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## LANGUAGE USE, NEEDS, AND PROFICIENCY OF ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE (ESL) LEARNERS

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**Abstract:** *Language remains to be the most essential tool for development. Students' success in academic endeavor greatly depends on their skilful use of the language of communication, in general and instruction, in particular. Hence, this study investigated the language use, needs and proficiency of English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. It made use of both quantitative and qualitative methods through a written English proficiency test, survey questionnaire, and focus group discussions. The respondents of the study were third year college students and faculty, both language and non-language. Results show that students are generally listeners in class lectures, speak most in study group discussions, read most the textbooks, and write most frequently lectures and other notes. Students' assessment of themselves together with their teachers' assessment of them as regards their proficiency in different communication situations shows a rating of somewhat proficient which closely confirms their average mastery in the English proficiency test. Both students and faculty attributed their proficiency in English to both home and school factors but college/university training and their language courses were considered to be the greatest contributors to the development of their English proficiency. While grammar was most emphasized in their language classes, the students and faculty still cited the same to be the skill students need the most improvement and the skill students would most need to advance in their career.*

**Key words:** *language use, language needs, language proficiency, career advancement, communication situations, factors contributory to development*

### INTRODUCTION

Language is in the heart of modern education – of all transmission of knowledge. Thus, academic success and failure are dependent on skilful use of the language of instruction. It has been observed that even colleges at present times are no longer fluent in speaking, reading, and writing the English language. Linguistic situation in the country today is such that there are less and less opportunities for the students to practice the English language, especially in the macro- skills of speaking. 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. 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. For this reason, after several years of exposure and experience to the English language, the Filipino students in general are still not accustomed to and proficient. Numerous books have been prescribed; yet, results revealed that the majority of the students are handicapped in the use of English. In view of the aforementioned issues, the researcher was motivated to conduct this study, which shall be made a reference for language policy formulation, language program enhancement, planning, and decision making of the University. Furthermore, the researcher was moved to look for more measures in developing the language proficiency of students by identifying their needs in language and their use of language.

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study made use of both quantitative and qualitative method in assessing students' language use, needs, and proficiency with the use of a written proficiency test in English, a survey questionnaire and focus group discussions. The respondents of the study were students, language faculty, and non-language faculty. The written English proficiency test has test specifications on vocabulary, grammar, and reading comprehension. The survey questionnaire was adapted from the *Living Language* book of researches by Guzman, et.al. (1998) and was designed to elicit answers from both faculty and students. The Students' Survey Questionnaire written in English consists of five parts such as the respondent's language background, their language use and preference, a self-assessment of their language proficiency, their language development and their language needs. The survey questionnaire for language and non-language 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. The Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) were held to gather additional insights on language use and needs from the students as well as to reinforce and validate, whenever possible, quantitative data obtained in the course of the study.

## **RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS**

### **Extent of English Use in Different Communication Situations**

Among the various listening situations, class lectures topped the list of listening activities most frequently engaged in by the students and teachers. Among the speaking activities, students most frequently engaged in study – group discussions, whereas interviews for language faculty and informal conversations for non-language faculty. For materials most frequently read, both students and teachers, cited textbooks. For writing activities, the students and teachers most frequently engaged in writing lectures and other notes.

As faculty members, the teachers reported engaging in the four communication activities in different frequencies. The language teachers ranked speaking, perhaps by virtue of their being language teachers, as that which they most frequently engaged in, followed by listening, then by reading. Similarly, the non-language teachers also ranked speaking as their most frequently engaged in activity. This activity was followed however, by reading and then by listening. Writing was cited by both groups of teachers as the activity they least frequently engaged in.

It could be gleaned from the table that students do not actively engage in communication activities as they do more of listening than speaking. The findings could also mean that there is still no paradigm shift in education as teachers still do more of the talking, making them the center of the educative process, rather than the students. This finding implies that students would not effectively use the language necessary of them to be equipped since there were less opportunities given them to speak the language. It could also be explained by the findings of the study that reading is least frequently engaged in, basically because teachers provide readily the information students ought to know by themselves. Motivation therefore, to hone this skill is not properly given.

Among the various listening situations, class lectures topped the list of listening activities most frequently engaged in by the students. Study-group discussions got the second rank. Third in the list of listening situations most frequently engaged in was the oral reports and



presentations. Least frequently mentioned were symposia/seminar-workshops and lectures by visiting lecturers. Interestingly, most language teachers said they listened most often to audio-visual presentations. Second in rank was to oral reports and presentations. Third on their list were recitations and class discussions. Like the students, the language teachers engaged least frequently to symposia/seminar-workshops and lectures by visiting lecturers. The non-language teachers, similarly, ranked class lectures with that of the students as their first. Informal conversations followed closely. Recitations/ class discussions and consultations/interviews were third in their list. Like the other two groups of respondents, the non-language teachers also least frequently engaged in lectures by visiting lecturers. But a very interesting contrast is shown as audio-visual presentations came last in their rank and which came first for the language teachers.

