

Speaking English as Experienced By Grade 7 Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract

Speaking the English language can be difficult for some second-language learners. This study explored the difficulties and experiences of using the English language among selected Grade 7 students in one of the private institutions in Ozamiz City, Philippines. The study used the phenomenological research design. Six students served as the study's participants and were selected through the purposive sampling technique. Research-made Interview Guide was used in gathering the data. The Moustakas' steps of data analysis were used in analyzing the data gathered. The study yielded four themes, namely: speaking difficulties experienced, psychological effects during class, adverse outcomes of speaking difficulties, and coping with English-speaking difficulties. The participants experienced recurrent deficiencies in the target language and struggled to perform oral activities in their English classes. The English-speaking difficulties deeply impact language learners, but they endeavor to overcome their linguistic limitations. Thus, attaining a good proficiency in the English language entails recognizing the difficulties and exerting the necessary effort to overcome them.

Keywords: Difficulties, English, experiences, proficiency, struggles

1. Introduction

English is widely recognized as the international language, and it is increasingly regarded as the most important skill for all students in the education system (Habibi et al., 2018). The ability to communicate in English is very necessary as it enables everyone to communicate easily with other people from other countries and is also utilized in global commerce, which gives people more job opportunities (Islam & Stapa, 2021). Further, the instruction of English has become a requirement in every school worldwide to produce proficient English speakers who can contribute to developing a more communicative atmosphere.

Four fundamental English skills are: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Speaking is the most vital aspect of the four skills needed for communicating and acquiring a second language (Leong & Ahmadi, 2019; Hamad & Alnuzailli, 2022). This skill allows people to express themselves using a language (Haidara, 2019). It is an important skill because it enables speakers and listeners to participate in oral communication to transfer and exchange information and develop long-term relationships.

However, acquiring the necessary level of fluency in spoken English is not a simple task being the most difficult skill to master. Most students consider speaking English a huge challenge though they have studied it for several years (Gatcho & Hajan, 2019). Students find speaking difficult to learn, for it requires them to understand or master first their linguistic knowledge to deliver their ideas effectively (Pawlak & Waniek-Klimczak, 2017). Because of the complexity of learning to speak English, students experience several difficulties (Gatcho & Hajan, 2019), both linguistically and psychologically. Linguistic speaking problems include grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation (Nurmela, 2019). In contrast, psychological problems include low self-confidence, anxiety, and fear of committing mistakes (Fitriani & Apriliaswati, 2018). In addition, students experience difficulty communicating verbally due to various internal and external factors (Aziz & Kashinathan, 2021).

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Concerning linguistic difficulties, a study conducted with Pakistani students reported that their inadequate knowledge of the language, such as errors in grammar and limited vocabulary, hinders them from speaking English effectively (Wahyuningsih & Afandi, 2020). Another study conducted in the Philippines by Danapoc et al. (2020) disclosed that the students unconsciously used their regional accent instead of basic English pronunciation, especially since the words' pronunciation may differ from how they are spelled. In addition, a study in Northern Cyprus about the pronunciation difficulties of Turkish students showed that the interference of the native language appears to be the primary cause of mistakes (Plailek, 2021).

On the other hand, students face difficulties in speaking not only because of their grammatical errors, lack of vocabulary, and mispronunciation of words but also to some psychological factors in the form of anxiety, a negative attitude, and a lack of motivation on the part of many students when they speak English (Haryanto et al., 2018). In language classes, students with high anxiety, fear, and low self-confidence may struggle to speak the target language (Tridinanti, 2018). A study conducted in Indonesia revealed that students had trouble speaking English because of nervousness, lack of self-confidence, fear of committing mistakes, and fear of being laughed at (Rabah, 2022). In a study conducted in the Philippines by Arcala (2021), the primary reason that affects students' speaking abilities is the psychological factor (Nadila, 2021).

Previous studies focused on the types and factors of language learners' English-speaking difficulties. However, limited studies were conducted on what students with English-speaking difficulties go through in the oral activities they must engage in for their classes, especially in English subjects. Thus, this study intended to address this gap in the literature.

In one of the private academic institutions in Ozamiz City, the researchers observed that many students experienced difficulties speaking English. Some students used the vernacular when asked to participate in the class discussion despite being encouraged to speak in English. They exhibited deficiency in grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary in speaking, as evidenced by their consistently poor performance in all the oral activities given to them. Thus, this study explored what students experienced when engaging in oral activities amid their awareness of English-speaking difficulties. Through this study, teachers may understand better what students with English-speaking problems go through and adopt possible ways to assist the latter.

1.1. Objective of the Study

This study explored the experiences of selected Grade 7 students with English-speaking difficulties.

