

Original Article

Baseline Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) Proficiency and Skill-Specific Gaps of Freshmen Students: Basis for an English Proficiency Enhancement Program

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Abstract. English language proficiency is a critical determinant of academic success in higher education, particularly in contexts where English serves as the primary medium of instruction. This study assessed the baseline English language proficiency and identified skill-specific gaps among freshmen students at San Pablo Colleges using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). A descriptive-comparative research design was employed, involving 205 first-year students from various academic programs. Data were collected using a CEFR-aligned assessment tool that measured four macro-skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The data were analyzed using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques. Descriptive statistics, including frequency, percentage, mean (M), and standard deviation (SD), were used to assess overall proficiency levels and examine variation across macro-skills. Inferential analyses, specifically independent samples t-tests and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA), were conducted to assess differences in proficiency when grouped by sex and academic program, with the level of significance set at 0.05. Findings revealed that the majority of respondents were classified at the B2 (Upper Intermediate) and C1 (Advanced) proficiency levels, indicating generally adequate readiness for academic engagement. However, disparities across macro-skills were evident, with reading obtaining the highest mean score (M = 61.18) and speaking the lowest (M = 50.25), highlighting a persistent gap in productive language skills, particularly oral communication. Results of the inferential analyses indicated that differences in proficiency across sex and academic program were not statistically significant, suggesting a relatively uniform distribution of language competencies among the respondents.

Keywords: CEFR; Communicative competence; English language proficiency; Higher education; Language assessment; Philippines.

English language proficiency remains a critical determinant of academic achievement, graduate employability, and meaningful participation in the global knowledge economy, particularly within English-medium instruction (EMI) contexts. As EMI continues to expand across higher education systems worldwide, proficiency in English is no longer merely an academic requirement but a foundational competency

that enables students to access disciplinary knowledge, engage in scholarly discourse, and perform effectively in diverse academic and professional settings. Empirical evidence suggests that students' success in EMI environments is strongly influenced by their linguistic competence, which directly affects comprehension, participation, and overall academic performance (Feng et al., 2023; Shepard & Rose, 2023). In the Philippine context, where English functions as a primary medium of instruction, higher education institutions are increasingly expected to produce graduates who are not only academically prepared but also communicatively competent and globally competitive. This expectation is consistent with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), particularly SDG 4.7, which emphasizes the development of skills necessary for lifelong learning and global citizenship. Despite sustained exposure to English instruction, many students continue to struggle to use the language effectively in academic contexts.

A persistent issue highlighted in recent literature is the imbalance between learners' receptive and productive language skills. While students often demonstrate relatively stronger abilities in reading and listening, they encounter challenges in speaking and writing, especially in tasks that require critical thinking, spontaneous expression, and structured academic argumentation. Research indicates that the development of productive skills is closely linked to opportunities for meaningful language use, which are often limited in traditional instructional settings (Sun, 2022; Tsang & Lee, 2023). Furthermore, writing proficiency, a crucial component of academic success, remains a concern, as learners struggle to organize ideas, apply appropriate academic conventions, and express complex arguments effectively (Li & Li, 2022; Kim et al., 2023). These challenges suggest that students may possess foundational comprehension skills but cannot actively produce language in ways that meet academic and professional expectations.

Recent developments in second language acquisition research further emphasize the importance of active language use in facilitating deeper learning. Contemporary perspectives highlight that language production plays a crucial role in enhancing cognitive processing, developing metalinguistic awareness, and strengthening communicative competence. In particular, speaking and writing are viewed not merely as outputs of learning but as essential processes through which learners construct meaning and refine their linguistic abilities (Sun, 2022; Tsang & Lee, 2023). These perspectives underscore the need for pedagogical approaches that promote active engagement, authentic communication, and the integration of higher-order thinking skills in language learning. Within higher education, such approaches are particularly important, as students are expected to articulate ideas clearly, engage in critical discourse, and demonstrate discipline-specific communication skills.

To systematically assess language proficiency and identify skill-specific gaps, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) remains a widely recognized, internationally benchmarked framework. Its structured proficiency descriptors enable institutions to evaluate learners' abilities across macro-skills and classify them according to standardized levels of competence. In EMI contexts, CEFR-aligned assessments have been utilized to provide diagnostic insights into students' strengths and weaknesses, thereby informing curriculum design and instructional interventions (Aizawa, 2024; Feng et al., 2023). Despite its growing adoption, however, there remains a need for localized applications that generate institution-specific data, particularly in Southeast Asian and Philippine higher education contexts.

In the Philippine setting, there is a notable scarcity of empirical studies that provide a detailed, skill-based analysis of students' English proficiency upon entry to higher education. Existing research often focuses on general proficiency levels without disaggregating performance across macro-skills, thereby limiting institutions' ability to design targeted and responsive interventions. This gap is significant, as the absence of nuanced diagnostic data may result in generalized language programs that do not adequately address learners' specific needs. Moreover, limited efforts to integrate proficiency assessment with program development and expert validation further constrain the practical application of research findings.

