

Socio-Cultural, Educational, and Psychological Barriers in ESL Learning: A Qualitative Study of Senior High School Students

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v5i3.1031>

| Juharto L. Usop |

CCNHS-Annex (L.R. Sebastian
Site, Cotabato City, Philippines

Jholidasan91@gmail.com



This work is licensed
under a Creative Commons Attribution-
ShareAlike 4.0 International License.

ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explores the complex issues faced by the Senior High School students in learning ESL. Using the interviews and focus group discussions, this study aims at finding out the students' experience, perception and challenges relating to their English accent. Ten male and twenty female students from the socio culturally and linguistically diverse school in Cotabato City Division volunteered for the study, offering information on the socio cultural, educational, and psychological aspects affecting their ESL learning during the academic year 2022-2023. The study shows that low students' interactions in English beyond the classroom, the preferred use of students' native language patterns, and inadequate amounts of exposure to English contexts are specific socio-cultural factors. Learning difficulties include; the imbalance in teachers' competency, instruction, and teaching methods, and student supplies. On the psychological level, students have anxiety, unstable motivation, and problems with self-efficacy, which provides a meaningful addition to learners' difficulties. Thus, this study recommended the need to tackle these challenges by increasing the training of teachers, developing quality teaching and learning materials, and providing effective learning conditions. These include promotion of English in contextual setting, computer aided instruction, offering counseling and psychological services to boost the learners' morale. The findings of this study are hoped to help educators, and relevant stakeholders understand the best practices on how to help ESL learner Senior High School Students to break barriers and succeed academically and in their future careers as the world becomes a global village.

KEYWORDS

ESL; qualitative study; learning challenges; senior high school students; language instruction

INTRODUCTION

Language is viewed differently by people from different fields, and one of the reasons why linguists and philosophers encounter difficulties in clarifying what the study of language should involve has to do with the general view that language means many things to people from different disciplines (Mwakapina, J. W, 2021). Especially for learning second language or English as second language. Difficulties experienced by learners in learning English as a Second Language (ESL) in Senior high school are unending and are compounded by various causes that are socio-cultural, educational and psychological in nature. These are some of the challenges that can greatly affect a student in terms of learning and mastering English

hence a crucial language in this globalized world. Socio-cultural includes: speaking the native language more often than English, other than in the classroom, which Halimi, Daniel, and AlShammari (2020) or Krashen (1982) observed. Students practice English in situations which are otherwise, they interact mostly with people who do not speak English most of the time because in their homes and communities, there is little English used. This may result in use of their first language while learning and this makes it difficult for them to learn DL, as pointed out by Swain, in 2013.

Educational difficulties are born of differences in the level of teachers' qualification and their approaches to teaching. Some of the teaching staff may not be well equipped with effective ESL approaches and teaching strategies which they use conventional teaching methods that may not be appropriate to the learners (Pimacshghadam, Zabetipour, & Aminzadeh, 2016). Also, it should be noted that learning and teaching aids could also be scarce in some schools and, in cases where they exist, their quality may be questionable. In some cases the students have updated language laboratory and multimedia facilities; in others inadequate or outdated materials or no materials at all. Such gaps can result in differential learning input and output and students learning different things from each other (Carter, 1997; Davies & Pearse, 1998).

Psychological factors such as stress, motivation, self-confidence in the learning of English also play a crucial role in ESL learning. It can be postulated that the learning of a language is in itself a challenge and the student brings stress with regards to achievement, and or failure and mistakes (MacIntyre, 2007; Pekrun et al, 2007). Such anxiety can be even higher in the case of the unsupportive and non-encouraging classroom climate. The level of motivation of students can be colored in different ways: there can be students who seek the knowledge of English for some personal/profession goals; other students can show low level of intrinsic motivation and actually do not see any need in learning English. This or that way, self-confidence or self-efficacy as the theoretical background defines influenced the learning tasks of students. Self-efficacy, in this case goes hand in hand with persistency, this is because while learners with high self-efficacy will persevere through the difficulties that are present, learners with low self-efficacy will quit easily as noted by Miller (2000).

The awareness of these aspects is central in developing forms of teaching and learning intervention that suit the ESL carriers. Thus, the significance of addressing these challenges can hardly be overemphasized especially with the current appeal to literacy in a world that is rapidly grappling with globalization thus changing the status symbol of English into a global language. English also guarantees equal opportunities to get employment and education; thus, has become apparent to eliminate all tendencies hindering a student from learning English. This study will be focused on the following objectives: to explicate the main issues of ESL learning observed among senior high school students and to identify the major challenges inherent in the educational process of the learners and apply the methods of qualitative research.

