

An Assessment of TOEIC Listening and Reading Proficiency Tests of Foreign Graduate Students: Basis for Comprehensive Enhancement Program

Haydee Claire B. Dy, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Philippines
Jared Manalastas, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Philippines
Albert M. Navarra, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Philippines
Mariel Coleen F. Villanueva, Lyceum of the Philippines University, Philippines

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Abstract

This study aimed to assess the current English Proficiency Program of the foreign students enrolled in the Claro M. Recto Academy for Advanced Studies at LPU Manila during the academic year 2021-2022. A Mixed Method research design was used in this study specifically an Explanatory Sequential, that explores both quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers collected and analyzed the TOEIC results of the 179 foreign graduate students about their English proficiency, both in listening and reading skills, and then collected an online survey to explain and elaborate on the significant experiences of the 25 students in taking up the English Proficiency program. It was revealed that most of the participants are classified in the Basic Working English Proficiency level which indicates further improvement in the language facility that will help them in the workplace and academic communication. These findings indicated that the respondents perceived the English Enhancement Program as having a positive and huge impact on their language acquisition in English. This implied that the existing program has an effective way to develop and improve the proficiency level of the English language. However, it was revealed in the findings that most of the respondents are still recommending the existing program to be revisited and improved that cater to the demands of the language learners.

Keywords: English Enhancement Program, Explanatory Sequential, Foreign Graduate Students, TOEIC

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1. Introduction

English plays an important role in our everyday life. It is used in various fields such as business, academia, media, entertainment, and the international business community. To communicate across national borders and maintain correspondence with overseas business parties or professionals, English is essential. Moreover, English is important for higher education and specialized training. Most of the books on any subject are written in English or quickly translated into English. English is the medium of instruction in Education in most universities and higher education institutes of the world. This is essential for getting easy access to any information.

International students, many of whom are non-native English speakers are challenged by academic language demands and a new culture. Differences in educational systems and expectations, listening skills, professors' strategies and examples, the quantity of reading, direct writing styles, critical analyses, class participation, oral communication, and vocabulary present difficulties. Professors perceive international students to have difficulty with oral and written communication, which can affect course performance. Most international students need a minimum score on an English proficiency examination to achieve their respective career and academic aspirations. Thus, international English standardized examinations are very important to determine the level of their English proficiency. This can demonstrate the mastery of English and can be beneficial for resume building, job and internship qualifications, scholarship applications, and educational background.

Meanwhile, The TOEIC test was developed by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) in response to the request of the Japanese Ministry of Trade and Industry and was first launched in Japan in 1979 (M. Chapman, 2004). According to ETS, the test aims at assessing English-language skills in the workplace (ETS, n.d.-a); and it can be specifically used “to recruit, place and promote the most qualified employees”; “identify job-training requirements”; “assign 5 employees to positions overseas” (ETS, n.d.-c). For approximately the first 30 years of its existence, the test assessed only the two receptive language skills – listening and reading.

However, these tests can be inaccurate in showing a real level of academic knowledge about skills in speaking, reading, and writing English (Sawir, Marginson, Forbes-Mewett, Nyland, & Ramia, 2012). Hattingh (2016) discovered that international students were passing English-based tests such as the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) to gain entrance into other foreign institutions. Phakiti, Hirsh, and Woodrow (2013) proposed that personal considerations such as self-motivation, self-regulation, and self-efficacy significantly and positively influenced English proficiency for international students.

In this study, the researchers opted to determine the background in the English language and the English proficiency level of foreign students enrolled in the graduate program of the Lyceum of the Philippines University, Manila during the academic year 2021-2022. After further descriptive analysis of the respondents, the researchers assessed the existing English Proficiency Program of the institution to further improve its effectiveness and adequacy to strengthen their language fluency in the macro skills of the English language. Oxford (2017) emphasized that successful direct instruction training should teach students to identify the language learning strategies, practice the approach, and to evaluate its effectiveness.

