
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

English Language Proficiency in the Philippines: An Overview

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| ABSTRACT

The Philippines is considered one of the largest English-speaking nations in the world. In fact, English is one of the official languages in the Philippines. But throughout the years, a gradual deterioration in English language proficiency can be observed among Filipinos based on the EF English Proficiency Index, Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC), and the average score of Filipino IELTS takers. This paper aims to discuss the different factors behind the descending Filipino English proficiency, such as learners' motivation, parental involvement, learning environment, teaching strategies, comprehensive input, learners' socio-economic status, and learners' age. Several articles have been reviewed and examined for the authors to come up with the following conclusions: 1) Continuous practice and usage of the English language could help us further cement our economy; 2) there is still a huge room for improvement in terms of grammar which could also help alleviate learners' anxiousness, and 3) we still need to strike a balance in polishing the English language education and nurturing our local and cultural languages. This review will help the teachers in planning and implementing English classes to improve students' English proficiency, the educational institutions that aim to uplift the quality of English language teaching, and curriculum developers in constructing innovative English proficiency learning materials.

| KEYWORDS

Language acquisition, Philippine English, English Proficiency, Philippine ranking, ESL

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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1. Introduction

The Philippines is regarded as one of the largest English-speaking nations (Cabigon, 2015). When the Philippine-American war ended in 1902, the American colonial administration introduced English as the primary language of government, business, and education.

At present, English is constitutionally named one of the official languages of the Philippines. It is the primary medium of instruction in education (Cabigon, 2015) and the language of business, science, technology, government, and international communication. With two-thirds of the population fluent in English (Mariñas, 2021), the Philippines is also one of the major ESL destinations.

Despite the fact that the majority of the Philippine population has at least some degree of fluency in the English language, a gradual deterioration can be observed based on the EF English Proficiency Index (an annual ranking by their level of English) over the past years. From 14th place in 2018 to 20th in 2019, the Philippines' ranking dropped to 27th in 2020. Though in 2021, the Philippines climbed up to rank 18, it is still far from its 13th ranking way back in 2016.

In February 2018, an article published by the GMA News and PhilStar Global mentioned that the English proficiency level of College graduates from the Philippines is lower than the target English proficiency of High school students in Thailand and the competency requirement for taxi drivers in Dubai according to a study conducted by the Hopkins International Partners, which is the official

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Philippine representative to the group called Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). Rex Wallen Tan, general manager of Hopkins International Partners, explained that this was alarming considering that taxi drivers in Dubai, United Arab Emirates, were expected to have a TOEIC proficiency score of 650, and business process outsourcing agents should have a score of 850 in the metric, while the average English proficiency score of a Philippine college graduate was only 631.4, based on the metrics of the Test of English for International Communication.

There was also a report by Andrew King, country director for the Philippines of IPD Education (an Australian Company offering English language testing in 80 countries for students, professionals, and others wanting to migrate, seeking to work, or pursue higher education to English speaking countries), that the overall average score of Filipino IELTS takers was disappointing because many of them were supposedly "educated". This reflects that English standards in the Philippines are slipping, according to the results compiled by IPD Education in 2021.

2. Literature Review

Based on the facts presented, we cannot deny that Filipino English proficiency has been descending for years because of some specific factors or reasons.

2.1 Motivation

Motivation is a key factor in explaining the success or failure of any difficult activity (Alizadeh, 2016). It is the desire to achieve a goal. In L2 learning, motivation is a very important concept. It is considered one of the fundamental ingredients to successfully learning a language.

According to the study by Pangket (2019) entitled "Oral English Proficiency: Factors Affecting the Learners' Development", one of the main factors affecting the proficiency of Grade 5 pupils of Bontoc Central School is motivation along with vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar. Lack of interest, lack of vocabulary skills, and training are the factors that demotivate the pupils in learning English.

The study by Castro (2018) entitled "Filipino University Students' Attitudes and Motivation in Learning English and Their Influence on Academic Achievement" confirmed that the more positive attitudes the students had towards learning English, the more motivated they were to learn English.

Alaga (2016), in her study "Motivation and Attitude of Students towards Learning the English Language," said that in the language acquisition process, motivation sees a high significance in the learning progress of every learner, especially Filipino students considering that they are second language learners. If students have low motivation to learn their second language, then students might fail to learn and acquire the second language.

Gaerlan (2016), upon her analysis of less successful Filipino ESL learners' experiences, resulted that the participants (15 high school ESL learners) were not motivated to use or learn English. They do not see English as part of or necessary to their future, and even if they do, they do not seem to want to exert too much effort in using the language.

2.2 Support at Home/Parental Involvement

Different studies have shown that the most exact indicator of academic accomplishment is not the financial status but the degree to which families support learning at home and include themselves in their children's education (Obansa, 2021). The more guardians engaged with their children's education, the better their whole class' inspiration, conduct, and grades.

Parental involvement makes a really big difference, especially in childhood. This is according to applied developmental psychologist Sharon Wolf (2021). It refers to the amount of participation a parent has when it comes to the schooling of his/her children (Bartolome, Mamat, Masnan, 2017). It is essential for student development and offers many benefits.

