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ARTICULATED DIFFICULTIES OF GRADE 11 STUDENTS AT TAYTAY SENIOR HIGH SCHOOL (TSHS) IN ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

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Abstract

English has been the medium of instruction since the beginning of the 20th century in the Philippines during the arrival of the Americans. This has been incorporated holistically in the society through the educational system, communication, mass media, publications and social media. It is given therefore that Filipino learners are bilingual-- i.e., speaking both Filipino (the native tongue) and English as Second Language (ESL). After a century though, proficiency in the language is still a difficulty and an anxiety, especially from public school learners. In Taytay Senior High School (a public senior high school), Grade 11 students were observed of certain levels of difficulties in reading, writing, speaking and listening. In this study, the researchers probed deeper into the following: a.) the difficulties experienced by grade 11 students b.) the factors that led to such difficulties and c.) the articulated ways to help them overcome such difficulties in English proficiency. As a descriptive study, the researchers used pre-survey, survey, FGD and extensive literature review as methodologies. The survey results revealed problematic stages on vocabulary, training and knowledge, confidence and self-esteem and interest. Articulated in the FGD furthermore were issues of generation, practice/articulation, and system as factors that led to difficulties in reading writing, speaking and listening. On the other hand, Grade 11 students underscored power of mind, the use of native language and practice as methodical solutions to the problem. Further directions of this study could include elaboration of the FGD results that pertain to issues of generation, practice/articulation and system. The use of native language could also be expounded on future studies.

Keywords

English Proficiency, Language Difficulty, Senior High School Students, Public School Learners

1. Introduction

The 21st century demands people to know how to adapt to the changes in the world (Aquino et al., 2016), and how to survive with the demands and trends of the society. It was also mentioned in the article of Chambers (2010) that the 21st century demands a people with a global perspective and who can handle problems from simple to more difficult ones. At this time and age, society in the state of globalization requires a high level of English proficiency (Paakki, 2013). In fact, according to Haydon (2010), people with a high level of English proficiency have the advantage and big opportunity in the developing economy. This has led many second language speakers in English to aspire and pass the standardized tests which determine their

competencies in reading, writing, speaking and listening in English as their second language. (eg. IELTS). Through having English as the university level's medium of instruction (Srikrai et al., 2016), Filipinos are considered to be Second Language Acquirers' (SLA) in the world (Summers, 2012). Filipinos were even known as 'highly literate individuals' (Labelitblank, 2013). However, the Philippines was also labelled as a '*nation of non-readers*' (Luz, 2007 cited in Labelitblank, 2013). This issue can be viewed in the daily lives of Filipinos wherein, they gather daily information from radio or Television and there are only small percentages of Newspaper or Magazines reader (Labelitblank, 2013). In fact, even history was passed through word of mouth than written records (Labelitblank, 2013). According to Luz (2007), Filipinos, despite being regarded as highly literate individuals, the quality of literacy and being literate is relatively low. The result of Philippine government 2013 survey even pointed that both rural and urban students have a low literacy rate. It means that, Filipino students may have poor reading skills which correlate to the poor language proficiency of public school teachers, be it English or Filipino (Wilson, 2009).

Though they have long been bilingual since the American regime with English as the medium of instruction in schools (Aquino et al., 2016), still, a number of Filipino millennial learners are still having a hard time in reading, writing and speaking in English, and this has been a prevalent problem. This is due to some factors inside and outside the classrooms like cultural differences (such as intercultural barriers, different classroom interaction, lack of knowledge of academic standards, insufficient learning) (Phakiti and Li, 2012), and negative academic experiences (Horwitz et al., 2010) related to language difficulties that create anxiety and fear in performing second and foreign languages (Horwitz et al., 1986). Oxford (1999) stated that language anxiety ranks high in the streets and the classrooms. In particular events or situations, such anxiety can be a major character trait later on. From passing state to episodic modes, fear of the situation arises. However, Gardner and MacIntyre (1993) pointed that, "if repeated occurrences cause students to associate anxiety with language performance, anxiety becomes a *trait* rather than a *state*." The effects of the anxiety will eventually be pervasive on language learning and language performance.

Torres (2001) also stated that the increasing percentage of Limited-English-Proficiency (LEP) was observed by the researchers in Taytay Senior High School which is one of the common problems of the students. In Taytay Senior High School, cases of difficulties in English

Proficiency are rampant. In fact, based on students' behaviour inside classes, English seems a difficult subject (Srikrai, 2016) next to Mathematics. Anxious feeling stops them to step up.

