

Assessing the English Grammar Proficiency of Online Filipino English Teachers

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Abstract

Recent literatures suggested that the English proficiency of Filipinos has been declining in the past decade. Despite this, several English language schools from countries like China, Japan, and Korea still hire Filipino teachers. Many of their stakeholders still believe that Filipinos are the most cost-effective option for their English language learning compared to their international counterparts. However, due to the expansion of the English language learning industry, competitors have started to challenge the affordability of Filipino teachers with native or native-like English teachers at a reasonable price. This study assessed the English grammar proficiency of 401 Filipino English teachers who are currently teaching online. Results showed that 90% of the respondents did not score more than 75% and that they struggled with basic grammar particularly in the use of verbs and adverbs. If Filipino English teachers want to remain competitive and rebrand themselves, they must undertake a self-analysis of their English skills to find their weak points and undergo a training and development program by themselves or with their current employers.

Keywords: *English grammar proficiency, online Filipino English teachers, English language tests*

Introduction

The value of the English language has never been so important due to its extensive use in almost all industries, academics, and politics. On top of that, it is now being amplified by the Internet that bridges the gaps and shatters the barrier of geographical locations among learners and teachers across the globe. Despite the global coronavirus pandemic, the English language market is expected to grow at a compound annual growth rate (CAGR) of 6.2% and reach \$54.92 billion by 2027 worldwide (Meticulous Research, 2020). English language teaching has been an in-demand profession for many nations both with native and non-native English speakers. One of the leading competitors in this market is a Southeast Asian country, the Philippines, whose English proficiency is still under debate (Balgoa, 2019; Ozaki, 2011, 2021).

Prior to COVID-19, the Philippines had been a hotbed destination for Asian English learners such as Koreans, Japanese, Vietnamese, and Middle Eastern as it is relatively more affordable compared to its counterparts such

as Australia, the US, and the UK. The Philippines' Department of Tourism (DOT) once reported that the country has been gaining its ground to become a "study English" destination since the number of students from foreign countries studying English in the country has tripled from 2013-2018 (Saavedra, 2019).

Institutions from non-English speaking countries openly invite qualified Filipino English teachers to teach in their countries (Llurda, 2004), luring talented and skillful English teachers out of the Philippines. However, when the global COVID-19 pandemic struck, businesses all over the world shifted to working online, and the online English teaching industry has become more competitive for Filipino English teachers since employers are looking for more qualified candidates than ever before (Pontillas, 2021).

Obviously, Filipinos have been known to have excellent English language proficiency (Kobari, 2019; Tolentino & Santos, 2020) and therefore they are tapped by the global market not only to work in outsourcing (Lee, 2015) and hospitality industries (Greenfield, 2012) but also in the education industry specifically in the English language sector to teach grammar within the four macro-linguistic skills (Nikkei, 2015). However, the Philippines' English proficiency has been declining over the years and if not given a solution, opportunities for Filipino English teachers abroad may be jeopardized. In the TOEFL iBT 2015 results, the Philippines garnered a score of 90 over 120 but then in 2019, the Philippines' score declined to 88. Doubling down on the result, Education First's English Proficiency Index (EF's EPI) in 2015 placed the Philippines on the 13th spot over other non-native English-speaking countries in the world but just less than five years, in 2019, the Philippines found its spot on the 27th, a drastic drop from the 20th spot in the previous year— a far cry from its previous placements and recognition all over the world. Furthermore, Ateneo Center for English Language Teaching (ACELT), on the rationale of their institution's inception, cited that the state of the English and English language teaching in the Philippines is at a crucial point. The British Council held a roundtable discussion in 2015 and found that there is a gap among qualified ESL teachers and the quality of ESL schools (Cabigon, 2015). Though there are a few studies made to investigate the Philippines' general population's English proficiency (Arranz, 2019; Gomez & Gomez, 2021; Leyaley, 2016), fewer investigated Filipino professionals (Gaytos et al., 2019; Meniado, 2019; Oducado et al., 2020), but so far, as per the writing of this research, there was no empirical research proving the Online Filipino English teacher's English proficiency level. The first step in solving any problem scientifically is to find out where the problem lies. Therefore, this study used descriptive statistics to survey the grammar proficiency of currently employed Filipinos who are teaching English online. The study aims to discover the current standing of English proficiency among professionals and experienced Online Filipino English Teachers (OFETs). A mediocre score from an English teacher who spent time and money mastering the art of teaching the language plus their learning through experience will definitely affect or reiterate the diminishing image of Philippine English. The results could drastically affect their employability and source of income on top of their confidence to teach sceptical clients. More specifically, this research tried to answer the question, "What is the English grammar proficiency of the respondents based on a customized grammar placement test?"

