

Managing English Language Anxiety in Focus: Lived Experiences of Elementary Learners in The Public School

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Abstract — The focus of this study is the elementary learners of Gasco & Centina Integrated School situated in Bato, Toril, Davao City. These learners have innate difficulties in English language, which when left unattended, as in many cases have progressed into language anxiety. This study investigated the attributions about the English language anxiety of Filipino students enrolled in the elementary school and how language anxiety affects their English proficiency and their language learning. The lived experiences in language anxiety of Filipino elementary learners were categorized into six (6) themes: Classroom Procedures, Language Testing, Personal-Interpersonal Issues, Instructor-Learner Interaction, Learner’s Beliefs about Language Learning, and Instructor’s Belief about Language Teaching. The causes of the learners’ language anxiety in this study were identified as speaking activity, error correction, communicating with English speakers, writing activity, negative self-perception, and non-comprehension. sentiments. These are the sentiments of elementary learners in alleviating their language anxiety and improving their English proficiency: “When we learn our second language, first we listen, then we speak, then we read and finally we write. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four language skills we need to develop for complete communication”; “To achieve these four basic language skills, we need to surround ourselves with English: make English part of our life at home, at work, during our free time. Practice makes perfect, which means that if we want to improve a certain skill, we must practice it. As a beginner learner we will need to achieve all 4 language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing”; and “Whatever learning style the learner has, whatever native language the learner has, the key to acquire and master the English language is practice as much and as often as possible to lessen the language anxiety.

Keywords — *English language anxiety, elementary learners, experiences, causes*

I. Introduction

English is considered the second language for the Philippines. English is also the nonexclusive language of science and technology (DepEd, 1987) which aims for the competence of learners in both Filipino and English at the national level. Teaching English as the medium of instruction is a crucial component of the Philippine school system. (e proliferation of its usage is so extensive that it is ingrained in almost every aspect of communication. In fact, one of the country’s identified strengths, which helped drive its economy and made the country the top provider of voice outsourcing, is the English proficiency of Filipinos (Tinsley, T & Board, K., 2013).

However, although the Philippines is still one of the preferred countries for foreign learners of English due to the affordability and quality of its English as Second Language Programs being offered, there is a worrying trend of decreasing English competence of teachers and learners. The English proficiency of the Filipino workforce has declined (English First, 2016), which might be attributed to Filipino graduates having only English proficiency at the basic working proficiency level.

Language anxiety can be manifested in the different stages of language learning, the input, processing, and output stages, and describing how anxiety is related to these three stages can provide insights on why second language learners and foreign language learners suffer from linguistic difficulties and mistakes (Von W'orde, 2007).

The focus of this study is the elementary learners of Gasco & Centina Integrated School situated in Bato, Toril, Davao City. These learners have innate difficulties in English language, which when left unattended, as in many cases have progressed into language anxiety.

Although there is sufficient literature about English language learning anxiety, there is still a scarcity of available and published written materials investigating the status of foreign language learning anxiety in the Philippines. This study investigated the attributions about the English language anxiety of Filipino students enrolled in the elementary school and how language anxiety affects their English proficiency and their language learning.

Filipino learners' anxious thoughts on speaking keep them focused on their learning difficulties and, in turn, might affect their learning process. There are distractions caused by negative thoughts that keep them from focusing on the task at hand, causing them to suffer from an inability to process, continue, or complete and even express a train of thought.

Speaking anxiety and writing anxiety are language-skill specific anxieties that are different from a general classroom-type of anxiety, meaning some students may be prone to suffer from anxiety in any second language class. In contrast, some may be particularly susceptible to anxiety in a situation in which a particular language skill is emphasized. Filipino learners seem to be more susceptible to speaking anxieties than writing anxieties. (e difference might stem from the fact that speaking entails a high exposure compared with writing activities. When Filipino learners are asked to speak in front of the class, they feel more vulnerable because of the fear that their foreign language weaknesses will be exposed to their teacher and classmates, causing them to lose their self-esteem.

