



CLASS ATTENDANCE AND STUDENT PERFORMANCE IN AN EFL CONTEXT: IS THERE A RELATIONSHIP?

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to analyse and investigate the relationship between university students' class attendance and learning performance in an EFL context. Data is gathered from 202 students studying English at H. E. School of Foreign Languages preparatory classes where attendance is mandatory. One group pretest posttest experimental design is employed to test the relationship between class attendance and learning performance. The students were given a proficiency exam and after a 12-week education they were given the same test as posttest. The analysis of the pretest and posttest showed that there is a meaningful relationship between class attendance and learning performance. The results of the tests also give implications for teaching in general, teaching a foreign language teaching in particular, educational policy.

Keywords: Class attendance, foreign language learning, performance.

INTRODUCTION

In many educational settings, but especially in higher education, the importance of attendance has been underestimated. There is a general belief that class attendance is not necessary to obtain mastery of the subject matter. The literature provides studies, though limited in numbers, on the importance of attendance but most of them come from the fields of sciences, economics, and other disciplines. In such environments much of the learning is passive. And the related studies carried out in passive learning environment regarding different factors as well as attendance, have shown that attendance has little effect on student performance. There are very few studies dealing with the effect of attendance in smaller, foreign language and language-related classes where much of the learning is active. These studies depict the importance of attending classes where the students and instructors interact with each other. The language classes which are relatively small in student numbers require the active use of the target language both for the students and the instructors.

According to Romer (1993) and Devadoss&Foltz (1996) absenteeism is a significant problem at many institutions of higher learning and a major concern for educators. Daily absenteeism in college classrooms can be as high as one-third to almost one-half of students in certain disciplines (Friedman, Rodriguez and McComb 2001, McGuire 2003, Moore 2003, 2005). Romer (1993) investigated the links between absenteeism and various characteristics of classes. He found that smaller classes had less absenteeism. Some researchers like White (1992) and Brauer (1994), suggested that student absenteeism adversely affected the overall "well-being of classes" and it created a "dead," tiresome, and unpleasant classroom environment; which most of the students and instructor would not ask for.

Passive Learning and Attendance

Early research on the relationship between attendance and grades was mixed. A number of studies demonstrated a relationship between high attendance rates and high grades (Brocato 1989, Launius



1997, Moore 2003, Thomas and Higbee 2000). Park and Kerr (1990) carried out research on economics students and indicated that effort and intelligence determined the grade, while student's attendance record and the student's overall value of the course were less important in determining the grade. Berenson, Carter and Norwood (1992) reported that classroom attendance does not affect academic performance.

A few studies such as Hyde & Flournoy (1986), St. Clair (1999), and Rodgers (2002) rejected an attendance performance link. Other studies, concentrated in economics and business, found only minor gains associated with conscientious attendance. Durden and Ellis (1995) found that attendance does matter, but not until a student has missed four classes in the semester.

Marburger (2001) found that scores on multiple choice exams were affected by failure to attend classes. He also found that low levels of absenteeism had no appreciable effect on student learning but that excessive absenteeism had a deleterious impact on course performance. He distinguished between student learning and course performance. In another study Marburger (2006) reported that a mandatory attendance policy brought about only a 2% improvement on multiple-choice exam scores. Riggs and Blanco (1994) determined that students who had more than 30% absence from lectures were likely to score in the bottom 15% on exams. The differences among the natures of the subjects and class sizes may account for differing results. A meta-analysis by Credé, Roch & Kieszczynka (2010) with a database of 28,034 students from many disciplines found that class attendance was better than any other known predictor of college grades.

Active Learning and Attendance

When the matter is active learning, Bevitt et al. (2010) conducted a study of the effects of attendance on students in what they termed high-stakes classes that is, practicals and seminars. Their findings supported the contention of Cleary-Holdforth (2007) in her study of nursing instruction, that the active and practical nature of the subject requires the development of particular skills, and therefore attendance is more important in smaller, practical classes than in lecture sessions.

Active Learning and Language Classes

Though much of the information on attendance comes from generally inactive classes, there are some if not many, studies where active learning takes place. Researchers agree that learning foreign/second language means active learning in a class where the students practice vocabulary, do some listening and reading and speak about different topics. In language classes students interact with each other as well as with the teacher. For that reason language classes should be small in number (20 or fewer students). Classes are active and participatory, and the teacher's goal is to get the students use the target language as much as possible. In language classes students are expected to speak more than the instructor. Instructors pay attention to attendance and states the importance of joining the classes regularly since language learning follows a sequential cycle. Hubbs-Tait (2002) reported a link between attendance at Head Start pre-school programs and a test of receptive vocabulary. Becker (2010) found that longer attendance (in months) at preschool had positive effects on German language development for Turkish immigrant children, but not for native German children, and more time spent in high quality preschools had positive effects on both groups. Lamdin (1994) found that better attendance in elementary schools in Baltimore was connected with higher reading and mathematics test scores. Condelli et al. (2002) found that regular attendance in adult ESL literacy programs resulted in improved reading comprehension and oral English skills. These studies all point in the same direction, but what is lacking is a detailed study of the extent to which absence from active-learning classes affects language learning.

