Speaking and listening proficiency of AB English students: basis for instructional material development

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive study sought to find the listening and speaking proficiency levels of the selected AB English students when their scores were taken as a whole and when categorized according to specific listening and speaking microskills. It also aimed to find out particular microskills the students needed to improve on. The research made use of listening and speaking tests patterned from Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Results showed that when taken as a whole, the students had *Advanced* speaking skills. When categorized according to specific microskill, their proficiency level in recognizing and producing vowel and consonant sounds was *High Advanced*, and *Low Advanced* in controlled and free speaking tests. Improvements may focus on specific microskills: (1) recognizing and producing consonant sounds, (2) employing appropriate vocal variety in rate, pitch and intensity, (3) selecting appropriate organizational pattern according to the topic, context, and purpose, (4) formulating substantial thesis statements supported by well-thought details, and (5) delivering the message in a clear, fluent manner using appropriate nonverbal behavior. In their listening skills, students exhibited *Advanced Level of Proficiency* when their scores were taken as a whole. When categorized according to specific microskills, their proficiency levels are as follows: Literal level- *High Advanced,* Inferential level– *Low Advanced,* and Evaluative level–*Low Advanced*. These results imply that review, planning, implementation of classroom activities and seminars must be carefully re-examined to polish the students' listening and speaking skills. A well-designed instructional material should be planned out for this purpose.

Keywords: English language, microskills, competencies

INTRODUCTION

The important contributions of the English language to the Filipinos cannot be underestimated. As a medium for intellectual pursuits and international communication (Regala 2017), English opens opportunities in overseas employment, outsourcing industry, and enrolment in international schools (UKEssays 2013). This importance is reflected in the Philippine

Constitution where Article XIV Section 7 states "for purposes of communication and instruction, the official languages of the Philippines are Filipino and, until otherwise provided by law, English" (De Leon 2008).

Named as one of the largest English-speaking nations in the world, the Philippines has 90% literacy rate (Hernandez 2015) with most of its population proficient in speaking basic English. However, recent data in Common European Framework of Reference of Language (CEFR) show Filipino university graduates having an average of B1 in language proficiency (Enerio 2018), and having an average of 631.4 in Test of English for International Communication as reported by Hopkin's International Partners (Morallo 2018). These scores attained by Filipino graduates are comparable to 5th or 6th grade students in the United States and United Kingdom.

Because of these alarming reports, the Senate Committee on Education prompted by Resolution 622 filed by Senator Grace Poe looked into the matter as the decline in English proficiency may pose problems in the country's labor force amidst the competitive global market (Romero 2018). Some reasons for the decline include: quality of teachers and English textbooks (Wilson 2009), bad attitude toward the language, lack of practice, (Diaz 2018), and even the use of Filipino and other local languages in the English classroom (Mclean 2010).

On the other hand, Philippine languages have less number of consonants and vowels compared to English. This results to Filipinos having difficulty in producing sounds not present in the inventory of their first language such as schwa /ə/ and voiced consonants /z/, /b/, /v/ and /ð/ (Ryan 2009). Errors because of this discrepancy in segmental inventory are common among second language learners of English as found by Hassan (2014) among students in Sudan.

Aside from the differences in segmental inventory, learning a second language echoes further the suprasegmental features of the first language. These features include stress, intonation, juncture, blending, and even kinesic elements. For example, aside from Filipinos pronouncing words as they are spelled, they also follow a syllable-timed rather than stress-timed rhythm of English (Bautista and Bolton 2009) and rely heavily on the intonation of their first language (Beltran 2015).

This phenomenon where speakers apply knowledge from one language to another language is the core of language transfer theory (Weinreich 1974; Jarvis and Pavlenko 2008). Language transfer may be positive or negative. When relevant unit or structure of both languages is the same, the linguistic interference can result to correct language production called positive transfer. When linguistic interference results to errors, there is negative transfer.

Among Filipinos, the negative transfer often stems from fossilization of the linguistic features of the speaker's first language and sociolinguistic factors especially on the educational background of the speaker.

To reduce errors and improve English language production, Filipinos may begin honing their speaking and listening skills. These skills according to Celik and Yavuz (2015) should always be kept in coordination with one another to guide students' learning process more effectively.

In this study, speaking and listening microskills of university students were described so that the areas of difficulty may be identified and remediated through appropriate classroom activities and instructional materials. Specifically, this study aimed to determine the level of speaking and listening proficiency of the selected university students as a whole and categorized as to specific microskills; and to identify particular microskills where students display difficulty.

