

## Learning Strategies Used by College Freshmen in Developing English Proficiency

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**Abstract** - *The main objective of this study was to determine the learning strategies used by College Freshmen to enhance the development of English language proficiency; and to find out the extent of using them along phonology, vocabulary and grammar. The survey-results served as the basis of devising an instructional tool that would offer more learning techniques and ways that would enhance further the development of English proficiency. The descriptive method of research was applied. Survey questionnaires of two parts were used. Part 1 was a diagnostic test in English focused on phonology, vocabulary and grammar. Part 2 was an inventory of English Language learning strategies that emphasized reading and study skills, which also determined the extent of using them along the three (3) elements of English. The research venue was Camarines Sur State Agricultural College where 255 College Freshmen served as respondents. The statistical tools used were score interval, weighted mean, averaging and ranking systems.*

*Results showed that the College freshmen are moderately proficient both on vocabulary and grammar but are hardly proficient on phonology. Varied learning strategies on reading and studying exercises are frequently used by the respondents in developing English proficiency. The extent or frequency of using learning strategies along the English language elements revealed that the respondents moderately used target learning strategies along phonology while they frequently used said strategies along vocabulary and grammar elements of English language. "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency" was devised to offer more learning ways and techniques that would enhance English proficiency development. The teaching tool entitled "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency" was found valid to be used in the curriculum.*

**Keywords** - Learning Strategies, English Proficiency, Language Elements, Instructional tool, Reading and Study skills

### I. INTRODUCTION

A priest friend, in a homily given before a group of teachers, once defined education and learning, thus:

"Education at its best is a journey from ignorance to knowledge and to faith. At its worst, education is the transfer of knowledge from the notebook of the teacher to the notebooks of the students without passing through their heads"(Bagayawa 1993). The first definition implies real learning taking place, while the latter implies that no learning has taken place at all (Gareza 1993). Teaching, which expected output is learning, is a difficult task, but a great commitment. In this study, it refers to Teaching English as a Second Language (TESL) or as a Foreign Language (TEFL). English has been adopted as an official language of communication, a medium of instruction, has developed into a lingua franca in this country although it is not the Filipinos' mother tongue. As a result, numerous basic and higher education learners as well as teachers find language teaching and learning a real problem in the achievement of superior educational development. This observation has been repeatedly proven by

numerous government examinations like the Bar Examination for lawyers, the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET), and the Board Examinations for Engineers as well as Nurses which results reveal that hardly half of the total number of the test takers passed their respective national evaluation.

Now it is evident that anyone who works with second language learners, whether in teaching or in research, discovers quickly how much individual variation there is in the ability to learn a new language. There are always a few learners who can learn the new language quickly, while some learners are able to become quite proficient in the new language after a year or two of exposure to it.

This great variability across individual learners in how long it takes them to learn English, and in how much help they need from others in order to learn at all, constitute a great problem for educators wherever there are sizable number of non-English speaking students attending the school (Dela Cruz, 2000).

The researcher's casual encounter with college freshmen who are outspoken of their difficult learning experiences in English for instance, is a real problem.

They complain not only of their incompetence in English but also of the workload required by tertiary education.

Exposed to varied learning problems of her students repeatedly and compelled by her sense of commitment to augment teaching outputs, the researcher undertakes a study on “Learning Strategies Used by College Freshmen at the Camarines Sur State Agricultural College in Developing English Language Proficiency.” With this venture, she could help find effective solutions to this and other related problems on English language learning.

## II. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

The study aimed to identify the learning strategies used by College freshmen to enhance the development of English language proficiency; and to determine the extent of using them along phonology, vocabulary and grammar; specifically, to determine the achieved level of English language proficiency of College freshmen of Camarines Sur State Agricultural College; to identify the learning strategies being used by the College Freshmen in developing English proficiency; to determine the extent of each learning strategy used by the respondents in developing English proficiency, specifically along with phonology, vocabulary and grammar; to identify the interactive teaching tool can be devised to enhance the respondents’ development of English proficiency, based on the findings of this study and to propose workbook entitled, Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency (LSBEP).

