

ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY AND COMMUNICATIVE COMPETENCE AMONG GRADUATE STUDENTS IN BICOL REGION, PHILIPPINES: A FOUNDATION FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE ENHANCEMENT PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT

ABSTRACT

Aims: To examine the English Language Proficiency and Communicative Competence of Graduate School Students in specific institutions within the Bicol Region of the Philippines, serving as the foundation for an English Language Enhancement Program.

Study design:

The study employed a descriptive-comparative-correlational design, utilizing content-validated and reliability-tested questionnaires alongside the English First Standardized English Test (EF SET), a standardized English proficiency test.

Place and Duration of Study: Naga College Foundation-Graduate school institution within the Bicol Region, Philippines. The timeframe of the study was, between April and June 2024.

Methodology: The study involved 118 graduate students selected through purposive sampling. Data collection utilized a content-validated, reliability-tested questionnaire alongside the EF SET, a standardized English proficiency test. Statistical analyses included frequency, percentage, weighted mean, Chi-Square, ANOVA, and Pearson's R.

Results: The findings indicated a significant gender disparity, with females constituting 86.44% of respondents. Most students were at an intermediate level of communicative competence and scored in the upper-intermediate range (EF SET scores averaging 52.32). Chi-square analysis found no significant relationship between communicative competence appraisal and proficiency level. However, a moderately positive correlation (Pearson's $r = 0.4691$, $p < 0.00001$) was observed between language proficiency and communicative competence. ANOVA indicated a significant difference in proficiency across educational levels, with doctoral students scoring the highest.

Conclusion and Recommendation: The study found that enhancing English proficiency and communicative competence can be achieved through a targeted English Language Enhancement Program; thus, the development of such a program. This approach could be beneficial in addressing skill disparities and improving communication effectiveness among graduate students.

Keywords: Enhancement Program, Communicative Competence, English Language Proficiency, Graduate School Students.

1. INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the world has witnessed an unprecedented level of interconnectivity, underscoring the necessity for proficiency in the global lingua franca, English. This interconnectivity also emphasized the pivotal role of English across various domains including education, business, politics, science, and technology. It serves as the primary medium for

information exchange, business transactions, relationship building, knowledge acquisition, and innovation. Moreover, English facilitates integration, sustainable development, human empowerment, international security, and environmental protection on a global scale, thereby highlighting its indispensability in navigating today's multifaceted landscape.

Within the context of graduate school or graduate studies the English language maintains its significance through its manifestations in modes of communication and instructions in the teaching and learning process, as it underpins the curriculum by integration of insights from myriad of studies conducted from different languages, and there has been a significant push for this trend as the rapid growth of globalization intensified that prompted higher education institutions to expand their English-medium and English taught programs (Clark, 2016), additionally language proficiency on academic achievement, with factors such as multilingualism, speaking, writing, reading, and listening skills playing crucial roles (Alrasheed et al., 2021; Martirosyan et al., 2015 as cited by Devi, 2023). Thus, it made the level of English proficiency among students and professionals the cornerstone for both academic and professional success (Kadir & Noor, 2014).

The ability to effectively communicate ideas, engage in scholarly discourse, and navigate diverse cultural contexts is essential across disciplines, given that many graduate programs utilize English as the primary mode of instruction and that fact itself prompts challenges for many graduate school students as Jung Yun Choi's (2015) study shed light on primary issues faced by international graduate students, particularly regarding language proficiency and communicative competence. These challenges manifest in various forms, including reluctance to participate orally due to linguistic barriers, fear of embarrassment, and reliance on passive learning strategies and not being able to harness their full potential due to these communicative barriers and adversely affecting their academic performance. It is also found out that even with high level of English proficiency lapses in academic or real-life skill issues still persist and this is due to the fact that linguistic competence or English proficiency does not automatically translate to communicative competence and various preexisting determinants still needs to be explored to fully balance out the two factors (Karta et al., 2023).

