

ENGLISH PROFICIENCY LEVEL OF SECONDARY STUDENTS

ALAN S. COMPE
SURIGAO DEL SUR STATE UNIVERSITY-SAN MIGUEL
SAN MIGUEL, SURIGAO DEL SUR, PHILIPPINES
e-mail: Compealan@yahoo.com

ABSTRACT

The study aimed to find out students' level of English Language Proficiency. The study used quantitative-qualitative method of inquiry. It made use of a survey questionnaire to describe the profile of students as subjects of the study. The study reveals that the students' level of proficiency is at the average of Moderate Proficiency. In grammar the students rated High Proficiency. It is in the Writing that the students are rated Low Proficiency. In Vocabulary, Reading, Speaking and Listening, the students were rated Moderate Proficiency. High Proficiency level of students in Grammar part tells their proficiency in the use of language structure. There are factors that contributed much why students are low proficiency in writing, one of those is that the four macro skills in English was not fully developed considering that they are graduated from Alternative Learning System during their completion in basic education. Some of the competency in basic education was not fully tackled. There are signs that English proficiency of students is not something to be taken for granted on by secondary teachers. Students have glaring difficulty in Writing in English. English proficiency enhancement is specifically most needed in the area of Writing in English.

Keywords: English Proficiency Level, Writing in English, Students Proficiency

1.0 INTRODUCTION

The concerns of the language teacher in planning the English class first falls on “what to teach and where to start”. A conscientious teacher will never think only of how he or she can deliver the lesson and how much lesson he or she can deliver but most of all he or she should be thinking of how much learning his or her learners will get from the lesson. Given the curriculum, the teacher is moved to follow what shots of lessons to deliver. With this reality however, there is always the question of learners’ readiness to a new wave of learning task. This is especially true to language teaching.

Mittica (2003) said in her TESOL article that while students with limited English proficiency have the opportunity to take some ESL classes while they are in high school, they have to fulfill the same graduation requirements as any other student. Of course, there are some schools that do offer more intensive ESL efforts for those who are new however, the intent of this paper is to keep informed ESL teachers in regular high schools, where ESL is seen to be the responsibility of a distinctly separate department, where ESL teachers typically work in isolation and where opportunities for communication across disciplines are generally lacking. Is this in the best interests of our teachers or our ESL students? heritage, language, family, gender, community and other factors shape experience and impact on learning; that teaching students with exceptionalities requires the use of specialized knowledge and skills; While students with limited English proficiency have the opportunity to take some ESL classes while they are in high school, they have to fulfill the same graduation requirements as any other student.

The global challenge of today to the academic sector is to produce graduates who are employable everywhere they might find a green pasture. After all, for what end should everyone struggle for college education if not to land a promising job. Along with this reality is the significant role of communication skills as a tool of a job seeker to grab the thinnest slice of job opportunity. Most often, a job seeker will always go through an interview. It is here where an individual job seeker should gain impression that the employer finds reason to hire him. Graduates for this reason, must be equipped with high proficiency in English language.

While teachers at DepEd are tested of their English proficiency, behind this test is the question of the teachers’ readiness to use the communicative tool in teaching the students. Reciprocal to the issue of teachers’ English proficiency and readiness in communicating is the product of their English instruction which is the English Language Proficiency of secondary students. Only by testing, that levels of proficiency are measured. It is therefore appropriate to test the high school graduates’ level of English proficiency in order to find out what has to be improved in the English language instruction of the secondary schools. The researcher being one of the secondary school teachers of English has all these reasons to go on the conduct of the study as part of his effort to improve the

English language instruction for the attainment of high English language proficiency of the secondary school graduates.

2.0 Conceptual Framework

The essential concept of this study is anchored on the belief of the researcher that thorough investigation on the level of proficiency of the students will enlighten the instruction plan to make some innovations to attain a desired high level of students' English proficiency. Suggestive design for enhancement will be the guide of teachers as to the process and activities to be done in the English instruction so that whatever is the difficulty of the students that caused their low proficiency will be remediated.

3.0 Research Design and Methods

This study is descriptive type. It described the level of the students' proficiency through which identifying areas of English where students are low was analyzed and contained as basis for recommendatory enrichment program of English instruction to remedy or improve the proficiency of students in English. The scientific process of data gathering was used in order to come up with quantitatively processed data.

The level of students' English proficiency was described according to the ratings they get from the test. It is also the individual components in the English proficiency test that determined where the students are low.

