Perceived Listening, Reading, and Writing Skills as Predictors of Academic Grades among Undergraduates in Sri Lanka

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ABSTRACT

English language proficiency plays a decisive role in academic achievement in higher education systems where English functions as a second language. In Sri Lanka, English is widely used as the medium of instruction across disciplines, yet undergraduates enter university with varied levels of competence in core language skills. This study examines the relative influence of perceived listening, reading, and writing skills on undergraduates' academic grades in Sri Lankan public universities. Using a mixed-methods research design, data were collected from 400 undergraduates representing four major universities in Sri Lanka. Quantitative findings from correlation and multiple regression analyses reveal that perceived reading proficiency is the strongest predictor of academic performance, followed by perceived writing and listening. Qualitative insights further explain how assessment structures, teaching practices, and language anxiety mediate this relationship. The findings provide evidence-based guidance for curriculum design, language support programs, and policy decisions in Sri Lankan higher education.

Keywords: English language skills, Reading proficiency, Writing skills, Listening comprehension

INTRODUCTION

Language competence is a fundamental determinant of academic success in higher education, particularly in post-colonial contexts where English functions as a second or foreign language. In Sri Lanka, English occupies a unique position as a link language, bridging diverse linguistic communities and serving as the primary medium of instruction in disciplines such as science, management, medicine, engineering, and increasingly, social sciences. Despite its institutional importance, many undergraduates struggle with academic English, resulting in disparities in academic performance.

University education demands advanced proficiency in multiple language skills. Students must listen to lectures, read complex academic texts, and write examinations, assignments, and research reports. While these skills are interrelated, their impact on academic achievement may not be equal. Identifying which language skills most strongly influence academic grades is crucial for designing effective pedagogical interventions.

Previous studies conducted in ESL and EFL contexts suggest that reading and writing skills are particularly influential in academic achievement due to the dominance of text-based learning and assessment (Grabe & Stoller, 2011; Hyland, 2013). However, empirical evidence specific to Sri Lankan undergraduates remains limited. Most existing studies examine general English proficiency rather than isolating individual language skills. This study addresses this gap by investigating the following central question:

Which perceived English language skill, listening, reading, or writing, most significantly affects undergraduates' academic grades in Sri Lanka?

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 English as the Medium of Instruction in Sri Lanka

English continues to function as an academic gatekeeping mechanism in Sri Lankan universities. Students who

demonstrate stronger English proficiency often experience smoother academic transitions, while others face challenges in comprehension, expression, and assessment performance (Seneviratne, 2020). This linguistic imbalance contributes to unequal academic outcomes despite comparable intellectual capabilities.

2.2 Empirical evidence from Sri Lanka

Empirical investigations conducted in Sri Lanka corroborate the general finding that English proficiency is an important correlate of undergraduate academic success, while also highlighting measurement gaps, especially for listening. Large-scale national assessments and policy reviews demonstrate systemic challenges in students' English skills upon entry to tertiary education. The British Council's *English Impact* (Aptis) study (2018) mapped reading, writing, listening and speaking skills among Sri Lankan school learners and reported widespread variation in competence and motivation, findings that the report links to transitions problems when learners move into English-medium university instruction (British Council, 2018). The University Grants Commission (UGC) also emphasizes English and IT as essential graduate competencies in its national handbooks and admissions guidance (UGC, 2023), reflecting institutional recognition that language skills shape academic progression.

2.3 Listening Skills and Academic Performance

Listening comprehension enables students to process lectures, understand instructions, and engage in classroom discourse. Vandergrift (2007) argues that academic listening involves complex cognitive processing, including inferencing, note-taking, and synthesis. However, lecture-based teaching styles prevalent in Sri Lankan universities often limit interaction, reducing opportunities for listening skill development.

Several studies report moderate correlations between listening proficiency and academic achievement, particularly in the first year of study (Flowerdew, 2015). Yet, students frequently compensate for weak listening skills by relying on peer notes, slides, or recorded lectures.

2.4 Reading Skills and Academic Performance

Reading is widely recognized as the most critical academic language skill. Academic success depends heavily on students' ability to comprehend textbooks, research articles, examination questions, and supplementary materials. According to Grabe (2009), academic reading integrates vocabulary knowledge, syntactic awareness, and critical thinking.

In South Asian higher education contexts, reading proficiency has consistently emerged as the strongest predictor of academic performance (Khan, 2015). Given the exam-oriented and text-heavy nature of Sri Lankan universities, reading competence is likely to exert a substantial influence on grades.

2.5 Writing Skills and Academic Performance

Writing serves as the primary mode through which students demonstrate knowledge in assessments. Academic writing demands not only linguistic accuracy but also coherence, argumentation, and discipline-specific conventions (Hyland, 2013). Writing anxiety, limited vocabulary, and lack of exposure to academic genres often undermine undergraduate performance. Research indicates that writing proficiency strongly predicts GPA, particularly in humanities and management disciplines where continuous assessment dominates (Ferris & Hedgcock, 2014).

2.5 Research Gap

While existing literature acknowledges the importance of all language skills, few studies comparatively evaluate their individual contributions to academic grades in Sri Lanka. This study fills that gap using empirical data.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

3.1 Objectives

1. To examine the relationship between undergraduates' *perceived* English language skills (listening,

reading, and writing) and their academic grades in Sri Lanka.

2. To identify which *perceived* English language skill most strongly predicts undergraduates' academic grades.

3. To explore undergraduates' perceptions of the extent to which listening, reading, and writing skills influence their academic performance.

3.2 Research Questions

1. What is the relationship between undergraduates' *perceived* English language skills (listening, reading, and writing) and their academic grades in Sri Lanka?

2. Which *perceived* English language skill (listening, reading, or writing) is most strongly associated with undergraduates' academic grades?