Shifting focus to the Southeast Asian context, specifically in the Philippines in which the English language is institutionalized as a co-official language that is used widely in the teaching front (Cabigon, 2015 as cited by Santos et al, 2022) and even though that's the case there is still a noticeable decrease in English language proficiency across various levels of society, affecting both linguistic and communicative competence in professional and academic fields. The yearly ranking based on English proficiency, the EF English Proficiency Index, shows fluctuations in the Philippines' ranking, indicating a need for sustained efforts to improve proficiency levels (Armea et al., 2022).

Despite efforts to integrate language interventions and communicative development activities and programs into higher education language teaching, there remains a gap in evaluating and enhancing the two existing areas of English language competence, which is the proficiency and communicative competence on which is needed to be evenly developed to achieve higher rate of academic success in the graduate school setup.

To address this gap, this study aims to analyze the relationship between language proficiency and communicative competence among graduate school students and its impact on overall linguistic competence. By examining existing literature and conducting empirical research, this study seeks to contribute to the understanding of effective language education strategies and their implications for graduate student success in an increasingly globalized world with a target intervention enhancement program in mind to be implemented after all of the initial stages.

2. MATERIAL AND METHODS

Research Design

A descriptive comparative correlational design was used in this study as it provides a comprehensive approach in appraising English language proficiency and communicative competence among graduate students. The current levels of proficiency and communicative competence is being outlined by the descriptive point or aspect of the study in order to provide a clear baseline. This baseline or descriptive information is crucial in order to pinpoint areas that need improvement. The comparative area explores and examines differences between groups within the student population, such as those based on academic discipline, levels or previous English education. By highlighting these differences, the study will tailor the English Language Enhancement Program to address the specific needs of various student clusters. The correlational component analyzes the relationship between English proficiency and communicative competence. By determining the strength and direction of this relationship, the study can identify whether improvements in language proficiency are likely to enhance communicative skills. This understanding is vital for designing an effective enhancement program. If a strong correlation is found, the program can focus on improving language proficiency to boost overall communicative competence. Thus, this research design provides a consistent framework for developing a data-driven, targeted English Language Enhancement Program for graduate students.

Research Locale and Respondents

The study consisted of 118 respondents who were all graduate school students within the Bicol Region in the Philippines with varying levels of education, including bachelors, masters, and doctoral. The purposive sampling technique was used as this study already has a target population in mind with specific characteristics, knowledge and experience, in order to access the specified subsets of the respondents. Participation in the study was voluntary. Participants were given informed consent forms, which provided information regarding the study, including the contact information of the researchers.

Research Instrument

The study adopted a descriptive survey instrument and a standardized test, that are intended to measure the specific focal points of the study. The descriptive survey is a five-point Likert scale questionnaire consisting of the personal profile of graduate school students and their professional English language proficiency and communicative competence appraisal. The questionnaire underwent psychometric testing for specific aspects of the English language, assessing validity and reliability. Cronbach's alpha results showed acceptable internal consistency: 0.78 for professional and work responsibility, 0.77 for the delivery system, and good reliability at 0.89 for communicative competence. The English First Standardized English Test (EF SET) was used to determine the actual level of English language proficiency and communicative competence of the respondents of the study. The test consisted of a series of situational and analytical questions that gauges how the respondents respond to specified circumstances that challenges both their communicative skills and mastery of the English language through their responses. The EF SET measures the level of English proficiency of the respondents through six levels: A1- Beginner (1-30); A2- Elementary (31-40); B1- Intermediate (41-50); B2- Upper Intermediate (51-60); C1- Advanced (61-70); and C2- Proficient (71-100). The validity of this test is anchored on the CEFR framework that yields the same results as TOEFL and IELTS, the most well-known standardized English tests

Treatment of the Data

The statistical treatment of data included frequency counts and percentage techniques for profiling, weighted means for appraisal identification, ANOVA for identifying significant differences across agencies, and Chi-Square tests for associations between profiles and appraisals. The study adhered to ethical considerations and a systematic investigation procedure, including questionnaire preparation and content validation, a dry-run, reliability testing, obtaining permits, data gathering, analysis, interpretation, and research reporting.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of Graduate School Students, delineating age distribution, gender composition, and civil status. Notably, among the 118 respondents, 33 falls within the late 20s to 30 age brackets, while 8 are categorized in the late 40s range. The gender distribution illustrates a predominance of female students, constituting 86.44%, with males comprising a smaller proportion at 13.56%. Regarding civil status, the data indicates a near-equivalent split, with 60 students reported as married and 58 as single. These findings underscore a notable predominance of female students within the late 20s to 30 age range, with a relatively even distribution observed across civil status categories.

