Linguistic and Pragmatic Proficiency of Students Learning English as A Second Language

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DOI: https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100500882

Received: 16 May 2026; Accepted: 21 May 2026; Published: 16 June 2026

ABSTRACT

This study evaluated students' linguistic and pragmatic proficiency at a public institution. It sought to investigate the relationship between respondents' linguistic and pragmatic proficiency and ascertain whether there are notable variations in the language competence of the respondents when categorized based on their profiles.

The descriptive-correlational design was used to determine the students' level of linguistic and pragmatic proficiency. Inferential statistics such as F-test, was used to determine the differences in the respondents' linguistic and pragmatic proficiency. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between respondents' linguistic and pragmatic competence.

Results of the study revealed that the respondents displayed significant differences in their linguistic and pragmatic proficiency when grouped according to the number of years in school, track, and strand. Generally, the respondents' linguistic and pragmatic competence level is approaching proficiency, which requires more classroom activities to improve their language competence to communicate meaningfully and successfully in appropriate social contexts. With this, strategic instructional materials to improve language efficacy were crafted.

Key Words: Linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, instructional materials

INTRODUCTION

One of the challenges faced by English teachers is how to develop the language proficiency of Second Language (L2) learners so that they can use language correctly and appropriately in a variety of social contexts. The desire to seek knowledge is one of the outstanding characteristics of human activity. However, accessing that knowledge is becoming increasingly dependent upon proficiency in the English language.

In the Philippines, English plays a role as a major medium for global communication. Over the years, with the non-stop change in the educational curriculum, English continues to pervade the educational system not only as a medium of instruction but has been treated to be taught as a subject in basic education and a course in tertiary education, and in graduate and post-graduate schools.

Despite years of formal education, many Filipino students continue to struggle with communicating and engaging in the language. English is the medium of instruction in kindergarten through senior high school, but it is disturbing to find college students who struggle to construct a sentence or answer questions in fluent English (Mancilla and Hisona, 2019). Language classes in junior and senior high schools have remained literature-based in orientation, with less emphasis on the linguistic features as grammar, lexis, and phonology. The Philippines has consistently scored lower in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) compared to other countries. Pragmatic competence is needed in understanding and answering PISA questions, which require inferencing, drawing conclusions, and contextual language usage that may not be emphasized in traditional classrooms. PISA questions are often indirect, requiring students to read between the lines, identify implicit meanings, and engage in critical discourse, where pragmatic competence is essential.

Effective communication requires more than just mastery of grammar and vocabulary. Equally essential is pragmatic competence or the ability to use language appropriately in context, which plays a central role in language teaching and learning. It enables learners to steer and manage conversations that extend beyond the mere exchange of information (Terzi, 2014).

At Nueva Vizcaya State University (NVSU), observations indicate that many freshmen still require significant improvement in both linguistic and pragmatic competencies to help realize the university's vision of becoming a leading university in education, innovation, and sustainable development. Interviews with English teachers revealed that students often struggle with vocabulary and grammar, as well as with identifying the functions of words within a sentence. Therefore, this study assessed the language competence of students learning English as a second language and explored strategies for enhancing English instruction at the university to foster both linguistic and pragmatic proficiency.

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of the study was to evaluate the linguistic competence and pragmatic competence of English as a second language students with the end in view of doing an enhancement program.

Specifically, the study intended to:

a. determine the profile of students in terms of age, sex, ethnicity, number of years in school, type of school, track and strand, and mother tongue

b. determine the level of linguistic competence of students;

c. ascertain the level of pragmatic competence of students;

d. investigate if there are significant differences in the linguistic competence of respondents when grouped according to their profile;

e. investigate if there are significant differences in the pragmatic competence of respondents when grouped according to their profile;

f. investigate if there is a significant relationship between the linguistic competence and pragmatic competence of respondents; and,

g. propose an enhancement training program for teachers of English toward the development of linguistic competence and pragmatic competence of ESL students.

METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the descriptive-inferential design to determine the students' level of linguistic competence and pragmatic competence. Inferential statistics such as F-test, was used to determine the differences in the respondents' linguistic and pragmatic proficiency. Pearson's product-moment correlation was used to examine the relationship between respondents' linguistic and pragmatic competence.

The study was carried out at the two campuses of Nueva Vizcaya State University, located at the towns of Bambang and Bayombong in Nueva Vizcaya, Philippines.

Three hundred five (305) freshmen students enrolled in Purposive Communication subject at the university were the respondents in the study.

Teachers teaching English courses from the two campuses of the university were interviewed about some problems and issues along the linguistic and pragmatic competence of students in their classes.

