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LEARNING IN A L2:

An analysis of less successful Filipino ESL learners' experiences through Consensual Qualitative Research

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Abstract: Despite being bilingual in Filipino and English, not all Filipino learners are successful in learning *in* English which is their second language (L2) and the MOI in Philippine schools. Majority of research on learning course content in a L2 have looked into the factors that lead to successful learning. However, for a *complete picture* of learning in a L2, factors that render a learner *"less successful"* must also be explored as this may lead to a better understanding of this group of learners. In this study, 15 Filipino high school ESL learners were interviewed about their learning in English. They were selected from four schools in Metro Manila (two public, two private) through purposive sampling method. The qualitative investigation was carried out from a constructivist/interpretivist research paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) and data were analyzed with the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) methodology (Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997; Hill et al., 2005). A central finding is that the participants are not motivated to use or learn in 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 to use the language The study sheds light on the actual lived experiences of Filipino high school students who are ESL learners as to their learning strategies, learning goals, and the difficulties they experience in learning in their L2.

Keywords: Bilingual learners; English-as-MOI; Medium of Instruction; CQR; unsuccessful learners

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite being bilingual in Filipino and English, the fact remains that not all Filipino learners are successful in learning in English which is their L2 and is the MOI in Philippine schools. To appreciate a complete picture of learning in a L2, factors that render a learner "less successful" must be explored as this may contribute to a better understanding of this group of learners. It is not known whether the factors

that lead to successful learning in a L2 are indeed missing in the Filipino L2 learners' environment and that valuable information is necessary for the planning and improvement of curriculum and instruction, and evaluating the learning environment as to whether it is supportive of this kind of learning or not.

MOI studies have typically focused on other stakeholders such as policy-makers, teachers, and parents describing the learner's experiences for them (Hopkins, 2006; Tam, 2011). There are fewer studies where the students themselves have the opportunity to describe their own experiences. One such investigation is that of Tatzl's (2011) which employed mixed-methods to look into teachers' and students' attitudes, experiences and challenges with the use of English as MOI in an Austrian university.

At present, the area of MOI seems to be under-researched in the Philippine setting even though it is apparent that the old problems have remained. Throughout history, the MOI in Philippine education has undergone many changes, from the English-only policy during the American Colonial Period (1900-1941) to an attempt at bilingual education in1939 to the nationalist resistance to English in the 1960s and finally to the implementation of the Bilingual Education Policy in 1974, and the reiteration in 1987. Bernardo (2004) in a study of the history and role of English in the Philippines (including its use as MOI) observed that despite conflicting opinions, there is still a clear preference among Filipino students and teachers for the use of English in education, with the preference being largely based on the perceived usefulness of English for learning, communication, and advancement. More recent studies on English as MOI such as those by Vizconde (2006; 2011) have been carried out, but the focus was on the dynamics of language instruction in the Philippines and the impact of language policy on education in general. To date, there are few studies that are specifically on unsuccessful learning in English in the Philippines specifically studies viewed from a constructivist lens. This study provides an understanding of learning in a L2 where the factors are defined by the learners instead of for them. Using the Consensual Qualitative Research (CQR) method, learners' subjective experiences are captured, providing insights on learning in a L2 and a theoretical understanding of this particular group of learners.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions: 1) What learning strategies do these learners employ as they learn in their L2? 2) What are these learners' learning goals as they learn in their L2? 3) What difficulties do these learners experience as they learn in their L2?

2. METHODOLOGY

2.1 Participants

The participants *(N=15)* were recruited from four high schools (two private, two public) in Metro Manila, Philippines. Teachers from these schools were asked to identify students who are *unsuccessful* in learning in English. Specific inclusion criteria for participants were as follows: a) must be a junior or senior in high school b) must have grades that are barely passing (in all or most of the courses they are taking), and c) must have Filipino as L1 and English as L2.

2.2 Researcher-as-instrument statement

The CQR team was composed of four professors, two from the English and Applied Linguistics department and two from the Counseling and Educational Psychology department. All members of the team had knowledge or background on learning in a L2 either from personal experience or from course work taken in graduate school. All are interested in the

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subject under investigation as all are educators curious to know what makes a learner unsuccessful in learning in their L2. The team had good working and personal relationships with one another as they have been colleagues in the same university for at least four years. The author served as the only interviewer for the study, but all four researchers analyzed the data. The research team's training in doing CQR included reading Hill et al.'s (2005; Hill, Thompson, & Williams, 1997) articles, discussing them, and explaining and clarifying Hill's methodology. For three of the four members, this is the second time to do a CQR study. The meetings were healthy exchanges of ideas and opinions.

2.3 Procedure

The participants were recruited through referrals from the researchers' acquaintances who were teachers in high school. All the participants were interviewed face-to-face, all the interviews were one-on-one, and although the questions were in English, the interviewer assured the participants that they could respond in either Filipino or English or both. Prior to the interview, the participants' parents completed the consent form, and the participants accomplished the demographic questionnaire. The length of the interviews ranged from 35 to 45 minutes with an average of 40 minutes. All interviews were audiotaped and transcribed by trained research assistants.

