

# Assessing English Language Proficiency Among Students in Public Secondary Schools

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**Abstract**— English is widely regarded as the most significant second or foreign language. Proficiency in this language is considered essential across diverse academic contexts. This study aimed to determine the level of English proficiency of high school students in some public schools in the Philippines. It utilized a quantitative research design, using descriptive statistics techniques for data analysis. The English Achievement Test was employed as a research instrument. The findings revealed that the students had a very low English proficiency level in the following essential skills: vocabulary, reading, grammar, listening, and speaking, indicating a substantial need for improvement. Consequently, there is an urgent need to implement targeted instructional interventions aimed at strengthening students' English language proficiency level, especially for students aspiring to pursue tertiary education. Knowing diverse strategies and approaches, which are research-based and proven to be effective through empirical evidence, could serve as an anchor in making informed decisions. However, addressing this issue presents a significant challenge that cannot be managed solely by English teachers, requiring collaboration from all stakeholders.

**Keywords**— Academic performance: descriptive statistics: fishbowl method: Philippines: second language acquisition.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language is a vital aspect of any society, serving as an important tool for communication and in the teaching and learning process. There is a considerable amount of published literature on the field of language, and many of these studies prove that language is the major vehicle for learning (e.g., Azarnoosh, 2014; Fryer, 2019; Galloway et al., 2019; Hopp et al., 2019) and for participating in human endeavors (Sućeska, 2018). Language is also considered the heart of any school curriculum (Foray, 2020; Lyster, 2015). Recent evidence suggests that throughout the world, being able to speak at least two languages (including the English language) or even more is of great advantage, particularly in the academe and even for an individual's and a country's socio-economic advancement (Eng & Muuk, 2015; Fandiño et al., 2019; Lanvers, 2018; Phantharakphong, 2012; Prasangani, 2015; World Economic Forum, 2018).

Many educators consider English as the most significant foreign language; hence, proficiency in using this language, particularly in communication, is a skill "that should be developed in all academic contexts" (Fandiño et al., 2019, p.1). Research shows that English proficiency could influence students' classroom participation and enhance critical thinking skills (e.g., DeWaelche, 2015; Racca & Lasaten, 2016). Further, English proficiency could guarantee opportunities for

graduate studies, a well-paying job, the ability to converse with other people in other countries (e.g., while on travel), and is often associated with enhanced socioeconomic opportunities and improved quality of life (Akbari, 2015; Crystal, 1997; Flores, 2024). As a result, a large number of people regard English as the world's lingua franca (Sucuoglu, 2017). Akbari (2015) identified several reasons that emphasize the importance of knowing the English language: (a) the use of technology and digital resources that are written mostly in English; (b) the explosion of knowledge or information, specifically in using the Internet; and (c) for cultural exchange among nations.

Significantly, English is now considered the second language of many countries in Asia (Kuo et al., 2015; Sani et al., 2014). Several of these countries (e.g., Malaysia and Thailand) implemented English as a medium of instruction that aims to improve English proficiency among their learners (Eng & Muuk, 2015; Phantharakphong, 2012).

However, English teachers in a developing country (like most countries in Asia) find it difficult and challenging to teach their students to learn the English language (Akbari, 2015). For instance, Phantharakphong (2012) found that Thai learners have difficulty using English to communicate effectively. This is also true in Malaysia; the English proficiency of their students needs improvement (Melor & Nur, 2011; Eng & Muuk, 2015).

In the Philippines, which is also a developing country in Asia and is considered one of the largest English-speaking countries in the world (Cabigon, 2018), students' proficiency in reading, math, and science was found below average in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results; all these subjects were tested using the English Language (PISA, 2018). Even with the latest results of PISA, the Philippines is in the bottom four among 64 countries (Chi, 2024). Extensive research has shown that students' English proficiency in the Philippines is steadily declining (Jimenez, 2018). There are more or less 400,000 college graduates every year in the Philippines, 75% of these graduates have substandard English skills (Bradillo, 2014). Studies revealed that most Filipino English teachers lack the skills to effectively conduct language instruction (Digap, 2016; Falsario et al., 2014).

This study aimed to examine the level of English language proficiency of Filipino high school students in some selected public schools in the Philippines. It further sought to evaluate their proficiency in the following essential skills: vocabulary, reading, grammar, listening, and speaking.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Language is something innate to man and does not depend on intelligence, but on the brain's autonomous function, since the ability to learn a language is shared universally by all humans (Chater & Christiansen, 2018). In the 1960s, language experts encountered a theoretical revolution, which began with Chomsky's publication of *Syntactic Structures* (1957). This upset the belief that language is learned by imitating, memorizing, and being rewarded for saying the correct things. Chomsky argued that the central force guiding language acquisition is the Language Acquisition Device (LAD) (Barbiere, 2020; Harris, 1989). This device governs all human languages, determines what possible form human language may take, and permits children to acquire the vastly complicated system that comprises human language in a relatively short time (Chomsky, 2006).