## III. METHOD

This study used the descriptive method of research which is designed to gather information about the present existing conditions. Two hundred and fifty five (255) out 700 college freshmen served as respondents in this study. They were randomly chosen from the different classes of first year college students of Camarines Sur State Agricultural College, now Central Bicol State University of Agriculture. Based on the subject teachers’ class records, the respondents were identified following intervals of 2 or 4 depending on the class size. With the use of the Slovin’s formula, the total number of respondents was accurately determined. The identified respondents participated actively in the study.

The main tool used to get the essential details needed to complete this research was a survey-questionnaire in two parts. The first part dealt on a standardized fifty 50- item diagnostic test materials in English focused on the language elements while the second part was an inventory of English language learning strategies focused mainly on reading and

study skills, which also determined the extent of using the learning strategies along the 3 language elements.

The survey-questionnaires were personally conducted by the researcher in the different classes of college freshmen, according to the schedule approved by the College Dean. The questionnaires were corrected, tabulated and the results were interpreted. All these were used as bases in determining the appropriate instructional materials that help augment the English proficiency of the respondents or college freshmen in general.

The research data came from the results of the statistical measures applied in the study such as score interval, weighted mean, averaging and ranking system. To determine the respondents’ level of English proficiency, the following score interval was used.

<u>10 item test</u>	<u>Verbal Description</u>	<u>20 item test</u>
8.4 – 10	Very Proficient	16.8 – 20
6.8 – 8.3	Proficient	13.6 – 16.7
5.2 - 6.7	Moderately Proficient	10.8 – 13.5
3.6 – 5.1	Hardly Proficient	7.2 – 10.7
1.0 – 3.5	Not Proficient	1.0 – 7.1

Weighted mean was utilized to determine the frequency of using the language learning strategies and for the validation of the workbook.

To qualify the weighted mean of each datum accurately, the following rating scales were used.

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Interval</u>	<u>Verbal Description</u>
5	4.21-5.00	Very Frequently Used
4	3.41- 4.20	Frequently Used
3	2.61- 3.40	Moderately Used
2	1.81- 2.60	Rarely Used
1	1.00- 1.80	Not/ Never Used

<u>Scale</u>	<u>Interval</u>	<u>Verbal Description</u>
5	4.20-5.00	Very Evident
4	3.41- 4.19	Evident
3	2.61- 3.40	Moderately Evident
2	1.81- 2.60	Less Evident
1	1.00- 1.80	Not Evident

## IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows that of the 50-item diagnostic test for English Proficiency, items 1 to 20 are on vocabulary, for which the average score the respondents got was 11.03 verbally interpreted as moderately proficient.

Items 21 to 40 were given to test grammar, the average score for which was 12.04 verbally interpreted as also moderately proficient.

**Table 1. English Proficiency Level**

Item Number	Language Element Tested	Average Score	Proficiency Level
1-20	Vocabulary	11.03	Moderately Proficient
21-40	Grammar	12.04	Moderately Proficient
41-50	Phonology	4.51	Hardly Proficient

The last 10 items dealt on phonology, and the average score of 4.51 showed that the respondents were hardly proficient in this language element tested.

Summarily, the respondents are moderately proficient both on vocabulary and grammar but are hardly proficient on phonology. This information implies that the respondents have a reasonable knowledge of word meanings and grammatical structures, but can hardly recognize and use sound patterns of the language.

The respondents' poor performance in phonology based on the diagnostic test is justified by the research of Liamson who observed the restriction in the English domain to the advantage of Filipino language." This has been reinforced by language educators who introduced the teaching of Standard Filipino English (SFE) which phonological contrasts and idiosyncrasies as well as peculiar characteristics as a standard dialect or national language become a source of language learning confusion and difficulties both to students and teachers.