Magno (2009) showed in his study, "How I learned to Speak English: Factors Involved in ESL Acquisition among Filipinos," that parents play a crucial role in the English language acquisition of a child. As reported by the respondents in the study, language is formed by 1.5 years of age, and these years are spent engaging in different modes of communication with the parents.

The study of Leander and Fabella (2020) on parental involvement and academic performances of grade 7 students in Marikina High School implies that parental involvement is essential to achieve the academic performance of students, especially those who were found to have unsatisfactory grades.

It is also revealed in Fontanilla's "English Language Learning Motivation and Self-identity Changes of Filipino English majors in Philippine Universities" (2016) that family, specifically the parents, primarily serves as the encouraging factor among the students who learn the English language.

Based on the studies presented, we can say that when parents involve themselves in their child's English language learning development, the student will feel more motivated to learn and improve their performance.

2.3 Learning Environment

Learning environment refers to the diverse physical locations, contexts, and cultures in which students learn. It is a diverse platform where users engage and interact with learning new skills (Movchan, 2018). It is not limited to the traditional connotation of a room with desks and chalkboards. It could be out-of-school locations and outdoor environments where students may learn. It encompasses learning resources and technology, means of teaching, modes of learning, and connections to societal and global contexts (Educause). It involves social, physical, psychological, or cultural factors that deeply affect the student's learning capability.

Magno (2009) mentioned in his study that English as a second language is acquired through the socialization process that occurs between the learner and other external events. This socialization process is characterized by the combined role of the family, media, role of others in language formation (friends and teachers), environmental cues, and seeking assistance. Unfortunately, the 2003 TIMSS report (IEA 2004) reveals unlike developed countries such as Australia, Japan, and the USA, only 3% in the Philippines have books at home. In terms of using computers at home and in school, the Philippines only 11%, which is below the international average of 39%, to reinforce classroom instruction.

2.4 Teaching Strategies

Teaching Strategies have long been recognized as an integral part of classroom learning. There are many variations that can be used depending on different factors in teaching: Subject matter, target competencies, students' level, age, and learning styles.

Using the target language in the learning environment is essential and is already proven by several researchers as an effective way. This is evident in English Language Education in almost every English class worldwide. However, in the Philippines, English has also been a mode of instruction in the teaching of academic and technical subjects. Bilingual education has been adapted and observed in the country since 1987 under the DO 52, s. 1987 The 1987 Policy on Bilingual Education.

In line with this, we must not only let the students speak in English during classes but also make use of appropriate activities. We usually see the language (English Teachers) giving topics and scenarios for the students to role-play and engage them in group work. Aside from it being easy to facilitate, group work also provides opportunities and encourages students to engage in communication (Kameradi 2011).

According to the study by Pangket, Willow in 2019, group work and role-play don't motivate students to perform better (Pangket, 2019). The teachers who participated in the study were asked about their perception of what is still lacking for the students to improve. One response was that the topics chosen by the teacher that are easy and don't challenge the students (2019). It would lead us to the point that how these strategies are applied in the classroom interest and push the students to develop their knowledge in skills.

In a study made at Batangas State University by Mojares (2013), the lecture method and brainstorming are most commonly used. She also concluded that the Profile of the Language Teachers (age, sex, educational attainment, and the number of years in teaching) has significance with the strategies used in the classroom.

Some questions arose alongside these findings. What could be the best teaching strategy to help improve English language education in the Philippines? With the evolving world and different generations of learners, what modifications should we apply to our teaching strategies? It's high time to be innovative.

2.5 Comprehensive Input

In Stephen Krashen's Theory of Language Acquisition, the $i+1$ concept of language input is beneficial for learners. This is connected to the role of comprehensible input in language learning. We should expose the learners to language that can be understood even without being familiar with the vocabulary and grammar in use (1981). Filipinos have been exposed to the English language even before the Dept. Order No. 8, s. 1973 of Bilingual Education.

Furthermore, English has been the language of business, entertainment, and even the law. It is safe to say that it's only natural that the Philippines is in 2nd place in EPI among other Asian countries. We are used to talking and what we call 'Taglish' even in our

daily life conversations. However, there is currently a looming problem that needs to be addressed. In EPI 2020, the Philippines dropped 7 steps from 2019's 20th to 27th place. Although the country is still considered a great choice for foreigners for English classes, the online ESL Industry is growing each year. The Philippines is dubbed the "world's low-cost English language teacher" (McGeown, 2012). It might be a good name for some aspects of tourism and the economy, although we can't turn a blind eye to its repercussions for the educators and industry in general. We will not dig deep into this as it is worthy of another article, but there have been some questions raised if quality ESL learning can still be justified despite claiming the legitimacy of having "low-cost" English-speaking workers? (Tupas & Salonga, 2016; Yeh, 2019)

Suarez, 2020 mentioned that the English used by Filipinos has "deteriorated". She further discussed that there is a lack of (good) model input in and out of the classroom. As she observed, even some English teachers don't have the same great command of the language as before. In the past, we even had Native English Speakers as teachers. Students in their 30s and 40s had the chance to learn and acquire the language under them. The implication of this to language teaching is that the input that the students receive might contain some inaccuracies in terms of pronunciation and grammar. Perhaps we could study and get to the root of this issue by looking through the current English classroom situation and ESL situations.

