

Communicative Competence of the Fourth Year Students: Basis for Proposed English Language Program

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Abstract

This study on level of communicative competence covering linguistic/grammatical and discourse has aimed at constructing a proposed English language program for 5 key universities in Vietnam. The descriptive method utilized was scientifically employed with comparative techniques and correlational analysis. The researcher treated the surveyed data through frequency counts, means and percentage computations, and analysis of variance/*t*-test to compare two main area variables. The respondents was 221 students from 5 universities randomly chosen. The major findings of the study generally reveal that the students' level of communicative competence is a factor of their parents' academic influence. Their linguistic/grammatical and discourse competence is helped by their chance for formal and intensive learning, conversing with a native speaker of the English language, rich exposure to social media networks, and reading materials written in English. Moreover, the students' greatest strength along linguistic competence is on the use and function of noun, pronoun and preposition, while their weaknesses are on the use and function of conjunction, adverb, interjection, and verb. It is a general finding that the 4th year students who are linguistically competent on the whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general (consisting of syntax, morphology, inflections, phonology and semantics) have the tendency to speak or write authoritatively about a topic or to engage in conversation. Basing on the findings from this study, an enhancement program was proposed with the certainty that this proposed English language program would bring the best efficiency in the second language acquisition.

Keywords: communicative competence, performance, linguistic competence, discourse competence

1. Introduction

In the global view, the English-speaking countries according to Deduney and Hockly (2010) which are usually known as Britain, United States, Australia, Canada or New Zealand. There are actually many other countries that use English as a second language and their citizens have high levels of English skills such as India, Singapore, Malaysia, Philippines, Nigeria, Kenya and Mauritius, to name a few. One of the interesting things about English as a global language is that it is increasingly being used as a 'lingua franca' (or common language) so that people from non-English-speaking countries can communicate with those who do speak English. For example, at a business meeting in Bangkok, Thailand, with participants from China, Japan, Korea, and Indonesia, the common language is usually English. Likewise, a business meeting in Munich, Germany, with participants from Sweden, Germany and France, usually takes place with English as their medium of communication. In this reference, Vietnam is not included. Nevertheless, today's curricular programs in Vietnam include among others the English language program.

According to Van et al. (2006), the quality of teaching and learning foreign languages at both general and tertiary levels in Vietnam is not very good. It does not meet the demand of socio-economic development of the country at the moment.

At the university, the start-up level of the students' English proficiency is very low, and according to the surveys conducted by five key universities in 2005 (Van, 2010), the real level of the majority of students is just about elementary, below A1 in the CEFR level. Therefore, many universities have to seek to the language program for beginner (or starter level) learners. As a result, after 240 hours of general English, the college students' level is

expected at lower-intermediate, it means A2 level. Then with from 60 to 90 hours of ESP at senior years, their real level of English cannot be significantly improved and is still very far from the requirements of their future jobs. In short, students' language proficiency is very low and many college graduates do not meet the foreign language requirement of the recruiters.

One more thing contributed to this negative situation at universities is that university students have diverse educational and socio-economic backgrounds, coming both from major cities where English learning is better resourced, and rural areas which offer only basic language learning opportunities. Furthermore, not all students take part in a placement test before the course to see how well their English level is. Therefore, new students are enrolled in the same classes, regardless of English level. Given this situation, it is often assumed that their English needs are elementary and that is thought to be problematic, thus disadvantaging and demotivating those aiming to achieve higher English levels (Dong, 2007). According to Van (2008), the situation is described in this way: "Learning English is not relevant to learners' purposes. They cannot understand a lecture in English. They cannot communicate in English (in daily or professional situations). They cannot read their professional or common sense reading materials texts. They cannot write in English. Therefore, although their motivation to learn English is high, they achieve very little."

Since 2008, the National Foreign Language 2020 Project has been implemented in Vietnam. This project has expanded its influence and training programs to the majority of teachers of English at all levels. Besides, several training workshops have been conducted by the different organizations and institutions to enhance the teachers' teaching skills.

1.1 Conceptual Framework

Recent theoretical and empirical research on communicative competence is based on three models of communicative competence: the model of Canale and Swain, the model of Bachman and Palmer and the description of components of communicative language competence in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). However, the present study considers the model of Canale and Swain.

The theoretical framework which was proposed by Canale (1980) and Swain (1981) had at first three main components, i.e. fields of knowledge and skills: grammatical, sociolinguistic, and strategic competence. In a later version of this model, Canale (1983, 1984) transferred some elements from sociolinguistic competence into the fourth which he named discourse competence. In this study, only the linguistic and discourse competence are assessed.

The present study considers that communicative competence (dependent variable), delimited into linguistic and discourse competence, of the fourth year college students. It also assumes that certain profile variables could influence the variations in the communicative competence of the students. The study views that somehow these variables could enhance or impede the development of communicative competence of the students, namely: sex, field of specialization, language spoken at home, and English language exposure. These are considered as the independent variables.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Generally, this study aimed to determine the level of communicative competence of the fourth year students as a basis for proposed English language program at 5 different universities in 5 different provinces in Vietnam. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

- 1) What is the profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - a) sex
 - b) field of specialization
 - c) parents' highest educational attainment
 - d) English language exposure
- 2) What is the level of communicative competence of the respondents in terms of:
 - a) linguistic/grammatical competence
 - b) discourse competence
- 3) What are the strengths and weaknesses of the respondents in the linguistic and discourse competence?
- 4) Is there a difference in the linguistic and discourse competence of the respondents when grouped according to

profile variables?

5) How can a remedial English language program can be proposed to improve students' linguistic and discourse competence?

2. Literature Review

The term communicative competence is comprised of two words, the combination of which means competence to communicate. This simple lexicosemantic analysis uncovers the fact that the central word in the study of communicative competence is the word competence.

Competence is one of the most controversial terms in the field of general and applied linguistics. Its introduction to linguistic discourse has been generally associated with Chomsky who in his very influential book *Aspects of the Theory of Syntax* drew what has been today viewed as a classic distinction between competence (the monolingual speaker-listener's knowledge of language) and performance (the actual use of language in real situations).