2. Research Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study used the phenomenological research design. Phenomenology is a research design that describes the common meaning of the lived experiences of several individuals about a particular phenomenon (Webb & Welsh, 2019). The design was considered appropriate in exploring the experiences of students with English-speaking difficulties.

2.2. Research Setting

The study was conducted in one of the private academic institutions in Ozamiz City, Philippines, specifically in the Junior High School Department.

2.3. Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were six Grade 7 students enrolled in Speech and Drama classes in the Junior High School. The subject required the students to be engaged in oral activities. The participants were chosen through purposive sampling and were identified through the following criteria: 1) with observable difficulties in grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency; 2) with consistent poor performances in the oral activities

participated in the class; 3) had given consent to participate in the study. Data saturation was the basis for identifying the number of participants.

2.4. Research Instrumentation

A semi-structured Interview Guide was used to elicit the participants' responses. The first part of the instrument asked for the demographic profile of the participants as to age and sex. In addition, the Interview Guide included an opening question to elicit the participants' perception of the English language. In contrast, the core questions explored what the participants experienced before and after the oral activities required to participate in their Speech and Drama class and the coping mechanism they used to deal with speaking difficulties. Finally, the exit question solicited the participants' views of students with similar speaking difficulties.

2.5. Data Collection

Before gathering the data, the researcher sought permission from the school authorities for the conduct of the study. After the approval had been obtained, the target participants were informed of the study and sought their consent to participate. The participants agreed that the online interviews were recorded for review and transcription. The transcriptions and analyses were validated by presenting them back to the participants.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

The researcher used the Helsinki Declaration (2001) for ethical considerations. The researcher informed all participants about the study's objectives and significance. The principle of autonomy and respect for the person were upheld through informed consent obtained before the interviews. The participants were assured of the confidentiality of their responses and were informed of the right to refuse or withdraw participation at any time without being penalized.

2.7. Data Analysis

The study used the NVIVO software as an aid in identifying the themes of the research data. Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology of data analysis was used in this study. The following were the steps in the phenomenological reduction which served as a guide in analyzing the data gathered: (1) Bracketing, (2) Horizontalization, (3) Clustering into Themes, (4) Textural Description, (5) Structural Description, and (6) Textural-Structural Synthesis.

2.8. Moustakas' Method of Data Analysis

2.8.1. Bracketing

Bracketing is an approach used to mitigate the effects of preconceived notions and perceptions to be held before the study starts. It is a process of suspending judgments and biases, or 'epoche.' Consequently, it reaches a deep level of inquiry from the topic and population selection, interview design, collection and interpretation, and dissemination of research findings. In this study, this step was followed during the selection of the participants, how the data were collected and interpreted in identifying the English-speaking difficulties and the underlying experiences of the participants.

2.8.2. Horizontalization

Horizontalization refers to the listing of all the verbatim expressions that have bearing in the study. Initially, each statement is looked into with equal value. In this study, the statements that were found irrelevant, repetitive, overlapping, and outside the scope of the study were ignored. Finally, horizons, the remaining sections after the data had been polished, were considered the phenomenon's constituent and significant parts. This step was followed in the study while transcribing the participants' answers during the interviews.

2.8.3. Clustering

Clustering is the third step in obtaining inferences from the study. It involves the reduction of experiences to invariant horizons, creating core themes, and validating the invariant horizons using multiple data sources. In validating the invariant horizons obtained from the study, the researchers reviewed the research findings using methods other than the data-gathering methods like observation, field note-taking, and related literature. This validation process was crucial to the accuracy and clarity of the representations. The themes of the study were identified during this step.

2.8.4. Textural description

Textural description, or 'what occurred,' refers to an account describing the phenomenon's perception. In obtaining the textural description of the participants' experience, verbatim excerpts from the interview are used, and a narration of the meaning units is derived from the themes that are supported by the verbatim statements of the participants. In the study, after identifying the themes formulated based on the research data, the researcher supported them with the participants' responses according to how they were stated.

2.8.5. Structural description

Structural description, or how it a phenomenon occurs, integrates imaginative variation, an ingenious outlook, and insights into the textural description. An imaginative variation is considered the mental experiment on analyzing the details and structures of the participants' experiences by being detached from natural inclination through epoche. It is appended in each paragraph of textural descriptions to generate a structural description. In this research, the step was done by providing insights into the participants' experiences.

2.8.6. The textural-structural synthesis

In the textural-structural synthesis process, the meaning units of each of the participants are collated, and a composite of textural and structural descriptions that are common to them is developed. Finally, a narrative or synthesis represents all participants written in a third-person perspective. The primary goal of this final step of Moustakas' method is to obtain the essence of the experience of the phenomenon. In the study, the researchers provided conclusions to the themes identified as the English-speaking difficulties experienced and what the selected participants went through in their English class.

