

Original Research Article

Exploring the Correlation between English Proficiency and Reading Comprehension among Elementary Learners in the Philippines

ABSTRACT

This descriptive-correlational study aimed to determine the relationship between the English proficiency and reading comprehension of the Grade 6 learners at an elementary school in the province of Davao Occidental. Specifically, it aimed to determine the level of English proficiency of the respondents in terms of grammar and vocabulary and their level of reading comprehension. With the use of complete enumeration, there were 20 Grade 6 learners selected as respondents of the study. A validated questionnaire was used to assess the level of students' English proficiency and the level of students' reading. The data were analyzed using mean and Pearson-r correlation analysis.

Results revealed that the level of English proficiency of the respondents is proficient. This implies that the learners show great understanding and application of the English language. Also, the level of reading comprehension of the respondents is described as high, indicating that they have strong understanding and reading comprehension abilities. Further, the result revealed that there is no significant relationship between the English proficiency and reading comprehension of the Grade 6 learners. It is recommended that further studies on other factors that affect the reading comprehension of elementary learners should be conducted.

Keywords: English proficiency, reading comprehension, elementary learners, Philippines.

1. INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has completely changed the educational system in many countries worldwide (Reimer, 2021), which caused the interruption of face-to-face classes (Kuhfeld, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, educators and parents sought to continue formal education through a combination of printed modular distance learning and virtual learning (Daniel, Hodges & Reich, 2020). However, students in remote areas primarily relied on learning modules, requiring independent reading. In the implementation of modular distance learning, according to Tingson and Aquino (2021), reading and reading comprehension becomes more essential in attaining academic success. Nevertheless, according to the Ministry of Finance (2012), learners' reading comprehension is below their grade level. Alarming, PISA results showed that the Philippines ranked lowest in reading comprehension, meaning Filipino learners have reading comprehension difficulties (Philstar.com, 2019).

Many educators agreed that proficiency in the English language is the foundation for the learners' success in academic endeavors. English language proficiency, particularly grammar and vocabulary, is an avenue to which a desirable academic performance is achieved (Aina, Ogundele, & Olanipekun, 2013). Hence, a person who is not proficient in the English language may not have access to the world's scientific and technological discoveries that are predominantly written in English. Moreover, English is the primary language spoken in schools and businesses, placing a language barrier between linguistically diverse learners and academic achiever (Drake, 2014).

On the other hand, many empirical studies, including the study of Li (2010) and Soruc et al. (2021), indicate that English proficiency plays a crucial role for learners in completing their studies in English-medium institutions, especially for those learners whose first language is not English. Yet, low proficiency in the English language, including incompetency in vocabulary knowledge, pronunciation and accent, grammar, listening and speaking, is among the reasons why learners are unable to read and understand (Khan, 2019; Schmitt, 2020; Shahbaz & Khan, 2017).

Based on the initial interview with the Grade 6 classroom adviser, the problems in reading comprehension occurred because the learners failed to understand the texts, have limited vocabulary mastery, and the change of ways of teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic. Also, although several studies on English language proficiency and reading comprehension were already conducted, no study relating to it was conducted in the province of Davao Occidental, particularly in the context of elementary learners, during the pandemic. With this, the researchers aimed to determine the relationship between English proficiency and learners' reading comprehension.

2. METHODS

The researchers employed descriptive correlational research design to describe the relationship between English proficiency and reading comprehension. The respondents of the study were the 20 Grade 6 learners of one of the public elementary schools in the municipality of Malita, Davao Occidental, identified using complete enumeration.

Further, a validated questionnaire was used to measure the respondents' English proficiency and reading comprehension. This questionnaire included separate sections for grammar and vocabulary proficiency, as well as reading comprehension. The English proficiency test was composed of an English grammar test (10 items) and an English vocabulary test (10 items). Also, the reading comprehension test was composed of (10) items. This instrument was answered by selecting the correct answer that corresponds to the given questions. The gathered data were analyzed using mean, and Pearson-r.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Level of Learners' English Proficiency

Table 1. Level of Learners' English Proficiency

PARTICULAR	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	DESCRIPTION
Grammar	6.85	1.81	Proficient
Vocabulary	6.90	1.17	Proficient
English Proficiency	6.88	1.28	Proficient

The level of learners' English proficiency in terms of Grammar and Vocabulary is presented in Table 1. Based on the table, the level of learners' English proficiency has a mean of 6.88, with a standard deviation of 1.28, described as proficient. This means that learners show great understanding and application of the English language. The result of the study agrees with the findings of Lindholm-Leary (2014), which states that English learners require several grades or years to be rated as proficient. Also, he reported that a substantial number of English learners can take five to seven years to achieve proficiency in English. According to Baker and Westrup (2013), learners with higher English proficiency levels consistently understand and apply the English language effectively in both written and oral communication. Also, Li and Zheng (2021) observed that learners who are proficient in English exhibited great understanding and application of the English language. Research suggests that learners who are

immersed in an English-speaking environment tend to achieve higher proficiency levels compared to those with limited exposure to the English language (Cheng, 2015).

