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An Exploratory Inquiry into the Second Language Acquisition of Junior High School Non-Readers

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Abstract. Learning a second language bridges the gap and links people to the world by creating a mellifluous relationship where information, ideas, and culture are shared through communication. The Philippines is ranked fifth in the world's largest English speaking countries. However, surveys on International academic assessment for high school students found that the country ranks lowest in English Language reading and speaking comprehension. This paper explores the experiences of junior high school non-readers in a public high school on second language acquisition in Negros Occidental, Philippines. This qualitative research utilized a phenomenological approach. The Philippine Informal Reading Inventory Assessment results were utilized as part of the inclusion criteria to identify the participants. The data were gathered through an in-depth interview and were analyzed using the thematic analysis approach by Lichtman (2010). This undertaking generated three themes that depict the lived experiences of the respondents in L2 acquisition: (a) Language Origin, (b) Practice of Target Language, (c) Learning Conditions. The findings indicate that external and internal factors substantially affect the L2 learning of students, and these factors in SLA will remain incessant when not addressed at once.

Keywords. Education, Second Language Acquisition, junior high school non-readers, qualitative design, Philippines

1. Introduction

Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is one main branch of Applied Linguistics, which is well-known by the research and practices in other disciplines like Linguistics, Psychology, and Sociology [1]. Second Language (SL) can be well-defined as a non-native language that is broadly used for purposes of communication, commonly as a medium of education, government, or business which significantly means that any language acquired after mastering the mother tongue or the *Lingua Franca* can be termed as a second language [18]. Acquisition of a child's first language begins at birth and continues to puberty, and at around age 12, the Chomskian acquisition device starts to wane, in theory, a child cannot acquire another language, he or she only can learn a second or foreign language [25]. Moreover, typical high school students will then learn another language based on three factors, *Comprehension* [15] which may include metacognition or prior knowledge, *Motivation* [36] which deals with internal factors of a learner, and *Experiences* [16] which depict the external influence to the child.

In the Philippine context, children grew up exposed to their first language which is Filipino, and a second language which is English. The English language is commonly used as

a medium of instruction in all educational settings and a majority of references studied by a learner are written in English [19]. Studies in acquiring a second language can be described in two ways: the first is through the group of studies concerned with describing how English as a second language is developed using cognitive and metacognitive systems of strategy. The second is through the group of studies concerned with how English as a second language is better facilitated to reach proficiency through different interventions [2]. These two descriptions are explained by three major theories in learning: Cognitive, social, and social-cognitive.

Second language acquisition in Philippines schools offers different interventions. Among bilingual learners, oral language proficiency is inadequate in measuring text comprehension in English [19]. To improve oral proficiency in a second language, the transition of instruction should be individual moving to a more generic instructional model. The movement to generic instructional models is brought about by familiarity with the bilingual learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and their previous experience [3].

There are already numerous academic SLA researches and studies done and across institutions, however, [15] highlighted that the field is still in a progressing stage and we are far from a complete theory on SLA, but there is development.

Given the scenario that Filipino bilingual learners are in continuous search for justifications as to the extent of their second language learning, this paper intends to explore further into the second language acquisition of Junior High School non-readers more specifically in a public secondary high school in the province of Negros Occidental, Philippines.

2. Method

This Qualitative research study employed the phenomenological approach since it is concerned with the study of experience from the perspective of the individual, associating taken-for-granted statements and usual ways of perceiving [18]. Qualitative research is an inquiry directed at clarifying and describing human experiences as it appears in the lives of the people [21]. This study aims to gather an in-depth understanding on the Second Language Acquisition (SLA) of the participants. Through qualitative design, the researchers can have a better grasp on the struggles and challenges of the Junior High School non-readers in SLA.

