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Beyond Accuracy: Challenges in Grammar Micro Skills Among ESL Students and Their Pedagogical Implications

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Article Info

Article History

Received:
11 September 2025

Revised:
7 January 2026

Accepted:
9 February 2026

Published:
1 March 2026

Keywords

Effective communication
Grammar proficiency
Language proficiency
Second language

Abstract

An aspect of learning English as a second language is grammar and its application of rules in the use and formation of words in sentences. The study aims to assess students' key grammar micro skills, as well as the challenges and pedagogical implications in ESL classrooms. Using convergent mixed-methods design, a 30-item test on key grammar aspects and faculty perspectives on students' grammar micro skills across various colleges and academic levels in a state university in Bulacan were evaluated. A validated interview questions and grammar test were used which included different aspects such as, verb tenses, coordination and subordination, sequencing of words to form sentences, parallelism, identification of sentence fragments and complete sentences and capitalization and punctuation. Results revealed that appropriate use of punctuation and capitalization, recognition of complete and incomplete sentences, spelling, subject-verb agreement and verb tenses were the key grammar micro skills which students found challenging. Additionally, the College of Engineering and College of Business Administration garnered the highest and second highest mean scores, respectively. The findings obtained from the study may serve as valuable insights to guide curriculum enhancement, pedagogical strategies, and institutional policies for better and more enriched learning experiences.

Citation: Francisco, J. C. & Buenaventura, B. R. (2026). Beyond accuracy: Challenges in grammar micro skills among ESL students and their pedagogical implications. *International Journal on Studies in Education (IJONSE)*, 8(2), 382-395. <https://doi.org/10.46328/ijonse.5638>



ISSN: 2690-7909 / © International Journal on Studies in Education (IJONSE).

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Introduction

Language proficiency is commonly defined as the ability to speak the language. An essential component of language learning is grammar which consists of rules guiding learners in the proper order of words to form sentences (Richards, Platt & Weber, 1986, cited in Nanquil, 2021). Grammar serves as the foundation for language skills, namely: listening, reading, speaking and writing (Andriani & Fuad Abdullah, 2021; Chang, 2011). According to Canale and Swain (1980), grammatical competence is considered an important element of learners' communicative competence. Hence, a solid grasp of grammar and its application is crucial for language learning (Lin, Hwang, Fu & Cao, 2020). Moreover, it provides a source for creating contextualized meanings (Olga, et al, 2012) and facilitates a smoother understanding of the message being communicated as highlighted by Albarico (2021). Hence, in the early 20th century, the approach used in English language teaching focused on grammar rules, followed by a series of exercises to master them.

However, with the emergence of World Englishes, which refers to the varieties of English spoken and used by people in various contexts globally, meaning takes precedence over grammar rules and correct usage. As long as the message is communicated and the meaning conveyed is understood, it will not matter if grammar will be on the sideline. Likewise, the use of communicative approach in the teaching of English subjects has been widely adopted in the Philippine education both in the basic and higher education. Hence, the teaching of grammar in enhancing effective communication especially in written form (Mufanti et al., 2012), has faced criticisms. A study by Samartin, et al. (2022) revealed that the methods employed by educators to teach grammar in countries where English is a second language are often ineffective in enabling students to apply grammar for communication (Gashaye, 2012). Similarly, Krashen (1982) opposed explicit grammar instruction, believing that learners acquire grammar rules unconsciously through engaging in classroom activities that integrate grammatical structures. Similarly, Prabhu (1987) advocated to focus on meaningful tasks involving critical thinking and problem-solving in the target language for optimal language learning.

Contrary to these views, Ellis's studies (2002, 2015) emphasized the necessity of teaching grammar to help students acquire proficiency in a second language. Additionally, Hudson (2021) pointed out reasons such as awareness of differences between learners' first and second languages in terms of grammar rules, knowledge of grammatical terms in oral and written communication, and facilitation of language skills teaching and learning, supporting the argument for the inclusion of grammar instruction.

