

Reflections of AB-English Students on Their English Language Experiences

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Abstract

This study seeks to investigate the language learning experiences of the thirty-nine AB-English majors of Bukidnon State University who were selected through fish-bowl technique from the 157 students enrolled in the AB-English program. Findings taken from the diary, questionnaire, and unstructured interview revealed that the motivation, learners' belief, self-monitoring, language anxiety, activities and strategies were the prevailing factors that influenced the learning of English of the participants.

Keywords: Diary, English language learning experiences, reflections, learner's belief, anxiety, self-motivated learner, teacher's role

Introduction

Language is the most useful medium of communication which allows people to explain and express their thoughts and ideas in oral or written form; hence, language is essential in every activity of man. This among other reasons spurred the need to study how non-native language students learn and the need to better understand the factors that facilitate learning as one of the requirements to help students approach their language experiences. These factors come in a variety of situations and forms that human beings exploit as an input of the target language.

Among the studies conducted on language learning involve the perspectives of the learners themselves (Carson, 2004; Fong, 2005; Narayanan et al., 2008; Matsuzaki, 2006). Understanding the standpoints of students on what helped them learn English as a second language has pedagogical values. The factors that contributed their language experiences suggest ways on how the teachers should instruct their learners. The teachers could look for strategies that best suit the type of students in their classes. Also, the students will be able to assess their language learning experiences that program designers can use in looking at students' perspective. Indeed, taking

into consideration the learners' perspective is a useful tool to understand the factors that contribute to effective language learning (Matsuda, 2004; Matsumoto, 1996).

Studies have shown that learners of English are capable of identifying the sources of knowledge by looking at their reflections especially when teachers give diary prompts that guide them to reflect on their language experiences (Curtis & Bailey, 2009; Fong, 2005; Matsuda, 2004; Matsumoto, 1996; Mori, 2007). These studies have demonstrated the learners' ability to identify the factors that helped them learn the target language. However, most of these studies focused on foreign language learners. There are still no studies conducted on the language learning experiences of the second language (L2) learners of Bukidnon State University (BSU). Thus, a link to research in this area would greatly help teachers instruct Cebuano learners in English.

In this study, the researcher focused on the language experiences of L2 learners and the factors that assisted them in learning English. Also, this study presents valuable information to the field of English language studies. Thus, the researcher hopes that this study would help

both L2 learners and teachers in learning and teaching English efficiently.

Theoretical Framework

This section explains the theories that support the conduct of the study.

Socio-cultural theory of Vygotsky (1962, 1978) operates on the assumption that human cognitive development is highly dependent on the use of language in a social context. It also occurs, as a result of meaningful verbal interactions between novices and more knowledgeable interlocutor such as parents, peers, or teachers as well as the mediating technologies (Vygotsky, 1980). This means that through interactions and use of mediating tools such as reading materials, computer, educational videos and other forms of media language learning is facilitated. Hence, people take part in communication and that they sometimes use tools to express themselves and to learn more about the ideas of others. Moreover, teachers may provide learners with meaningful interaction and assistance to help students learn better the language.

This study also capitalizes on the social learning theory which explains that humans are capable of observational learning. Students acquire knowledge by observing others – their styles, efforts, and successes. Social learning also involves four stages (Bandura, 1997). First is the attention phase in which the students perceive a model. Second is the retention stage in which they process what they observed. Third is the reproduction phase in which the learner repeats the modeled behavior. Last is the reinforcement phase in which the learners reinforce as they repeat such behavior. This signifies that a learner of a language often imitates the behavior of others. Learners are keen observers and the language expressions that they hear and the content of communication serve as language inputs. They, therefore, learn not only by actively getting involved in the process of communication but also by listening, reading and observing the use of language.

Another theory is on engagement.