Soon after Chomsky proposed and defined the concepts of competence and performance, advocates for a communicative view in applied linguistics (e.g. Savignon, 1972) expressed their strong disapproval at the idea of using the concept of idealized, purely linguistic competence as a theoretical ground of the methodology for learning, teaching and testing languages. They found the alternative to Chomsky's concept of competence in Hymes's communicative competence which they believed to be a broader and more realistic notion of competence. Namely, Hymes (1972) defined communicative competence not only as an inherent grammatical competence but also as the ability to use grammatical competence in a variety of communicative situations, thus bringing the sociolinguistic perspective into Chomsky's linguistic view of competence. During the 1970s and 1980s many applied linguists with a primary interest in the theory of language acquisition and/or the theory of language testing gave their valuable contribution to further the development of the concept of communicative competence. Just a few of them will be mentioned in the following, namely those whose theoretical reflections and empirical work seem to have had the most important impact on the theory of communicative competence. In an attempt to clarify the concept of communicative competence, Widdowson (1983) made a distinction between competence and capacity. In his definition of these two notions he applied insights that he gained in discourse analysis and pragmatics. In this respect, he defined competence, i.e. communicative competence, in terms of the knowledge of linguistic and sociolinguistic conventions. Under capacity, which he often referred to as procedural or communicative capacity, he understood the ability to use knowledge as means of creating meaning in a language. According to him, ability is not a component of competence. It does not turn into competence, but remains "an active force for continuing creativity", i.e. a force for the realization of what Halliday called the "meaning potential" (Widdowson, 1983). Having defined communicative competence in this way, Widdowson is said to be the first who in his reflections on the relationship between competence and performance gave more attention to performance or real language use.

Canale and Swain (1980) and Canale (1983) understood communicative competence as a synthesis of an underlying system of knowledge and skill needed for communication. In their concept of communicative competence, knowledge refers to the (conscious or unconscious) knowledge of an individual about language and about other aspects of language use. According to them, there are three types of knowledge: knowledge of underlying grammatical principles, knowledge of how to use language in a social context in order to fulfill communicative functions and knowledge of how to combine utterances and communicative functions with respect to discourse principles. In addition, their concept of skill refers to how an individual can use the knowledge in actual communication. According to Canale (1983), skill requires a further distinction between underlying capacity and its manifestation in real communication, that is to say, in performance.

Unlike Hymes, Canale and Swain or even Widdowson, Savignon (1972, 1983) put a much greater emphasis on the aspect of ability in her concept of communicative competence. Namely, she described communicative competence as the ability to function in a truly communicative setting – that is, in a dynamic exchange in which linguistic competence must adapt itself to the total informational input, both linguistic and paralinguistic, of one or more interlocutors" (Savignon, 1972:8). According to her, and many other theoreticians (e.g. Canale and Swain, 1980; Skehan, 1995, 1998; Bachman and Palmer, 1996 etc.), the nature of communicative competence is not static but dynamic, it is more interpersonal than intrapersonal and relative rather than absolute. It is also largely defined by context.

As to the distinction between competence and performance, Savignon referred to competence as an underlying ability and to performance as an open manifestation of competence. In her opinion, competence can be observed, developed, maintained and evaluated only through performance. Like many theoreticians in the field of language

learning and teaching (e.g. Stern, 1986), Savignon equates communicative competence with language proficiency. Due to this, as well as to the controversial use of the term competence, Taylor (1988) proposed to replace the term communicative competence with the term communicative proficiency. At approximately the same time and for similar reasons, Bachman (1990) suggested using the term communicative language ability, claiming that this term combines in itself the meanings of both language proficiency and communicative competence. Leaning especially on Hymes, Widdowson and Candlin, Bachman defined communicative language ability as a concept comprised of knowledge or competence and capacity for appropriate use of knowledge in a contextual communicative language use. In elaborating on this definition, Bachman devoted special attention to the aspect of language use - that is, the way how language is used for the purpose of achieving a particular communicative goal in a specific situational context of communication.

Chomsky separates competence and performance; he describes “competence” as an idealized capacity that is located as a psychological or mental property or function and ‘performance’ as the production of actual utterances. In short, competence involves “knowing” the language and performance involve “doing” something with the language. The difficulty with this construct is that it is very difficult to assess competence without assessing performance.

Competence refers to one’s underlying knowledge of a system, event, or fact. It is a non-observable, idealized ability to do something. With regard to language, therefore, competence is one’s knowledge of the language system itself.

Performance, on the other hand, is the overtly observable and concrete manifestation or realization of competence. It is the “willful act” (Saussure) of doing something or, as in the case of language, showing one’s knowledge or ability of the language system (Orillos, 1998).

In their model of communicative competence, Canale and Swain (1980) show four separate elements interacting and influencing each other as parts of communicative competence: grammatical competence, sociolinguistic competence, discourse competence, and strategic competence.

According to Díaz-Rico and Weed (2010), communicative competence is a feature of a language user’s knowledge of the language that allows the user to know “when, where, and how to use language appropriately” (p. 58). Grammatical/linguistic competence is one of four areas of the communicative competence theory put forward by Canale and Swain (Gao, 2001). The four areas function together in language production (Lyster, 1996).

Grammatical/linguistic competence focuses on command of the language code, including such things as the rules of word and sentence formation, meanings, spelling and pronunciation (Gao, 2001). The goal is to acquire knowledge of, and ability to use, forms of expression that are grammatically correct and accurate (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2010; Gao, 2001). Grammatical/linguistic competence acts to promote accuracy and fluency in second language production (Gao, 2001), and increases in importance as the learner advances in proficiency (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2010).

In like manner, along communicative competence particularly linguistic and discourse competence, Kroger (2005) discussed that good knowledge on the parts of speech is necessary. There must be good performance along subject-verb agreement and on the distinct functions of the other parts of speech. According to Kroeger, verb agreement refers to a system in which the form of the verb reflects the person, number, and/or gender of one or more arguments. It normally agrees only with terms, i.e. arguments which bear the grammatical relations of subject, object, or secondary object. The verb is an action word that figures out whether it is in the present, past or future. It agrees with the noun or pronoun in number. As there are a good knowledge and understanding of the identity and functions of nouns and pronouns, antecedent is likewise important to know. Antecedent according to Seaton, et Al (2007) is the noun that a pronoun stands for. In addition she states about other parts of speech and she said that prepositions relate nouns or pronouns to some other part of the sentence, while conjunctions are words that connect other words or groups of words, and interjections are words or short expressions that show sudden strong feeling. She further added that good knowledge of the parts of speech contributes to the construction of good sentences and writing better paragraphs. Hence, linguistic competence is enhanced with good grasp of the functions of the different parts of speech.