It is noteworthy that the Philippines is recognized as one of the Asian countries where English serves as a second language, and Filipinos are generally acknowledged as proficient English speakers (Santos, Fernandez and Ilustre, 2022). As mentioned in President Marcos's State of the Nation Address in (SONA) in July 2023, Filipinos possess a competitive edge in English language proficiency, leading to their preferential hiring by foreign employers (Galvez, 2022). However, recent studies have highlighted a concerning decline in the quality of English instruction within the country (Antivola, 2023). As early as 2006, Rex Wallen Tan of Hopkins International Partners, Inc. reported that approximately 400,000 college graduates demonstrated inadequate grammar skills. Particularly alarming was the English proficiency level of college students in the Philippines, which was observed to be lower

than that of high school students in Thailand (Mizon, 2017). Furthermore, the 2022 English proficiency Index (EPI) revealed a drop in the Philippines' ranking to 22nd place out of 111 countries, down from its 18th place among 112 countries <https://www.bworldonline.com/infographics/2022/11/18/488034/philippines-drops-to-22nd-in-english-proficiency-ranking/>. While it is true that results of EPI are not directly correlated to students' grammar proficiency, it is still perceived to be a factor since comprehension is affected when grammar is not observed.

While the challenges in English proficiency in the Philippines persist, as evidenced by the afore-mentioned studies and the decline in the country's English Proficiency Index ranking, it is crucial to note that existing research has predominantly focused on specific aspects. Studies have delved into grammatical proficiency within specific language courses (Santana, 2019; Albarico, 2021; Merza, 2022; Alova & Alova, 2023), explored teaching strategies related to the teaching of grammar (Chatterjee & Halder, 2023; Nanquil, 2021; Olga, et al., 2012; Mufanti, 2019), and investigated factors contributing to declining proficiency levels, particularly in the context of the Philippines (Mizon, 2017). In terms of the methods used, in the study conducted by Grammar Translation Method (GTM) has been widely used in Indonesia in teaching EFL (Milawati, 2019), while using deductive and inductive method was looked into in the research conducted by (Benitez-Correa et al., 2019). Still, an important gap remains relative to grammar proficiency, as fewer studies have been conducted assessing students' micro skills in grammar (which is considered an essential aspect of English language proficiency) across academic levels, and the perspectives of selected faculty members in a state university regarding the aspects of grammar students found difficult including the reasons why students lack grammar proficiency. This gap represents a significant opportunity to discern developmental trends and design interventions accordingly.

Theoretical Framework

The study is anchored on Anderson's Adaptive Control of Thought--Rational (ACT-R) Theory (1990). This is a model that shows how the human mind works in terms of memory, learning and problem solving, as it integrates "declarative" or factual and "procedural" or skill-based knowledge. This theory serves as the reference of DeKeyser's Skill Acquisition Theory (SAT) (2007), which follows the same process of how language learning is acquired as it starts from declarative or factual knowledge and moves to procedural knowledge. Both theories emphasize that in learning a language, knowledge must first be acquired and followed by application through constant practice. In the context of learning grammar micro skills, students must first be taught the foundational elements, sentence structures and grammar rules, along with other linguistic nuances. They should understand their usage, differences and functions as used in different contexts. Having acquired knowledge on these aspects, application in authentic and real -life situations will follow through different activities both oral and written to ensure that grammar concepts have been learned and understood.

Methodology

Research Design

The study made use of convergent mixed-methods design in which both quantitative and qualitative data were

collected and analyzed in one phase. According to Creswell (2018), convergent mixed-methods research is “an approach to inquiry that combines or associates both qualitative and quantitative forms. It involves collecting and analyzing data at the same time whose results lead to the formulation of conclusions. For the quantitative part of the study, it utilized descriptive analysis to characterize and interpret the students’ grammar key micro skills. This approach is particularly suitable for the researchers’ purpose, as it allows for the comprehensive description of significant quantifiable data, aiding in the exploration of students’ grammar skills.

To measure micro grammar skills, a validated questionnaire was used. The main part of the questionnaire made use of test questions that determined how students were at par with English proficiency in terms of verb tenses, coordination and subordination, sequencing of words to form sentences, parallelism, sentence fragment vs. complete sentence, and capitalization and punctuation. The study was also of quantitative-correlational type since this explored the relationship of some factors that may lead to understanding the causes of the levels of English grammar skills of students.

For the qualitative part, the study employed individual interviews with selected faculty members who teach subjects using English as the medium of instruction. Its purpose was to solicit teachers’ perspectives based on their observations relative to students’ grammar performance and their impact on their oral and written communication skills.