Sampling Procedure

All the students who belong to the graduating class AY-2011-2012 of San Miguel National Comprehensive High School- Main Campus were taken as subject-respondents of the study. The graduating students were chosen among the secondary students because they were recipients of the finished English instruction and curriculum in the secondary school. It was illogical to take samples from other year levels because the instruction they have received is not yet the sum of all the English instruction given to the secondary students.

Research Instrument

The instrument is a test based on a test for English Proficiency provided by Transparent Language. The test was originally based on standard English vocabulary and English grammar that one would find in any English language learning material, so that this proficiency test can measure one's command of the English language. Some modifications were made to fit in the Filipino student's English learning background and was validated by expert English teachers. Since modifications were made, two English professors and experts from Private school and one secondary school English teacher from DepEd were consulted to validate the content of the test and the instrument.

Data Gathering Procedure

First of all, the researcher sought permission from the principal of San Miguel National Comprehensive High School to be allowed to conduct the survey and the English Proficiency test to the graduating students. The researcher prepared the survey questionnaire where the students filled in for their profile. It is from this survey questionnaire that the researcher was able to get data about the personal profile of the respondents.

Another paper prepared was the English Proficiency test for the students to answer and to undergo in order for the researcher to get the level of students' English proficiency. There were seven categories of the test, six of which were answered in pen and paper while the speaking test was answered orally. There were three raters who inter-rated the oral proficiency and writing proficiency of the students using the rubrics for each respectively.

After the test was conducted and the survey questionnaire was filled in by the subject-respondents, the researcher collected the data and computed the summary of the individual rating to come up with a description of students' English Proficiency. The researcher then scrutinized the result as to what area of English is the students' lowest proficiency. This was done in order for the researcher to recommend what area in English language teaching will be improved to gain a lift in the English Proficiency of secondary students.

Statistical Treatment

The data gathered was treated statistically for the researcher to analyze easily. Frequency counting and simple percentage was used to analyze the data gathered through the query of problem number 1. The ratings revealed in the English Proficiency test was treated with mean and came up with a qualitative description based on the scale of parameter.

Scale of Parameter for Speaking Rubric

4.20 – 5.00 -excellent 3.40 – 4.19 – very good 2.60 – 3.39 -good 1.80 – 2.59 -poor 1.00 - 1.79 – very poor

Scale of Parameter for Writing Rubric

3.25 – 4.00 Highly proficient 2.50 – 3.24 Moderately proficient 1.75 – 2.49 Less proficient 1.00 –1.74 least proficient

Scale of Parameter for Level of Proficiency

81 - 100% Very High Proficiency 61–80% High Proficiency 41-60% Moderate Proficiency 21–40% Low Proficiency 1 - 20% Very Low Proficiency

4. Results and Discussions

Table 1

Profile of the Secondary Students

Specific Profile	Frequency	Percentage	Rank
Age			
17 years old	37	61.67	1
16 years old	20	33.33	2
18 yrs and above	3	5	3
Sex			
Female	33	55	1
Male	27	45	2
Mother tongue			
Surigaonon	1	1.67	4
Ilocano	2	3.33	2
Ilongo	1	1.67	4
Tagalog	1	1.67	4
Manobo	55	91.66	1
Educational Attainment			
ALS graduate	42	70	1
Elementary	17	29	2
High School	1	1	3

The subject-respondents' profile is clearly presented in Table 1. It shows their age, sex, mother tongue and educational attainment. As to age, it is seen that majority of the students are in the age of 17 years. There are at most 37 out of 60 (61.67%) subjects who are at the age of 17. The age profile implies that the students started their school at an exact age which is 7 years old to start graders' curriculum. Analyzing from the age and educational attainment of the subject-respondents, about 70 percent of the students are graduated from ALS in their elementary which contributed much to the problem of being unskilled in the four macro skills in English. They have gone through English language subjects for an average of ten years. After ten years of studies with English as among the subjects in the curriculum, now the rate of their English Language proficiency.

In the sex profile of the subject respondents, it is seen that majority is females among the graduating secondary students. There are 33 out 60 who are females. It means that 55% of the subject-respondents are females. The difference in sexes is not too far since females are only 5% over the number of males which compose the 45% of the subject respondents. The findings cannot point out sex difference as the basis of language

proficiency levels. Whatever the average proficiency level of the students, it cannot be related to the point that they are girls or because they are boys.

