
The English Language Proficiency Level of First Year Students in Dilla University

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Abstract: The purpose of the study was to assess the current status of the English proficiency level of freshman students in Dilla University. The population of the study included all freshman students who joined Dilla University in 2014/15. A total of 368 subjects were selected and all of them took a proficiency test. Based on their test scores, the subjects were classified into three proficiency levels. Then, 9 subjects representing the proficiency levels were selected for an oral proficiency test. Besides, the subjects' EnLa 1011 scores were collected to compute correlation coefficients with proficiency test scores. Percentages, correlation coefficients, and coefficient of determinations were used to analyze the data. The findings suggested that the majority of the subjects (81.5%) had low proficiency level; some of them (16%) had average proficiency level; and quite a few of them (1.6%) were found to have high proficiency level. Regarding their reading competence, the majority (81%) were found to be at frustration reading level; some (16%) were at instructional reading level; and quite few (3%) attained independent reading level. As a result, recommendations were suggested that the Ministry of Education and Dilla University should put their efforts together in order to alleviate the prevailing problem.

Keywords: language proficiency, proficiency levels (high, average, and low), reading levels (independent, instructional, and frustration)

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Operational Definition of Key Terms

- **Language proficiency:** Language learners' general ability to use language in communication contexts.
- **Communicative competence:** Language learners' linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse and pragmatic competences.
- **Discourse competence:** Language learners' ability to maintain coherence between sentences and paragraphs.
- **High-proficiency level:** A category of language learners whose aggregate scores are between 70 and 100 in the proficiency test.
- **Average proficiency level:** A category of language learners whose aggregate scores are between 50 and 69 in the proficiency test.
- **Low proficiency level:** A category of language learners whose aggregate scores are below 50 in the proficiency test.
- **Independent reading level:** when a test-taker scores above 60 in the cloze test.
- **Instructional reading level:** when a test-taker scores between 40 and 60 in the cloze test.
- **Frustration reading level:** when a test-taker scores below 40 in the cloze test.

Background to the Study

Theoretical: Language Proficiency

For decades, researchers had exerted great efforts in order to have a complete understanding of the concept - language proficiency. Even so, the research outcomes seemed to have been inconclusive because of the enormity and complexity of the concept. Earlier researchers had tried to understand language proficiency by spelling out what elements it comprised. For example, Chomsky (1965) attempted to explain language proficiency by dichotomizing it into competence and

performance. As to Chomsky, competence referred to the perfect knowledge of an ideal speaker-listener who was not affected by psychological, social, and situational variables. In reaction to Chomsky's ideas, Hymes (1972) forwarded communicative competence because Chomsky's (1965) ideas failed to capture the social aspect of language use. In this regard, Hymes (1972) argued that children learned not only the grammatical structures but also how to use language appropriately in a given social context. Hence, his model consisted of two components: grammatical competence and sociolinguistic competence. Canale & Swain (1980) capitalized on Hymes' (1972) concept of communicative competence and added one more component: strategic competence, increasing the number of components to three. A couple years later, Canale (1983) added discourse competence which raised the number of components to four. Some years later, Bachman (1990) advanced a more profound conceptualization of language proficiency which she coined as 'communicative language ability'. This model, primarily geared towards developing a theoretical framework for language test designers, was composed of three major components: language competence, strategic competence, and psychophysiological mechanisms. According to Bachman's classification, language competence is sub-divided into two: organizational and pragmatic competence. These are again further divided into grammatical, textual, illocutionary, and sociolinguistic competence. Based on Canale's (1983) communicative competence and Faerch and Kasper's strategies of communication, Bachman assumes that strategic competence contains three components namely: assessment, planning, and execution. Furthermore, Bachman explains how these components interact with the language user's knowledge and language use context. Bachman and Palmer's (1996) model was aimed at explicating the characteristics of language users or test-takers in test-taking contexts. In this connection, language user's characteristics included: topical knowledge, affective schemata, and personal characteristics. At the same time, language ability was believed to subsume strategic

competence and language knowledge which comprised organizational knowledge and pragmatic knowledge.

Besides identifying different components that constituted communicative competence, researchers tried to describe what specific skills each component comprised. First, grammatical competence refers to language learners' ability to understand and produce accurate sentence structures (i.e. syntax), use appropriate words (i.e. lexis), use correct spelling, punctuation, and capitalization (graphology), and recognize and produce accurate speech sounds (i.e. phonology). Second, discourse competence deals with students' ability to keep cohesion and coherence between sentences and paragraphs in long stretches of oral and written texts. More specifically, learners are expected to be cognizant of the kind of relationship that exists between sentences and paragraphs and hence use the right conjunctions or pronouns to maintain the relationship logically. Third, Canale (1983) contends that pragmatic competence refers to language learners' ability to comprehend and use language appropriately in different social contexts. Thus, language users should have the ability to understand the intentions of the speakers (i.e. indirect speech acts, irony, and sarcasm). So, pragmatic competence is more closely related with sociolinguistic competence. Fourth, considering sociolinguistic competence, it is essential to confirm if language learners have awareness about social rules of language use such as formality, politeness, and directness. Furthermore, students should have the ability to use appropriate non-verbal behaviours and idiomatic expressions in different social situations. Eventually, Canale and Swain (1980) stress that strategic competence refers to both verbal and non-verbal communication strategies that language users apply when they face communication breakdowns because of performance variables such as fatigue, distraction, inattention, or insufficient competence in the target language. Consequently, it is important to check that language learners are able to use such communication strategies as paraphrase, circumlocution, literal translation, lexical approximation, and mime when they are engaged in oral communication situations.

