| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Code-Switching, Social Interactions, and Supportive Environment: Addressing the Challenges in Speaking English

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| ABSTRACT

Limited vocabulary, anxiety, and lack of practice are common challenges faced by non-native speakers when speaking English in the classroom. Despite these obstacles, students often find ways to overcome them, enhancing their learning experiences. This study aimed to investigate the strategies employed by college-level English language majors in addressing the challenges in speaking English in the classroom and to explore how effective students perceived these strategies. Using descriptive-qualitative research design and interpretative phenomenological analysis, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with purposively selected participants. The thematic analysis revealed that students commonly utilized code-switching, social interactions, and supportive environment to address challenges related to vocabulary, limited language practice, and classroom dynamics. These strategies were perceived as effective in improving their English-speaking abilities. The study recommends teaching students to use code-switching as a communicative tool, incorporating more group work and peer collaboration in speaking activities, and providing professional development for teachers on employing effective encouragement techniques.

| KEYWORDS

Code switching, social interactions, supportive environments, speaking English, IPA, qualitative design

1. INTRODUCTION

English has been playing a significant role in career advancement and business successes. We have heard many successful stories of prominent business industries and people who have learned English to expand their businesses across the globe targeting billions of audiences. Branded as one of the powerful language in the world, English is a lingua franca and many of the highly progressive countries like Japan, China, South Korean, Singapore, and Dubai take into account of learning English today to be more competitive and advanced in the field of trade and business, entertainment and arts, technology, healthcare, and education (Pablo, 2023).

Highly valued in professional settings, English communication skill are the most significant skill that most employees work on to achieve and develop (Cambridge English, 2016) in order to remain viable at work. According to Setiawan (2022), mastery of English is crucial for obtaining employment and achieving career advancement, emphasizing the importance of various sub-skills like listening, reading, writing, and speaking. One of the essential English communication skills for effective communication both in academic and professional settings is the English-speaking skill. English-speaking skill is a process of building and sharing meaning through verbal and non-verbal forms, aiding in reinforcing grammatical structures and vocabulary (Naibaho, 2022).

Over 95% of employers in non-native English-speaking countries placed a high value on English communication skills (Kamlun, et al., 2022) as it facilitates effective interaction among diverse employees, is essential for crafting written correspondences, and correlates with achieving organizational objectives (Rattan, 2023). In fact, employees in multinational companies require English language training to address issues related to grammar, confidence, comprehension, and

communication that impact growth potential, safety, and effective communication (Narzoles & Palermo, 2021). Employers today place a high priority on these skills, as they are crucial for effectively meeting the demands of costumers in an interpersonal work environment (Patil, 2021). The means to say that proficiency in English speaking allows us to articulate our thoughts clearly and persuasively. It is also a gateway to many opportunities.

Developing countries like the Philippines hold more importance and prestige to English because of their role in the economy, education system, and migration (Shah, 2023; Ozaki, 2022). For instance, a significant percentage of Filipinos work as English teachers abroad, particularly in countries like Japan, the United Arab Emirates, and other nations (Carpio & Stewart, 2023; Lemana, 2022). Several English language schools in countries such as China, Korea, Thailand, and Japan employ Filipino teachers because many stakeholders of these institutions consider Filipinos to be more effective teachers for their English language learning compared to their international counterparts (Pablo, 2023).

In 2023, the Social Weather Survey (SWS) conducted a survey using face-to-face interviews. The results revealed that 55% of 1, 200 Filipino adults can speak English (Cervantes, 2023). While the Philippines is recognized as one of the largest English-speaking nations globally, recent studies indicated a decline in actual proficiency levels, including challenges in reading, writing, speaking and listening (Atanacio-Blas et al., 2018). Although Filipinos are known as good English speaker than other Asian races, they consistently rank low in several proficiency surveys conducted, particularly in reading comprehension and mathematics. The World Bank reported that 90% of Filipino students struggled to read and understand simple texts in English (World Bank Group, 2022). This findings highlights a significant challenge in literacy; however, it also suggests that despite these difficulties, many Filipinos are still able to communicate in English. Nevertheless, as expressed by several studies, having the ability to communicate in English may not be the sole guarantee that one may be hired immediately because English speaking encompasses multiple competencies including grammar, fluency, and pronunciation. Thus, to enhance one's employability in competitive job markets, effective English-speaking skills are essential.