**Table 2. Classification of Reading & Study Skills**

Reading & Study Skills	WM	VI	Rank
<b>Reading Skills</b>			
a. Word Attack	3.78	Frequently Used	1
b. Text Attack	3.75	Frequently Used	2
c. Utilizing Information	3.58	Frequently Used	3
d. Using Flexibility Technique	3.50	Frequently Used	4
<b>Study Skills</b>			
a. Organizing Information	3.36	Frequently Used	1
b. Gathering Information	3.16	Moderately Used	2

Table 2 shows the classification of reading and study skills strategies. Reading skills are classified into 4: a) utilizing information skills b) skills using flexibility technique c) word –attack skills and d)text-attack skills while Study skills are classified into two (2): a) organizing information skills and b) gathering information skills.

It was found out that of the four reading skills, Rank 1 was Word Attack skills with a weighted mean of 3.78 and verbally interpreted as frequently used.

Rank 2 was Text Attack skills with 3.75 verbally interpreted as also frequently used. The skills of utilizing information ranked 3 with 3.58 weighted mean and verbally interpreted as frequently used too. Rank 4 was the skill on using flexibility technique with 3.50 and verbally interpreted as Frequently Used.

Summing up these findings, the average weighted mean was 3.65. The over-all verbal interpretation was frequently used. This is justified by the complexities and nature of reading skills according to the study of Tandog (2003). Translating text-attack skills into reading comprehension skills, she spelled out the details that involved noting details, finding the main idea, inferring, predicting as tasks of exploiting a selection, all embraced by text-attack skills. These are forms of attack or exploitation of any discourse based on Christine Nuttal's (1985) works on reading skills development.

### Study Skills

Gathering and organizing information as study skills are counted as learning strategies that help augment the development of English proficiency. Included in the inventory of learning strategies that this study surveyed were study skills. The former study skills require the learner to master the use of the library – the pool of information on varied disciplines; while the latter study skills involve the orderly and chronological expression of gathered information.

Based on Table 2, of the two classifications of study skills, the respondents frequently used Organizing information skills with a weighted mean of 3.36, while they just moderately used skills on gathering information, with a weighted mean of 3.16. The data indicated above revealed that the average weighted mean was 3.26 which over-all equivalent verbal interpretation was moderately used. Obviously, the skills of organizing were more frequently used by the respondents than the tasks of gathering information. Tierney and Readence (2000) stressed that note taking, outlining and summarizing as specific organizing information skills helped make students more efficient when frequently applied. This is a clear implication of these findings.

### Extent of using Learning Strategies along the Language Elements

The language elements as the bases of English instruction, according to J.B. Heaton (1975), are

expected to help develop language skills. In the study, these are phonology or the sound system of the target language, vocabulary or word formation/ enrichment and grammar or rules on the organized signs, symbols, their corresponding sounds and meanings that express complete thoughts /ideas.

The extent of using the learning strategies along phonology, vocabulary and grammar was translated into a scale of five options such as 5 – Always Used, 4 – Very Often Used, 3 – Often Used, 2 – Rarely Used, and 1 – Never Used. Essential information on this problem was yielded by the survey-questionnaire which details are presented hereunder.

As ventilated, relevant learning strategies for reading are listed as test items 1 to 27; items 1 to 7 are word attack skills, items 8 to 18 are text-attack skills, items 19 to 21 are skills on utilizing information, and items 22 to 27 are skills on using flexibility technique. There are 23 study skills learning strategies items; items 28 to 47 are skills on organizing information and items 48 to 50 are skills on gathering information.

**Table 3. Extent of Using Strategies along Phonology**

Strategies along Phonology	WM	VI	Rank
<b>Reading Skills</b>			
a. Word Attack	3.15	Moderately Used	4
b. Text Attack	3.24	Moderately Used	2
c. Utilizing Information	3.42	Frequently Used	1
d. Using Flexibility Technique	3.16	Moderately Used	3
<b>Study Skills</b>			
a. Organizing Information	3.05	Frequently Used	1
b. Gathering Information	2.96	Moderately Used	2

