

THE EFFECT OF LANGUAGE LEARNING PROGRAM ON STUDENTS' ENGLISH SPEAKING ABILITY

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Paper Received: 07.07.2021 / Paper Accepted: 09.08.2021 / Paper Published: 12.08.2021

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Abstract

The major problem of this study was to determine whether the language learning program exerts significant effect on students' English speaking ability or not. The study made use of descriptive-correlation method of research which used the English speaking assessment checklist as the primary data gathering tool. The respondents of the study were the students enrolled in any of the three branches of a Bulacan-based language learning center. The results of the study were tabulated and processed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). The results of the study revealed that the language learning program led to a significant improvement in the English speaking ability of Beginner and Advanced Level students, albeit not for the Intermediate Level students. Nevertheless, the null hypothesis which postulated that the language learning program does not exert significant effect on students' English speaking ability was rejected. Implications were drawn from the findings of the study.

Keywords: Learning, Short-term Study, English, Program Effectiveness.

Introduction

The Language Learning Program (LLP) has been utilized as intervention in the process of improving the teaching of the English language among learners. This can be observed in the formal classroom setting which has started to incorporate new teaching methods, such as inquiry-based learning (Alecio et al., 2012) which has been found to profoundly and positively affect reading achievement in Science and English students.

Intervention in English language learning is also apparent in emergent methods such as communicative language teaching which advocates limited error correction and emphasizes the meaning, rather than the form of the statement, and task-based learning which lends autonomy to the language learners (Achmad & Yusuf, 2014). Attempts to provide language learning intervention have been made from as early as the pre-school level which resulted in developmental growth for participants with language learning difficulties over the course of the longitudinal study (Gasteiger-Klicpera, 2009). School-age children from Europe have also experimented with learning language intervention, leading to higher rates of production of English words (Pirchio et al., 2017).

However, it is the short-term language learning programs such as the 4-week program meant to develop students' pragmatic competence (Edwards & Csizer, 2004) and the 9-week English as a Second Language (ESL) class meant to develop mastery over interactional routines in English (Waring, 2013) that caught the attention of the researcher due to their opportunities for quickly and efficiently raising levels of language proficiency especially in speaking English.

Quite often, these language learning programs would provide opportunities for students to perform actions through speaking. They may be direct actions such as declarative statements, interrogative questions, and imperative commands, or indirect actions such as interrogative requests and declarative questions (Madkur, 2014), though these are not always evident in the materials used to facilitate language instruction.

One finding suggests that currently available intermediate-level textbooks have very inadequate lessons and none of those evaluated covers all of the criteria which include politeness, adherence to the speech act theory, and conversation analysis (Petraiki & Bayes, 2013). Meanwhile, another study refutes that the latest books do in fact place adequate emphasis on useful phrases (Herbst, 2014).

Apart from the concern of availability of suitable language learning materials, the aforementioned language learning programs have mostly been conducted in such a varied myriad of sociolinguistic landscapes, raising the question of whether that may have influenced the results of the previous studies. The present study assessed the significant effect of a particular language learning program in the province of Bulacan on English speaking ability.

The contribution that the present study aimed to make may possibly improve current practices by shortening the amount of time needed in order to implement the language learning program (Edwards & Csizer, 2004; Waring, 2013).

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model of the study which was utilized to assess the significant

effect of the Language Learning Program on the English speaking ability of the students.