The quality of students often reflects the quality of their teachers, which is why parents and adult learners would prefer to pay individuals and institutions that provide high quality of training. As suggested in Bandura's Social Learning Theory, Krashen's Comprehensive Input Hypothesis, and Schumann's Acculturation Model of Second Language Acquisition (Orillos, 1998), when teachers are proficient in English, it is more likely that students will also become proficient. Hence, if OFETs are keen to present themselves as still qualified and proficient enough to confidently teach the English language and command a stable income for themselves and their families especially nowadays that teaching English online has become more competitive due to the global COVID-19 pandemic then they should take into careful consideration and follow through the methodology and the recommendations of this study.

This study is essential to Filipino English teachers whether they conduct online or face-to-face classes or whether they handle non-Filipino or Filipino students because it will point out the errors that were overlooked or were not paid attention to. Teachers may have been oblivious of the errors as found in a study of faculty members in a higher education institution in the Philippines (Meniado, 2019) and observed in a much earlier case study about the language drift of the Philippines English (Malicsi, 2007). This study will also aid institutions in hiring and evaluating Filipino English teachers on their grammar proficiency to maintain teacher quality and to support what the DOT ESL Market Group aspired during their round table meeting hosted by the British Council in 2015. Finally, future researchers can benefit from these findings which can contribute to the body of literature in the fields of language assessment and teacher development. While this study investigated the English grammar proficiency of Online Filipino English teachers, it was delimited by the one-way approach of teacher's answering multiple choice questions under time pressure. The result may vary when given in an interview method but due to cost and volume, the study was limited to conducting the test online. Future researchers may pick up from where this study left off. One area is the segmentation based on where the teachers graduated from. The Philippines promotes the bilingual education system in the entire country, but not all regions are fully exercising the use of English language in their schools besides the National Capital Region and some regions in central and southern parts of the country.

The objective of this study is to assess the English grammar proficiency of online Filipino English teachers. It aims to discover the current standing of English proficiency among professionals and experienced Online Filipino English Teachers (OFETs) by surveying their grammar proficiency using a customized grammar placement test. The results could drastically affect their employability and source of income on top of their confidence to teach skeptical clients. The study also recommends that if OFETs want to remain competitive and rebrand themselves, they must undertake a self-analysis of their English skills to find their weak points and undergo a training and development program by themselves or with their current employers.

Related Literature

Grammar proficiency

Oxford dictionary defined *proficiency* as “high degree of skill” i.e., expertise. It is distinct from competence which is considered just a level below proficiency so when it comes to language proficiency, Chomsky (1965) placed a distinction between language *competence* and language *performance*. Competence denotes the person’s mastery of the grammar rules of the language and ability to distinguish the meanings and ambiguities in an infinite number of sentences, while performance refers to the execution or application of the language comparable to the utterances of a native speaker. Canale and Swain (1980) took it a little further and differentiated language proficiency into linguistic, sociocultural, and strategic competencies. Linguistic competence refers to the knowledge of lexicon and the rules of morphology, semantics, phonology, and syntax, while sociolinguistic competence is the ability to appropriately use the language in social interactions. Strategic competence, on the other hand, is the ability to make repairs, to compensate communication breakdowns due to limited knowledge of rules, and to maintain communication by performing verbal and non-verbal mechanisms such as repeating, paraphrasing, hesitating, avoiding, guessing, and shifting registers and styles (Savignon, 1983). Shanklin (1994) regarded grammar proficiency as the ability to make judgments about the acceptability and appropriateness of an utterance with specific reference to grammatical concepts.