1.2 Research Questions

The study aimed to assess the TOEIC listening and reading test scores of LPU Manila Foreign Graduate students as a basis for enhancing the English Proficiency program at the Graduate level. The following research questions will be answered at the end of the study:

1. How do the TOEIC listening and reading test scores of LPU Manila Foreign Graduate students serve as the basis for enhancing the English Proficiency program at the Graduate level?
2. How may the respondents be described in terms of?
 - Age
 - Current Job Position
 - Attitude in English language learning
3. What is the listening and reading proficiency level of the respondents?
4. What are the factors influencing the TOEIC listening and reading tests of the respondents?
5. What are the common challenges encountered by the students in taking the English Proficiency Program?
6. How may the findings of the study be utilized in improving the English Proficiency Program?

1.3 Significance/Rationale

This study would be beneficial to international students, educators, and the institution. The results of this study identified how educators in graduate studies might create programs that could be more efficient in teaching international students how to adjust and improve their English proficiency level. Educators should revisit the crafted syllabus of the program, based on these findings to ensure that international students are receiving the best educational opportunities.

2. Methodology

This study made use of **Mixed mixed-method research** design that explores both quantitative (numerical) and qualitative (descriptive) data to further understand the research problems and generate research findings and conclusions. Specifically, an **explanatory sequential design** was used as a method of investigation through an electronic questionnaire that included both closed- and open-ended questions. The researchers collected and analyzed the TOEIC results first as the basis of quantitative data about the English Proficiency Skills of the respondents both in listening and reading skills, and then conducted an online survey to explain or elaborate on the significant experiences of the foreign students in taking up English Proficiency course in the graduate program. According to Hassan (2022), the researcher may use the qualitative data to clarify unexpected or contradictory results from the quantitative analysis.

The researchers used purposive sampling. The respondents for the quantitative data were 179 foreign graduate students. Meanwhile, the 25 foreign graduate students were asked about their significant experiences in taking up the English Proficiency Program during the academic year 2021-2022 at Lyceum of the Philippines University, Manila. The researchers devised a research questionnaire based on the significant research experiences of the respondents.

The construction of the instrument was based on the statement of the problem and relevant research gaps in the literature and studies related to the study. The questionnaire was submitted to the three English language experts for approval and revision. All the suggestions and recommendations were incorporated into the final draft. Retrieval of the responses was undertaken as soon as the questions were answered. The researchers used the following instruments and techniques to obtain the data needed for this investigation:

The researchers used the TOEIC results and questionnaire as a primary source of data in obtaining relevant information. This is divided into two parts.

The First Part- TOEIC Test Scores. The researchers described the TOEIC listening and reading skills test scores of the participants and their demographic profile such as their age, nature of work, current job position, and attitude toward English language learning.

Second Part- The Perceived Challenges and Opportunities in Learning English. The second part of the survey describes the participants' challenges, initiatives, and opportunities in learning English.

The statistical techniques presented here are mixed methods. Descriptive statistics deals with the techniques used to describe the variables (median, frequency, percentage). Moreover, to analyze the qualitative data that is collected for the study, a thematic analysis was utilized. Thematic analysis is an effective method to analyze qualitative data in that allows researchers to summarize, highlight, and interpret multiple data sets, and the analysis method has great flexibility in terms of the type of research questions needed to be answered, and the type and amount of data needed to interpret (Kiger and Varpio, 2020). This is done by giving labels to important words or phrases in the data that represent the themes of the responses.

The data gathered were statistically treated using the Weighted Mean and Standard Deviation. This was done to establish the average of the collected data or the mean itself and the gap or the distance between each result. A low standard deviation indicates that the data points tend to be close to the mean. Percentage displays the data that specifies the percentage of observations that exist for each data point or grouping of data points. It expresses the relative frequency of responses and other data. On the other hand, frequency refers to the number of times a data value occurs. Lastly, SPSS Software v, 26 was used in the analysis of data.

During the conduct of this study, the researchers considered different ethical considerations.

The following ethical considerations were strictly observed:

Informed consent is a vital part of every research study. It is the responsibility of the researchers to protect the rights and freedom of the target respondents from forced participation. Respondents chose whether to participate in the information-gathering process. They were not forced to participate in any way. Respondents have the right to withdraw at any time and for any reason. If the respondents do not want to answer the questions, the researchers respect their decisions. The researcher adhered to the highest standards of ethical practice in research. Informed consent, autonomy, anonymity, dignity, and safety were given utmost attention.

