

Diagnostic Assessment on the Linguistic Competence of College Freshmen: A Basis for Developing Grammar Enhancement

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Index Terms:

Cagayan State University, linguistic competence, diagnostic assessment, grammar enhancement, college freshmen, descriptive-correlational research

Abstract. The study assessed the linguistic competence of college freshmen at Cagayan State University, Sanchez Mira Campus, and identified their difficulties across key areas of English grammar as a basis for developing grammar enhancement materials. Using a descriptive-correlational design, a researcher-made and validated diagnostic test was administered to 289 freshmen students drawn from the campus's five board programs, most of whom were female graduates of public high schools. Linguistic competence was described in terms of students' passing rate against the institution's standard threshold of 75%. Results showed that students passed only in verb identification and usage (75.5%), performed at a Fair level across most other areas, and were weakest in adjectives, which registered a passing rate of 42.49%. Course, sex, high school track, and high school English grade were significantly related to students' linguistic competence, while type of high school was not. These findings pointed to the need for remediation in adjective use and general improvement across grammar areas, leading to the development of Bridging Grammar Gaps: A Diagnostic-Based Enhancement Material.

Introduction

Linguistic competence is a central part of human capability, serving not only as a means of communication but as a key factor shaping intellectual and academic readiness. English has become the default lingua franca for sharing research, pursuing international collaboration, and fitting into global academic systems, which places a premium on strong English for Academic Purposes competencies among incoming students. Yet serious language deficits among incoming college students remain well documented. Hashed Mabkhota and Alzahrani (2023) found that linguistic deficiencies are a significant moderating factor linked to weaker academic outcomes, lower engagement, and reduced satisfaction among students navigating a university environment. Related work on speaking proficiency among first-year EFL learners similarly points to speech anxiety and other psychological barriers that limit verbal communication and compound basic language difficulties (Multidimensional Barriers Affecting the Speaking Proficiency of First-Year EFL Learners, 2025).

Grammatical competence functions as the structural bedrock of academic communication. Grammar is the system that governs how words combine into clauses and phrases; it gives writing clarity and coherence and, by extension, meaning. Arcilla et al. (2025) emphasized that reinforcing grammar skills cannot be separated from developing higher-order academic skills such as critical thinking and analysis, since basic grammatical deficiencies make nuanced argumentation - an essential requirement of critical inquiry - difficult to sustain. In this sense, a linguistic deficit is not merely a surface error but an underlying impediment to cognitive development and school readiness.

The problem has been compounded by global disruptions since 2020. Poole and Sahakyan (2023), reporting on WIDA data on English learners' proficiency scores post-pandemic, found that English learners at higher grade levels have continued to grow more slowly than their pre-pandemic counterparts, suggesting that freshmen entering college from 2022 onward carry an uneven share of accumulated skills gaps. Systematic error analyses of university students' academic writing likewise reveal fairly consistent deficit profiles: fragments (17.5%) and run-on sentences (14.7%) are typically the most

frequent error categories, while verb-tense errors are the highest-ranking morphological problem, reported at 14.1% by Arcilla et al. (2025) and at 28% by Phommavongsa (2021). These documented, recurring deficits (Korpershoek et al., 2017) argue for comprehensive diagnostic methods over simpler assessment approaches, since traditional instruments such as the SAT or TOEFL have historically struggled to predict academic success or to yield the fine-grained, classroom-usable detail that differentiated instruction requires. Error analysis - which identifies not only what mistakes are made but their likely origins - remains the most suitable methodological approach for this purpose (Aitsahalia, 2021). Similar patterns have been observed locally. At Cagayan State University-Sanchez Mira Campus, classroom interaction, student output, and routine assessment have repeatedly surfaced persistent difficulties among first-year students in applying grammar rules correctly, whether in speech or in writing. These recurring classroom observations pointed to a need for a systematic investigation rather than reliance on anecdotal impressions - yet no formal diagnosis of freshmen's grammatical strengths and weaknesses had been conducted on the campus to serve as a basis for a localized Grammar Enhancement Material. This study was undertaken to address that gap: to diagnose the grammatical strengths and weaknesses of entering college freshmen and to use the findings as the basis for a Grammar Enhancement Material responsive to their identified needs.