Engagement theory provides direction to educators on how to help students become more engaged in learning (Guthrie 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997, 2000). It also emphasizes motivational, conceptual, and social aspects of learning in which learners became more engaged in learning. This theory also states that engaged learners are those who are intrinsically motivated to learn and frequently involved in activities related to it (Guthrie; Guthrie & Wigfield). This implies that language learning takes place when students become more engaged in the lessons or topics or when they are intrinsically driven to learn the language. Thus, learners are also self-propelled. They have their objectives in learning a language, and this can prompt them to do tasks that will help them learn a language.

Embedded in the theory of engagement is motivation. Motivation is the drive people have to reach their goal or to accomplish something (Oxford & Shearin, 1994). Thus, if students are motivated to achieve their language learning goals, they are more likely to engage in classroom activities to enhance their skills. Also, being engaged means they are more enthusiastic to learn in class and practice at home to attain their goals.

These theories are very much helpful in the study since they talk about how learning takes place. Specifically, the said concepts can be used to support language learning and even in the conduct and analysis of the study.

Statement of the Problem

1. What are the reflections of the AB-English students about their English language experiences?

1.1 How do students' reflections influence their learning?

Methodology

This study used phenomenological research design. This design is concerned with the study of experiences from the perspective of an individual.

This study was conducted at Bukidnon State University, particularly in the College of Arts and Sciences. This college offers five courses. One of these is Bachelor of Arts major in English. The first semester of the academic year 2011-2012 was the implementation of the new curriculum of AB-English, which is far different from that of the previous curriculum that is more focused on literature. The new curriculum focuses more on courses concerning the study of language.

There were the 39 AB-English students who participated in the study. Among 157 enrollees of the AB-English program of the College of Arts and Sciences of Bukidnon State University in the academic year 2011-2012, 25% of the enrollees were selected to participate in the study. In selecting the participants from each year level, the researcher used the fish-bowl technique. In this method, the names of all participants were written on paper and placed in a container where the researcher got the samples. Except for a 34-year old student, the age bracket of the participants ranged from 16-26 years old. Table 1 below presents the number of learners including the number of male and female participants.

Table 1.
Description of Participants in the Study

Level of Participants	Selected No.	Gender	
		Male	Female
1st year	12 students	4	8
2nd year	12 students	3	9
3rd year	12 students	1	11
4th year	3 students	2	1
Total	39 students	9	30

The researcher employed triangulation in gathering the data. Triangulation is using various techniques in answering the research problem to ensure the validity of the result.

First, the researcher used the diary as the primary data gathering tool. As gleaned from the review, the researcher provided guide questions. These questions were from the

queries used by Fong (2006) in his study. These queries served as their guide in writing their diary.

Data gathering of the reflections happened during class hours. The researcher asked permission from the instructor of the participants to conduct the study in the classroom during the teacher's instructional time. Before the students answered their diary using the diary prompts, the researcher oriented the participants to recall all their experiences in the language. They were also allowed to write their answers in Cebuano, Filipino or English; they can also code switch. Second, the researcher used a questionnaire to further capture the participants' experiences in learning English. The questionnaire was modified from the questionnaire of Narayanan et al. (2008) on factors affecting English language learning. The participants responded to 27 items about the different causes that affect their English learning. The use of this questionnaire is intended to support the diary to make sure that the different language learning experiences are indeed captured.

Lastly, the unstructured interview was used. An unstructured interview is an informal, conversational form of an interview in which the participants answer open-ended questions of their English language experiences. The questions were from items that were not fully explained in the diary. A voice recorder was used to document the interview making it easier for the researcher to transcribe their responses.

The study used average and percentage to check the factors that affect language learning such as, motivation, learners' belief, language anxiety, activities and strategies, and social factors. The results gained in this questionnaire were used to support the qualitative account of the study.

In presenting the results of the questionnaire, the researcher used the percentage computation and not the Likert's computation. This is because the study focused on the number of students who have responded to an item.

Three raters evaluated the diary of the

learners. The researcher with the help of the research mentor had undergone training on how to code the entries.

Aside from the author, two instructors from Bukidnon State University were selected to read and identify the diary's entries.

