

PERCEIVED ENGLISH PROFICIENCY OF STUDENTS: ITS RELATIONSHIP TO THEIR ENGLISH PERFORMANCE

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Abstract

This study investigated the English proficiency of college students as perceived by them and by their teachers as well as demonstrated by their actual performance. The college students from the third year level and the teachers of both language and non-language areas were selected through stratified random sampling. The study made use of descriptive-correlational method of research. Data were elicited through the use of survey questionnaire, English proficiency test, and focus group discussions. Results show that students assessed themselves somewhat proficient but are average in actual performance and attribute development of English proficiency to university training and language courses. Moreover, students' perceived English proficiency does not influence and explain their actual proficiency. The study concludes that students' high perception of their proficiency does not necessarily guarantee a high actual performance but their university training and their language courses remain as the primary modes of enriching their English language proficiency. Hence, teachers need to provide more meaningful and authentic activities that would enhance students' language skills needed for social interaction and academic and professional environment.

Key Words: *English performance, factors contributory to development, perceived English proficiency*

INTRODUCTION

In an increasingly globalized and interconnected world, the importance of English cannot be overstated. Many opportunities in international regions and markets are created when one has working knowledge of the English language. The knowledge of the English language opens opportunities of job employment and success as it is the communication medium in fields such as education, business and commerce, and engineering, to name a few. In these fields, many of the available jobs are taken by those who have facility of the English language.

The Philippines used to have the biggest competitive advantage in the global job market because of the proficiency of skilled workers in the English language (Kim, 2006). Impressively, Filipinos have long stood out for their competence and proficiency in English. This advantage, however, is fast being eroded by rising competition from other countries coupled with declining mastery of the English language by college graduates. Today, even colleges are no longer fluent in speaking, reading, and writing the English language. Once students are admitted to the colleges and universities, they are generally required to do one or two more years of language

study, seemingly to give some finishing touches to their English language skills before they board upon the more complex academic work that would, as expected make an invariable demand in the language skills (Flores, 2007). Nevertheless, those faculty members who have had a number of years of experience in teaching English to college students certainly agree that what they have done for them is not the finishing touches intended to make them look like scholars with a world viewpoint but a kind of corrective work that has to be done to bring their language proficiency up to the college or university level.

This is the over-all condition that subsists in most colleges and universities in the country at present which Cagayan State University is not spared from. Many research findings indicate that there are many factors impeding students from learning English effectively. Those factors range from class sizes, learning and teaching resources, learning and teaching practices, motivations, and students' education background. Spolsky's (1989) general model of second language learning model suggested that social contexts play major roles in producing linguistic and non-linguistic outcomes for the learners. It described several factors affecting students' second language learning outcomes. Those factors include students' social contexts, attitudes, motivation, age, personality, capabilities, previous knowledge, and learning opportunities in the form of formal and informal education. In the context of the study, it is believed that students motivations or attitude and perceptions of the English language greatly spell their actual performance of the use of the language. In addition, social contexts such as students' school and home factors, learning opportunities through their college courses, and co-curricular and extra-curricular activities, are all assumed to have contribution to students' development of English proficiency.

Literature Review

English Proficiency

Language proficiency or linguistic proficiency is defined as the ability of an individual to speak or perform in an acquired language. Cummins (1979) introduced a distinction between English spoken in classrooms and English spoken on the playground, which he called Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) and Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) respectively. Later, Cummins (1981) found that students require longer periods of time to acquire CALP; hence, he argued that classroom language instruction should focus on this area of learning English. The terms BICS and CALP, while still in use, essentially refer to social and academic use of English.

In this view, came in English language proficiency as a cornerstone of communication, business, and the economy. Filipinos proficiency in the English language has improved in 1993 as shown by survey results of the Social Weather Stations (SWS) with the spiraling up of the number of Filipinos who understand, write, speak, and think in English. However, three surveys in 1993 to 2006 showed a decline in English competence but made substantial recovery in 2008

survey findings. Specifically, the SWS survey found out that the number of Filipinos who understand spoken English improved from 65 percent in March 2006 to 76 percent in April 2008.

