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RESEARCH ARTICLE

STUDENTS' ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND ANXIETY LEVEL

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ABSTRACT

This study was conducted to investigate the students' English language proficiency and anxiety level among Freshmen College and Senior High School students at the Visayas State University (VSU). The first set of data was gathered from 227 Freshmen College students selected at random. Research instruments used were a questionnaire, English proficiency tests, and in-depth interviews. Data were gathered using descriptive statistics. Wilcoxon and Friedman analyses were also used. Results showed that the Freshmen College students' overall English language proficiency is "fair". Most of them had average proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Only a few got high proficiency level in these areas. Through in-depth interviews, results further revealed that the factors affecting the respondents' English language proficiency were the type of school attended, sources of support, English teachers, study habits, and attitudes toward the English language. The study has come to conclude that respondents were aware of their level of language proficiency, and that they could attribute this on some factors that somewhat affect their learning of the target language. The second set of data was gathered from 203 Senior High School students through a questionnaire and English proficiency tests. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and Pearson r statistical analysis was employed to determine relationship between proficiency and anxiety. Findings revealed that the Senior High School students were competent users of the English language in four language skills -- listening, speaking, reading, and writing. This means that they can communicate and express their ideas well using the English language. Results suggest that taking a proficiency test to determine one's level in language proficiency would be a good challenge for students if they really do want to improve their proficiency in the target language which is English.

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INTRODUCTION

The need for mastery in English is becoming more significant in the 21st century (Lee, 2011). More than 600 million people worldwide use English as an international language. Thus, it has become a major agent of globalization and its contribution has resulted in it being a prerequisite for an individual to become a part of the international business and cultural society. English has emerged as the world's great lingua franca. In the world of today where competition is very high, being proficient in the English language provides an edge to an individual. Proficiency in English is a huge advantage for every job seeker and even to those who have no plans of working abroad. In the Philippines, thousands of young Filipino graduates end up jobless, no matter what university they come from.

The battle of who knows more and who is best among these graduates in their chosen fields of specialization are not only the bases that a company is looking for and when applying for a job (Garcia, 2006). Job interviews are inevitable, and educational institutions and other corporate companies will be looking for employable personalities who are proficient English speakers. In language learning, anxiety is by far one of the issues why students have proficiency problems especially in their oral communication. Anxiety is described as an uncomfortable emotional state in which one perceives danger, feels powerless, and experiences tensions in preparation for an expected dangerous events or insecurities (Ellis, 2004). The problem on the deterioration of students' performance in English is real. In fact, the problem has been brought out in various seminars and workshops, albeit not in-depth. Personal discussions with some language teachers also have indicated invariably that students have poor communication skills. To help solve the problem, it is a must that reforms be in place.

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These reforms should include new ways of teaching, appropriate instructional materials, and competent teachers to carry out teaching-learning process. But to be responsive, these efforts should be based on the current language proficiency level of the intended learners. Thus, this study was conducted to explore the English language proficiency of Freshmen College and Senior High School students as well as some factors affecting their proficiency. It also tackled the respondents' language anxiety level in relation to their proficiency in the English language.

Objectives of the Study: Generally, this research aimed to determine the English language proficiency level and language anxiety among Freshmen College and Senior High School students at the Visayas State University (VSU). Specifically, it aimed to:

- Determine the students' English language proficiency level;
- Determine the students' language anxiety level;
- Determine the factors affecting students' English language proficiency;
- Determine if there is a significant difference between and among students' English language proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing; and
- Determine the relationship between the students' English language proficiency and their anxiety level.