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on an integrative framework of second-language acquisition theories that together explain how grammatical competence emerges, how it can be diagnosed, and what forms of intervention are likely to advance it. Processability Theory (Pienemann, 1998) holds that learners can only produce grammatical structures that their current developmental stage allows them to process, offering a principled explanation for the patterns of error and performance gaps a diagnostic assessment is likely to reveal. Input Processing Theory (VanPatten, 2002) complements this by explaining how learners allocate attention to form within input, arguing that learners generally process meaning before form and that acquisition depends on input conditions that allow learners to notice and map forms to functions - a premise that supports designing enhancement materials that deliberately direct learner attention to target forms.

Usage-based and construction grammar perspectives (Tomasello, 2003; Goldberg, 2006; Ellis, 2015) further frame grammar not as an abstract rule system but as a dynamic pattern that emerges through repeated, meaningful exposure - implying that enhancement materials should embed grammar practice in functionally rich, communicative contexts rather than isolated drills. Interactionist perspectives (Long, 1996; Swain, 1985) add that interaction is effective because it makes input comprehensible, creates opportunities to negotiate meaning, and pushes learners to produce language, making them aware of gaps in their own grammatical repertoire. Taken together, these perspectives justify a diagnostic assessment that doubles as a blueprint for evidence-based, performance-oriented grammar materials rather than a purely declarative teaching tool.

Conceptual Framework

The study is anchored on an Input-Process-Output model that traces a logical progression from identifying students' profile as English language learners, to diagnosing their linguistic competencies, to producing grammar enhancement materials tailored to their needs (Figure 1). The input consists of the students' profile - course, sex, type of high school graduated from, academic track, and final English grade in senior high school - together with their diagnostic performance across the areas of linguistic competence under study. The process stage classifies the types of grammatical errors made, identifies recurring patterns, and interprets performance in relation to profile variables, yielding evidence-based decisions about which grammatical structures most urgently need attention. The output is a set of Grammar Enhancement Materials - pattern-rich, contextualized, and input-enhancing activities, informed by principles of interaction and output, designed to help learners notice and gradually close their own grammatical gaps rather than simply correcting surface errors.

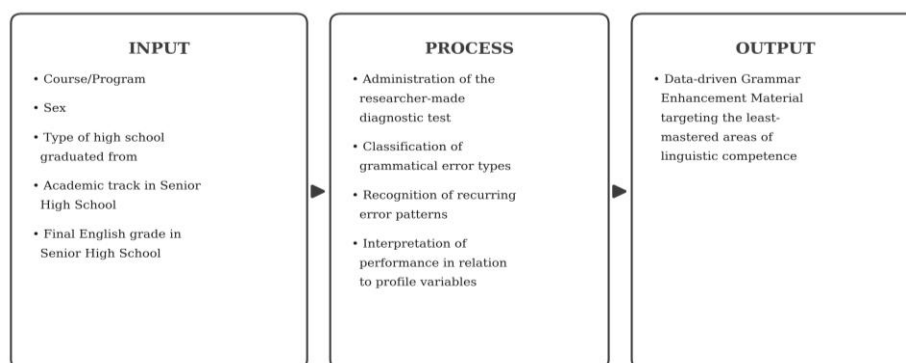


Figure 1. The Research Paradigm of the Study

Statement of the Problem

This study conducted a diagnostic assessment of the linguistic competencies of college freshmen. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: (1) What is the profile of the freshmen students in terms of course/program, sex, type of high school graduated from, track in senior high school, and final English grade in senior high school? (2) What is the level of linguistic competence of the college freshmen as revealed by a diagnostic grammar assessment along form classes or content words (noun, verb, adjective, adverb), structure or function words (pronoun, preposition, conjunction), mechanics (spelling, capitalization, punctuation), vocabulary, and identifying errors on subject-verb agreement? (3) Is there a significant relationship between the students' profile and their linguistic competencies? (4) What grammar enhancement materials can be developed to improve the linguistic performance of the students?

Assumption of the Study

The following null hypothesis was tested at the .05 level of significance: there is no significant relationship between the students' profile and their linguistic competencies.

Significance of the Study

Sound assessment information gives teachers and decision-makers an accurate picture of student performance and helps guard against the effects of misdiagnosis. The findings of this diagnostic assessment are intended to benefit several groups. Policymakers may draw on the results to set standards, monitor the quality of instruction, and direct resources toward the areas of greatest need. Curriculum planners may use the findings to identify program strengths and weaknesses and to plan improvements to the English Language Proficiency curriculum. Teachers and administrators may use the identified difficulties as a basis for enhancement materials that improve the teaching and learning of English. The researcher, as a language teacher, may apply the findings to refine her own instructional strategies and materials development skills. English language learners themselves may benefit from a Grammar Enhancement Material that offers structured, contextualized, learner-centered activities addressing their specific difficulties, supporting them in becoming more effective communicators. Finally, future researchers may use the study's design, instruments, and findings as a reference point for comparable or related investigations.