Unlike the authors in the preceding paragraphs, Cummins (1984) attempted to dichotomize language proficiency into two categories: Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive/Academic Language Proficiency (CALP). In this case, BICS refers to the use of language in everyday communicative events while CALP is about learners' language use in academic situations. To describe the relationship between these concepts, Cummins used a transversing continuum which ranged from context-embedded to context-reduced situations and cognitively demanding to cognitively undemanding tasks or activities. In context-embedded situations, learners might rely on paralinguistic features and situational clues to process language. On the other hand, context-reduced situations might make learners rely only on linguistic forms to process information. With regard to the second continuum, it might refer to the cognitive complexity of the communicative task or activity in both situations that learners had to deal with. Rosenthal (1996), on his part, attempted to conceptualize the relationship between BICS and CALP using the ice-berg metaphor in which the ice above the waterline represents BICS that includes knowledge of surface features of language such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation whereas the huge body of the ice below the waterline symbolizes CALP that embodies knowledge of the functional and semantic meaning of language. With regard to the emphasis that should be placed on the dichotomies, Cummins (1980, 1981), Krashen & Biber (1987), Rosenthal (1996), and Spurlin (1995) believe that students should have more reliance on CALP than on BICS as they draw more on CALP, for instance, to read textbooks, participate in dialogues or debates, and do their written assignments. In this connection, Cummins (1982) and Rosenthal (1996) stress that students who have underdeveloped CALP might encounter much difficulty to follow their university education which demands higher-level cognitive operations and communicative language use.

Contrary to the componential approach, Oller (1979) viewed language proficiency differently and developed Unitary Competence Hypothesis based on the data he got from a battery of tests. In his study, Oller

(1979) applied factor analysis on his subjects' test scores which suggested that the test batteries were testing only one general factor. Thus, this triggered a controversy among researchers whether the componential or unitary hypothesis was adequate to account for the nature of language proficiency and the debate still seems to have continued without being resolved.

As it can be drawn from the preceding paragraphs, there seems to be no consensus upon a theoretical model that can accurately portray the underlying concept of language proficiency. Hence, the researchers decided to assume intermediary theoretical stance, mediating both the componential approach and unitary hypothesis. This might enable the researchers to complement the inherent inadequacies in both approaches. In order to achieve this, the researchers used dictation, cloze test, and oral proficiency tests so as to determine the subjects' overall language proficiency (in view of unitary hypothesis); at the same time, they used grammar and dialogue completion tests to identify the students' specific language skills competence (in view of componential approach). Thus, language proficiency is viewed in the current study as learners' ability to apply the grammatical, lexical, and phonological knowledge of the language system in different communication situations.

Levels of Proficiency

Different testing institutions across the world had attempted to develop proficiency levels or scales so as to determine the communicative competence of test-takers who would sit for their standardized tests. Some of the most known proficiency scales used in different parts of the world included the following: the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR), Interagency Language Roundtable Scale (ILR), American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages Proficiency Guidelines (ACTFL), New Brunswick Oral Proficiency Scale (NBOPS), Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB), and Public Service Commission of Canada (PSC). The number of proficiency levels

differed from institution to institution. Most institutions had six levels while some had five or four levels of proficiency. In this regard, Stern (1983) reported that the U.S. Foreign Service Institute and the Defense Language Institute developed a proficiency scale (FSI) which had five levels of proficiency: (1) elementary proficiency; (2) limited working proficiency; (3) minimum professional proficiency; (4) full professional proficiency; and (5) native or bilingual proficiency. Similarly, the Common European Framework Reference (CEFR) had three broad proficiency levels: basic user, independent user, and proficient user. These categories were again sub-divided into six proficiency levels. These included: beginner, elementary, intermediate, upper intermediate, advanced, mastery or proficiency. Despite differences in the number of proficiency levels, researchers had tried to draw equivalences between the proficiency scales used by different testing institutions.

In fact, these proficiency levels seem to have been prepared for people who use English as the first language and English as a second language since the lowest levels demand language users to have some knowledge and skill in using the language for communication. If these proficiency levels are used to determine the performances of Ethiopian students, all of them might fall into one category. This may not be proper for the purposes for which the current study is conducted. As a result, there is a need for devising a way by which makes clear distinctions can easily be made so as to designate the proficiency levels of the subjects in this study.

Earlier Studies

Several studies conducted in Ethiopia indicated that the English proficiency of Ethiopian learners is declining from time to time (Taye 1999; Alemu 2004; Gebremedhin 1993; Hailom, 1993; Hailemichael, 1993; Mekonnen, 1998; Argaw, 2005; Haregewoin, 2008; and Abiyot, 2006 to mention a few). Some of these studies suggested that students during the period of the monarchy had far better proficiency than those

during the military government. The discrepancy was that students during the Emperor's time were taught by expatriate staff who were native speakers of English and the textbooks were imported from Great Britain. Hence, the students were obliged to communicate with their teachers only in English and they had to read literature in the foreign culture. However, shortly after the 1974 Ethiopian Revolution the expatriate staff left the country and the textbooks were also abandoned. Consequently, learners had to be taught by less qualified teachers who themselves had imperfect knowledge and skill of the language. On top of that the textbooks were politically oriented and the activities were so poorly constructed that they were not appropriate to meet students' needs. To make things worse, there were many students in a classroom disabling the teacher to provide appropriate follow up and help. After the overthrow of the Derg, this dismal situation seems to have continued despite great improvements observed in textbook preparation. These textbooks were much better than those in *Derg* regime because they seemed to have been prepared based on the principles of communicative language teaching (CLT) (Alemu, 2004). They attempted to present the four skills integratively. Nevertheless, having better textbooks by itself might not guarantee successful learning unless there are qualified teachers who have adequate knowledge and skill in language teaching methodology and students who are committed to undertake personal initiatives to study the language by themselves.

When the case in Ethiopian higher institutions is considered, one may realize the gravity of the situation. Many instructors are complaining about the poor proficiency level of new students who are joining the universities every year. This can be evidently observed from their communicative English skills test scores. Moreover, several researchers suggest that students who join universities seem to be linguistically ill-equipped to pursue their tertiary education (Taye 1999, Haregewoin 2008, Mesafint 2009). Although they mentioned that students had low proficiency in the target language, the studies did not attempt to reveal the extent of the problem by working out the different

proficiency levels that the study-subjects might have. However, the current study tries to fill the gap and addresses the following research issues:

- the proficiency level of students currently joining Dilla University;
- how students belonging to one proficiency level differ from those in another proficiency level;
- what proportion of learners have the required proficiency level so as to succeed in their university education; and
- how learners' current proficiency level affects their performance on Communicative English Skills course.

