

Enrolling students without literary exposure for a Degree in English: A critical investigation

Hemamala V Ratwatte

Department of Language Studies, Open University of Sri Lanka, Nawala, Nugegoda

The dearth of qualified English teachers in Sri Lanka has prompted authorities to encourage students who have not had any prior formal exposure to English literature, to offer English for the degree. This paper seeks to examine the performance of such students, in a course in English and English literature, in relation to that of students who have had some formal exposure to English literature previously.

The study was carried out using students who enrolled for the Advanced Certificate in English, a one year pre-degree programme offered to students with good proficiency in the language, (assessed through an entry test), before enrolling for the BA in English and English Language Teaching. Three courses are offered at this Certificate, viz. Advanced Writing, Advanced Reading and Introduction to Literature. The first two introduce learners to academic expository prose while the last seeks to familiarize learners with basic concepts in literature with examples from poetry, drama and fiction. The students were grouped according to whether they had had some previous exposure to English literature or not. The marks obtained for the three Continuous Assessment (CA) assignments and the Final Evaluation were used to monitor academic performance. Participation – i.e. whether students complete both CA and Final Evaluation, was also monitored.

The findings indicate that although students who have had prior exposure to English literature perform better than those without a literature background initially in all three courses, in the case of Advanced Reading and Advanced Writing, by the end, the performance of both groups is similar. The picture is complicated however, because a far higher percentage of students without previous exposure opt not to take the final evaluation even though they have scored as well as their counterparts in the CA component. In Introduction to Literature, the overall performance of those without prior exposure is weaker than that of the other group. Also, a distinctly different development pattern can be seen in the two groups in all three courses.

The paper goes on to highlight and make recommendations on the necessity to adopt special measures to enhance these students' ability to deal with written texts which represent a different stylistic, cultural, religious, ethical and social notions as well as the need for mechanisms that would enhance confidence in their own abilities.

Present Address: School of Culture, Language and Communication, IoE, University of London, UK

hemamalar@yahoo.com

Tel: 011 2853777

Ext: 431