The purpose therefore of this study is to help learners who have low English proficiency by providing intervention for such problem. Professional interventions may be designed to allay their struggles and fears in English proficiency.

This research aimed to identify the (a) difficulties experienced by Grade 11 students in terms of reading, writing, listening and speaking as requirements of English proficiency, (b) factors which led to the difficulties in English proficiency by the Grade 11 students of Taytay Senior High School and (c) how Grade 11 students can overcome the identified difficulties in English proficiency.

This research was a school-based assessment of the Grade 11 students of Taytay Senior High School in English in terms of their articulated difficulties in Language required competencies.

The researchers conducted a pre-survey to evaluate the students' difficulty in English proficiency. A room-to-room pre-survey was done through the respondents' listing of their difficulties in English language. They were asked to qualitatively list down their identified difficulties as much as they can. The 29 items listed were grouped into four (4) thematized areas to be the focal items in the survey namely; vocabulary, training and knowledge, interest and confidence/self-esteem.

2. Methods

2.1 Credibility, Truthfulness, Reliability, Dependability, and Validity of this Study

Gathering, collection, collation, interpretation, and analysis of data were evaluated with credibility, truthfulness, dependability, reliability and validity.

This study had credibility and truthfulness because it utilized multiple data bases, both from the primary and secondary sources through the process of item analysis, pre-survey, survey, literature review, and focus-group-discussion (FGD). In terms of reliability, the items on survey instrument were taken from the direct point of view of the respondents through pre-survey. The researchers then compared and assessed them from the 33-point FLCAS (Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Scale) of Horwitz et.al. (1986) which used a five (5) point Likert Scale (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree, and Strongly Agree). The FLCAS, however, measures the language anxiety level of the English learners but did not specifically delineate it to

difficulties experienced by the language acquirers. The researchers crafted an instrument that is consistent with the gathering of pre-survey item bank. In order to secure the validity of the survey question items, two raters (one expert in Social Science research and another in teaching Language) validated the instrument to ensure the face and content validity of the instrument. The researchers, however, used a different scale (Always, Often, Sometimes and Never) because the results of pilot testing in one section generated 90% of the answers as neutral. It was found out later that students understood the (Always, Often, Sometimes and Never) better than the (Strongly Disagree, Disagree, Neutral, Agree and Strongly Agree).

2.2 Design

The researchers utilized the descriptive method for this research. The pre-survey and the survey provided the baseline analysis to articulate the difficulties experienced and encountered by Grade 11 students. A Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was later used to elaborate the results of the survey, as well as to clear the ideas gathered from the survey and second hand data.

2.3 Respondents of the Study

The school had 178 total enrollees, and there are five (5) transferees and zero (0) number of drop-outs in the second semester of academic year 2016-2017. The study was limited to the respondents who were present on the day the researchers administered the survey, and to those having difficulties. There were 153 survey respondents; 93 female and 60 male students of Grade 11 students who were officially enrolled in the three tracks offered: HUMSS (Humanities and Social Sciences), ABM (Accountancy, Business and Management), and TVL-ICT (Technical-Vocational and Livelihood- Information and Computer Technology).

2.4 Instrument

The items on the survey instrument were derived from the item analysis. These survey questions were centered on difficulties in vocabulary, training and knowledge, confidence and self-esteem, and interest of the student in terms of reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills in English language. When the researchers administered the survey, they did pilot testing. The Focus Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted after class hours to clarify and articulate further the results of the survey.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Difficulties Experienced by Grade 11 Students that Affect their Language Proficiency Competencies

Survey Results

Table 1: Summary of the Difficulties in Vocabulary of the Respondents

		Learning New Words Every Day		Having Difficulties In Learning New Word		Understanding The Meaning Of The Word Easily		Having Extensive Vocabulary	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
N	Valid	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Table 1 shows that majority of male and female chose number two (Sometimes). This means that sometimes, they learn new words every day, they are having difficulties in learning a new word, they understand the meaning of the word easily and they have extensive vocabulary. This indicates that the vocabulary of the respondents is in the problematic stage.

According to Min, (2013), lack of vocabulary is a difficulty experienced by students around the world. Vocabulary is also crucial to all kinds of learners' second language development (Min, 2013) because it has a big role in learning English language. Cited too in the study of Min (2013) and Wilkins (1972), "Without grammar, very little can be conveyed, without vocabulary, nothing can be conveyed" (p. 111). Hence, grammar and vocabulary are interconnected with each other (Folse, 2015) because such problem in grammar relates to vocabulary. In addition, 55% of the respondents said that grammar is one of the most common problems that they encountered in writing.