Table 3 illustrates the frequency of using learning strategies (reading and study skills) along phonology focused on the English sound system. Word attack under reading skills had a weighted mean of 3.15 and verbally interpreted as Moderately Used, which ranked 4<sup>th</sup>. Following this information is the text attack skills which bared a weighted mean of 3.24 also interpreted as Moderately Used and ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>. Utilizing information had a weighted mean of 3.24 and proved to be the only reading skill which is frequently used along phonology and ranked 1<sup>st</sup>. close to word attack, skill on using flexibility technique got a weighted mean of 3.16 and also moderately used and which ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>. Under study skills learning strategies, organizing information had 3.05 weighted

mean which is verbally interpreted as Moderately Used and ranked 1<sup>st</sup> and gathering information bared 2.96 weighted mean also interpreted as Moderately Used which ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>.

Summing up the findings on the extent of using reading and study skills as learning strategies along phonology, reading skills as learning strategies yielded an average weighted mean of 3.24 or Moderately Used.

Study skills as learning strategies were used in phonological lessons in English according to the data borne by this study's survey. The findings of which bared that along phonology, study skills as learning strategies were moderately used with an average weighted mean of 3.0.

The general weighted mean of these data is 3.12 which revealed that the respondents moderately used the target learning strategies in developing and mastering lessons on phonology.

The information mentioned above is confirmed by Farrell (1993) who introduced the "Three-Part Reading Practice," a package of few learning strategies like 1) reading aloud as practice, 2) translating the reading piece, and 3) writing a summary or resume' of the piece. She found these learning tasks win interested learners who emerged actively in varied classroom tasks that develop further English language skills, specifically pronunciation and intonation and other lessons on phonology.

Ieonna Palioura's (1996) works express relevant views that phonology through constant oral skills' practice responds to the students' needs for effective communication in their second or foreign language like English. This develops further the students' ability to understand and exchange real information. Through simulation, according to her, English language proficiency can be achieved as it involves: 1) information dissemination through reading and/or speaking drill, 2) problem identification based on the reading text and solution discussion, 3) follow-up work and evaluation. She believes that all those language activities contribute to the development of competence in English.

Undoubtedly, those studies prove that reading tasks and study skills as learning strategies are necessary as well as frequently used along phonology which is commonly known as the sound system of the target language – English. Fromkin and Rodman (1981) emphasized that the phonology of a language is used in two ways: 1) as a study of sound patterns 2) as the sound patterns of speech sounds, being an essential part of a language's grammar.

Vocabulary as the total number of words which make up a language has been dealt with great difficulty in learning English being a foreign discipline to Filipino language learners. Explored by

this study, the survey collected data that are related to such observation.

**Table 4. Extent of Using Strategies along Vocabulary**

Strategies along Vocabulary	WM	VI	Rank
<b>Reading Skills</b>			
a. Word Attack	3.76	Frequently Used	2
b. Text Attack	3.71	Frequently Used	3
c. Utilizing Information	3.85	Frequently Used	1
d. Using Flexibility Technique	3.67	Frequently Used	4
<b>Study Skills</b>			
a. Organizing Information	3.43	Frequently Used	1
b. Gathering Information	3.39	Moderately Used	2

Table 4 shows that along vocabulary, out of the 27 learning strategies for reading skills development, word attack got 3.76 weighted mean and verbally interpreted as Frequently Used which ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>. Text-attack skill items which followed, had a weighted mean of 3.71 also verbally interpreted as Frequently Used and which ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>. Skills on utilizing information bared a weighted mean of 3.85 and frequently used too by the respondents and ranked 1<sup>st</sup>. Lastly, skills on utilizing flexibility technique gave a weighted mean of 3.67 and also frequently used just like the other reading skills and ranked 4<sup>th</sup>. All these data end up to a favorable result showing that respondents admitted that learning strategies enhance the development of English proficiency. Reading lessons as learning strategies were quite frequently associated with vocabulary exercises in developing language skills, according to Santayana (1995). Learning strategies that correspond to teaching methodologies would offer fun and laughter in language learning especially vocabulary building.