The literature survey has revealed several factors responsible for the challenges that learners experience while learning English as a second language. The socio-cultural factor comprises of; English not being used in daily practice and impacts of native language (Alonso, 1997; Bada, 2001; Erarslan & Hol, 2014). Education variables pertain to teachers' and teacher education on ESL and the accessibility of teachers and teaching aids and the impact they have on students' uses of the language (Carter, 1997; Davies & Pearse, 1998; Lekova, 2010). Principles of motivation and apprehensive and self-confident learning enter into the learning-teaching process, According to Corder (1967), Russel & Spada (2006) and White (1991), cognitive and affective factors are included in the learning process. This work will investigate the difficulties encountered by senior High School students regarding

learning ESL and identify the socio-cultural, educational and psychological aspects that hinder the learning process. Further still, it entails the students' experiences and impressions of such difficulties as well as recommendations for the improvement of the ESL teachers' practices based on the effects of the difficulties faced.

Consequently, the main purpose of this research study is to determine and explicate various challenges that learners encounter in learning ESL, adopting a qualitative research methodology. As such, the information obtained from this study will in one way or the other help in exploring and establishing the socio-cultural, educational and psychological factors that influence the ESL learning among students. The conclusions of this study will enable educators, policy-makers, and other related stakeholders to set the proper practices that will enhance the ESL learners' performance and enable them to succeed academically and especially in their future careers in the growing inter-connected global society.

RESEARCH METHODS

The study used Descriptive-Exploratory design to derive and analyze the social context of high school learners' learning process of ESL. With regards to the participants, 30 senior high school students from different schools in the Division of Cotabato City were chosen; they constituted a socio-culturally and linguistically diverse group. The subjects of the study were male and female students 15-18 years old; the students were in different strands and schools of Cotabato City Division. The necessary ethical clearance was sought and ensure use of anonymous data collected with the participants' consent.

Research Instruments

Data for this study were gathered through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to ensure a comprehensive view of ESL senior high school students' experiences. The technique used was face-to-face semi-structured interviews, which enabled the researcher to capture the students' personal perceptions and experiences of learning ESL (Klingner, Artiles, & Méndez Barletta, 2006; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007). The questions used in the interviews were general ones, allowing the students to freely talk about their acculturation process and obstacles regarding their personal experience in studying English, their first language, and socio-cultural, educational, and psychological factors. These interviews were conducted in a combination of English and students' L1 to maintain comfort and enhance the clarity of the conversation; each interview took about 30 to 45 minutes.

Focus Group Discussions

The questions in the focus group discussions revolved around aspects that participants may have in common and areas of divergence in the students' experiences. Five to seven students were grouped into small learning groups that allowed the participants to share their experiences in an environment they were comfortable with. These sessions discussed studying approaches with the students as a group because the individual interviews aimed at finding out some common issues and different attitudes within students' groups. The number of participants in each focus group ranged between 4 and 8, and each focus group discussion lasted approximately 60-90 minutes with a set of questions similar to those explored in the individual interviews, although the latter were open-ended to stimulate group discussions (Pishghadam et al., 2016).

Data Recording and Transcription

All interviews and focus group discussions were conducted with the participants' permission and recorded using an audio recorder, after which a written record in the form of a transcript was made. The transcriptions were initially checked for clarity and accuracy before being subjected to thematic analysis. This method involves assigning codes to the data with the aim of establishing themes or patterns of the difficulties encountered by the students in learning ESL. The themes of students' accounts were divided under the headings of socio-cultural, education-related, and psychological aspects to gain more systemic insights into the students' learning and struggles (Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007).

This study was conducted in three stages. To obtain general ideas of the students' learning experience and difficulties in learning ESL, one-on-one semi-structured interviews were first carried out. After the interviews, focus group discussions were conducted to enhance the identification of shared and different patterns among the students. Lastly, interviews were conducted post-focus group to get more detailed information about the issues mentioned by the students in the interviews and build up the identified themes.

This multiple cycle data collection design proved useful in understanding the students' experiences and determining major issues with ESL education that would, in turn, inform ways to enrich instruction by incorporating the viewpoints of the students. The advantage of using both individual and group data collection techniques enriched the data and allowed for studying the socio-cultural, educational, and psychological conditions to a greater extent affecting ESL learning.

Data Gathering Procedure

Before the actual data gathering, the participants were oriented about the set-up of the interview. The researcher also provided a detailed explanation of the content and limitations of the interview guide. The study was conducted in three stages. Initial Interviews: Semi-structured interviews in the form of one-on-one interview were carried out to obtain individual personal experience and difficulties faced by the students about ESL learning experience. Focus Group Discussions: The participants were grouped into smaller groups as a way of considerably discussing the issues. Such meetings were supposed to focus on similarities and disparities in the students' backgrounds. Follow-up Interviews: More focus group discussions were also carried out in order to get elaborative information in regard to the themes as identified.

