

Pre-Service Teachers' Linguistic Proficiency: Basis for An English Language Enhancement Program in State Universities and Colleges

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Abstract

As the academic world becomes increasingly advanced, learners have to improve their linguistic proficiency which is critical for educational enhancement and professional outcomes. This study compared the linguistic proficiency in English structure along content and function words among the secondary education pre-service teachers in a state university and in a state college in northern Philippines. The overall linguistic proficiency of the learners is neither high nor low; though, they have a higher proficiency in Function Words than in Content Words. In state university, the females as well as the younger pre-service teachers have a higher linguistic proficiency. In a state college, their linguistic proficiency is the same regardless of sex or age. For the areas in content words and function words, their performance is comparable, except for adjectives where the pre-service teachers in state college performed better, and in pronouns where the state college pre-service teachers perform better. With this, it would help if an English language enhancement program is initiated and institutionalized as all teachers regardless of specialization are expected to be English language teachers.

Keywords: content words, English structure, function words, linguistic proficiency, Northern Cagayan, Philippines

INTRODUCTION

English, a means of communication for speakers of different first languages, is the world's lingua franca. Arsad, et.al (2014) says it all as it is one of the most effective media of communication in international businesses, and its importance is recognized in the educational system to improve the standard of the individuals' English language capability. Also, its importance has been recognized in South East Asia (ASEAN) region as countries in this part of the globe use English as the medium of instruction in many universities.

In the country, Article 14 Sec 7 of the Philippine constitution states that for purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and English. Hence, the need for both the teachers and the students to be proficient in both languages for the ESL learners to be globally competent. However, as cited in Racca and Lasaten (2016) there have been various studies revealing that the quality of education in the Philippines is continuously declining. This notion is based on the results of achievement tests and board examinations. Not only the elementary and secondary graduates are affected but also the college graduates. The Professional Regulatory Commission (PRC) reports that passers of board examinations in all fields of endeavor continue to go down. One of the important causes for this phenomenon is the low academic performance in the elementary and secondary levels. This academic performance of the students can be attributed to their proficiency in the English language.

Members of the academic community agree that proficiency in the English language is the basis for success in academic pursuits. Reading, writing, and among others are tasks that are based on language skills. Indeed, language proficiency is a key. A person who does not know English, for instance,

may not have access to the world's known scientific and technological discoveries that are predominantly written in English (Fakeye & Ogunsiji, 2009). This means that students need to be proficient in English for a better grasp of information in any field of knowledge.

In learning a second language, debates continue to rage on regarding the teaching of grammar; however, ESL and EFL teachers stress that the study of English grammar is considered "an important aspect in the learning of English" (Ho, 2005). One of the general aims of English, as a second language, to enable students to speak, write, and make presentations in internationally accepted English that is grammatical, fluent, and appropriate for purpose, audience, context, and culture. Knowledge of grammatical rules and terminology is important for all foreign language learners, but especially for undergraduates who are used to cognitive learning and who are aiming for a high level of accuracy in the language (Hall, 2002).

A survey of research evidence shows that grammar can, in fact, be useful in terms of its effects on the learners' communication skills, either in their first language or in a modern foreign language (Paribakht, 2004). There is general agreement in the field that grammar learning is system learning and that such knowledge provides learners with a basis for generative and creative use of language and enables them to manipulate the language data in both comprehension and production of novel linguistic input and output, respectively. Similarly, Kato (1998) forwards that although grammar teaching has been treated in different ways in the past decade, at present, some researchers give favorable account of explicit grammar instruction. Explicit grammar instruction can help learners with their language acquisition in various ways including explicit grammar, rapid learning, improvement of language accuracy, development of interlingua, and prevention of early fossilization.

While it is true that grammar is but one of the areas that a student should master, it is also the sole foundation upon which other language skills are built. Writing and speaking – two skills that are of paramount importance – which directly translate to access to more and better jobs across all industries and sectors, are founded on the essential skills of good grammar. Zhonggangao (2001) argues that grammar can be used as an important means to help adult increase their chances for success in learning a second or foreign language.