Other figures pertaining to the Filipinos English language proficiency also showed upward movement: of those who are able to read English, from 65 percent to 75 percent; of those who are able to write in English, from 48 percent to 61 percent; of those who are able to speak in English, from 32 percent to 46 percent; and of those who think in English, from 27 percent to 38 percent.

Along this view, Mangahas (2006) said that the apparent improvement of the Filipinos English proficiency as shown by the survey does not appear due to mere sampling variation because the recovery pattern persists when the data are tabulated by the English-related factors of social class, education, and occupation.

Yasin, et.al. (2010), a group of Malaysian researchers, investigated the English proficiency of civil engineering students of a Malaysian polytechnic, through a questionnaire modelled after the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) approach and The Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills report. Their study revealed that the students' frequency or ability of using the English language was low, irrespective of the type of workplace or level of study. Analyses of skill deficiencies revealed wide learning gaps between the acquired and required English skill attributes. Analysis of the survey data had also identified a list of important skill attributes in the workplace, and the four most highly valued English skill attributes were a combination of academic and specific job-related tasks: *understanding technical documents, correct grammar, vocabulary and sentence structure, writing test/investigation report and questioning for clarification*. The results of this study implied the need for curriculum changes (such as content and mode of delivery) so that polytechnic graduates could meet the workplace expectations.

Moreover, Sharif (2005) posited as cited by Aziz (2017) that employability skills of fresh graduates have constantly received considerable attention in the local media. Lack of English language proficiency has often been cited as one of the major factors contributing to graduate unemployment. Similarly, Jawhar (2002 cited in Yasin 2010) stated that in the private sector, graduates are becoming unemployable as a result of lack of proficiency in the English language. Various surveys such as that of Mohe (2008) and Tueh (2008 as cited in Martirosyan, 2015) have been carried out on employers in relevant industries to gauge whether graduates are meeting industry needs and the recurring theme that emerged from these surveys has been the lack of English language skills among fresh graduates and workers. In general, these studies implied that the majority of graduates and workers were limited users of English especially in writing and speaking. In the same vein, Ibrahim, et.al. (2013) concluded that English language proficiency among pharmacy students is affected by lack of confidence in expressing their thoughts and opinions in English as well as lack of time in attending extra classes.

To compound the findings even more, Tong (2003) in a study on identifying essential learning skills in students' engineering education stated that the majority of employers expressed dissatisfaction with students' communication abilities. This ranged from failure in both written and oral communication skills to presentational and other work-specific communication skills such as informal discussions, public speeches and interviews.

Self-Perceived English Proficiency

Indubitably, higher education aims to cultivate students' attitudes, habits and competence as a lifelong learner. Knowles (1976) pointed out that teachers have to help learners develop the attitude and concept that learning is a lifetime process, and learners need to be equipped with the skills of self-directed lifelong learning. Relative to language learning, it is itself a lifelong task, and the skill for learners' self-directed language learning.

With the trend towards globalization, the society and industries demand that human resources are proficient in English. People fluent in English (reading, writing, speaking) have a decided competitive edge in the job market. Thus, in the education system, particularly in ESL context, English is still a core required subject as it is in other education systems. Language is a living subject that evolves over time since people use it to communicate. For the sake of effective communication, language can be changed and modified to meet specific needs. In school, learners should not only learn the language but also be equipped with the skills to continue learning on their own in the future.