Data Analyses

The transcribed data were subjected to thematic analysis. In this method, the data gathered was coded in order to be able to uncover the main themes and patterns characterizing the problems that the students encounter. The themes were then examined in terms of socio-cultural, education and psychological domains.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Socio-Cultural Challenges. Many students said they scarcely practice English outside the classroom; they conversed in their mother tongue at home and with their friends, which limited their practice of English. The imposition of the students' native language was palpable in that they frequently translated English with literal translations and used grammar rules of their first language to shape English. First, difficulties were observed due to the difference between their first language and English regarding the way of communication and turn-taking, lexical resources, and idiomatic uses (Alonso, 1997; Bada, 2001; Erarslan &

Hol, 2014). This aligns with findings from studies that emphasize the impact of cultural and linguistic backgrounds on language acquisition (Halimi et al., 2020; Klingner et al., 2006).

Educational Challenges. The study found discrepancies in the quality of ESL instruction, with some teachers encouraging interactive learning while others rely on rote memorization. Learning facilities and materials were also scarce in some schools, while in others, language labs, multimedia, and different types of reading materials were available for use by the students. Teacher knowledge was also a key factor, with high-knowledge teachers offering simple explanatory styles of demonstration plus positive feedback, while low-knowledge teachers failed to address learners' needs (Corder, 1967; Russel & Spada, 2006). This variation in instructional methods significantly affects language learning outcomes (Pishghadam et al., 2016; Salvia & Ysseldyke, 2007).

Psychological Challenges. Students said that they feel pressure on themselves when it comes to oral and written communication in English, and the pressure stems from the fear of other students and teachers judging them by checking and pointing at the mistakes they make. The motivation fluctuated in the course of practice, with relatively motivated students being willing to practice and seek help while the rest of the students languished due to perceived low proficiency. The students' perception of self-efficacy in learning and using the English language influenced their learning, with higher perceived self-efficacy students persisting and working harder to overcome difficulties, while students with lower perceived self-efficacy quickly quit (Miller, 2000; White, 1991; Özşık, 2014). The role of affective factors in language learning is well-documented, with emotions such as anxiety and self-efficacy playing crucial roles in student performance (MacIntyre & Gregersen, 2012; Pekrun et al., 2007).

The study provides readers with the necessary knowledge about the difficulties that high school learners encounter when learning English as a second language. The results indicate the necessity of considering socio-cultural, educational, and psychological aspects in teaching ESL. Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made: Schools should extend the chances for the usage of English in context – through organizations, language clubs, and using English during interactive practices and during stays in English-speaking environments. Another area requiring financial consideration is the development of training for teachers to enhance their capabilities in teaching techniques and methodologies adopted in the classroom, using technologies, and more student engagement approaches. It is crucial that every school is well-equipped with learning materials and learning aids, including language laboratories, multimedia, and a variety of reading materials. Lastly, advice on providing academic accommodations for dealing with stress-related issues and building students' self-esteem through counseling, peer support, and reward systems is given.

CONCLUSION

This study identifies significant challenges and opportunities for improving the status of English language learning among senior high school students in Cotabato City Division. As English continues to be the medium of instruction across academic levels, addressing the socio-cultural, educational, and psychological barriers is crucial. The findings suggest that low student interaction in English beyond the classroom, the preferred use of native language patterns, and inadequate exposure to English contexts are critical socio-cultural factors hindering ESL learning. Educational challenges include the imbalance in teacher competency, instructional methods, and availability of learning materials. Psychologically, students face anxiety, unstable motivation, and self-efficacy issues, which significantly impact their language acquisition.

Analyzing these findings in the context of previous research indicates that without effective strategies to improve learning outcomes, English proficiency among students may continue to decline. The results highlight the need for a comprehensive approach to address these challenges. This study provides fresh insights into the students' experiences and preferences, offering new avenues for pedagogical exploration and scientific investigation to enhance English language learning outcomes.

The results present important pedagogical implications that stakeholders in English instruction may want to consider:

- **Feedback Provision:** It is established that feedback processes that are timely and constructive should be included in educational practices with an intention of improving the learning outcomes in language. English teachers should encourage helpful comments to ensure the areas that the learners have shortcomings in are corrected while bearing in mind the learners' preferences and responsibilities in the learning process.
- **English Medium Education:** Pointing out that English is taught and used in the academic context, English teachers and other content area teachers should include corrective feedback into their practices. For this reason, it can be used to enhance students' language comprehension by correcting mistakes and offering information on the English language's application in different fields.
- **Implementing Strategies:** Educational pedagogy should seek to discover and apply such ideas as context-based teaching and learning, English-only environments, using technology in instruction, and course content development. It is these strategies that can help improve the students' learning of English and students' active, meaningful use of the target language and various activities therein.