The study utilized three (3) researcher-made tests that underwent expert validation. The instruments include the Background Information Questionnaire which was used to gather information about the profile of the respondents; a 40-item Linguistic Test to measure the grammatical/linguistic ability of the respondent; and, a 30-item Pragmatic Test to assess the learners' ability to use speech acts, or social language in a structured setting. To triangulate students' linguistic and pragmatic competence, an interview guide for teachers was included to gather pertinent information about the study at hand.

In gathering pertinent data, the researcher sought permission from the University President to conduct the study with the respondents. The questions were delivered to the teachers concerned to administer the test. The test papers were retrieved, checked and coded, and the result was subjected to statistical analysis.

The respondents' profiles were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically frequency and percentage. The results of the linguistic and pragmatic tests were summarized using the mean and standard deviation. To determine significant differences, inferential statistics such as the F-test were employed, while the relationship between variables was examined through Pearson's product–moment correlation. All data analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Profile of Respondents

The table shows the profile of the respondents in terms of *age, sex, ethnicity, number of years in school, type of school, track and strand, and mother tongue.*

Table 2. Frequency and percent distribution of respondents' profile

Profile	**Frequency (n=305)**	**Percentage**	
Age	17-18	60	19.70
	19-20	226	74.10
	21 above	19	6.20
Sex	Male	105	34.40
	Female	200	65.60
Ethnicity	Ilocano	175	57.40
	Ifugao	60	19.70
	Tagalog	41	13.40
	Ibaloi	29	9.50
Number of Years	11	4	1.30
	13	291	95.40
	15	10	3.30
Type of School	Public	230	75.40
Graduated from Track and Strand	Private	75	24.60

Academic	ABM	24	7.90
	STEM	115	37.70
	GAS	78	25.60
	HumSS	20	6.60
Technical Vocational & Livelihood			
	HE	30	9.80
	ICT	7	1.60
	IA	7	2.30
	AFA	5	1.60
Non Senior High		21	6.90
Mother Tongue			
	Iloko	177	58.00
	Ifugao	36	11.80
	Tagalog	50	16.40
	Ibaloi	15	4.90
	Kalanguya	27	8.90

The study revealed that most participants (74.10%) are aged 19–20, suggesting that most are at a typical stage of early tertiary education, which may reflect timely progression from basic to higher education. The predominance of female respondents (65.60%) may imply a gender imbalance, which could influence the perspectives represented in the study. Ethnically, the sample is largely composed of Ilocanos (57.40%), followed by Ifugaos, Tagalogs, and Ibalois. This distribution, together with the prevalence of Iloko as the primary mother tongue (58.00%), highlights a strong regional linguistic and cultural influence, which may shape communication practices and learning experiences among respondents. In terms of educational background, majority (95.40%) have completed 13 years of schooling, indicating alignment with the K to 12 curriculum and suggesting that most respondents experienced standardized basic education. It can be noted that 75.40% of the respondents from public schools, likely reflecting accessibility and socioeconomic considerations. Regarding academic preparation, a substantial proportion (77.70%) pursued the Academic track in senior high school, with STEM emerging as the most common strand.

Level of Linguistic Competence of Respondents

Table 2. Level of linguistic competence of respondents.

Linguistic Competence		**Mean**	**SD**	**Qualitative Description**
1	Vocabulary	5.93	1.66	Approaching Proficiency
2	Subject-Verb Agreement	4.98	1.51	Approaching Proficiency

3	Sentence Pattern	2.40	1.22	Developing
4	Use of Possessives	2.64	1.32	Approaching Proficiency
5	Correct Usage	7.01	1.87	Proficient
	Mean	22.93	4.65	**Approaching Proficiency**

The findings show that respondents' overall linguistic competence is approaching proficiency (m = 22.93). They are proficient in correct usage (m= 7.01), approaching proficiency in vocabulary (m = 5.93), subject–verb agreement (m = 4.98), and possessives (m = 2.64), but remain developing in sentence patterning (m = 2.40). This indicates adequate knowledge of lexis and basic grammar, yet limited control of sentence structure.

These results highlighted the need to strengthen instruction in syntax alongside vocabulary and grammar. Consistent with Stephen Krashen (1988), effective grammar learning occurs when learners are motivated and exposed to comprehensible input in meaningful contexts. Notably, students in the academic track demonstrated higher competence in vocabulary, agreement, and correct usage, suggesting that motivation and quality language instruction contribute significantly to linguistic development.

Level of Pragmatic Competence of Respondents

Table 3. Level of pragmatic competence of respondents.