In the research conducted by Coo (2005), she aimed at developing and validating a manual for teachers' corrective feedbacking based on the common errors of students in the English proficiency test which was administered among college freshmen students. It was found out that in the listening test, the students committed the highest number of errors in word stress recognition, followed by determining the sentence meaning and recognizing vowels and consonant sounds as the third. The reading test revealed that the students committed the common errors in the use of prepositions, followed by vocabulary and the observance of correct verb form. Writing test, on the other hand, showed that the students scored the lowest in terms of content, followed by language use and mechanics. The data were further supported by the findings on the actual errors of students in language use wherein the observance of verb tenses and correct verb forms got the highest error percentage, followed by mechanics and subject-verb agreement. The speaking test also revealed that the most number of errors were committed in grammar, followed by pronunciation, fluency, and comprehensibility.

However, while teachers may have lamented on their students' limited proficiency, they themselves need to look into their own. Villafuerte's (2005) study revealed that the teachers' competencies and skills were satisfactory in English language proficiency, presentation and discussion skills. There was a marked correlation in the perception of the teachers in English

language proficiency, high correlation in presentation skills, and negative high correlation in discussion skills.

Between the male and female students, the difference in English proficiency was found very significant only in the category of reading comprehension, significant in grammar and correct usage, but not significant in spelling, capitalization and punctuation, and sentence structure. Female students show better language skills than male. She further concluded that the students' English proficiency is influenced by their gender and the type of school they come from, although this is not very conclusive.

PURPOSE OF THE RESEARCH

With the end in view of developing students' language skills as necessary for effective communication, this study generally aimed to assess the students' level of English proficiency, as perceived by them and by their teachers vis-à-vis their actual performance. Specifically, it described the students' level of English proficiency in performing communication tasks. Moreover, it ascertained the factors that contribute to the development of the students' English proficiency and the relationship between the perceived and actual English proficiency of students.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study made use of descriptive-correlational research design. The design enabled the researcher to describe the level of perceived English proficiency of the students and the factors that contribute to the development of the students' English proficiency. The design also established the relationship between the perceived English proficiency and their performance in English.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

There were 292 student-respondents and 87 faculty-respondents that were randomly selected from the colleges of Teacher Education, Engineering, and Business, Entrepreneurship, and Accountancy. The Slovin's sampling formula was used to determine the sample size.

Instruments

To generate data pertinent to the study, the assessment of language proficiency took the quantitative and qualitative forms with the use of a written proficiency test in English, a survey questionnaire, and focus group discussions.

The study made use of the University English Proficiency Test developed as qualifying examination for second year college students in 2007, and subsequently underwent revisions of items as required by the conduct of item analysis. The test specifications were as follows: vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension.

The study also made use of a two-part Survey Questionnaire written in English. The Survey Questionnaire came in three forms: Student, language faculty and non-language faculty. All forms followed the same format: questions to be answered from tick-off choices, with provisions for responses other than those listed. They also had essentially the same content, with changes or adaptations introduced to suit the context of each college respondent.

The Student Survey, in addition to a demographic profile of the student-respondents, had two main parts: (1) a self-assessment of their language proficiency; and (2) their language development.

There was a separate Survey questionnaire for two groups of faculty members from the different participating colleges: language and non-language; the former to include both teachers of English and Filipino and the latter, teachers of major, professional, or technical courses.

The form for the faculty was essentially the same as the student-respondent forms, except that instead of a self-assessment of language proficiency, the teacher-respondents were asked to assess, on the same scale, their students' proficiency in fifteen language tasks.

After all responses were gathered, a group of students from each college was convened for the Focus Group Discussions in order to reinforce and to validate the obtained data from the questionnaire.

Data Collection

A formal request for survey, FGD, and test administration was secured from the Office of the University President and the university deans and campus deans of the different campuses of the university. Before permission from the respective heads was sought, the researcher made an initial survey on the number of students in the third year level and on the number of faculty from the three academic colleges of select campuses of the University identified as the locale of the study. For this to be facilitated, she referred to the Management Information System, the database office of the University.