2.6 Socio-economic Factor

English movies from Hollywood, English music from American and European singers and musicians, and classic English books - are relatively easy to access in the Philippines compared to other countries.

Speaking using the English language is not just part of the day-to-day life of Filipinos, but it has also been a status symbol. It is still accepted as a measure of intelligence and even social status. Aside from that, the Philippines is renowned for high English proficiency.

Akin to this, Filipinos still exhibit anxiousness and fear of speaking, especially in the classroom. Students will often ask their teachers, "May I answer in Filipino?" when asked to recite. Aside from the comprehensible input, constant oral practice is valuable for fluency improvement. We are exposed to the English language, so what could be the possible reason for this?

Yuet (2008) stated that the socio-economic background of students plays a big role in their motivation to learn Hol, Yavuz (2017). Shamim (2011) found that putting the English scores of English learners side by side with their socio-economic level shows that "learners from high socio-economic level always outperformed the learners with low socio-economic level and the reason may be attributed to their opportunities in learning a foreign language at an earlier age or private courses."

They might also have less time to focus, and access to English materials might be limited. In some cases, they might also be living in locations that are not reached by network signals and internet connectivity. Moreover, even though we are raised as bilinguals, some parts of the country (considered low-income areas) lack support for Education resources such as schools, classrooms, books, and teachers.

Given this, it's not just the English language education that could be affected negatively by this factor. It is nationwide, to say the least, a crisis that needs immediate attention.

2.7 Age

Age is an important factor in learning a certain skill or language. There is a notion that younger students learn more and acquire language easier than older learners. Filipinos fall under 'Simultaneous Bilingualism,' and it is a factor why most locals can understand and speak the English language fluently.

Lenneberg's (1967) Critical Period Hypothesis states that 2-14 years old is a period of growth in which full native competence is possible when acquiring a language. As early as their childhood, Filipino children are exposed to the English language, falling into the category of simultaneous bilinguals. Its connection to the high English proficiency of Filipinos is something worthy of scrutiny.

However, some researchers have looked into the effectiveness of L2 teaching to older learners.

One factor is plasticity and entrenchment. A child's L2 language, emotional development, and socio-cognitive behavior are not as entrenched as that of an L2 adult (Simon, 2010), although younger ones' sensory cortex brains are more plastic in the early stages of life (Shibata, Watanabe, Sasaki, & Kawato, 2011). A study by Muñoz (2006) examined two groups: older EFL children (aged 11) and younger EFL children (aged 8) in a Spanish school setting. The results showed that older learners acquire their L2 more effectively than their younger counterparts Muñoz (2006). It is parallel to the findings of Sollars and Pumfrey that the older group performed better at receptive skills (listening and reading) than the younger ones.

There is an opportunity for us to bank on our country's bilingual education that starts at an early age. If the appropriate steps are taken, this could lead us to further enhance our learners' abilities and skills in other aspects of education. Of course, aside from age, there are many more internal and external factors affecting the language acquisition of learners.

3. Conclusion

With all of these being said, it is evident that the research journey about Language acquisition in the Philippines isn't ending soon. The stage is set for a greater scale of globalization, and the role of English as the International language is in the spotlight. Our fluency has done us some good in terms of communication and economics. Continuous practice and usage could help us further cement our economy.

The recent EPI ranking, more foreigners wanting to learn English, and the aggressive changes happening within each country's English language education are just a few of the many signs that we need to up our game. There are many issues that need further investigation and studies. Things must be modified, some even removed or replaced.

First, we need to assess the current situation in the English classes in the school classroom. We need fresh, accurate data about Filipino learners. Find ways how we can aid them with the language weapons they would need in the respective fields that they want to pursue. From the elementary level up to the university levels, there is work to do. Shifting the focus to grammar knowledge and accuracy is a recommendation. We've seen so much of the comprehension and speaking skills of Filipinos. There is still a huge room for improvement in grammar, which could also help alleviate anxiousness.

On the other hand, we still need to strike a balance in polishing the English language education and nurturing our local and cultural languages. We don't want to be like Singapore, where they speak so many languages but have not perfected even one: effects of ambilingualism (Oha, Uwajeh, Daniel & Iyere, 2010; Multilingualism in Wikipedia, 2012; Valdés, 2005); or (2) Taiwan whose youngsters have difficulty in speaking or understanding Taiwanese Hokkien, the tongue of their parents (Talk: Taiwanese Hokkien in Wikipedia, 2012).

In the end, there are two main paths that we should find a way to connect with each other: Not getting left behind in terms of English language education that is needed for achieving goals for our learner and country's future; not losing our national identity in the process.

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