Anchored on these theoretical and empirical considerations, the present study aims to determine the baseline CEFR proficiency levels and identify skill-specific gaps among freshmen students at San Pablo Colleges. Specifically, it examines students' profiles by sex and CEFR proficiency levels, analyzes their performance across the four macro-skills, ranks the relative difficulty of these skills, and determines whether significant differences exist when grouped by sex. Furthermore, the study seeks to develop a contextually grounded English Proficiency Enhancement Program tailored to the identified needs of learners and to evaluate its acceptability among experts. By generating institution-specific empirical evidence, this study advances language education by informing

curriculum development, strengthening instructional practices, and supporting policy initiatives aligned with Sustainable Development Goal 4. Ultimately, it addresses a critical gap in the literature by linking proficiency assessment with targeted intervention, thereby promoting more effective, inclusive, and globally responsive higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-comparative research design to examine the baseline English language proficiency of freshmen students and to identify skill-specific gaps across the four macro-skills: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. The descriptive component enabled systematic profiling of respondents and analysis of proficiency distributions by the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) levels, providing a standardized, internationally comparable measure of language competence.

Concurrently, the comparative component facilitated examination of potential differences in English language proficiency across groups defined by selected profile variables, particularly academic program and sex. This design is appropriate for investigating naturally occurring conditions without manipulating variables, allowing objective measurement of existing proficiency levels and the identification of statistically significant differences across groups. Moreover, the design provides an empirical basis for developing targeted instructional interventions and language support programs within higher education contexts.

Research Participants

The participants of the study consisted of 205 freshmen students enrolled in various academic programs at San Pablo Colleges, including Nursing, Arts and Sciences, Accountancy, Radiologic Technology, Business Management, Computer Studies, and Physical Therapy. The sample represented a diverse academic population, enabling cross-disciplinary comparison of English proficiency levels.

A total enumeration sampling approach was employed, wherein all available freshmen students within the identified programs during the data collection period were included in the study. This approach was deemed feasible and appropriate due to the manageable size of the target population and the institutional accessibility of respondents within a single academic setting. By including the entire population of interest, the study minimized sampling error. It enhanced the internal validity and representativeness of the findings, thereby providing a more comprehensive baseline assessment of students' English language proficiency.

The demographic distribution revealed a predominance of female respondents (75.1%), which reflects enrollment trends commonly observed in health-related and allied programs. However, this imbalance may limit the generalizability of the findings across more gender-balanced populations and should be considered when interpreting comparative results. The inclusion criteria required participants to: (1) be officially enrolled as first-year students at San Pablo Colleges; (2) be currently taking courses requiring English as a medium of instruction; and (3) provide informed consent to participate in the study. Students who did not complete the assessment or submitted invalid responses were excluded from the final dataset.

Research Instrument

The study used a researcher-developed English language proficiency assessment instrument explicitly aligned with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to ensure standardization and international comparability of results. The instrument was designed to comprehensively assess students' performance across the four macro-skills of language learning: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. Each component of the assessment captured distinct yet interrelated dimensions of language competence. The reading and listening sections focused on receptive skills, assessing students' ability to comprehend written texts and spoken discourse through tasks that required interpretation, inference, and understanding of explicit and implicit meanings. In contrast, the writing and speaking components evaluated productive skills, emphasizing students' ability to generate coherent, grammatically accurate, and contextually appropriate responses in both written and oral forms.

The structure and content of the instrument were guided by CEFR proficiency descriptors, ensuring that the tasks corresponded to internationally recognized standards of language ability. Scores obtained for each macro-skill were aggregated and subsequently mapped to corresponding CEFR levels, ranging from A1 (Beginner) to C2

(Proficient), to facilitate standardized interpretation of students' overall and skill-specific proficiency. This mapping process allowed for a nuanced analysis of learners' strengths and weaknesses across different language domains.

To ensure methodological rigor, the instrument underwent a comprehensive validation process involving a panel of five experts in English language teaching, applied linguistics, and educational assessment. The validation focused on the relevance, clarity, coherence, and alignment of the assessment tasks with the CEFR descriptors and the study's objectives. The instrument achieved a Content Validity Index (CVI) of 0.92, indicating high validity. Furthermore, a pilot test was conducted with 30 students from a comparable higher education institution to establish instrument reliability and assess internal consistency. The results yielded an overall Cronbach's alpha coefficient of $\alpha = 0.91$, demonstrating excellent reliability and confirming that the instrument consistently measured the intended constructs of English language proficiency. Through rigorous validation and reliability testing, the instrument was deemed appropriate and methodologically sound for assessing the English proficiency levels of the target population.