Table 1. Personal Profile of Graduate School Students

Data	f	%
Age		
21 - 25	23	19.49
26 - 30	33	27.97
31 - 35	26	22.03
36 - 40	17	14.41
41 - 45	11	9.32
46 - above	8	6.78
Total	118	100
Sex		
Male	16	13.56
Female	102	86.44
Total	118	100
Civil Status		
Single	58	49.15
Married	60	50.85
Widow/er	0	0
Total	118	100

Table 2 outlines the educational attainment and teaching experience of 118 graduate school students. Most of these students, 88 individuals (74.58%), have attained a master's level education. This is followed by 16 students (13.56%) with a Doctorate level and 14 students (11.86%) with a Baccalaureate level of education. Regarding their teaching experience, the largest group, comprising 33 students (27.97%), reported having no teaching experience. This is closely followed by those with 1-3 years of experience, numbering 30 (25.42%). Further groups include 19 students (16.10%) with 4-6 years, 13 students (11.02%) with 10-15 years, 14 students (11.86%) with more than 15 years, and 9 students (7.63%) with 7-9 years of teaching experience.

Table 2. Professional Profile of Graduate School Students

Data	f	%
Educational Attainment		
Doctorate Level	16	13.56
Master's Level	88	74.58
Baccalaureate Level	14	11.86
Total	118	100
Number of Years in Teaching		
1 – 3 years	30	25.42
4 – 6 years	19	16.10
7 – 9 years	9	7.63
10 – 15 years	13	11.02
Above 15 years	14	11.86
None	33	27.97
Total	118	100

Table 3 presents a breakdown of the types of trainings attended by individuals, listing both the frequency (f) and percentage (%) of each category. The training related to the Professional Code of Ethics for Teachers had the highest attendance, with 60 participants (23.90%). This was followed by trainings focused on the Application of Content and Pedagogy/Instructional Delivery, attended by 58 participants (23.11%). Trainings on ICT Competency Standards for Teachers had 54 attendees (21.51%), while 45 individuals (17.93%) attended training or certifications on English Communicative Competence. The least attended training was Professional Development Training in English Language, with 34 participants (13.55%). Overall, a total of 251 training sessions were attended.

Table 3. Summary of Trainings Attended

Trainings Attended	f	%
Training/Certifications on English Communicative Competence	45	17.93
Professional Development Training in English Language	34	13.55
Trainings related to Application of Content and Pedagogy/Instructional Delivery	58	23.11
Trainings related to Professional Code of Ethics for Teachers	60	23.90
Trainings related to ICT Competency Standards for Teachers	54	21.51
Total	251	100

Table 4. Communicative Competence Appraisal Summary

Indicators	Mean	Interpretation
Linguistic/ Grammatical Competence	3.18	Intermediate
Sociolinguistic Competence	3.18	Intermediate
Strategic Competence	3.18	Intermediate
Discourse Competence	3.23	Intermediate
Average Mean	3.19	Intermediate

Table 4 indicates that respondents appraised their communicative competence as being at an intermediate level across various context, with mean scores of 3.18 for Linguistic/Grammatical Competence, Sociolinguistic Competence, and Strategic Competence, and a slightly higher 3.23 for Discourse Competence. This uniformity suggests that respondents have a balanced skill set without particular strengths or weaknesses, functioning adequately in routine communication but potentially struggling with more complex tasks. The findings highlighted the need for comprehensive training programs that address all aspects of communicative competence to help individuals advance from intermediate to higher proficiency levels, thereby enhancing their overall communication effectiveness in more demanding contexts.