The findings show that the actual classroom setting employs the use of class lectures, adhering to the old paradigm where the teacher is at the center of the curriculum and not the students. This may not be very motivating for students to learn more the language, because accordingly, they just become passive learners. Additionally, they learn by themselves and not with an active engagement between them and their teachers. Studies show, such as that of Stapa (2003), that types of learning that emphasize receptive skills only were not appealing to students. They did not like to be sitting passively in classroom, but to be actively engaged in classroom practices.

Most of the students mentioned that, among the speaking activities listed, they most frequently engaged in study-group discussions. Second in their list were the class recitations, followed by informal conversations. The speaking activities they least frequently engaged in were participating in symposia/seminars and performing/participating on stage/radio shows.

For the language teachers, consultations/interviews appeared to be the primary speaking activity most frequently engaged in, followed by study-group discussions, and class recitations/discussions, in that order. Like the students, the language teachers also least frequently engaged in performing/participating in state shows.

The non-language teachers, on the other hand, ranked informal conversations as their first in the list of speaking activities they most frequently engaged in. Interestingly, what the language teachers least frequently engaged in, was what the non-language teachers ranked



as their second. However, they almost have the same ranking for class recitations and reporting/making oral presentations which came third and fourth in rank, reciprocally. Non-language teachers cited participating in symposia as speaking activities they least frequently engaged in.

The findings show that there exists collaboration among students with the use of study-group discussions, which may in most cases, use languages other than English. Activities such as these should be closely monitored by the teachers so as to facilitate the desired language of discussion. While this may be favoured by some, it may not be the case for still others. Studies show that most groups showed a negative preference for group learning (Reid, 1987), a fact which could be ascribed to the weak facilitation of most teachers.

For the materials most frequently read by the students and teachers, results show that textbooks are the most frequently read by students. This was followed by technical reports. On the third rank, were examinations. Rarely did they read manuals for instructions, school newspapers, official letters, and lectures and other notes. It stands to reason that students would read more of textbooks as these were the same references to be used by their teachers. It could be surmised from the findings, however, that students read more of materials of technical kind as majority of their subjects have this as a requirement.

As faculty members, the language and non-language teachers ranked textbooks as the material they most frequently read. Examinations ranked second for the language teachers while lectures and other notes ranked second for the non-language teachers. Lectures and other notes ranked third in the list of the language teachers whereas theses, dissertations and other studies came third in the list of the non-language teachers. Among the reading materials both groups least frequently read were personal letters, supplementary readings, and school newspapers.

The findings of the study show that textbooks are still of the utmost value as the source of information despite the advent of technology where easy information could be readily accessed through such as the internet. Both students and teachers reading most frequently the textbooks also imply that the former are most likely guided as to the flow of discussion of their latter's subjects.

Among the writing activities listed, the students most frequently engaged in writing lectures and other notes. Interestingly, with the advent of technology at present, personal letters



still came to be at the second rank. Examinations were the third in rank of the list of writing activities most frequently engaged in. Least frequently engaged in were writing official letters/memoranda, manuals for instructions, plans/graphs/worksheets, and articles for the school newspaper. Both groups of teachers said they most frequently wrote lectures and other notes. Minutes of meetings came second while personal letters came third in rank for the language teachers. On the other hand, non-language teachers ranked examinations as the second of the writing activities they most frequently engaged in. Next came reports or technical reports. The writing activities they least frequently engaged in were writing literary pieces, articles for the school newspaper, and manuals for instructions. A slight contrast was noted on writing the minutes of meetings as non-language teachers ranked it one of their least frequently written activities, which is not the case for the language teachers.

The findings reaffirm the use of teacher talk in the classroom as students frequently engaged in writing lecture notes by listening to the lectures done by their teachers. This reiterates negative implication on the language learning of students as they were not actively engaged in the learning process.

#### **Level of English Proficiency of Students in Performing Communication Tasks**

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.

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 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 (1984) 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.

#### **Level of English Proficiency of Students in Content Areas**

Results of the written proficiency test in English administered to students show that on the whole, the students were on the average in their level of English proficiency.