Data Gathering Procedure

Prior to data collection, a formal request for permission was submitted to the appropriate institutional authorities of San Pablo Colleges. Upon approval, coordination was undertaken with program heads and faculty members to facilitate the administration of the proficiency assessment. The CEFR-aligned assessment was administered in a controlled setting to ensure standardization of testing conditions. Participants were provided with clear instructions regarding the purpose of the study, procedures, and ethical considerations. Informed consent was secured prior to participation. Data collection was conducted within a specified timeframe, after which all responses were compiled, checked for completeness, and encoded for analysis. The collected data were securely stored and handled in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using both descriptive and inferential statistical techniques to ensure a comprehensive and rigorous examination of the data. Descriptive statistics, including frequency counts and percentages, were used to summarize the respondents' demographic profile and present the distribution of their CEFR proficiency levels. To assess students' performance across the four macro-skills—listening, reading, speaking, and writing—mean scores and standard deviations were computed. These measures provided an overall estimate of central tendency and variability, allowing for the identification of patterns of strengths and weaknesses among the respondents. Furthermore, the computed mean scores were used to rank the macro-skills by relative difficulty, thereby providing a data-driven basis for identifying priority areas for instructional intervention.

To examine potential differences in proficiency levels across selected grouping variables, inferential statistical analyses were employed. Specifically, an independent-samples t-test was used to determine whether there are significant differences in language proficiency across sex groups. At the same time, a one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to assess differences across academic programs. These statistical procedures were selected due to their appropriateness in comparing group means and determining whether observed variations are statistically significant rather than attributable to random chance. A predetermined level of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$) was used to make decisions.

To ensure the validity and reliability of the quantitative data, the research instrument underwent rigorous validation. Content validity was established through expert evaluation by specialists in language education and research, who assessed the instrument for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the constructs being measured. Revisions were made in response to their recommendations to enhance the instrument's overall quality. Reliability was determined through pilot testing, and internal consistency was measured using Cronbach's alpha coefficient, with values meeting the acceptable threshold of 0.70 or higher, indicating that the instrument yields consistent and dependable results.

Although the study is primarily quantitative in nature, measures to ensure methodological rigor and trustworthiness were also observed. Data collection procedures were standardized to minimize bias, and responses were treated with strict confidentiality to encourage honest and accurate reporting. Additionally, appropriate statistical assumptions for the t-test and ANOVA, such as normality and homogeneity of variance,

were considered prior to analysis to ensure the validity of the results. These procedures collectively strengthen the credibility, dependability, and overall integrity of the study’s findings.

Ethical Considerations

The study strictly adhered to established ethical research standards. Approval was secured from the institutional authorities prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the research process. No personally identifiable information was collected, and all data were used solely for academic purposes. Data were securely stored in password-protected files and handled in accordance with principles of transparency, legitimate purpose, and proportionality. By upholding these ethical standards, the study ensured the protection of participants’ rights and the integrity of the research process.

Results and Discussion

Table 1 reveals a markedly disproportionate distribution, with females comprising the majority of the sample (n = 154, 75.12%), while males represent a smaller proportion (n = 51, 24.88%). This indicates that the dataset is female-dominated, suggesting that the study’s findings are more reflective of female respondents’ perspectives, experiences, and performance patterns. Such an imbalance is not uncommon in education-related and language-learning studies, where female participation tends to be higher due to greater engagement in academic and communicative domains.

Table 1. Profile of Respondents According to Sex

Sex	Number of Respondents	Percentage
Female	154	75.12%
Male	51	24.88%

From an analytical standpoint, this predominance of female respondents may be associated with established trends in educational research indicating that female learners often demonstrate higher participation, motivation, and engagement in language-related tasks. Recent empirical evidence suggests that females tend to exhibit stronger self-regulated learning strategies and interpersonal engagement, which contribute positively to language proficiency outcomes (Dan et al., 2024). Similarly, studies have shown that female learners frequently display greater interest and perceived need for language learning, which can influence both participation rates and academic persistence (Lasekan, 2024). These tendencies may partially explain why female respondents constitute a larger proportion of the sample in the present study.

However, it is equally important to recognize that the unequal distribution does not necessarily imply superiority of one sex over the other in terms of competence or performance. Contemporary research underscores that, while gender differences may exist in learning strategies, motivation, and engagement, these differences are often context-dependent and not always statistically significant in terms of actual learning outcomes (Sandsør & Brevik, 2024). Moreover, variations in language learning experiences are influenced by sociocultural factors, classroom dynamics, and access to learning resources rather than sex alone (Huang, 2024). This suggests that the observed distribution should be interpreted cautiously, particularly when drawing generalizations about proficiency or achievement.

In a broader sense, the dominance of female respondents may also reflect gendered patterns in educational enrollment and program selection, especially in teacher education and language-related disciplines. Literature indicates that female students are more likely to engage in cognitively oriented and academically structured activities, whereas male students may exhibit different learning preferences and engagement styles (Kheder & Rouabhia, 2023). Consequently, the higher female representation in the sample could be indicative of broader systemic and sociocultural trends rather than purely incidental.