The participants of this study were the ten (10) Junior High School non-readers of a public secondary school in Talisay City, province of Negros Occidental. They were determined using purposive sampling technique according to pre-selected criteria such as they must be in Grade 10 of the current school year 2020-2021, they are the students ranked at bottom utilizing the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (PHILIRI), and whose ages range from 15-16 years old. The respondents were then given pseudonyms to conceal their identity for the purpose of data privacy.

The data were collected from the respondents utilizing an in-depth, semi-structured interview. The use of in-depth interview facilitated the gathering of detailed and useful information to provide the context to the data [17]. Prior to the conduct of the interview, permission to administer the Phil-IRI was sought from the District Supervisor and School Head. Informed consents and parental waivers were then given to the participants. The data from the interview were collected using audio-recording which were permitted by the participants and note-taking techniques. Recording technique targets to record the utterances and statements that the participants make, and note taking technique is for data-classification [26]. The one-on-one interview took place in the Learning Resource Center (LRC) of the school. Apart from the interview, the researcher also took note of the explicit and implicit signals given by the participants to determine their mood, tone, and emotions in answering the questions.

After the interview, the participants were then debriefed and reassured of the confidentiality of their responses. The recording and notes taken were transcribed to ensure accuracy and precision.

To analyze the data gathered, Recursive Textual Analysis using Lichtman's (2012) 3 Cs to cull out the lived experiences of Junior High School non-readers in SLA through Coding, Categorizing, and Conceptualizing. The language data are not single words, rather interconnected words merged into sentences, and sentences linked into discourses. The data varied from every participant, which makes it difficult to convert it into numbers for analysis [22]. Similarities and differences are easily and accurately found by coding, categorizing and conceptualizing the data in the experiences of the participants.

This phenomenological approach to the SLA of Junior high school non-readers necessitated several considerations to ensure the integrity and credibility of the study. The participants must willingly partake in the study and are ensured that no potential harm will transpire to them [6]. Their identities were not publicized and were concealed with pseudonyms. Furthermore, participants signed a written agreement of participation. Data from participants were treated with utmost confidentiality and were accessible only to the researcher. Electronic files such as the transcription and audio recordings were deleted right away making sure that no traces of data will be retrieved.

3. Results

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences in Second Language Acquisition of Junior High School non-readers in a Public Secondary School in the Philippines. Thematic analysis was utilized to inductively analyze the data. Three themes emerged from this qualitative study, Language Origin, Practice of Target Language, and Learning Conditions.

3.1. Language Origin

This speaks of the origin and causes of how L2 is learned and acquired, the understanding of how language is embodied in the mind, and whether there is a difference between the ways L2 is attained and processed [7].

3.1.1. Home

Majority of the responses coming from the participants agrees that the foundation of L2 learning starts at home. This is where the initial learning of the English language took place, with the help of everyone in the household. The quality of learning acquired by the participants depends on the knowledge and background in English language of those who taught them at home.

"My mom is the first person who taught me how to speak English however I am not paying attention during those times."

"I learned English with the guidance of my sisters."

"Si nanay nag tudlo sa akon kung paano kag diin gamiton ang English. – (My mother taught me on how and where to speak English.)"

"Gabulos-bulos si Mama kag Papa tudlo sakon English sang una, kis.a wala na ko kabalo kung sino ang intsakto sa ila duwa. (My mother and Father take turn in teaching me English, sometimes, I do not who is accurate between them.)"

3.1.2. Early Childhood L2 Education

The respondents stressed out the role of their early childhood schools which supplemented their L2 learning. Schools became their avenue in practicing English which they learned from their homes with the supervision and guidance from their teachers.

“My teachers taught me how to speak English because majority of the subjects that were taught in our school were using English language.”

“My teachers influenced me to speak English for they always tell us that it is very important.”

“I learned English most when I was a kinder.”

“English is being taught in schools which helped me to learn how to speak and write using the said language.”

3.2. Practice of Target Language

This refers to the facility and usage of the target language (L2) that happens inside the classroom or through activities in everyday life [21].