Specifically, the students, though they performed better in the single word approach, were noted to have been weak in vocabulary building as the results in their double word approach and context clues showed. Notably, the students were noted to have performed best in reading comprehension.

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' responses 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 Students' Development of English Proficiency**

The students and teachers were asked to identify factors that have contributed significantly to their English proficiency. Both students and teachers gave credit to their





college/university training for the development of their proficiency in English. However, their responses were spread out on the rest of the items. For students, high school training came second in rank for the factor that contributed to their proficiency, followed by grade school, friends, and home, in that order. Media and the workplace were considered least effective, having been cited only as the 6<sup>th</sup> and the 7<sup>th</sup>.

For both groups of teachers, workplace or the practice of their profession came second for the factor that significantly contributed to their proficiency in English. A significant “others” ranked third for the language teachers while high school training, coming closely with students’ ranking, came third for the non-language teachers. Grade school, home and friends were considered least effective in the development of both language and non-language teachers’ English proficiency. As Stapa (2003) asserted, students feel satisfied of their training in college for it is where they learn more to become independent learners and where they feel more responsible of their future. Accordingly, if these were met, the students would feel satisfied with their achievement if only they could use the language effectively in real-life situations.

When asked which courses in college or university contributed the most to students’ learning of English, a clear majority identified their language or communication courses as their first. Second in rank were their major courses. Closely following for the third rank was their literature and humanities courses. Least important in this respect, according to the students, were their natural and physical science courses.

Major courses and language courses played a major role in the development of proficiency in English of both the language teachers and non-language teachers. Third in rank for the language teachers were their literature and humanities courses while philosophy and social sciences for the non-language. As with the case of the students, least important in this respect, according to the teacher respondents, were their natural and physical science courses.

The findings indicate that the language courses offered to students are found to be helpful and so too, their major courses which make use of English as medium of instruction. With the number of basic language courses students are required to take, they have met the basic needs of the students. What the basic language course fail to improve, it is enhanced or enriched in the students’ major courses. It could be understood that natural and physical





science courses were posited to have least developed students' proficiency because these courses require that a more common language be used to teach it with. Science courses such as this could hardly be understood when students have yet to understand the language first before understanding the concepts. Teachers then, are more conscious of what language to use for students to better understand and eventually, be able to apply concepts in real life, which in this case, may be Filipino and the vernacular, other than English.

Among the students' co-curricular activities, classroom interactions and discussions ranked first as the most crucial in the development of their English proficiency. Second in rank were school organizations. School newspaper came next. Least helpful, said the students, were practicum or on-the job training and theatre or cultural groups.

The responses of the teachers to the question on co-curricular activities which have been influential in the development of their proficiency in English are spread out over a number of items except for classroom interactions and discussions which came at the top of the list of both groups of teachers. Second in rank for the language teachers were the practicum or on-the-job training. This activity was followed by seminar-workshop. As for the non-language teachers, seminar-workshops ranked second in their list, followed by school newspaper. Both groups, however, considered theatre/cultural groups to be the least contributory factor in the development of their English proficiency.

The findings show that when students are actively engaged in formal discussions, i.e. classroom interactions, they would be encouraged to use the English language well, as this helps them effectively convey their ideas.

### **Language Needs of Students**

When asked which specific English language skills were most emphasized in their communication courses, the students and language teachers were one in their responses in the top three of their list: grammar, writing sentences, and writing paragraphs, respectively. Reading reports, articles and newspaper columns and writing longer (multi-paragraph) compositions/themes were also unanimously considered by both students and language teachers to be least emphasized in their language courses.

Similarly, the non-language teachers considered grammar on top of their list of the language skill most emphasized in their college language courses. Writing the term paper and listening comprehension were ranked second and third, respectively, in their responses. The



skills least emphasized in their language courses were public speaking or speech communication and reading reports, articles, and newspaper columns.

It could be surmised from the findings that students and teachers alike were one in skills most emphasized in their language courses. This could be attributed to the fact that grammar remains to be the thumb of language learning, meaning, when students are good at it, they would most likely succeed in other communication activities.

However, it should be stressed that this should not just be taught in language courses and just the concern of language teachers because “language is the heart of the curriculum because through language, students learn both knowledge and rules of functioning in the classrooms; language study was to be not a single subject of study, but integrated throughout all subjects (Philadelphia reports)”.

The students were likewise asked to identify specific skills in English which they think they need to get ahead in their chosen career. The students said grammar was the skill they most need to succeed in their career. This skill was followed by the skill in public speaking. Third in their list of the skill they need most was building or using vocabulary. The students found the skills in reading literature and reading reports, articles, and newspaper columns to be least needed in their career advancement.