The findings carry several important implications. First, the skewed sex distribution suggests the need for cautious interpretation of subsequent analyses, particularly those involving comparisons across groups, as the smaller male sample may limit statistical power and representativeness. Second, educators and curriculum designers should consider gender-responsive pedagogical approaches that address diverse learning preferences, ensuring that both male and female students are equally engaged and supported. Third, future research should aim for a more balanced sample to enhance generalizability and allow for more robust inferential analysis of sex-related

differences. Finally, institutions may need to explore strategies to encourage greater male participation in language and education programs, thereby promoting inclusivity and diversity in academic environments. Overall, while the results highlight a clear predominance of female respondents, the discussion underscores that gender should be viewed as a contextual and interacting variable rather than a deterministic factor in educational outcomes.

Table 2 presents the distribution of respondents by proficiency level according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The findings reveal that the largest proportion of respondents falls under B2 – Upper Intermediate (n = 98, 47.80%), followed by C1 – Advanced (n = 56, 27.32%) and B1 – Intermediate (n = 35, 17.07%). Only a small percentage reached C2 – Proficient (n = 10, 4.88%), while very few were classified under A2 – Elementary (n = 5, 2.44%) and A1 – Beginner (n = 1, 0.49%). Overall, 80.00% of the respondents are situated within the B2–C2 levels, indicating that the majority are already functioning as independent to proficient users of the English language.

Table 2. *Respondents' CEFR Proficiency Level*

CEFR Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage
C2 - Proficient	10	4.88%
C1 - Advanced	56	27.32%
B2 - Upper Intermediate	98	47.80%
B1 - Intermediate	35	17.07%
A2 - Elementary	5	2.44%
A1 - Beginner	1	0.49%
Total	205	100.00%

The predominance of B2-level learners suggests that most respondents can comprehend complex texts, interact with relative fluency, and produce organized written and spoken discourse. This aligns with findings that learners at the B2 level demonstrate increased communicative autonomy and strategic competence necessary for academic engagement (Liao, 2022; Huang & Tsai, 2024). In higher education contexts, such proficiency is often considered a threshold level that enables students to participate meaningfully in academic discourse and content learning delivered in English (Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2023). The substantial proportion of C1 learners further indicates that a considerable number of respondents are already approaching advanced proficiency, characterized by flexibility in language use and the ability to express ideas with clarity and precision across contexts.

Despite this favorable distribution, the relatively low percentage of respondents at the C2 level highlights a gap between advanced proficiency and mastery. Progression from C1 to C2 requires not only linguistic accuracy but also a high degree of discourse sophistication, critical thinking, and pragmatic control. Studies have shown that even learners enrolled in English-medium instruction programs continue to experience academic language challenges, particularly in productive skills such as speaking and writing (Cui & Gardiner, 2025). Moreover, proficiency alone does not guarantee academic success, as other factors, such as self-efficacy and learning strategies, also play a role (Ihlenfeldt & Rios, 2023). This suggests that while many respondents are already advanced users, targeted instructional support is still necessary to facilitate movement toward near-native proficiency.

The minimal representation of learners in the A1–A2 levels indicates that the cohort has largely surpassed the foundational stages of language acquisition. However, even a small number of low-proficiency learners underscores the need for inclusive and differentiated instruction. Research emphasizes that heterogeneous proficiency levels within a classroom require adaptive teaching approaches, including scaffolding, remediation, and proficiency-based grouping (Wudthayagorn et al., 2025). Furthermore, structured language support programs and general English instruction have been shown to significantly improve proficiency, particularly among lower-level learners (Huang, 2024). Thus, while the overall proficiency profile is strong, instructional practices must remain responsive to varying learner needs.

The findings suggest that English language instruction should be strategically aligned with learners' proficiency profiles. Given that the majority are at B2 and C1 levels, there is a need to shift from foundational language teaching toward advanced academic literacy development, including argumentation, critical writing, discipline-specific communication, and oral presentation skills. Additionally, institutions should implement CEFR-aligned diagnostic and placement systems to ensure that instruction is appropriately differentiated and responsive to

learners’ proficiency levels (Liao, 2022).

Moreover, targeted interventions should be designed to support learners in progressing from B2/C1 to C2, particularly through exposure to authentic language use, research-based tasks, and higher-order communicative activities. At the same time, support mechanisms such as bridging programs and language enhancement initiatives should be provided for learners in the lower proficiency bands to ensure equitable learning opportunities. Ultimately, the findings highlight the importance of a balanced, differentiated instructional approach that not only supports the development of higher-level learners but also reinforces foundational skills for those who require it.