General Objective of the Study

The study is aimed at identifying the proficiency levels of first year students currently joining Dilla University.

Methodology

The Study Area, Subjects, and Sampling Methods

Dilla University, one of the newly established higher institutions in the country, was selected as a potential study site because most of first year students who took the common course (i.e. Communicative English Skills) demonstrated low performance. As a result, the population of the study consisted of 1st year students who joined Dilla University in 2014/15. The study population was 4500. As the population was much enormous, the researchers selected 10% of the total population for the study. However, the number of subjects who completely took the proficiency test was only 368. The reason for the reduction was that the subjects who were unable to take the tests completely were avoided. With regard to the appropriacy of sample size, Cohen, Manion & Morrison (2007) mentioned that a sample size of 392 is appropriate to maintain 90% of confidence level for a population of 5000. Therefore, a sample size of 368 might suggest

90% of confidence level for a population of 4500. Besides, purposive sampling was used to select 5 colleges in the University. This was done to exclude colleges in which the number of high-scoring students was believed to be high. Each college, thus, selected was given different proportions depending upon university intake capacity: College of Engineering and Technology (28%) = 103, College of Business and Economics (24%) = 89, College of Social Sciences and Humanities (9%) = 33, College of Agriculture (15%) = 55, College of Natural and Computational Sciences (24%) = 88. However, random sampling was used to select the particular group or department within each college. The departments selected, thus, included: pre-engineering, computer science, accounting, PADM, sociology, agro-economics, biology, and geology. In order to answer the second research question, stratified sampling method had to be used especially when the population was not believed to be homogeneous (Kothari, 2004). To achieve homogeneity, the population had to be classified into different strata (i.e. proficiency levels). Since involving more subjects in interview might be costly and unmanageable, 9 study-subjects were selected for the oral proficiency test: 3 from high-scoring, 3 from average-scoring and 3 from low-scoring students. In this regard, the cut-off points for the three proficiency groups were based on Dilla University's Senate Legislation. Thus, test-takers whose scores ranged from 70 to 100 belonged to 'high proficiency level', those who scored 50 to 69 formed 'average proficiency level', and the test-takers who scored 0 to 50 constituted 'low proficiency level'.

Methods of Data Collection

The methods used to collect data included: a battery of proficiency tests, and documents. The proficiency tests used to draw the required data were dictation, cloze test, grammar, dialogue completion, and oral proficiency test. The purpose of the proficiency tests was to determine learners' English language proficiency levels whereas the oral proficiency test was used to reveal how subjects belonging to each of the proficiency levels performed differently when engaged in oral

communication. The questions were framed around students' early school background, personal endeavor to improve the English language, and attitude towards their English language proficiency when they joined Dilla University. Along with the questions, scoring criteria were drawn based on sub-skills like accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. The scoring scale ranged from 3 to 1. That is to say, the score 3 was given for high-performance, 2 for average performance, and 1 for poor performance. Thus, the subjects were evaluated based on this scale and the score on which at least two of the researchers agreed upon was taken and recorded as an accurate measure of each of the test-takers' communicative competence. The grammar test, drawn from Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL), was aimed at testing subjects' grammatical knowledge whereas the cloze test and dictation tests were believed to test different skills at a time. In this regard, Oller (1973) contends that a cloze test provides a good measure of students' language proficiency. A narrative text entitled *Guta Plays Detective* was selected to prepare the cloze test. After a couple of introductory sentences, the first deletion was made randomly and then every 5th item was deleted until the 50th item. Regarding the dictation test, a short text was selected based on some criteria: conceptual difficulty, familiarity, style, lexical and syntactic difficulty. Once the selection was made, the next task was to select the words that had to be deleted so that learners could restore them by listening to the taper-recorder. Then, the text was segmented into a series of short texts so as to mark where exactly the pauses should be made during dictation. The dictation test was administered in the language laboratory. In this regard, accuracy was the only criterion by which learners' performance was assessed.

In order to answer the fourth research question, the subjects' scores in Communicative English Skills should be correlated with their aggregate scores in the proficiency tests. Before running the correlation coefficient, it would be quite essential to see to what extent both tests were valid and reliable. Regarding the Communicative English Skills course, it is given throughout the University for all new comers. The

daily classroom instruction and periodical assessment activities are overseen by the Department of English Language and the College of Social Sciences. Besides, the teaching materials, continuous assessments, and final examinations are prepared and controlled by a committee designated for this purpose only. Concerning the proficiency tests, they were drawn from TOEFL and prepared with strict adherence to Oller's (1979) test construction. Thus, correlating both tests might create an opportunity to see to what extent the subjects' proficiency levels during admission could be reflected in their scores on Communicative English Skills course.

Methods of Data Analysis

Frequency counts and percentage scores were used to determine what proportion of the study-subjects would fall to different categories of proficiency levels. Besides, correlation coefficients were computed to identify to what extent the subjects' proficiency level affected their Communicative English Skills scores. Eventually, coefficient of determination (R^2) was used to determine to what extent performance variability among subjects accounted for by difference in language proficiency.

Findings and Discussion of Results

Findings from the Proficiency Test Scores

As explained in Section 3, the proficiency tests had different components. These included dictation, grammar, cloze test, dialogue completion and oral proficiency test. A total of 368 students drawn from five colleges sat for the proficiency tests. The test papers were scored and the scores were thus categorized as high, average, and low based on the number of test items in each test.