To ensure the protection of participants' anonymity and confidentiality, their names or identities were disclosed at any stage of data collection, analysis, and reporting of the study results. The privacy and confidentiality of the responses, as well as the participant's experiences, data analysis, and dissemination of the findings, were carefully managed throughout the study and the writing of the manuscript.

The researchers strictly adhered to the provisions of Republic Act No. 10173, also known as the Data Privacy Act of 2012. Participants' consent was obtained for the use of their data exclusively for research analysis purposes, and the information provided was not utilized for any other purposes unrelated to academic and research endeavors.

The participants in this study were given one week to complete answering the survey questionnaires. They did not pose significant risks or inconveniences in any other way. The data is kept private and confidential. Participation in this study was voluntary. No additional information was disclosed unless required by the study, and any relevant data was used solely for this study.

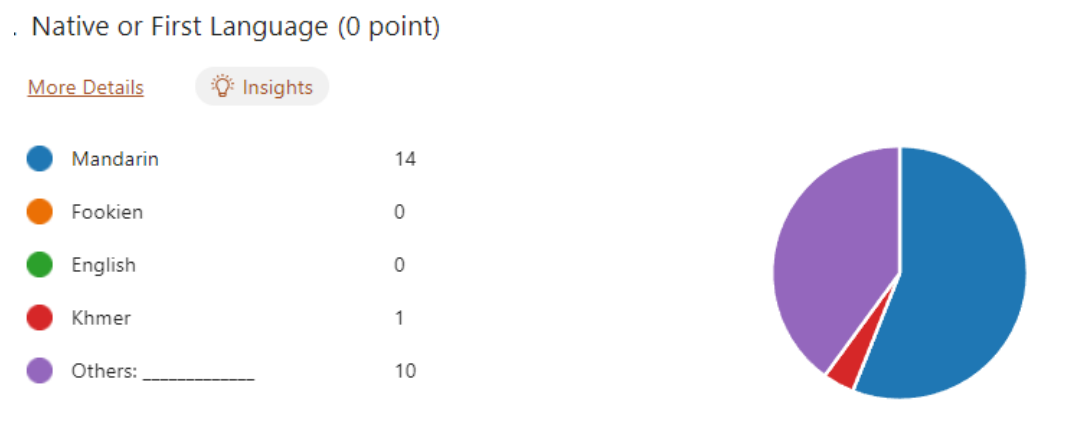
Benefits such as awareness and knowledge about the importance of English language learning can be gained by the participants taking part in this study.

The participants were assured that the results would be transparently reflected once the study was concluded. If participants need access to the study's results, they can send a message to contact the researchers, and the file will be accessible to the participants.

3. Results and Discussion

Firstly, a brief profile of the participants is presented. All initial codes relevant to the research questions were incorporated into a theme. Braun and Clarke (2006) also suggest the development of thematic maps to aid the generation of themes. These helped the researchers to visualize and consider the links and relationships between themes. All the themes extracted from this study are interrelated, from analyzing the data it emerged based on the experience in the English Enhancement Program.

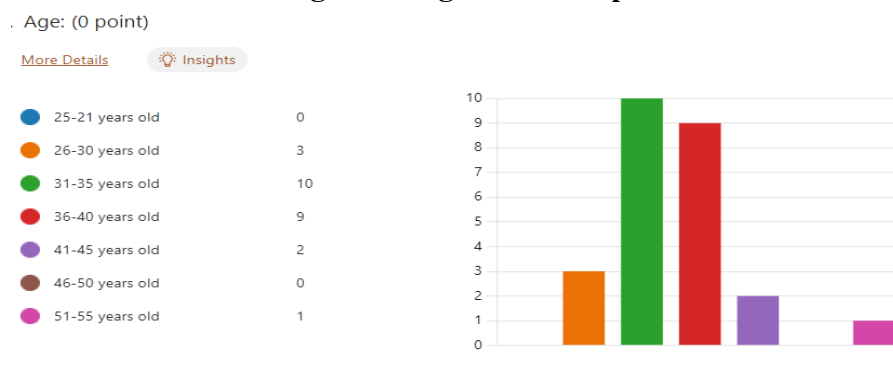
Figure 1: Profile of the Participants



According to Kramersch (2013) language, not seen as a linguistic system, but seen in context is a coherent symbolic system for making meaning. (Kramersch, 2013) In this sense, it cannot separate the study of language and language learning from culture and the context that