Pragmatic Competence		**Mean**	**SD**	**Qualitative Description**
1	Discourse Completion Test	9.39	3.04	Approaching Proficiency
2	Idiomatic Expression	5.90	2.48	Approaching Proficiency
3	Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test	2.63	1.89	Approaching Proficiency
	Mean	17.92	5.13	**Approaching Proficiency**

Table 3 shows the pragmatic competence of the respondents in terms of the *discourse completion test, idiomatic expression,* and *multiple-choice discourse completion test*.

It can be gleaned from the table that the respondents' level of pragmatic competence is approaching proficiency (m=17.92). Specifically, students' level of competence in the *discourse completion test* (m=9.39), *idiomatic expression* (m=5.90), and *multiple-choice discourse completion test* (m=2.63), is approaching proficiency. It can be explained that the respondents know how to use the language but need further practice to be able to negotiate meanings. This supports the study of Mojabi (2014) that as the students are developing in their linguistic competence that they are also progressing in their pragmatic competence. Although pragmatic competence is difficult to teach, there is a necessity to integrate it in the syllabi in basic education.

Linguistic and Pragmatic Proficiency of the Respondents

Table 4. Relationship of the linguistic and pragmatic proficiency of respondents.

Linguictic Competence	**Pragmatic Competence**							
	Discourse Completion Test		*Idiomatic Expression*		*Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test*		*Overall*	
	r	sig.	*r*	sig.	*r*	sig.	*r*	sig.

Vocabulary	.286**	0.000	.284**	0.000	.255**	0.000	.368**	0.000
Subject-Verb Agreement	.169**	0.003	.111	0.053	0.014	0.811	.171**	0.003
Sentence Pattern	.229**	0.000	.074	0.199	.210**	0.000	.261**	0.000
Use of Possessives	.358**	0.000	.223**	0.000	0.098	0.087	.357**	0.000
Correct Usage	.323**	0.000	.226**	0.000	.213**	0.000	.377**	0.000
Overall	.440**	0.000	.290**	0.000	.275**	0.000	.495**	0.000

**. Correlation is significant at 0.01 level (2-tailed).

The findings revealed a meaningful and significant relationship between linguistic and pragmatic proficiency ($r = 0.495$, $p < 0.05$), indicating that as learners' command of language structures improves, their ability to use language appropriately in context also increases. Among the linguistic components, vocabulary emerged as a consistent predictor of pragmatic competence, showing significant correlations with discourse completion tasks, idiomatic expressions, and multiple-choice discourse completion tests. This underscored the role of lexical richness in enabling learners to interpret and respond effectively across communicative situations.

Correct language usage also demonstrated a moderate and significant association with pragmatic variables ($r = 0.377$, $p < 0.05$), reinforcing the importance of grammatical accuracy in achieving communicative effectiveness. Similarly, sentence patterns and possessives exhibited moderate relationships with discourse completion tasks, suggesting that structural awareness contributed to coherent and contextually appropriate responses. However, weaker and non-significant relationships, such as those between idiomatic expressions and sentence patterns, and between subject-verb agreement and certain pragmatic measures, indicated that some aspects of pragmatic competence, particularly idiomatic understanding, relied more on exposure, contextual familiarity, and experiential learning than on formal grammatical knowledge alone.

Moreover, the generally weak correlations involving subject-verb agreement and multiple-choice discourse completion tests suggest that discrete grammatical skills do not automatically translate into pragmatic competence. This is further supported by qualitative observations from the discourse completion test, where respondents tended to produce minimal responses (e.g., "Thank you") without extending interactional meaning, and showed difficulty in maintaining coherence and cohesion in short narratives. These patterns point to gaps in learners' ability to sustain socially appropriate and contextually rich communication.

Overall, while respondents demonstrated emerging proficiency in both linguistic and pragmatic domains, their competence remained limited, particularly in vocabulary depth, grammatical application, and pragmatic flexibility. The findings implied the need for instructional approaches that integrate form-focused instruction with meaningful communicative practice. Grounding grammar teaching in authentic contexts and providing increased exposure to varied discourse situations may help learners develop both accuracy and appropriateness, ultimately leading to more effective communicative competence.

Table 5. Comparison on the linguistic competence of respondents' when grouped according to profile.