3. Results and Discussion

The study explored the experiences of the selected Grade 7 students. The researcher utilized the accounts of the six participants in identifying the themes. The study revealed the following four themes: speaking difficulties experienced, psychological effects during class, adverse outcomes of speaking difficulties, and coping with English-speaking difficulties. The researchers lifted sample statements from the participants who answered using the Bisayan language and English terms or expressions. English translations followed.

3.1. Speaking Difficulties Experienced

Speaking good English is a necessity in academic and global communities. Thus, language learners must equip themselves with the necessary skills to convey properly intended messages. Since most linguistic occasions require speaking, the development of oral communication is of paramount importance. However, in academic institutions, several students are observed to be demonstrating linguistic difficulties in speaking, specifically in terms of grammar, pronunciation, and vocabulary.

Participant 1 cited, "My speaking difficulties is kay unsa na mga grammars nako and when I speak is like I have anxiety it feels like wrong." (My speaking difficulties are my grammar and I get anxious when I speak because I feel like it's wrong.) She could not express her ideas well using the English language because of her grammar issues. It is evident in her statements that she had problems constructing her thoughts using English, specifically in terms of subject-verb agreement. Instead of saying, "My speaking difficulties are," she said, "My speaking difficulties is." The verb in her statement did not agree with the subject "speaking difficulties."

In addition, poor pronunciation skill was also a challenge when speaking English. Participant 2 cited, "Usahay malibog kog pronounce sa words and mura mawala ko sa ako i-estorya like kana mag ramble ang words." (I sometimes got confused in pronouncing words and seemed to be lost on what to say with seemingly jumbled words.)

The participant found it hard to pronounce words, especially that there are words in which the pronunciation could be different from how they are spelled. Participant 1 also mispronounced an English word during the interview. Instead of pronouncing the word "lesson" as /'les(ə)n/, she wrongly pronounced it as /'li:s(ə)n/. She pronounced the short vowel /ɛ/ instead of long 'e' /i/, thus mispronouncing the word.

Limited vocabulary was another difficulty experienced by the students. Participant 5 admitted that he could not speak English well because of his vocabulary problems. He claimed, "Hard pa ko mag understand sa ubang words sa English." (I hardly understand some English words). The student expressed that he could barely understand the meaning of some words, which caused him to not able to formulate correct sentences. Similarly, in a statement from Participant 1, she incorrectly used the word "participant" in her sentence. She cited, "If kabalo ko mo participant ko ma'am. If dili, dili ko mo participant kay mahadlok ko if wrong ba." (If I knew, I would participate. If not, I would not participate because I am afraid if it will be wrong.) Instead of saying the verb "participate," she used the noun "participant," which made the sentence erroneous.

Correct grammar, good pronunciation skills, and vocabulary are essential in creating meaningful communication. The vocabulary of a language is its words, while grammar is the set of rules involved in combining words to express meanings. When grammar and vocabulary work together, ideas are communicated. Therefore, students must be able to master both grammar and vocabulary for them to create meaningful sentences.

3.2. Psychological Effects during Class

Psychological aspects of English-speaking influence the learners' speaking skills. Several emotional concerns addressed the challenges in expressing spoken words in the scope of psychological effects, such as anxiety, nervousness, and embarrassment. These psychological effects in class could impair students' ability to communicate fluently. Thus, this study revealed that students faced psychological effects in class before and after speaking the target language. For example, Participant 1 said, "There are times that I speak English mura kog mag mali-mali ang words because of anxiety. I feel like di ko maka-talk kay mura ma-blanko ang ako mind." (There were times that when I speak, it seemed my words were faulty because of anxiety. I feel like I could not talk because my mind could go blank.) Similarly, Participant 6 mentioned, "Usahay murag ma-anxious ko unsa ako i-speak." (Sometimes I seemed to get anxious on what to say.)

The participants admitted that when asked to speak English in front of a class, they felt anxious while addressing an audience. They could not focus and experienced emotions like fear and anxiety. They also experienced nausea and excessive sweating. Participant 4 claimed, "Kuan ma'am kanang kulba like mangurog ako kamot kay basin maulawan. Kulba jud ma'am inig mag- oral activity. (I felt nervous that my hands shivered because I might get embarrassed. It's really nervous- causing when having oral activity.) Moghaddam and Ghafournia (2019) disclosed that all students felt nervous when they had to speak.

Moreover, the participants in this study admitted that they felt too embarrassed about themselves after participating in English-speaking activities, knowing they had committed speaking errors. Participant 2 claimed, "Ma-embarrassed ko ma'am kay naa koy mali. Like example ma-wrong kog pronounce sa words then kana di nako masulti dayon kanang dili mao ang grammar sad." (I felt embarrassed Ma'am because I made mistakes. For example, I mispronounced words and I could not express immediately, and my grammar was erroneous, too.) Similarly, Participant 4 mentioned, "Ma embarrassed ko kay unyag sawayon ma'am." (I could get embarrassed when criticized.)

