes

2.5. Data analyses

The collected data have been statistically analyzed and all the hypotheses have been checked by using Chi-Square independence test.

3. Results

The results have been briefly presented for each section in the instrument. As for the demographic profile, there is no significant relationship between students' achievement and sex as well as the cities they come from. There is no significant relationship between the students' academic performance and having good communication with the instructors or being satisfied with their advisors attitude and guidance. However, there is significant relationship between students' CGPA and their time management skills both for academic and social purposes as well as their study skills and habits such as underlining important parts, and writing their own comments while listening to their instructors in class.

4. Conclusion

The present cross-sectional study was set out to explore some factors affecting students' academic performance by grouping the participants in two ways: a) The comparison of three main groups as high-

average-low achievers, b) The comparison of only high and low achievers. The outcomes of the first group have been briefly presented above; however, the statistical analysis of the second group is still in progress. The comparative analysis of the two groups is likely to reveal some information which will have constructive reflections on both the students and the university administration. The present survey is regarded as a pilot study which is hoped to lay the background for some potential studies in the future.

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