LEXICAL AND SYNTACTIC COMPETENCE OF COLLEGE FRESHMAN STUDENTS IN A PHILIPPINE STATE UNIVERSITY

Dr. MARIVIC I. VETORICO

Graduate School, Eastern Samar State University, Borongan City, Philippines.

Abstract

Enhancing English academic performance has been identified as a requisite in the modern world in order to be globally competitive. Students and teachers should exert more effort to improve communicative competence. Improving lexical and syntactic competence is one way of helping students develop their linguistic competence. This is a descriptive study administered to 200 students determined the level of students' lexical and syntactic skills in order to provide necessary measures and needs to improve their communicative competence. Data were analyzed using frequency tally and percentages. Based on the result, it is manifested that majority of first year college students are not competent in the lexical aspects particularly in using the correct idioms, synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and affixes in the sentence. In the syntactic aspect, the students could not identify the correct subject-verb agreement in the sentence, and could not use the correct adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions in the sentence. The study showed that majority of first year college students have very low performance in lexical and syntactic aspects. This results indicates that the areas on lexical and syntactic aspects are really difficult to understand by the learners. As revealed, only the College of Education students are very highly competent followed by the college of Arts and Sciences who are highly competent. The rest of the students in the different colleges needs more effort in enhancing their knowledge and skills in lexicon and syntax specially the students of College of Computer Studies and Information Technology. After analyzing the result it is recommended that students should be exposed to varied learning materials, exposed to varied appropriate tasks, should be updated with current trends, faculty enhance pedagogical emphasis and concerned officials must review admission policy of the university.

Keywords: Lexical Competence, Syntactic Competence, Communicative Competence, Linguistic Development, English academic performance

INTRODUCTION

The English language is essential to modern life and has many uses, claims Naved (2015). The importance of English in education and student life cannot be overstated. It is the official language of numerous countries, despite not being the language that is spoken by the greatest number of people worldwide. In addition to being an official language, the world's language is frequently referred to as a crucial communication tool. Because the language is so widely utilized, there is a need to enhance via strategies and communication abilities. It has been concluded that in order to be globally competent in the current world, English academic performance must be improved. It entails the speaker's knowledge of appropriate linguistic usage. It involves all four skills—speaking, writing, listening, and reading.

English communication includes both utilizing the language appropriately and producing it as well as using it for a specific goal. Speakers acquire communicative competence in a language when they can carry out the necessary communicative functions. According to Mathews (2012), a person's language competence is demonstrated by their command of the language and their capacity to utilize it to comprehend and create texts that are appropriate for the context in

which they are employed. Through purposeful language activities and language use tailored to their needs, interests, and experiences, language competency can be achieved. To develop pupils who are anticipated to be communicatively and globally competent, it is necessary to practice and analyze the vocabulary, grammatical structures, and textual forms.

To develop people who can compete on a global scale, the teaching-learning process in higher education must be valuable, successful, and effective. Students need to strengthen their talents in order to be prepared to meet the requirements of global competitiveness. Students should be ready to grasp the worldwide demand in this regard. The main difficulty for educators in this regard is to create students who are capable of conducting business, prepared to face the global community, and knowledgeable in their particular field of expertise. But most students today still lack the abilities needed to compete on a global scale.

The ability to link words together and expand one's vocabulary both help pupils become better communicators. Students or language learners may be able to improve communication abilities using this skill. If they can effectively communicate, they will be able to express viewpoints, make claims about particular matters, provide clarification, go into detail about specific subjects, and respond to essay questions using narration, description, cause and effect analysis, process analysis/synthesis, and evaluation.

As Milton (2010) postulated, "a large vocabulary and speed of vocabulary knowledge appear indispensable to the development of good performance in any language skill." The requirement to study vocabulary is essential since word knowledge underpins learning in all other parts of language. This was backed up by Stahl's (2005) assertion that vocabulary awareness is the understanding of a world that offers the word's usage in addition to its meaning. As a result, scholars and practitioners work to identify, define, and comprehend the significance of acquiring the meaning of words. Knowing the meaning of a word goes beyond simply being able to identify which word belongs in a given context and understanding how words relate to one another.