surrounds the learner, especially when it refers to the learning of a foreign language. From this study, the majority of the respondents, (fourteen) 14, speak Mandarin as their native/first language. A total of eleven (11) participants speak another native language. According to the National Clearinghouse for Bilingual Education Journal (2000), students who learn English and continue to develop their native language have higher academic achievement in later years. In this assertion, it is a good implication that the respondents have higher academic achievement in their education. It is strongly supported by the study of Madriñan (2014) that students who have strong first language skills can acquire a second language more easily due to language transfer. Furthermore, she stressed that the mother tongue could be used as support for the second language acquisition process, which makes the learning process easier for students and teachers. Hence, having a good foundation in the native language can scaffold the English language acquisition as the respondent's second language.

Figure 2: Age of the Respondents



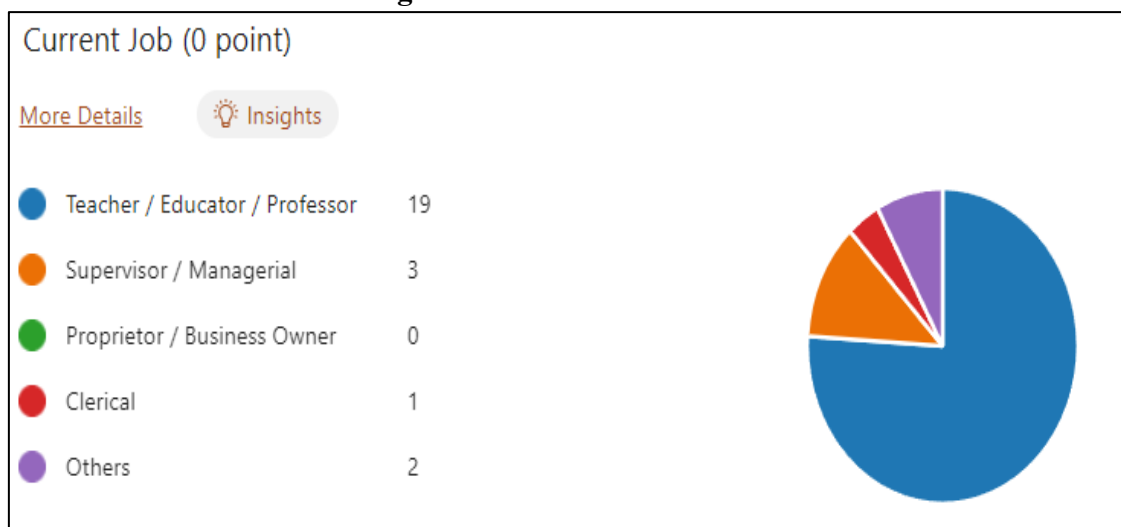
The respondents are mostly adults. Most of the respondents of this study are in the age of 30s specifically from 31- 40 years old. It is stated in the study of Ruyun Hu (2016) that there is a critical period for second language acquisition. It further elaborated that children have a great advantage over adults or adolescents. This critical period is used to refer to the general phenomenon of declining competence over increasing age of exposure. This hypothesis was first introduced by Penfield and Roberts (1959).

As well, Ellis (1986) observes that there is a period when language acquisition can take place naturally and efficiently, but after a certain age, the brain is no longer able to process language in this way. This critical period is defined by Scovel (1988) in the following manner: In brief, the critical period hypothesis is the notion that language is best learned during the early years of childhood and that after about the first dozen years of life, everyone faces certain constraints in the ability to pick up a new language.

Morford and Mayberry (2000) note that individuals who are exposed to language at earlier ages consistently outperform individuals exposed to language at earlier ages for first and second languages of both signed and spoken languages. This assumption agrees that people will perform well in language learning at an early age. This is the hypothesis for the “the younger the better” position.