This idea of Chomsky inspired a great deal of research in language acquisition, for example, Lenneberg (1967) with his *Critical Period*, Brown (1973) with his *Grammatical Morphemes*, and Oxford (1990) with her *Language Learning Strategies*, among others, found striking evidence that some learning behaviors are common to all children and adults no matter what language they are learning, and that language acquisition is an interaction between the child's innate mental structure and the language environment. Krashen (1981), however, stressed that language acquisition requires meaningful interaction in the target language (natural communication in the environment) in which speakers are concerned not with the form of utterances but with the message they are conveying. The best methods, then, in acquiring a new language are those that supply comprehensible inputs (e.g., gestures, facial expressions, circumstances, etc.) in low-anxiety situations.

In his seminal work, Halliday (1970) identified seven basic language functions as indicators in acquiring a target language (e.g., English language). These are the *instrumental function* (using language to get things); the *regulatory function* (using language to control the behavior of others); the *interactional function* (using language to create interaction with others); the *personal function* (using language to express personal feelings and meanings); the *heuristic function* (using language to learn and discover); the *imaginative function* (using language to create a world of the imagination); and the *representational function* (using language to communicate information).

It stands to reason that if a person can perform the above functions of the language, the acquisition is successful. Nonetheless, learning a second language like English is a little more challenging and intricate than learning the first language.

Second language acquisition is the process of acquiring a new language beyond the mother tongue through meaningful use and interaction (Ambridge & Lieven, 2011; Aljumah, 2020; Stefansson, 2013). Learning a second language usually occurs in different contexts. Researchers agree that the two most important contexts are the following: (a) that the second language is socially dominant (for instance in most parts of the Philippines wherein the English language is socially dominant) and (b) the language is not widely used in the

learner's immediate environment (Fandiño et al., 2019) and they do not have the opportunity to apply English outside of the four corners of the classroom. Thus, Ziegunfuss et al. (2014) indicated that the student's learning environment is essential in learning the English language.

Recent studies show that there are several factors affecting the learning of English as a second language (Chan, 2018; Cheng & Lee, 2018; Kachlicka et al., 2019; Tsai, 2019; Vattøy & Smith, 2019). Some of these factors are the teacher's pedagogical skills and proficiency in English (Digap, 2016), the learner's socioeconomic and cultural background (Greenfader et al., 2014; Kieffer, 2010), a collaborative effort among school, family, and community (Buxton et al., 2012; Louie & Welton, 2016), among others. Fandiño et al. (2019) stressed that all these factors related to second or foreign language acquisition could be categorized into context (e.g., social and education contexts, common beliefs and cultural sensitivity about the second language, the time devoted to its study, etc.) and subject or person (e.g., aptitude, learning process, and affective factors like empathy, anxiety, motivation, etc.).

## III. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized a quantitative research design and employed descriptive statistical methods, specifically the mean, median, and standard deviation. The Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) was used for data analysis.

The respondents were identified through the fishbowl sampling technique, comprising 260 students (10%) out of 1,883 junior high school students from the 14 randomly selected public schools (50%) in one division of the Department of Education (DepEd) in Leyte, Philippines.

The English Achievement Test was used as a research instrument, which provided valuable data on the students' mastery of the English language in terms of vocabulary, reading, grammar, listening, and speaking. This instrument has undergone content validation by experts in language teaching, as well as English and reading teachers, which resulted in the revision of some items to better align with the reading level of the respondents. This was also pilot-tested and refined before the data gathering commenced.

Formal letters requesting permission to conduct the study from DepEd officials, as well as informed consent from the respondents, were obtained before data collection. Numerical codes were assigned to each respondent to protect their identity. All data collected was treated with the utmost confidentiality.

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading, grammar, listening, speaking, and vocabulary were among the abilities taken into account when determining English language competence. The data, as illustrated in Table 1, show that the respondents' vocabulary skills ( $M = 10.9$ ,  $SD = 4.40$ ) yielded 76% and a grade equivalent of 3.0, indicating that the students' vocabulary skills need improvement. Similarly, students' reading skills ( $M = 10.7$ ,  $SD = 3.60$ ) obtained 78% and a point equivalent of 2.75, grammar ( $M = 9.5$ ,  $SD = 5.68$ ) got 75% and a point equivalent of 3.0,

listening ( $M = 18.6$ ,  $SD = 3.77$ ) resulted to 76% and a point equivalent of 3.0, and speaking skills ( $M = 9.1$ ,  $SD = 3.77$ ) obtained 76% and a grade equivalent of 3.0, all of which were at very low levels. Consequently, the overall English proficiency of the respondents ( $M = 58.8$ ,  $SD = 19.53$ ) resulted in 76% and a 3.0 grade equivalent, indicative of poor or very low-level English proficiency.