Both language and non-language teachers were asked which language skill they thought their students should be well-prepared for to do well in the students’ academic work. The language teachers considered writing the term paper to be most needed by students for their career advancement. It was followed by writing sentence and then by grammar. Contrastingly, the non-language teachers opined that the language learning students should be most skilled at would be grammar. Second in rank was building and using vocabulary. Next were writing paragraphs and writing the term paper. Least needed by the students as considered by both groups of teachers were public speaking and writing reports, articles , and newspaper columns.

The findings in this study show that while students consider the need to be skilful in public speaking, the teachers themselves consider it a skill the student least need in their profession. This seeming disregard by teachers for the speaking skill is also clearly seen in the activities most frequently engaged in by students. Students listen more than talk.



Theoretically, language learning and proficiency would be most crucial at this point since language is basically speech, and as speech, it is basically oral.

Most teachers have conflicting opinions on what their students need to advance in their chosen career. Although most teachers believe that their students come to language classroom with different interests and preferences, they are still reluctant to consult learners in conducting language learning activities, hence being unable to meet the learning needs of individual learners. Teachers, therefore, need to discover their students' needs of learning the language. This way, they can teach in a way that is appealing to most students, if not all, and do what works best for them in their chosen profession.

Of the skills and learnings listed, the students expressed a need to improve in grammar in English, the same skill which they said they would need the most in order to advance in their chosen career. It was followed by their skill in public speaking and building vocabulary, ranking respectively on the second and third. These were also the same skills in the same order that they considered they need the most to advance in their profession.

Consistent with their thrust in their language courses, the language teachers said their students needed the most improvement in grammar. The non-language teachers, however, thought differently; they said their students needed the most help in writing sentences. Though they differ on their first skill needing the most improvement, there was a marked agreement between the second and third rank in the list of both groups: skills on listening comprehension and building or using vocabulary, were the skills identified.

It was posited by Oxford (1996) underscored that mastery of the fundamentals of learning is not only important in aiding language learners in consolidating vocabulary, acquiring basic structures, and accumulating the necessary linguistic and communication skills, but such mastery of learning skills puts the learners in an active control of their own learning experiences. It must be added however, that culture and practice have been found to exert a significant influence on the development of such orientation to learning.

### **Recommendations to Meet Students' Language Needs**

Students and faculty were asked to offer recommendations on measures to meet the language needs of English language learners. Almost three-fourth of the students endorsed the talking in English inside and outside the classroom. The modification of admission requirements to include proficiency in English was favoured by more than one-half of the



respondents, followed closely by the recommendation to offer specially designed language courses for specific professions as electives. It can be inferred from the topmost recommendation that students are not engaged strongly in a communication in English by their teachers and by their fellow students all because they have all the liberty to use whatever language they want to.

Most of the language teachers surveyed recommended the raising of admission requirements for language proficiency in English. Talking to students in English inside and outside the classroom ranked second which was followed by transacting business in English within the premises of the University. In contrast, the non-language teachers saw a need for measures to offer a specially-designed language courses for specific profession and major fields as electives. Following closely were talking to students in English inside and outside the classroom and raising the admission requirements for language proficiency in English.

It appears that both groups of teachers saw the need to enhance more their students' proficiency in English by speaking the English language as it points to the fact that speech is basically oral. Though, they may have slight differences in their other recommended measures, both groups identified a tightening of admission requirements to include language proficiency as criterion, which should allow college teachers to concentrate on college-level instruction, instead of adjusting downwards to accommodate the low English language proficiency of college students.

## **CONCLUSIONS**

Based on the findings of the study, it is concluded that although the existing language program is somewhat meeting students' needs, the students generally accept the need for an enhanced language program that would improve their English proficiency as they listen most frequently in communication with others and as they need more grammar skills while the same skills are already emphasized in their language classes. 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. Students and faculty attributed their proficiency in English to both home and school factors but college/university training and their language courses were considered to be the greatest contributors to the development of their English proficiency. To meet the students' language needs, both students and



faculty endorsed the talking in English inside and outside the classroom and the modification of admission requirements to include proficiency in English.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In the light of the findings and the conclusions made, the following are recommended:

1. University administrators need to formulate, adopt, and implement an English language policy that would benefit students and teachers alike in the development of their English proficiency.
2. A proposed enhanced English language program is recommended for adoption to meet the language needs of the students along the skills they need most in the advancement of their career and along the skills they need the most improvement.
3. Similar studies are encouraged to include the workplace as a locale of the study, looking into the responses of the employees and employers in the actual workplace.

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