Rutherford (1987) emphasized the importance of grammar in the process of language acquisition since its significance has been overlooked in the age of communicative competence popularized by Canale and Swain (1980). In communication theories, Shannon and Weaver’s (1949) Model of Communication illustrated the effects of an *internal “noise”* in the channel that greatly affect the receiver’s interpretation of the message such as the misspelled words on text and when taken into the context of language proficiency is the persistent lexical and syntactical errors committed by the speaker which led to misinterpretation and misunderstanding. Native and non-native English speakers may be distinct in their utterances but the proficiency in grammar could absolutely place a distinction between the two.

English proficiency requirement for English teachers

A teacher is viewed as “an expert who is capable of imparting knowledge... provides to the learner’s knowledge, skills” (Senge, 2000, p. 26). Therefore, an English teacher is an expert in the English language and capable of imparting the knowledge in the various levels of a language i.e., phonetics, morphology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics. Grammar proficiency as discussed earlier will put a distinction between a native and non-native English speaker that is why English teachers are expected to be proficient and have a “good” sense of its complexity (Borg, 2006; Brosh, 1996; Murdick, 1996; Wichadee, 2010). Obviously, stakeholders implicitly expect and demand their teachers to be proficient in the subject matter (Kadha, 2009). A collaborative study at

Muhammadiyah Malang University in Indonesia found that students expect their teachers to possess sufficient level of English proficiency (Masduki et al., 2022).

Though it is greatly useful to make use of standardized tests for English as Second Language (ESL) learners, teachers need not or often are not required to take them in order to teach at various online English learning companies. For instance, NativeCamp Online English School based in Japan currently has over 13,000 teachers, most of them are based in the Philippines. They are in service to more than 110 countries with over half a million students (NativeCamp, 2022). Their website indicates that an applicant needs only to be 18 years old and with a stable internet connection. Teaching experience is not necessary and there is no English proficiency check prior to employment.

Another large online English learning platform based in Shanghai, China is iTalki. They cater to over five million students worldwide who are being taught by more than 5,000 teachers. Applicants should only be 18 years of age, native or near native language speaker, and enjoy teaching informally (Vesselinov & Grego, 2018). Language proficiency seemed to be less of importance than their communicative competence. Moreover, Dubinka and Dubinka-Hushcha (2021) claimed that the use of contemporary information and educational technologies in the development of communicative competences help to solve the problem of overcoming linguistic, ethnic, and cultural barriers. In addition, Krashen and Mason proposed that people acquire language through comprehensible input that is exposure to compelling reading and listening texts that are above a learner's current language ability as such will result to gradual language acquisition (Krashen et al., 1979; Krashen & Mason, 2020). Their hypothesis did not emphasize the other component of the learning process which is the teacher who is a source of superior language ability than the learner themselves.

Novakid, a Russian-based online English platform with branches in San Francisco, USA, and Krakow, Poland has immensely grown in just over five years. They now cater to over 50 countries serving 4–12-year-old learners with a 500% annual growth rate since its inception (Azarov, 2022). Besides a year of teaching children experience as a requirement, Novakid demands any international teaching certificate such as TESOL (Novakid for Teachers, n.d.), but such qualification can now be obtained by an asynchronous and unstandardized curriculum offered and issued by often questionable companies online.