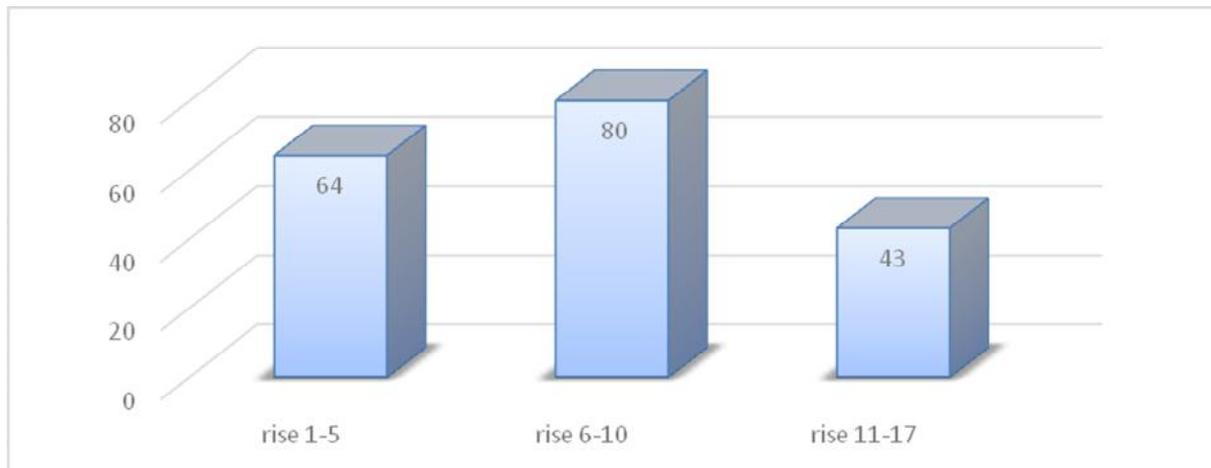
METHOD

The study was conducted at Duzce Universtiy, H. E. School of Foreign Languages, Department of Basic English. 219 students studying English at H. E. School of Foreign Languages English preparatory classess participated to the study. The preparatory classes at Duzce University are selective and % 80

attendance to the classes is required from the students to be able to take the final exam. Each class receive 24 hours basic English and two hours optional club activities per week. As the department emphasizes the importance of class attendance, instructors are required to make sure all absences are recorded. One group pretest posttest experimental design is employed to test the relationship between class attendance and learning performance. At the beginning of the fall academic year the students were given a proficiency exam in which there were 50 questions and after a 12-week education preiod they were given the same test as posttest. There were some discrepancies in terms of the numbers of the students who took the tests. That is, the number of the students taking pretest was 202 while it was 219 in the posttest. Only the scores of the students taking both tests were evaluated. Other results related to one test, either the first or the second, were excluded. The number of the students whose both pretest and posttest were evaluated within the scope of the study was 202.