Scope and Delimitation

This study diagnosed grammatical errors in the linguistic proficiency of first-year college students at Cagayan State University-Sanchez Mira Campus during Academic Year 2025-2026, examining performance in form classes (noun, verb, adjective, adverb), function words (pronoun, preposition, conjunction), vocabulary, mechanics of writing (spelling, capitalization, punctuation), and subject-verb agreement. Only students enrolled in the campus's board programs were included, and only five profile variables were considered: sex, course, type of high school graduated from, academic track in senior high school, and final English grade in senior high school. The diagnostic test focused solely on written grammatical proficiency and was limited to the researcher-developed instrument; it did not extend to broader aspects of syntax, semantics, or discourse analysis. The development of grammar enhancement materials was restricted to the areas where the highest levels of error were observed. Given these delimitations, the findings are primarily applicable to the population and context examined and should be generalized to other year levels, institutions, or settings with appropriate caution.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed the descriptive-correlational method of research, an approach well suited to a fact-finding study requiring accurate interpretation of findings (Matibag, 2019). The descriptive component described the respondents' profile - course, sex, type of high school graduated from, academic track, and final English grade in senior high school - and their level of linguistic difficulty, consistent with Calderon et al.'s (2004) view that a method is descriptive when a survey is used to identify conditions typical of a population. The correlational component determined whether a relationship existed between the respondents' profile and their linguistic difficulties.

Locale of the Study

The study was conducted at Cagayan State University-Sanchez Mira Campus (CSU-SM), located in C-2, Sanchez Mira, Cagayan, with an enrolled population of roughly five thousand students. The campus offers eight baccalaureate programs - Hospitality Management, Industrial Technology, Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering, Teacher Education, Information and Computing Science, Criminal Justice Education, Business Entrepreneurship and Accountancy, and Agriculture - as well as master's and doctoral programs.

Respondents and Sampling Technique

A total of 289 freshmen students enrolled in the campus's board programs and taking the English Language Proficiency course participated in the study. Respondents for the instrument's pilot testing were drawn separately from first-year students in the campus's non-board programs, using purposive sampling - a non-probability technique in which participants are deliberately selected for characteristics relevant to the study's purpose. These students were chosen because, as college freshmen who had completed the basic senior high school English curriculum, they shared characteristics comparable to the target respondents, while administering the pilot instrument outside the actual study population minimized testing effects and allowed the instrument to be evaluated before its use with the intended participants.

Program	Number of Students
Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BSA)	49
Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSE)	43
Bachelor of Elementary Education (BEEd)	62
Criminal Justice Education (CCJE)	104
Bachelor of Science in Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering (BSABE)	31
Total	289

Table 1. Distribution of Respondents According to Course/Program

Research Instruments

The research instrument was a diagnostic test questionnaire in two parts. Part I gathered the students' demographic information - course, sex, type of high school graduated from, academic track, and highest English grade in senior high school. Part II was the diagnostic test proper, covering the parts of speech (noun, verb, adjective, adverb, pronoun, preposition, conjunction), mechanics of writing (spelling, capitalization, punctuation), vocabulary, and subject-verb agreement. The instrument was developed by the researcher with the assistance of her statistician and research adviser. Prior to the main data collection, a pilot test consisting of 100 items was administered to first-year students enrolled in the campus's non-board programs. Item responses were subjected to the Kuder-Richardson Formula 21 (KR-21), a statistical measure of internal consistency reliability that also helps eliminate items that are too easy or too difficult. Sixty items - fifty on grammar and ten on vocabulary - were retained for the final diagnostic test.

Data Gathering Procedures

After securing permission from the campus executive officer and the respective college deans, the researcher personally administered the diagnostic test, assisted in some sections by English teachers recommended by the deans, to help ensure accurate responses and prompt retrieval of the questionnaires. Respondents were briefed on the importance of their participation and given written instructions for each part of the test; apart from the diagnostic items themselves, they simply indicated their profile information by checking the appropriate response.