Table 1: Percentages of high, average, and low scores in each component of the proficiency tests

	Scale	College of Engineering and Technology	College of Business and Economics	College of Social Sciences and Humanities	College of Agriculture	College of Natural and Computational Sciences	General / all subjects together
Dictation	14-16	33 (32)*	9 (10)	5(15)	6(11)	30(34)	83(23)
	8-13	42 (41)	38(43)	9(27)	27(49)	36(41)	152(41)
	<8	28 (27)	42(47)	19(58)	22(40)	22(25)	133(36)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368
Grammar	13-15	4 (4)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	4(1)
	7-12	50 (49)	18(20)	10(30)	19(35)	44(50)	141(38)
	<7	49 (48)	71(80)	23(70)	36(65)	44(50)	223(61)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368
Cloze test	>60	6 (6)	1(1)	0(0)	0(0)	4(4.5)	11(3)
	40-60	31 (30)	7(8)	1(1)	8(15)	21(23.9)	68(18)
	<40	66 (64)	81(91)	32(99)	47(85)	63(71.6)	289(79)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368
Dialogue completion	5/6	9 (8.7)	7(8)	1(3)	1(1.8)	4(4.5)	22(6)
	3/4	43 (41.7)	18(20)	7(21)	13(23.6)	34(38.6)	68(18)
	1/2	51 (49.5)	64(72)	25(76)	41(74.5)	50(56.8)	278(76)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368

*Values in parentheses are percentages.

When the overall performance of subjects on the different types of the proficiency tests is examined, the same pattern could be discerned except in the dictation test. That is to say, the majority of the subjects (61%, 79%, and 76%) got low scores on grammar, cloze test, and dialogue completion tests, respectively. While some of the subjects (38%, 18%, and 18%) achieved average scores, only a few subjects (1%, 3%, and 6%) got high scores on the tests mentioned. However, this pattern does not repeat itself in the dictation test performance. Since the test was prepared from a simple text that consisted of everyday words, 23% of the test-takers got high scores and 41% attained average scores.

Regarding the subjects' performance in relation to the different types of the proficiency tests across colleges; it might be possible to clearly see a specific pattern with grammar, cloze test, and dialogue completion test. In other words, the proportion of subjects showed a sharp increase from high scores to low scores. However, the pattern appeared to be completely irregular with the dictation test. More specifically, subjects from the College of Engineering and Technology (32%) and those from the College of Natural and Computational Sciences (34%) seemed to have performed well in the dictation test. Of course, the rest three colleges had some subjects who got high scores in the dictation test. Except the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, the rest of the colleges had a sizable proportion of subjects who achieved average scores in the dictation test. On the other hand, all of the colleges had subjects whose scores were low in the dictation test. Of course, there were variations in the proportion of subjects who got low scores on the test mentioned. The highest proportion of subjects who got low scores on the dictation test was from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 58%; College of Business and Economics, 47%; and College of Agriculture, 40%. Regarding the scores on the grammar test, only the College of Engineering and Technology had the least proportion of the subjects (4%) who were able to get high scores. Similarly, there were no subjects who had high scores on grammar in the rest of the colleges. On the other hand, all of the colleges had a fairly large proportion of subjects who got average scores on the grammar test. Although all colleges seemed to have subjects with low scores on grammar test, the highest proportion belonged to College of Business and Economics, 80%; College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 70%; and College of Agriculture, 65%. Concerning the subjects' performance on the cloze test, only the College of Engineering and Technology (6%) and the College of Natural and Computational Sciences (4.5%) appeared to have the fewest number of subjects who got the highest scores. Simultaneously, it appears that the College of Engineering and Technology (30%) and College of Natural and Computational Sciences (23.9%) had a sizable proportion of subjects who got average scores

on the cloze test. However, the rest of the colleges had quite a small proportion of subjects who had average scores on the cloze test. Even though all of the colleges happened to have a large number of subjects whose scores were low on cloze test, the largest proportion belonged to the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 99%; College of Business and Economics, 91%; and College of Agriculture, 85%. Regarding the subjects' scores on dialogue completion test, only the College of Engineering and Technology (8.7%) and College of Business and Economics (8%) had some subjects who got high scores on the test mentioned. Nevertheless, the rest of the colleges had insignificant proportion of subjects who registered high scores on dialogue completion test. While the College Engineering and Technology (41.7%) and College of Natural and Computational Sciences (38.6%) had a sizable proportion of subjects who got average scores on dialogue completion test, the rest of the colleges had some subjects who registered average scores on the same test. Although all of the colleges had a large number of subjects who attained low scores on dialogue completion test, the highest proportion belonged to the College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 76%; College of Agriculture, 74.5%; and College of Business and Economics, 72%.

Proficiency Levels

Fast et al. (2004) as cited in Abdi (2008) stress that the number of performance levels is largely determined by the number of test items and length of the test. That is to say, the longer the test the more will be the opportunity for the researchers to make subtle distinctions between the subjects' test performances. Hence, as the number of test items in the current study was relatively small, the subjects' performance was roughly classified into three levels: high-scores, average-scores, and low-scores.

After scoring the test papers, an attempt was made to categorize the subjects under different proficiency levels. Towards this end, the fixed scale in the Legislation of Dilla University was used. As a result, test-

takers whose scores fell between 70 and 100 were identified as having high proficiency level while those who attained average proficiency level should get 50 to 69 scores. Besides, the subjects who had scored between 0 and 49 were believed to have low proficiency level.

Table 2: Proficiency Levels across Colleges

Scale	Proficiency level	College of Engineering and Technology	College of Business and Economics	College of Social Sciences and Humanities	College of Agriculture	College of Natural and Computational Sciences	General/ all subjects together
70-100	high	4 (4)	1(1)	0(0)	0(0)	1(1)	6(1.6)
50-69	average	26(25)	5(6)	1(3)	6(11)	24(27)	62(16.8)
0-49	low	73(71)	83(93)	32(97)	49(89)	63(72)	300(81.5)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368

**Values in parentheses are percentages.*

As shown in Table 2, the proportion of subjects who achieved high proficiency level (4%) were from the College of Engineering and Technology. This, however, could be quite insignificant when compared to the total number of samples taken for the study. In other words, this might suggest the scarcity of students with high proficiency level in the university. The data also suggests that the chance of getting students with high proficiency level was little or none with the rest of the colleges.