In Korea, one of the most successful online English platforms is Skybel. The company mainly focuses on teaching IELTS specifically the speaking section. They have a preference towards native English speakers except for the Philippines though they make sure that the candidate can teach IELTS. Having a British accent is also a plus. The desire for Koreans to speak as native-English-like as possible has been ongoing for more than three decades. Parents pay through the nose in order to send their kids abroad as early as possible sacrificing family time just for the children to get ahead in life as reported in a Washington Post by Cho (2007) and echoed in research on the

language politics of “English Fever” in South Korea by Shim and Park (2008). Now, Koreans do not need to leave their country nor sacrifice family time just to acquire the coveted language proficiency. That said, companies like Skybel make sure that their clients get their money’s worth. It was reported that out of 30 applicants, only one was hired (OET Jobs, 2022).

Methodology

Since the study is geared towards finding out the grammar proficiency of Online Filipino English teachers, descriptive research with quantitative approach was employed. In descriptive research, data are collected and analyzed to find the status of the current phenomenon being studied (Gay, 1992). Whereas there has been a tremendous gap between theoretical language specialists within the generative convention and those language specialists who work with quantitative data types, this gap is narrowing. There has been a revolution in the use of quantitative data in the study of syntax, i.e., grammar (Featherston & Versley, 2016).

The study involved 401 random Online Filipino English teachers who are based in the Philippines and are currently working in various online English school platforms. The minimum teaching experience is one year.

In order to find out the grammar proficiency of current Online Filipino English teachers, the study modified the online grammar exam of British Study Centres (2021), a training and educational institution based in England since 1930, for the purpose of identifying the proficiency on specific grammar elements such as tenses of verbs and prepositions of the respondents. The study based the question selection randomly from the book published by Marian (2014) about most common mistakes in English where the author divided the textbook into five categories (things, verbs, adjectives, prepositions, and commas) that English learners most likely commit mistakes in and that teachers should be adept in.

Through collaboration with an existing online English school, the researcher and the institution administered the modified grammar proficiency exam to the applicants who are applying for the position as an online English teacher. The test has 40 multiple choice questions on a Google form platform and was timed to 15 minutes to avoid cheating. Those who went overtime were discarded along with those who took the test twice or more. Only the first results were considered valid to prove the reliability of the test.

Descriptive statistics was used to analyze the data gathered.

Ethical Considerations

Research participants were informed about the purpose of the study and that their participation is voluntary. To ensure data privacy and confidentiality, no sensitive and personal information was gathered from the participants and their responses were treated with anonymity.

Results

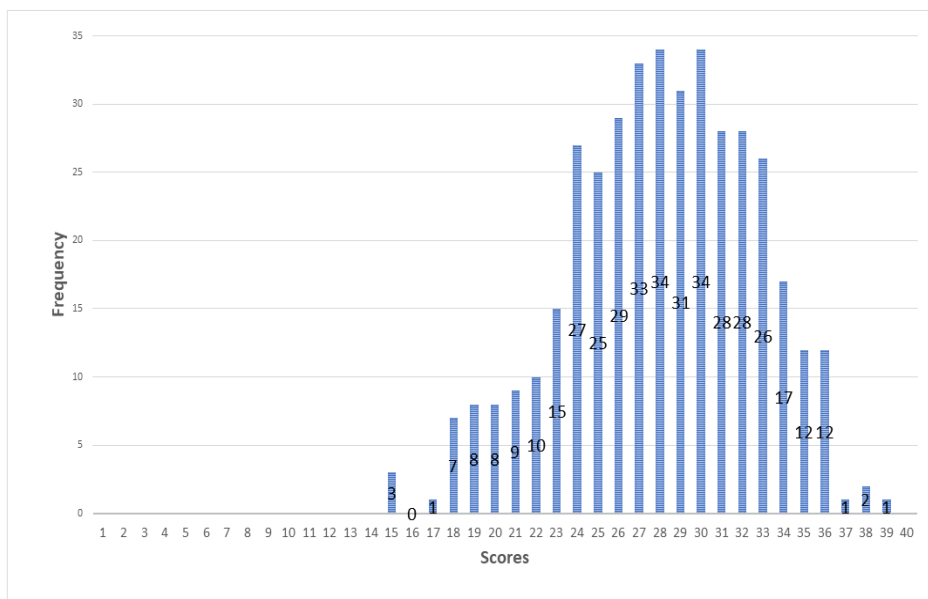
The test was conducted for a period of three months between April-June 2022.