Analysis of Data

Gathered data were coded, encoded, tabulated, and analyzed using the following statistical tools. The respondents' profile was summarized using frequency counts, means, and percentage distribution. The level of linguistic competency was described in terms of students' passing rate - the proportion of students scoring above the institution's standard threshold, generally set at 75% - interpreted using the scale in Table 2. The Pearson product-moment correlation was used to test the relationship between the respondents' profile and their linguistic proficiency, with all tests evaluated at the .05 level of significance. Following the quantitative analysis, brief interviews were conducted with selected respondents; these were used solely to triangulate and add context to the quantitative findings and did not constitute a separate qualitative data set.

Percentage Score	Descriptive Value	Level of Competency
93 – 100%	Very High Pass	Excellent
84 – 92%	High Pass	Very Satisfactory
75 – 83%	Pass	Satisfactory
51 – 74%	Fair	Needs Improvement
25 – 50%	Low	Needs Remediation
1 – 24%	Very Low	Learning Not Evident

Table 2. Scale Used to Interpret Students' Passing Rate

Ethical Considerations

The study followed standard ethical guidelines for research involving human participants. Permission was secured from the relevant institutional authorities before data collection, and all participants were informed of the study's purpose and gave voluntary consent. Responses were kept anonymous and confidential; data were analyzed and reported without any personally identifiable information, and participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any point without penalty. The researcher maintained objectivity throughout data collection, analysis, and reporting, and properly acknowledged all sources consulted. Results were used solely to inform instructional improvement and support student learning.

Results and Discussion

Profile of the Respondents

Of the 289 freshmen students who participated in the study, the largest group came from Criminal Justice Education (104, or 36.0%), followed by Bachelor of Elementary Education (62, or 21.5%), Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (49, or 17.0%), Bachelor of Secondary Education (43, or 14.9%), and Bachelor of Science in Agriculture and Biosystems Engineering (31, or 10.7%), as shown in Figure 2. The majority of respondents were female and graduates of public high schools. In terms of academic track, most respondents completed Humanities and Social Sciences (HUMS), followed in order by Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (STEM), Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL), Accountancy, Business and Management (ABM), and General Academic Strand (GAS). On average, respondents entered college with a senior high school English grade of 89.16%, which falls within the Very Satisfactory range.

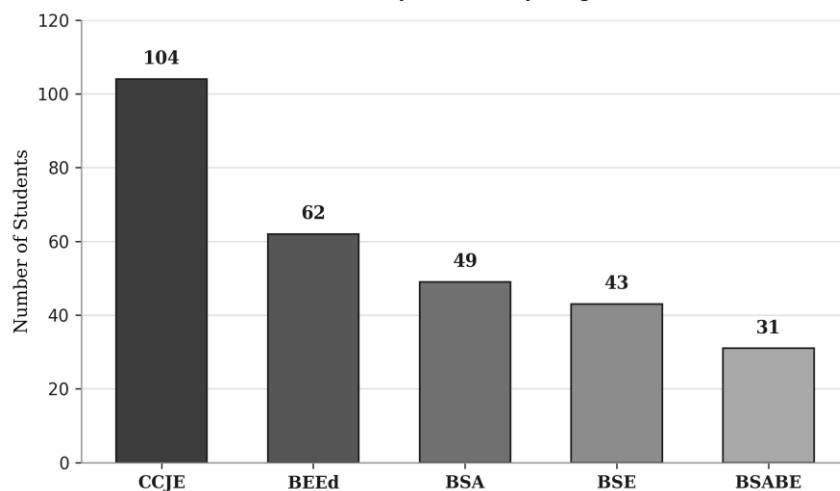


Figure 2. Distribution of Respondents by Course/Program (N = 289)

Level of Linguistic Competence

Table 3 summarizes the diagnostic assessment results across the twelve areas of linguistic competence examined. Students passed only one area - verb identification and usage, at 75.5% - registering a Satisfactory rating. All other areas were rated Fair and in need of improvement, with the exception of adjectives, which fell to Poor and required remediation at a passing

rate of only 42.49%. The overall mean passing rate across all areas was 62.47%, a Fair level indicating that while freshmen possess a basic grammatical foundation, that foundation has not yet reached the standard the institution expects.