Table 2: Summary of the Difficulties in Training and Knowledge of the Respondents

		Perform Basic Rules Of Grammar Well		Having A Hard Time In Constructing A Simple Sentence		Practice Speaking English		Learning More By Self Study		Learning More With Visual Aids And PowerPoint Presentations	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
N	Valid	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		2	2	2	2	3	3	2	2	2	4

Table 2 shows that majority of male and female respondents chose number two (Sometimes). This means sometimes they perform the basic rules of grammar well; they are having a hard time in constructing a simple sentence, and they learn more by self-study. On the other hand, in the practice of speaking English, both male and female respondents chose number three (3) which means Often. Moreover, majority of the male respondents chose number two (2) which means Sometimes they learn more with visual aids and PowerPoint presentation while majority of female chose four (4) which means Always. Overall the training and knowledge of the students is in the problematic stage. Shabiralyani et al. (2015) stated that visual aids catch the attention of the learners and help the teachers to easily explain the lessons. This is the reason why today’s learners learn more with visual aids and PowerPoint. Also, the students lacked practice that made their skills and knowledge limited. Based on the study of Khajloo (2013), students were tired of practicing and repeating the language. In this study, 33% of the respondents said they have difficulty in identifying the main ideas when they read a text because they are not practicing it. Thus, the students’ training, and knowledge is also in the problematic stage.

Table 3: Summary of the Difficulties in the Self-Confidence of the Respondents

		Fluent In English Before The Crowd		Feeling Comfortable When Speaking English		Having A Stage Fright		Stutter When Speaking In English In The Crowd		Delivering A Speech Confidently Before An Audience	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
N	Valid	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Mode	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2

Table 3 shows that majority of male and female chose number two (Sometimes). This means that sometimes they are fluent in English before the crowd; they feel comfortable when speaking English; they are having a stage fright; they stutter when speaking in English in the crowd; and they deliver a speech confidently before an audience. This indicates that the self-confidence of the respondents is in a problematic stage.

As cited by the study of Jamila (2014), ‘Self-esteem and self-confidence are like the foundations of a building: if they are not secure enough, even the best technology will be insufficient to build solid walls over them’ (Dörnyei, 2001, p.87). Self-confidence and speaking

are interconnected with each other (Jamila, 2014). High level of confidence means high level of being a successful speaker (Krashen, 2002). Based on the survey conducted by the researchers, 57% of the respondents have encountered lacking of confidence with regard to speaking English. It only means that the level of anxiety of the respondents in speaking is high. So the confidence and self-esteem of the students are in a problematic stage, which demands an attention and solution.

Table 4: *Summary of the Difficulties in the Interest of the Respondents*

		Watch English Movies		Hate Reading English Books		Like Writing Story Essay And Poem		Having Little Interest In English Subject	
		Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female	Male	Female
N	Valid	60	93	60	93	60	93	60	93
	Missing	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Mode		3	3	2	2	2	2	4	3

Table 4 shows that majority of male and female chose number two (2) which means Sometimes they hate reading English books, and they like writing story, essay, and poem. On the other hand, in case of watching a movie, both the males and females chose number three (3), which means often. Moreover, majority of male chose number four (4) which means they are always having little interest in English subject while majority of female chose number three (3) which means Often. This indicates the summary of results wherein, the interest of the students is in problematic stage.

According to Khajloo (2013), interest is the most important factor of difficulties in English proficiency. Khajloo (2013) states that most of the students are not interested in English that tends them to forget the lesson after the session. In listening, 50% of the respondents were having a hard time in identifying the meaning conveyed by supra segmentals (e.g. tone and stress) which discouraged them not to listen because they do not understand them.

Focus Group Discussion

3.2 Factors that Lead to the Difficulties in English Language proficiency

3.2.1 Attitude/Motivation

Attitude/Motivation is one of the factors affecting one's proficiency in English. According to Hum (2013), a student who has high motivation achieves better grade than non-motivated student. This only means that motivation is necessary in learning language. Like what one participant said,

“When it has unfamiliar word, some will take it for granted” (R1).

They take their problems for granted because these are not their interests at all. This makes them ill-focused and has difficulty in speaking English, given that they are used to speaking the native language, Filipino.

Another participant on the other hand said,

“I am not reading, maybe because I do not give English such importance” (R2).