Table 3 presents the respondents’ mean scores and standard deviations across the four macro-skills of language proficiency. The results show that reading obtained the highest mean score ($M = 61.18$, $SD = 12.08$), corresponding to the C1 (Advanced) level, while speaking recorded the lowest mean score ($M = 50.25$, $SD = 11.48$), which falls under the B1 (Intermediate) level. This contrast highlights a clear disparity between receptive and productive language competencies, indicating that while students demonstrate advanced reading proficiency, their oral communication skills remain comparatively underdeveloped. This pattern is consistent with established findings in second language acquisition, where learners tend to acquire comprehension skills more readily than productive abilities (Ma, 2024; Huang, 2024; Huang & Gráf, 2025).

Table 3. *Respondents’ Mean Scores Across Four Macro-Skills*

Macro - Skills	Mean Score	SD	CEFR Level	Rank
Reading	61.18	12.08	C1 (Advanced)	1 st
Listening	58.24	11.07	B2 (Upper Intermediate)	2 nd
Writing	56.17	12.13	B2 (Upper Intermediate)	3 rd
Speaking	50.25	11.48	B1 (Intermediate)	4 th

Note: A1 (Beginner): 1-30% A2 (Elementary): 31-40% B1 (Intermediate): 41-50% B2 (Upper Intermediate): 51-60% C1 (Advanced): 61-70% C2 (Proficient): 71-100%

The dominance of reading proficiency suggests that respondents can process written texts effectively, including understanding main ideas, identifying supporting details, and engaging with academic materials. This finding aligns with recent studies emphasizing that reading is often the most developed skill among learners due to its strong integration in formal education and frequent exposure to text-based materials (Kim et al., 2023). Moreover, reading proficiency is closely linked to vocabulary development and overall language competence, serving as a foundational skill that supports the acquisition of other macro-skills (Uchida & Negishi, 2025; Yu et al., 2022). The relatively high performance in listening further indicates that respondents can comprehend spoken input, although not at the same level as reading. This may be attributed to limited exposure to authentic listening environments or to variability in speech input, both of which can affect comprehension (Aizawa, 2024).

In contrast, the lower mean scores in writing, particularly in speaking, highlight persistent challenges in productive language use. Writing, while moderately developed, still requires learners to organize ideas coherently, apply grammatical accuracy, and demonstrate appropriate academic discourse conventions. Research shows that writing proficiency, especially in academic contexts, demands higher cognitive processing and explicit instruction, which may explain its relatively lower performance compared to receptive skills (Kim et al., 2023). More notably, speaking emerged as the weakest macro-skill, indicating that respondents may experience difficulties in oral fluency, pronunciation, and spontaneous language production. This finding is consistent with empirical evidence suggesting that speaking is often the most challenging skill for language learners due to factors such as anxiety, limited practice opportunities, and lack of confidence (Alamri & Qasem, 2024).

The observed disparity between receptive and productive skills underscores the need to view language proficiency as multidimensional rather than uniform. While learners may demonstrate adequate comprehension, this does not necessarily translate into effective production. Studies in English-medium instruction contexts further confirm that learners with relatively high receptive skills may still struggle with oral and written expression, particularly in academic settings (Cui & Gardiner, 2025). Thus, the results suggest that although respondents possess a solid foundation in understanding language, there remains a critical need to strengthen their ability to produce language effectively and confidently.

The findings carry important pedagogical implications. First, instructional practices should prioritize developing productive skills, particularly speaking, through communicative and task-based approaches that provide learners

with ample opportunities to use authentic language. Second, writing instruction should be enhanced through explicit teaching of academic discourse, structured feedback, and process-oriented writing activities to improve coherence and accuracy. Third, while maintaining strong instruction in reading and listening, educators should integrate these skills with speaking and writing tasks to promote balanced language development. Finally, institutions should consider implementing CEFR-aligned enhancement programs that specifically target productive competencies, ensuring that learners progress toward higher levels of communicative proficiency.

Table 4 revealed no statistically significant differences in CEFR-aligned macro-skills proficiency across sex groups. As reflected, the computed t-values for Reading ($t = 0.87$, $p = 0.386$), Listening ($t = 0.65$, $p = 0.517$), Writing ($t = 0.92$, $p = 0.359$), and Speaking ($t = 0.48$, $p = 0.631$) all failed to reach the level of statistical significance at $\alpha = 0.05$. A closer examination of the mean scores further supports this finding: male and female respondents demonstrated closely aligned performance across all four macro-skills, with only marginal differences. These variations are not only statistically non-significant but also educationally negligible, indicating that learners' proficiency levels are generally comparable across sexes. In essence, the results suggest that within the context of this study, sex does not function as a determinant of English language proficiency.