However, Filipino English teachers in different countries encountered challenges that mirror broader difficulties in English communication. These include racialized native-speakerism, pressure to outperform native speakers, and the preference for native speakers (Carpio & Stewart, 2022; Pablo, 2023), making it difficult to secure stable job opportunities. And because of the expansion of the English language learning industry, competitors begin to challenge the affordability of Filipino English teachers with native or non-native English teachers at a reasonable price (Pablo, 2023). These challenges highlight the broader issue of speaking English in professional and academic contexts.

In the school context, the majority of students still face challenges in developing their English speaking skills, particularly among non-native speakers, as highlighted by various studies (Abugohar et al., 2020; Karademir & Gorgoz, 2019). Accordingly, speaking is often perceived as the most difficult language skill to acquire and develop (Abugohar, et. al., 2020). This difficulty stems from various interrelated factors. For instance, students frequently exhibit reluctance to participate in speaking due to anxiety, which creates a fear of making mistakes or being judged by peers. A lack of confidence further compounds this issue, as students may feel unprepared or incapable of expressing themselves fluently and accurately.

Furthermore, several barriers were reported to have impeded students to speak English and one of these is psychological barrier. Islam & Roy (2024) reported that students hesitate to participate in a speaking activity as they are concerned about being criticized or bullied. Aside from this, anxiety and fear of making mistakes are also exhibited by students, leading them not to participate in classroom discussions and oral presentation (Robah & Anggrisia 2023). Lack of an English-speaking environment also discourages students to speak English (Rahman, et.al., 2024).

Another significant challenge is an insufficient vocabulary, which limits students' ability to articulate their thoughts effectively (Karademir & Gorgoz, 2019). Without the adequate vocabulary, students struggle to construct meaningful sentences or keep up with conversational demands. Additionally, the lack of quality learning materials, such as engaging speaking exercises or authentic language contexts, hinders students' opportunities to practice and improve their speaking skills.

The challenges in speaking English are multifaceted and affect the students from various non-English speaking countries and in various aspects of learning due to limited exposure, differences in grammar and phonology, and motivation (Amiruddin, 2022). Aside from that, insufficient vocabulary is the common struggle of many students (Rusli, et al., 2024), which impedes students' ability to articulate clearly. Uncertainty in grammar and pronunciation also lead students to feel confused and commit errors during speaking activities (Robah & Anggrisia, 2023; Jamila et al., 2024).

Unfortunately, there are no known studies as of today that navigate how students address the challenges in speaking English, particularly in English as the second language (ESL) in the Philippine context. It may not be fair to focus solely on the challenges they face in speaking. It is equally important to explore the strategies students use to overcome these challenges and to explain how students perceive the effectiveness of these strategies.

With this in mind, the study attempted to explore the strategies used by the students to overcome their challenges in speaking English and why they perceive these strategies effective. The study may be of significance to teachers who want to develop their teaching approaches in teaching speaking. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What strategies do students use to overcome challenges in speaking English?
2. How effective do they perceive these strategies to be?

Studying the strategies students utilize to overcome their challenges in speaking English may provide valuable insights, particularly informing the teachers about effective methods to improve students' speaking skills and overall proficiency. The teachers and institutions may also design tailored interventions and programs that align with students' strength, needs, and learning styles. Finally, the findings may contribute to the body of knowledge in second language acquisition and pedagogy, benefiting teachers, policymakers, and researchers in developing effective English language programs.