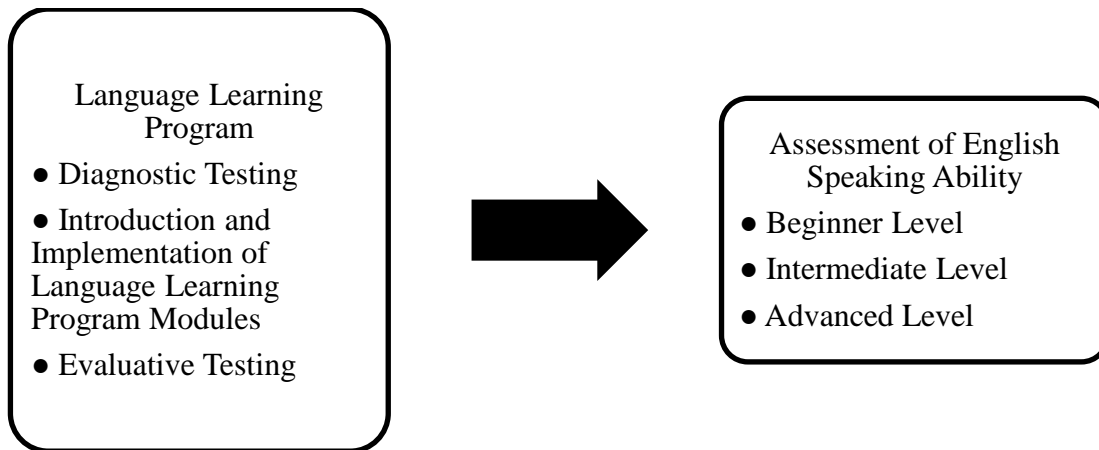


Figure 1: Conceptual Model of The Study

As can be observed in the Figure 1, the effects of the Language Learning Program on students' English speaking ability was established by the execution of the Language Learning Program itself which consists of three steps - diagnostic testing, introduction and implementation of the Language Learning Program modules, and evaluative testing. The outcomes of which were measured through the English speaking assessment.

The main concern of the study was to assess the significant effect of the Language Learning Program on the ESL students' English speaking ability. Specifically, the study sought to accomplish the following:

1. Describe the features of the language learning program based on diagnostic testing, the introduction and implementation of the language learning program modules, and evaluative testing;
2. Describe the English speaking ability of the students on the levels labeled Beginner, Intermediate, and Advanced;
3. Determine whether the language learning program significantly affects students' English speaking ability; and
4. Propose recommendations based on the findings on the study.

Methodology

Succinctly, the main tasks of this paper were to assess the significant effect of the Language Learning Program on the English speaking ability of the respondents. To accomplish this, the study utilized a descriptive-correlation method, a quantitative research approach, by deliberately measuring and analyzing quantitatively the subject variables.

A documentary analysis was utilized to explore the modules contained in the Language Learning Module and a standardized questionnaire on English speaking ability were used as primary data gathering tools.

The respondents of the study were all of the students of varying ages and levels of proficiency from three (3) branches of a private language learning center in Bulacan. Universal sampling includes all the students enrolled in the language learning program of a particular private language learning center.

The English Speaking Assessment Checklist (Camacho, 2014) was used to address the research question regarding students' English speaking ability. The speech acts listed on the checklist must be performed adequately by the students in order to determine their level of English speaking ability. They may be categorized as beginner, intermediate, or advanced.

The data was gathered within the confines of the language learning center from the students enrolled in the language learning program. Upon receiving informed consent, the students were subjected to the diagnostic test which was facilitated through a series of prompt-and-response questions that targeted the criteria in the English Speaking Assessment Checklist. Once the teacher has determined the student's level through the checklist, the modules are introduced and implemented accordingly.

The language learning program was carried out through modules over a span of 20 days; each day, for one hour, a new theme or topic was presented alongside vocabulary and common expressions or grammar structures related to the theme to take note of. These vocabulary and expressions were practiced

within the hour both through role play activities and through prompt-and-response activities.

On the 20th day of the language learning program, the English Speaking Assessment Checklist was administered once more by asking prompt-and-response questions and any follow-up questions to students to gauge grammatical accuracy and pragmatic ability.

The data collected were tabulated and processed using Statistical Packages for Social Sciences (SPSS). In order to analyze and interpret the data gathered, the checklist is quantified as such:

- 1 for every check mark indicating successful execution of a speech act.
- 0 for every blank box indicating non-completion of a speech act.

The scores of all the English Speaking Assessment Checklists were averaged and subjected to frequency distribution in order to describe the English speaking ability of students. The data was presented using percentage. Afterwards, the data underwent regression analysis so that the significant effect of the Language Learning Program on students' English speaking ability may be established.