Discourse competence is the ability to organize thoughts to form a unified text in spoken or written discourse. In this way, the construction of good sentences and/or paragraphs and recognition of the use of well-constructed and good sentences is an edge, either in written or oral communications. Though sentences vary widely in style and subject matter, their focus is still the thread that binds together these sentences. In other words, these sentences have certain qualities in common. Some of these are found in the book published by AMSCO school

publications, Inc. When these qualities are observed and applied, discourse competence can be improved. These qualities are: (1) Good sentences do not waste words. They use only enough words to carry the thought. Nor do they wander. They make their point . . . and stop. (2) Good sentences are clear. They express a thought precisely and directly. (3) Good sentences have unity. They stick to one general topic in a sentence. (4) Good sentences are coherent, using accurate connectives. (5) Good sentences are varied in structure. They do not always follow a set pattern. (6) Good sentences call upon strong, specific nouns and vivid verbs to convey the thought. They use adjectives and adverbs sparingly but effectively (7) Good sentences are pleasing to read, usually an enjoyable part of a larger whole (8) Good sentences are complete, neither fragments nor run-ons. (9) Good sentences are technically correct, following accepted standards of usage.

Canale and Swain's sociolinguistic competence as mentioned by Orillos in his book (1998) is now broken down into two separate pragmatic categories: functional aspects of language (illocutionary competence, or, pertaining to sending and receiving intended meanings) and sociolinguistic aspects (which deal with such considerations as politeness, formality, metaphor, register, and culturally-related aspects of language).

Strategic competence refers to a speaker's ability to adapt their use of verbal and nonverbal language to compensate for communication problems caused by the speaker's lack of understanding of proper grammar use and/or insufficient knowledge of social behavioral and communication norms. Strategic competence, along with grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence constitute a framework for determining a language learner's proficiency in communication as posited by Michael Canale and Merrill Swain in 1980 (Canale & Swain, 1980). A fourth component, discourse competence, was later added by Canale in 1983 (Canale, 1983). Together, these four competencies are considered mainstays of modern theory on second-language acquisition. (Diaz-Rico & Weed, 2006).

Essentially, any speaker using techniques intended to preserve communication, repair breakdowns in communication, or prevent miscommunication can be considered to be demonstrating strategic competence. Some examples of behaviors demonstrating strategic competence include using synonyms to substitute for words the speaker cannot recall or has not yet learned, resorting to physical gestures to convey meaning, asking for clarification from the listener, raising one's voice in order to be heard, and feigning comprehension in order to listen for context clues.

The Importance of a Communication-oriented Framework

Adoption of the communication-oriented foreign language teaching, popularly known as Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), in English classrooms has been repeatedly stressed by SLA researchers, and indeed, there have been many studies attempting to determine its effects on L2 learners (Breen and Candlin, 1980; Canale 1983; Canale and Swain, 1980; Fillmore, 1979; Kasper and Rose, 2002; O'Malley and Chamot, 1990; Oxford, 1990; Swain, 1985; Skehan, 1995; Tarone and Yule, 1989; Widdowson, 1978).

Developing Communicative Competence as a Primary Focus of L2 Teaching

Brown (1994a), viewing CLT as an approach rather than a specific method of teaching, describes four underlying characteristics in defining CLT in a second language classroom, which is summarized below:

1. Focus in a classroom should be on all of the components of communicative competence of which grammatical or linguistic competence is just a part.
2. Classroom activities should be designed to engage students in the pragmatic, authentic, and functional use of language for meaningful purposes.
3. Both fluency and accuracy should be considered equally important in a second learning classroom, and they are complementary.
4. Students have to use their target language, productively and receptively, in unrehearsed contexts under proper guidance, but not under the control of a teacher.

Further, Brown (1994b) lists six key words of CLT to better understand what it aims at: learner-centered, cooperative (collaborative), interactive, integrated, content-centered, and task-based.

Canale and Swain structuralized four categories in Communicative Competence. However, two categories – Linguistic and Discourse and Sociolinguistic have been considered quantifiable since Strategic Competence Test must be given full attention and it has to be observed interactively. Otherwise, the judgment of one's level of Strategic Competence is compromised and is subjective and insufficient. Yet, Strategic Competence must almost always be a part of a communicative competence.

The investigation of a student's level of communicative competence is indispensable in a classroom setting as it aids in the use of bringing-out and maximizing the student's full potentials using integrated skills. Integrated skills bring about receptive and productive skills of students. Receptive skills are reading and listening while productive skills are speaking and writing. The interpretation of skills integrating pertains not only to linguistic skills but also to skills in manipulating information in an integrative manner or notion which includes quasi or similar operation of both language skills and information (Zahedi, 2012).

3. Method

3.1 Research Design

This study used the descriptive method, particularly employing the survey and comparative techniques. In this study, it describes the respondents' profile such as sex, field of specialization, languages spoken at home, and English language exposure. Furthermore, the study is descriptive as it describes the status of level of communicative competence of fourth year students at 5 universities in Vietnam in terms of 1) grammatical/ linguistic competence 2) pragmatic/ discourse competence. From these components, fourth year students are able to understand and use language effectively to communicate in authentic social and school environments.

On the other hand, this study used comparative research design to determine the difference in the over-all communicative competence of the respondents when grouped according to profile variables.

3.2 Respondents and Sampling Procedures

The respondents of the study were the fourth year students who came from the 5 universities in Vietnam during the school year 2016-2017. It is represented in the study by a sample size obtained, through the Slovin's formula, wherein N is the population size, n is the sample size and e is the margin of error which is 5%. After the desired sample size was determined, stratified random sampling was used to proportionately allocate the number of respondents per university. This technique was used to avoid bias sample, wherein the entire population consists of 5 different universities, the final subjects are randomly and proportionally selected from different universities. The technique provided that more samples were obtained from universities with more students.