2. METHODOLOGY

The study utilized the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) research design, which is particularly suited for exploring individual's lived experiences and the meanings they attach to their challenges (Clark, 2010; Smith, 1996). The IPA approach involved several systematic steps: familiarizing the phenomenon, initial noting, developing themes, connecting themes, and presenting the findings. This methodology enabled an in-depth understanding of the participants' unique perspectives on their strategies for overcoming the challenges in speaking English.

The study selected eight students enrolled in English language courses through purposive sampling. The selection criteria included willingness to participate, being enrolled in Bachelor of Arts in English language program, and experiencing challenges in speaking English. Prior to the interviews, participants were provided with consent forms and thoroughly briefed on the study's objectives and procedures. A debriefing was also conducted to ensure transparency and ethical compliance.

Data collection involved semi-structured interviews, which allowed for flexibility in exploring participants' experiences, and classroom observations to provide contextual insights. The individual data recording took place in an area with less noise and a lower chance of interruptions. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of the participants were not asked. The answers were audio recorded. The recordings were then transcribed for analysis. The data were given codes to the mp3 files produced to ensure confidentiality and organization and stored in the Hard Drive. And alphanumeric codes such as R1 for respondent 1, R2 for respondent 2, and so on. Only the researcher had complete access to the Hard Drive folder.

The recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to rigorous thematic analysis using Braun and Clarke's (2012) thematic analysis framework. This process involved generating initial codes, identifying patterns, and constructing themes that captured the essence of participants' experiences.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Challenges in Speaking English

The respondents were enrolled in AB English Language program during the conduct of the study. The respondents consisted of two males and six females. They were proficient in Bisaya, Tagalog, and English The languages that they knew how to speak were Bisaya, Tagalog, and English, with Bisaya as the most commonly used language at home and in casual conversations with peers.

In the classroom, the respondents reported using a mix of Bisaya and English, a practice also observed during classroom observations. Both respondents and teachers frequently used Bisaya to explain concepts and give instructions. However, English was predominantly used to accommodate a foreign classmate, demonstrating an effort to create an inclusive environment.

The respondents were selected based on classroom observations and interviews. They were identified as individuals who openly expressed facing challenges in speaking English, making them suitable participants for the study. An initial interview was conducted to determine the challenges encountered by the respondents when speaking English. The results revealed consistent difficulties, including limited vocabulary, anxiety, lack of exposure and language practice, and challenges related to the classroom environment.

During the classroom observations, respondents were observed to frequently pause for extend periods during speaking activities, indicating they were thinking of correct words to use. There were also frequent *"uhms" "ahs"* interspersed throughout their explanations. At times, respondents were frequently observed asking their teachers, "Pwedi mag Bisaya, Ma'am? [Can I speak

in Bisaya, Ma'am?]". Despite these challenges, the respondents successfully navigated their degree program by employing several strategies. These strategies included code-switching, social interactions, and creating a supportive environment.

3.2 Code-switching

One of their challenges was insufficient vocabulary. They expressed feeling frustrated and shy that they were unable to communicate clearly because of only having limited vocabulary knowledge. This behavior was exemplified by frequent long pauses, *"uhms", and "ahs",* and processing-hand gestures. Many times, they found themselves using inappropriate words or unintended words because they do not know the exact English equivalents they had in mind. One of the respondents said, "*Mag lisud ko ug express sa akoang gusto e ingon in English kay wala ko kabalo kung unsa na word dapat akoang e ingon* [I have a hard time expressing what I want to say in English because I don't know what word I should say]." Another respondent mentioned that sometimes he felt unsatisfied with his performance during speaking activities, as he often resorted to using different expression in English, rather than the ones he intended. They sometimes expressed that it took them longer to organize their thoughts because they were still searching for appropriate words to convey their intentions. As a result, they often found themselves selecting and repeating words that did not fully capture what they meant to say.