College students have trouble understanding vocabulary words and how to string them together to make sentences. When students come across unfamiliar words in particular circumstances, they often struggle to understand their meanings, especially if they are under time constraints. This also occurs in board exams. Examinees become agitated, which prevents them from providing thoughtful responses, which causes them to falter. According to Buena (2015), inadequate vocabulary hinders comprehension and prevents students from putting their thoughts into writing. As a result, the current study that is being proposed to evaluate students' lexical and syntactic competency will be crucial in meeting the demands of the global community. Teaching is a total package. Although the teacher is the best resource material who manages the classroom and mold the minds of the students to become competent and independent learners, certain teaching strategies have to be employed. This is a big factor to the students so they can build confidence and gain mastery of the subject-matter. Current day challenge for college educators and academicians is to produce quality and efficient graduates who can globally compete. With this challenge, comes the responsibility of inculcating appropriate knowledge and skills so as to hone and prepare plays a key role. One cannot be

understood of one does not know the string of sounds and words that go together with an utterance. Further, the more words one knows and the way these words are used in certain contexts play a crucial role in developing lexicon (word meaning). Lexical awareness relates to comprehension of certain passages. One's lexicon or mental storehouse of information about words and morphemes contributes a lot in trying to string together smaller units of words into larger ones so as to convey meaning. The researcher personally noticed this prevalent and urgent issue among tertiary students as they attempted to achieve academic achievement and meet academic standards. Similar issues are made worse by student overuse of social media and networks instead of reading meaningful and relevant books or engaging in educational activities. Instead, they become highly engaged in online games and other time-consuming activities. Because of the nature of the real workplace, the researcher felt compelled to look into the learning needs of the students along lexical and syntactic competence. To determine whether it is necessary to redesign and improve the language curriculum at the university in order to meet the demands of the students, this study will be carried out.

Objectives of the Study

This study explored on the level of lexical and syntactic competence of first year college students and sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of students' lexical competence in relation to

    1.1 idioms;

    1.2 antonyms;

    1.3 homonyms; and

    1.4 affixes?

2. What is the level of students' syntactic competence in terms of:

    2.1 Subject-verb agreement;

    2.2 adjectives and adverbs;

    2.3 pronoun preference; and

    2.4 prepositions?

3. Based on the result of the study, what learning materials could be designed by the faculty.

METHODOLOGY

The descriptive method of research was employed in this study. This aimed to determine the level of lexical and syntactic competence in English subjects of freshman students in ESSU. A teacher made test was used to assess the level of freshman students' lexical competencies in terms of idioms, antonyms and synonyms, homonyms and affixes. Syntactic competencies covered the subject-verb agreement, adjectives and adverbs, pronoun preference and prepositions. The instruments were validated by three language experts and have gone through

the process of validation by pilot testing. This study covered the respondents of freshman students that were selected randomly from the different colleges of the university. A total of 200 students were identified as respondents of the study. For the respondents, slovin's formula was used to get the exact number of sample. There were 200 students that were identified as respondents. The students' scores determined the level of lexical competence of the following aspects: idioms, synonyms, antonyms, homonyms and affixes as well as the level of syntactic competence of the following aspects: subject-verb agreement, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions. The result of the tests were tallied, analyzed descriptively and interpreted through the use of frequency tally and percentages.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Students' level of lexical competence along idioms

Table 1 shows the students lexical competence along idioms: 24 % got the highest percentage with the frequency of 48 showing that students are moderately competent on idioms. This is followed by 23% with the frequency of 46 which are not competent. It also shows that there are 16% of students with a frequency of 32 who are slightly competent. Overall, 37 or 74 out of 200 are rated as highly competent to very competent. The finding indicates that students need to enhance more their level of competence in idioms.

Table 1: Students' level of lexical competence along idioms

Frequency	Percent	Adjectival Rating
43	21.5 %	Very highly competent
31	15.5 %	Highly competent
48	24 %	Moderately competent
32	16 %	Slightly competent
46	23 %	Not competent
200	100 %	

Students' Level of lexical competence along synonyms

Table 2 shows the distribution of students in terms of their level of competence on synonyms. Further it depicts the 24.4 % of 49 students are not competent with the least of 15.5 % or 31 got the rating of very highly competent. Overall, about 60.1 % or 120 students showed slightly competent to highly competent rating. This indicates that students' level of competence in synonyms is very low.

Table 2: Students' Level of lexical competence along synonyms

Frequency	Percent	Adjectival Rating
31	15.5 %	Very highly competent
32	16 %	Highly competent
43	21 %	Moderately competent
45	22.7 %	Slightly competent
49	24.4 %	Not competent
200	100%	

Students' level of lexical competence along antonyms

It is shown in Table 3 that for student's lexical competence on antonyms, 28% got the highest percentage with the frequency of 56. This is followed by 24% with the frequency of 48 rated as moderately competent. 33 students with a percentage of 16.5% are slightly competent, and 41 students with a percentage of 20.5% are not competent. It is clear that only 22 students with a percentage of 11% are very highly competent.