With regard to the proportion of subjects who had average proficiency level, almost all of the colleges seemed to have students having the mentioned level of proficiency only with varying degrees. For example, the College of Natural and Computational Sciences and the College of Engineering and Technology had 27% and 25%, respectively. This might suggest that both of the colleges had proportionally equivalent numbers of students with average proficiency level. The situation becomes almost gloomy with the remaining three colleges. There appears to be only some students in the College of Agriculture (11%)

and College of Business and Economics (6%) with average proficiency. Nevertheless, there was little or no chance of getting students with average proficiency in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities (3%).

The above data indicate that the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level appears to be very high in almost all of the colleges. Three of the colleges seemed to have the highest proportion of subjects with low proficiency level: College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 97%; College of Business and Economics, 93%; and College of Agriculture, 89%. The other two of the colleges appeared to have relatively equivalent proportion of subjects with low proficiency level: College of Natural and Computational Sciences, 72% and College of Engineering and Technology, 71%. As a result, we may realize that the largest proportion of the sample (81.5%) comprises subjects with low proficiency level. This might suggest that the majority of the subjects irrespective of the college in which they are assigned may encounter much difficulty in following their university education.

Reading Levels across Colleges

Rankin & Culhane (1969) attempted to draw comparisons between multiple-choice comprehension test scores and cloze test scores so as to work out a frame of reference for interpreting cloze test scores. Thus, they attempted to determine and interpret learners' reading levels by equating their cloze test scores with their corresponding multiple-choice comprehension test scores as shown in the table below.

Table 3: Reading Levels of Students (a comparison of cloze test and multiple-choice comprehension test)

Multiple-choice comprehension test scores		Cloze test scores	
Scale	Scale	Reading level	Interpretation
>90%	>60	Independent level	Material is too easy.
75-90%	40-60	Instructional level	Material is about the right level of difficulty.
<75%	< 40	Frustration level	Material is too difficult.

Consequently, an attempt was made to work out the percentage of the study-subjects that fall under different reading levels outlined in the table above. This is shown in the table below.

Table 4: Subjects' Reading Levels across Colleges

Scale	Reading level	College of Engineering and Technology	College of Business and Economics	College of Social Sciences and Humanities	College of Agriculture	College of Natural and Computational Sciences	General/ all subjects together
>60	independent	6(6)	1(1)	0(0)	0(0)	4(4.5)	11(3)
40-60	instructional	31(30)	7(8)	1(3)	7(13)	21(23.9)	60(16)
<40	frustration	66(64)	81(91)	32(97)	48(87)	63(71.6)	297(81)
	Total	103	89	33	55	88	368

**Values in parentheses are percentages.*

As shown in Table 4, the proportion of subjects at independent reading level appeared to be quite few (3%) in relation to the total sample. These few subjects belonged to two colleges: College of Engineering and Technology, 6% and College of Natural and Computational Sciences, 4.5%. This might suggest that the proportion of subjects who can read and understand written texts by themselves was quite small.

With regard to the second level of reading, we may realize that the proportion of subjects at instructional reading level seemed to be relatively large. Specifically, two of the colleges which had a relatively larger number of subjects included: College of Engineering and Technology, 30% and College of Natural and Computational Sciences, 23.9%. With the rest of the colleges, the proportion of subjects at instructional reading level appeared to be quite few: College of Agriculture, 13%; College of Business and Economics, 8%; and College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 3%. This means that the proportion of subjects who can read and understand written texts with the help of their teachers appeared to be larger in the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences than the rest of the colleges.

Regarding the third category, almost all of the colleges seemed to have the highest proportion of subjects who were at frustration reading level. However, the proportion showed variations from college to college. For instance, the colleges in which we could find the highest number of subjects at frustration reading level included: College of Social Sciences and Humanities, 97%; College of Business and Economics, 91%; and College of Agriculture, 87%. At the same time, the colleges which had a relatively fewer number of subjects at frustration reading level were two, namely: College of Natural and Computational Sciences, 71.6% and College of Engineering and Technology, 64%. This means that the proportion of subjects who were at frustration reading level in the given sample appears to be very huge, 81%. Therefore, a large number of subjects in the study sample experienced

much difficulty in reading and understanding written texts in their respective field of specialization even if they sought assistance from their instructors.

Reading Levels across Proficiency Levels

In the preceding sections, an attempt was made to work out the proportion of the subjects in view of proficiency levels and reading levels in isolation. This, however, may not be sufficient; rather it is essential to find out the proportion of the subjects' reading levels in relation to their proficiency levels.

Table 5: Reading Levels across Proficiency Levels

College	Proficiency Level	Independent	Instructional	Frustration	Total
College of Engineering and Technology	high	3(3)	1(1)	0(0)	4(4)
	average	3(3)	23(22)	0(0)	26(25)
	low	0(0)	7(7)	66(64)	73(71)
	total	6(7)	31(30)	66(64)	103(100)
College of Business and Economics	high	1(1)	0(0)	0(0)	1(1)
	average	0(0)	5(6)	0(0)	5(6)
	low	0(0)	2(2)	81(91)	83(93)
	total	1(1)	7(8)	81(91)	89(100)
College of Social Sciences and Humanities	high	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)
	average	0(0)	0(0)	1(3)	1(3)
	low	0(0)	1(3)	31(94)	32(97)
	total	0(0)	1(3)	32(97)	33(100)
College of Agriculture	high	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)	0(0)
	average	0(0)	6(11)	0(0)	6(11)
	low	0(0)	2(4)	47(85)	49(89)
	total	0(0)	8(15)	47(85)	55(100)
College of Natural and Computational Sciences	high	1(1)	0(0)	0(0)	1(1)
	average	3(3)	18(20)	2(2)	23(26)
	low	0(0)	2(2)	62(70)	64(73)
	total	4(5)	20(23)	64(73)	88(100)
General/ all subjects together	high	5(1)	1(0)	0(0)	6(2)
	average	6(2)	53(14)	3(1)	62(17)
	low	0(0)	14(4)	286(78)	300(82)
	total	11(3)	68(18)	289(79)	368(100)

*Values in parentheses are percentages.