TABLE I. Students' English proficiency level

Variable	Highest Possible Score	Mean Score	S.D.
Vocabulary	30	10.9	4.40
Reading	24	10.7	3.60
Grammar	30	9.5	5.68
Listening	51	18.6	13.42
Speaking	26	9.1	3.77
Overall	161	58.8	19.53

N=260

These findings align with numerous Asian studies demonstrating a steady reduction in English language proficiency among students, particularly those enrolled in public institutions or schools (e.g., Eng & Muuk, 2015; Fontillas et al., 2022; Melor & Nur, 2011; Phantharakphong, 2012). Some studies, however, negate these findings. For example, Racca and Lasaten (2016) found that the majority of the Grade 8 students of the Philippine Science High School (PSHS) in Northern Luzon demonstrate a satisfactory level of English language proficiency. This could be associated with the tedious and rigorous screening of their applicants. Students who are accepted into PSHS must pass a competitive exam that assesses students' aptitude in science, math, language, and abstract reasoning. Student passers are considered scholars and receive monthly allowances from the government. It is interesting to note that most students who are admitted to PSHS come from private schools. Research proves that several factors may affect the students' English proficiency (Azarmoosh & Birjandi, 2012). These should be identified, addressed, and applied (if found helpful and effective), especially in the Philippine public schools.

It is also important to emphasize that the Philippine educational system, through the Department of Education (DepEd), has undergone a series of overhauls in its educational reforms to uplift the quality of education in the Philippines, for instance, the Basic Education Curriculum (BEC) which was implemented in 2002, Understanding by Design (UBD) in 2010, K to 12 Curriculum implemented in 2012, and recently the MATATAG Curriculum.

Further, these innovative actions are merged with English programs (e.g., Language Arts and Multiliteracies Curriculum (LAMC)), which were created as a solution to the poor performance of Filipino learners (Barrot, 2018). There are also reading programs carried out, like Every Child A Reader Program (ECARP), Do It And Make A Reader (DIAMAR), Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Reading Enhancement Advocacy Program (REAP), etc.

These programs are forged and solidified with initiatives from various sectors of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), for example, Sa Aklat Sisikat Foundation (SAS), Kuya Efren Kariton Classroom, and God's Kids Literacy Program.

Yet all these reforms seem to come short of their expected outcomes (Bautista et al., 2009; Ocampo, 2024). This clearly underscores the continuing need for more responsive and evidence-based educational interventions.

## V. CONCLUSION

This research examined the English competency of high school students in some selected Philippine public schools. The findings revealed that secondary students demonstrated limited English proficiency across all essential skills, including vocabulary, reading, grammar, listening, and speaking, indicating a substantial need for improvement. These results are consistent with various research studies and with international assessments like PISA.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings of the study, there is an urgent need for targeted instructional interventions aimed at strengthening students' English language proficiency level, especially for students aspiring to pursue tertiary education. Proficiency in the English language is undeniably essential as it enhances their academic performance and widens their chances for success in a globally interconnected environment (Kirkpatrick & Deterding, 2011; Flores, 2024). Failure to master the English language could result in difficulty in most subjects. College-level demands proficiency in reading, writing, and speaking in the English language.

These necessitate English teachers, notably at secondary levels, to have knowledge and expertise in various strategies, approaches, and methodologies in teaching the five fundamental language skills, which are research-based and proven to be effective through empirical evidence. These could serve as an anchor in making informed decisions relative to enhancing their students' English proficiency. For instance, research shows that engaging students through interactive and collaborative activities like project-based tasks, role plays, and discussions could improve learners' vocabulary and grammar skills and enhance their confidence in speaking the English language (Eslit & Valderama, 2021).

Opportunities must also be provided for students to use the English language in all modalities (speaking, writing, etc.), anchored on the real-life or contextualized setting, integrating practical application in everyday life experience (Azarmoosh & Birjandi, 2012; Hiver et al., 2024). Variables such as instructional methods, technology, and access to resources could also be considered. Research in these areas can offer valuable insights that might effectively improve students' English proficiency, particularly among Filipino learners. These could also provide educators with data-driven strategies for designing and implementing targeted English instruction programs.

It is also important to note that an English teacher alone is unlikely to achieve meaningful success in this undertaking.

The education of a student necessitates the shared commitment and collaborative support from all the stakeholders: administrative staff, parents, community members, legislators, and policymakers.

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