After the sample size per faculty was known, the students involved in the study were identified by draw lots in small universities and by random number key of a scientific calculator for bigger universities. Thus, from the 518 population of the study, 221 were identified through the use of Slovin's formula.

3.3 Research Instrument

The researcher used a self-made Communicative Competence Test in English to gather relevant information and data from the respondents. The instrument was subjected to content validation by some experts and some revisions were made before its finalization. The survey questionnaire has two parts. The first part is on the profile of respondents such as sex, field of specialization, and their exposure to the English language; while the second part has a 50-item questionnaire intended to elicit the level of communicative competence of the respondents in learning the second language. In particular, the questionnaire contained tests on linguistic and discourse components.

3.4 Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher sought the approval of the University Presidents for the conduct of the research. After which, the researcher was endorsed to the Deans for the schedule of the floating of questionnaire through the help of the teachers of each faculty/college.

The teacher-made survey questionnaire for students was presented to the practitioners for content validation. Then pilot testing of the survey questionnaire was done to a group of students who were not the respondents of this study to validate the strengths and weaknesses of the instrument. The experts were again consulted for the finalization of the questionnaire before the researcher personally administered the questionnaire per faculty/college for 100% retrieval. The senior students were first convened in a room and the researcher explained the purpose of the study as well as the items in the questionnaire. This helped them understand and motivated to answer it honestly.

The score of each item was given a corresponding weight value with one as the lowest and ten as the highest (according to the scale in Vietnamese educational system). Descriptive equivalents or verbal descriptions were also provided for the interpretation of result.

3.5 Statistical Tools and Analysis

The researcher used the descriptive statistics particularly frequency counts, and percentages in analyzing the profile of the respondents.

To describe the extent of exposure to language, below is the scale.

Scale	Adjectival Value
4	Always
3	Often
2	Sometimes
1	Never

The scale below was also used to determine their communicative competence in discourse.

Score Intervals	Competence Level
21 – 25	Very Competent User of English
16 – 20	Competent User of English
11 – 15	Fair User of English
6 – 10	Modest User of English

Competence Level for the Whole Test

Score Intervals	Competence Level
41 – 50	Very Competent User of English
31 – 40	Competent User of English
21 – 30	Fair User of English
11 – 20	Modest User of English
1 – 10	Limited User of English

To determine the difference of the level of competence when they are grouped according to their profile variables, Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used, and T-test was used to compare between two groups: linguistic and discourse competence.

4. Result

4.1 Profile of Students

Table 1 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of the respondents according to sex. It is gleaned from the data that 57.5% or 127 out of 221 student-respondents are male, while 42.5% or 94 out of 221 are female. This finding infers that majority of the 4th year students are male.

Table 1. Profile of the students according to sex

Category	Frequency (n = 221)	Percent
Male	127	57.5
Female	94	42.5

Table 2 shows the frequency and percentage distribution of respondents according to the field of specialization. It is generally observed on the table that the distribution of percentage is almost fairly spread among 12 curricular programs or the fields of specialization, which means that there is almost close to ideal proportion of respondents representing the different programs. Specifically, only 16.6% or 37 out of 221 respondents comprise the respondents from Bachelor of Accounting-Auditing; 11.8% or 26 students from each of the two programs such as Bachelor of Business Administration and Bachelor of English; 10.8% or 24 students from each of the two other programs such as Bachelor of Banking and Bachelor of Constructive Engineering; 10% or 22 students from the Bachelor of Electrical-Electronics; 5% or 11 students from each of the three programs such as Bachelor of Tourism Business, Bachelor of Commerce, and Bachelor of Architects; 4.5% or 10 from each of the two programs such as Bachelor of Finance and Bachelor of Mechatronics; while only 4.1% or 9 student-respondents represent the Bachelor of Information Technology.

Table 2. Profile of the students according to field of specialization

Field of Specialization	Frequency (n = 221)	Percentage
Bachelor of Business Administration	26	11.8
Bachelor of Tourism Business	11	5.0
Bachelor of Commerce	11	5.0
Bachelor of Finance	10	4.5
Bachelor of Banking	24	10.8
Bachelor of Accounting – Auditing	37	16.6
Bachelor of Information Technology	9	4.1
Bachelor of Electrical-Electronics	22	10.0
Bachelor of Mechatronics	10	4.5
Bachelor of Constructive Engineer	24	10.9
Bachelor of Architects	11	5.0
Bachelor of English	26	11.8

Table 3 shows the profile of the students according to father's highest educational attainment. It is clearly observed that 35.3% or 78 out of 221 of the students' fathers finished college education program; 24.4% or 54 finished junior high school education; 18.6% or 41 finished elementary and secondary school education; and only 3.2% or 7 out of 221 did not have formal schooling. These findings infer that these parents might not have been recipients of English language education programs during their collegiate years.

Table 3. Profile of the students according to father's highest educational attainment

Father's Education	Frequency (n = 221)	Percent
No formal Schooling	7	3.2
Elementary School	41	18.6
Secondary School	41	18.6
Junior High School	54	24.4
College Graduate	78	35.2
Total	221	100

Table 4 shows the profile of the students according to mother's highest educational attainment. Similar to the findings with fathers' educational attainment, it is observed in this table that 32.6% or 72 out of 221 of the students' mothers completed tertiary education programs; 24.9% or 55 of these mothers finished junior high school; 17.6% or 39 of these mothers were able to complete secondary education level; 19% or 42 of them finished elementary education, while only 5.9% or 13 out of 221 of these students' mothers did not have any formal schooling. These findings would also imply that the mothers of the respondents have exposure in the English language.

Table 4. Profile of the students according to mother's highest educational attainment

Mother's Education	Frequency (n = 221)	Percentage
No formal Schooling	13	5.9
Elementary School	42	19.0
Secondary School	39	17.6
Junior High School	55	24.9
College Graduate	72	32.6
Total	221	100

4.2 English Language Exposure of the Respondents

Table 5 shows the profile of the students according to English language exposure. It is gleaned from the data that the respondents Low (sometimes) English language exposure. This finding indicates that they have minimal English language exposure. They do not have a wide range of opportunities to use the English language and to be engaged in circumstances that allow them to develop their competence.