It means that students do not usually give importance in being fluent in English.

”We are distracted when we are studying alone. Nowadays, we cannot learn when we are alone” (R3). This presupposes that students tend to be too dependent on their peers and become easily distracted. Hence, the attitude/motivation has a big influence in the learning of the students especially in English.

3.2.2 Background

Learners nowadays are having a hard time in English. One of the factors of it is their background in English (Aquino et al., 2016). As one participant said,

“I have low levels at English skills like reading, writing, and speaking because I don't read” (R4).

Another participant said,

“I got used to hearing only Tagalog words”(R5).

This result indicates that learners should read a lot for them to improve their English skills. It also appears that it is hard for the learners to adapt to the English language because they got used to the Filipino language, which they have been exposed to since birth. The background of the students in the use of English whether on the streets or school has an effect to their English language learning. This supports the study of Schwarz and Terrill (2000) which pointed that previous education is one of the factors contributing to the difficulties in English proficiency. Such is the education of language that is primarily spoken at home, the Filipino language.

3.2.3 Emotional Factor

One of the reasons that learners struggle in English proficiency is the emotional factor. Hum (2013), mentioned that emotional factor has a vital role in the success and failure in learning language. Like they do not prefer English as a subject, and that they have a condition called glossophobia. One participant said,

“According to what I've read, a person who is afraid to speak in front of people has the so-called ‘glossophobia’; that whenever they speak in front of people they become shaky; they lose confidence.”(R6)

One participant also stated the different feelings whenever they speak in English like being shaky, stuttering, and nervous.

”It leads us to difficulty or lack of confidence whenever we speak in front of people. It is either we are not sure to use some vocabularies or we do not want to be judged and mocked by a lot of people. That is why we decline to speak in English.” (R7)

The result has pointed out that they do not want to be embarrassed and are afraid to be judged by other people, by being so competitive and ‘appearing’ to be boastful and be subject of contempt and bullying of peers and classmates. In relation to this, a study concluded that emotional factor has an impact to the learning of the students who are constrained to speak well. Huang et al. (2010, p.3), recommended though that social support from teachers and peers is an important component that may influence academic achievement.

3.2.4 Generation

Generation is generally marked by an increased use and familiarity with communications, media and digital technologies, which has a big impact on how students learn new things and languages from which most public school students are deprived of due to lack of access.

“We are 21st century learners; presumably due to the advent of technology it trained us to use these words...There is language like jejemon...colloquial words...so it means that technology has huge influence on the difficulties in English language learning.” (R8)
Another participant said,

“There are those who read books, they read and read. But as for me, I would rather go on to computer shops, at least I will enjoy it, though I know my eyes are abused in playing computer games”. (R9)

The two participants agreed that technology has a huge impact which contributes to having difficulties in English proficiency.

“We are 21st century learners and we can't avoid the fact that in our generation, technology is very useful but it can destroy our studies.” (R10)

3.2.5 Practice/Articulation

Through practice and improvement of English proficiency skills, it can help students to improve their skills in reading, writing, speaking, and listening, and hence, become more familiar to English words however; it is still a major struggle for most of the respondents.

”If you are going to encounter a foreigner sometimes what they say become so mixed up; there is a possibility that you might face a situation leading to a gap in communication”. (R11)

Another said, “Sometimes we are impressed on people who are fluent in speaking English and making us looks up to them” (R12). According to Schwarz and Terrill (2000), lack of opportunity to practice the English skill is one of the reasons of difficulties in learning the language.

3.2.6 System

Strategies in teaching English can affect the students in learning English. One of the difficulties in English proficiency is identifying the main idea of the text.

“If no one will explain the story, I cannot understand it. That is why we wanted to translate it first in Tagalog in order to get the main idea of the story” (R13)

Translation is one of the keys to overcome the difficulties in English proficiency. The limited time is also the reason why students struggle a lot in English comprehension. It takes a lot of time for them to correct their grammar leading to their getting nervous and out of focus. Hence, the system can influence the learners in learning English. According to Hum (2013), system like time, frequency in learner’s contact with language and number of students in the class, is one of the factor which has a big influence in the learning of the student. Schwarz and Terrill (2000) further argued that the mismatch between the teacher’s teaching style and the learner’s learning style is one of the difficulties in learning.