Theoretical Background: English proficiency is the person's ability to express what he or she knows and feels clearly either in speaking or writing using the English language as medium and to understand what he or she hears or reads. It reflects the total operational quality and efficiency of a learner's English language machinery. This study was anchored from Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis (Krashen, 1985) which states that emotions such as anxiety can directly interfere or assist the learning of the new language. Some emotions can create a kind of filter that blocks the learner's ability to learn and use new words or grammatical structures.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The first set of respondents composed of 227 Freshmen College students were made to answer English proficiency tests in listening, speaking reading and writing. Respondents who got the highest and the least proficiency scores were interviewed on the factors affecting their proficiency. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics such as means, percentage, and standard deviation to describe the respondents' proficiency levels in the four language skills. Wilcoxon and Friedman tests were run to find out if there is a significant difference between respondents' proficiency in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The second set of respondents composed of 203 Senior High School students took the International English Language Testing System (IELTS, 2016) proficiency tests in the four language areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). To survey the respondents' language anxiety level, a modified version of English Language Anxiety Survey (ELAS), which is practically based from Foreign Language Anxiety Scale (FLAS) questionnaire developed by Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) was employed. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics. Pearson r statistical analysis was used to determine relationships between proficiency and anxiety levels.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the Freshmen College students, had "fair" proficiency level in listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Only a few got high proficiency level in these areas. The test scores further revealed that majority of the respondents did not find listening a serious problem and that basically, they did not have any hearing problem that might have been significant enough to affect their ability to listen. In the speaking proficiency test results, many of the respondents had a good control of the English language but they also had a good number of phonetic and grammatical errors. The errors, however, did not actually interfere with overall intelligibility of their expression. In reading proficiency tests, results showed that a little more than majority of the respondents were able to understand the total meaning of the given passage and had a high level of reading comprehension. However, they exhibited low proficiency in their oral reading. Overall result of the reading proficiency points out the need to develop students' reading skills. Finally, the overall result of the respondents' writing proficiency tests indicated that majority of them could express themselves in written English but they had major problems in vocabulary and language use.

To determine whether the respondents differ in terms of the four language areas (listening, speaking, reading, and writing), the Wilcoxon test was run on the data. However, since the scores on speaking and writing proficiency tests were not normally distributed, the Friedman test was employed. Both tests showed significant differences (.05 level of significance) between the following: 1) listening and speaking; 2) listening and reading; 3) listening and writing; 4) speaking and reading; and 5) speaking and writing. Interestingly, however, there was no significant difference between reading and writing proficiency level in the four language skills. It further showed that a language learner may be able to develop proficiency in one skill but not in the other. For example, one may be proficient in listening but not in writing. Personal interests and individual differences explain this variation. To get a glimpse on the factors that affect English proficiency among respondents, in-depth interviews with seven least proficient and seven most proficient subjects were conducted. Findings revealed that the least proficient respondents came from public elementary and high schools located in rural areas. The most proficient ones were mostly from private schools found in cities and in the suburbs.

They received honors and awards. All respondents reported that their parents supported their education. They also said that their parents encouraged them to study hard. For the record, the least proficient students described their English teachers as bookish and they lack mastery of the subject matter. According to them, they were just made to memorize and there was less practice. Some of them said that their teachers were so strict. On the other hand, the most proficient ones said that their teachers were good. They employed varied teaching strategies like reading stories, drills, and library research. For this group, their teachers were friendly but were disciplinarians. In terms of study habits, the two groups were quite similar, that is, they study hard to improve their language proficiency. However, the least proficient ones complained that it takes them time to understand the lessons. Some of them would try to talk to their friends in English. Respondents reported that they review their notes everyday and perform assignments. They also consulted with friends for some lessons they do not understand.

Lastly, both groups exhibited positive attitudes toward the English language. They recognized its importance as an international language. For them, learning the language could help them improve their personality and avoid embarrassment when speaking in public. The least proficient ones, however, considered English as a "very difficult" subject. The aspect that they considered the hardest is grammar. On the other hand, among the 203 Senior High School students, results showed that they varied in their proficiency level in using the English language. Overall results based on the mean scores showed that students are competent in listening and good in reading, speaking, and writing. However, results revealed that most students have language anxiety since English is not their native tongue. Anxiety had a negative correlation to their listening and reading, and positive correlation to speaking and writing. For the test of significance, the relationship that exists between proficiency and anxiety is not significant for listening and reading but is significant for speaking and writing. This implies that respondents tend to be more conscious when speaking and writing using the target language.

Conclusion and Recommendation

Based on the findings, the study has come to conclude that the respondents' English language proficiency depends on many factors and anxiety could be a hindrance to success in language learning. This is because the students tend to feel low in terms of using the English language. Moreover, anxiety can make students lose faith in themselves making them give up in learning and using the English language. However, Brown (2007) suggested that a little stress about a matter or task at hand is going to be facilitative. Nevertheless, the study suggests that teachers provide remedial classes and support programs to the students to help them attain higher language proficiency level. Results of the interviews with those who performed least in the proficiency tests underscore the need for a training on language teaching. With the appropriate pedagogical training, teachers' competence would surely be improved and so with the students' English language proficiency.

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