Area	Passing Rate	Gap to Passing Rate	Descriptive Value	Remarks
Verb	75.50%	-0.50	Pass	Satisfactory
Preposition	74.04%	0.96	Fair	Needs Improvement
Vocabulary	71.62%	3.38	Fair	Needs Improvement
Noun	71.28%	3.72	Fair	Needs Improvement
Spelling	65.86%	9.14	Fair	Needs Improvement
Pronoun	63.11%	11.89	Fair	Needs Improvement
Conjunction	63.06%	11.94	Fair	Needs Improvement
Adverb	59.80%	15.20	Fair	Needs Improvement
Capitalization	57.61%	17.39	Fair	Needs Improvement
Punctuation	53.38%	21.62	Fair	Needs Improvement
Subject-Verb Agreement	51.96%	23.04	Fair	Needs Improvement
Adjective	42.49%	32.51	Poor	Needs Remediation
Overall Mean	62.47%	12.52	Fair	Needs Improvement

Table 3. Summary of Linguistic Competence Results by Grammar Area

A. Form Classes or Content Words On Noun Identification and Usage

Freshmen registered a Fair passing rate of 71.28% on noun-related items. The most frequently missed items involved distinguishing parts of speech from words with related meanings (54.33% correct) and identifying types of proper nouns (52.25% correct); in interviews, several students explained that they associated the target word with a concept from another subject rather than its grammatical function, or judged noun type by the number of items named rather than by grammatical category. These results are consistent with Sioco and De Vera (2018), who found students comparatively more competent in nouns than in other parts of speech even as overall performance remained average, and with Manuel (2022), who reported similarly average proficiency across parts of speech among senior high school students entering college.

On Verb Identification and Usage

Verbs were the only area in which freshmen met the 75% passing benchmark, registering 75.5% and a Satisfactory rating. The most challenging items involved parallel structure with correlative conjunctions and the present perfect progressive aspect, where students tended to rely on surface time expressions (such as "for days") rather than on the grammatical distinction between simple past and duration continuing to the present. This pattern is consistent with Guduru and Bommanaboina (2021), Merza (2022), Entong (2023), and Desales (2025), who similarly found that learners often default to the simple past when time expressions are present, overlooking the grammatical meaning involved - reinforcing the case for grammar instruction that foregrounds tense and aspect in relation to meaning and function rather than rule memorization alone.

On Adjective Identification and Usage

Adjectives were the freshmen's weakest area, with no single item reaching the 75% benchmark and an overall passing rate of only 42.49%, rated Poor and in need of remediation. Students tended to select options that "sounded right" semantically - for example, equating "simple" with "easy" - without attending to the adjective's grammatical role or its fit with the social context of the sentence. This reflects what Sioco and De Vera (2018) describe as a knowledge-skill gap: students could often

identify or supply a plausible word but struggled to select the semantically and contextually appropriate one, consistent with Hymes's (1972) view that linguistic competence involves not just forming words but selecting words suited to their social context.

On Adverb Identification and Usage

Adverbs registered a Fair passing rate of 59.8%, with students showing particular difficulty in identifying adverb placement and function within complex sentence structures. This finding is consistent with Desales (2025), who found that adverbs - especially as modifiers - ranked among the most difficult parts of speech for Filipino college freshmen, reflecting the syntactic flexibility that makes adverb placement harder to master than more fixed grammatical categories.

B. Structure or Function Words

On Pronoun Usage

Pronoun usage registered a Fair passing rate of 63.11%. The most frequently missed item involved pronoun agreement with a collective noun ("board of directors"), where most students selected the plural "they" rather than the singular "it," treating the collective noun as inherently plural. This mirrors what Merza (2022) and Guduru and Bommanaboina (2021) identify as a common area of grammatical weakness, and reflects what Corder (1967) termed a developmental error - a logical but ultimately incorrect generalization from the plural sense of "board" as a group of people.

On Preposition Usage

Prepositions registered a Fair passing rate of 74.04%, just short of the passing benchmark, indicating some generalized knowledge of prepositions that has not yet translated into consistent contextual accuracy. The most difficult item involved selecting the correct preposition of source or origin, an area Merza (2022) also identified as one of the more common sources of grammatical error among Filipino college freshmen, often attributable to first-language interference in preposition choice (Zhang, 2009).

On Conjunction Usage

Conjunctions registered a Fair passing rate of 63.06%. Students had particular difficulty with subordinating conjunctions expressing reason, cause, or specific time conditions, with roughly a third of respondents answering the relevant item correctly. This finding is consistent with Cuyos et al. (2024) and Bautista et al., who similarly documented variance in students' competence with subordination as a persistent source of grammatical error.