Linguistic Competence	**Profile**															
	Age		Sex		Ethnicity		Number of Years in School		Type of School		Track		Strand		Mother tongue	
	n=3		n=2		n=4		n=3		n=2		n=3		n=9		n=5	
	F_c	Sig	t_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	t_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig

Vocabulary	1.38	.25	2.60	.11	.47	.70	.47	.63	1.99	.16	**7.24***	**.01**	**3.32***	**.01**	1.78	.13
Subject-Verb Agreement	.20	.82	.21	.65	1.15	.33	.48	.62	.67	.41	.90	.41	1.37	.21	.46	.77
Sentence Pattern	.75	.48	1.07	.30	.72	.54	2.91	.06	.36	.55	3.12	.06	1.91	.06	.59	.67
Use of Possessives	1.35	.26	1.32	.25	1.28	.28	**3.68***	**.03**	3.35	.07	1.74	.18	**2.15***	**.03**	2.16	.07
Correct Usage	.91	.40	1.53	.22	1.03	.38	**8.15***	**.01**	.13	.72	**6.58***	**.01**	**2.99***	**.01**	.48	.75
Overall	.53	.59	3.86	.06	.39	.76	**4.65***	**.01**	.00	.99	**9.31***	**.01**	**4.64***	**.01**	.84	.50

Results suggested that students' linguistic competence did not uniformly influence all profile variables; rather, only selected factors showed significant differences.

Variables such as age, sex, ethnicity, type of school, and mother tongue generally showed no significant differences across most linguistic components (all p-values > .05). This implied that these demographic factors do not meaningfully affect students' linguistic competence in vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, and overall usage. In other words, competence appears relatively stable across these groups.

Number of years in school, track, and strand emerged as the key differentiating variables. Number of Years in School shows significant differences in *Use of Possessives* (p = .03) and *Correct Usage* (p = .01) indicating that extended exposure to schooling enhances grammatical accuracy and overall linguistic proficiency.

On the other hand, track significantly affects *Vocabulary* (p = .01) and *Correct Usage* (p = .01). This suggested that students' academic track influences their language development, likely due to differences in curriculum focus and language demands. In addition, strand shows significant differences in *Vocabulary* (p = .01); *Use of Possessives* (p = .03); and, *Correct Usage* (p = .01) This further reinforces that specialization within tracks shapes specific linguistic skills, particularly vocabulary and grammatical precision. Further, Subject-Verb Agreement and Sentence Pattern showed no significant variation, suggesting these may be more foundational skills that are less influenced by profile differences.

Overall, the findings implied that educational experiences (years in school, track, and strand) played a more decisive role in shaping linguistic competence than demographic characteristics. Linguistic development appeared to be curriculum-driven rather than background-driven, highlighting the importance of instructional design and academic specialization in improving students' language proficiency.

Table 6. Comparison on the pragmatic competence of respondents when grouped according to profile.

Pragmatic Competence	**Profile**															
	Age		Sex		Ethnicity		Number of Years in School		Type of School		Track		Strand		Mother tongue	
	n=3		n=2		n=4		n=3		n=2		n=3		n=9		n=5	
	F_c	Sig	t_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	t_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig	F_c	Sig
Discourse Completion Test	1.71	.18	.42	.52	.38	.77	3.37	.06	1.99	.16	**6.73***	**.01**	**4.48**	**.01**	1.06	.38

Idiomatic Expression	.09	.91	.69	.41	1.25	.29	.83	.44	9.15	.07	**8.06***	**.01**	**6.48**	**.01**	1.57	.18
Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test	.89	.41	3.08	.08	5.41	.08	1.07	.34	2.26	.13	.73	.48	**2.56**	**.01**	.73	.57
Overall	.30	.74	2.04	.15	.49	.69	2.44	.09	.03	.86	**10.52**	**.01**	**6.22**	**.01**	.81	.52

Similar to linguistic competence, pragmatic competence was not influenced by most demographic variables, but was shaped by specific educational factors. Age, sex, ethnicity, type of school, and mother tongue yielded no significant differences across all components of pragmatic competence (all p-values > .05). This indicated that students' ability to use language appropriately in context, whether in discourse completion or idiomatic expression, was generally independent of these background characteristics.

In addition, track and strand emerged as the strongest sources of variation showing significant differences in *Discourse Completion Test* (p = .01) and Idiomatic Expression (p = .01). This suggested that students' academic track significantly influenced their pragmatic skills, likely because different tracks exposed learners to varying communicative contexts and language use demands. Also, strand significantly affected Discourse Completion Test (p = .01), Idiomatic Expression (p = .01), and Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test (p = .01). This indicated that specialization within tracks further refines students' ability to interpret and produce context-appropriate language, especially in structured and applied communication tasks. On one end, number of years in school showed a marginal effect (e.g., DCT p = .06; overall p = .09), suggesting that prolonged schooling may contribute to pragmatic development, though not as strongly as track and strand. Among the components, Idiomatic Expression and Discourse Completion were most sensitive to track and strand, highlighting that pragmatic nuance and contextual appropriateness were shaped by academic exposure. Likewise, the Multiple Choice Discourse Completion Test was influenced primarily by strand, indicating that recognition-based pragmatic skills vary with specialization.