The item that the respondents have registered the highest rating is *I attend to English class session in school*, as shown by a weighted mean of 3.08. This finding implies that the respondents expose themselves in the English language by attending a formal class session in English. Perhaps, this is the greatest exposure rated by the respondents because English is part of their regular subject in school.

The statement, *I speak English when I talk to a native speaker*, obtained the second highest mean of 3.0 (high). Such rating indicates that the respondents often talk in English whenever they meet native speakers of the English language. They are forced to use the language because there is no other way to communicate with them. Besides, this situation becomes an opportunity for them to use their knowledge and competence in using the English language which they have learned formally and informally. By forcing themselves to speak in English, they are able to test how well they have really mastered the language.

It is also worthwhile to pay attention that the students “often” *converse with their teachers in English*, as indicated by its mean of 2.68. This finding connotes that they find it important that they have to speak English before an English language teacher. It is an established policy of the school that all English students have to communicate with their teachers in English. The logic of this policy that all students and teachers are able to further improve their language proficiency once they are able to use the language more often. This can be explained by the law of practice which indicates that one is able to master any language once he speaks or uses the language more often in his day to day life.

On the other hand, the items that received the lowest means are *I speak English when I talk to local authorities (1.17- never)*; *I use English at home (1.33 - never)*; and *I attend seminar, trainings, conferences, and meetings where English is the medium of communication (1.35 – never)*.

The very low language exposure of the respondents on the statement *I speak English when I talk to local authorities*, implies that they do not at all speak with the policemen and government officials in English when transacting with them. In Vietnam, English is just a foreign language and not as a second language. Thus, all transactions are expressed in *Kinh* language and the English language is just used in schools and business transactions.

Moreover, the very low language use of English at home means that the respondents do not use the language in communicating with their parents, siblings and other relatives. Even if their parents understand English, the respondents use the *Kinh* language as they are able to express themselves more clearly and meaningfully. Besides, the parents, siblings and the respondents are more comfortable using the *Kinh* language than English in daily conversations inside the home.

Finally, the very low mean obtained by the statement *I attend seminar, trainings, conferences, and meetings where English is the medium of communication (1.35 – never)* implies that there are no opportunities provided for the respondents to further enrich their competence in the English language. Unlike in other countries wherein English is considered as a second language, Vietnam treats English as a foreign language. Provision of seminars and trainings for students to enhance the students’ language proficiency is rare. It is up for the students who are interested to learn and master the English language to look for seminars and trainings as this is not imposed by the school and other agencies anyway.

Table 5. Profile of the students according to English language exposure

Items	Mean	Description
1. I attend English class session in school.	3.08	Often (High)
2. I read journals, research articles, and textbooks.	2.58	Often (High)
3. I read English magazines, newspapers, pocket books.	2.54	Often (High)
4. I converse with my classmates/ friends in English.	1.59	Never (Very Low)
5. I converse with my teachers in English.	2.68	Often (High)
6. I use English in class recitation.	1.35	Never (Very Low)

7.	I use English at home.	1.33	Never (Very Low)
8.	I use English language in any writing tasks.	2.62	Often (High)
9.	I watch English movies or TV programs.	2.73	Often (High)
10.	I listen to English music.	2.86	Often (High)
11.	I speak English when I socialize/mingle with other people.	1.37	Never (Very Low)
12.	I speak English when I talk to local authorities.	1.17	Never (Very Low)
13.	I read English internet materials like social media post, researchers, and other uploaded information.	2.58	Often (High)
14.	I attend seminar, trainings, conferences, and meetings where English is the medium of communication.	1.35	Never (Very Low)
15.	I speak English when I talk to native speaker.	3.00	Often (High)
General Weighted Mean		2.19	Sometimes (Low)

Legend:**Scale Adjectival Description***1.00 - 1.74 - Never**1.75 – 2.49 - Sometimes**2.5 – 3.34 - Often**3.35 – 4.00 - Always**4.3 Level of Grammatical/Linguistic Communicative Competence*

Table 6 shows the level of communicative competence of the respondents along grammar. As gleaned from the table, the Actual Test Mean Score is 17.39 with a descriptive value of “competent” user in English. This data implies that the respondents have high communicative competence in grammar. In Vietnam, the approach in teaching English is focused more on grammar rather than communication. Most of the time, students are exposed to grammar testing and the way to determine the competence of the students in English is usually gauged by their ability to pass the grammar tests. With this practice, there is tendency for the students to excel more in grammar as compared to other dimensions of language.

The high competence of the respondents in grammar implies that they are able to master the different parts of speech. They are also able to know the rules of the different parts of speech and use them appropriately.

A further look into the table reveals that 65.6% or 145 out of 221 students got 16-20 correct answers from the 25-item test. This bulk of the respondents are competent grammar users of the English language because they have the knowledge, ability and skills in explaining how sentences are constructed and how different types of sentences are formed. It also shows that they have high competence on how to punctuate each type correctly and how to combine different sentence types for effective written communication.

The stress on developing grammar skills among the respondents affirms the findings of researchers such as Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2010; Gao, 2001, who averred that the goal of language teaching is to acquire knowledge of, and ability to use, forms of expression that are grammatically correct and accurate. Grammatical/linguistic competence acts to promote accuracy and fluency in second language production (Gao, 2001), and increases in importance as the learner advances in proficiency (Díaz-Rico & Weed, 2010). In like manner, along communicative competence particularly linguistic competence, Kroger (2005) discussed that good knowledge on the parts of speech is necessary. There must be good performance along subject-verb agreement and on the distinct functions of the other parts of speech. According to Kroeger, verb agreement refers to a system in which the form of the verb reflects the person, number, and/or gender of one or more arguments. It normally agrees only with terms, i.e. arguments which bear the grammatical relations of subject, object, or secondary object. The verb is an action word that figures out whether it is in the present, past or future. It agrees with the noun or pronoun in number. Hence, grammar/linguistic competence is enhanced with good grasp of the functions of the different parts of speech.