The raters read each diary and labelled the parts that contributed to the English language learning of the students. The researcher compared the coding of the coders. The researcher did not meet the intercoder anymore after the papers were returned to him because in general, the evaluators agreed in the coding. In cases when intercoder had a different coding, the researcher followed the rating of the two coders.

Results and Discussion

1. Language Learning Experiences of AB-English Students

The table below presents the result.

Table 2 shows the data of the survey conducted among 39 AB-English students. As shown in the table, the students' learning of English was an outcome of a host of factors. Among these factors, the students agreed that in general, the activities and strategies of both the teachers and students were helpful in learning English. This is followed by motivation and teacher's role in English language learning. Thus, L2 learners tend to be more proficient in studying English when their teachers gave relevant activities and strategies that suit the learner's interest.

The findings are in agreement with the statement that numerous factors affect language learning (Fong, 2005; Narayanan et al., 2008; Matsuzaki, 2006). The table also supports the reasons which are revealed by the students in their summative diary. Further discussions of these factors follow. Data from the interview are also provided.

1. Motivation

In the diaries of the participants, it was

revealed that students were extrinsically motivated. The study of Fong (2006) had the same findings about extrinsic motivation. Several factors affect extrinsic motivation. This includes the aims of the students to increase their job opportunities in the country and even abroad and to earn good grades in school. As seen in Table 2, a percentage of students recognized English as instrumental in looking for a good job and finding a better career in the future. Gonzales (2010) supports this finding that learners were extrinsically motivated because they wanted to earn a living and get jobs. Also, students were motivated because of their teachers and families. This is in consonance with the theory of Vygotsky (1980) that the interaction of learners with their teachers and parents or any family members can facilitate the learning process.

A. Job Opportunities and Travel Abroad

Students were extrinsically motivated in their language learning as summed up in their diaries. One of which is the aim to have a good job after college and a greater chance to work abroad.

The diary entry above is an example of participant responses that confirmed the importance of English to increase the participants' chances of looking for a high paying job within and outside the country. They also recognized the need to learn English so they can communicate effectively with others who speak English. In the questionnaire on motivation, item numbers 5 and 7 were the highest rated statements which support the value of English in the field of employment and travel. This is perhaps because, in the Philippines, the English language has received the status of prestige; it is the language of business and institutions. Also, one of the well-paid places to work is found in English-speaking countries. Gonzales (2010) supports the finding that Filipinos are extrinsically motivated learners because of career development and the chances of working abroad.

Table 2. Factors that Affect English Language Learning

Factors	n=39				
	5	4	3	2	1
A. Motivation					
1. I do enjoy learning English	53.8	43.6	5.13		
2. English will help me acquire new ideas and broaden my outlook.	69.2	28.2	2.56		
3. I can learn more about the world through learning English.	51.3	38.5	10.3		
4. English is necessary to get a good job.	59	38.5	10.3		
5. English will be helpful for my future career.	87.2	10.3	2.56		
6. English will help me to pass my exam and graduate from college.	69.2	20.5	7.69		2.56
7. English will help me if I should ever travel abroad.	74.4	23.1	2.56		
8. I can reach my goals and dreams in life if I learn English.	56.4	35.9	7.69		
9. I study English for me to get higher grades.	33.3	38.5	20.5	5.13	2.56
Total	61.53	30.5	7.40	.57	.56
B. Learners' Belief					
10. If I have high English proficiency, others think I am cool.	17.9	41	30.8	23.1	
11. It is natural for me to learn English.	46.2	41	12.8		
12. Learning English can boost my confidence in school.	46.2	35.9	17.9		
13. I feel confident when asked to participate in English language class.	25.6	30.8	51.3		
Total	33.98	37.18	28.2	8.35	
C. Teacher's Role					
14. My teacher helps me in learning English by giving effective strategies.	56.4	38.5	2.56	2.56	
15. I learn more in English when the teacher is approachable.	64.1	23.1	12.8		
Total	60.25	30.8	7.68		1.28
D. Language Anxiety					
16. I feel anxious if someone asks me something in English	10.3	25.6	43.6	15.4	5.13
17. I can hardly explain my answers in class using English	7.69	20.5	46.2	23.1	2.56
18. I feel nervous when I speak English	7.69	23.1	46.2	20.5	2.56
19. It embarrasses me to volunteer answers in our English language class.	2.56	25.6	38.5	20.5	12.8
20. I am afraid the other students will laugh at me when I speak English.	17.9	30.8	28.2	20.5	2.56
21. I feel more tense and nervous in English language class than in other classes.	20.5	46.2	28.2	2.56	2.56
Total	11.11	28.63	38.48	17.09	4.70
E. Activities and Strategies					
22. Instructional materials are really helpful in learning English	69.2	25.6	2.56		2.56
23. Reading books can enhance my ability in using English.	87.2	10.3	2.56		
24. I try to use English as much as possible in class time.	33.3	48.7	15.4		2.56
Total	11.11	28.63	6.83		1.71
F. Social Factor					
25. I prefer to learn English with someone's help.	20.5	38.5	25.6	12.8	2.56
26. I can socialize with others if I learn English.	25.6	48.7	23.1	2.56	
27. I learn English because I have friends who are speaker of English on the web.	5.13	17.9	33.3	30.8	12.8
Total	17.08	35.03	27.33	15.39	5.12