Consequently, pragmatic competence, like linguistic competence, appeared to be more curriculum-driven than demographically determined. The findings emphasized that instructional context (track and strand) plays a crucial role in developing students' ability to use language appropriately in real-life situations, while personal background variables exert minimal influence.

CONCLUSION

The study revealed that the majority of respondents are aged 19–20, predominantly female, and largely of Ilocano ethnicity. Most have completed approximately 13 years of schooling, attended public schools, and are enrolled in academic tracks, particularly in the STEM strand, while a smaller group belonged to the Home Economics strand under the Technical-Vocational Livelihood track. Iloko was the primary mother tongue of most respondents.

Findings indicated that respondents demonstrated approaching proficiency in both linguistic and pragmatic competence suggesting that while students possessed a functional command of English, their mastery of grammar, vocabulary, and language structures remained limited. This observation was reinforced by teachers' feedback, which highlighted persistent difficulties in grammatical accuracy and appropriate word usage in both oral and written communication.

Notably, demographic variables such as age, sex, ethnicity, type of school, and mother tongue did not significantly influence either linguistic or pragmatic competence, indicating a relatively uniform level of language ability across these groups. In contrast, educational factors—particularly years of schooling, track, and strand—played a more decisive role. Students with longer exposure to formal education tended to exhibit better performance in grammatical aspects such as possessives and correct usage. Similarly, those enrolled in academic

tracks, especially STEM and related strands, demonstrated stronger vocabulary and overall linguistic competence compared to those in technical-vocational tracks.

A parallel trend was observed in pragmatic competence, where students' ability to use language appropriately in context also reached an approaching proficiency level. Consistent with previous studies (e.g., Mojabi, 2014; Savignon, 2002), the findings suggested that as linguistic competence develops, pragmatic competence likewise improves. However, certain linguistic components, such as subject-verb agreement and sentence patterns, showed no significant relationship with some pragmatic measures, indicating that not all aspects of grammar directly translate into communicative effectiveness.

Overall, the results underscored that language competence is largely shaped by educational experience rather than demographic background. This highlighted the critical role of curriculum design and instructional practices. In line with Terzi (2014), there is a need to integrate both linguistic form and pragmatic function in English language teaching. Effective pedagogy should balance form-focused instruction with meaningful, communicative activities that reflect real-life language use. As the adage suggests, "you cannot give what you do not have"; thus, teacher proficiency and modeling of effective communication are equally essential.

RECOMMENDATION

In view of the conclusions drawn from the study, the following recommendations are offered:

Curriculum Makers may design and integrate courses and learning experiences that explicitly develop both linguistic and pragmatic competence among Filipino learners. The curriculum should balance grammatical accuracy with meaningful language use, ensuring that students are trained not only in form but also in context-appropriate communication.

Instructional Material Writers may develop exemplars and communicative tasks that promote the application of language in authentic contexts. Textbooks, journals, and reference materials should be responsive to the diverse needs of learners across regions, ensuring accessibility, relevance, and inclusivity in fostering pragmatic competence.

Teachers may adopt a balanced approach that integrates form-focused instruction and meaning-focused communication. Teachers should model effective language use, as their proficiency directly influences learners' development. Classroom practices may include essay writing, oral presentations, role-plays, simulations, and portfolio-based assessments to capture holistic language competence. In addition, explicit instruction in grammar (e.g., phonology, morphology, syntax), vocabulary development, pronunciation, and structured exercises (e.g., dictation, translation, and guided practice) should be meaningfully connected to communicative tasks to avoid isolated learning and promote real-world application.

Students to take an active role in improving their language proficiency by engaging with books and instructional materials on English structure and use. Learners are encouraged to use technology productively, such as interacting with English-speaking communities online, to enhance grammatical, discourse, and sociocultural competence. They should also practice using English confidently in academic and social contexts without fear of negative judgment.

Future researchers may also conduct further in-depth and longitudinal studies on linguistic and pragmatic competence to better understand learners' developmental processes. They may explore the impact of pragmatic instruction, investigate instructional interventions, and contribute to the continuous improvement of English language programs. Such studies will also help expand empirical knowledge and research methodologies in the field of pragmatics.

Subsequently, future research could strengthen the study by incorporating qualitative methods such as interviews, classroom observations, or discourse analysis to better understand how students develop pragmatic competence in real communicative situations. Expanding the study to include multiple institutions would also improve generalizability and allow for broader comparisons across different educational contexts.

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