In the school they attended, English was the primary medium of instruction. Despite being a Bisaya-dominant community, English was consistently used in the classroom to accommodate foreign students. Frequently, teachers reminded the respondents to speak in English, both to accommodate their foreign classmates and because they were English majors. Aside from being English majors, respondents were also encouraged to speak English consistently during reporting and recitation as a means of improving their speaking skills. However, because they struggled to express their thoughts in English, they often resorted to code-switching. Fortunately, they mentioned that their professors did not reprimand them for this and allowed occasional code-switching, as long as it was limited to a few sentences. Nevertheless, emphasizing the importance of practice in enhancing their language proficiency. the respondents made concious efforts to switch back to English. They said,

"Bisaya-on na lang nako kung mag lisud ko ug express sa akoang gusto e ingon [I will just speak in Bisaya if I have difficulty expressing my thoughts]" (R1)

"Biskan mag Bisaya ko, gina try gihapon nako ug switch to English kay diri ko

maka learn [Even if I speak in Bisaya, I will switch to English because I know this is how I learn]. (R3)

"I still prefer to speak English even though nagkalisud-lisud ko [I

struggled] because I feel like I need to improve my English." (R5)

In light of this phenomenon, the respondents preferred to code-switch to their mother tongue as a way to ensure clear communication and achieve a sense of satisfaction, rather than consistently using English and risking ridicule or embarrassment during reporting and recitation. Code-switching refers to shifting from a language to the most comfortable language to use throughout a conversation or a sentence, depending on the conversational setting. According to the respondents, at times when explaining complex concepts during reporting activities, they resorted to code-switching to enhance their understanding and reduce stress and speaking anxiety.

Second acquisition theory emphasizes the role of affective filters in successful language learning (Krashen, 1985). Krashen (1985) believed that heightened affective filters reduce students' ability to absorb comprehensible input. In line with the event, code-switching appears to mitigate the respondents' negative emotions associated with speaking English and diminishes speaking anxiety. Respondents noted that engaging in code-switching enables them to express themselves more effectively, therefore fostering greater participation in speaking activities and improving language learning. Majority of the respondents expressed that whenever they code-switch they feel fulfilled and confident. They also expressed that they would participate more if their teachers allowed them to code-switch. Several studies have also reported that code-switching improves students' comprehension and communication (Kumar, Nukapangu, & Hassan, 2021), language performance (Makena & Mpahla, 2022), reduces speaking anxiety (Sholikha & Isnaini, 2024), and boosts confidence (Hakim et al., 2023).

3.2 Social Interactions

Limited language practice and exposure to English during both basic education and at home may have significantly contributed to the respondents' challenges in speaking. Many respondents reported attending public schools where English was not consistently used as the primary language of instruction. They also mentioned that they were often given limited opportunities to practice their English in school because of several factors. These included overcrowded classrooms exceeding full capacity, frequent absences, and a lack of quality learning materials. One respondent expressed, "Back in our hometown when I was in

elementary and high school, we were given a little opportunities to practice English maybe because we are 50 students in class." "I was the eldest and sometimes when I was in elementary, I was frequently absent in class because I had to help my parents," said the other respondent.

They also claimed that their teachers and classmates did not consistently use English during class, which displays a level of leniency that allowed them to communicate in their mother tongue. Because of this experience, respondents asserted that limited exposure and lack of learning materials restrict vocabulary acquisition and practice opportunities. They believed that their lack of access to technology as an essential tool in the learning process during their childhood may have further restricted them from opportunities to engage in language learning. According to Yusuf et al.(2024) and Suwanda et al. (2024), digital technology like TikTok may provide interactive resources to improve pronunciation and writing skills since it fosters engaging and effective learning environments and allows learners to personalize learning experiences and improve engagement in the learning process. Unfortunately, most of the respondents expressed that their parents at that time could not afford to provide them with materials and equipment, such as books and television.