Similarly, the data in Table 6 further illustrates that 20.8% or 46 of the respondents got scores between 11-15 (fair), while 10.9% or 24 students got 21 to 25 (very competent) correct answers. Respondents who got scores between 11-15 connotes that they have low competence in the use of the different parts of speech and its rules

while those who obtained scores between 21-25 have very high level of competence in grammar.

Table 6. Language Competence of the respondents in the English grammar test

Category Scores	Frequency (n = 221)	Percentage
6 – 10	6	2.7
11 – 15	46	20.8
16 – 20	145	65.6
21 – 25	24	10.9

Lowest Score: 7

Highest Score: 25

Actual Test Mean Score: 17.39 – (Competent user in English – High level of Competence)

SD: 2.79

Ideal Test Mean Score: 15.5 (Test moderately difficult)

Index of Mastery: 69.56

Coefficient of Variation: 0.16 (Test poorly discriminating)

4.3 Level of Discourse Communicative Competence

Table 7 shows the performance of the students in the English discourse competence test. The Actual Test Mean Score of the respondents is 15.40 which has an adjectival value of “fair” user in English. This finding of the study implies that the respondents have low level of discourse competence.

The low discourse competence of the respondents suggests that they have low knowledge, ability and skill in linking sentences (in written discourse) or utterances (in spoken discourse). They too are weak in determining the coherence of sentences.

It is observed on the data that 49.32% or 109 out of 221 students got 11-15 (fair) correct answers in the 25-item test. Only 43.44% or 96 of them got 16-20 (competent) correct answers; while 3.62% or 8 students got 21 to 25 (very competent), and 6-10 (modest) scores, respectively.

Since majority of the respondents obtained a “fair” discourse competence, it can be inferred that they have low ability to understand and construct monologues or written texts of different genres, such as narratives, procedural texts, expository texts, persuasive (hortatory) texts, descriptions and others.

The foregoing finding supports the assertion of Schiffrin (1996) who said that there is a need to increase the students’ level of discourse competence. This can be done by having serious implementation of understanding the “system of use of the rules and norms of learning a language” for a wide range of social and expressive functions. However, this requires more than just learning word-and sentence-formation and correct pronunciation but also for sentence coherence.

Table 7. Language competence of the respondents in the discourse test

Category Scores	Frequency (n = 221)	Percentage
6 – 10	8	3.62
11 – 15	109	49.42
16 – 20	96	43.44
21 – 25	8	3.62

Lowest Score: 7

Highest Score: 25

Actual Test Mean Score: 15.40 – (Fair user in English)

SD: 2.74

Ideal Test Mean Score: 15.5 (Test moderately difficult)

Index of Mastery: 61.61

Coefficient of Variation: 0.18 (Test poorly discriminating)

4.4 Overall Level of Communicative Competence of the Respondents

The overall level of communicative competence of the respondents is illustrated in Table 8. It shows that the overall mean for the two dimensions is 32.79 which has an adjectival value of “competent”. However, between the two dimensions, discourse competence is fair or low. This gives the idea that the respondents are poor in discourse competence which corroborates the earlier finding. Thus, the respondents are more skilled in grammar rather than discourse competence. This finding is accounted to the fact that method in teaching English in Vietnam stresses more on grammar rather than discourse competence. Moreover, teachers teaching English in Vietnam use the first language in teaching not to mention that they also do code switching in the class.

Table 8. Summary table for the grammatical and discourse competence of the respondents

Communicative Competence	Mean Scores	Arbitrary Scale	Descriptive Value
Grammar	17.39	Competent	High
Discourse	15.40	Fair	Low
Overall Mean	32.79	Competent	High

41 – 50 - Very Competent User of English (Very high)

31 – 40 - Competent User of English (high)

21 – 30 - Fair User of English (Moderate)

11 – 20 - Modest User of English (Low)

1 – 10 - Limited User of English (Very Low)

4.5 Strengths and weaknesses of the respondents in the linguistic competence

Table 9 shows the strengths and weaknesses of the students in grammar. It is observed on table that the respondents are strong on *nouns* which registers 91.55 index of mastery (ranked 1) and with a mean of 2.75. The second greatest strength of the respondents is *pronouns* with 88.84 index of mastery (ranked 2) and with a mean of 2.67. On the other hand, the third strength of the respondents is *prepositions* (ranked 3) which has 86.27 index of mastery and with mean of 2.59.

The strength of the respondents on nouns connotes that they have the knowledge, ability and skill in identifying any of a class of people, places, or things. They are also able to distinguish the different kinds of nouns and its function within a clause or sentence (i.e., as a subject, object, or complement of a verb or preposition).

Meanwhile, the strength of the respondents relative to pronouns indicates that they have the knowledge and skill in determining the function of a pronoun as substitute for a noun or noun phrase. They too are able to ascertain that pronouns are used so that a sentence is not cumbersome with the same nouns being repeated over and over in a paragraph.

Moreover, the strength of the respondents along prepositions suggests that they have the competence to determine that prepositions are used to link nouns, pronouns, or phrases to other words within a sentence. It also means that they know that prepositions are normally placed directly in front of nouns, however in some cases, they are in front of gerund verbs.

In contrast, it is also observed that the weakest point of students in grammar which is below 75% index of mastery include verb (ranked 8) having a mean of 46.00; adverb (ranked 7) as revealed by a mean of 57.35 and interjection (ranked 6) with a mean 58.37.

The weakness of the respondents relative to verb indicates that they have low knowledge, ability and skill in determine the function of verb that is to describe an action, state, or occurrence, and forming the main part of the predicate of a sentence. They are also weak in determining the two main categories of verbs and their function in

the sentence. More importantly, the respondents are also very weak in recognizing the functions of “verb as a system in which the form of the verb reflects the person, number, and/or gender of one or more arguments”.

The other weakness of the respondents relative to adverb implies that the respondents have low competence in understanding that an adverb in a word or phrase modifies or qualifies an adjective, verb, or other adverb or a word group, expressing a relation of place, time, circumstance, manner, cause, and degree. Meanwhile, the weakness of the respondents relative to interjection shows that they have difficulty understanding that interjections show the emotion or feeling of the author and that they can stand alone or be placed before or after a sentence. They also fail to recognize that many times, an interjection is followed by a punctuation mark, often an exclamation point.