Table 5. Communicative Competence Appraisal Breakdown by Educational Attainment

Educational Attainment	Communicative Competence Mean	Interpretation	Rank
Doctorate Level	3.21	Intermediate	1
Master's Level	3.17	Intermediate	3
Baccalaureate Level	3.18	Intermediate	2
Total	3.19	Intermediate	

Table 5 presented the breakdown of graduate students' communicative competence based on their educational level. The table shows that students at the doctorate level have the highest mean score of 3.21, ranking first in terms of appraisal. Despite having a higher educational level, students at the master's level have a lower mean score of 3.17, ranking third. Students at the Baccalaureate level have a slightly higher mean score of 3.18 compared to those with more units in the master's level. The findings revealed that all graduate school students in the study area have an intermediate level of communicative skills.

Table 6. EF SET Score, CEFR Level, Interpretation, and Ranking

Educational Attainment	Overall EF SET Score Average	CEFR Level	Interpretation	Rank
Doctorate Level	61.65	C1	Advanced	1
Master's Level	51.48	B2	Upper Intermediate	2
Baccalaureate Level	43.83	B1	Intermediate	3
Average	52.32	B2	Upper Intermediate	

Table 6 presents the results of respondents on the EF SET standardized test, revealing that doctorate-level respondents achieved the highest rank with an overall EF SET score of 61.65 (C1 – Advanced). Master's level respondents ranked second with an overall score of 51.48 (B2 – Upper Intermediate), while baccalaureate-level respondents ranked third with an overall score of 43.83 (B1 – Intermediate). The average overall EF SET score for all respondents is 52.32 (B2 – Upper Intermediate). When cross-referenced with the data from Table 4, which indicates that respondents appraised their communicative competence as intermediate across various contexts—with mean scores of 3.18 for Linguistic/Grammatical, Sociolinguistic, and Strategic Competence and 3.23 for Discourse Competence—a comprehensive picture emerges. This suggests that while respondents have a balanced skill set, their self-assessment aligns with their standardized test performance, indicating they function adequately in routine communication but may struggle with more complex tasks. The findings

highlighted a positive trend for the respondents and further solidifies the need for comprehensive enhancement program that address all aspects of English language proficiency and communicative competence to help individuals, particularly those at lower educational levels, advance from intermediate to higher proficiency levels. This approach could significantly enhance their overall communication effectiveness, especially in demanding professional and academic contexts.

Table 7. Association between the respondents' Level of Educational Attainment and self-appraisal on communicative competence

Educational Attainment	Fundamental Awareness	Novice	Intermediate	Advanced	Expert	Total
Doctorate Level	1	1	8	5	1	16
Expected Value	0.68	1.22	9.36	4.07	0.68	
Master's Level	3	6	54	22	3	88
Expected Value	3.73	6.71	51.46	21.61	3.73	
Baccalaureate Level	1	2	7	3	1	14
Expected Value	0.59	1.07	8.19	3.56	0.59	
Total	5	9	69	30	5	118
The chi-square statistic is 2.8796. The p-value is .941683. The result is <i>not</i> significant at $p < .05$.						

Table 7 shows the chi-square test conducted at a 5% significance level to examine the association between communicative competence appraisal and grouped English proficiency levels. The results indicated no statistically significant association between these variables. This finding is consistent with the data presented in Table 5, where the mean proficiency levels across the three educational groups are closely aligned, despite the gaps in their educational knowledge and experience. Additionally, the ranking inconsistencies, such as the master's level being ranked lower than the bachelor's level, further support the conclusion that there is no significant relationship between communicative competence appraisal and English proficiency levels.

Table 8. Association between the respondents' Level of Educational Attainment and EF SET Score

Educational Attainment	Lower Half (A1, A2, B1)	Upper Half (B2, C1, C2)	Total
Doctorate Level	3	13	16
Expected Value	7.05	8.95	
Master's Level	39	49	88
Expected Value	38.73	49.27	
Baccalaureate Level	10	4	14
Expected Value	6.17	7.83	
Total	52	66	118
The chi-square statistic is 8.4152. The p-value is .014882. The result is significant at $p < .05$.			