However, the result of the study opposes the findings of Abdala and Mustafa (2015), who state that speaking proficiently in English is difficult and worrisome for learners. Thus, he also reported that learners are low proficient in English because of having little exposure to the English-speaking environment and a lack of knowledge about the English language. According to Xie (2020), learners' lack of English proficiency is due to limited grammatical structures, inadequate vocabulary, and insufficient linguistic repertoire. Latha and Rames (2012) demonstrated that family literacy determined the success or failure of learners' proficiency in the English language. The study by Forey (2016) found that due to the lack of support from family and peers, the learners were unable to make progress in achieving higher levels of proficiency, resulting in a lack or poor proficiency in the English language.

Further, results showed that the level of learners' English proficiency, in terms of grammar, has a mean of 6.85, with a standard deviation of 1.81, describes as proficient. This means that learners show great understanding and application of the English grammar. The result of the study agrees with the findings of Diaz-Rico and Weed (2010), which state that when learners master all skills of English grammar, they will be able to reach the proficiency level that is required to be able to write and speak efficiently, and as well as to apply grammar consistently. Thus, mastering and applying grammar skills will allow learners to enhance effective oral and written English communication, which is required to be proficient in grammar, as well as in the field of education where the English language is necessary. According to Deng and Lin (2016), competence in English grammar is needed to achieve the goal of reaching the proficiency level in grammar and being proficient in the English language at the same time. Furthermore, according to Costley and Nelson (2013), implementing features of written and spoken grammar in class will help to improve the effectiveness of learning and applying grammar consistently.

However, the study's results oppose Akbari's (2014) findings, which state that many learners consider mastery of grammar a huge difficulty because they are not proficient in grammar and cannot recognize all the elements of a sentence. Thus, many learners have a poor attitude toward grammar, causing a lack of knowledge of grammar (Hutchinson et al., 2012). According to Richards and Schmidt (2013), some researchers agree that poor proficiency in grammar can hinder the improvement of the English language.

Moreover, vocabulary, one of the indicators of English proficiency, has a mean of 6.90, with a standard deviation of 1.17, described as proficient. The result of the study agrees with the findings of Gardner (2013), which states that learners who are proficient in vocabulary are able to communicate effectively, perform successfully, and apply vocabulary consistently. Thus, it is important that learners have a higher level of proficiency in vocabulary in order to learn new vocabulary words and can have retention of unfamiliar words (Kim, 2011). A study by Nation (2011) emphasized that learners who are proficient in vocabulary and have a wide-ranging vocabulary demonstrate correct usage and consistent application of vocabulary in the English language. According to Lee and Kim (2021), extensive reading, particularly reading authentic texts and storybooks, significantly contributes to achieving a proficiency level in vocabulary. Studies have shown that learners who engage in regular independent reading demonstrate higher levels of proficiency in vocabulary and foster consistency in applying vocabulary in the English language (Cunningham & Stanovich, 2011).

However, the result of the study opposes the findings of Wu (2013), which states that among the indicators of English proficiency, learners have difficulty when it comes to vocabulary because learners did not adopt more engaging teaching pedagogies that would help them to be proficient in vocabulary. Thus, learners are confused when they encounter highly academic words and unfamiliar words that are presented in a specific context and fail to grasp their meaning because they are low proficient in vocabulary (Baeta, 2012). According to Nayan and Krishnasamy (2015), learners' poor and limited vocabulary results in inconsistent application of vocabulary in the English language. Low proficiency in

vocabulary was the main obstacle learners faced in using and applying vocabulary consistently; this is confirmed by Altalhab (2017), who argues that poor or low proficiency in vocabulary might lead learners to difficulty in applying vocabulary efficiently and understanding or comprehending texts effectively.

3.2 Level of Learners' Reading Comprehension

Table 2. Level of Learners' Reading Comprehension

PARTICULAR	MEAN	STANDARD DEVIATION	DESCRIPTION
Reading Comprehension	7.15	1.23	High

The level of learners' reading comprehension is presented in Table 2. Results showed that the level of learners' reading comprehension has a mean of 7.15, with a standard deviation of 1.23, described as high. It implies that the learners have strong understanding and reading comprehension abilities. The result of the study agrees to the findings of Krashen (2014) which states that research has shown that learners who read for pleasure have higher levels of comprehension than those who do not. Thus, learners with high reading comprehension tend to understand what they are reading and have strong reading comprehension abilities (McKee, 2012). High level of reading comprehension helps learners to understand and draw conclusions pertaining to what is appropriate or valuable in the written text (McLaughlin, 2012). According to Roomy and Alhawsawi (2019), learners who have higher levels of reading comprehension are more engaged into reading, reflecting, critical thinking, and develops attentiveness which eventually results to high level of reading comprehension.

However, the result of the study opposes to the findings of Taj (2017) which states that learners tend to have lower level of reading comprehension due to several factors like lack of motivation and reading engagement. Swan (2015) confirmed that learners who have low comprehension can't understand what they read and have limited understanding and reading comprehension abilities. According to Protacio (2017), learners who have low levels of reading comprehension were not engaged into reading, and don't have motivation to read, learn, and participate in social activities that promotes reading, use learning strategies while reading, and developing or understanding meaning from texts and passages that they are reading.