Table 9. Strengths and weaknesses of the students in grammar

Sub-tests	Number of items	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean	SD	Index of Mastery	Rank
Noun	3	0	3	2.75	0.56	91.55	1
Pronoun	3	0	3	2.67	0.69	88.84	2
Verb	3	0	3	1.38	0.82	46.00	8
Adjective	3	0	3	1.97	0.88	65.61	4
Adverb	4	0	4	2.29	0.74	57.35	7
Preposition	3	0	3	2.59	0.71	86.27	3
Conjunction	4	0	4	2.58	0.96	64.48	5
Interjection	2	0	2	1.17	0.81	58.37	6

Note: The index of mastery indicates the ratio between the aggregate scores of correctly answered items in a test and the highest possible total of scores in the test. The ranks with lower values indicates the strengths and those with higher values indicate the weaknesses.

4.6 Strengths and Weaknesses of the Respondents in the Discourse Competence

Table 10 shows the strengths and weaknesses of the students in discourse competence. It is observed on table that the respondents' rating in all the subcomponents of discourse is below 75% index of mastery. In short, all the four subcomponents are considered the weaknesses of the respondents.

Among all the components of discourse competence, the respondents are weakest along coherence with an index mastery of 53.70 followed by conjunctions (67.33), substitution (68.10) and referents (71.72).

The very low index of mastery of the respondents along coherence implies that they find difficulty in linking the meanings of sentences or utterances in written or spoken texts. In like manner, they do not excel in putting logic or consistency in their written or orally said views or perspectives. On the other hand, the very low mastery level of the respondents relative to conjunctions connotes that they are hard up in thinking of words that connect other words or groups of words. It also implies that they are weak in making meaningful connections of words, phrases, clauses and sentences as there is a need for them to have enough knowledge and understanding on the functions and use of transitional devices particularly the different kinds of conjunctions

This finding of the study supports Van's finding (2010) that the star- up level of students' English proficiency is very low in five key Universities in Vietnam. The quality of teaching and learning foreign languages at both general and tertiary levels in Vietnam is not very good. It does not meet the demand of socio-economic development of the country at the moment. Likewise, Van, et. Al (2006) stressed that there is a need for the students to seek and subject themselves to the language program for beginner (or starter level) learners to improve English proficiency. Thus, there is a need to have an English Program that can enhance English Language Proficiency which in turn improves communicative competence

Meanwhile, the low index mastery of the respondents along substitution and referents implies that they do not excel well in using referents in language discourse. They also find difficulty in identifying what a word or phrase it denotes or stands for. Moreover, the respondents' low mastery on the use of substitution suggests that they have difficulty in code switching and appropriately demonstrating skill in replacing or swapping. Also, they are not good at translating cultural language into some foreign languages.

Table 10. Strengths and weaknesses of the students in discourse competence

Sub-tests	Number of items	Lowest Score	Highest Score	Mean	SD	Index of Mastery	Rank
Referents	4	1	4	2.87	0.61	71.72	1
Substitution	4	0	4	2.72	0.78	68.10	2
Conjunction	5	0	5	3.37	1.02	67.33	3
Coherence	12	0	12	6.44	2.08	53.70	4

4.7 Test of Difference in Grammatical and Discourse Competence of the Respondents When Grouped by Sex

Table 11 shows the comparison on the grammatical and discourse competence of students grouped by sex. The data reveal that the male and female respondents' competence in both English grammar and language discourse are not significantly different, as indicated by the computed *t*-values of -1.427 and -0.294, respectively. Thus, the null hypothesis is accepted. This finding points that the students, regardless of sex, have the same level of competence in English grammar and the language discourse.

Table 11. Comparison on the grammatical and discourse competence of students grouped by sex

Groups	Mean	SD	St. Error of Difference	t-value	Prob.	Statistical Decision
Grammatical Competence						
Male	17.15	2.72				
Female	17.70	2.86	0.3818	-1.427	0.155	Not Significant
Linguistic Competence						
Male	15.35	2.47				
Female	15.46	3.08	0.3865	-0.294	0.769	Not Significant

ns = not significant.

4.8 Test of Difference in Grammatical and Discourse Competence of the Respondents when Grouped by Specialization

Table 12 shows the analysis of variance on the grammatical and linguistic competence of the students grouped by specialization. Results show that there is a significant difference in the grammatical and linguistic competence of the respondents based on specialization. In short, grammatical and linguistic competence is associated with the respondents' field of specialization. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected at .01 level of significance.

The significant difference in the grammatical competence of the respondents by specialization is reflected in the computed *f*-ratio of 26.887 and a probability value of 0.000. As gleaned from the table, those who enrolled in Bachelor of English expectedly obtained the highest mean for grammatical competence (21.15) followed by Bachelor of Tourism Business (19.18); and Bachelor of Business Administration (18.50). The high competence of the respondents enrolled in Bachelor of English is more likely to happen because this is their major and that they are expected to be better in such language. On the other hand, respondents who enrolled in Bachelor of Tourism Business are also expected to perform higher than their counterparts because competence in grammar both written and oral form is required in their specialization. For example, it is essential that those who are taking tourism and business have to communicate with their customers in grammatically correct form as this is needed in transacting with them. The same holds true with those enrolled in Business administration because business correspondence necessitates correct grammar for more effective and efficient communication.

In contrast, respondents who enrolled in Bachelor of Banking and Bachelor of Constructive Engineer and

Bachelor of Information Technology registered the lowest means of 13.83, 14.54 and 15.33, respectively. The low performance of the respondents in grammar among these courses may be related to the kind of work that these professionals discharge. For example, bankers and engineers in the country do not transact with their clients in English. In this case, they are not very cautious with their grammar in the performance of their duties and responsibilities.

In terms of discourse competence, results revealed that there is also a significant difference in the discourse competence of the respondents when grouped according to their field of specialization. This is reflected in the computed f-ratio of 21.057 and a probability value of 0.000. This finding indicates that there are differences in the discourse competence of the respondents based on their courses.