C. Mechanics

On Spelling

Spelling registered a Fair passing rate of 65.86%, pointing to a notable weakness in orthographic skills. This finding is consistent with Ilustrisimo and De la Cruz (2019), whose study of pre-service teachers' spelling proficiency similarly found room for improvement in this area, suggesting that spelling difficulties may persist well beyond the freshman year without targeted intervention.

On Capitalization

Capitalization registered a Fair passing rate of 57.61%. Many respondents struggled to distinguish proper nouns from common nouns, particularly geographical and directional terms that can function as either depending on context. This corroborates Arcilla et al. (2025), who found that grammatical errors among college students often stem from overgeneralizing rules to contexts where they do not apply.

On Punctuation

Punctuation registered the lowest mechanics score at a Fair passing rate of 53.38%, with students showing particular difficulty distinguishing comma splices from correctly joined independent clauses. This aligns with Desales (2025), who found that first-year college students often show a basic understanding of English grammar but continue to struggle in applying grammatical and mechanical conventions consistently.

D. Vocabulary

Vocabulary registered a Fair passing rate of 71.62%. Item-level results showed that eight of the ten vocabulary items proved difficult, with the lowest passing rates recorded for the words "dispute" (10.03%), "inhibit" (19.38%), and "transient" (25.95%). In interviews, students explained that these words rarely appear in everyday conversation; many admitted to guessing based on surface associations with other words in the item rather than on the words' actual meanings. This points to a need for enhancement materials that build vocabulary through direct exposure and context-rich practice rather than assuming incidental acquisition.

E. Identifying Errors on Subject-Verb Agreement

Subject-verb agreement registered the second-lowest passing rate at 51.96%, described as Fair and in need of improvement. Students had the greatest difficulty with conditional constructions requiring simultaneous attention to tense and agreement, and with compound subjects or subjects separated from their verbs by intervening phrases. This is consistent with Cuyos et al. (2024), who found that Filipino tertiary students frequently misapply grammar rules in more complex sentence structures. Taken together with the findings of Desales (2025) and Arcilla et al. (2025), these results suggest that students' difficulty lies less in a lack of basic knowledge of subject-verb agreement than in applying that knowledge consistently under more demanding syntactic conditions - underscoring the value of continuous, contextualized practice.

Relationship Between the Profile Variables and Linguistic Competence

Table 4 presents the Pearson correlations between the respondents' profile variables and their linguistic competence across the areas examined. Course ($r = .2610$, $p < .01$) and high school English grade ($r = .3972$, $p < .01$) emerged as the most consistent and strongest predictors of overall linguistic competence, while type of high school ($r = -.0560$) showed no significant relationship. Sex ($r = .1173$, $p < .05$) and academic track ($r = -.1679$, $p < .01$) were significantly, though more modestly, related to overall competence.

Area	Course	Sex	Type of H.S.	Track	H.S. Grade
Noun	0.3440**	0.1022	-0.0915	-0.1090	0.3101**
Verb	0.1315*	0.0978	-0.0314	-0.0602	0.2861**
Adverb	-0.0400	0.0166	0.0627	-0.0931	0.0745
Adjective	0.1552**	0.1230*	0.0196	-0.0842	0.3042**
Pronoun	0.1440*	0.0226	-0.0194	-0.0080	0.1380*
Preposition	0.0049	-0.0168	-0.0513	-0.1118*	0.0864
Conjunction	0.0884	0.0642	-0.0727	-0.1318*	0.2302**
Spelling	0.2062**	0.1132*	-0.0032	-0.1544**	0.2633**
Capitalization	0.1619**	0.0891	-0.0322	-0.1882**	0.2418**
Punctuation	0.2082**	-0.0417	-0.0314	-0.1400*	0.2069**
Vocabulary	0.0706	0.1087	-0.0356	-0.0022	0.1635**
Subject-Verb Agreement	0.1105	-0.0152	-0.0293	-0.0386	0.1787**
Overall	0.2610**	0.1173*	-0.0560	-0.1679**	0.3972**

*Significant at the .05 level (critical $r = .112$). **Significant at the .01 level (critical $r = .148$).