3. How do undergraduates perceive the influence of listening, reading, and writing skills on their academic performance?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

A mixed-methods approach was employed to ensure both statistical rigor and contextual depth.

Participants

The sample comprised 400 undergraduates from four Sri Lankan public universities.

Table 1: Sample Distribution

Faculty	Number of Students
Arts & Humanities	120
Science	100
Management	100
Engineering	80
Total	**400**

Instruments

1. **Language Skills Self-Assessment Questionnaire**

   o 15 items (5 per skill)

   o 5-point Likert scale

2. **Academic Performance Data**

   o CGPA obtained with consent

3. **Focus Group Interviews**

   o 40 participants (10 per faculty)

4.4 Reliability

Cronbach's Alpha coefficients:

- Listening: 0.81/Reading: 0.88/Writing: 0.85

4.5 Data Analysis

- Pearson correlation
- Multiple regression analysis
- Thematic analysis for qualitative data

RESULTS

Descriptive Statistics

Table 2: Mean Scores of Language Skills

Skill	Mean	SD
Listening	3.21	0.64
Reading	3.67	0.58
Writing	3.34	0.61

Graph 1: Mean Language Skill Scores (Bar chart showing Reading highest, followed by Writing and Listening)

5.2 Correlation Analysis

Table 3: Correlation between Language Skills and CGPA

Skill	r	p-value
Listening	.38	<.01
Reading	.62	<.001
Writing	.49	<.001

Multiple Regression Analysis

Table 4: Regression Model Predicting CGPA

Predictor	β	t	p
Reading	.45	9.12	<.001
Writing	.30	6.48	<.001
Listening	.21	4.27	<.01

- $R^2 = 0.54$

- $F_{(3,396)} = 61.72$, $p < .001$

Thematic Analysis of Qualitative Data

In addition to the language skills self-assessment questionnaire and academic performance data, focus group interviews were conducted to obtain in-depth qualitative insights into undergraduates' perceptions of how English language skills influence their academic performance. A semi-structured interview protocol was developed based on the research objectives and existing literature. The protocol included open-ended questions focusing on students' experiences with listening, reading, and writing in academic contexts, perceived challenges, and coping strategies.

A total of four focus group discussions were conducted, one from each faculty, with 10 participants per group. Each session lasted approximately 60–75 minutes and was conducted in a mixed-language format (English with occasional clarification in Sinhala when necessary) to encourage participant comfort and depth of response. All discussions were audio-recorded with participant consent and subsequently transcribed verbatim for analysis.

Thematic analysis of focus group data from 40 undergraduates revealed three key patterns regarding the role of English language skills in academic performance:

I. Reading as foundational, with students across faculties emphasizing that comprehension of lecture notes, textbooks, and examination questions was central to academic success, and difficulties in reading often led to poor performance despite adequate subject knowledge;
II. Writing as assessment-critical, where students reported challenges in organizing ideas, using academic vocabulary, and managing writing anxiety, particularly in written examinations and assignments; and
III. Listening as compensable, as students acknowledged difficulties in understanding English-medium lectures but commonly mitigated these through peer notes, lecture slides, recordings, and group discussions.
Overall, the qualitative findings support the quantitative results, highlighting reading as the most influential skill, followed by writing, with listening playing a supportive but less decisive role.

DISCUSSION

The findings clearly indicate that perceived reading proficiency exerts the strongest influence on academic grades among Sri Lankan undergraduates. This result aligns with international and regional research emphasizing the centrality of reading in academic learning. The dominance of written examinations, lecture notes, and reference materials amplifies the importance of reading skills.

Perceived Writing proficiency emerged as the second most influential skill. Students who could articulate ideas clearly and coherently performed better in essays, reports, and structured examinations. Writing anxiety and limited exposure to academic genres were frequently cited obstacles.

Perceived Listening skills, while significant, showed a comparatively weaker effect. Qualitative data suggest that students compensate for listening difficulties through alternative learning strategies such as peer discussions and recorded lectures.

Implications

Pedagogical Implications

- Introduce discipline-specific reading programs
- Establish academic writing centers
- Incorporate interactive listening activities

Policy Implications

- Strengthen English support beyond first year
- Align assessment strategies with language development goals

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that while listening, reading, and writing all contribute to academic achievement, perceived reading proficiency is the most decisive factor influencing undergraduate academic grades in Sri Lanka. Enhancing students' academic reading and writing skills is essential for improving educational equity and performance in higher education.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to English for Academic Purposes (EAP) and second language acquisition research by empirically substantiating a skill-differentiated model of academic language proficiency. Rather than treating English proficiency as a unitary construct, the findings support the argument that academic literacy, particularly reading, functions as the core mediating mechanism between language competence and academic achievement in text-dominant higher education environments. This reinforces literacy-based models of EAP, which emphasize receptive and productive academic skills as discipline-specific and assessment-driven rather than equally weighted.

Furthermore, the convergence of quantitative and qualitative findings suggests that listening skills may be partially compensated through institutional and peer-mediated learning practices, challenging assumptions in traditional EAP frameworks that position listening as equally predictive of academic success across contexts. This highlights the need for context-sensitive EAP theory that accounts for instructional practices, assessment structures, and learner strategies.

Overall, this study advances both theory and practice by demonstrating that academic success in ESL higher education is driven less by generalized language ability and more by targeted academic literacy skills. The findings underscore the need for EAP programs in Sri Lankan universities, and comparable ESL contexts, to prioritize reading-intensive and writing-focused pedagogical interventions, thereby aligning language instruction more closely with the realities of academic assessment and learning.

Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from the relevant university ethics review committee prior to data collection. All participants provided informed consent, and confidentiality and anonymity were strictly maintained. The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest associated with this study.

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