As in Table 5, when one examines the overall picture of the study-subjects with respect to proficiency levels and reading levels, there are quite insignificant proportion of subjects (1%) who have attained high proficiency level and independent reading level. This means that the possibility of getting students with high proficiency level and independent reading level appears to be quite rare. At the second level, the situation seems to look up as we could get some proportion of subjects with average proficiency level and instructional reading level (14%). At the same time, the chance of getting students with

average proficiency level and independent reading level (2%) and average proficiency level and frustration reading level (1%) seems to be quite rare. At the third level, however, the picture becomes much distinct as it shows a steady increase in proportion from left to right. That is to say, the chance of getting students with low proficiency level and frustration reading level is ample (78%). Simultaneously, the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and instructional reading level seems to be quite small (4%). This may suggest that a large proportion of the study sample is composed of learners who experienced much difficulty to follow their university education. This was, in short, the general picture of the study-subjects.

In the College of Engineering and Technology, the proportion of subjects with high proficiency level and independent reading level appears to be quite small (3%) and that of subjects with high proficiency level and instructional reading level happens to be quite negligible (1%). Despite the view that students joining the college have better command of the English language, the data reveal that the chance of getting students with high proficiency level and independent or instructional reading level appears to be quite limited. In the second level, the proportion of subjects with average proficiency level and instructional reading level happens to be larger (22%) when compared with the proportion of subjects who had average proficiency level and independent reading level (3%). In the third level, the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and frustration reading level seems to be enormous (64%) whereas that of those subjects with low proficiency level and instructional reading level is relatively quite small (7%). This implies that the majority of learners joining the College of Engineering and Technology constitute those with low proficiency level and frustration reading level. Hence, it can be predicted that the majority of the students would face much difficulty to complete their education successfully.

Concerning the College of Business and Economics, the situation becomes a bit different. That is to mean, the chance of getting subjects with high proficiency level and independent reading level appeared to be almost nil (1%). Similarly, the proportion of subjects with average proficiency level and instructional reading level is quite small (6%). At the third level, we may notice a striking similarity with that of the College of Engineering and Technology. In other words, we may realize a steady increment in the proportion. In short, the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and frustration reading level appeared to be much more enormous (91%) than those subjects who attained low proficiency level and instructional reading level (2%) which might be quite negligible. This may indicate that the majority of learners in the particular college might face much difficulty in following their university education.

The situation becomes worst when we see the data pertaining to the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. Specifically, we can hardly find subjects with high proficiency level and nor can we find those with average proficiency level and independent or instructional reading level. What we might find is a learner with average proficiency but with frustration reading level (3%) which could be quite negligible. Unlike the rest of the colleges, almost all of the subjects sampled for the study in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities belonged to one category - low proficiency level and frustration reading level (94%).

We can observe a similar situation with the data related to the College of Agriculture. That is to say, we may notice the absence of subjects with high proficiency level and any of the reading levels. However, we could observe a small proportion of subjects (11%) with average proficiency level and instructional reading level. At the third level, the situation was as similar as those observed with the other colleges. In other words, the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and frustration reading level happened to be large (85%). At the same time, the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and instructional reading level were found to be quite small (4%) which could be

negligible. Likewise, this might suggest that a large proportion of the subjects could face much difficulty in following their university education.

With regard to the College of Natural and Computational Sciences, the situation seemed to be a little different. The chance of getting subjects with high proficiency level and independent reading level was almost insignificant (1%). At the second level, however, the situation became a little different. We could find learners with average proficiency level and with varying proportions of reading levels. Specifically, we could observe some of the subjects (20%) had average proficiency level and instructional reading level and quite an insignificant number of subjects (3%) and (2%) had average proficiency level and independent reading level; average proficiency level and frustration reading level, respectively. Like in other colleges, a similar situation happened at the third level of analysis. The highest proportion of the subjects (70%) had low proficiency level and frustration reading level and at the same time the proportion of subjects with low proficiency level and instructional reading level was quite insignificant (2%). Likewise, this might suggest that the largest proportion of the subjects in this particular college would experience much difficulty to follow their university education.

Findings from the Oral Proficiency Test

Nine subjects were selected from the three proficiency levels in order to work out how subjects belonging to the different proficiency levels differed from each other. These subjects took an Oral Proficiency Test which included the sub-skills: accuracy, fluency, and comprehension. Each of the researchers used the criteria below to assess the subjects' performance in the sub-skills:

Table 6: Scoring Criteria for Oral Proficiency Test

Sub-Skill	Criteria	Score
Accuracy	Uses accurate language	3
	Has some inaccuracies	2
	Full of inaccurate language	1
Fluency	Can speak freely and without hesitation	3
	Can speak somehow but with a lot of hesitations and interruptions	2
	Limited to 'yes' or 'no' responses; falls short of words to express ideas	1
Comprehension/ negotiation skills	Can understand and respond correctly and appropriately	3
	Can understand but experiences difficulty of expressing his ideas	2
	Lacks understanding and thus cannot respond correctly and appropriately	1

The score with which two of the researchers consented was taken for the score of the subjects in the particular sub-skill. Hence, the following output was obtained.