2.4 Research paradigm

The investigation was carried out from a constructivist/interpretivist paradigm (Ponterotto, 2005) which holds that reality is constructed in the mind of the individual and thus the goal of the study was to understand the "lived experiences" from the point of view of those who live it day by day (Ponterotto, 2005). The researchers believe that no one is a better authority on their own reality and experiences in learning in a L2 than the learners themselves.

2.5 Research design

The data were analyzed using CQR, an analysis that focuses on the consensus of the research team's identification of themes and categories. The CQR method (Hill et al., 2005, 1997) prescribes the structure of identifying and coding domains, abstracting the core ideas, auditing, and cross-analyzing.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A total of seven broad domains (pertaining to the factors that influence the learners' learning experiences in English) emerged from the analysis of the data: (1) Language use at home, (2) Domestic life, (3) Language experiences in school, (4) Learning experiences in school (5) Learning strategies and goals, (6) Recreation and socialization, and (7) Beliefs about the self/self-perceptions.

A major finding is that despite the use of the L2 as MOI in school, these learners use only the L1 in learning (i.e. studying) and in learning activities outside of the classroom and the school. Apparently, English is viewed by these learners only as a language used by their teachers in teaching and not a language that they themselves can use as they learn. There are many studies on the attitude of students toward learning English but none on their attitude toward English as MOI. In Yazici et al. (2010), the importance of the L1 in using the L2 was reiterated, but concurrent to earlier studies, the investigation focused on the L2's role in language acquisition and not on the L2 as MOI. It has been proven that competence in the L1 leads to easier and better learning in the L2, but no study has presented the learners' perspective, specifically the role of their L1 in their learning in a L2 and the reasons behind their language choices while studying.

It was also found that the participants code-switch in school for reasons that

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correspond to findings in studies on code-switching in the Philippines notably by Bautista (1991). They code-switch due to: (perceived) lack of fluency in English; to make learning easier; and to be understood by their peers. Eldridge (1996) noted that English language teachers who teach in monolingual environments have long been concerned about reducing or even abolishing student use of the L1 in the language classroom to maximize the amount of time spent using the target language, and thus improving learning efficiency. However, results of his study which was carried out in a Turkish secondary school showed that there is no empirical evidence to support the notion that restricting L1 use would necessarily improve learning efficiency, and that the majority of code-switching in the classroom is highly purposeful, and related to pedagogical goals. Because English is the MOI in the Philippines, teachers often feel compelled to discourage or even forbid students to code-switch, especially in English classes, but many studies actually point to the fact that code-switching can be used as a resource in teaching and learning (see Bernardo, 2005 A and Bernardo, 2005B, Bernardo & Gaerlan, 2012; Borlongan, 2009; Borlongan, Lim & Roxas 2012 & Valdez, 2010). Eldridge urges educators to understand code switching's causes, motivations, and effects before making rash censorial judgments.

Further, the participants seem to be under the impression that they are "not bilingual" because they are "not good in English." Thus, they do not seem to be aware of the benefits of code-switching and are not able to "maximize" their bilinguality in learning. Kibler (2010) suggested that students lack the discipline-specific vocabulary to be effective language brokers or interpreters for each other and that the brokering process does not provide students with full access to the curriculum or improved opportunities for English language acquisition or use. Thus, it is possible that the participants in the present study are also unable to maximize their bilinguality because they rely on one another for support during learning activities without being equipped with the necessary vocabulary (both in L1 and L2) and other language skills.

The participants also verbalized feeling that there are not enough opportunities to learn in the L2 despite the fact that it is the MOI and that most of their teachers require them to use the language. What is alarming, though, is the possibility that there are really not enough learning opportunities in English in Philippine high schools. The use of English as MOI does not automatically translate to learning opportunities in English. Khan and Ali (2010) for example looked at English as a subject and as a language in a Pakistani university and examined the quality of the textbooks, opportunities of listening to good English with proper/correct pronunciation and ascertained whether various exercises and activities such as seminars, group discussions, debates and competitions were regularly being arranged or not. A similar study might be carried out in Philippine high schools to see whether valid learning opportunities in English do exist, and more importantly, whether the students are aware of these opportunities and how to maximize them.

Another significant finding that emerged from the data is the effect of the classroom environment on the participants' learning. They described their environment to be "riotous," with fights occurring in and out of the classroom due to troublemakers. This kind of scenario, according to them, leads to the teacher losing patience and sometimes even to the teacher walking out. In Philippine public schools, this is quite understandable as the ratio is usually 1 teacher to 70 students. In the private schools, the ratio is usually 1: 40 making classroom management less difficult; however, students are usually grouped according to ability (based on performance

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on the entrance exam or yearly assessment of academic performance) and so the "underperforming" students are usually in the middle to the last sections. The participants in this study are classified under "underperforming" or "unsuccessful" and for some reason students such as these are also typically the ones who have behavior problems. Early studies carried out in the United States revealed that many middle schools and junior high schools place greater emphasis on teacher control and discipline and that high school teachers are concerned more about behavior management than actual teaching (Eccles & Midgley, 1989).