It is clearly illustrated in the table that respondents who enrolled in Bachelor of English also obtained the highest mean of 19.61. This corroborates the earlier finding that they are also good in grammatical competence. Following the Bachelor of English in terms of discourse competence are students who enrolled in Bachelor of Commerce (17.09); Bachelor of Tourism business (16.45) and Bachelor of Business Administration (16.23). Again, the possible explanation for this is that discourse competence is essentially needed in these courses. It must be noted that clients of these professionals are usually multinational and the medium of instruction needed to communicate with them is English. It is in having a high discourse competence among these professionals that they are capable of making good interpersonal relationship and building good business relationship with them.

Table 12. Analysis of variance on the grammatical and linguistic competence of the students grouped by specialization

Specializations	Grammatical Competence		Discourse Competence	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Bachelor of Business Administration	18.50	1.77	16.23	2.86
Bachelor of Tourism Business	19.18	0.87	16.45	0.93
Bachelor of Commerce	18.36	1.91	17.09	1.76
Bachelor of Finance	17.50	0.85	14.70	2.45
Bachelor of Banking	13.83	2.28	12.42	1.99
Bachelor of Accounting – Auditing	17.92	2.05	14.78	1.98
Bachelor of Information Technology	15.33	2.74	14.78	2.05
Bachelor of Electrical-Electronics	16.77	1.54	15.00	1.69
Bachelor of Mechatronics	17.90	0.99	16.10	1.10
Bachelor of Constructive Engineer	14.54	2.02	13.33	1.46
Bachelor of Architects	17.64	1.43	15.18	1.25
Bachelor of English	21.15	1.76	19.61	1.83
F-ratio	26.887		21.057	
Probability	0.000		0.000	
Statistical Decision	Significant at 0.01		Significant at 0.01	

4.9 Relationship and Difference in the Linguistic and Discourse Competence

Table 13 shows the relationship between grammatical and linguistic performance of the students and select variables. Results show that there exist a significant relationship between grammatical and linguistic competence of the respondents with their language exposure but not with the highest educational attainment of their mothers and fathers. This is reflected in the computed r - value of 0.263 for grammatical competence and language exposure. The same positive correlation is seen between discourse competence and language exposure with a computed r - value of 0.262. Thus, the null hypothesis of the study is partially rejected only on language exposure.

The significant relationship between the grammatical and linguistic competence of the respondents with their language exposure signifies that the higher is the language exposure of the respondents to English, the higher is

their grammatical and linguistic competence. This finding translates the fact that respondents who are linguistically competent on the whole system and structure of a language or of languages in general (consisting of syntax, morphology, inflections, phonology and semantics) have the tendency to speak or write authoritatively about a topic or to engage in conversation.

The direct relationship between the two variables affirms the finding of Masangya and Lozada (2009) who found out that students with high exposure of the English language have significantly less frequency in their errors in wrong case, fragmentation, parallelism, punctuation, and verb tense.

Table 13. Relationship between grammatical and linguistic performance of the students and select variables

Variables	Grammatical Competence		Discourse Competence	
	r-value	Prob.	r-value	Prob.
Language Exposure	0.263**	0.000	0.362**	0.000
Father's Education	-0.023 ^{ns}	0.732	0.066 ^{ns}	0.328
Mother's Education	-0.020 ^{ns}	0.763	0.070 ^{ns}	0.298

ns= not significant.

** = significant at 0.01 level.

5. Discussion

After careful interpretation and analysis of the data, the study reveals that most of the respondents are males, they are enrolled in Bachelor of Accounting and have fathers and mothers who are college graduates. Moreover, the respondents have low English language exposure.

In terms of the level of communicative competence, the grammar competence of the respondents is “competent - high” while their discourse competence is “fair - low”. However, putting together the means of these two dimensions, the respondents have “high” level of communicative competence.

Moreover, results reveal that the strengths and weaknesses of the respondents in relative to linguistic competence are along nouns, pronouns and prepositions. On the other hand, their weaknesses are along verb, adverb and interjection. In contrast, the respondents show no strength along discourse competence since they have low scores in all the four components such as referents, substitution, conjunction and coherence.

Test of difference show that there is no significant difference in the linguistic and discourse competence of the respondents when grouped according to sex. However, there exists a difference in the linguistic and discourse competence of the respondents when grouped according to specialization.

Finally, there is a significant relationship between grammatical and linguistic competence of the respondents when grouped according to language exposure but not on parents' highest educational attainment.

6. Conclusion

Communicative competence among 221 students at 5 universities is a factor of manifold factors. Foremost, the low discourse competence among learners is influenced by their low English language exposure and less focus of this dimension in the teaching of English. Structurally, the low discourse competence is accounted to the fact that English language is treated as a foreign language and not as a second language. Such policy in the country impedes the development of language proficiency of the learners in the English language. Specifically, the field of specialization spells out differences in communicative competence of the learners inasmuch as the expected level of communicative competencies in different professions vary. Finally, grammatical and discourse competence among the learners is influenced by their English language exposure. The more exposed the learners in English language, the higher is their communicative competence.

7. Recommendations

The following are recommendations meant to enhance the communicative competence of students in the English Language:

5 universities should be created with an enhanced English language communication program that can sustainably help enhance students' discourse competence. This program could be in the form of teaching and learning

modules designed to address the gray areas of oral and written discourse components specifically along the identified weaknesses in linguistic and discourse competence.

The University administration may consider the use of computer-aided and animated audio and visual presentations to enhance the linguistic and discourse competence of the learners.

The University Administrations should adopt an instructional policy providing more English language exposure to the students. In this way, students are given varied and rich opportunities to develop their communicative competence.

The University Administrations should adopt a policy on No Code Switching in the teaching of English language. Besides, English must be used as a medium of communication during classroom recitation and when talking with friends/classmates within school premises. This is to ensure that teachers and students are able to have practice and discourses in the English language;

The University Administrations must consider the adoption of the proposed English Language Program;

A research is aimed to conduct on the difficulties of students along lexical code switching, contextual and conceptual swapping and translating Vietnamese cultural language in the English language.

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