Another opposite view is ‘the older the better’. It illustrates that older language learners are more successful and efficient than young learners. Some studies have been done to support this view. Ekstrand (1976) reveals that L2 learning ability improves with age. In Harley’s research (1986), he favors the faster acquisition rate among later beginners. Therefore, the older learners are the efficient language learner.

Figure 3: Current Job Position



Being the lingua franca of the world, the role of the English language in a globalized world is undeniable. Communicative skills in English could create countless opportunities for an individual in today's job market. Admittedly, proficiency in English could be a determining factor in leaving a good first impression in job interviews. Considering the different fields in a job sector necessitates English language proficiency. The participants are mostly educators. Nineteen out of twenty-five are in the academe field. Three (3) of them are in managerial/supervisory positions and others are in clerical and other fields.

Attitude in English Language Learning

Time and Ways of Learning by the Participants Before Enrolling to the English Enhancement Program

Twenty-one (21) of the participants claimed that they have been learning the English language since their primary school and junior middle school. Moreover, two (2) students answered that they just learned during the English course online. Mahmoud Samer (2018) recommended in his study that the students should be continually exposed to the English language e researcher recommended that students should be continually exposed to the English language daily to encourage them to overcome their weaknesses and improve their fluency as well as proficiency in acquiring the English language. Thus, longer exposure to the target language can enhance second language acquisition.

How Students Learned During the English Enhancement Program in Lyceum of the Philippines University

Most of the participants acknowledged that they had positive learning experiences under the English Enhancement Program. Twenty—four participants out of twenty-five responded positively to their learning experience under the program. A few factors that contribute to creating a positive learning environment are establishing a supportive learning culture, addressing a learner's needs, and encouraging a student's involvement in all activities. Also, online classrooms can be made interesting by using informative presentations, engaging activities, and formative assessments. Moreover, there is a teacher factor also in this aspect. Teachers should strive to create an environment that is more conducive to engagement and learning. A learning environment that is not positive and full of restrictions and rigid rules

impairs learning by narrowing a student's focus and inhibiting his/her ability to explore multiple viewpoints and solve problems. A positive learning environment helps improve attention, reduces anxiety, and supports the emotional and behavioral regulation of students.

When educators foster a positive learning culture, learners are more likely to acquire higher motivation which leads to wonderful learning outcomes.

Teaching Strategies of the Professors of the Program

Fifteen (15) participants asserted that they have good learning outcomes based on what they have experienced in the English Enhancement Program. Nine (9) participants focused their answers on the teaching style used by their respective teachers though their inputs were relatively positive on their learning experience. Teaching methods also should vary accordingly. How much a student can learn is also determined by the compatibility of the student's learning styles and the teacher's teaching styles. Therefore, teachers need to know their learners' preferred learning styles because this knowledge will help teachers plan their lessons to match or adapt their teaching and to provide the most appropriate and meaningful activities or tasks to suit a particular learner group at different stages. (Mai Zhou, 2011) Teachers are normally encouraged to use different types of teaching strategies that cater to different students' learning styles and needs (Gozcu & Caganaga, 2016). Understanding students' learning styles helps teachers to choose which types of teaching strategies are suitable for their individual students. However, using different strategies can be very difficult to attain especially with large classes and it is probably more realistic to find a balance, so all students understand the essence of the lesson being taught.

Learning Engagement During the English Program

The majority of the participants, twenty-one (21) in particular, claimed that they had active learning engagement during the English Enhancement Program. They perceived the program as more enjoyable, more meaningful, and more complete. Michel, Cater, and Varela (2009) hold that active learning is a phrase tossed around a great deal today on college campuses and it suggests an approach to classroom instruction in which students engage material through talking, writing, reading, reflecting, or questioning-in other words, through being active.

According to Gong (2003), active learning involves providing opportunities for students to meaningfully talk and listen, write, read, and reflect on the content, ideas, issues, and concerns of an academic subject.

