

Oral Fluency: Basis for Designing a Communicative Competence Structured Module

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Abstract This study analyzed and observed the oral discourse of Local Community College students. A descriptive analysis was conducted to find out the communicative competence level among the one hundred fifty randomly chosen respondents. A triangulation method was initiated to ensure the legitimacy of the gathered data. *Focus Group Discussion, Classroom Observation, and Individual Interview* were used to collect and validate the data gathering procedure. Results showed that one hundred five out of one hundred fifty respondents belong to the unconscious incompetence level while the remaining forty-five fall under the conscious competence level. The study concluded with the findings that the design of a communicative competence based module was necessary to develop oral fluency. The paper recommended for students to be constantly exposed to communicative activities in their classes to further develop their communication competencies.

Keywords: *communicative competence, fluency, module*

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1. Introduction

Oral fluency is one the most important markers of proficiency in second language but undeniably it is a neglected component in a communicative classroom. The greatest achievement of a learner is to be proficient in a language as communication is part of everyday life. Language is more than an external expression; it is also an exchange of internal thoughts through formulated expression ranging from independent verbalization to non-verbalization. Sirbu posits that language is essentially a means of communication among the members of a society [1]. Indeed, it is through language that people understand each other in a social interaction.

In a country like the Philippines, which aims to participate meaningfully in international affairs, learning the English language has a special place [2]. Alongside Filipino, English is used as an official language mainly in publications, media and the academe. Knowing the language increases people's chances of getting a good job. However, learning a language is a *complex task* as it involves several imperative processes [3]. It requires not only learning grammar structures and acquiring vocabulary but also developing communication skills. Yet, Oberg strongly believes that oral fluency can be taught by means of providing communicative activities [4]. Hence, the researcher in this study looked into classrooms and

sought to find out the communicative competence level of the college students in a Local Community College.

Tuan in a research conducted in Vietnam that their English needs are elementary and that is thought to be problematic, thus disadvantaging and demotivating those aiming to achieve higher English levels [5]. The situation described that learners consider English irrelevant for their purposes. They did not understand English lectures. They did not communicate in English in daily or professional situations. Students failed to read their professional reading materials texts. Furthermore, they were not able to write in English. Therefore, although their motivation to learn English was high, they achieved very little. The situation in the research locale of this paper was quite similar. The college respondents were hesitant to communicate and write in English. When asked, they fall back to their first language. Survey questions requiring opinions were likewise answered in their first language.

According to Tuan, with the cited situation in Vietnam; the National Foreign Language 2020 Project was implemented [5]. The project expanded its influence and training programs to the majority of teachers of English at all levels. Several training workshops were similarly conducted by the different organizations and institutions to enhance the teachers' teaching skills. This paper sought to do the same. A communicative competence based module which covers areas of discourse, strategic, grammatical and linguistic competencies was designed and developed to train teachers and students.

According to McGuire & Larson-Hall, the primary purpose of teaching discourse fillers to second language users is to facilitate fluency and proficiency of target language [6]. Oral fluency is often a neglected component in a communicative classroom. Rossiter believes that oral fluency is one of the most salient markers of proficiency in second language [7]. Universities focus more on the development of students' writing and reading skills, whereas the speaking and listening skills are relatively neglected. Prime importance should be placed in using the target language. Hence, the teachers' intervention methods in emphasizing oral fluency were considered highly significant in developing students' speaking skills. Majority of the student-populace today fail to express their ideas, thoughts and emotions verbally to particular events or situations. Consequently, speaking skills and vocabulary learning have become worse and have greatly deteriorated. The researcher looked into this scenario through classroom observation, focus group discussion and interview.

2. The Theoretical Framework

Figure 1 below presents the conceptual framework of this study. Krashen's [8] Second Language Acquisition Theory and Wray's [9] integrated model of Discourse Fillers were basis in creating the framework of this paper.