Table 4. *Test of Significant Difference in CEFR Macro-Skills When Grouped According to Sex*

Macro Skill	Sex	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Interpretation
Reading	Male	61.32	10.84	0.87	0.386	Not Significant
	Female	62.75	11.92			
Listening	Male	58.41	11.76	0.65	0.517	Not Significant
	Female	59.63	12.88			
Writing	Male	55.27	13.95	0.92	0.359	Not Significant
	Female	57.84	14.62			
Speaking	Male	50.96	11.43	0.48	0.631	Not Significant
	Female	51.88	12.57			

Note: A1 (Beginner): 1-30% A2 (Elementary): 31-40% B1 (Intermediate): 41-50% B2 (Upper Intermediate): 51-60% C1 (Advanced): 61-70% C2 (Proficient): 71-100%

This interpretation is reinforced by the statistical pattern observed in the dataset, wherein the magnitude of differences between male and female groups is minimal and lacks substantive meaning. The absence of significant variation across both receptive (reading and listening) and productive (writing and speaking) skills points to a shared learning trajectory among respondents, suggesting that language development is shaped more by common instructional and contextual experiences than by demographic distinctions. Such a pattern reflects a learning environment in which opportunities, exposure, and expectations for English language use are relatively uniform across sexes, thereby producing comparable outcomes in CEFR-aligned competencies.

From a theoretical and empirical standpoint, the findings align with a growing body of research that posits that gender differences in second- and foreign-language learning are neither universal nor consistently predictive of performance outcomes. Denies et al. (2022) demonstrated that, while gender gaps may appear in certain contexts, these are typically small and highly variable across languages, skills, and sociocultural settings. Notably, English was found to be among the more “gender-neutral” languages, with performance patterns that fluctuated depending on contextual influences rather than on biological or demographic determinants. This lends strong support to the present findings, where no stable or systematic advantage was observed for either male or female learners.

Similarly, the work of Curle et al. (2024) in English-medium instruction contexts underscores that language proficiency, rather than gender, is the strongest predictor of academic success. This perspective is particularly relevant to the present study, as it shifts the analytical focus away from sex-based comparisons toward more meaningful determinants such as competence, engagement, and instructional quality. In the same vein, Dan et al. (2024) highlighted that although male and female learners may differ in certain dimensions of self-regulated learning and classroom interaction, these differences do not necessarily translate into consistent disparities in language proficiency. Thus, the current findings affirm that sex is, at best, a peripheral variable in explaining CEFR-related outcomes and should not be overemphasized in interpreting language performance.

The non-significant result in speaking proficiency merits particular attention, given that productive skills are often associated with affective variables such as anxiety, confidence, and willingness to communicate. However,

evidence from Alamri and Qasem (2024) indicates that foreign-language speaking anxiety does not differ significantly between male and female learners, thereby providing a plausible explanation for the comparable speaking performance observed in this study. This suggests that both groups may be experiencing similar affective conditions in language use, and that speaking proficiency is more likely influenced by instructional opportunities, communicative exposure, and practice intensity rather than by sex. Furthermore, Sandsør and Brevik (2024) emphasized that gender-related trends in language learning are dynamic and context-sensitive, reinforcing the notion that the absence of significant differences in the present study reflects a localized and context-bound reality rather than a universal rule.

Taken together, these findings advance a critical insight: CEFR-aligned English proficiency among the respondents is fundamentally a function of educational experience rather than demographic categorization. The consistency of performance across sexes suggests that learners are benefiting from a relatively equitable instructional environment, in which access to learning resources, pedagogical approaches, and assessment practices does not disproportionately advantage one group over another. This is a positive indicator of instructional fairness and aligns with broader educational goals of inclusivity and equity.

From a pedagogical standpoint, the findings call for a shift away from gender-based assumptions in language instruction. Since the evidence clearly indicates that male and female learners perform at comparable levels, instructional design should instead prioritize skill-specific and needs-based interventions, particularly in areas where overall performance may be lower, such as speaking and writing. This reinforces the importance of data-driven instruction, in which decisions are anchored in actual learner performance rather than preconceived notions about gender differences.

Moreover, the results strongly support the adoption of inclusive and gender-responsive pedagogies that uphold equity without resorting to unnecessary differentiation. In alignment with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (Quality Education), educators are encouraged to create learning environments that are accessible, supportive, and responsive to all learners, regardless of sex. This includes providing equal opportunities for participation, fostering collaborative learning, and ensuring that classroom practices do not inadvertently reinforce gender biases.

Finally, the study highlights the need to focus on more substantive determinants of language proficiency, such as motivation, exposure to authentic language use, self-regulated learning strategies, and the quality of instructional delivery. As supported by Denies et al. (2022) and Curle et al. (2024), these factors exert a far more significant influence on language outcomes than demographic variables. Consequently, future research may benefit from exploring these dimensions in greater depth, particularly within the framework of CEFR-aligned instruction and assessment. In sum, the findings affirm that there is no significant difference in CEFR proficiency levels across sex groups, thereby reinforcing the view that language learning is a complex, multifactorial process that transcends simplistic demographic classifications.