The fear of making mistakes and being corrected or negatively evaluated is a significant source of anxiety for the Filipino learners. It can be explained as the feeling commonly associated with the evaluation of performance when being corrected or a learner's anxiety as caused by corrective observations when he or she uses the target language, which in this case is English. Like other foreign language students, Filipino foreign language learners usually do not want to be criticized and corrected in front of the whole class. In the study conducted by Yahya (2013), fear

of error correction or negative evaluation was identified as the most significant cause of foreign language anxiety, while the study of Ok and Ustaci (2013) on Turkish EFL learners also showed that the students preferred not to be corrected by their teachers when they made a mistake while speaking because they believed the corrections made by their teacher were a source of anxiety.

Causes of English Language Anxiety. Howitz (2010) stresses that foreign language anxiety is caused by three factors related to performance: 1) fear of negative evaluation, 2) communication apprehension, and 3) test anxiety. Fear of negative evaluation is the feeling of “apprehension about others’ evaluations, avoidance of evaluative situations, and expectation that others would evaluate oneself negatively.”

The literature on foreign language anxiety can generally be summarized into six major causes stemming from three primary sources: the learner, the educator, and instructional practice. These causes are 1) interpersonal and personal anxiety, 2) learners’ beliefs about learning a foreign language, 3) classroom procedures, 4) employing teacher-centered methods, 5) teachers’ beliefs about language teaching, and 6) language examination (Young, 2000). More recently, Luo (2012) believes the main sources that lead to experiencing foreign language anxiety are the classroom atmosphere, attributes of learners, the target language, and the process of foreign language learning itself.

Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (2006) in their popular research define English language anxiety as “a distinct complex construct of self-perceptions, beliefs, feelings, and behaviors related to classroom language learning arising from the uniqueness of language learning process.” They state that anxiety associated with an English language is a situation-specific form emerging from the uniqueness of foreign language learning, not as a general anxiety moved to learning a foreign language. They prove their theory by observing language learners during the process of teaching in language classes and feedback from thirty language learners attending a language class as well.

This theory proposes that other academic fields of study do not have the same degree of self-concepts and self-expression like foreign language learning, which makes this type of anxiety different from other academic anxieties. Learners who perform well at other subjects experienced anxiety when learning the English language. Numerous studies adopted this theory and provided a piece of evidence to validate it.

II. Methodology

This research study is descriptive and focuses on the identification of the sources and causes of language anxiety and analysis of how language anxiety affects language learning.

Since the study is phenomenological-qualitative in approach, the main instrument for gathering the data are interviews. The participants of this study were interviewed, and because they were minors, after consent was given, all interviews were carried out with an adult (either

parent, guardian or teacher involved). Then the data were transcribed, analyzed and the report was written.

The interviews were done either at the homes of the participants, the school or whenever the location proved comfortable for the interview. When the researcher felt that the interview became too pressured or uncomfortable, then it was re-scheduled for some other time.

Participants in this study were 15 elementary learners. All learners are officially enrolled in grade 5 and 6 of the Gasco and Centina Integrated School of Bato, Toril, Davao City.

All learners have been immersed in English or language classes. It is understood that the medium of instruction is English, yet due to language difficulties and cultural reasons, the teacher reverts to “code switching” or use of the mother tongue.

The interview followed the research questions and probing questions. The first question is about the respondents’ experiences about language anxiety, which was intended to generate the probable attributions of anxiety. The questions were designed to reflect what the learners experience to ensure the respondents will provide a comprehensive response. The second question deals with situations or events inside their English classroom that caused them anxiety.

Thematic analyses were used to analyze the recorded and transcribed responses of the participants. It requires more involvement and interpretation from the researcher. Thematic analyses move beyond counting explicit words or phrases and focus on identifying and describing both implicit and explicit ideas within the data, that is, themes. Codes are then typically developed to represent the identified themes and applied or linked to raw data as summary markers for later analysis. Such analyses may or may not include the following: comparing code frequencies, identifying code co-occurrence, and graphically displaying relationships between codes within the data set.

By referring to the literature, the interviewer gains information that allows him or herself to make inferences from the interview or therapy session. Once the themes have been collected and the literature has been studied, the researcher is ready to formulate theme statements to develop a storyline. When the literature is interwoven with the findings, the story that the interviewer constructs is one that stands with merit. A developed storyline helps the reader to comprehend the process, understanding, and motivation of the interviewer. These steps were followed in given order and organization to the identified participants of this study.