Participants

The study involved the participation of 264 randomly selected undergraduate students from across levels and courses in a state university in Bulacan for the quantitative part. The respondents were from the following colleges: College of Arts and Letters, College of Social Science and Philosophy, College of Business, Economics and Accountancy, College of Criminal Justice Education, College of Education, College of Science and College of Engineering. On the other hand, eight (8) faculty members were selected for the individual in-depth interview for the qualitative part based on the following criteria to ensure the reliability of the data: must have a degree in English Language, Literature and Education, must teach English subjects or other subjects in which English is used as the medium of instruction, must have at least five (5) years of experience teaching the said subjects and must be willing to participate in the study.

Instrument and Procedure

The data gathering procedure for this study was conducted in three phases to ensure both quantitative and qualitative perspectives on students’ English grammar micro skills.

Phase 1: Validation and Administration of Key Grammar Micro Skills Test

A 30-item grammar test with 5-point items for each of the different grammar micro skills, namely verb tenses, coordination and subordination, sequencing of words to form sentences, parallelism, sentence fragments vs.

complete sentence and capitalization and punctuation, was validated by experts in grammar teaching. It was then pilot tested for purposes of validity and reliability. Having revised some items, the link which was indicated in the approval letter to the Deans of the different colleges was sent to the respondents across year levels and colleges.

Phase 2: Collection of Faculty Perspectives

To supplement quantitative results, qualitative data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with selected faculty members teaching English and communication subjects. Through the interviews faculty observations of students' grammar difficulties, institutional language practices, and pedagogical strategies currently used by faculty were explored. Each interview lasted about 30-45 minutes and was audio-recorded with consent from the participants. Thematic coding was later applied to extract recurring themes.

Phase 3: Data Integration/ Data Analysis

The quantitative and qualitative findings were integrated using a convergent mixed-methods approach. Results of the grammar test (quantitative) were triangulated with faculty perspectives (qualitative) to obtain comprehensive understanding of the problem at hand. Integration was done at the interpretation level comparing numerical data with narrative insights and observations.

Results

Quantitative Data Interpretation and Analysis

Table 1 shows the mean scores in the said dimensions. The 4th year students garnered the highest mean scores for all dimensions except "Sequencing of Words to Form Sentences." Differences in mean scores are proven significant with reference to Table 4, except for "Sequencing of Words to Form Sentences," mean scores of at least one year level for all dimensions are significantly different.

Table 1. Averages of Scores in Key Micro Skills by Year Level by Dimension

Year Level	Verb Tenses	Coordination and Subordination	Sequencing Words to Form Sentences	Parallelism	Sentence Fragment vs. Complete Sentence	Capitalization and Punctuation
1st Year	0.718	0.693	0.383	0.379	0.579	0.516
2nd Year	0.737	0.732	0.394	0.437	0.661	0.533
3rd Year	0.781	0.783	0.415	0.459	0.688	0.545
4th Year	0.781	0.802	0.391	0.509	0.728	0.598

Table 2 shows that College of Engineering (COE) got the highest mean scores for all dimensions, followed by College of Business Administration (CBA). Statistically, there is sufficient evidence to claim that two colleges top the Grammar Micro Skills test in all dimensions.

Table 2. Averages of Scores in Key Grammar Micro Skills by College Dimension

College	Verb Tenses	Coordination and Subordination	Sequencing Words to Form Sentences	Parallelism	Sentence Fragment vs. Complete Sentence	Capitalization and Punctuation
CSSP	0.699	0.672	0.384	0.376	0.568	0.480
CCJE	0.714	0.687	0.368	0.381	0.572	0.512
CAL	0.729	0.755	0.400	0.403	0.684	0.581
COED	0.685	0.644	0.359	0.368	0.559	0.465
COE	0.826	0.860	0.430	0.528	0.770	0.649
CBA	0.782	0.775	0.403	0.476	0.706	0.569
CS	0.776	0.818	0.453	0.447	0.706	0.582

Qualitative Data Interpretation and Analysis

The qualitative part explored the aspects of grammar students found challenging and the reasons for their lack of proficiency based on the observations of their teachers in English, Science and Research subjects where English is used as the medium of instruction. Through the in-depth interviews conducted with eight (8) faculty members, the following themes surfaced from the transcripts that were interpreted and analyzed (see Table 3).