The scores clustered somewhere between 24 and 33 with 295 participants which account for 74% of the sample data. The distribution is skewed to the left with 15% of participants scoring 15-23. The remaining 11% scored 34 and above.

Most of the respondents scored high on adjectives, verb+ infinitives and past tense with 'did' and fairly scored on nouns. The respondents scored low for the rest of the grammar test parameters. Through frequency distribution, more than half of the respondents looked fair with their scores higher than 50% of the test emphasized by the modes 28 and 30 and the median score resting at 27.5.

Figure 1

Score distribution of the respondents in the grammar proficiency test



Looking at Figure 1, it can readily be observed that on average, the respondents are able to score an above average and that the mean score if ungrouped is 30.55 (76.3%) over 40 overall points. N= 401. However, on a closer examination, out of 401 respondents, no one had a perfect score, only one scored 39/40, then two scored 38/40, one scored 37/40, twelve scored for both 36/40 and 35/40, and seventeen scored 34/40.

Table 1*Frequency distribution of test scores of OFET*

Group	Frequency
1-5	0
6-10	0
11- 15	3
16-20	24
21-25	86
26-30	161
31-35	111
36-40	16
	401

Table 2*Mean score of the respondents when grouped by specific grammar elements*

Selected Grammar Element	Mean percentage
Verb	62%
Conditionals	74.3%
Perfect Tenses	73%
Prepositions	73%
Phrasal verbs	58.5%
Modals	36.5%
Verb + infinitive	80.5%
Adjective	95.2%
Nouns	75.5%
Past tense with 'did'	84.5%
Neither vs either	61%
Overall mean score	71.23 %

Table 1 suggests that the respondents struggled with verbs specifically modals and phrasal verbs. Several literatures found that students of English as a Second Language (ESL) have trouble with phrasal verbs (Alwreikat & Yunu, 2022; Imrose, 2013; Shareef, 2018;), also in learning modals (Erton, 2018; Nurlaila, 2019; Rasheed & Khudhair, 2018).

The online English school that we collaborated with acknowledged that an English teacher must at least score an "A" or the lowest limit of 85% (34/40) to show that they can set themselves apart from the students who would score below than the threshold set up. However, the teachers would then struggle when they need to handle higher level students who are not that rare these days since a lot of the students have studied abroad in English speaking countries like the US for years.

Given the overall score, an 85% lower limit will set apart 45 respondents who would be invited to the second stage which is an online interview. This means that only 11% of the respondents can go to the next phase of the hiring process.

Discussion

In the Licensure Examination of Teachers (LET) in the Philippines, a passing score of 75% is required to be qualified as a teacher in the country. Given the results of the grammar test conducted, 161 respondents scored 75% and above. A 40% passing rate which is fairly good compared with the actual LET exam. However, statistical principle dictates that the larger the population sample may not garner the same result as it is in smaller samples. Also, when certain parameters were examined such as modals, prepositions, verbs and conditionals, the respondents failed to reach the passing score of 75%. These parameters serve as the anchor of sound syntax among learners and therefore it is imperative for the teachers to know better.

