

READING EFFICIENCY AND ACADEMIC PERFORMANCE IN LAW SCHOOL

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The ability to read well is a critical, indispensable skill that can make or break the academic career of any aspiring lawyer. (McKinney 2005)

Critical reading skills are key to law success. In fact, reading skills may be more determinative of law school success than LSAT scores. However, some students arrive at law school with deficient reading skills or with undergraduate skills that do not translate into good reading skills in law. (Grise' 2014)

James Stratman, an experienced reading researcher, suggests that legal educators incorrectly assume that law students enter law school with “intact literacy skills” and those skills can be “readily transferred to the texts of law.”

A beginning law student’s success with legal text is based upon both general reading skills and an understanding of the law. (Dewitz 1990) Professor Ruth Ann McKinney summarizes the importance of legal reading to the beginning law student as follows:

Law students-and lawyers-who read law well are getting something from their reading that is not shared by those who read law less proficiently. Starting with the first days of class, what law students understand about the reading process itself has a major impact on how they read their assignments. How they read their assignments determines what they are able to get from those cases and statutes, what they are able to bring to class discussions and take from class discussions, and ultimately – what they are able to learn for exams.

In her 1995 study, Dorothy Deegan, one of the pioneers of legal reading research, inquired: If it could be empirically demonstrated that variability in reading correlates with performance as assessed by grades, then the law school community would be hard-pressed to continue to ignore factors concerning individual differences in student reading.

In her empirical study on legal reading (published in 2007), Christensen suggests a correlation exists between the reading strategies of the top law students and their first semester grades.

Research Aims

The study addressed the following research questions:

1. What is the reading efficiency of the first year law students?
2. What is the general weighted average of the first year law students?
3. Is there a relationship between the reading efficiency and general weighted average of the first year law students?

Method

Participants

This study included the freshman law students for school year 2015-2016 who completed the Nelson-Denny Reading Test Form G at the first day of the first semester; only students whose general weighted average (GWA) were obtained at the end of the first semester were included in the study.

The majority of students were female (56%). Average age was 26.6 (SD=6.16, range 20 to 57). All participants are Filipinos, sufficiently fluent in English.

Measures

The Nelson-Denny Reading Test (NDRT) Form G was administered to classroom groups and yielded scores for vocabulary, comprehension and reading rate.

The Nelson- Denny Reading Test is a reading survey test for high school, college students and adults. A two-part test, the Nelson-Denny measures vocabulary development, comprehension, and reading rate. Part I (Vocabulary) is a fifteen-minute timed test; Part II (Comprehension and Rate) is a twenty-minute test. The first minute of the Comprehension test is used to determine reading rate.

The Nelson-Denny consists a vocabulary section comprised of 80 multiple-choice questions and a reading comprehension section; on the latter section, a reading rate score (based on the first minute of the test) can be obtained. The reading comprehension section consists of seven reading passages and a total of 38 multiple-choice questions (each with five possible answers). Examinees are instructed to read completely through a passage before answering the questions; they are also told that they may look back at the passage but should not puzzle too long over any one question. The passages are divided into three types: Humanities, social sciences, and science. The 38 comprehension questions are divided equally between “primarily literal” items and “largely interpretive” ones.

Procedures

The researcher administered the Nelson-Denny Reading Test Form G at the beginning of the 1st semester 2015-2016 on August 2015 at the Arellano University School of Law, Manila to the incoming freshmen.

The test administrator was responsible for scoring the tests. The study adopted the scoring guidelines for native English speakers and non-native speakers of English from the *NDRT Manual for Scoring and Interpretation* as provided by Houghton Mifflin Company.

Analyses

For statistical analysis of data, mean, standard deviation and Pearson r were used. The computed value of r was interpreted at 0.05 level of significance.

