

ASSESSING THE PHONETIC COMPONENTS OF THE LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT: This paper explored the speaking skills of the graduates of an English proficiency program at a state-owned Science and Technology University in the Philippines. This study evaluated pronunciation, fluency, voice variety, and accuracy in communication; as necessary skills in job placement. This study utilized a descriptive survey design. A questionnaire was routed, and participants had their responses through a recording. Interviews supported the validation of data. The general results showed that the speaking skills of these graduates were excellent. In particular, accuracy and voice variety was evaluated as the highest. The results suggested that these skills were instrumental in landing jobs for these graduates. It was found that the language program yielded a good result; thus, the study recommends that speaking skills be explored deeper to have a more comprehensive analysis of the necessary sub-skills essential in gaining employment.

Keywords: Speaking skills, job Enabling skills, communication skills, language program

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the significant features of unemployment relates not to academic ability but to the inability to communicate well. Several studies show that the lack of soft skills, especially communication skills in English, has contributed significantly to unemployment and difficulties securing the first job. Some elements identified as significant reflect soft skills, including communicative ability [1, 2].

Communicative ability, operationally used in the study, included the speaking skills of which micro-skills are pronunciation, fluency, voice variety, and accuracy.

Speaking Skills

Pronunciation plays a vital role in intelligibility [2]. Mispronouncing a single sound causes the listener's misunderstanding, and various uses of stress and intonations result in different meanings. The primary reason is that the language spoken is not the speaker's native language.

Fluency in language use is considered a success factor for students during language learning. Fluency is not something separated from accuracy. Further, [4] thinks a person who is a fluent language user obtains communicative competence because significant elements of fluency are speed of reading, accuracy, and appropriate expressions.

The term fluency refers to the ability to use the language quickly and confidently without too many hesitations or too many unnatural pauses to cause barriers in communication [4] in the process of understanding English as a foreign language has frequently occurred in the minds and thoughts of both teachers and students recently. In other words, fluency is an expectation for anyone who wishes to be competent in a target language that they have spent their time and effort to acquire. According to [6], fluency is a significant characteristic of communicative competence. Fluency is considered an essential indicator of progress in language learning [7].

Accuracy, as used in this study, is the use of correct forms where utterances do not contain errors affecting a language's phonological, syntactic, semantic, or discourse features [8]. In other words, people believe that beginners to English learning need to use English as a correct form of grammar and structure.

Speaking competence covers speaking accuracy and fluency. Speaking accuracy indicates "the extent to which the language produced conforms to target language norms" [9], which involves correct pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar. More hesitations and pauses may obstruct speaking fluency and depress the speaker. As an essential language teaching and learning tool, speaking can "facilitate language acquisition and development" [3]. As an essential aspect of language skills, English speaking should not be devalued but be "developed in its own right" [10]. Therefore, good speaking competence is essential to English learners.

Over-focus on accuracy may result in a lack of fluency, and too much emphasis on fluency may lead to a lack of accuracy [11]. Therefore, it is necessary for EFL learners need to balance speaking accuracy and fluency.

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design and Instruments

This study employed descriptive survey research; it explored the speaking skills of the Language Program graduates to determine its contribution to the student's development in communication skills. The fluency test is an adapted version of the Speaking Tests in IELTS. Language experts validated the test given to the respondents.

Setting, Respondents, and Data Gathering Procedure

The study was conducted at the government-owned University in Cagayan de Oro. Using Slovin's formula, students were selected. They were asked to answer a survey questionnaire that evaluated their learning from the language program. Then, they took an online test that assessed their speaking skills. The test consisted of questions in which respondents' answers were to be recorded in a specified format. The recording was attached to the questionnaire they had to send back to the researchers.

Ethical Considerations

The researchers had asked permission from the respondents of the study. The study was based on the respondent's availability and complete understanding and consent of the study conducted.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Phonetic components of the Language Program

Phonetic components	Mean Score	Standard Deviation	Description
Pronunciation	4.14	0.77	Very Good
Fluency	4.09	0.68	Very Good
Voice variety	4.17	0.76	Very Good
Accuracy	4.27	0.60	Very Good
TOTAL	4.17	0.70	Very Good

The table shows the speaking skills of the graduates of the language program. Accuracy has a 4.27 mean score with a 0.60 standard deviation, which is very good; next is voice variety with 4.17 and 0.76 standard deviations, very good; then, pronunciation, which is 4.14 with a 0.77 standard deviation, also very good and fluency with 4.09 and 0.68 standard deviations another perfect. It can be noted that they all are rated *Very Good* as the description stipulated, but they just varied in minimal points. It can be purported as [12] mentioned that graduates possessing good communication skills can increase employability and opportunities for career advancement.

First, the highest is accuracy, proving the JEEP Program benefits the graduates' speaking skills. Accuracy is defined by [8] as the use of correct forms wherein the respondents' utterances do not contain errors that affect a specific language's phonological, syntactic, semantic, or discourse features. As beginners in English, the graduates have learned to use English as a correct form of grammar and structure.

Next to that is voice variety, [13] posited that the advanced speaker's excellent use of vocal variation, intensity, and pacing are characteristics. A speaker's verbal expression is also natural and enthusiastic and avoids fillers. This vocal variation is evident in the beginning speaker's speech. Hence, a speaker also enunciates clearly, speaks audibly, and generally avoids fillers (e.g., "um," "uh," and "like," among others).

Then, pronunciation, as [14] described, has a positive effect on learning a second language, and learners can gain the skills they need for effective communication in English. Further, for learners to pronounce, they ought to change how they think about the component sounds of those words, as this goes not just for individual sounds but for more significant elements of speech, such as syllables, stress patterns, and rhythm.

Last is fluency, considered an essential indicator for progressing in language learning, and it becomes one of the conditions ensuring success in communication [8]. In total, therefore, good speaking competence is essential to English learners.

4. CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The language program proved to have a considerable effect on the graduates' speaking skills as graduates possessed good speaking skills, particularly accuracy, vocal variety, pronunciation, and fluency. These factors are external

manifestations of the student's communication skills and are projected to increase employability and opportunities for career advancement. With these findings, it is recommended that these areas be enhanced to have graduates make good impressions on prospective employers.

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