3.2.1. Effective L2 Practice

This pertains to the procedures or ways which proved to be operative and useful to participants in utilizing the L2.

“If I can hear someone speaking English, I can understand, but if I’m the one speaking, it is so hard. I should practice more often. I read books in English during my vacant periods.”

“When I talk to the teacher, I try my best to speak in English even if I am not sure if I am doing it correctly.”

“We are answering questions in English most of the time, which is a big help that improves my speaking skills in English.”

“I am reading English books aloud to make my pronunciations better and I also downloaded apps that would help me improve my vocabulary.”

3.2.2. Ineffective L2 Practice

This refers to the procedures and methods which are proven to contribute to the unsuccessful L2 practice of the learners. This factor weakens the drive of the participants to learn English.

“I sometimes speak English in school because our teachers tell us to do so, but at home, I don’t speak English.”

“I do not know that I am using a word in the present tense in which it is meant to be in the past tense.”

“I just keep quiet during English class. I am afraid to be called out by the teacher.”

“Ga-speak lang ko English kung may role-play or performance task para lang sa grades. (I only speak English if there are role-play or performance task, just for the sake of grades.)”

3.3. Learning Conditions

This adheres to the current circumstances that make the learning of L2 possible [21]. These conditions of the participants may include the context where learning took place or the individual capacity or characteristics to successfully learn English.

3.3.1. Motivation to speak the language

This refers to the internal factors that intensify the desire of the learners to learn the English language.

“Learning English is very difficult for me. My parents don’t speak English, so I told myself that I need motivation in order for me to learn English.”

“Gusto ko maging teacher someday, that is why kinanglan ko gid magtuon English para ma-improve ko self ko kag para ma reach ko ang akon dream in the future. (I want to become a teacher someday, that is why I need to learn English for my self-improvement so that I will be able to reach my dream in the future.)”

“My family is very poor, and we struggled even more because of the pandemic. I realized how important education is, and promised myself to do better in school and learning English further is one of my priorities.”

“I wish to work abroad, that is why I need to learn English.”

3.3.2. Emotions

Emotion is vital to human cognition [12]. The respondents were able to relate their varied emotions that correlate with their language learning.

“I would like to speak English but I am afraid to make mistakes, I feel upset and discouraged.”

“Wala ko ga practice speak English kay nahadlok ko makadlawan kung wrong grammar ang akon panghambal (I do not practice speaking in English for I am afraid to be laughed at when I commit grammatical errors in my statements.)”

“Most of the students are afraid to speak in front of many people especially when they are required to speak in English.”

“I feel happy when I speak a straight English sentence, but honestly, I feel embarrassed when my classmates laugh at me if I speak ungrammatically.”

3.3.3. Social Interactions

Social interactions among the participants solely take place in school in which they can only find the opportunity to use the language, since they find it hard to use in in everyday living.

“Most of my classmates can speak English and as for me, I should start learning from them in order for me not to be left behind.”

“I had no chance to speak English in school, knowing that my other classmates speak in Hiligaynon when talking to one another.”

“Gina-try ko mag storya sa mga classmates ko in English tapos gakakibot na lang ko nga iban gakabatian ko mag storya nga gagamit man English. (I always try to talk to my classmates in English, and to my surprise, I can also hear others talking in English as well.)”

4. Discussion

The Philippines is considered the largest English-speaking Asian country having English as one of our national languages. We cannot deny the fact that we are at par with some native English-speaking countries in terms of its usage, however, the Philippine education sector faces a linguistic struggle with Filipino learners who can hardly utilize the language. Generally, children learn a language through association and reinforcement [1]. It means to say that a child will be able to successfully learn his/ her second language through strengthening their linguistic abilities which should be done at home and in school. Results of this study revealed that the home and the school act as the primary language learning niche of students since members of the family and the language teachers serve as the foundation of early L2

development of a child. Participants would tell that learning the English language was difficult most especially that they were not oriented with the L2 usage properly and accurately at home. Schools were the only avenue where they could express and attempt to use the language. The quality of the language learned by the participants was dependent on the knowledge imparted to them by the people inside their household and their early language teachers. Furthermore, the learning environment and teachers can significantly influence the student in learning a foreign language [32].