3.3 Overcoming the Difficulties

3.3.1 Power of Mind

Based on the survey and FGD (Focus Group Discussion), power of mind is one way to overcome such difficulties in English. One participant said that to overcome these difficulties, learners, should think that English is easy to understand and practice. The more the learners think that it is hard, the harder it is for them to overcome it. The learners easily give up because certain issues and problems are embedded on their mindset that they cannot overcome it. This only means that one solution to overcome such difficulty is empowering the learners’ cognition

through positive motivation. According to the article of Sasson (2001), the power of mind is the one which can affect one's attitude toward something.

3.3.2 Native Language

Using the mother tongue based instruction is one way to overcome the difficulties based on the results of the survey and the FGD (Focus Group Discussion). By using the mother tongue before translating it in English, students understand the lesson more. It can create a comfortable atmosphere for the learners to digest new knowledge, and in fact, there is a high retention in their minds in this strategy. Research confirms that children learn best in their mother tongue as a prelude to and complement of bilingual and multilingual education (Ball, 2010). Auerbach (1993) proposed too that using native language in English classes is necessary in the learning of student, but for only chosen aspects like when discussing cross cultural issues and others related to it.

3.3.3 Practice

John Dewey's *Learning by Doing* holds true still in the arena of language and communication by which practice makes perfect in the course of learning. In this study, it has been revealed that students have the desire to practice more in speaking, reading, writing and listening.

4. Conclusion

The results revealed that the performance in speaking and writing tasks are indicators of difficulties in English proficiency. The respondents' performances in speaking and writing tasks are both in the problematic stage. The study underscored that learners nowadays are not interested in speaking and writing. Learners in fact, are not practicing because they are out of focus, like what the result of the FGD showed. There is a negative correlation between the learners' performance in reading and writing, and the amount of attention they give in practicing to read and write in English.

Horwitz et.al. (1986) also stated that self confidence and self-esteem are the indicators of difficulties in English proficiency. These indicators proposed by the mentioned authors were found true in this study. This only means that the lack of self confidence and self-esteem are the common factors which contributed to the difficulties in English learning. Based on the results, the learners' self confidence and self-esteem are in problematic stage which is needed to be

addressed. These factors have big impact to the learning of the students especially in their speaking skills.

Referring from the study made by Horwitz et al. (1986), however, the researchers found interesting variables to English learning like generation, practice/articulation, system, and background which are also indicators of such difficulties.

- The generation has an impact to the learning of the learners, because every generation has its own learning habits. Today's generation set dynamics by inventing new language like 'Jejemon' which causes distortion of grammar and which can be considered as one of the roots of difficulties in learning English.
- Practice/Articulation is important in learning English too, because when learners practice, they will form the habits of speaking, writing and listening.
- The system is also an indicator given the limited time of teaching. It is hard for the students to learn the language when the exposure is limited time.
- The background is also considered as one of the indicators of such difficulties, because in FGD, the researchers found out that learners were too dependent with their native language. This was related to the reason as to why it is hard for them to adapt a new language, and in this case, the English language.

The FGD on the other hand revealed the power of the mind, use of native language, and practice as ways to overcome such difficulties which were not being mentioned in the study of Horwitz et.al.(1986).

- The power of the mind can be a solution in the boredom or lack of interest of the learners.
- The use of native language can increase the level of understanding in English.
- Additionally, practicing is one of the best ways to overcome the challenge, because practice makes the learners more confident and competent.

Therefore, the Grade 11 students of Taytay Senior High School are having difficulties in English proficiency especially in terms of speaking which is the hardest skill for them compared to reading, writing, and listening.

5. Future Directions of the Study

The first batch of Grade 11 students in Taytay Senior High School articulated the difficulties they experience in terms of Language Proficiency competencies. Admittedly, these

learners needed more confidence, technical assistance, practice, and a learning environment that supports the enhancement of the competencies in English. Nazara (2011) supports this and thus recommending that it is appropriate to have speaking classes to improve speaking skill and need to provide a friendly environment for the learners. The results of both the survey and the FGD further revealed that the competencies are low and studies that relate to the socialization process of the learners should be emphasized. The inclination of the results was towards the social adaptability of the learners given the articulated difficulties, factors that make being proficient difficult and ways to overcome the difficulty in the drawn thematic analyses such as: generation, practice/articulation, system, background, power of mind and use of native language. Further studies therefore should be directed to “Socialization as a factor to Becoming English Language Proficient among Basic Education Learners in the Philippines” or “Social Adaptability Factors that lead to the lack of Proficiency in the English Language of the Public School Basic Education Learners in the Philippines”.

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