The self-determination theory (SDT) of Ryan and Deci (2000) maintains that in order for learners to function optimally, the processes of intrinsic motivation, internalization, and integration require that basic psychological needs be supported. Accordingly, SDT suggests that the most basic psychological needs are the needs for relatedness, competence, and autonomy. In the present study, it is typical among the respondents to belong to a group of friends, who naturally influence their behavior and decisions, and indirectly, their learning. Ironically, SDT also suggests that if adolescents can feel autonomy, competence, and belongingness in school, they will experience more intrinsic motivation, which does not seem to be the case with the respondents. It is possible that only the need to belong is met and not the need for perceived competence and autonomy. Since school is the central domain (outside of the family) for most adolescents to engage in tasks of development, it is important for administrators and teachers to ensure that their affective and not only their cognitive needs are met in school. Especially with less successful learners, factors that lead to intrinsic motivation need to be investigated and subsequent support prioritized.

Generally, the participants in this study would like to improve their grades and since most of them incur failing grades, they only aim for mere "passing" marks. They also admit that they do not use strategies in learning. The SDT theory holds that unless a behavior is accompanied by a sense of autonomy, perceived competence will not enhance intrinsic motivation. Thus, the sense of belongingness that the participants get from being part of a group of friends does not lead to them being intrinsically motivated since their teachers may not be autonomy-supportive because the latter may be too concerned about behavior management.

Further, considering that these learners admit that they are not good in English and are under the impression that they are not bilingual because of this, it is apparent that their need for perceived competence is also unmet. Newman (1994) pointed out that students need to self-monitor their academic progress and seek out teachers and peers for help when it is needed, but poorly regulated students are reluctant to ask for help, often fearing criticism or ridicule. A possible cause for concern is the finding in the present study that only one out of the 15 respondents evaluate his/her own learning (*Norman, a 16-year old private school senior said he always checks how he is doing in his subjects so that he can still do something about it before the last quarter of the school year). Zimmerman (1989, 1998, 2000, 2001) stresses the important role of self-evaluation and self-regulation in learning and achievement. According to Zimmerman, Greenberg, and Weinstein (1994), high school students are expected to develop self-regulatory skills such as goal-setting, self-monitoring and time management as well as sources of motivation to self-initiate and sustain learning; however, a significant number do not adopt effective learning strategies. The learning strategies that the participants in the present study need to adopt should be specifically helpful to bilingual learners who

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have difficulty learning through a second language.

4. CONCLUSIONS

A central finding in the results is that the participants are not motivated to use or learn in 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 to use the language. In contrast, Gaerlan (2009) found that successful learners are highly interested and motivated to use English because they believed this would ensure them of success in the future. These successful learners verbalized wanting to become better English users because they wanted to secure good jobs in the future. Miller and Brickman (2003, 2004 in Greene, Miller, Crowson, Duke, & Akey, 2004) argued that one set of concerns that may influence achievement goals is the personally valued future goals that people pursue. When tasks are perceived to be instrumental to personally valued future goals, their incentive value is enhanced through the future goals to which they are connected.

However, this goal is not only something the participants should want for themselves, but for their families and other loved ones as well. As Wentzel (1999) said, social-motivational processes and socialization experiences can play a critical role in students' academic success and that students' social encounters and experiences with parents, teachers, and peers might influence their adoption and internalization of socially valued goals. She observes that significant social influences on adolescents' motivational meaning system include parents, teachers, and peers. The successful learners in Gaerlan's (2009) study verbalized that they were inspired to do well in learning in English by their teachers whom they mentioned as being good role models. They also mentioned receiving support from their parents and other family members.

Many studies have emphasized the important role of the affective component in learning. The participants in this study seem ambivalent on their emotions/attitude/feelings toward learning in English. Although they express experiencing difficulties using English in learning, they are also aware of the advantages. These learners should be made aware of the cognitive benefits of being bilingual and how it can be maximized. Since English will continue to be the MOI in Philippine schools in university (beginning in third grade only, as the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy [MTB-MLE] stipulates) there is a need to further study Filipino students' attitude toward learning in a L2 and their motivations (or lack thereof). Even though problems with MOI seems to be an "old" issue in Philippine education, it is obviously still a fertile ground for study. There is also a need to look into the specific learning tasks that these students need to do in their L2 (speaking, listening, reading, writing) as the present study only looked at the broad view of difficulties in learning in a L2. Also necessary is a follow up study that looks into the specific support necessary for successful learning in a L2, such as teacher, parental, and peer support, interaction, etc.

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