Table 8 presents the chi-square test conducted at a 5% significance level to examine the association between educational attainment and grouped English proficiency levels of the graduate school students. The results indicated a statistically significant association between these variables, suggesting that higher educational attainment is connected to higher levels of English proficiency. This finding is corroborated by the data presented in Table 6, which shows that individuals with a doctorate level of education ranked highest in English proficiency, followed by those with a master's level, while those with a baccalaureate level ranked last. This significant association underscores the relationship between increased educational knowledge and improved English proficiency.

Correlation Between the Communicative Competence Appraisal and English Language Proficiency of Graduate School Students

Table 9. Correlation between Communicative Competence and English Language Proficiency using Pearson's R

Statistical Measures	Statistical Value	Interpretation
Pearson's r	0.4691	Moderately Positive Correlation
p-value	< .00001	Significant Correlation

Table 9 shows the results of the Pearson's r test between the respondents' communicative competence appraisal and EF SET scores. Although there is only a moderately positive correlation between the communicative competence appraisal and EF SET scores, this correlation is significant enough to be noteworthy. This moderate correlation can be attributed to the respondents' self-awareness of their English language proficiency, as most of those who appraised themselves higher generally scored higher. Conversely, there are respondents who rated themselves as having poor or low communicative competence ended up achieving decent or high scores on the EF SET. This small discrepancy between self-appraisal and actual test scores explains why the correlation is only moderate, as there are instances where the respondents' self-assessments and their test results contradicts each other.

Difference in English Proficiency Among Level of Educational Attainment

Table 10. Significant Difference in the EF SET scores of the graduate school students using Analysis of Variance

Statistical Measures	Statistical Value
f-ratio	8.17112
p-value	.000481
Interpretation	Significant

Table 10 presents the results of the one-way analysis of variance, revealing that the differences in EF SET scores among the three educational levels are statistically significant. This finding suggests a clear trend of proficiency across different educational attainment levels, reinforcing the results in Table 6 where no group exhibits an equal level of CEFR proficiency. Specifically, the doctorate level is at C1, the master's level at B2, and the

bachelor's level at B1, indicating a distinct correlation between higher educational attainment and higher English proficiency.

4. CONCLUSION

This study concluded that the Graduate Studies students are composed mostly of females and of young to middle age in their profession, scaling almost equally in terms of civil status. It was also determined that a considerable number of these individuals have undergone different levels of professional training when it comes to English and communicative enhancement. The graduate schools' students across varying levels of education (Bachelors, Masters and Doctoral) appraised themselves as an intermediate level when it comes to both their English language proficiency and communicative competence mainly because all of the respondents are professionals in their respective fields and are still continuing their professional development and possesses competence in multiple areas the English and communication. The graduate students' appraisal as having an intermediate level of English language proficiency and communicative competence is substantiated by their standardized English test results, which predominantly indicated an average proficiency at the intermediate level. This alignment between self-perception and test outcomes underscores a positive trend, demonstrating that these graduate students possess an adequate level of English language proficiency and communicative competence, thereby reinforcing their self-evaluation.

The study also indicates a moderately positive correlation between language proficiency and communicative competence. Consequently, it can be concluded that achieving communicative competence necessitates a certain level of mastery of the English language, specifically an intermediate to high level of proficiency.

The study further concluded that the substantial variation in the language proficiency of the respondents is closely tied to their education level, alongside the training and certifications they have completed. This is evidenced by the results, which indicate that individuals at the doctoral level achieved the highest rankings in English language processing and communicative competence. They demonstrated advanced proficiency in all areas assessed, despite not all being language students, but rather representing diverse academic majors. This suggests that their level of education and training backgrounds significantly influenced their performance. These findings underscore the necessity of the study, highlighting that language and communicative competence across multiple dimensions (grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, and discourse competence) can be enhanced through a comprehensive education system. Such a system should be designed to improve language proficiency not only through understanding the language itself but also by teaching its effective communicative use.

5. RECOMMENDATION

The proposed program aims to significantly enhance the English language and communicative competence of graduate school students, equipping them with the necessary skills for academic and professional success.

English Language and Communicative Competence Enhancement Program (ELCCEP)

Entry Requirements

Eligibility: The program is designed for graduate school students who have demonstrated intermediate to upper intermediate proficiency in English based on prior assessments or standardized tests.