The Findings on students' level of competence on antonyms support the knowledge of Gruyter (2008). He investigated on the freshmen students' level of knowledge and context clues. Results showed that students had good level of knowledge but still recommended that students should be given more exposure to relevant tasks inside the classroom and appropriately use learning materials suited to teaching-learning needs.

Table 3: Students' level of lexical competence along antonyms

Frequency	Percent	Adjectival Rating
22	11 %	Very highly competent
56	28%	Highly competent
48	24%	Moderately competent
33	16.5%	Slightly competent
41	20.5%	Not competent
200	100	

Students' level of lexical competence on affixes

Table 4 shows that most students got the highest percentage at 36 % with the frequency of 72. Overall, about 17% or 34 out of 200 students are highly competent and very highly competent. The least percentage is at 3.5% with the frequency of 7. This goes to show that most first year college students in ESSU have a very poor performance on affixes. Finding indicates that students have to be exposed to varied tasks and activities designed for the course. Similarly, the teaching-learning process has to be responsive to the learning needs and styles of students.

Table 4: Students' level of lexical competence on affixes

Frequency	Percentage	Adjectival Rating
7	3.5%	Very highly competent
27	13.5%	Highly competent
46	23%	Moderately competent
48	24%	Slightly competent
72	36%	Not competent
200	100	

Students' level of lexical competence along homonyms

Table 5 manifests that 34% with the frequency of 68 are very highly competent. As seen, 29 percent with a frequency of 58 exhibits to be highly competent in terms of performance. This goes to show that most first year college students in ESSU are competent on homonyms. Findings show that students have been exposed to these skills and may have develop

competence on homonyms already. However, results suggested that students have to be exposed to varied tasks and activities designed for the course in order to increase the percentage of the students who are performing well.

Table 5: Students' level of lexical competence along homonyms

Frequency	Percentage	Adjectival Rating
68	34%	Very highly competent
58	29%	Highly competent
39	19.5%	Moderately competent
22	11%	Slightly competent
13	6.5%	Not competent
200	100	

Students' level of syntactic competence on subject-verb agreement.

Table 6 shows the distribution of students in terms of their syntactic competence on subject-verb agreement. It depicts that 37% with a frequency of 74 are not competent. Overall, it shows that 48% or 96 students rated as slightly to moderately competent. Only 15% with a frequency of 30 are highly and very highly competent. The finding goes to show that subject-verb agreement is difficult for them to master. The result suggests that the first year college students in Eastern Samar State University need more exposure of enrichment activities that will improve their competence on subject-verb agreement.

Table 6: Students' level of syntactic competence on subject-verb agreement

Frequency	Percent	Adjectival Rating
6	3%	Very highly competent
24	12%	Highly competent
45	22.5%	Moderately competent
51	25.5%	Slightly competent
74	37%	Not competent
200	100%	

Students' level of syntactic competence on adjectives

Table 7 depicts that on the use of adjectives, students got the highest percentage of 29% with a frequency of 58. It shows that majority of the students are very highly competent in the use of adjectives in the sentence. Overall, about 76.5 % of 153 students rated as moderately competent to very highly competent. It is manifested that there are 23.6 % or 47 students do not really excel may be they find adjectives difficult when used in sentences.

The adjectival rating which is highly competent shows that first year college students in ESSU still have to do better in these aspects because there are only 54 % or 108 students are performing well.

Table 7: Students' level of syntactic competence on adjectives

Frequency	Percentage	Adjectival Rating
58	29%	Very highly competent
50	25%	Highly competent
45	22.5%	Moderately competent
35	17.5%	Slightly competent
12	6%	Not competent
200	**100**	

Students' level of syntactic competence on adverb

Table 8 shows that for the students' competence on the use of adverb, 43 % with the frequency of 86 rated as highly and moderately competent and no one belongs to very highly competent. The result shows that there are 57 % or 114 students do not perform well in this aspect. The finding indicates that students need to enhance more their level of competence in the use of adverbs in the sentence.

Table 8: Students' level of syntactic competence on adverb

Frequency	Percentage	Adjectival Rating
0	0%	Very highly competent
43	21.5%	Highly competent
43	21.5%	Moderately competent
68	34%	Slightly competent
46	23%	Not competent

Students' level of syntactic competence in the use of pronoun

Table 9 shows that in the use of pronoun in a sentence, there are only 30.5 % or 61 students out of 200 perform well in this aspect and majority of the students with a percentage of 69.5 are not competent. It shows that more than half of the students should be given more exposure relevant to the task and appropriately use learning materials suited to teaching-learning needs.