Features of the Language Learning Program

The language learning program ran for 20 days per student. It was facilitated on a one-on-one basis through 19 modules that had been tailored to suit the linguistic needs and personal preferences of the students, namely: Introductions and greetings; Describing people; Taking calls, making requests, inviting; Giving/receiving good/bad news; Describing homes; Neighborhoods; Travel; Describing food; Dining out; Describing clothes; Shopping; Education; Careers; Entertainment; Sports and hobbies; Technology; Describing art; Law and order; and Health.

There were three steps in the implementation of the language learning program, namely: diagnostic testing, introduction and implementation of language learning program modules, and evaluative testing.

Diagnostic testing was done through prompt-and-response questions which were anchored on the English speaking assessment checklist in order to determine the English speaking abilities that the student can or cannot do at the start of the program. It set a baseline level for comparison in order to say that the program indeed has any effect on the student's English speaking ability.

Upon determining whether the student belongs to the Beginner, Intermediate, or Advanced Level, the

language learning program modules are then introduced to the students and then implemented. Only one topic is focused on for one hour each day, though the skill set to be targeted for improvement may be more than one. For instance, a topic about travel may hone the student's ability to narrate as well as to discuss one's own personal history and/or preferences. Food and dining may lend itself to developing students' abilities to order a meal and to make a complaint, as well as encourage spontaneity in the way they ask and answer questions or initiate and respond to simple statements.

Other topics in the language learning program include introductions and greetings, describing people, taking calls, making requests, inviting, giving or receiving good or bad news, describing homes and neighborhoods, describing clothes, education and careers, entertainment, sports and hobbies, technology, describing art, law and order, and health.

Each session, the student was first shown an image or quote and they must guess what the topic was going to be for that day. Afterwards, new vocabulary was introduced. These words were expected to be used by the students throughout the session. At times, especially for the Beginner and Intermediate Levels, grammar lessons were also briefly discussed. These were contextualized and exemplified so that the students may also practice applying them along with their new vocabulary.

Upon introducing new words and useful phrases and explaining the proper use of some grammar structures to the students, they were then asked prompt-and-response questions which were answerable using their newfound linguistic tools. Sometimes they were asked about their preferences or opinions. Other times, they may be told to narrate a story, complete not only with conflict and resolution but also with detailed descriptions. They were told to bring the listener to the place, or to introduce the listener to a person, using only words.

Students were often up to the task especially after learning new words and useful phrases, however in the event that they fell short of their expected performance, and then a more structured dialogue was provided in the form of a scripted role play. They were either given a fill-in-the-blank type script, or given a specific prompt such as "Pretend you are at your favorite restaurant; order what you usually eat in complete sentences in English."

Towards the remaining few minutes of each session, the students were debriefed regarding their learning's for the day, and then assigned some writing tasks which they presented the next session. The homework was meant to serve as a review for

the students to ensure continuity throughout the 20-day program.

On the last day of the program, an evaluative test was administered with the use of a module designed specifically for that purpose, as well as the English speaking assessment checklist. Once more, prompt-and-response questions were asked regarding topics and abilities that the students had been exposed to throughout the past 19 days in the program. Upon receiving their final evaluation, the students were then awarded a certificate of completion indicating the level that they achieved.

English Speaking Ability of Students

Data was collected on the 20th day of the program using the English speaking assessment checklist to measure the English speaking ability of students.

At the end of the program, all 12 Beginner Level students were able to use basic courtesies, introduce themselves and prompt small talk, while 91% were able to demonstrate the pragmatic abilities required to give and ask for directions, order a meal, and make purchases on their own. This is significant to note seeing as Milleret (2007) mentioned that pragmatic ability can and must be sharpened in the classroom in order for the students to use their target language better.

Notably, instances of students repeating the teacher's words and answering with utterances ranging from only 2-3 words are completely gone. In fact, one trait commonly associated with Intermediate Level students, increased utterance length with long pauses to gather thoughts, was also observed among 25% of the Beginner Level students. This is likely because students have been equipped with sufficient vocabulary and useful phrases for a variety of topics, thus allowing them to speak at length or at least comfortably hold a conversation with others without the need to give only short, curt answers or to repeat the words of the person with whom they are speaking.