This phenomenon led most of the respondents to feel insecure about their speaking ability. They felt anxious about whether they were using correct grammar and following grammatical rules, which often led them confused about what to say and unsatisfied with their communication. Considering this event, it may be related to overgeneralization of grammar rules. Overgeneralization is a phenomenon where language learners analogically analyze or use a pattern and apply a grammar rule where it does not apply, resulting in a nonconventional form (McKercher, 2018). McKercher (2018) posited that the phenomenon is likely demonstrated by second language learners. According to Chernovaty (2022), overgeneralization in grammar occurs when rules are applied too broadly, such as incorrectly using articles with plural forms, which indicates similar patterns in the acquisition of both native and foreign languages. Some of the respondents expressed that the situation caused them not to participate in discussion and oral recitation because they were afraid to commit grammatical mistakes in front of their teachers and felt ashamed if they did.

Ximenes and Pinheiro (2020) argued that speakers draw upon their grammatical knowledge and entrenched language patterns to avoid overgeneralization. In connection, respondents asserted to socially interact with others, especially with the native-like speakers, in addressing the issue. They believed that by interacting with their peers and teachers, they could practice and at the same time observe and learn how native-like speakers apply the grammar rules. In comparison to Ximenes and Pinheiro's claim, this strategy enables respondents to recognize appropriate contexts for applying specific grammatical rules, which helps them to navigate language use more effectively and reduces errors.

One respondent said, "I prefer to speak with native speakers because I can practice and learn from them how they actually use the idiomatic expressions and grammar rules." Others also said that they wanted to apply the grammatical rules that they learned in actual conversations for enhancement not only in speaking but also in writing. They believed that this exposure might alleviate their speaking anxiety and improve their language proficiency. The respondents mentioned that their anxiety when speaking stemmed from a lack of confidence and a fear of making mistakes. They also believed that practicing what they learned in actual conversations would help develop their skills. The event is connected to Pitoy's (2012) argument. He posited that in effective language learning substantial exposure to a variety of communicative resources significantly allows learners to independently analyze and engage with information, which in turns foster improvements in their speaking fluency and overall language proficiency (Pitoy, 2012). By interacting with diverse sources, learners develop the skills necessary to communicate more confidently and effectively.

3.3 Supportive Environments

Most of the respondents claimed that having supportive classmates and teachers positively influences their attitude and motivation to speak English. They said that they had not faced ridicule or reprimanded in public due to their manner of speaking. One respondent said, "My teacher was not angry at me when I speak bad English. They are very patient with us. They always advise us to read more English books, to listen to English podcasts or songs, to watch English movies or to read the subtitles of the English movies. Because they said these can help us improve our English skill." Most of the respondents stated that they followed their teachers' advice to listen to and watch English sermons or movies as a way to guide them and help develop their skills. The respondents also mentioned feeling comfortable speaking in English with their peers, as they were not afraid of making mistakes. They believed that sharing struggles in learning English encouraged them to study and learn together without pressure. Other respondents also revealed to watch sermons delivered in English during their free time as he believed this could give them ideas to effectively speak in public.

Ekaputri (2023) argued that a supportive environment in foreign language learning enhances psychological well-being. A supportive atmosphere cultivates social support, positive interactions, and empathy among learners. It also promotes resilience, enabling them to traverse challenges and maintain motivation. The respondents shared that their teachers were supportive and patient in guiding them through the learning process. They also mentioned feeling relaxed and confident speaking English in front of their friends and classmates, whom they believed faced similar challenges. This supportive environment allowed them to make grammatical errors without feeling ashamed. Additionally, they said that they exchanged insights and knowledge during conversations.