On the other hand, there are four (4) students considered the program a passive one. They are not motivated to speak during the English Enhancement Sessions. This may fall under the theory of Stephen Krashen, Affective Filter. Krashen (1980) claims that learners with high motivation, self-confidence, a good self-image, a low level of anxiety, and extroversion are better equipped for success in second language acquisition. Low motivation, low self-esteem, anxiety, introversion, and inhibition can raise the affective filter and form a mental block that prevents comprehensible input from being used for acquisition. In other words, when the filter is up, it impedes language acquisition. As Figueroa (2019) explained students who exhibit a high affective filter can demonstrate many signs. They tend to feel very self-conscious about their abilities in the new language. Many may experience stress when asked to speak, read, or write in class, and they may have very little faith in their ability to learn. Students report breaking out into a cold sweat, becoming nervous, anxious, and even

surprised when incoherent speech comes out of their mouths since in their head, they understand the concepts. Students with a high affective filter are reluctant to participate in class discussions because they are afraid of making mistakes and being judged by the teacher or other classmates. They would much rather collaborate with classmates in a small group setting, as that allows them to lean heavily on peers for support or avoid work altogether. Boredom is another way that a high affective filter may manifest in a student. Students who don't comprehend what is happening in the classroom may stare into space with a slightly glazed look in their eyes. They are completely disengaged because they have no idea what is going on around them. These students believe that if they don't draw attention to themselves and pretend to know what is going on or demonstrate disinterest, they will be left alone. Thus, the goal of educators is to lower the affective filter so that students feel safe and comfortable and are able to learn.

Furthermore, analysis of the research literature (Xu, 2002), suggests that students must do more than just listen. Students must read, write, discuss, or be engaged in solving problems and most importantly, to be actively involved, and they must engage in such higher-order thinking tasks such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

Usefulness of English Enhancement Program in the Workplace

The role of the English language in career advancement is undeniable in this era of globalization. According to a British Council report (Elizabeth J. Erling, 2014), English language skills are extremely rewarded in the labor market. It also emphasizes that skills in English have a constructive impact on economic growth. As the data shows, there are twenty-two (22) participants who gained strength and positive skills to improve their productivity at the workplace. However, there are remaining two (2) participants who find their learnings beneficial in their workplace. And, one (1) participant has the uncertain answer. The study of T. Murugavel and A. Clement (2018), it shows that the necessity of English language skills in the workplace hasn't changed, and the participants have reiterated the role of English as the influencing factor during interviews and at the workplace. This study stressed that the results of the study have revealed that the employees are convinced that English language skills are required for getting a job and performing their responsibilities effectively.

Topics and Skills in English Program That Students Find Challenging

Learning a new language can be difficult, but studying as you are immersed in the language and the culture can make the process a bit easier. These are the most common challenges students face when learning English as a second language. All twelve (12) participants of this study emphasized that speaking is the most challenging skill/topic that they encountered in the English Enhancement Program. They further elaborated it using the various activities done in the programs such as impromptu speeches, question and answer sessions, speech presentations, reporting, and discussions. Next in line, four (4) participants find listening activities challenging. In addition, three (3) participants find the English language structure demanding. Three (3) participants have uncertain answers. The responses of these participants are not related to the question. Two participants find the reading comprehension and analysis difficult for them. One participant claimed viewing skills are challenging too.

Macro Skills That Students Need to Improve More After Taking the English Enhancement Program

Good ability in listening means having the competence to comprehend information during listening activities. However, listening skill is still considered one of the most difficult skills for English language learners although they have been learning English for few years. 16 out of 25 participants highlighted listening skills as the macro skill that they need to improve more. Several factors influenced students' listening skills, limited vocabulary mastery, accent, pronunciation, and lack of practice. Furthermore, their prior knowledge of English structure supported them to be able to figure out some challenges in listening skills. Hence, the students realized the importance of the listening activities, and having good listening skills still appeared as a challenge for most of the participants. Similarly, 15 of the participants noted that their speaking skills need to improve further since they are not mostly exposed to the target language. They find this skill that needs to be enhanced because they believe that the English language is essential for communication.

Moreover, writing and reading are also highlighted by the participants that they need to improve more. The ability to read and write effectively is an important workplace skill across professions and business sectors. In general, writing serves as a core medium for communication and activity in the workplace. Nearly all job postings advertise the so-called soft skills in a job position, frequently detailing descriptions such as strong command in writing skills or "excellent written communication skills" under preferred requirements (Messum et al., 2016).