Practice is one of the events of language instruction [21]. Through practice, the participants may be able to demonstrate the level of their understanding of the language learned and this provides an opportunity for improvement. Nonetheless, the extent of their language practice may be effective or ineffective. The effective practice would pertain to the manner participants had used the language on circumstances that provided the opportunity to utilize the L2 appropriately, and ineffective practices are those procedures or experiences which did not contribute to their effectual language use [21]. There are certainties that the participants were able to feel that successfully accomplishing the language task given to them provides retention in language learning. It drives them to do better when given positive reinforcements and makes them eager to learn the language better. On the contrary, unwarranted of the L1 or native tongue in everyday classroom instruction limits opportunities for students to be exposed in L2 which results in adverse effects on the language learning process [29]. Participants would reveal that they only speak English when they are told to do so, afterwards, they continue to speak with their vernacular, or just remain silent and opt not to talk at all. Students honestly exposed that they prefer using L1 in classroom instruction, but overuse of L1 in language classes is believed to have some demotivating effects on students and restricts their opportunities in learning the target language [4]. They just see English as a foreign language that is only used during English language classes [27]. This is the reason why students have less exposure to L2 making their practice of target language ineffective.

External and internal factors also play a significant role in the acquisition of L2 of students since they learn best when they are intrinsically motivated and the environment where they socially interact with serves a potential niche for language learning for a child will most likely execute the linguistic sound of his/her environment [23]. Learning a language is a complex process for it involves external and internal factors [30]. These Junior High School non-readers learn the language best when they are motivated, they socially interact with other students who also speak the target language, and when they feel happy and valued. Students' motivation is a holistic key factor in language learning; it is an intrinsic force that tells someone to obtain something [24]. The participants of this study are already aware of their goals and ambitions in life, which is the prime reason why they are motivated to learn the English language better [11]. When the participants are motivated to learn, they become emotionally attached to the desire in doing better, and they tend to radiate that feeling of eagerness to master the language through everyday interaction to their classmates to also learn the language.

5. Conclusion

The findings of this exploratory inquiry on the second language acquisition of Junior High School non-readers revealed three major themes which contribute to both the success and failure of the language learning of the participants. It was found out that the early beginning of L2 acquisition serves as the foundation of all language learning of students. The quality of language learning by the students relies on the vitality of knowledge and comprehension given to them during their formative years at home and in school. In most cases, it is their mothers who give effort in teaching their children the basics of the second language and then

supplemented by the school. Teachers must also be competent with the facility of the language since they are the second source of language learning of most students.

Students practice their L2 acquisition basically in school, where there are a lot of opportunities for them to use the language. Students would tend to speak the language based on how it was taught to them and on necessity. Junior High School is a crucial stage of language development for students that is why it is important for them to realize the value of every effort exerted and become aware and open to welcome additional learning. This is the appropriate time for students to learn, relearn, and unlearn the things about second language acquisition towards the success of their language learning.

The more students are motivated, the more they desire to learn the L2. They become well-driven since they have clearer goals in life, and they have already established a feeling of contentment each time they are told that they did great. Aside from being motivated, students learn L2 best when they are emotionally satisfied. Students who are easily upset need positive reinforcement. In addition, these statements are evidence that there are barriers to SLA of most Filipino Junior High School on-readers.

Moreover, the participants agree that learning the English language is both worthwhile and challenging. They stressed that the road to complete language acquisition is long, but they are getting there. The English language is deemed to be the universal language that is why learning the language entails a lot of advantages and opportunities. This study is not meant to oppose or contradict existing theories or principles, rather to scaffold other researchers on their venture on Second Language Acquisition.

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