Pre-Assessment: Prospective participants must undergo a diagnostic test to confirm their English proficiency level and identify specific areas for improvement.

Application Process: Students must complete an application form, submit a statement of purpose, and provide recommendations from academic supervisors.

Program Procedures

Orientation Session: Introduction to program objectives, structure, and expectations. Students will also receive a detailed schedule and materials for the course.

Module Breakdown

Academic Writing: Focuses on advanced essay writing, research papers, thesis writing, and scholarly articles. Emphasizes structure, argument development, and proper citation practices.

Oral Presentation: Develops skills for delivering effective presentations, public speaking, and academic discussions. Includes techniques for engaging the audience, clarity of speech, and use of visual aids.

Active Listening: Enhances abilities to understand and critically evaluate spoken information, participate in academic dialogues, and effectively respond to questions.

Contextual Communication: Teaches the nuances of language in various academic and professional contexts, including networking, intercultural communication, and professional correspondence.

Assessments:

Formative Assessments: Continuous assessments through quizzes, assignments, and participation in class activities to provide ongoing feedback and measure progress.

Summative Assessments: Final exam covering all modules to evaluate overall competence. Capstone project requires a comprehensive research paper and a presentation, demonstrating the application of learned skills.

Peer and Instructor Evaluations: Regular evaluations by peers and instructors to provide diverse feedback and ensure balanced assessment.

Exit Requirements:

Final Assessment Score: Students must achieve a score higher than the upper intermediate level on the final assessment.

Capstone Project: Successful completion and defense of the capstone project before a panel of instructors.

Participation and Attendance: Students must attend at least 85% of the sessions and actively participate in all activities.

By adhering to these comprehensive and academic procedures, the ELCCEP aims to significantly enhance the English language and communicative competence of graduate school students, equipping them with the necessary skills for academic and professional success.

The study illustrated its implications in English and communication as it emphasizes the crucial necessity of education in improving English language skills and effective communication abilities, emphasizing the need for enhancement programs in educational environments. The findings suggest that increased levels of education have a positive influence on English proficiency and communicative competence, highlighting the importance of implementing such programs, especially in graduate courses. This implies that true communicative competence encompasses more than just comprehending the language conceptually. It also entails effectively utilizing the language in various intricate and various contexts, encompassing discourse, strategic, grammatical, and sociolinguistic elements. Hence, it is imperative for

educational programs to give precedence to the practical application of language in addition to theoretical knowledge, taking into account the diverse educational levels and backgrounds of students, in order to optimize their communicative proficiency.

These findings indicated that an extensive and comprehensive approach to language education is crucial, incorporating thorough instruction that prioritizes practical communication. The correlation between language proficiency and communicative competence is moderately favorable, suggesting that achieving an intermediate to advanced level of language mastery is essential for enhancing communicative skills. Therefore, it is necessary to create a curriculum that specifically targets professional growth possibilities and advanced-level training, which may be observed in the high degree of skill displayed by the doctorate students. Therefore, the education system should strive to provide linguistic knowledge and cultivate proficient communication abilities, equipping students or individuals for prosperous careers in various fields.

CONSENT

In this study, firm and strict ethical procedures were followed, ensuring the protection and utmost confidentiality of all the data gathered from the respective respondents. Informed consent was obtained before the data collection while making sure that the respondents were well-informed about the aims of the study, the purpose of the data, and the precautionary measures taken to maintain confidentiality. In the data collected the respondents are provided an option to disclose their identity or not making sure they are comfortable with how their information could be used. All information is stored on a secure drive, only accessible to the researchers. The findings are aggregately presented to ensure that there is no linkage between the real identity of the respondents. Furthermore, the statistical analysis was carried out securely making sure no private information will be leaked as the researchers are committed to utmost security and protection of the respondent's information.

ETHICAL APPROVAL

Before proceeding with the existing study, the researchers secured a letter of permission allowing them to conduct the study on the selected institute located at Naga City Camarines Sur. The letter of permission was signed and granted by the dean of graduate studies of Naga College Foundation Inc.

DISCLAIMER

The authors hereby declare that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

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