Study skills as learning strategies were also surveyed in this study specifically to determine the extent of using these along vocabulary. These 23 items (from 28 to 50) were included in the diagnostic test that yielded data which shows that organizing information skills had a weighted mean of 3.43 which is verbally interpreted as Frequently Used and ranked 1<sup>st</sup> while gathering information study skills bared 3.39 weighted mean and the only skill which is Moderately Used by the respondents along vocabulary ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>.

The partial findings on the extent of using reading skills as learning strategies along vocabulary revealed in this research an average weighted mean of 3.74 for

reading skills and 3.41 for study skills, both are verbally interpreted as frequently used.

After unveiling the partial findings on the extent of using learning strategies along vocabulary, the general average weighted mean of 3.58 yielded by both reading and study skills showed that the respondents frequently used learning strategies along vocabulary lessons in developing English proficiency. All these data ventilated an optimistic result that learning strategies are contributory and are very useful in the development of English proficiency through the learner's constant exposure to vocabulary lessons.

These findings were supported by the study of Rivera (1995) on the correlation of the vocabulary and reading comprehension. She stressed that the development of reading habits, skills and the provision of adequate reading materials helped in enriching the learner's vocabulary. The study of Senosin (2005) reinforced the same findings because she discovered that learning techniques applied in teaching English yielded more effective vocabulary learning. Conley (1995), on the other hand, insisted that in order to learn successfully in any content area subject, the learners should be exposed to vocabulary teaching/learning because vocabulary is the key to the understanding of any discipline/lesson.

**Table 5. Extent of Using Strategies along Grammar**

Strategies along Grammar	WM	VI	Rank
<b>Reading Skills</b>			
a. Word Attack	3.62	Frequently Used	3
b. Text Attack	3.79	Frequently Used	1
c. Utilizing Information	3.71	Frequently Used	2
d. Using Flexibility Technique	3.48	Frequently Used	4
<b>Study Skills</b>			
a. Organizing Information	3.42	Frequently Used	1
b. Gathering Information	3.29	Moderately Used	2

English proficiency is manifested in the learner's ability to express facts, ideas, feelings and attitudes clearly and with ease as well as the ability to understand what they hear or read. In this study however, this was measured by the survey questionnaire, in order to determine the extent of using learning strategies along grammar which findings are indicated.

Table 5 is on the extent of using relevant learning strategies along grammar where word attack skills in reading got a 3.62 weighted mean and frequently used by the student-respondents and which ranked 3<sup>rd</sup>. Text-attack items bared a weighted mean of 3.79 also verbally interpreted as frequently used and ranked 1<sup>st</sup>. Skills on utilizing information gave a weighted mean of 3.71 while skills on utilizing flexibility technique gave a weighted mean of 3.48, both are also verbally interpreted as frequently used just like the two skills earlier cited. The former ranked 2<sup>nd</sup> while the latter ranked 4<sup>th</sup>.

Disclosing more data on the extent of using relevant learning strategies along vocabulary, organizing information under study skills had a weighted mean of 3.42 and verbally interpreted as Frequently Used, which ranked 1<sup>st</sup> while gathering information, also under study skills got a 3.29 weighted mean which is verbally interpreted as Moderately Used and ranked 2<sup>nd</sup>. The totality of the findings on the extent of using the target learning strategies along grammar in this study revealed that the 27 reading skills as learning strategies yielded an average weighted mean of 3.65 and verbally interpreted as Frequently Used.

On the other hand, the 23 study skills as learning strategies yielded an average weighted mean of 3.36 and verbally interpreted as Moderately Used by the student-respondents.

The general average weighted mean of the data mentioned above which is 3.5 exposed the summary on the extent of using learning strategies along grammar. This revealed that these learning strategies were frequently used by respondents in their aspiration to master grammar as an element in developing English proficiency.

Tom McArthur (1998) justifies these findings by presenting the detailed coverage of grammar not only

as one of the language elements but as a study which involves varied descriptions, contents and rules which complexities require both the teachers and the learners to deal with it using strategies and/or techniques that would help facilitate language learning, as well as teaching.