III. Results and Discussion

Lived experiences in language anxiety of Filipino elementary learners

Experience 1. Classroom Procedures. The factor that highly contributed to speaking anxiety was classroom procedures. Most of the participants commented that classroom procedures really affected their study.

Experience 2. Language Testing. Most participants agreed that they felt anxious when they were taking a speaking test.

Experience 3. Personal-Interpersonal Issues. The low self-esteem might be the most common personal-interpersonal issue faced by the participants

Experience 4. Instructor-Learner Interaction. In addition to the pressure that they got from the class activities, it seemed that the students also concerned about the error correction that happened during the lesson.

Experience 5. Learner's Beliefs about Language Learning. The learner belief about language learning was affecting their performances during the learning process.

Experience 6. Instructor's Belief about Language Teaching. Instructor belief about language teaching could also be considered as one of the anxiety's factors faced by the students.

Causes of the learners' language anxiety

Cause 1. Speaking Activity. Anxious students felt a deep self-consciousness when asked to speak using the English language in the presence of other people.

Cause 2. Error Correction. Of the sources of anxiety, error correction ranked second, which is attributed to the fact that students do not want to be criticized and corrected in front of the whole class.

Cause 3. Communicating with English Speakers. Speaking in the English language is the most frightening language skill and they feel stressed and even start to "freeze" when they have to act out a role-play or deliver a speech.

Cause 4. Writing Activities. It is interesting to note that the learners' apprehension of writing activities using English causes high anxiety, but all the other indicators incite a level of anxiety.

Cause 5. Negative Self-Perception. Generally, negative self-perception is a source of anxiety for Filipino learners. The feeling of not doing well in their English class is a source of anxiety.

Cause 6. Non-Comprehension of English. It is a fear of not accurately understanding English materials that they have heard and the feeling of not being able to give the details of the English materials that they read.

Sentiments of elementary learners in alleviating their language anxiety and improving their English proficiency.

When we learn our second language, first we listen, then we speak, then we read and finally we write. Listening, speaking, reading, and writing are the four language skills we need to develop for complete communication. (P12)

To achieve these four basic language skills, we need to surround ourselves with English: make English part of our life at home, at work, during our free time. Practice makes perfect, which means that if we want to improve a certain skill, we have to practice it. As a beginner learner we will need to achieve all 4 language skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. (P14)

Join voiced chats. Technology has advanced a lot in terms of social networks so, wherever you live, you'll find a way to join. (P4)

Talk and record yourself. This may sound funny, but it will help you realize how you can improve by repeating the recording several times till you feel happy with the results. (P12)

Talk to your classmates in English when you are not in class. You can even make a group to play games, have a meal or just chat together. (P4)

Analysis

All the sentiments expressed by learners can be reduced to just one: practice, practice, practice! Whatever learning style the learner has, whatever native language the learner has, the key to acquire and master the English language is practice as much and as often as possible to lessen the language anxiety.

Learners' reports of not doing anything show that they may need to be motivated to improve themselves in the four basic skills. The reason for learners not doing anything may be because they have given up hope of being able to improve in English. This sense of helplessness should be addressed by English teachers first before learners can benefit from learning activities to help them improve in language proficiency as learned helplessness can affect students' motivation to learn. English teachers could create learning environments with a definite potential for success through setting attainable goals and reasonable challenges for learners. Opportunities for success and celebrating success will enhance their self-confidence.

Teachers could introduce anxiety reduction strategies to help learners feel more relaxed in the English classroom. Teachers put forward three types of affective strategies that can be used to

regulate learner attitudes, motivation, and emotions. These *include strategies for anxiety reduction (using progressive relaxation and deep breathing exercises, music, and laughter), for self-encouragement (making positive statements, taking risks wisely, and administering self-rewards), and for monitoring emotions (listening to the body, completing a checklist, writing a language learning diary, and discussing feelings with peers)*. It is also important to avoid tension-causing activities such as surprise quizzes, overly competitive activities, and putting students in front of their peers without warning or chance for preparation.