With English now considered as a global language of business, eventual state university and state college graduating students and even graduates may find it difficult to compete in the business arena if they have poor proficiency in grammar. One of the thrusts of the English subject in HEIs is to strengthen its efforts to prepare students to use English effectively both in their academic and everyday life. Given this premise, the facility to communicate effectively is not only crucial to the academic success, but also in the professional and career success of the graduates of teacher education in state universities and colleges especially that these graduates shall take the English Proficiency Test (EPT) which greatly contributes to their chances of getting employment in the Department of Education (DepEd). Consequently, it is important that an assessment of the students' grammar proficiency, the foundation by which the more active areas of English language learning is created, be done. It is also believed by some that students in a state university perform better those trained in a state college. These observations, notion and more that are relative to English language proficiency prompted the researcher to conduct this study.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES:

This research generally assessed the linguistic proficiency of non-English major pre-service teachers in the tertiary education (state university and state college) in northern Philippines using a teacher-made language questionnaire to identify weaknesses and to propose an English proficiency enhancement program to eventually improve instruction and the quality of learning for tertiary education students. Specifically, it identified the linguistic proficiency level of the pre-service teachers of a state university and a state college along English structure in content words and function words; it looked into

the English grammar structure which they find it easy/difficult; and it established differences on the linguistic proficiency of the pre-service teachers when grouped according to age and sex.

METHODS AND PROCEDURES

Research Design

The researcher employed descriptive correlation method of research. This undertaking utilized the descriptive method of research to quantitatively assess the linguistic proficiency along content and function words among state university and state college students. A 90- item test was used to further identify the grammar difficulties to improve instruction and the quality of learning for students. It also looked into the sex and age profiles of the pre-service teachers particularly the non- English major students of the Bachelor of Secondary Education program of a state university and a state college. The relationships of the identified variables were looked into.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in one state university and one state college in the Northern part of the Philippines. These higher educational institutions cater to students in the northwestern part of Cagayan province, from the northern part of Ilocos Norte province, and from the lower part of Apayao province.

Respondents and Sampling Procedure

The research included the graduating non –English major students who were enrolled in the Bachelor of Secondary Education program in the College of Teacher Education. A total of 120 respondents were taken from the two groups of respondents. In a state college, a total of 60 students who are non-English major students were taken as sample. Also, in a state university, 60 students were also taken as samples through quota random sampling from the non-English major students.

Research Instrument

The English Language Proficiency Test consists of two subtest namely: Content words on nouns , verbs , modifiers (adjective/adverbs) with 45 items and Function words on prepositions , conjunctions and pronoun with another 45 items of a multiple choice type covering the topics on English structure. In as much as this is a teacher-made test, a pilot study was conducted to check the reliability of the instrument. Based from the result of the pilot, the Cronback alpha obtained a .90 coefficient which is greater than .80 which according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007), instruments with coefficients higher than .80 are considered to have high reliability.

Data Gathering Procedure

Upon approval of the study, a letter was sent to the heads of the HEIs through channels to seek permission to conduct the study and inform them of the nature of the study. After the request was granted, the researcher with the aid of research assistants personally distributed and retrieve the questionnaires. Prior to the distribution of the instrument, the researcher explained the objective of the study to the respondents. Hence, they were briefly oriented as to the nature of the study, and all consented for their participation in the study. The questionnaires were collected after the examination for data treatment using statistical tools.

Data Analysis

The data gathered were recorded, summarized, tabulated analyzed and interpreted in the light of the problems of the study using the following statistical tools: Frequency counts and percentages were used in treating the profile of respondents. The proficiency of the respondents in English Structure based on the different subtests are Content words (Noun, Verb, Adjectives) and Function Words (Pronoun, Preposition, Conjunction) were computed using the mean, percentage, and frequency counts. The scale below was used to describe respondents' proficiency per component.

SCALE		Descriptive Value
Overall Proficiency	Proficiency for each Sub-test	
37-45	13-15	Excellent
28-36	10-12	Above Average
19-27	7-9	Average
10-18	4-6	Below Average
0-9	0-3	Very Poor

In determining the area in their test in English Structure as to content and form that the respondents find easy and difficult the raw score was interpreted using the scale below.

Raw Score	Descriptive Value
13-15	Very Easy
10-12	Easy
7-9	Average (Neither easy nor difficult)
4-6	Difficult
0-3	Very Difficult

Pearson Product Moment Correlation (Pearson r) and Chi-square test were be used to find the difference on the performance of the pre-service teachers in English structure when grouped according to age, sex and school.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-service Teacher's Profile as to Age

About half of the respondents belong to the age bracket 18-20. Of the 120 respondents, there are 45 or 37.50% of the respondents who belong to the age bracket 21-23. The remaining percentages of the population have ages from 24 to 32 years of age. The mean age which is 21.84 or 22 means that the respondents are a bit older than the usual or normal age of a fourth year student which is 19 or 20 years old when they started grade school at 6 or 7. The data gathered imply that the respondents still continue their studies even though they are a bit older than the normal age for a fourth year college student. In short, age is not a matter for them to finish their college education. This supports the report of Gomez (2014) that education knows no age. There are old age individuals who go to school because wanted to prove to their family members that they are capable despite their age. Also, the findings is in consonance to an article published in Canada in 2015 which narrates the stories of old women who attended school and quotes that no one is too old to learn. There is a fear in many adult students that they are simply too

old to go to school. But in the stories presented and many others prove though, there is no reason to be ashamed in pursuing an education no matter what age you are.