Table 3. Aspects of Grammar Students found difficult based on Teachers' Observations

Grammatical Aspects	Teachers' Observations
Subject-Verb Agreement/ Verb Tenses	<p>Teacher 1: <i>Students cannot formulate simple sentences correctly using the s-form and base-form of the verb.</i></p> <p>Teacher 5: <i>I am an English teacher but I know when my students make mistakes in using the correct verbs in sentences. Many times I notice that they mix different tenses even in one sentence.</i></p> <p>Teacher 4: <i>If there is one glaring error I see among my students' reports, it's the wrong forms of verbs for different tenses.</i></p> <p>Teacher 2: <i>When it comes to grammar, I would say that students need to learn tense consistency and the number of verbs to be used in compound subjects.</i></p>
Punctuation Marks, Capitalization and Spelling	<p>Teacher 8: <i>Although a lot of students that I handle are very good in written and oral communication, a great number are not. When I check students' output in research, most of the errors are in the use of correct punctuation marks, capitalization and even spelling.</i></p> <p>Teacher 1: <i>Students make a lot of errors in the proper use of punctuation marks and</i></p>

Grammatical Aspects	Teachers' Observations
Complete and Incomplete Sentences	<p><i>capitalization. They do not know when letters should be capitalized in sentences.</i></p> <p>Teacher 2: <i>I noticed many errors in capitalization and punctuation marks. It could be because they get used to the way they text or send messages on social media.</i></p> <p>Teacher 6: <i>In simple written activities, I can see a lot of errors in punctuation and capitalization and spelling too.</i></p> <p>Teacher 4: <i>I believe students do not know what a sentence is and what it is not. There are times when they will punctuate phrases. When they see a long group of words written as one, they think it is always a sentence.</i></p> <p>Teacher 3: <i>I notice that in the reports and experiments of students, they put periods in incomplete sentences. They have probably this idea that when it is long, it is a sentence.</i></p> <p>Teacher 7: <i>I always notice in the research proposals submitted that they do not know when to use punctuation and capitalization. Common error I see is the use of small "I" for pronoun "I".</i></p> <p>Teacher 1: <i>Since my subject requires students to do write-ups, I find it very exhausting to write the same corrections because students do not know how to distinguish fragments from complete sentences.</i></p> <p>Teacher 6: <i>Students make mistakes in using capital letters and punctuation marks in sentences.</i></p> <p>Teacher 2: <i>I suppose being exposed to SMS language makes students unable to distinguish complete from incomplete sentences, even using the right punctuation marks. Actually, most of the time, I observe that students do not use any punctuation marks in sentences.</i></p>

Results of the qualitative analysis showed that students often make errors in subject-verb agreement, verb tenses, proper use of punctuation marks and capitalization, spelling, sentence fragments and complete sentences. Similarly, in the study conducted by Santana (2019) it was noted that subject-verb agreement (Nayan & Yusoff, 2009; Najjlaa & Fong, 2012; Pontillas et.al, 2024), verb conjugation/tenses were the grammar aspects students encountered, showing that such findings were in consonance with the findings of this research. On the other hand, Ashraf (2017) highlighted pronouns, adjectives, adverbs and tenses. Predominant is the SV Agreement as the aspect of grammar which students find problematic, especially in terms of applying the rules in written and oral activities (Ngo et al., 2021; Pablo, 2023).

The reasons why students lack grammar proficiency based on teachers' observations are shown in Table 4. The said results resonate the findings of the study conducted by Ibrahim (2016) which stated that grammar is a must to attain proficiency in ESL. Moreover, English, being the language used in the academe, necessitates grammar instruction as it is where the academic language is built up (Tilahun, 2022). Accordingly, if students do not have a good grasp of grammar concepts and rules, it would mean that they would perform poorly in other English macro skills like reading, writing, listening and viewing in which grammar is integrated (Wen & Tan, 2020).