On the students' mother tongue profile, there are 5 languages spoken as first language. Manobo language is the mother tongue of 91.66% of the subject respondents. Manobo speakers are dominant in the group because there are 55 out of the 60 students under test. It implies that whatever is their learning in English has become, there must be some influences of the Manobo language as their first language.

The case of this group of subject-respondents' profile when given weight in relation to the English Language learning can be pointed to age and mother tongue profile. While it is true that the secondary students have been in formal school for ten years and have studied English for ten years, they are also being immersed in their mother tongue which is Manobo.

Psycholinguistics transfer theory states that, when learning a target language, one's mother tongue can inevitably have a certain influence on it. This kind of influence is called "transfer". "Transfer" may be either positive or negative. Much of the early research of the 1970's was guided by the conception of a "language acquisition device" which facilitates the process of "creative construction" in the mind of the learner. The behaviorist ideas state that second language learning is a process of habit –formation in which the major obstacle to learning is interference from the mother tongue (Davies, Elder, 2006)

Table 2

Students' Level of Proficiency in the Written English

Language Area	Average Rating	Adjectival Rating	Rank
English Grammar	62%	High proficiency	1
English vocabulary	60%	Moderate proficiency	2
Reading Comprehension	51%	Moderate proficiency	3
Speaking	50%	Moderate proficiency	4
Listening	46%	Moderate proficiency	5
Writing	40%	Low Proficiency	6
Total Mean	51.5%	Moderate proficiency	

The data presented in Table 2 reveals that the students' level of proficiency is at the average of Moderate Proficiency. In the 6 components examined in the English language proficiency, it is in Grammar that the students rated High Proficiency where they got a mean of 62%. It is in the Writing that the students are rated Low Proficiency with a mean of 40%. In Vocabulary, Reading, Speaking and Listening, the students were rated Moderate Proficiency.

High Proficiency level of students in Grammar part tells their proficiency in the use of language structure. Part I of the test measured the ability of the students on how to string language into a correct structure. Part II measured also the students' ability to detect errors in grammar or items in the sentence that make it ungrammatical. It revealed students' high proficiency in grammar. There is implication that content coverage of English.

Part III test measured the ability of the students in vocabulary and its usage. Students were described moderately proficient in vocabulary. It implies that their ability in this aspect has not reached maximum level. There is still a need to enhance their vocabulary power which is essential to string language structure into meaningful and functional language. If the student is not achieving in the area of fluency, educators should look into explicitly teach fluency to students in order for them to read smoothly, comprehending what they read more efficiently (Herron, 2008) states "Students who are not at least moderately fluent in reading by third grade are unlikely to graduate from high school"

Part IV was the measurement of the students reading comprehension level of proficiency. It was described of moderate proficiency. The same with vocabulary proficiency, it did not reach maximum level. It simply implies that there is still a room for improvement in the reading comprehension skills of the students. Students may have been scared at opportunities to read more in-depth reading materials. Correlation according to the researchers sought to identify the variable that could account for the greatest amount of variation in reading comprehension. The premise underlying this question is that vocabulary and grammar as components of linguistic proficiency are involved in reading comprehension. (Shiotsu and Weir, 2007)

Part V of the test measured the speaking proficiency. This revelation implies an scarce speaking opportunities of the students. It is related to a major finding of Csizer and Dörnyei's (2005) study with Hungarian learners is that integrativeness is the primary factor in the overall motivational disposition of second language learners. Existing evidence points to the fact that contexts have a profound impact on the way instrumental and integrative motivations relate to language learning. "The nature and effect of certain motivation components might vary as a function of the environment in which the learning takes place.

The part VI of the test revealed the moderate proficiency of the students in listening. It has an implication that there was not much opportunity of the students to engage in listening activities in their classes or in their environment.

In the general view of the secondary students' English Language Proficiency, there can be not much fulfilment finding them to have achieved only Moderate Proficiency in English Language. As to Kern & Warschauer, ((2000) Language is all about living the day to day life especially in this era where technology is very dominant and is using English as

the medium of its operation. If the academic community has to take this seriously as life itself, there can be no smile at this finding. Finding that the secondary students have reached only moderate proficiency, it is recommendatory that there should be a move for enhancement of English language instruction. There is the constant push to train teachers in the use of English language. It is evident in Diokno's (E.C. Dioko 2004) article "Teachers' Bamboo English Won't Do" which stresses that those teachers handling the three content areas with English as medium of instruction should be competent users of the language. Without such competence, the teaching-learning process suffers.