The test results imply that the OFETs lack the mastery of the English language, which is expected by the learners, presumed by their employers, and will be demanded by their potential employers. According to Caena (2011), teachers are traditionally viewed as managers of instruction, caring people, expert learners, and cultural and civic people. Senge (1990) emphasized that teachers are experts and knowledgeable. In Japanese, the word *sensei* (先生) means “a person ahead” or someone who has mastered a certain skill and therefore even doctors, lawyers and artists are given such title. In Tagalog language, *guro* or *maestro/maestra* connotes authority and mastery of disciplines. Since the result of the grammar test says otherwise about the OFETs, employers such as ESL institutions and even the DOT of the Philippines can design a training program that will target the gaps in the English skills of Filipino teachers. This will in turn affect their employability since the market has become more competitive due to the COVID-19 pandemic. This global pandemic may have a lasting effect especially in the education sector wherein many public and private institutions have realized the value of integrating online learning into their curricula. Knowing where we stand is a key to any improvement. When one looks at a certain map to find where he wants to go, he needs to find first where he is at. The same is true with OFETs, knowing their English syntactical weak point may motivate them to pursue improvements to remain competitive in this hypercompetitive market.

In our societies, regardless of political or economic valuation of a teacher’s job, the esteem that the position commands cannot be taken for granted. Though it does not mean that perfection is a requirement, teachers are expected to be answer givers. The customized grammar test shows that more than 90% of the respondents did not score more than 30 over the 40 questions. That is a 75% passing rate, an equivalent of B+ on a standard grading system used in traditional schools and only 12 scored 35 which is equivalent to A and a mere three respondents scored A+. This result coincides with the study by Meniado (2019) of faculty members of a Higher Education Institution (HEI) in the Philippines in which the respondents were found to be on B1 and B2 levels on the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR).

The respondents scored very poorly in some of the basic grammar concepts such as verbs and adverbs as seen on Table 1. This suggests that the teachers have not mastered these concepts yet despite the fact they have studied them in their schools and have been teaching them to their students for at least a year. A study of 400 South African English teachers and 400 students found that statistically, the proficiency of the teacher's English affected the acquisition of the second language amongst the learners along with the learning process itself (Nel & Müller, 2010). A recent case study of Bangladeshi English language teachers found that the teachers were poor in their grammatical structure and range in lexicon usage since they to switch to their native language (L1) while teaching the English language (Rouf & Mohamed, 2022), consequently affecting the learning language acquisition and the entire learning process. Therefore, we may deduce that the quality of English acquired by the students from the respondents in this research may have been as erroneous as the ones who taught them accordingly. Bandura, Krashen and Schumann's theories pinpointed that the quality of learning does not far exceed the quality of the teacher (Orillos, 1998).

While this study found that the grammar proficiency levels of the Online Filipino English teachers are relatively lower than the desired or expected English language proficiency threshold for the teaching profession, it does not necessarily mean that they cannot generally and operationally communicate in English as they carry out their duties and responsibilities in teaching. It simply implies that there seems much to be done if the respondents of this study aim to be at par with their international counterparts in other parts of the globe.

Also, if the English language schools, whether that be online or in a physical school, that hire English teachers from the Philippines are concerned about the quality of the outcomes of their lessons, they will need to look into and establish a Continuing Professional Development (CPD) and other metrics for their current teachers. They may also need to set up a more stringent hiring process since the quality of the teachers reflects the quality of the school or institution as the quality of the students reflects their teachers.

Conclusion

Finding out where the problem lies is the first step in any scientific problem solving so knowing where OFETs stand on their grammar proficiency is the initial step in solving the concerning reports of the country's English proficiency global standing.

The study aimed to find out the current status of OFETs grammar proficiency since it is a measure of expertise and an expectation from their stakeholders.

Having proven that the diminishing English proficiency of Filipinos is now evident even among OFETs, a much stronger action to address this issue should be done particularly by DOT if it wants the Philippines to remain as an ESL destination for learners and bring in income for the country and employment to its citizens.

Secondly, ever since the global pandemic has wreaked havoc in all sectors around the globe, online jobs have become more competitive and learning English online has become even more cutthroat. Therefore, OFETs' clienteles have more options to choose from jeopardizing the source of income of many OFETs.

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