Language and non-language faculty members of the University were also asked to assess their students' proficiency in English. Like the student-respondents, faculty-respondents were asked to answer questions on language needs – not as their needs, but as the needs of their students, and from their perspective as teachers. Students from the different academic colleges covered in the study were called for focus group discussions, one for each college, to validate their responses in the survey questionnaire.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed with the use of descriptive statistics such as weighted mean, mean rank, standard deviation and Pearson r. Specifically, weighted mean was used to describe the assessed English proficiency as perceived by the students themselves and by their teachers. Mean and standard deviation were employed to gauge students' English test performance. For the

factors contributory to development of students' English proficiency, Mean rank was used while to show relationship between perceived English proficiency and English performance, Pearson r was employed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results and discussion that follow present students' perceived English proficiency, their English performance, the factors that contributed to the development of their English proficiency, and how their perceived English proficiency relate to their English performance.

Perceived English Proficiency

Table: 1
Perceived students' English proficiency.

Communication Tasks	Students	Language Faculty	Non-language Faculty
	Weighted Mean	Weighted Mean	Weighted Mean
1. Presenting reports/other expository materials orally	3.30	2.12	2.72
2. Taking down/summarizing notes from lectures and other forms of oral communication	3.60	1.96	2.76
3. Writing reports/technical papers/case/case studies	3.25	3.27	2.76
4. Reading/analyzing/understanding unfamiliar/abstract/complex ideas found in textbooks, journals, and other academic/technical/professional materials	3.41	1.89	2.66
5. Following/understanding ideas/information presented orally	3.57	2.25	2.88
6. Arguing/defending a position	3.08	3.29	2.67
7. Doing research (defining the problem/gathering, analyzing, organizing, presenting data, etc.)	3.45	3.46	2.78
8. Composing, organizing, and presenting original ideas	3.35	3.25	2.59
9. Participating in discussions/presenting ideas extemporaneously	3.46	2.62	2.68
10. Explaining/interpreting technical matters/terms to the layman (i.e., one who does not have an academic/technical/professional background)	3.35	4.07	2.56
Overall Weighted Mean	3.38	2.82	2.71

Legend:

- 1.00-1.79 Least Proficient (LESP)
- 1.80-2.59 Less Proficient (LSP)
- 2.60-3.39 Somewhat Proficient (SP)
- 3.40-4.19 Proficient (P)
- 4.20-5.00 Very Proficient (VP)

The students were asked to rate their proficiency in ten communication tasks. The students considered themselves to be proficient in taking down or summarizing notes from lectures, reading and understanding complex ideas found in textbooks, following or understanding ideas and information presented orally, doing research, and presenting ideas extemporaneously. They considered themselves somewhat proficient in all other communication

tasks listed. As a whole, the student respondents rated themselves in all communication tasks somewhat proficient.

More specifically, accountancy students doing more analysis as their proficiency rating in three areas shows, could be attributed to the nature of their course which requires them to be more of a reader and a writer than a speaker and listener as cited in their responses during the Focus Group Discussion conducted with them. On the other hand, education students rating of themselves as proficient in writing down lectures re-emphasizes the previous claim that they are made to listen more than talk which may not be in consonance with the nature of their profession. As teachers of the future, they claim as expressed in the FGD, that they expect themselves proficient in the areas of speaking and reading. Sadly, and crucial at this point, what they are expected to be proficient as they do more listening, which is understanding information presented orally, is what they consider to be their less proficient area. It could be inferred that they hear information presented to them but they do not process the information to be significant input, thus, no listening in its strict sense, takes place.

A comparison of the mean ratings shows that the language teachers surveyed considered their students proficient in only two of the communication tasks: doing research and explaining technical matters/terms to the layman. On the other hand, the non-language teachers considered their students only somewhat proficient in majority of the items listed. Two from these communication tasks, *composing, organizing, and presenting original ideas and explaining technical matters to the layman*, were rated by the non-language teachers as tasks where their students are less proficient. On the whole, both language and non-language teachers rated their students putting all communication tasks together, to be somewhat proficient.