Table 7: Oral Proficiency Test Scores with respect to Proficiency Levels

Proficiency levels	Test code	Department	Sex	Accuracy			Fluency			Comprehension		
				1*	2	3	1	2	3	1	2	3
High	278	Geology	F			x			x			x
High	38	Accounting	M			x		x				x
High	411	Pre-engineering	F		x			x				x
Average	112	Agro-economics	F		x				x		x	
Average	339	Computer Science	M		x			x				x
Average	71	Sociology	M	x				x				x
Low	66	Sociology	F	x			x			x		
Low	87	Sociology	F		x			x				x
Low	122	Agro-economics	M	x			x			x		

*1= low score; 2= average score; and 3= high score

Based on the data in Table 7, an effort was made to depict the characteristics of subjects belonging to the three proficiency levels. The characterization was done in relation to the speaking sub-skills mentioned above. Hence, subjects who appeared to have attained high proficiency level used accurate language, could speak freely but with some hesitations, and understood language input and responded appropriately when they were engaged in oral communications. Regarding subjects who seemed to have average proficiency level, they used language with some inaccuracies, could speak freely but with a lot of hesitations, and showed some difficulty in understanding language input, but responded appropriately to input they had understood. Nevertheless, subjects belonging to low proficiency level used a language laden with a lot of inaccuracies. They hardly spoke with the target language; their responses were rather limited to 'yes' or 'no'. Thus, these subjects lacked understanding of the language and thus they could not respond to a language input accurately and appropriately.

Findings from Grade Reports

The subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 was correlated with the total test scores of the proficiency test and cloze test scores separately. The purpose of computing the correlation was to test if the proficiency level that the subjects had by the time they joined the university might have affected their EnLa 1011 scores. The correlation coefficients, thus, obtained were interpreted using Best's (2006) frame of reference: 0.00-0.20 = negligible; 0.20-0.40 = low; 0.40-0.60 = moderate; 0.60-0.80 = substantial; >0.80 = very high.

Table 8: Pearson's Correlation Coefficient between Proficiency Test Scores and EnLa 1011 Scores

College	total test scores and		cloze test scores and	
	EnLa1011 scores		EnLa1011 scores	
	r	strength	r	strength
College of Engineering and Technology	0.72	substantial	0.66	substantial
College of Natural and Computational Sciences	0.68	substantial	0.66	substantial
College of Agriculture	0.63	substantial	0.57	moderate
College of Business and Economics	0.54	moderate	0.57	moderate
College of Social Sciences and Humanities	0.48	moderate	0.35	low
General/ all subjects together	0.61	moderate	0.59	moderate

With regard to the correlation between total test scores and EnLa 1011 scores, the subjects that belonged to College of Engineering and Technology had the highest correlations (0.72) while those from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities had the least correlation coefficient (0.48). This might suggest that 52% of the subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 from the College of Engineering and Technology and 23% from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities accounted for their proficiency level when they joined the university. At the same time, 48% and 77% of the subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 might have been due to other unidentified factors. Furthermore, a somewhat similar picture was maintained in the correlation coefficients between cloze test scores and EnLa 1011 scores. Relatively, the highest correlation coefficient (0.66) was obtained from the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences whereas the least correlation coefficient (0.35) was from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities. This implies that only 44% of their scores in EnLa 1011 could be accounted for their reading levels when the subjects from College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences joined

Dilla University. On the other hand, only 12% of the scores in EnLa 1011 for those subjects from the College of Social Sciences and Humanities could be attributed to their reading levels. In this connection, 56% of the subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 in the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences could be attributable to other unidentified variables. Similarly, 88% of the subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 in the College of Social Sciences and Humanities was due to some other factor rather than language competence. This striking similarity in pattern between the two correlations (i.e. total test scores and EnLa 1011 scores on one hand and cloze test scores and EnLa 1011 scores on the other) might be due to the cloze test that constitutes the largest proportion (50%) of the total test scores. Furthermore, the other interesting result from the data is that the more high-scoring subjects a college has the bigger will be the coefficient of correlation and the smaller will be the proportion that accounts for other variables. Conversely, the more low-scoring subjects a college has the smaller will be the coefficient of correlation and the bigger will be the proportion that accounts for unanticipated variables.

Discussions on Research Outcomes

Taye 1999, Haregewoin 2008, and Mesafint's 2009 findings suggested that Ethiopian students who are joining higher education are linguistically ill-prepared. These findings seemed to have been supported by the outcome of the current study in which it was reported that 81.5% of the study-subjects were found to have low proficiency level when they joined Dilla University (Table 2). Furthermore, an equal number of subjects (81%) appeared to have been at frustration reading level (Table 4). Of 81.5%, 78% of the subjects were reported to be at frustration reading level, having low proficiency level (Table 5). This implies that the majority of the subjects hardly understand what they are reading. In university, students are expected to read a lot of materials to enrich their knowledge. If they lack the competence to read and understand written texts, how can they be expected to pursue their

tertiary education? As a result, we may realize how embarrassing this dismal situation is for different stakeholders: instructors, students' parents, the university, and the students themselves.

With regard to the subjects' performance in view of the different components of the proficiency tests, we may observe that 61%, 79%, and 76% of the subjects had low scores in grammar, cloze test, and dialogue completion, respectively. This may suggest that 61% could hardly recognize the correct grammatical form of a sentence or a word let alone using it in free speech and writing; 79% could not understand reading texts and thus were unable to complete gaps with accurate words; and 76% could not follow the line of discourse in a dialogue and as a result were unable to provide appropriate responses to be filled in the blank spaces. Moreover, the findings from the oral proficiency test suggested that the subjects selected from those having low proficiency level could hardly understand spoken input when they were engaged in oral discourse. More specifically, they responded inaccurately and inappropriately to the oral input. Besides, these subjects usually preferred to respond 'yes' or 'no' when they did not understand the spoken input. However, learners in universities are expected to present oral presentations and respond to questions orally during presentations. If students lack this important skill, how can they succeed in their tertiary education? Hence, developing the oral skills is quite pivotal in helping learners succeed in their higher education.

With regard to subjects' performance with respect to the components of the proficiency tests, it appears that high-scoring learners were placed in the College of Engineering and Technology. For instance, 4%, 6%, and 8.7% of the subjects who achieved high-scores in grammar, cloze test, and dialogue completion were all from the College of Engineering and Technology. In addition, 30% and 41.7% of the subjects that got average-scores were from the same college (Table 1). At the same time, the subjects who achieved low-scores were assigned to College of Social Sciences and Humanities and College of Business and Economics (Table 1). This may suggest that the number of students

who had good English language proficiency were very small in contrast to the large number of learners having deficiency in language proficiency.