### Proposed Instructional Tool for Better English Proficiency

Based on the concrete findings in this research, some appropriate teaching materials have been conceived and prepared to offer possible solutions to language education problems ventilated in this paper. A workbook entitled, "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency," is presented which coverage is indicated below.

Exercises or Practice Drills on the three language elements that require the careful application of some reading and study skills have been the main contents of said instructional tool. The primary objective in putting up this workbook is to augment the English Proficiency of interested language learners specifically, the College freshmen.

Unit 1 deals with phonology or the sound system of the English language. It is categorically divided into segmental (vowels, consonants and diphthongs) and suprasegmentals (intonation, stress and juncture).

Unit 2 focuses on semantics or word formation. The lessons on affixation and compounding provide experiences to students for vocabulary development.

Unit 3 deals with structural patterns of English. It presents and discusses traditional-prescriptive grammar (parts of speech) and transformational-generative grammar (kernel sentences and transforms).

**Table 6. Curricular Validation of the Instructional Material**

Criteria	Phonology WM-VI	Vocabulary WM-VI	Grammar WM-VI	Average WM-VI
Objectives/Introduction	4.6-VE	4.63-VE	4.63-VE	4.62-VE
Lesson Presentation/ Activities	4.56-VE	4.57-VE	4.57-VE	4.57-VE
<b>Average Weighted Mean</b>	4.58-VE	4.6-VE	4.6-VE	<b>4.6-VE</b>

There were ten members of the evaluating team—all College English professors, coming from the three (3) campuses of the Camarines Sur State Agricultural College – Main campus in Pili, Sipocot Campus and Calabanga campus. Most of the professors have attended seminars on Instructional Materials Development and Book Writing, one(1) has become the head of the College Editorial Board and four (4)

are presently the Technical Adviser of the School Organ in the different campuses.

Table 6 answers the fourth question of this study which concerns the curricular validation of the instructional material in English. The first column shows the components/criteria for validation in which the team rated: 4.20-5.00 (Very Evident), 3.41-4.19 (Evident), 2.61-3.40 (Moderately Evident), 1.81-2.60 (Less Evident), 1.0-1.8 (Not Evident).

There are three units (lesson on language elements) with corresponding weighted mean. The table shows the details of the curricular validation of the instructional material. The components or criteria tested are the introduction/objectives and lesson presentation/activities. The introduction/objectives got an average weighted mean of 4.62, verbal interpretation as very evident, while the lesson presentation/activities got 4.57 average weighted mean, verbal interpretation as very evident also. With the result of the validation, the difference between the higher value and the lower value is .05 which means that the criteria or components are substantially related and with a total average weighted mean of 4.60 with verbal interpretation as very evident; therefore, the instructional material entitled, "Learning Strategies for Better English proficiency", is curricularly valid.

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The College freshmen of Camarines Sur State Agricultural College are moderately proficient both on vocabulary and grammar but are hardly proficient on phonology. Varied reading and study skills are frequently used by the respondents as learning strategies in developing English proficiency. The respondents moderately used learning strategies along phonology, while they frequently used learning strategies along vocabulary and grammar. "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency" was devised to offer more learning ways that would enhance English proficiency development. As a teaching tool, "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency" was found curricularly valid.

## VI. RECOMMENDATIONS

Supply and teach more appropriate learning strategies that correspond to the students' need specifically, to develop further English proficiency. Conduct more researches on learning as well as teaching strategies or techniques that will help enhance further the development of English proficiency. Further, conduct a similar study using the experimental method of research. Invent and produce more instructional materials, provide language lessons according to the learners' needs and interests. Utilize the instructional tool devised by the research entitled, "Language Strategies for Better English Proficiency" to aid and enhance skills development of the learners, and to test its content validity. Produce interactive audio material that can go together with the instructional output of this study, especially for the phonology part.

Similar studies may also be undertaken on the following topics: "Enhancing phonology skills of College students through Language strategies;"

"Language Learning Strategies in Teaching Phonology to College Students;" "Developing the Speaking Skills of College Students;" and "Learning Styles of College Students."

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