Table 4. Reasons for Students' Lack of Grammar Proficiency

Students' Reasons for Lack of Grammar Proficiency	Teachers' Observations
Seldom speak in English language	<p>Teacher 1: <i>It could be because students know that even if they will not speak in English, they could still pass the subject as long as they do well in written activities or performances.</i></p> <p>Teacher 3: <i>Students get used to speaking in the vernacular even in English subject; that's why, they seem not to improve on their fluency, much less proficiency in speaking English. As I always tell them, "Fluency first before proficiency."</i></p> <p>Teacher 8: <i>I believe that the reason why students lack grammar proficiency is that they do not recite or use the English language often in class. Of course, if you always speak the language, you will later on develop proficiency in grammar as you become more conscious of your grammar.</i></p> <p>Teacher 5: <i>In my class, I allow my students to speak in Tagalog (dialect in the Philippines). Maybe, that's the reason because majority of them speak in Tagalog because they find it hard to express themselves in English.</i></p>
Lack of subject in Grammar	<p>Teacher 1: <i>I would say that not having Grammar as a subject in higher education and even in the Basic Education as per K to 12 curriculum is a big factor why students lack grammar proficiency. Besides, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is the approach used in teaching the English subject.</i></p> <p>Teacher 2: <i>I think it is because of the approach used that meaning is more emphasized than structure. It's like saying that as long as the message is understood, even if the grammar is incorrect, it is acceptable.</i></p> <p>Teacher 7: <i>What I know is there is only one English subject in college in the new General Education Curriculum. Maybe, that is a factor unlike before in the old curriculum where many English subjects were offered.</i></p> <p>Teacher 3: <i>As an English teacher, I believe that having one English subject being offered in the higher education which does not even include grammar as one of the topics is a big factor that contributes to students' lack of grammar proficiency.</i></p>
Leniency in using the vernacular	<p>Teacher 1: <i>I have observed that students do not make any effort in speaking the English language because even in English subject, some teachers allow their students to use the vernacular.</i></p> <p>Teacher 5: <i>I maybe at fault here because when students could not express their ideas in English, I tell them to use Tagalog; that's why, they don't make an effort to speak English.</i></p> <p>Teacher 4: <i>Since many students graduated from public schools where Tagalog is used as medium of instruction, then it is really expected that they will not have mastery of grammar.</i></p>

Other reasons that emerged were the “lecture” strategy and “homework” activities done by teachers in teaching grammar which students find boring (Mufanti et. Al., 2019), the teaching of grammar without relating it to meaningful context and real-life situations (Ashraf, 2017; Rahman & Rashid, 2017; Lee et.al., 2015).

Integration of Quantitative and Qualitative Data Interpretations

Results showed that students’ performance in the different grammar micro skills varied considerably, with verb tenses and coordination/subordination obtaining the highest mean scores, while sequencing of words and parallelism recorded the lowest (see Table 5). This suggests that students demonstrate relative mastery of basic grammar rules but continue to struggle with more complex structures.

Table 5. Integration of the Quantitative and Qualitative Interpretations

Grammar Micro Skills	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Integrated Interpretations
Verb Tenses	Highest mean score (M = 0.74, SD = 0.23); significant differences across year levels (p = 0.029) and colleges (p < .001).	The faculty noted the subject–verb agreement and verb tenses as aspects students found difficult.	Despite relatively higher scores, verb tense use is still a concern that must be looked into based on faculty observations.
Coordination and Subordination	High mean score (M = 0.72, SD = 0.26); significant differences across year levels and colleges (p < .001).	The faculty noted that students had difficulty when it comes to complex sentence structure.	Students can understand and use basic coordination but not with subordination, making it difficult for them to construct complex sentences.
Sequencing of Words to Form Sentences	Lowest mean score (M = 0.39, SD = 0.20); no significant difference across year levels (p = 0.523); some differences by college (p = 0.030).	The faculty observed that students had a hard time arranging words to form coherent sentences, which may be due to the influence of vernacular in forming sentences.	Difficulty on structuring words to form sentences is consistent across levels, which is a concern worth note-taking.
Parallelism	Low mean score (M = 0.42, SD = 0.32); significant differences across year levels (p = 0.001) and colleges (p < .001).	The faculty observed students’ difficulty in maintaining parallel structures in sentences.	Students have difficulty maintaining parallelism in sentence structures which affects clarity of expression both in oral and written communication.
Sentence Fragment vs. Complete	Moderate mean score (M = 0.63, SD = 0.31); significant differences across year	The faculty observed that students could not recognize the difference	Students oftentimes commit mistakes in using fragments in place of sentences,

Grammar Micro Skills	Quantitative Findings	Qualitative Findings	Integrated Interpretations
Sentence	levels ($p < .001$) and colleges ($p < .001$).	between complete and incomplete sentences in written activities.	showing low level of mastery on this basic aspect of grammar
Capitalization & Punctuation	Mid-level mean score ($M = 0.53$, $SD = 0.26$); significant differences across year levels ($p = 0.044$) and colleges ($p < .001$).	The faculty noted capitalization, punctuation and even spelling as aspects students struggle with.	Basic and simple grammar micro skills are a major concern which affects accuracy and clarity specifically in written works.