METHODS

Research Design

This descriptive study sought to find the level of speaking and listening proficiency of selected university students. According to Best and Kahn (1989), descriptive research involves the descriptive analysis and interpretation of existing conditions.

Profile of the Respondents

The respondents of this study were 31 first year English major students selected through purposive sampling. According to Fraenkel and Wallen (2009), purposive sampling is used when the researchers use personal judgment to select a sample depending upon the researchers' previous knowledge of the population and the purpose of the study.

In this study, respondents were chosen using these criteria: (1) year level and major being pursued (respondent must be a First Year AB English student for the academic year 2015-2016), (2) agreement to be a part of the study, and (3) availability and willingness to undergo speaking and listening tests.

Instruments Used in the Study

This study utilized listening and speaking tests patterned from Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) and Test of English for International

Communication (TOEIC). Both tests use the General American English which is in consonance with the English used as a standard in almost all Philippine schools and workplaces. The 50-item test was designed considering the listening and speaking microskills from the list of Brown (2001), Bloom's taxonomy of cognitive domain (Anderson and Krathwohl 2001), and competencies set in the AB English program (CHED 2012) (Tables 1 and 2). Both tests were validated by a pool of experts composed of three English teachers who are reviewers of TOEFL and TOEIC.

Table 1. Table of specifications for speaking competency test.

Speaking Competencies	Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain					
	Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating
Vowel and Consonant Sounds 1. Demonstrating knowledge of the vowels and diphthongs 2. Demonstrating knowledge of the consonant sounds 3. Using consonant and vowel sounds correctly and clearly	1-10 11-20		 21-30			
Controlled Speaking Task 4. Employing appropriate vocal variety in rate, pitch and intensity 5. Using appropriate paralanguage (pause, emphasis, tone, etc.) 6. Using appropriate kinesic elements (posture, gesture and facial expressions) that achieve congruence and enhance the verbal intent			31-34 35-37 38-40			
Free Speaking Task 7. Selecting appropriate organizational pattern according to the topic, context and purpose 8. Formulating a substantial thesis statement supported by well-thought details 9. Delivering the message in a clear, fluent manner using appropriate nonverbal behavior that supports the verbal message			 47-50	41-43 44-46		

Table 2. Table of specifications for listening competency test.

Listening Competencies	Bloom's Taxonomy of Cognitive Domain					
	Remembering	Understanding	Applying	Analyzing	Evaluating	Creating
Literal Level 1. Retaining chunks of information 2. Understanding stated facts	1-10	11-20				
Inferential Level 3. Predicting outcomes 4. Inferring situations		21-30 31-40				
Evaluative Level 5. Drawing logical conclusions and judgments					41-50	

Data Gathering Procedure

After a short orientation session with the respondents, the listening and speaking tests were conducted. For the speaking test in vowel and consonant sounds, students were given 10 minutes to answer the paper-and-pencil test which included choosing words with different underlined vowel and consonant sounds. After this, they were called individually in a separate room to test their vocal production by making them read words containing critical vowel and consonant sounds. For the controlled speaking test, the students read paragraphs to test the appropriateness of vocal variety, paralanguage, and kinesic elements. Lastly, for the free speaking test, students chose one from a set of given questions.

For the listening test in the literal level, the respondents listened to an audio clip once and responded to a four-item multiple-choice test. Because there were five audio-clips with four questions each, the students answered 20 questions. For the inferential listening test, they listened to two audio clips where they predicted outcomes and made inferences by completing sentences based on the text. Lastly, for evaluative level, they listened to an audio clip after which they write conclusions and judgments in a paragraph format.

The students' objective answers in the paper-and-pencil tests for both speaking (20 items) and listening (20 items) were checked. Their videotaped

reading of words with critical vowel and consonant sounds, controlled speaking and free speaking were stored in a flash drive. Paragraphs used as responses to listening tests were photocopied. Both tests were scored by the three evaluators who are English teachers.

Data Analysis

To find out the general picture of the students' listening and speaking proficiency, the researchers subjected the data to statistical analysis using mean, percentage and standard deviation. The mean (±sd) scores were converted to percentages interpreted using the following ten-point scale adapted from the one designed by the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (Brown 2001):

Percentage		Description
1-10	-	Low Beginner
11-20	-	Beginner
21-30	-	High Beginner
31-40	-	Low Intermediate
41-50	-	Intermediate
51-60	-	High Intermediate
61-70	-	Low Advanced
71-80	-	Advanced
81-90	-	High Advanced
91-100	-	Superior

RESULTS

Students' Speaking Proficiency

As a whole, the speaking proficiency of the students is *Advanced*. When the scores were categorized according to the specific microskills, their proficiency in the vowel and consonant sounds is *High Advanced*. However, in controlled speaking and free speaking, students' level of proficiency is *Low Advanced* (Table 3).