4. DISCUSSION

The results of the study further explores lack of vocabularies, limited language exposure, and social environments to have consistently contributed to the challenges of English as the second language learners in the effective language learning process, especially in speaking. These challenges are already common phenomena in speaking English among non-native speakers. The study further elucidates various strategies that students employ in mitigating and addressing these challenges. It is also important to note that these strategies depend on socio-cultural contexts, such as students' community, social support system, available resources, and attitude toward English. To elaborate, the respondents in this study were enrolled in private, religious-based higher education institutions, which may have played a significant role in fostering that supportive environment they experienced. Such institutions often emphasized community, shared values, and interpersonal connections, all of which can enhance the students' sense of belonging and psychological safety, ultimately contributing to their language learning experiences.

It is revealed in the analysis that code-switching, as one of the strategies, potentially addresses stress, demotivation, and anxiety associated with speaking English and language learning in general. Li et al., (2023) said that code-switching happens naturally among bilingual speakers. It is also influenced by topic, context, and the speaker's intention. The analysis of this study is also in accordance with previous studies which found that code switching facilitates communication and improves performance (Almussallam, 2024; Le, 2022). Majority of the respondents resorted to code-switching in explaining difficult concepts during speaking activities. Based on the analysis, code-switching boosts the students' confidence and promotes an effective language learning process. The study provides further implication to encourage code switching as a pedagogical tool as it may help students to understand and explain complex concepts, by relating them to their native language. The findings are also in accordance with the affective filter hypothesis, which states that the fewer the negative emotions the more motivated students to understand difficult lessons and participate in class. However, code-switching, if used as a pedagogical tool, requires planning and appropriate integration in the classroom. The study therefore recommends that students should be taught how to effectively incorporate code-switching and that teachers should also be trained to integrate and use code-switching appropriately in lesson planning.

Social interactions also play an important role in addressing issues related to vocabulary and language practice. Based on the analysis, these interactions provide students with opportunities to apply what they have learned, collaborate with their peers, and tackle challenges collectively through mutual support. The study further posits that students struggle with speaking because they lack sufficient opportunities to participate in actual conversation, which is essential for developing fluency and confidence in using the language. Hence, engaging in real discussions allows students to practice vocabulary in context and receive immediate feedback, both of which are vital for language acquisition.

According to Musa et al. (2023), engaging in conversation and practicing English with non-native speakers and colleagues significantly improves fluency and confidence, which means the learners feel comfortable committing errors in grammar and pronunciation while also learning from each other. Meanwhile, in the context of learning in the classroom, teachers that employ methods such as storytelling, games, and interactive discussions foster a supportive environment, which encourages participation and reduces anxiety (Sukmojati, et al., 2023).

Based on previous studies, supportive environments characterized by teacher support and encouragement is important in promoting student's willingness to participate in speaking activities (Habsy et al., 2023; Idzni & Setiawan, 2021). When a teacher creates a positive and supportive environment, students are more likely to feel valued and safe, which boosts their confidence to speak. Encouragement from teachers and peers can motivate students to take risks in language use, facilitating a more active engagement in conversations and discussions. The findings of this study suggest that a supportive environment reduces anxiety and fear of judgment. This scenario may allow students to practice their speaking skills more freely and effectively.

5. CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of the study, it could be concluded that code-switching, social interactions, and a supportive environment may be significant strategies that potentially address issues related to speaking anxiety, distress, lack of participation, lack of practice and exposure, and lack of vocabulary knowledge among students that struggle in speaking English inside the classroom during speaking activities. However, it is important to consider reading as well as a way to overcome the problem of limited vocabulary knowledge. Even though students are within a supportive environment, they still have to engage more in reading to enhance their word bank. The lack of vocabulary knowledge is not only present in speaking but also in writing. Nonetheless, in the context of speaking, it is therefore essential to incorporate reading and speaking activities, such as book review reports, not only to practice their speaking skill but also to assist them in developing their vocabulary. Given the results of the study, it is recommended that students should be taught how to effectively use code-switching as a tool to facilitate communication. Teachers should incorporate more group work and peer collaboration in speaking activities to help students learn from one another. And teachers should be provided with professional development on employing effective encouragement techniques.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.
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