Results

Overall Performance

1. What is the performance of the students as regards vocabulary, comprehension and reading rate?

Stanine	Vocabulary		Comprehension		Reading Rate	
	N	%	N	%	N	%
9	0	0	0	0	2	1.8
8	0	0	2	1.8	5	4.5
7	2	1.8	9	8.11	11	9.91
6	11	9.91	30	27.03	26	23.42
5	24	21.62	48	43.24	21	18.92
4	31	27.93	19	17.12	26	23.42
3	32	28.83	3	2.7	8	7.21
2	8	7.21	0	0	11	9.91
1	3	2.7	0	0	1	0.9
Total	111	100	111	100	111	100
Mean	3.95		5.26		4.9	
SD	1.28		1.33		1.39	

2. What is the GWA of the students?

GWA	Grade		Total	
		%	N	%
1	99-100	0	2	1.8
1.25	96-98	0	5	4.5
1.5	93-95	0	11	9.91
1.75	90-92	0	26	23.42
2	87-89	1.61	21	18.92
2.25	84-86	14.52	26	23.42
2.5	81-83	14.52	8	7.21
2.75	78-80	32.26	11	9.91
3	75-77	37.1	1	0.9
Total		100	111	100
Mean			79.4	
SD			4.54	

3. Is there a significant relationship on paired profile variables of the students?

Variables	Computed r	Tabular r at 0.05	Description	Decision
Vocabulary and Comprehension	0.63	0.1946	Significant	Reject Ho; Accept Ha
GWA and Vocabulary	0.32	0.1946	Significant	Reject Ho; Accept Ha
GWA and Comprehension	0.36	0.1946	Significant	Reject Ho; Accept Ha
Vocabulary and Reading Rate	0.23	0.1946	Significant	Reject Ho; Accept Ha
Comprehension and Reading Rate	0.23	0.1946	Significant	Reject Ho; Accept Ha
GWA and Reading Rate	-0.05	0.1946	Not Significant	Accept Ho

Discussion

The overall purpose of the current study was to assess the reading efficiency of the freshmen law students and investigate the relationship between reading efficiency and general weighted average.

The vocabulary scores of the respondents revealed an average raw score of 52 from a total of 80 items (65%), stanine 3.95. The comprehension scores of the respondents revealed an average raw score of 28 from a total of 38 items (74%), stanine 5.26. The average reading rate was 207 words per minute, stanine 4.9. The mean GWA of the respondents at the end of the first semester was 79.4.

The results revealed the significant relationship of paired profile variables: vocabulary and comprehension, vocabulary and reading rate, comprehension and reading rate, GWA and vocabulary, GWA and comprehension.

Some students arrive at law school with deficient reading skills or with undergraduate skills that do not translate into good reading skills in law. (Grise' 2014) One of the most important skills in law school is to read a judicial opinion efficiently and accurately. Yet there have been relatively few empirical studies researching how law students read legal text. Not only are legal texts "largely incomprehensible" to novice readers, law schools do not always spend sufficient time instructing students about how to read legal text. Instead, we assume our students are good legal readers upon entering law school. (McKinney 2005)

Legal reading is a challenging task for a new law student. To comprehend legal text requires knowledge of legal terminology and an understanding of both case structure and legal theory. Although there are many students who adapt quickly to legal reading, there are others who continue to struggle with legal reading throughout law school. (Lundberg 1987)

Legal educators can no longer assume that all law students are good legal readers simply because they were successful before law school. In addition, just because students did well before law school does not mean they will be successful in the study of law. (Christensen 2007)

Future research

Given the distinct fluency groups identified in this exploratory study, future research may validate instructional methods and curriculum for use with each group. We anticipate that additional experimental and descriptive studies can help disentangle the relationship of skill level and the value of targeted interventions.

Conclusion

A positive and substantial relationship exists between reading efficiency and academic performance in law school.

Adult educators may be able to help many law students achieve greater academic success by teaching how to read law efficiently, effectively and powerfully.

Fortunately, the ability to read law well (quickly and accurately) is a skill that can be acquired through knowledge and practice. The sooner the student masters these skills, the greater the rewards. (Deegan 1995)

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