Proposed English Proficiency Enhancement Program

Grounded in the findings of the study, which revealed a concentration of students within the B2 and C1 proficiency levels alongside notable gaps in productive skills—particularly speaking—a targeted English Proficiency Enhancement Program is proposed. While the respondents' overall proficiency suggests readiness for academic engagement, the identified imbalance between receptive and productive competencies highlights the need for structured interventions to promote active language use. In alignment with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), the proposed program aims to strengthen communicative competence by addressing specific skill deficiencies and supporting learners in achieving more balanced language development.

The proposed program is anchored on the principle of communicative competence, which emphasizes not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to use language appropriately and effectively in real-life contexts. Drawing on the theoretical framework of Canale and Swain (1980), the program integrates linguistic competence (knowledge of grammar and vocabulary), sociolinguistic competence (appropriateness of language use), and strategic competence (the ability to overcome communication breakdowns). This multidimensional approach ensures that learners are equipped to engage in meaningful interaction across academic and professional settings.

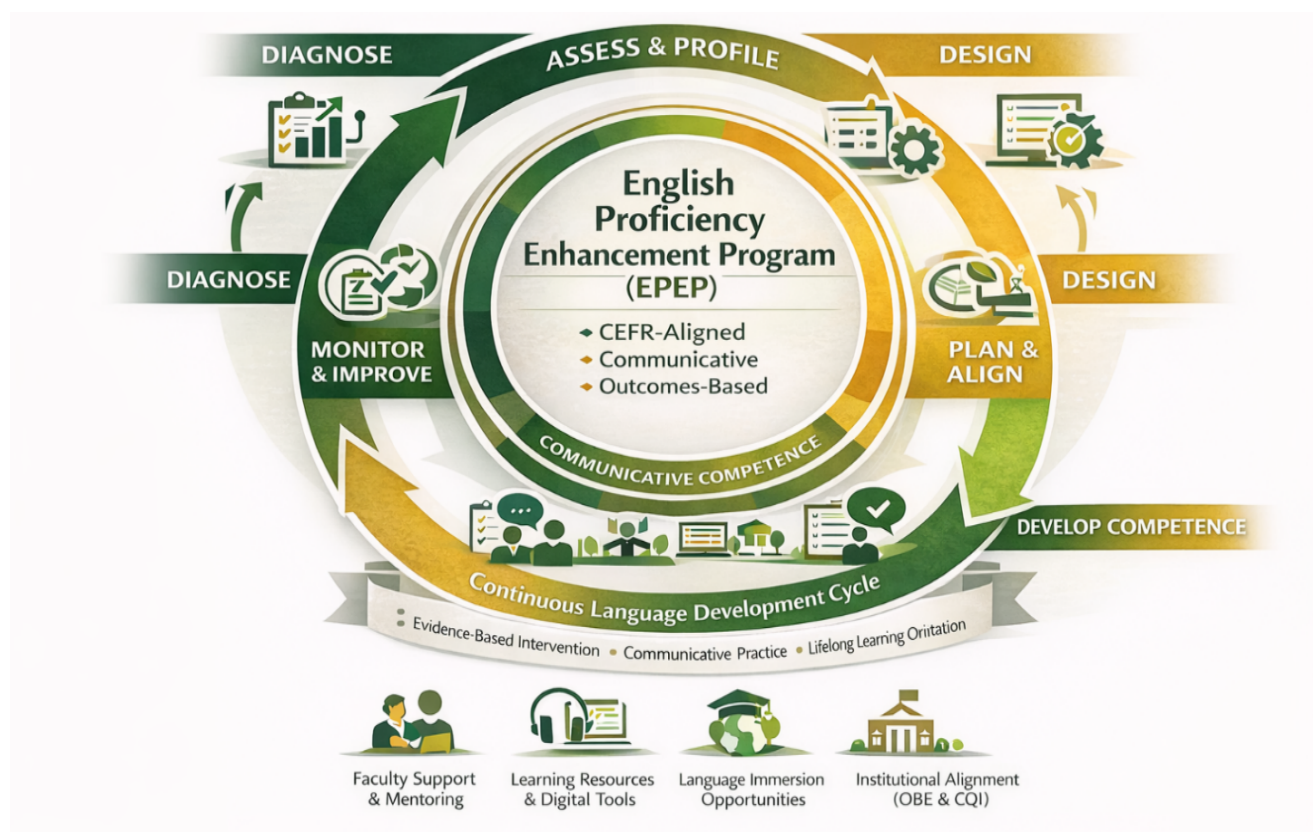


Figure 1. CEFR-Aligned Communicative Competence Enhancement Framework

Core Components of the Program

A. Speaking Development Module (Primary Focus)

Given that speaking emerged as the most difficult macro-skill, this module serves as the central component of the program. It is designed to provide learners with structured and sustained opportunities for oral language production. Activities such as role-playing, simulations, academic discussions, and presentations are incorporated to simulate authentic communicative situations. These tasks aim to enhance fluency, pronunciation, and confidence while encouraging spontaneous language use. By engaging students in interactive and collaborative activities, the module addresses both cognitive and affective barriers to speaking.