Problems That Students Encounter While Learning English

English language teaching and learning in non-English speaking countries is a really challenging job. The English language is kept as the subject in school and university curricula and even many schools or universities have adopted English as a medium of instruction in countries where English is used as a second and foreign language, but many students find English a difficult subject to learn (Akbari, 2015; Phyak, 2016).

Seventeen (17) participants claimed that they had linguistic problems while learning English. Since most of them are second-language learners of the English language. Limited vocabulary knowledge limited grammatical knowledge and weaknesses in four language skills are the areas of the English language they find challenging. Akbari (2016) reported some problems in learning English in her research article that are similar to the problems encountered by the participants. She further stated that language learning difficulties may occur due to a lack of understanding of the key role English plays in their life which means motivation plays a vital role in learning a language. If learners are informed about the use of the English language in their lives, then they may be highly motivated to learn the English language. If learners are motivated, then they show their concentration in study and learning becomes faster.

Moreover, four (4) participants have environmental problems due to lack of exposure to the English language. Exposure to language can be defined as the contact that the learners have with the target language that they are attempting to learn. More practice and exposure to the target language are needed by these participants.

Personal problems of the two participants such as language retention and time management are also stated. It is stated that the behavior of the participants in learning the target language is the primary problem such as the motivation in learning the English language and time management. From the above expressions, it can be said that students are unable to develop their language skills due to their behaviors.

Lastly, two (2) participants didn't have any problems encountered while learning the English language.

Recommendations to Further Improve the English Enhancement Program at Lyceum of the Philippines University

Most of the participants suggested the existing Enhancement program be improved based on their concerns and needs. They emphasized the increase in class hours and reduced the number of students per class, language topics, and strategies. These areas must be taken into consideration by the curriculum developer to achieve its objectives in this program more effectively. In contrast, five (5) participants are satisfied with the existing English program of the university.

Conclusions

Based on the results 88% of the respondents considered English as an essential factor of their professional development. The use of the English Language will be also beneficial in their workplace communication, however, some of them find it challenging because of their cultural practices in their own countries.

Based on the TOEIC results majority of the students were able to get the target score required by LPU in their English Proficiency Level on listening and reading examinations.

The English Enhancement Program that they enrolled before the taking examination became helpful for them to reach the target score. The exercises given by their instructors helped the students to become more prepared to take the listening and reading test provided by Hopkins International.

The students were challenged in terms of linguistic capabilities. They need to improve their grammar and vocabulary to be more advanced at the graduate level. The environmental factors like lack of exposure to the language, cultural practices in their country, beliefs in the use of English Languages in their country, and teaching strategies they encountered as the English Language was introduced to them by their former teachers. The readiness of the learners in terms of acquiring the English language is another factor that challenges their ability to learn.

The findings of the study helped the researchers to further improve the program in terms of teaching strategies, classroom management, length of the program (not limited to 10 meetings only), providing remedial sessions for other students, who need more enhancements, giving more engaging activities for further exploration of the macro skills, positive motivation and reinforcement, and provide more exposures on oral and written communication.

Recommendations

To further enhance the effectiveness of the program and the scores of the students in terms of taking international examinations like TOEIC, the researchers recommend the following:

1. Promotion of the English Enhancement Program to other partner universities locally and internationally.
2. Speaking and writing international examinations are recommended aside from the listening and reading tests provided by Hopkins International.
3. Improve the syllabi of the English Enhancement Program considering the needs of the students according to their level.
4. Provide more English Enhancement Classes aside from the 10 preliminary sessions practiced.
5. Determine the other weaknesses of the students in terms of other skills to improve such as vocabulary development, grammar enhancement, listening and reading comprehension, discourse writing techniques, and speaking engagements such as participation in competitions to further motivate their enhancement of skills.
6. Faculty members teaching the program will have more training to further improve their teaching strategies both locally and internationally.
7. Categorize the students according to their level of proficiency after taking a preliminary or diagnostic examination before continuously enrolling in the program of their needs.
8. Exploration of the demographic profile of the students or language learners to further adjust to their needs with the means of preliminary interviews.
9. Recommendation to more face-to-face interaction with their instructors than online classes.
10. Benchmarking to other universities on their English Enhancement Practices.

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Contact email: haydee.dy@lpu.edu.ph