Various studies have shown that there can be considerable discrepancies of opinion between learners and their teachers or syllabus experts. Brindley (1989) as cited by Villafuerte (2005) found out that a divergence of opinion between these groups has been noted in relation to the nature of language and language learning of learners. This finding implies that if teachers are aware of where their learners are coming from, how they approach language learning, what they feel about their language learning experiences, and how they like to learn the language, they will be able to facilitate desired learning outcomes in the classroom. Learners must be encouraged to express their learning preferences, both for themselves and teachers. Doing so would allow learners to consider why they are participating in certain activities, how these activities help them learn English, and what use they can make of them both for academic purposes and outside classrooms.

Students’ English Performance Test

Table: 2
Students’ performance in the English Proficiency Test by college.

Skills	Accountancy		Education		Engineering	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD

Single Word Approach(SWA)	3.83	0.835	3.39	0.952	3.64	0.933
Double Word Approach(DWA)	6.08	0.996	4.71	1.877	5.49	1.218
Context Clues (CC)	5.92	1.881	3.72	1.839	4.18	1.669
Reading Comprehension (RC)	18.67	2.674	16.13	3.267	16.51	3.307
Correct Usage (CU)	19.08	3.288	15.31	3.891	17.13	3.788
Identifying Errors (IE)	17.58	2.610	13.71	4.556	15.56	3.265
Overall Score	71.17	8.111	56.97	12.565	62.51	9.809
Index of Mastery	71.17		56.97		62.51	

Legend: Score Range

SWA-1-5

DWA-0-10

CC-0-10

RC-3-25

CU-3-25

IE-0-25

Comparably, among the three colleges that were administered the test, the students of the College of Business Entrepreneurship, and Accountancy scored highest. The scores of College of Engineering students were generally higher than the scores of the students from the College of Education. According to the results, the Accountancy students scored highest in correct usage while the weakest was on vocabulary specifically in using context clues. The Engineering students also had least difficulty in correct usage and the most difficulty on vocabulary particularly in using context clues. The students from the College of Education scored highest in reading comprehension, and similarly as with the other two colleges, scored lowest in vocabulary on using context clues.

The language component in teacher training courses remains inadequate (Kelemen, 1994). The language courses are provided to enable the prospective teacher to develop communicative competence so that by the time they graduate with the course, they would have gained at least the basic language skills of speaking, listening, reading, and writing, and would have developed reading comprehension in English. But the inadequate background and proficiency level of students can only lead to unsatisfactory levels of language proficiency with dire consequences to the quality of classroom teaching as gleaned from actual use of learners. It can be surmised that the students' low level of proficiency in English is reflective of the substandard training accorded to students. This therefore indicates that the teaching of English at all levels needs to be improved especially in teacher training courses.

The performance of the students from the College of Business, Entrepreneurship, and Accountancy show the most impressive result. This finding could be attributed to the fact that there are screening activities done in the retention of students in the college. Students are then motivated to perform better as they go up the ladder, thus, being more equipped with knowledge of the language and become language proficient (Coo, 2005). The engineering students showing a better performance than the education students could also be attributed to the selection and

retention schemes made on the students. Students in the college are also screened in the upper years of their education.

Moreover, the findings of the study are a transparency of the communication activities mostly engaged in by students, where they do best and where they do not. This finding could be ascribed to the emphasis done by teachers in teaching the students the language. Curriculum-wise, looking into the courses offered, they all point to more time spent to the use of grammar and to the comprehension of texts. Least emphasis was given to vocabulary building. The claim was further supported by the students' respondents during the focus group discussions that their teachers do not teach them the jargons of their course, thereby, weakening their skill in seeing the relationships of words in context.

Factors Contributory to Development of Students' English Proficiency

Table: 3
Factors contributory to the development of students' English proficiency.