Pre-service Teacher's Profile as to Sex

As to the profile of the pre-service teachers as to sex, the gathered data show that be it in a state university or in a state college, there are more female pre-service teachers as respondents than male. Of the 120 population, 85 or 70.83% are female and 35 or 29.17% are male. Further, this means that for every 10 respondents, 7 of whom are female and only three are male. This is not surprising because the report alone by the Philippine Statistics Office on the educational status of men and women in the country, there are 1.4M females enrolled in tertiary education as compared to males with just 1.1M enrollees as of 2016.

Assessment in the English Structure as to Content Words

The raw scores of the pre-service teachers on content words specifically the respondents' score in Verbs, Adjectives, and Nouns in 15 items each show that based from the computed mean score per component, the pre-service teachers find the test in Nouns "Easy" as shown by the computed mean score of 10.53. Their mean scores in Adjective (7.71) and Verb (7.34) are both interpreted as "Average" or the respondents find it neither easy nor difficult.

Comparing the performance of the two groups of respondents, the pre-service teachers in state university had a higher performance in Verbs and Adjectives as shown by their Mean Score of (7.55) and (8.13) respectively. The respondents in State College are a bit lower registering a mean score of (7.15) and (7.28) in Verb and Adjective respectively.

However, for the Noun component of the content words, the respondents in the state college registered a higher mean score of 11.78 compare to the 10.28 mean score of the respondents in State university.

Of the three sub-tests in Content words, the test on Verb was rated the lowest. The learners having a problem on verbs is in relation to the findings of Rahman and Ali (2015) who said that many EFL learners face several problems and continue making mistakes in English verb tenses and aspect even when the students are already in their advanced level studies. Also, in the study of Widianingsih and Gulo (2016), it was found out that among the other difficulties found in the process of learning the grammar of the English language the Indonesian students had grammatical difficulty in tenses of verbs and in the lack of subject and verb agreement.

In another study in support to this findings, it was found out by Tshotsho, Cekiso and Mumbembe (2015) that the top English language grammar challenges of students pursuing their degree in one of the universities in South Africa are challenges related English tenses (present, past, present continuous, past continuous, future, perfect tenses), concord, infinitive forms of the verb among others. Likewise, in an article authored by Acevedo & Rodriguez (2011), they asserted that many educators have trouble with ESL students learning verb tenses. Moreover, several learners have difficulties acquiring this concept because they cannot make a connection between the native language and the second language. Similarly, in an article by Pesce (2018) choosing the wrong tense of the verb and wrong subject verb agreement were included in the top 10 biggest grammar mistakes by ESL. All these articles and researches reinforce the findings that the content word particularly on verb is a challenge and a problem to English as Second Language Learners.

Assessment in the English Structure as to Function Words

The raw score of the pre-service teachers on function words specifically the respondents' score in Preposition, Conjunction, and Pronoun in 15 items each indicate that based from the computed mean

score per component, the pre-service teachers find the test in Pronouns “Easy” as shown by the overall mean score of 11.25. Their overall mean score in preposition and conjunction with 9.63 and 7.2 respectively means that the respondents find the test along those areas “Neither easy nor difficult”.

Looking at the mean score of the two groups of respondents, the pre-service teachers of state university had a higher mean score in Preposition and conjunction as shown in the computed mean score of 9.82 and 7.27 respectively. The respondents in the state college registered a bit lower with 9.43 and 7.12 mean scores in Preposition and Conjunction.

But, for the test on Pronouns, the pre-service teachers in state college registered a higher mean score of 11.9 compared to the 10.57 mean score of the respondents in state university.