As to specific microskills in vowel and consonant sounds, the students fare better in recognizing vowels and diphthongs (High Advanced) than in recognizing consonants (Advanced). Students may have used spelling as a clue in recognizing similar vowel sounds such as /i/ in *wheat, beat,* and *meet*, /a/ in *shock* and *stock,* and /o/ in *oat* and *oath* (Table 4).

In producing critical vowel and consonant sounds, the students have *High Advanced* level of proficiency with most (86.9%) of them having no

problems pronouncing sounds found also in their first language such as vowels /ɛ/, /a/, /i/, and /u/, and consonants /b/, /p/, /k/, /g/ and /ŋ/ (Table 4).

Table 3. The percent mean (±sd) speaking proficiency of AB English students. Scales and Description: 1-10—Low Beginner, 11-20—Beginner, 21-30—High Beginner, 31-40—Low Intermediate, 41-50—Intermediate, 51-60—High Intermediate, 61-70—Low Advanced, 71-80—Advanced, 81-90—High Advanced, 91-100—Superior.

Categories	Percent Mean (±sd)	Description
Whole	72.4 (±5.60)	Advanced
Vowel and Consonant Sounds	83.3 (±2.2)	High Advanced
Controlled Speaking	70.3 (±1.4)	Low Advanced
Free Speaking	69.5 (±0.8)	Low Advanced

Table 4. The percent mean (±sd) speaking proficiency of the AB English students when scores are categorized as to specific microskills. Scales and Description: 1-10—Low Beginner, 11-20—Beginner, 21-30—High Beginner, 31-40—Low Intermediate, 41-50—Intermediate, 51-60—High Intermediate, 61-70—Low Advanced, 71-80—Advanced, 81-90—High Advanced, 91-100 – Superior.

Categories	Percent Mean (±sd)	Description
Vowel and Consonant Sounds		
1. Demonstrating knowledge of the vowels and diphthongs	83.1 (±1.3)	High Advanced
2. Demonstrating knowledge of the consonant sounds	80.0 (±1.1)	Advanced
3. Using consonant and vowel sounds correctly and clearly	86.9 (±1.5)	High Advanced
Controlled Speaking Task		
4. Employing appropriate vocal variety in rate, pitch and intensity	69.0 (±0.5)	Low Advanced
5. Using appropriate paralanguage (pause, emphasis, tone, etc.)	72.6 (±0.5)	Advanced
6. Using appropriate kinesic elements (posture, gesture and facial expressions) that achieve congruence and enhance the verbal intent	70.9 (±0.5)	Advanced

Free Speaking Task 7. Selecting appropriate organizational pattern according to the topic, context and purpose	68.8 (±0.3)	Low Advanced
8. Formulating a substantial Thesis statement supported by well-thought details	69.9 (±0.4)	Low Advanced
9. Delivering the message in a clear, fluent manner using appropriate nonverbal behavior that supports the verbal message	69.8 (±0.8)	Low Advanced

In controlled speaking test, the students' proficiency in microskill 4 is *Low Advanced* with some (69.0%) of them attempting to approximate the American stress-timed rhythm with some notable vocal variety. In microskills 5 and 6, students' proficiency is *Advanced* with some (72.6%) of them employing some appropriate paralanguage and a few (70.9%) using appropriate kinesic elements (Table 4).

Lastly, in free speaking test, the students' proficiency in microskills 7, 8, and 9 is *Low Advanced* which shows that they need more improvement in organization, formulation of substantial thesis and details and delivery (Table 4).

Students' Listening Proficiency

As a whole, the listening proficiency of the students is *Advanced*. When the scores were categorized as to the specific microskills, their proficiency in the literal level is *High Advanced* while in inferential and evaluative levels, their proficiency is *Low Advanced* (Table 5).

Table 5. The percent mean (±sd) listening proficiency of AB English students. Scales and Description: 1-10—Low Beginner, 11-20—Beginner, 21-30—High Beginner, 31-40—Low Intermediate, 41-50—Intermediate, 51-60—High Intermediate, 61-70—Low Advanced, 71-80—Advanced, 81-90—High Advanced, 91-100-Superior.

