



## PROFICIENCY IN SOCIOLINGUISTICS AMONG BSED ENGLISH STUDENTS

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### Abstract

The usefulness of English is apparent in today's global culture. A crucial talent is the capacity to express oneself in the second language and modify one's speech to match the various circumstances in order to convey the intended meaning. The study conducted investigates BSED English students' written sociolinguistics ability. In particular, this establishes the students' sociolinguistics competency in terms of their use of language suitable for communicating intended speech act as well as their linguistic background. This study used a questionnaire-based descriptive-normative survey method to collect the data needed to measure the variable under investigation. The study finds that family background and other social and cultural factors influence students' language proficiency. According to the study, family background and other social and cultural norms present at home, school, and in the community have an impact on students' language proficiency. Findings also demonstrate students' sociolinguistics proficiency that was above average. This means that even though their answers contain few mistakes, students still manage to express themselves respectfully and clearly, and appropriately given the contexts. Although grammar mistakes were noted, they had no impact on the sentences' intended meaning. However, it may be assumed that developing students' grammar skills is a crucial component of their higher linguistics ability. As a result, this study recommends also examining students' grammatical proficiency as well as language teachers' intervention strategies so that optimal communicative competence of students are guaranteed.

**Keywords:** sociolinguistics competence, communicative competence, descriptive-normative, BISU BSED English students

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## INTRODUCTION

### Rationale

English, as considered by people, is the lingua franca of the world. It is the language used in most of the “controlling domains”, not only in the Philippines, but more so in the rest of the world (qtd. from Bernardo, et al. 2009). It is a vehicular language – a language systematically used to make communication possible between or among people even though not sharing a mother tongue.

The usefulness of English is an undeniable truth. The ever-growing demand for English nowadays has created a greater need to learn the language. Filipino students should gain proficiency in English to become more competitive. Thus, it makes sense that schools should develop English language proficiency especially the future English teachers. These students must learn the language to a higher level of accuracy and fluency which means that they must achieve a high level of competence – the ability to use and manipulate the language properly and adequately.

In the same way, language teachers should be experts not just in speaking but more so in teaching the English language. They should learn to master an effective approach in tapping the language potentials of students for them to gain superior language competence level.

Language instructors – the facilitators of the communication process – should step up their efforts in improving the teaching pedagogy to address the prevailing issue of the deteriorating quality of English language users in the Philippines.

National and international student assessments indicate low performance level of Filipino students in English. As cited by Sugay in the *Modern Teacher* August 2008 issue, results of achievement test in English show that learners across the country fare poorly in this subject. Poor English has also been pointed out by Hidalgo (2005) as culprit for students’ low performance in all subjects taught in English.

Moreover, results of bar examinations, licensure exam for teachers, and related national tests reveal the deterioration of the quality of English specifically and of Philippine education in general. The Self-Assessment Test in English administered by the National Education Testing and Research Center (NETRC) in Science, Math, and English for secondary school teachers under the National English Proficiency Program (NEPP) revealed that out of 51,000 teachers tested, only ten thousand passed.

In the workforce, most often heard are the anecdotal reports of call centers accepting only a very small portion of those who apply because only

three of 100 applicants are proficient in English.

In the classroom context, the researcher has observed that most of her students, despite being English majors, still exhibit inadequate skills in using the target language (L2) both for oral and written purposes. Their language competence appears impeded. Consequently most of them seldom volunteer to participate in class or when they do, they seem timid. What often happens is that only few of them are confident of their English communicative skills, so the rest would prefer to be quiet rather than make mistakes and expose them to ridicule in the class.

Somehow, what may come true to the above-mentioned problem is that knowledge of grammar alone may not give students the ability to express their intended meaning in using second language. According to Gador (2002), teaching a language involves a great deal more than just transmitting the linguistic code of that language. As believed by sociolinguists, the teaching of appropriate speech behavior is as important as the teaching of grammar. Accordingly, an utterance may be grammatical, but students have to know also whether or not it is suitable to the given context or social condition since what is appropriate in one situation may be inappropriate in another.