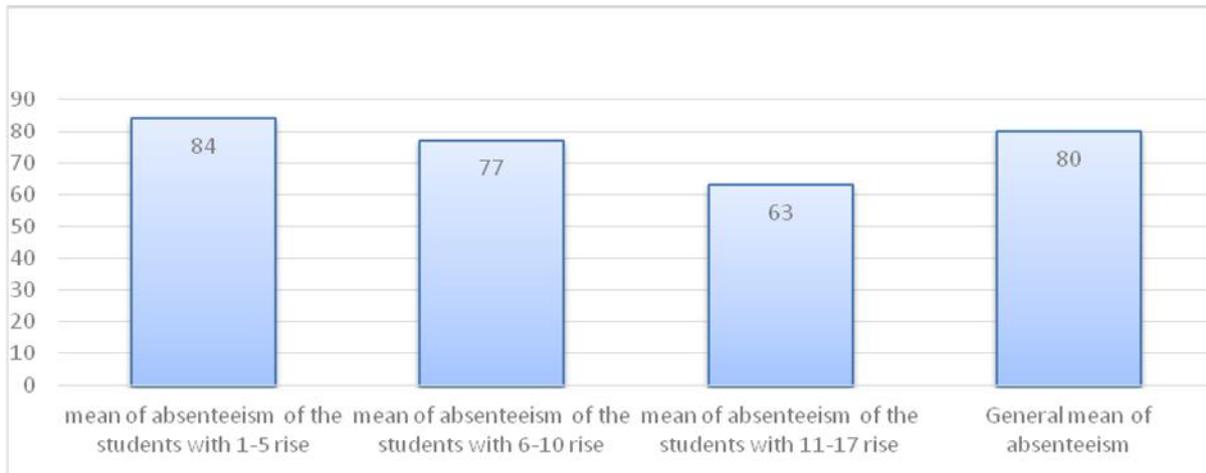
FINDINGS

The pretest and posttest results revealed that 57 students had a 10 and above correct answer rise, 2 students had the same scores and 12 students had a fall when compared with their pre-test and post-test results. The mean of the fall is 2.1; which cannot be regarded as significant. The table below shows the number of students with a correct answer rise between 1-5, 6-10 and 11-17. When interpreting this rises, we should be aware of the fact that some students had a rise from 3 correct answers to 4; which is relatively less meaningful while some had a rise from 24 to 29; which can be a sign of development in language performance. So, when the numbers come together they may lead to meaningful interpretations but as the subject matter absenteeism is about each individual, every detail about numbers were scrutinized so as not to cause misinterpretations.



Graphic 1: The number of the students according to their correct answer rise

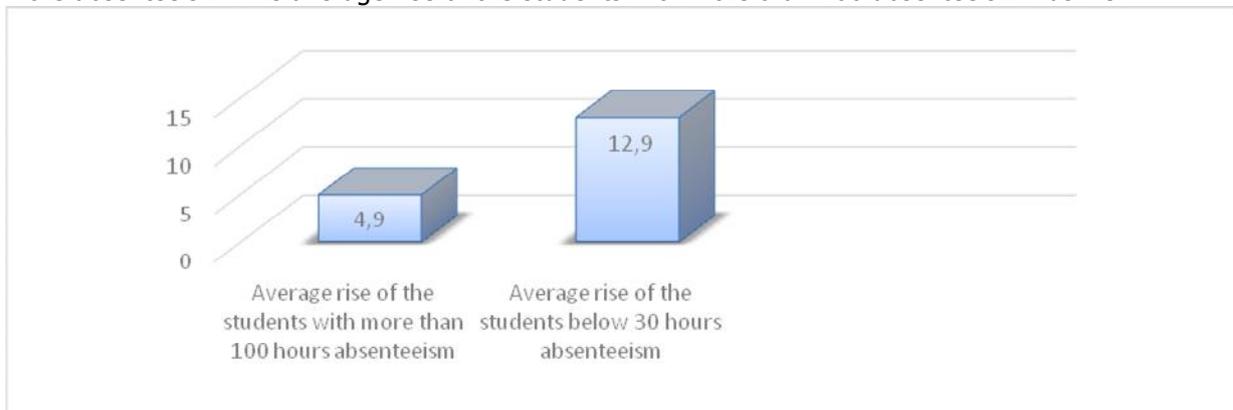
According to the statistics, students' general absenteeism mean was 80. When we examine the means of absenteeism according to the rises, the table illustrates a meaningful relation with attendance and performance.



Graphic 2: Mean of absenteeism according to the correct answer rise

The table clearly shows that students who are below the average absenteeism had a more remarkable increase. The students having a rise between 11-17 correct answers had the least absenteeism records; which can be regarded as meaningful. There is also a rise with the students who have absenteeism above the average but we cannot regard .

The mean of the rise of the students according to their absenteeism also proved that the students who did not attend the classes between 0-30 hours in total were much more successful in their pretest and posttest results. The students showing a rise between 11-16 correct answers had an average of 12.9 rise while the same rate showed a huge decline with the students who had 100 and more absenteeism. The average rise of the students with more than 100 absenteeism was 4.9.



Graphic 3: Average of the rise according to hours of absenteeism

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Much as absenteeism is a significant problem at many institutions of higher learning and a major concern for educators, the importance of attendance has been underestimated. Much of the previous research has dealt with the issue from the fields of sciences, economics, and other disciplines rather than language classes. The language classes which are relatively small in student numbers require the active use of the target language and interaction both for the students and the instructors. This can be achieved mostly through high attendance rates. The present study also supported the view that students with lower absenteeism rates are more likely to perform better in language classes. Nevertheless, students' performances were tested by means of a proficiency test rather than a performance based evaluation by means of which we would be able to test four skills thoroughly. So, to be able to make generalizations, further studies with larger groups are needed to be carried out.



For class attendance to have the most academic value, both students and teachers must be actively engaged. Students will accomplish little academically if they only come to class to socialize, complete work for other classes or activities, or sleep. Students must choose to participate in their own education and take responsibility for their learning. Class attendance does not guarantee success, but can enhance the probability of academic success.

Teachers too have an obligation to students to present informative and exciting material that keep students interested and engaged.

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