3.2 Relationship between Learners' English Proficiency and Reading Comprehension

Table 3. Relationship between English Proficiency and Reading Comprehension

PARTICULAR	R-VALUE	DESCRIPTION	P-VALUE	INTERPRETATION
Grammar	0.20	Slight Positive Correlation	0.39	Not Significant
Vocabulary	0.45	Moderate Positive Correlation	0.05	Significant
English Proficiency	0.35	Low Positive Correlation	0.13	Not Significant

The Table 3 shows the relationship between learners' English proficiency and reading comprehension. As reflected in Table 3, the relationship between English proficiency and reading comprehension has a positive low correlation with an r-value of 0.35. This means that as the level of learners' English proficiency increases, their level of reading comprehension also increases. However, it has a p-value is 0.13, which is greater than at α . 0.05 level of significance, indicating that there is no significant relationship between English proficiency and reading comprehension among learners. The result of the study agrees to the findings of Chen and Lee (2018) which states that English proficiency and reading comprehension has no significant relationship, stating that English proficiency alone did not guarantee higher levels of reading comprehension abilities. According to Tuncer and Bahadir (2014), the relationship

between English proficiency and reading comprehension may not be as straightforward as previously believed; the study anticipates finding weak or low correlation between these variables which means that as the level of learners' proficiency in the English language increases, the level of their reading comprehension also increases.

However, the result of the study opposes to the findings of Baker and Macintyre (2019) which states that English proficiency and reading comprehension has a significant relationship suggesting that learners with higher English proficiency also achieved higher levels of reading comprehension at the same time. According to Gupta (2017), learners with high level of proficiency in the English language also achieve higher levels of reading and comprehension abilities, self-confidence, and improved cross-cultural understanding. Furthermore, learners with higher English proficiency exhibited improved problem-solving and critical thinking skills, cognitive abilities, and higher levels of reading comprehension skills (Adesope & Lavin, 2010).

Moreover, as indicated in the table, a slight positive correlation is found between grammar and reading comprehension with an r-value of 0.20. This means that as the level of grammar increases, the level of reading comprehension also increases. However, grammar and reading comprehension has a p-value of 0.39, which is greater than 0.05 level of significance, indicating that there is no significant relationship between grammar, one of the indicators of English proficiency, and reading. The result of the study agrees to the findings of Morvay (2012) which states that there is no significant relationship between grammar and reading comprehension because studies have shown that learners' grammar has no impacts on the levels of their comprehension. However, the result of the study opposes to the findings of Hendriks and Koster (2010) which states that grammar and reading comprehension has a significant relationship because learners who are able to use and produce correct grammar are also able to comprehend it and vice versa. According to Grabe (2010), there is a significant relationship between grammar and reading comprehension due to the fact that grammar is a major foundation of higher levels of reading comprehension.

Further, the results revealed that there is a moderate positive correlation between vocabulary and reading comprehension with an r-value of 0.45. This indicates that as the level of vocabulary increases, the level of reading comprehension also increases. Further, vocabulary and reading comprehension has a p-value of 0.05, which is equal to 0.05 level of significance, indicating that there is a significant relationship between the two. This means that learners' English proficiency, particularly vocabulary, contributes to the level of their reading comprehension. The result of the study agrees to the findings of Mancilla-Martinez and Lesaux (2010) which states that there is a significant relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension because in order to achieve and raise learners' comprehension level, they should have mastery and knowledge in vocabulary. According to Lee and Kim (2021), vocabulary has been positively correlated with reading comprehension, and states that exposure to a wide range of vocabulary affects and enhances learners' level of reading comprehension. Furthermore, vocabulary has been linked to improved speaking, writing, and reading comprehension skills (Milton, 2019).

However, the result of the study opposes to the findings of Lawrence (2019) which states that the relationship between vocabulary and reading comprehension was inconsistent and has a low correlation because learners' level of vocabulary did not affect the level of how they read and comprehend at the same time. Past studies showed that vocabulary did not contribute to learners' reading comprehension and shows inconsistent results of various correlations between the two variables (Logan & Kieffer, 2017).

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the findings and statistical results of the study, the following conclusions were derived:

The level of English proficiency of the respondents, including in terms of grammar and vocabulary, is proficient. This implies that the respondents have a great understanding and application of the English language. On the other hand, the level of reading comprehension of the respondents is high. This implies that the learners have strong understanding and reading comprehension abilities. Further, result showed

that there is no significant relationship between English proficiency and reading comprehension. However, a significant relationship between vocabulary, one of the indicators of English proficiency, and reading comprehension is found. Thus, it is recommended that teachers should focus more on improving learners' English vocabulary skills, through employing word-of-the-day activities, to improve their reading comprehension. Also, future researchers may conduct other study that would focus on the indicators of vocabulary skills and its impact to learners' reading comprehension to bigger number of respondents.

UNDER PEER REVIEW

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