Discussion

The findings on how students felt in English classes suggest that English teachers need to consider how learners feel and try to provide a risk-free environment in English classes where learners do not feel afraid or shy to make mistakes. In addition, efforts must be made to raise their confidence and courage in learning English.

Teachers should provide learners with opportunities to succeed and thus build up their self-perceptions regarding learning English. Mastery experiences will strengthen learners' self-percepts of efficacy and enhance their performance attainments. Steps can also be taken to alleviate stress through relaxation activities or instruction on stress management. Positive affirmations and encouraging words from teachers would also go a long way to helping relieve stress.

Teachers' supportive attitude towards learners and efforts to understand the affective needs of learners can make a significant contribution towards making learners feel comfortable and motivated to learn in English classes.

Teachers can help learners overcome their anxiety and shyness about speaking in English class by providing more opportunities for them to interact in safe groups in which they feel comfortable. In addition, teachers must make a conscious effort to ensure that these learners can participate in class, not just the ones who take the initiative. Wait-times should also be lengthened to ensure that these learners have enough time to respond without interruption.

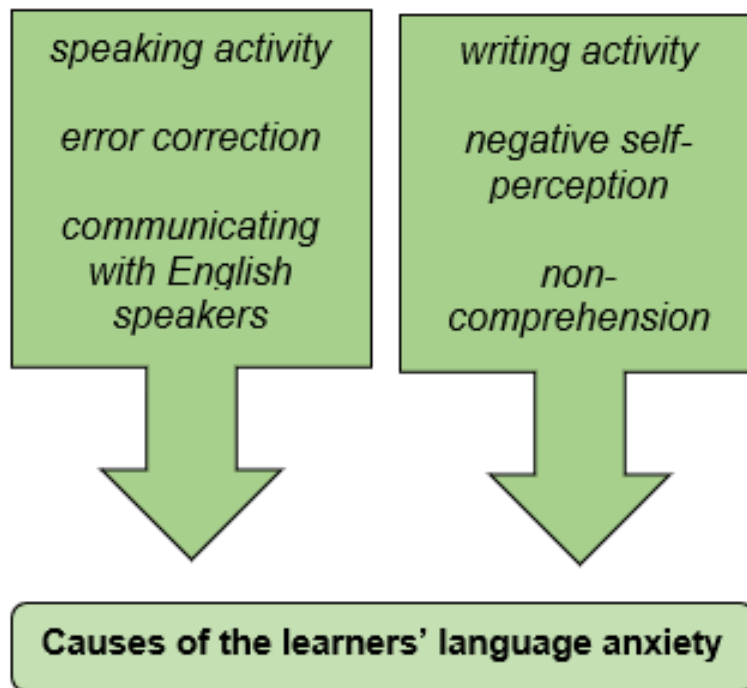
The findings presented in this paper are limited to the learners of the school involved in this study. A replication of this study involving learners from schools in other parts of Davao City would provide further support for the generalizability of the findings.

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APPENDIX



AUTHOR'S PROFILE**JONIT SOLIS POPON**

The author is 34 years old, married, and born on December 1, 1989, in Toril, Davao City, Philippines. She is currently living at Toril, Davao City where her school assignment is also located. In her early years, she finished her Bachelor's degree in Nursing at Davao Doctors College located in General Malvar St., Poblacion District, Davao City. Passed the licensure exam and pledged as a professional Nurse. Assigned to selected hospitals in Davao City to practice her skills in the medical field. After a year of service in the medical field, she took the Earning Units for Education at Davao Central College located in Toril, Davao City. After her completion, she took the Licensure Examination for Teachers (LET) and was able to pass. Processed and complied with the DepEd requirements for rating, to be able to get an item in DepEd schools. Accomplished her Master's Degree of Arts in Educational Management at Rizal Memorial College located in Davao City.

Currently, she is waiting for her appointment as a teacher iii in the department of education, Cluster 4. She is a Grade -v teacher at Gasco & Centina Integrated School which is situated at Barangay Bato, Toril, Davao City, Davao del Sur, Philippines. She is the school clinic coordinator, school science coordinator, and vice president of the school teachers' association.