Categories	Percent Mean (±sd)	Description
Whole	77.9 (±3.4)	Advanced
Literal Level	85.4 (±2.9)	High Advanced
Inferential Level	63.9 (±3.2)	Low Advanced
Evaluative Level	64.8 (±1.0)	Low Advanced

The students have *High Advanced* proficiency in all specific microskills in the literal level of listening skill. This shows that students can retain information listened to and understand stated facts. Their exposure to movies, advertisements, and other audiovisual materials at home, in school and even online must have scaffolded their familiarity of American English (Table 6).

In inferential and evaluative levels, however, the students' level of proficiency ranges from *Low Advanced* to *Advanced*. Lastly, in the evaluative level, the students' responses show they still need to improve making conclusions and sound judgments based on audio materials listened to, and to minimize the urge to simply write down and condense the information (Table 6).

Table 6. The percent mean (±sd) listening proficiency of the AB English students when scores are categorized as to specific microskills. Note: Scales and Description—1-10—Low Beginner, 11-20—Beginner, 21-30—High Beginner, 31-40—Low Intermediate, 41-50—Intermediate, 51-60—High Intermediate, 61-70—Low Advanced, 71-80—Advanced, 81-90—High Advanced, 91-100 – Superior.

Categories	Percent Mean (±sd)	Description
Literal Level		
Retaining chunks of information	84.1 (±1.8)	High Advanced
Understanding stated facts	86.7 (±1.6)	High Advanced
Inferential level		
Predicting outcomes	73.7 (±1.9)	Advanced
Inferring situations	67.9 (±1.7)	Low Advanced
Evaluative Level		
Drawing logical conclusions and sound judgments	64.8 (1.9)	Low Advanced

Microskills where Students Display Difficulty

For controlled speaking task. Among the microskills under the controlled speaking task, in employing appropriate vocal variety in rate, pitch and intensity, the students' speaking task is *Low Advanced*. Most (69.0%) of the students read the paragraph word for word, a discrepancy most attributed to the syllable-timed rhythm of their first language. They also gave equal weight to each word which makes their manner of speaking to take the staccato effect.

For free speaking task. All microskills under free speaking task have *Low Advanced* levels which may not pass in global standards. In microskill 7, most (68.8%) of the students did not establish distinct organizational pattern in their answers. They simply began by reading the questions, then transforming the questions into statements while others used transition words such as *first, second, third, then, finally*.

In microskill 8, most (69.9%) of the students failed to advance a convincing, persuasive, and substantial thesis statement that shows their argument. By not having a strong thesis statement, their discussions have become fragmented.

In microskill 9, a number (69.8%) of students jumped from one idea to the next, and sometimes got lost in the middle of their answers as shown in very long pauses and fillers such as *ah, uhm* and *you know*. Further, very few of them employed nonverbal behavior like appropriate hand gestures and facial expressions that go with the verbal message.

For listening. In inferring situations, 67.9% of the students showed difficulty in using real-world knowledge to make sound inferences. This may be due to their heavy reliance on a multiple-choice type of test, lack of exposure to the listening task and a limited number of listening strategies.

In drawing logical conclusions and sound judgments, 64.8% of the students showed a tendency to simply copy stated facts rather than provide a substantial explanation or description.

DISCUSSION

Students' Speaking Proficiency

As a whole, the students speaking proficiency is *Advanced*. This finding concurs with the findings reported in the study of Hernandez (2015) which posits that Filipinos can speak, read and write at a rudimentary level. However, this level at 72.4% proficiency rate is barely passing in international standards such as in TOEIC, a result which is similar to the findings of other studies like Enerio (2018) and Morallo (2018).

In the vowel and consonant sounds, students' speaking task is *High Advanced*. At 83.3% proficiency rate, the students have successfully identified critical American vowel and consonant sounds. This may be attributed to the similarities in vowel and consonant inventories between English and

Philippine languages (Tayao 2011) and the positive transfer of these in speaking English.

In controlled speaking and free speaking, however, the result is *Low Advanced*. At just 70.3% for controlled speaking and 69.5% for free speaking. This may be due to the students' lack of self-confidence (Pangket 2019), limited vocabulary (Leong and Ahmadi 2017), and less opportunities to speak in front of an audience.

Shen (2013) and Wang (2014) highly encouraged the exposure of the students to public speaking exercises through workshops and trainings.

Students' Listening Proficiency

As a whole, students listening proficiency is *Advanced*. At 77.9% proficiency rate, this result is in consonance with what Tendero (2008) found among Filipino college students whose listening skill is merely passing.

For the literal level, students have *High Advanced* listening proficiency. Remembering information listened to and retaining this to short-term memory (Talwar et al. 2018), having adequate vocabulary, and exposure to American English are some possible factors for the 85.4% proficiency rate.