Table 9: Students' level of syntactic competence in the use of pronoun

Frequency	Percent	Adjectival Rating
3	1.5%	Very highly competent
12	6%	Highly competent
46	23%	Moderately competent
77	38.5%	Slightly competent
62	31%	Not competent

Students' level on lexical competence per college

It can be seen from Table 10 that of the aspect of lexical competence probed into, 84.8% students in the College of Education were able to get the correct answers interpreted as very highly competent. Next in rank are the students in the College of Arts and Sciences with a percentage of 67.1% interpreted as highly competent. Students in the College of Nursing showed that they are highly competent with a percentage of 53.38.

For the College of Business Management and Accountancy there are 51.8% of the students were able to give the correct answers. Students in the College of Criminal Justice are slightly competent with a percentage of 38.72.For the students in the College of Engineering only 35.8 got the correct answers interpreted as slightly competent.

For the College of Agriculture and natural Sciences, only interpreted as moderately competent. Students in the College of Engineering are slightly competent with a percentage of 35.8%. In the College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences, only 35.6 % got the correct answers interpreted as slightly competent. The last in rank are the students in the College of Computer Studies and Information Technology wherein only 17.7%   of the students got the correct answers interpreted as not competent.

Table 10: Students' level on lexical competence per college

College	Idioms Percentage	Synonyms Percentage	Antonyms Percentage	Homonyms Percentage	Affixes Percentage	Average	Interpretation
CANS	24%	42%	43%	24%	45%	35.6%	Slightly Competent
CAS	81%	59%	63.7%	67.8%	64%	67.1%	Highly Competent
CBMA	63%	44%	49%	49%	54%	51.8%	Moderately Competent
CCS/IT	19%	14%	19.3%	18%	18.1%	17.7%	Not Competent
COC	28%	42%	47.4	35%	41.2%	38.72	Slightly Competent
CE	29%	47%	24.9%	36%	43%	35.8%	Slightly Competent
COED	85%	81.2%	83%	87%	88%	84.8%	Very Highly Competent
CON	42%	54%	46.2%	63%	61.7	53.38%	Highly Competent

Distribution of students on syntactic competence per college

Table 11 shows that in the aspect of syntactic competence through using the correct subject-verb agreement, adjectives, adverbs, pronouns and prepositions in a sentence, students in the College of Education are very highly competent.

It shows that there are 81.86 of the students got the correct answers. Next in rank are the students in the college of Arts and Sciences with a percentage of 58.32 interpreted as moderately competent. For the College of Business Management and Accountancy, the result showed that 54.3% of the students got the correct answers. It is revealed that, their students are moderately competent. Students of the College of Nursing showed that 54.3% of the students got the correct answers. It is revealed that their students are moderately competent. Students in the college of Nursing showed that they are moderately competent with a percentage of 51.44%. Next in rank are the students in the College of Engineering, it shows that they are also moderately competent with a percentage of 41.18. Students in the College of Criminology showed that they are slightly competent with a percentage of 36.8%. For the College of Agriculture and Natural Sciences, the result showed that students are slightly competent with a percentage of 28.7. Last in rank are the students in the College of Computer Studies and

Information Technology. The result shows that they are not competent with regards to the syntactic aspects because only 17.07% were able to give the correct answers.

Table 11: Distribution of students on syntactic competence per college

College	Subject-Verb Agreement Percentage	Adjectives Percentage	Adverbs Percentage	Pronouns Percentage	Prepositions Percentage	Ave-rage	Interpretation
CANS	29.2%	28.4%	27%	28.9%	30%	28.7%	Slightly Competent
CAS	48%	43%	41.6%	41.4%	69%	58.32%	Moderately Competent
CBMA	52%	61.2%	58.3%	56.3%	43.7%	54.3%	Moderately Competent
CCS/IT	10.3	18.4%	19.0%	18.4%	19.27%	17.07%	Not Competent
COC	41%	38%	41%	29%	35%	36.8%	Slightly Competent
CE	39%	41%	38%	43.9%	44%	41.18%	Moderately Competent
COED	81%	83%	82%	81.5%	81.8%	81.86%	Very Highly Competent
CON	50.2%	55%	61%	48%	43%	51.44%	Moderately Competent

CONCLUSION

With the findings of this study the following conclusions were made:

1. There is a need to retool pedagogical approaches and there is a need for teachers to be sent to fora and trainings along their field of expertise for more professional development.

2. There is a need to maximize the use of learning materials. Along this line, teachers have to strengthen use of appropriate, authentic, and meaningful learning materials to facilitate in the teaching-learning process.

3. For students from moderately down to not competent should be given a bridging program of remedial instruction. With the suggested activities for first year college students in Eastern Samar State University along admission policy should be reviewed.

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