As it is also revealed that the lowest in proficiency of the secondary students among the macro skills in language is in writing. They got a rating only of 40% in writing which is described low proficiency. It means that it is also in Writing skills that the students need more enhancements in instruction. Students were already High Proficiency in grammar. Competence in grammar is already a good tool in writing skill. The students may have a good command in English grammar however; they had a problem in organizing the ideas.

In the study of Ghib (2002) on Secondary School Students' Perceptions of Learning Difficulties and Strategies, the research has shown that more focus should be put on listening and writing since they proved to be the hardest skills. These skills should therefore be reinforced, and students should be given more opportunities to practice English; i.e., they should be given more opportunities to listen to, read, write, and speak the foreign language.

Secondary students' level of English Language proficiency reached only Moderate Proficiency level. Their English Writing has the lowest proficiency which is described as Low proficiency. Their English Grammar is described as High Proficiency, which is a good tool for students in writing skill. Their problem is in writing but not because of grammatical incompetence. The students being low proficiency in writing is caused by low organizational competence. It is well then to recommend the suggestion of Ghazi Ghaith (2002) to remediate low proficiency of students in English Writing. In this suggested activities, writing in English is the main target of development, yet other areas like vocabulary enrichment, listening, speaking and reading proficiency maybe enhanced.

5. Conclusions

Based on the findings of this study conclusions were drawn that sex as variable in this study does not have any bearing at all in the English Language Proficiency of students. The fourth year High School students were in the right age and have been exposed to English as a subject in school for 10 years or so. Being native speakers of Manobo, these students' English language acquisition may have been influenced by their native tongue. Students were already potential in their grammar competence. There are factors that contributed much why secondary students are low proficiency in writing, one of those is that one of the four macro skills in English was not fully developed considering that they are graduated from ALS during their completion in elementary. Some of the

competency in elementary was fully tackled. There are signs that English proficiency of fourth year High School students is not something to be taken for granted on by secondary teachers. Students have glaring difficulty on Writing in English. English proficiency enhancement is specifically most needed in the area of Writing in English.

6. Recommendations

Based on the foregoing conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are firmly pushed; Data on the students' mother tongue shall be given consideration as influential to the students' English Language learning. ALS implementers should assure that their students well equipped with the four macro skills in English. It is important for secondary teachers to evaluate the English Language Proficiency of students every year not only among graduating students to assure quality English instruction; Writing in English of secondary students should be given preferential attention by the English teachers; Secondary English teachers should be given more training in teaching writing and be provided materials and multimedia resources for teaching writing strategies enhancements.

REFERENCES CITED

- Brigaman, K.J. (2002). The Culturally Diverse Classroom: A Guide for ESL and Mainstream Teachers. Paper Presented at the TESOL Convention.
- Csizer, K., & Dörnyei, Z. (2005). The internal structure of language learning motivation and its relationship with language choice and learning effort. *The Modern Language Journal*, 89(1), 19-36.
- Davies, Alan; Elder, Catherine (2006). General introduction. *Applied linguistics: Subject or discipline?* In A. Davies & C. Elder (Eds.), *The handbook of applied linguistics* (pp. 1–18). Oxford: Blackwell.
- Dioko, E.C. English Proficiency. Secuya Web Technologies 2004
- Ellis, Rod Understanding Second Language Acquisition. Oxford, New York. Oxford University Press (1995)
- Ghaith, Ghazi. 2002. Teaching Writing. American University of Beirut.
- Herron, J. (2008, September). Why Phonics Teaching Must Change. *Educational Leadership*, 66(1), 77-81.
- Mittica, Rosalie. Mentoring Mainstream Teachers of ESL Students rosalie.mittica [at ... of Western Ontario ESL course, July 22, 2003) This team approach to mentoring has ...
<http://iteslj.org/Articles/Mittica-Mentoring.html> The Internet TESL Journal, Vol. IX, No. 11, November 2003

McCutchen, D., Teske, P., & Bankston, C. (2008). Writing and cognition: Implications of the cognitive architecture for learning to write and writing to learn. In C. Bazerman (Ed.), *Handbook of writing research* (pp. 451-470). Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Shiotsu, T., & Weir, C. J. (2007). The relative significance of syntactic knowledge and vocabulary breadth in the prediction of reading comprehension test performance. *Language Testing*, 24, 99–128.

Warschauer, M. and Kern, R. (2000) (eds.) *Network-based language teaching: concepts and practice*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Zen, D . What is Wrong with ESL Programs in School? Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of Mid-America Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages, (2001).