Category	Accountancy (Mean Rank)	Education (Mean Rank)	Engineering (Mean Rank)
School and non-school Factors			
1. Home	5.58	4.70	4.80
2. Friends	4.25	4.13	4.51
3. Grade School	3.25	3.60	3.64
4. High School	1.75	2.41	1.89
5. College/University	1.42	1.56	1.76
6. Workplace	7.08	5.96	6.35
7. Media	4.75	5.22	5.43
College Courses			
1. Literature/Humanities	3.75	3.17	2.76
2. Language/Communication (Functional English 11A and 11B, English 11and 12, etc.)	1.67	1.54	1.69
3. Natural/ Physical Sciences (Chemistry, Biology, Mathematics, etc.)	4.00	4.10	4.22
4. Philosophy/Social Sciences (Political Science, History, Social Studies, etc.)	3.83	3.86	3.67
5. Major courses (English, Sciences, Mathematics, etc.)	1.75	2.43	2.73
Co- and Extra-curricular Activities			
1. Campus politics	5.50	4.81	4.80
2. School newspaper	3.75	3.77	2.93
3. Seminar-workshops	3.67	4.00	4.18
4. School organizations	3.25	3.48	3.67
5. theater/cultural groups	4.33	4.97	5.20
6. Practicum/on-the-job training	5.00	5.04	5.71
7. Classroom interactions/discussions	5.92	1.60	1.40

The students from all three academic colleges attributed their proficiency in English to both home and school factors except for curricular factors where their responses differed. For all

three colleges, college/university training and their language courses were considered to be the greatest contributors to the development of their English proficiency.

Notably, the findings show that the language courses in the curriculum of all three academic colleges in the University are responsive to the language needs of the students. Students claim during the Focus Group Discussion conducted with them, that their language courses were really helpful, just that they do not find themselves motivated in the active and proficient use of the English language because teachers themselves do not model its use in their transactions and discourses with them. Furthermore, it could be inferred from the findings that students are generally motivated to develop their proficiency if they are actively engaged in the teaching-learning process.

Relationship between Perceived English Proficiency and Test Performance

Table: 4
Relationship between perceived English proficiency and English Proficiency Test performance.

English proficiency test	r-value	Probability
Single Word Approach	0.103 ^a	0.082
Double Word Approach	0.042 ^a	0.478
Context clues	0.005 ^a	0.937
Total	0.051 ^a	0.395
Reading comprehension	0.015 ^a	0.797
Correct Usage	0.067 ^a	0.264
Identifying Errors	0.068 ^a	0.251
English proficiency	0.064 ^a	0.282

^a=not significant at .05 level

The findings indicate that the perceived students' English proficiency does not relate to the English performance of the students. Students' assessment of themselves as regards their proficiency in different communication situations does not significantly influence their actual proficiency as reflected in their average mastery of reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study mainly investigated the English proficiency of college students as perceived by them and by their teachers as well as demonstrated by their actual performance.

Findings show that students assessed themselves somewhat proficient in the different communication situations but their actual proficiency based on test scores is at the average. Both home and school environment are a factor to the development of students' proficiency in English but college/university training and their language courses are the greatest contributors to the

development of their English proficiency. Moreover, students' perceived English proficiency does not influence and explain their actual proficiency.

The students' high perception of their proficiency does not necessarily guarantee a high actual performance and vice versa. Development of students' proficiency in English is attributed to both home and school factors, however, college/university training and their language courses remain as the primary modes of enriching learners' English language proficiency.

The study suggests that University administration, through its language teachers, needs to strengthen the English language program already existing in the university. Teachers are also encouraged to develop more the English proficiency of learners by providing meaningful and authentic activities that would enhance skills and strategies; increase their self-confidence through practice and training; and enhance their language skills needed for social interaction and academic and professional environment. It is likewise recommended that similar studies be conducted to include language needs of students as perceived by them and their teachers.

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