These ideas all batted for the improvement of English teaching in all schools in the country. Apart from grammatical competence, awareness of sociolinguistics proficiency are found wanting. With this, language teachers can set up learning tasks to accommodate, not only learning but also the social needs or social well-being of students. In this way, they can be given opportunities not just to talk about the language, but more importantly, to use it properly.

Building on this premise, the researcher extends knowledge on second language learning and teaching by examining the sociolinguistics competence of 72 English majors of Bohol Island State University Main Campus. The primary purpose of the study was to determine the: profile of the respondents in terms of age, gender, year level, and language background; and the sociolinguistics proficiency in terms of their use of language appropriate for expressing intended speech act.

### Theoretical Background

This study is mainly propounded on the communicative competence theories of several noted researchers, namely: Hymes (1972), Canale & Swain (1980), Savignon (1997), and Celce-Murcia (2006).

The theoretical construct of communicative competence refers to a speaker’s knowledge of and

ability to use language. It is the basis of a number of approaches to language teaching and testing that seeks to reflect real-life language use. The term has been invoked for nearly decades now to express the notion that language competence involves more than Chomsky's (1965) rather than narrowly defined "linguistic competence" (Douglas & Smith, 1997).

As Hymes (1972 as cited by Douglas & Smith, 201) originally formulated the concept, communicative competence involves judgments about what is systematically possible, psycholinguistically feasible, and socioculturally appropriate, and about the probability of occurrence of a linguistic event and what is entailed in the actual accomplishment of it.

In addition, competence is more than knowledge: "Competence is dependent upon [tacit] knowledge and [ability for] use (Hymes, 1972 as cited by Douglas & Smith, 2010).

Communicative competence consists of four: grammatical competence, discourse competence, sociocultural competence, and strategic competence components (Savignon 2000, 1987, 1983; Canale and Swain 1980; Canale 1983).

Grammatical competence (Savignon, 1997) refers to sentence-level grammatical forms, the ability to recognize the lexical, morphological, syntactical and phonological features of a language and to make use of those features to interpret and form words and sentences. It is not linked to any single theory of grammar and does not include the ability to state rules of usage. One demonstrates grammatical competence not by stating a rule but by using a rule in the interpretation, expression, or negotiation of meaning.

However, Richards does not guarantee that while grammatical competence is an important dimension, it is not the ultimate end of language learning since one can master the rules of sentence formation but cannot be very successful at using the language for meaningful communication. This implies that grammar teaching should not just be confined on memorizing content but more so on how it is strategically used by students in oral communication.

Sociolinguistics competence requires adjusting one's grammatical forms to be appropriate to the setting in which communication takes place. Moreover, attention has to be paid to other factors (e.g. age, status, gender, formality of the setting, etc.) that may contribute to the circumstances thus may call for different speech reactions (Mizne, 1997). Sociolinguistics competence is essential for effective communication, cultural understanding, social integration, professional success, empathy, inclusivity, language variation appreciation, and

language policy development. It empowers individuals to navigate the complexities of language use in diverse and dynamic social contexts, contributing to a more inclusive and harmonious society.

Wolfson (1989) as cited by (Mizne, 1997) describes the effects of this different cultural context on language learning with the term sociolinguistics relativity, which means that each community has its unique set of conventions, rules, and patterns for the conduct of communication and that this must be understood in the context of a general system which reflects the values and the structure of the society.

In this vein, several authors have made reference to the principles of politeness in a language. According to Brown and Levinson (1987) as cited by Pichastor and Anglesa (2007), politeness strategies may have different orientations in different cultures distinguishing between positive politeness strategies (those which show closeness and intimacy between speaker and hearer) and negative politeness strategies (those which stress non-imposition upon the hearer and express deference). Politeness then should not be confused with deference or being indirect since cross-cultural studies (Blum-Kulka, 1989 as cited by Pichastor & Anglesa, 2007) have shown that certain cultures stress solidarity strategies and value communicative clarity in speech.