On the other hand, students have *Low Advanced* level of proficiency in both Inferential and Evaluative Levels. This result may be due to the rate of delivery and unfamiliar vocabulary (Stepanoviene 2012), speaker's unfamiliar accent, listeners' lack of background knowledge on the topic, failure to concentrate, and lack of interest to listen (Hamouda 2013).

To help students improve their listening proficiency, teachers may need to expose students to a variety of listening exercises (Eken and Dilidüzgün 2014; Al-Nafisah 2019), teach them bottom-up, top-down, and interactive listening strategies (Field 2004; Yeldham 2018) and explore both traditional and latest instructional materials and methods in listening (Ma 2010).

Microskills where Students Display Difficulty

For controlled speaking task. While the students' utterances were still comprehensible, their speech did not show appropriate use of vocal variety in rate, pitch, and intensity which can affect emphasis in meaning or alter pragmatic functions. They read the paragraph word for word, a discrepancy most attributed to the syllable-timed rhythm of the students' first language which differs to the stress-timed rhythm of English (Bautista and Bolton 2009). Moreover, most students use Hiligaynon accent delivered

without using American English juncture and blending. This negative transfer of intonation from the first language to English is also observed by Beltran (2015) among Filipino student teachers.

For free speaking task. In microskill 7, the students' proficiency level shows that there is a lack of organizational pattern that highlights their important points and establishes a cohesive speech. Because of this, their speech seems to be beating around the bush. This result is similar to the findings of Lockwood et al. (2008) among Filipino call center agents whose speaking differ from the deductive structure and linear pattern used by Americans.

In microskill 8, the students' level of proficiency is at 69.9% only. The difficulty in making thesis statements is in contrast to what Dunbar et al. (2006) found among American students whose thesis statements in a public speaking class were above satisfactory standards.

In microskill 9, the students' speeches showed a need for improvement, a result which is similar to what Lasala (2014) found among Filipino secondary senior students.

Since wage disparity is another problem Filipino graduates might face in working abroad, there is a need for them to improve on these microskills. According to Wongsamuth (2015) even when a Filipino manages to secure a job, rarely does their pay come close to that of a white candidate. In the study of Furnham and Wilson (2011) over half of participants believe wage disparities exist between men and women; whites and blacks.

Thus, to improve students' speaking proficiency and prepare them better to be globally competitive, they need to be given more opportunities to enhance these microskills through seminars on various speaking tasks (Albino 2017) and techniques (Moradi and Talebi 2014), fluency training (de Jong and Perfetti 2011) and speaking workshop (Emandi 2015).

For listening. Filipinos' problem in listening comprehension specifically on predicting outcomes and inferring situations may be due to unfamiliar vocabularies and difficult grammar structure (Cubalit 2016). As second language learners, they struggle with getting a general understanding of what has been said. Capan and Karaca (2013) concluded that the inability of the learners to comprehend is a factor aggravating learners' listening comprehension level.

In drawing logical conclusions and sound judgments, the students' responses showed that they focus more on copying or summarizing facts from the audio material, and they have not bothered to make sound judgments to

make sense of the information. This may be due to lack of exposure to listening tasks that encourage evaluation which has a similar result found among Turkish students in the study of Saricoban and Karakurt (2016).

To improve their level of listening proficiency, students need to be exposed to varied listening tasks such as form-filling, sentence completion, summary completion, description and evaluation of spoken texts (Graham 2016). The most salient recommendation of the study is making an instructional material for speaking and listening (Tavil 2010; Yang et al. 2012). This material may include a variety of activities that are found to improve students' proficiency both in their speaking and listening skills (Gowhary et al. 2015; Aji 2017).

English has been perceived as related to one's economic status, intelligence, and employment (Bacon and Kim 2018) both locally (Beerepoot and Hendriks 2013) and internationally (TESDA 2011). Global competitiveness has also accelerated the importance of oral communication skill and is cited as one of the most desired graduates' employability skills (Jackson 2014). Having impeccable listening and speaking skills in English are among the most important skills that help graduates get high paying jobs (Pandey and Pandey 2014). Lastly, acquiring communicative and linguistic competences becomes a "must" in view of a more flexible and smoother insertion into the labor market worldwide (Greculesco et al. 2014).

In the 2011 tracer study (Yap et al. 2012) conducted among the AB English graduates, all 74 respondents were employed, but only 10% of them landing a job abroad and having a monthly salary of over PhP 25,000. Therefore, the researchers believed that to improve their students' chances of getting high-paying jobs both in the country and abroad, enhancing their communication skills in English should be in place.

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