Overall result, the study implies an imperative need for a systemic and planned model to follow in the educational approach to language, feedback provision, teacher capacity uplift and the use of proper and efficient practices. With the help of this approach, the level of English language senior High School students in Cotabato City can be enhanced. Perhaps future research may design the study from an experimental viewpoint or replicate the study with a larger population in order to obtain even higher outcomes of significance.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

I would like to express my appreciation to all the participants of this study starting from the senior high school students and their teachers who spare their time and contribute to the study. Their suggestions and participation were most useful in dissecting the various related issues of difficulty in learning English as a second language. The authors appreciated the cooperation and assistance of the administrative staff of the participating schools during the data collection phase. I am also indebted to my colleagues and mentors in the Development Academy of the Bangsamoro (DAB-BARMM) and in my school particularly to the CCNHS-Annex, L. R. Sebastian Site where I have taught for six years for their support and guide. In a way, I owe this research to their guidance and advice. Last but not the least, I extend my much-deserved gratitude to my family and friends for their support and tolerance to all my activities while conducting this study. I must thank them for having understood and encouraged this work.

REFERENCES

Alonso, M. R. (1997). Language transfer: Interlingual errors in Spanish students of English as a foreign language. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 10, 7-14.

- Bada, E. (2001). Native language influence on the production of English sounds by Japanese learners. *The Reading Matrix*, 1(2).
- Carter, R. (1997). *Vocabulary: Applied linguistic perspectives*. Routledge.
- Corder, S. P. (1967). The significance of learners' errors. *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 5, 161-170.
- Davies, P., & Pearse, E. (1998). *Success in English teaching*. Oxford University Press.
- Erarslan, A., & Hol, D. (2014). Language interference on English: Transfer on the vocabulary, tense, and preposition use of freshmen Turkish EFL learners. *ELTA Journal*, 2(2), 4-22.
- Halimi, F., Daniel, C. E., & AlShammari, I. A. (2020). Motivation and socio-cultural milieu of second language learners: Considerations involved in English teaching. *English Language Teaching*, 13(5), 149-163.
- Klingner, J. K., Artiles, A. J., & Méndez Barletta, L. (2006). English language learners who struggle with reading: Language acquisition or learning disabilities? *Journal of Learning Disabilities*, 39(2), 108-128.
- Krashen, S. D. (1982). *Principles and practice in second language acquisition*. Pergamon Press.
- Lekova, B. (2010). Language interference and methods of its overcoming in foreign language teaching. *Trakia Journal of Sciences*, 8(3), 320-324.
- MacIntyre, P. D. (2007). Willingness to communicate in second language: Understanding the decision to speak as a volitional process. *The Modern Language Journal*, 91(4), 564-576.
- MacIntyre, P. D., & Gregersen, T. (2012). Emotions that facilitate language learning: The positive-broadening power of the imagination. *Studies in Second Language Learning and Teaching*, 2(2), 193-213.
- Miller, D. (2000). *Active learner: Successful study strategies*. Roxbury Publishing Company.
- Mwkapina, J. W. (2021). What is the Nature of Language? How does it Behave? What is Language Learning then? A Review Paper in Applied Linguistics. *Randwick International of Education and Linguistics Science Journal*, 2(4), 603-618. <https://doi.org/10.47175/rielsj.v2i4.357>
- Özşık, C. (2014). Identifying preposition errors of Turkish EFL students. *ELT Research Journal*, 3(2), 59-69.
- Pekrun, R., Frenzel, A. C., Goetz, T., & Perry, R. P. (2007). The control-value theory of achievement emotions: An integrative approach to emotions in education. In P. A. Schutz & R. Pekrun (Eds.), *Emotion in education* (pp. 13-36). Elsevier Academic Press.
- Pishghadam, R., Zabetipour, M., & Aminzadeh, A. (2016). Examining emotions in English language learning classes: A case of EFL emotions. *Issues in Educational Research*, 26(3), 508-527.
- Russel, J., & Spada, N. (2006). *The effectiveness of corrective feedback for the acquisition of L2 grammar: A meta-analysis of the research*. University of Toronto.
- Salvia, J., & Ysseldyke, J. E. (2007). *Assessment in special and inclusive education*. Houghton Mifflin.
- Swain, M. (2013). The inseparability of cognition and emotion in second language learning. *Language Teaching*, 46(2), 209-224.
- White, L. (1991). Adverb placement in second language acquisition: Some effects of positive and negative evidence in the classroom. *Second Language Research*, 7, 133-161.