B. Writing Enhancement Module

Recognizing that writing also poses a moderate level of difficulty, this module focuses on developing students' ability to produce coherent and well-structured texts. Guided writing exercises scaffold learning, while feedback-driven revision processes help students refine their work and internalize language conventions. Emphasis is placed on academic writing, including organization of ideas, clarity of expression, and appropriate use of grammar and vocabulary.

C. Integrated Skills Workshops

To address the observed imbalance between receptive and productive skills, the program incorporates integrated skills workshops that combine listening, speaking, reading, and writing in meaningful tasks. Activities such as listening-to-speak and reading-to-write tasks encourage learners to process input and transform it into output, thereby reinforcing language acquisition. This integrative approach aligns with task-based language teaching principles, which emphasize using language as a tool for communication rather than mere knowledge acquisition.

D. Assessment and Feedback Mechanism

A systematic assessment and feedback component is embedded within the program to monitor learner progress

and ensure alignment with CEFR standards. Formative assessments based on CEFR descriptors are utilized to evaluate skill development, while performance-based tasks provide authentic measures of communicative competence. Continuous feedback is provided to help learners identify their strengths and areas for improvement, thereby fostering self-regulated learning.

The proposed English Proficiency Enhancement Program directly responds to the study's empirical findings by prioritizing the development of productive language skills, particularly speaking. The emphasis on communicative competence reflects a shift from traditional, input-oriented instruction toward a more learner-centered and interaction-driven approach. This is consistent with contemporary perspectives in language education, which highlight the importance of meaningful communication in facilitating language acquisition.

Furthermore, the integration of CEFR-aligned assessment ensures that the program maintains international standards while remaining responsive to the local context of San Pablo Colleges. By focusing on skill-specific gaps rather than on generalized instruction, the program promotes targeted, efficient learning interventions. The inclusion of interactive and performance-based activities also addresses affective factors such as anxiety and lack of confidence, which are commonly associated with speaking difficulties.

Importantly, the study's findings indicated no significant differences in proficiency levels when grouped by sex, suggesting that the proposed program can be implemented uniformly across the student population. Instead of demographic-based differentiation, the program emphasizes needs-based instruction, ensuring that all learners benefit from structured opportunities to develop their communicative abilities.

Overall, the proposed program serves as a data-driven and contextually relevant response to the identified proficiency gaps. Its implementation has the potential to enhance students' readiness for academic tasks, improve their participation in classroom discourse, and prepare them for the communicative demands of their future professions.

Conclusion

The study provides a comprehensive assessment of the English language proficiency of freshmen students at San Pablo Colleges, revealing that while most learners demonstrate functional competence within the B2 and C1 levels of the CEFR, notable skill disparities persist. Specifically, students exhibit stronger performance in receptive skills—reading and listening—while productive skills, particularly speaking and writing, remain areas of concern, with speaking identified as the most challenging macro-skill. Although no statistically significant differences in proficiency were found when respondents were grouped by sex, this finding carries important pedagogical implications, as it supports the adoption of gender-neutral instructional designs and interventions that can be applied broadly across student populations without demographic differentiation. These results underscore the need for targeted, skill-based interventions that prioritize communicative competence, particularly in productive language use, to better prepare students for academic and professional demands. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution, as the study is limited to a single institutional context, which may constrain the generalizability of the results to other higher education settings with different student profiles or instructional conditions.

In response to these findings, it is recommended that San Pablo Colleges adopt a structured, CEFR-aligned English Proficiency Enhancement Program that prioritizes developing speaking and writing skills through communicative, task-based, and performance-oriented instructional strategies. The integration of guided writing activities, interactive speaking tasks, and continuous formative assessment across disciplines is essential to ensure sustained skill development. Furthermore, regular CEFR-based diagnostic assessments and faculty training in communicative language teaching should be institutionalized to support consistent and effective implementation. Future research may also explore additional variables influencing language proficiency to further refine instructional approaches. Overall, a holistic, data-driven, and institutionally supported framework is imperative to strengthen students' communicative competence and ensure their readiness for global academic engagement.

Contributions of Authors

Author 1: Led the conceptualization and overall research design of the study. Responsible for writing the original draft, conducting data analysis and interpretation, and developing the proposed framework. Oversaw the entire research process and finalized the manuscript.

Author 2: Contributed to the conceptualization of the study. Responsible for refining and fine-tuning the manuscript, formatting the paper in accordance with publication standards, and

enhancing the methodological section. Assisted in ensuring the overall clarity, coherence, and readiness of the paper for publication.

Author 3: Assisted in data gathering and field data coordination, including logistical support during data collection and ensuring completeness of responses.

Author 4: Assisted in data gathering and field data coordination, including logistical support during data collection and ensuring completeness of responses.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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