The foregoing statement implies that culture can be used as an underlying framework for making sense of all the regularities in a community's use of language. Thus, students may better understand the conventions of language use in a society if importance of the sociolinguistics aspects of language is emphasized (Mizne, 1997). This fact has brought the term speech act into focus. Speech act theory, first introduced in 1962 by Austin deals with the communicative effect, the function and effect of utterance (Douglas & Smith, 1997). He dissected an utterance into three notions: the locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts to distinguish among the form of an utterance, its intended purpose, and its effect. Locution has come to mean the actual utterance or saying something with a certain meaning in traditional sense; illocution, the act performed by utterance; and perlocution, the effect the act has on the hearer. Searle (1976, 1965, & 1969) as cited by Douglas and Smith (1997) further developed Austin's work by analyzing the speech acts into the five macro-classes of representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations.

Using mainly the criterion of point or purpose of the speech act, i.e. illocutionary point, Searle

claims the following to have distinctions: representatives let the speaker convey his belief in the truth of the expressed proposition, thus, he/she asserts, suggests, hypothesizes, swears, hints; directives allow the speaker to attempt to get the hearer to do something, and thus, orders, commands, begs, prays, invites, permits, and advises; commissives make the speaker commit himself to some future course of action and as such he/she promises, vows, pledges, and guarantees; expressives enable the speaker express psychological state or feeling about something, and thus, thanks, congratulates, apologizes, condoles, deploras, welcomes, and etc.; lastly, declarations help the speaker bring about a correspondence between the propositional content of his utterance and reality, as such, he/she performs the act of declaring (Bautista, 1979).

These mentioned concepts have comprised important background knowledge in doing analysis in this study.

### Methodology

The descriptive-normative survey method was used in this study utilizing questionnaires to gather data requirements in measuring the variable investigated. This was conducted at the Bohol Island State University Main Campus to 72 randomly selected English majors. This study mainly focused on these students considering the need to evaluate their communicative competence as future English teachers.

This study made use of a profile questionnaire to obtain background of the respondents. Then, another main tool – a researcher-made questionnaire was utilized to measure students' sociolinguistics proficiency that was made up of 10 communication situations that demand written responses from the respondents. Rubrics were used to measure the results of the gathered data.

### Statistical Treatment

To determine the profile of respondents, the simple percentage was utilized:  $(P = (f/n) \times 100\%)$ ; where,  $f$ =frequency counts;  $n$ =total number of respondents; and  $P$ =respondents' profile.

To determine the sociolinguistics proficiency of the respondents, descriptive statistics was employed. This included mean and standard deviation.

To compute the scores of sociolinguistic results, the Z-score was employed:  $(Z = \frac{\text{actual mean} - \text{hypothetical mean}}{SD / \sqrt{n}})$ ; where,  $Z$  = Z-score, actual mean = mean scores; hypothetical mean = 60% passing percentage,  $SD$  = standard deviation,  $n$  = total number of respondents.

### Findings

The results of the survey enabled the researcher to arrive at the following findings:

1. The profile revealed that the respondents' age corresponded to the four year levels and this signified that most of the respondents enrolled tertiary education in the right or expected age based on Philippine education system. As regards gender, majority of them were female. This plurality is what is commonly expected for majority of the courses in the College of Teacher Education. The first year students ranked the most in terms of number, followed by the second year students, then least are the third year and the fourth year students. Majority of the respondents' parents completed college which could prove satisfactory in influencing, encouraging or guiding them to learn and master their chosen field.
2. The survey on students' language background showed that, with the general mean of 4.1, they were 'often' exposed to such activities that could play a vital role in shaping their skill in the use of L2.
3. Students' sociolinguistics proficiency is found to be above average which means that they were mostly aware of the appropriate responses to the given situations and expressed themselves in clear and polite language despite few grammatical errors, but these do not totally interfere meaning in their construction.

### Conclusions

The study concludes that BSED English students are above-average in sociolinguistics proficiency. This suggests that despite a few grammatical faults, their comments were generally appropriate and polite given the settings. Although grammar mistakes were discovered, they had no impact on the sentences' intended meaning.

On the other hand, the grammatical faults are concerning given that the respondents are English majors. In order to expose students to language use in real-world contexts, it is recommended that language teachers should forgo teaching grammar in a systematic manner and instead concentrate on communicative language learning.

### Recommendation

Language instruction needs to go from a structured to a conversational approach, which has to be researched. English teachers need to re-examine their teaching techniques taking into account crucial elements such as efficient teaching and learning methods, particularly in order to enhance students' sociolinguistics and improve their grammar proficiency.



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