Meanwhile, all the students in the Intermediate Level were able to engage in the speech acts that they were tasked to accomplish, such as initiating and responding to simple statements; introducing

oneself and prompting small talk; giving and asking for directions; ordering a meal; making a purchase; participating in simple conversations on topics beyond immediate needs; discussing their personal history; justifying their preferences; and even self-correction. These all point to their specific needs being adequately addressed (Bambara et al., 2018) thereby building enough rapport for them to become comfortable with speaking at length and correcting their own errors, when applicable (Dippold, 2014).

However, there are some skills associated with the Intermediate Level that were rarely observed among the students, such as showing signs of spontaneity and the ability to narrate (20%). It is likely that narration was not focused on that much as compared to the other English speaking abilities that the Intermediate Level students have been able to perform.

As for the students under the Advanced Level, apart from mastering the English speaking abilities associated with Beginner and Intermediate Levels, they were all able to describe personal appearance, manage conversations in everyday situations, and make a polite apology. On the other hand, only 66% of the Advanced Level students could elaborate further when prompted for details and make a polite complaint. It is likely that these skills were not as often practiced as those that were mastered.

Additionally, only 66% of Advanced Level students could smooth over shortcomings with pause fillers, stalling devices, differing rates of speech, and paraphrasing even though 100% can correct their evident errors in speaking. It can be inferred that in lieu of the above mentioned, other means of smoothing over shortcomings in speaking that were not mentioned in the English speaking assessment checklist might have been employed by the Advanced Level students.

Effect of the Language Learning Program on Students' English Speaking Ability

Using regression analysis, the following table contains the quantified data that can establish the significant effect, if any, of the language learning program on students' English speaking ability.

Table 1: Regression of the Language Learning Program and Students' English Speaking Ability

Levels	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients		
	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
Beginner	.690	.240	.674	2.882	.016*
Intermediate	.500	1.708	.167	.293	.789
Advanced	.695	.016	.999	43.377	.000*

R-squared = 0.79

F-value = 68.16

p-value = .000

alpha = .05

Data under Table 1 represent how much the language learning program has influenced the students' English speaking ability. It indicates that for every implementation of the language learning program in the Beginner and Advanced Levels, students' English speaking performance can be expected to improve as evidenced by their respective p-values of 0.016 and 0.000 that are below the 0.05 alpha. On the other hand, the effect of the language learning program on students in the Intermediate Level is found to be insignificant with its p-value of 0.789 which exceeds the 0.05 alpha.

Having applied analysis of variance on the regression of the language learning program on students' English speaking ability, an overall F-value of 68.16 was found. Furthermore, because the overall p-value of 0.00 is lower than 0.05 α , then it can be concluded that the language learning program does indeed exert a significant effect on students' English speaking ability.

The findings mirror that of the successful 9-week program in Waring (2013) and with the 4-week program that aimed to build pragmatic competence through a range of situations and activities, which was described to be "promising but needs more thorough application" (Edwards & Csizer, 2004).

Proposed Recommendations

Given the issues presented regarding the unavailability of suitable learning materials for students who would like to improve their English speaking ability on a short-term basis, as well as the dearth of literature on effective language learning programs on a local level, there are three interventions that are proposed based on the findings of the study.

Firstly, more attention may be drawn to specific skills such as showing signs of spontaneity, initiating and responding to simple statements, giving and asking for directions, ordering a meal, making a purchase, narrating, describing physical appearance, correcting one's own errors, and smoothing over shortcomings.

Furthermore, the modules of the 20-day language learning program may be applied as an updated, context-driven and useful set of learning materials for students who would like to improve their English speaking ability, given that the modules are facilitated by trained language experts within the allotted proper time frame.

Lastly, second language learners who seek to improve their English speaking ability can benefit from participating in the language learning program that is offered in the language learning center where the study was conducted. As of 2021, the program has become available online, and not just in the three branches of the language learning center where it was originally conducted.

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