Table 4. Relationship of the Profile Variables with the Level of Linguistic Competence of the Students

The positive relationship between course and linguistic competence suggests that students' academic programs shape their language development to different degrees, with some programs demanding more reading, writing, and critical engagement than others - a pattern consistent with Asio and Quijano (2022), who found English proficiency to be a significant predictor of academic performance, and with Hashed Mabkhota and Alzahrani (2023), who linked repeated exposure to academic language tasks with stronger language capacity. High school English grade showed the strongest overall relationship with linguistic competence, echoing Lozano, Ilagan, and Maluluyon (2020) and Asio and Quijano (2022) in identifying prior academic achievement as a robust predictor of subsequent language proficiency. Sex, by contrast, showed only a weak, if statistically significant, relationship with competence, consistent with Manuel (2022), who likewise found only modest demographic differences in English proficiency. High school track showed a significant negative relationship with overall competence, suggesting that students from tracks with less emphasis on language and communication arrive at college with less developed readiness to benefit from language instruction, in line with Lin and Lin (2025), who argue that diagnostic assessment must account for the varying levels of language preparedness students bring from different educational backgrounds. Type of high school, meanwhile, showed no significant relationship with competence, suggesting that individual engagement with language learning may matter more than the type of institution previously attended. Notably, subject-verb agreement showed no significant relationship with course, sex, or high school background, but was

significantly related to high school grade - suggesting that mastery of this particular structure may depend less on formal instruction or demographic background than on what students have already internalized through earlier language experience. Overall, these findings, consistent with Samillano and Pastolero (2025), underscore that academic-related variables carry more weight than demographic ones in shaping linguistic competence, pointing to the value of early, sustained language-focused intervention well before students reach college.

Grammar Enhancement Material

The diagnostic results pointed to a need for improvement in subject-verb agreement, pronoun-antecedent agreement, conjunction use, modifiers, sentence structure, spelling, capitalization, and punctuation. In response, the researcher developed Bridging Grammar Gaps: A Diagnostic-Based Enhancement Material for College Freshmen, designed around eight guiding features: (a) a diagnostic-based focus tied directly to the areas of greatest need; (b) a grammar-in-context approach that embeds practice in authentic sentences and passages rather than isolated drills; (c) scaffolded exercises that build progressively from recognition to production; (d) built-in error analysis and feedback opportunities; (e) an interactive and engaging format; (f) integrated vocabulary and reading support; (g) instructor guidelines and assessment tools; and (h) explicit bridges connecting grammar practice to academic writing tasks.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Overall, the linguistic competence of the college freshmen examined in this study is generally below the level expected for postsecondary academic work. Students showed the strongest command of basic grammar involving nouns and verbs but struggled with more complex structures - subject-verb agreement, pronouns, conjunctions, and modifiers - and mechanics and vocabulary results point to limited exposure to reading and insufficient practice applying rules accurately rather than a lack of surface familiarity with English. Students appear to rely heavily on meaning-based guessing rather than grammatical rules, which produces recognizable and recurring error patterns rather than random ones. Demographic factors carried little explanatory weight, while academic factors - course and high school English grade - proved considerably more influential, pointing to gaps between what students learned in secondary school and what is expected of them at the tertiary level, and to a clear opportunity for targeted instructional investment.

These findings carry direct implications for how CSU-SM and similar institutions support incoming freshmen. Colleges may consider transitional or bridging courses grounded in diagnostic assessment, targeting the least-mastered competencies such as subject-verb agreement, modifiers, pronoun agreement, and sentence structure. Teachers may use error analysis as an instructional strategy in its own right, having students examine and correct their own errors to deepen grammatical awareness, and may adopt a grammar-in-context approach that situates practice in sentence construction, paragraph writing, and authentic communicative tasks rather than rote rule memorization. Institutions may design or adopt instructional materials targeting the most commonly missed skills, encourage wider reading and vocabulary-building through word banks and context-rich texts, and invest in continuous professional development for instructors on grammar instruction and differentiated assessment for diverse learners. Future researchers are encouraged to examine additional variables that may influence linguistic competence and to evaluate the impact of intervention programs, including the Grammar Enhancement Material developed from this study, which language teachers may adopt directly to address the specific gaps identified here.

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Competing Interests Statement

The author declares that she has no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this article.

Data Availability Statement

The item-level diagnostic test data supporting the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request, subject to the confidentiality assurances given to the student-respondents of Cagayan State University-Sanchez Mira Campus.

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Appendices

No appendices are attached to this study.