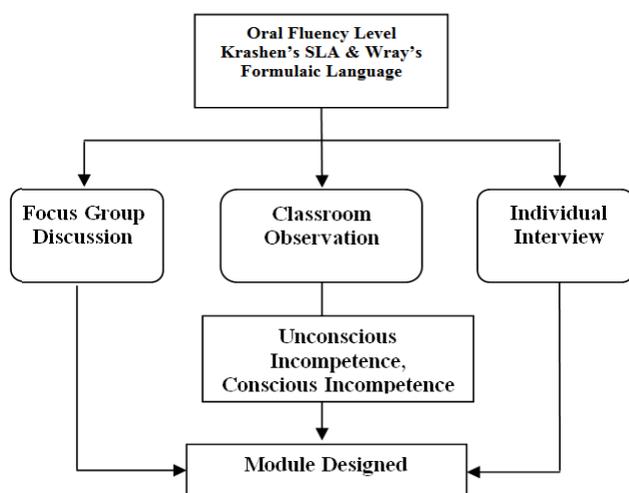


Figure 1. Framework of the Research

Generally, students are diverse in language competencies particularly in academic performance. Hence, finding out their individual communicative fluency level is deemed vital as this manifests spontaneous expression of thoughts and ideas. A strong command of English language will place them in good employment when they graduate. As a communicative classroom is an important component in developing the said speaking competency, this study was conducted. In particular, this study sought to identify the communicative competency level of the respondents, their engagement in communicative activities in the classrooms and the design of module to address the competency level. As shown in Figure 1, the researcher did triangulation to identify the communicative competence level of the respondents then

designed the module to address their unconscious incompetence.

3. Methodology

This study used both the qualitative and quantitative research methods to investigate the communicative competence level of the research participants. The qualitative research method was found suitable for the study as a means of exploring the individuals in their environment [10]. The research further targeted to identify and observe the College students in a Local Community College and the word fillers that helped them in the communication process. The students as the important core in the classroom became recipients of substantive information from the teachers. However, engaging these students in classroom discussion and activities is vital to foster learning. The Descriptive analysis was likewise used in this study for it consists of systemic observation and description of the characteristics and classroom events to discover the use of word fillers. This was supported by Gall who stated that the goal of descriptive research is to describe a phenomenon and its characteristics. The paper was more concerned with 'what' rather than 'why' something has happened [11]. Hence, observation and survey tools were used to gather data.

Furthermore, the study aimed to provide a qualitative description of the respondents' experiences in the classroom environment. Their non-engagement to communicative activities in their classes was basis for the development of the communicative competence based module.

4. Results and Discussion

To address the first research problem, the researcher based the research questionnaire from the literature [12-13] guided structural questions. Hence, the stages of questioning in the identification of word fillers among the college students included: (1) Open-ended questions, (2) Questions to get more information, (3) Questions to clarify a point, and (4) Questions to compare perspectives. The activity was videotaped apart from the separate notes made by the researcher. The objective of the Focus Group Discussion was linguistic-based with emphasis on the word fillers generated from the students in their oral discourse. In introducing the focus group discussion, Hennink's [14] recommendation was subsequently followed as: (1) Welcome, (2) Overview of the topic, (3) Ground rules, and (4) Question and Answer. These were the phases utilized in the Focus Group Discussion.

The evaluation and note taking of the commonly used word fillers was done during this process. However, other forms of research tools were used to determine and measure oral fluency based on the triangulation method. This was supported by [15] that a triangulation method can be used in a quantitative research to test the reliability and validity but can also illuminate some ways to test or maximize the validity and reliability of a qualitative study.

The tabular results that follow show the communicative competence level of the College respondents in a Local Community College during the Focus Group Discussion, individual interview and classroom observation. The rating scale for each instrument was given a corresponding weight value with one as the lowest and ten as the highest (according to the scale in Philippine educational system). Descriptive equivalents or verbal descriptions were also provided for the interpretation of result.

The scale that follows, adapted from Tuan [5]; was used to determine the respondents' communicative competence in discourse. This was used during the focus group discussion. Using the FGD prompts, the competency level of the one hundred fifty research subjects was derived. Table 1 shows that majority of the College students in the Local Community College belong to the modest user of English. These respondents uttered un-English sentences, faulty grammar and sentence construction. They likewise were observed to have difficulty in expressing themselves using the English language. Most of the time, they would fall back to their first language when asked to respond to the questions directed to them in a question and answer activity.

Table 1. Communicative Competence Level of the Respondents

Number of Respondents	Score Interval	Competence Level
2	8-10	Very Competent User of English
18	7-9	Competent User of English
25	4-6	Fair User of English
105	1-3	Modest User of English

To derive the score intervals, Nassaji's [16] communication matrix of the communicative competence level of language use was employed. It is subsequently represented.