The participants felt too embarrassed after committing errors in expressing their thoughts. They became so conscious of themselves with the faults committed. The participants also worried being embarrassed on what their classmates might think of their performance, or being laughed or perceived as inferior.

Psychological factor is one of the main factors affecting speaking abilities which includes the unwillingness to speak the language and anxiety about making mistakes while speaking (Arcala, 2021). Anxiety impairs students' courage in using the language being studied. Thus, teachers need to create a comfortable learning environment where students can express themselves freely and confidently (Daab, 2017).

3.3. Adverse Outcomes of Speaking Difficulties

The participants' inability to speak English affected them psychologically and academically. Their difficulties in speaking English led them to be demotivated to participate in class and had poor academic standing. Participant 3 claimed, "Siguro po dahil sa mga mistakes ko parang nawawalan ako ng confidence tapos nahihiya na ako mag-participate sa klase po. Sometimes po pag tinawag ako ng teacher, hesitant po ako." (Maybe because of my mistakes that I was losing confidence and that I felt shy participating in the class. Sometimes when called by the, I was hesitant.) Similarly, Participant 4 stated, "Kanang ako confidence sad ma'am murag na apektohan pud kay maulaw naman ko mo-answer kay di man ko kabalo mo-English. Kanang maulaw ko na unyag maka-commit kog mistakes." (It seemed my confidence got affected because I felt ashamed to answer because I did not know English well. I felt embarrassed because I might commit mistakes.)

The absence of fundamental language abilities (grammar and vocabulary) and the feedback given during activities affect students' willingness to participate in speaking English (Patau, 2018). In relation to the study, students' speaking abilities were crucial to their academic standing. The inadequacies of the participants expressing their ideas adversely affected their performance. The participants felt hesitant and shy in communicating with their classmates, that they would not want to participate at all. The faulty grammar, mispronunciation of words, limited vocabulary, and difficulty in expressing ideas discouraged them from participating in oral class activities.

The participants' insufficient English language knowledge and lack of participation in speaking in front of the class caused their poor academic performance, especially in English classes. According to Khan et al. (2020) students who are anxious and lack confidence in themselves when speaking English tend to achieve low in their academic performance. In contrast, learners learn more effectively when they are confident in their abilities despite prior experiences.

3.4. Coping with the Difficulties in Speaking English

Learning English is not as simple as it seems. It takes a lot of practice to speak the language proficiently. The participants claimed that one of the ways to cope with their English-speaking difficulties was by reading English literature for recreational and academic purposes. As cited by Participant 1, "Reading para pud makasabot or kanang makabalo ug lain na mga words." (Reading so that I can understand or know other words.) In addition, Participant 4 claimed, "Mag lantaw ug movies na English para makasabay. Inig kadugayan nimong lantaw makasabay pud ka unsay mga pasabot atong worda sa English." (I watch English movies to be able to cope. After sometime of watching one can get what is meant by the words in English.) For Participant 2, he stated that "Naa sad times mag-practice kog speak kanang mag talk ko sa ako self and usahay sad sa ako friends" (There were times that I practiced speaking by talking to myself and sometimes with my friends.) On the part of Participant 5, he claimed, "Whenever kung ako ug akong mga siblings ma'am kay mag watch ug English cartoon movies kay mag English mi para ma practice pud and for me na maka encounter og new na words." (P5) (Whenever my siblings and I watch English cartoon movies, we try to speak English for us to practice and for me to encounter new words.)

As claimed by the participants, they exerted the necessary effort to improve their grammar skills. They knew the need to improve themselves, making them spare time for reading to overcome their difficulties. Aside from practicing for familiarity, watching English movies could be a means for the participants to enhance their English-speaking skills. Though the learning process might take time, these students could eventually attain better skills in constructing correct sentences. A study conducted in the Philippines by Rosales (2019) disclosed that watching English-subtitled videos improved the students' vocabulary. By watching television, students could watch English movies which help correct pronunciation and improve their English-speaking abilities.

4. Conclusions and Recommendations

Speaking English can be a daunting experience for some language learners because it means mastering the different facets of the language, which may be challenging to achieve. Moreover, poor speaking skills can deeply affect language learners in various ways. Nevertheless, amid the difficulties experienced, they are determined to overcome their deficiencies and psychological struggles in using the target language.

Based on the findings and conclusion of the study, it is recommended that school administrators consider equipping and training their teachers with new approaches and strategies in teaching grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation skills that may adequately address the needs of the students. Also, teachers may structure a friendly and non-threatening learning environment to reduce the amount of anxiety in an English class. Future researchers may look into effective ways for language learners to master English effectively.

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