Aina et al. (2013) and Andrade (2009) assert that language proficiency has direct bearings on students' academic achievement. That is to say, learners whose language proficiency is high are more likely to perform better than those with low proficiency level. In the current study, Pearson's Product Moment Correlation was used to find out if the subjects' language proficiency had effects on their performance of Communicative English Skills (EnLa 1011) course. Towards this end, two correlations were computed between: (1) the total scores of the proficiency tests and EnLa 1011 scores; and (2) cloze test scores of the proficiency test and EnLa 1011 scores (Table 8). Based on Best's (2006) frame of reference, subjects from College of Engineering and Technology, College of Agriculture, and College of Natural and Computational Sciences seemed to have yielded strong correlations (0.72, 0.63, and 0.68, respectively) between total test scores and EnLa 1011 scores. This means that 52%, 40%, and 46% of the subjects' EnLa 1011 scores were due to their language proficiency. The rest proportions (i.e. 48%, 60%, and 54%) could be due to other variables such as quality of test construction, language instruction, learning environment, learner commitment, and other unidentified factors. Regarding the correlation between cloze test scores and EnLa 1011 scores, only subjects from the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences achieved to have strong correlations (0.66). More specifically, 44% of the subjects' scores in EnLa 1011 were due to their language proficiency. The remaining 56% might be attributed to factors mentioned above. In short, the data suggest that the subjects' EnLa 1011 scores were partly due to their language proficiency when they joined Dilla University.

Summary and Conclusion

Earlier studies indicated that Ethiopian learners' English language proficiency was declining from time to time. Furthermore, they stressed that the majority of them were linguistically deficient when they joined universities in the country. However, none of the studies attempted to reveal how deficient the learners were by classifying them under different proficiency levels. In order to fill this gap, the researchers took a sample of 368 freshman students from five colleges and administered the proficiency tests. Then, the subjects' test scores were used to classify them into three proficiency levels. Next, the researchers selected a total of 9 subjects (i.e. 3 from each proficiency level) for the oral proficiency test. During the test, the researchers applied a scoring criteria to rate the subjects' performance.

Regarding the proficiency level of the total number of sample subjects, the majority (81.5%) had low proficiency level, some of them (16.8%) had average proficiency level whereas quite a few of them (1.6%) had high proficiency level. This may suggest that the majority (81.5%) lacked the required proficiency to succeed in their university education. The analysis of the subjects' reading levels had revealed that it had a striking similarity with that of their proficiency levels. While the majority of the subjects (81%) were at frustration reading level, some of them (16%) were reported to have attained instructional reading level. Quite a few of them (3%) were at independent reading level. This indicates that the majority could face much difficulty in understanding written texts despite requiring assistance from instructors. Hence, the majority of the subjects were found to be inadequately prepared to pursue their university education.

Except in the dictation test, the subjects' performance had shown discernible pattern in grammar, cloze test and dialogue completion tests. It was shown that the majority (61%, 72%, and 76%) had scored low scores on these tests. This may suggest that the majority of the

subjects lack grammatical as well as discourse competences which were believed to be quite essential in university education.

The oral proficiency test revealed that there was a distinct difference between subjects belonging to different proficiency levels. Specifically, subjects who were drawn from high proficiency level demonstrated high understanding of spoken input and responded accurately and appropriately whereas those from average proficiency level showed some difficulty in understanding the spoken inputs and responded with hesitations. On top of that, subjects from low proficiency level exhibited that they had much difficulty in understanding the spoken inputs and thus were unable to respond accurately and appropriately. Their responses were limited to 'yes' or 'no'. Therefore, the majority of the subjects might have much difficulty in expressing their ideas orally or in maintaining oral communications with their counterparts and instructors.

The correlation coefficients showed that the presence of high correlation between the subjects' EnLa 1011 scores and the aggregate scores of the proficiency tests on one hand and the subjects' EnLa 1011 scores and the cloze test scores. This high correlation was shown in the College of Engineering and Technology and College of Natural and Computational Sciences. Besides, the analysis revealed that the subjects' current proficiency level partly affected their scores on EnLa 1011 (Communicative English Skills course). Hence, this implies that students should have the required proficiency level in order to succeed in their university education.

Implications

The current study may have great implications for curriculum planning and teacher training. On the basis of the research outcome, we learned that the majority of the subjects had deficiencies in language macro skills. Specifically, the subjects had experienced much difficulty in understanding written texts and spoken inputs. Since university

education requires learners to have such competencies, they should develop these before they join the universities. In order to achieve this, students should be trained by well-qualified teachers at primary and secondary schools. Hence, due attention should be given to teacher training. Furthermore, there should be periodical and professional evaluation of English teachers. Even at university level, there should be some mechanism to compensate for learners' linguistic deficiencies. This can be achieved by making some modifications to the curriculum. Specifically, every department should see that students are given one or two English courses throughout the life of the programme. Besides, the university should establish short-term training centers for learners to develop their linguistic skills.

Recommendations

On the basis of the findings, the following recommendations were given so that the Ministry of Education, Dilla University, and the English Department should act accordingly to alleviate the problem:

- The Ministry of Education should exercise strict control over the administration of university entrance examination and thus ensure that only students with the right proficiency level should be allowed to join universities.
- The Ministry of Education should exercise gate-keeping responsibility by raising the cut-off-points for university entrance examination.
- The Ministry of Education should oversee the quality of language education at secondary, junior, and elementary schools.
- The Ministry of Education should oversee the quality of teacher training programmes.
- The Ministry of Education should revise the existing modular curriculum so that universities could provide an intensive language improvement courses for freshman students before they are allowed to join their respective departments.

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- The university should establish free access centers (i.e. language laboratories) for students to practice the English language at their free time.
 - The Department of English should organize short-term trainings for students with language difficulties.
 - The Department of English should revise the Communicative English Skills course so that students could get more reading and listening practices.

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