Looking at the mean score of each test type in the function words, the test on Preposition received the lowest score. This means that among the three tested areas on function words, this is the hardest. Lindstromberg (1991) and Capel (1993) as cited in Delija and Koruti (2013) avered that prepositions in English are a well-known challenge for ESL learners and it is one of the most problematic areas for they are very confusing and one has to understand all the nuances of the English prepositions, to memorize them and to properly use them. Likewise, Chodorow et.al.(2007) as cited in Dordevic (2013) noted that preposition usage is one of the most difficult aspects of English grammar to master because they are mono-morphemic words which belong to the closed class of lexical items or items that cannot be derived from other words. Prepositions are also non-inflecting which means that they do not have different forms like case and gender as in verbs or nouns for instance. The researcher concluded that preposition is obviously the most difficult field of grammar for ESL learners. Simpson (2014) added that prepositions are tricky little beasts. Common prepositions have several different functions and there is no logical way of deciding which preposition goes with a particular noun, verb, or adjective.

This difficulty by the ESL learners in preposition is also supported by the teachers as claimed in Delija and Koruti (2013) that teachers felt that English prepositions are difficult to teach to nonnative speakers because of the polysemy of prepositions where difficult meanings change according to the context in which prepositions are used, because of lack of a spoken or written guide on how to use prepositions and because of native language interference.

Linguistic Proficiency on English Structure of the non-English major pre-service teachers

The overall linguistic proficiency of the non-English major pre-service teachers of the two groups of respondents along English structure is shown below. The overall mean score of 26.815 (the score after getting the average of content and function word raw score) indicates that the pre-service teachers had an “Average” linguistic proficiency in English Structure.

Comparing the computed mean score on the two divisions of English structure, the respondents registered a higher mean score in function words with 28.05 interpreted as “Above Average”, compared to the mean score for content words which is only 25.58 interpreted as “Average”.

In other words, the pre-service teachers performed better in Function words than in content words.

If we try to compare the performance of the two groups of respondents, for content words, the pre-service teachers in state university performed better than the pre-service teachers in state college as shown by the computed mean score of 25.97 and 25.18 respectively. Both are interpreted as having an “Average” proficiency.

On the other hand, for the mean score of the two groups of respondents along function words, this time, the pre-service teachers in state college had a higher mean score compared to the pre-service teachers of state university as shown in the computed mean of 28.45 and 27.65 respectively. The former is interpreted as “Above Average” while the latter merely “Average”.

The computed mean on the overall linguistic proficiency of the respondents which is average is closely related to the findings of Barraquio (2015) wherein the respondents had a fair score in some

areas, they needed improvement in few areas and they failed in other areas tested in grammar. However, generally, their grammar proficiency needs improvement. Also, San Miguel (2006) as cited in Barraquio (2015) conform the findings that students were deficient in many areas of their spoken English proficiency.

The findings of the current study support the findings in the study on English language proficiency by Racca and Lasaten (2016), where they found out that the students have an average language proficiency level. In the 60 –item Verbal Aptitude in the NCE Test, majority of the respondents gained a satisfactory score. There are also a few students who were rated fair and very satisfactory; however, there were no students who have excellent performance nor poor performance. In another study conducted by Pascual and Clemente (2019) on the grammatical proficiency of the college ESL teachers, it was found out that the respondents show a minimal competence in grammar. They are weak or have a satisfactory rating only in the application of rules in correct usage, S-V rules, analyzing sentences and identifying errors.

Also, in the study of Serquinia and Batang (2018), they found out that majority of the ESL students' English Proficiency is Approaching Proficiency. This means that in a 30-item test in English, majority of them got a score of 16-20 or just the average.

MacFarlane (2015) in his study on investigating the grammar proficiency of English of teachers of English language found that many of the respondents showed a lack of understanding on certain aspects of grammar.

Table 1. Linguistic proficiency of the non-English major pre-service teachers

SCORE in Content Word	Frequency (Percentage)		Overall Mean Score	Descriptive Value
	State University	State College		
0-9			25.58	Average
10-18	3 (5%)	6 (10%)		
19-27	28 (46.67%)	32 (53.33%)		
28-36	29 (48.33%)	21 (35%)		
37-45				
Mean Score	25.97 (Average)	25.18 (Average)		
SCORE in Function Words				
0-9			28.05	Above Average
10-18	3	1		
19-27	29	20		
28-36	28	39		
37-45				
Mean Score	27.65 (Average)	28.45 (Above Average)		

OVERALL MEAN SCORE	26.81	26.82	26.815	Average
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Difference on the Proficiency of the Pre-service teachers when grouped according to AGE

The table below shows the difference on the proficiency of the respondents when grouped according to age. For the respondents in the state university, it was found out that the respondents proficiency in function words differ in age as shown by the f-value of 2.93365 which is higher than the critical value of 2.493670. Looking at the computed mean of each age bracket, the pre-service teachers of state university whose age ranges from 27-29 had the highest computed mean which means to say then that they had a better performance than the rest and the age groups. It was also found that in the overall proficiency of the respondents in content and function words, age was also significant. It means to say then that the overall English structure proficiency of the respondents in state university vary in age based from the f- computed of 2.890498 which is higher than the critical value of 2.493670. Again, based from the computed mean in the age brackets, the age group 27-29 received the greatest mean of 59.