Discussion

The integration of quantitative and qualitative findings reveals three major factors influencing students' grammar proficiency: year level progression, college/university-specific context, and limited exposure to authentic English use.

First, the quantitative results showed that fourth-year students consistently outperformed their lower-year counterparts across grammar micro skills, except in sequencing of words. Faculty perspectives suggest that this is due to students' exposure to academic writing tasks and formal communication requirements. However, persistent weaknesses in sequencing and parallelism even among advanced learners indicate that grammar difficulties are not fully mastered through progression alone. This finding supports recent claims that grammatical accuracy develops gradually and requires constant practice, and not merely a product of academic progression (Larsen-Freeman, 2019; Nassaji, 2020).

Second, differences by college revealed that the College of Engineering (COE) and College of Business Administration (CBA) obtained significantly higher scores across grammar dimensions. Faculty attributed these results to the implementation of English language use and the required written and oral outputs in these programs. This suggests that institutional culture and policy significantly influence language proficiency outcomes, aligning with recent studies that emphasize the role of learning environments in shaping students' linguistic development (Babalola & Aboluwodi, 2021; García & Sylvan, 2022). Colleges that maintain stricter implementation of English usage provides more opportunities for practice, which translates to stronger grammar performance.

Finally, the persistent low scores in sequencing and parallelism across year levels and colleges point to a major issue caused by limited authentic opportunities for students to practice their English speaking and writing. Moreover, faculty noted that students depend so much on the use of vernacular structures in both speech and writing, thereby limiting their mastery of English sentence structures. Recent research confirms that frequent code-switching and reduced exposure to authentic English activities affect the internalization of grammar skills, particularly at the sentence-construction aspect (Bautista & Bolton, 2020; Fang, 2022).

This emphasizes the importance of creating learning opportunities that encourage constant use of English in meaningful contexts, both inside and outside the classroom. These findings underscore the need for structured grammar interventions. While higher year levels and certain colleges show stronger performance, grammar proficiency remains uneven across micro skills. Addressing persistent gaps in sequencing and parallelism requires conscious effort toward instructional design and institutional support to ensure that students are not only exposed to grammar rules but also given adequate opportunities to apply them in real-life situations.

Conclusions and Implications

Results of the study revealed that appropriate use of punctuation and capitalization, recognition of complete and incomplete sentences, parallelism, spelling and verb tenses are the key micro skills students found challenging. Reasons for students' lack of proficiency are attributed to the lack of grammar subject, not speaking the language during classes, and the leniency in using the vernacular or mother tongue due to the prevalence of World English languages. Such are the challenges that need to be taken into consideration to enhance their communication skills.

These findings complement various studies conducted on grammar and language proficiency, as grammar proficiency is an important aspect of English language proficiency and essential to effective communication, both oral and written. Moreover, results also align with the Skill Acquisition Theory proposed by DeKeyser (2007) and Anderson (1990) which emphasizes the process of learning grammar, which starts with knowing the rules and transforming such knowledge to practice, as learners apply them in authentic and real-life situations. Their implications may be seen in the following: curricular (reintroduction of grammar subject/s), pedagogical (meaningful oral and written activities for fluency and accuracy), and institutional (policies and campaigns promoting the use of English). Addressing grammar proficiency holistically requires not only classroom strategies but also support from administration to ensure that students develop not just grammar skills but proficiency in the English language usage.

It is then recommended that more meaningful grammar-based oral and written activities be given that will further develop their communicative competence. They must be encouraged to speak English in subjects where it is used as medium of instruction. Filipino, being their national language is something they are already fluent and proficient at, and it would be to their optimal benefit if they can be proficient in using and speaking another language, specifically English which is recognized as the global language.

Acknowledgement

The researchers would like to express profound gratitude to those who contributed to this study. Sincere appreciation is extended to the Administration and Research Management Office of Bulacan State University for their support and encouragement. Deepest appreciation is likewise extended to the faculty and students who served as participants, for their cooperation and willingness to be part of this endeavor. Lastly, all praises and glory are offered to Almighty God for the wisdom and strength granted throughout the conduct of this study.

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