Table 2. Communication Matrix employed for Individual Interview

Level of Competence	Description
Pre-intentional	Pre-intentional or reflexive behavior that expresses state of subject. State (eg., hungry, wet) is interpreted by observer.
Intentional Proactive Behavior	Behavior is intentional, but is not intentionally communicative. Behavior functions to affect observer's behavior, since observer infers intent.
Non-conventional Pre-symbolic Communication	Non-conventional gestures are used with intent of affecting observer's behavior.
Conventional Pre-symbolic Communication	Conventional gestures are used with intent of affecting observer's behavior.
Concrete Symbolic Communication	Non-conventional gestures are used with intent of affecting observer's behavior.
Abstract Symbolic Communication	Limited use of abstract (arbitrary) symbols to represent environmental entities. Symbols are used singly.
Formal Symbolic Communication	Rule-bound use of arbitrary symbol system. Ordered combinations of two or more symbols according to syntactic rules.

The study further used Owen's multiple stages of competence [17] to assess as the respondents they communicated in the classrooms. This is depicted in the tabular presentation reflected as Table 3. The data shows

that the population studied mostly belong to the unconscious incompetence stage.

Table 3. The Respondents' Stage of Competence

Stage of Competence	Description	Number of Respondents
Unconscious Incompetence	Being unaware of communicating in an incompetent manner	105
Conscious Incompetence	Learning more about communication and having a vocabulary to identify concepts, knowing what is to be done, realizing what is done is not as well as it could have	25
Conscious Competence	Knowing that he/she is communicating well in the moment, which will add to the bank of experiences to draw from in future interaction	18
Unconscious Competence	Communicating successfully without straining to be competent	2

Before building up a rich cognitive knowledge base of communication concepts and practicing and reflected on skills in a particular area, speakers may exhibit unconscious incompetence. One hundred five out of one hundred fifty College respondents belong to this category. They were unaware of communicating in an incompetent manner. Majority of them code mixed and code switched when they respond to their teachers. They manifested anxiety in using English, and were not able to complete one utterance using the target language; English. There were a few who were noted to stammer when they recite. Furthermore, twenty-five of the respondents exhibited conscious incompetence. They knew and were conscious of their utterances. They were likewise aware that they were not doing well as they could. This was triangulated when the individual interview was conducted among them. However, there were eighteen whose communicative competence fall under conscious competence. They were aware of communicating well during the classroom observation and individual interview and focus group discussion. The two respondents who reached the stage of unconscious competence, just spoke naturally; as if native English speakers; without straining to be competent. The ideas they shared were full of content.

According to Owen [17] reaching the stage of unconscious competence does not mean that the person will always stay there. Factors such as facing new communication encounters regularly will help one ladder to the next level. However, it will take a few instances of conscious incompetence before the advancement to later stages is achieved.

With these results, the researcher designed and developed a training module composed of five academic parcels. Each parcel contained topics and activities which address communicative competence difficulties. The modules confirmed that the areas of linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, strategic and grammatical competence were given sufficient activities for the students' training. Word fillers was one of the subtopics

under discourse competence. This was one area found to help the respondents in their communicative acts. They similarly established this during the focus group discussion.

Furthermore, the modules were evaluated using the evaluation instrument developed by Ong [2]. Before the development of the academic parcels, they went through a thorough assessment by three experts in the field of language teaching. Additionally, appraisal was during the development phase. The research adviser carefully scrutinized the academic packets 'content.

5. Conclusions

Communicative competence among 150 respondents at a local community college is an element of diverse factors. Primarily, the unconscious incompetence and modest competence among these learners were influenced by a brief English language exposure. The implementation of English language use was not firmly employed. English language was thus literally seen as a foreign language, not a second language. Such approach among language classes hinders the development of language proficiency of the learners in the English language. Specifically, the command of language use spelled out diverse communicative competence levels of the learners. Though majority of the respondents fall under one low category. Finally, grammatical and discourse competence among the learners was influenced by usage of word fillers. The more word fillers they used, the higher their communicative competence level reached.

6. Recommendations

These recommendations are suggested to enhance the communicative competence of students in the English Language. Colleges and Universities may strictly implement use of English as a second language. Policies which will motivate teachers to use communicative and collaborative activities may be considered among classes. An enhanced English language communication program maybe designed to sustain existing language programs. Teachers may likewise be sent for trainings quarterly.

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