Using the same table, for the respondents in a state college, the pre-service teachers' proficiency in English structure as to content and function words as well as in the overall proficiency have nothing to do with their age as shown by the computed f-values which are all lower than the critical value of 2.53969. It means that regardless of their age, be it they are young or old, their proficiency is the same.

Table 2. Difference on the proficiency of the respondents when grouped according to age

OVERALL PFOFICIENCY OF STATE UNIVERSITY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS				
AGE	MEAN	F-VALUE	F-CRITICAL	REMARKS
18-20	55.71	2.890498	2.493670	SIGNIFICANT
21-23	52.47			
24-26	40.50			
27-29	59.00			
30 and above	55.00			
OVERALL PFOFICIENCY OF STATE COLLEGE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS				
AGE	MEAN	F-VALUE	F-CRITICAL	REMARKS
18-20	53.46	0.141203633	2.53969	NS
21-23	54.41			
24-26	52.00			
27-29	51.67			
30 and above	53.33			

Difference on the Proficiency of the Respondents when Grouped according to SEX

Table 3 shows the difference on the proficiency of the respondents when grouped according to sex. For the group of respondents in a state university, it was found out that sex has something to do with their proficiency in function words. This is evidenced by the computed t-value of 1.67477 which is higher than the critical value of 1.66462. Basing from the results, the males performed better in function words than females. For, the proficiency of the males and females in content words, their proficiency is comparable. However, in the overall proficiency of the respondents in state university, it is also significant as shown in the computed value of -1.79172 which is higher than the critical value of 1.66462. Since the computed mean for females is higher than males, the females performed better in English structure than males.

This is in consonance to the findings of Arsad, Buniyamin and Manan (2014) among Malaysian students wherein in their English Proficiency, the females performed better than males. Also, in the study of Pascual and Clemente (2019), the English proficiency of the females particularly in Grammar is higher than males. Similarly in the study of Barraquio (2015) found that the performance of females in grammar is a bit higher percentage than males though both scores had similar interpretations of poor-needing improvement.

Table 3. Difference on the proficiency of the respondents when grouped according to sex

PROFICIENCY OF STATE UNIVERSITY PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS				
SEX	MEAN	T-VALUE	T-CRITICAL	REMARKS
MALE	53.32	-1.79172	1.66462	SIGNIFICANT
FEMALE	56.80			
PROFICIENCY OF STATE COLLEGE PRE-SERVICE TEACHERS				
SEX	MEAN	T-VALUE	T-CRITICAL	REMARKS
MALE	55.94	1.50537087	1.671552762	NS
FEMALE	52.72			

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The non-English major pre-service teachers in a state university and a state college in northern Cagayan, Philippines who are a bit older than the normal age for a fourth year college have an "Average" proficiency in Content Words and "Above Average" Proficiency in Function words. These pre-service teachers find Nouns and Pronouns easy, and they find Conjunction, Adjective, Verb and Preposition neither easy nor difficult. Preposition for function word and verb for content word received the lowest scores. The overall linguistic proficiency of the non-English major pre-service teachers is "Average".

In state university, the linguistic proficiency is affected by age and sex. In state college, regardless of age and sex, their linguistic proficiency is the same.

The pre-service teachers in state university performed better in Adjectives, but the pre-service teachers in state college have a higher performance in pronoun. For the other areas in content words and function words, their performance is comparable.

With this, it is recommended that students wanting to graduate as teachers should continue striving to be a teacher who has a mastery of the structure of the English language. University and college professors of the English language could develop an English language proficiency program by

conducting remediation classes, refresher courses and English language seminars and trainings, especially among non-English major students, before they go out of the university to better ensure that these pre-service teachers who will soon be teaching are able to significantly contribute to the development of young and lifelong learners. One cannot teach what he/she does not have; thus, knowledge on the rules and standards of the English structure particularly on content and function words is essential.

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