B. Earn Good Grades

Some students reported that their aim of having good grades in the subject is what motivated them in their learning.

Kong (2009) also found out that students study to get higher grades and achievement in class. In the questionnaire, the answers of participants in items number 2, 6, and 9 (see Table 2) support the finding that learning English is important to earn good grades and to acquire more knowledge. In college, the majority of the subjects are taught in English, and those students who are good in using the English language are at an advantage because they can better understand the content and express themselves than those whose English skills are poor.

C. Teacher's Role

It is evident in the diaries of the learners that their teacher has an significant role in their English learning.

As revealed in the diaries, students were motivated because their teachers helped them learn English such as suggesting they watch English movies and read English books. Also, students were also adaptable in learning when the teacher has a good attitude towards the learners. Students also pointed out that they were encouraged when the teacher was proficient in teaching English. In fact, students found it remarkable to encounter a teacher who motivated them to learn more. In items number 14 and 15 (see Table 2) the results are consistent with what is revealed in the reflections. For instance, students tend to learn better in English when the teacher is approachable and uses appropriate strategies in teaching. Thus, the teacher who encourages the learners to make good on the subject and provides a harmonious relationship in the classroom has a positive effect on the learning progress of the students. Dornyei (1988) and Fong (2005) support this finding that teachers are very much important in the learning process since they can influence the performance of the students in learning English.

D. Self-motivated Learner

There were only two students who have reported that they were intrinsically motivated in learning English.

As revealed in entries #25 and #31, the students enrolled in an English course because they just want to learn the language. According to Kong (2009), intrinsic motivation is the willingness of the student to learn a new knowledge to fulfill the purpose of their curiosity. Thus, it is the need to know and enhance their self-growth that motivated the students to learn. There were only two students in the study who wanted to improve their skills in English.

2. Language Anxiety

The identified sources of anxiety in the study of Cubukcu (2007) were also found in the current study. Making mistakes in using English, the teacher's behavior and the difficulty of the activities in the classroom were the reasons for the learners' anxiety. These factors are also documented in the diaries of the students.

A. Teacher's Role in Student's Anxiety

English language learning involves different components, and as discussed earlier, the teacher has a crucial function in the learning process. However, the teacher cannot only be the source of motivation, but they can also be a source of anxiety in the learning environment.

As revealed in this diary, the teacher hinders the student from learning English because of the teacher's treatment of their students. Crawford (1993) explains that the environment in the classroom must be convenient for students to learn and that interaction must be free flowing so learners can give their best in class. Also, the teacher must keep the class unthreatening for the learners because it can augment learners' performance. Hence, it is the task of the teacher to keep the class atmosphere conducive for learning.

B. Class Activities that Causes Anxiety

Activities in the classroom can also be a source of learning (Guthrie, 2004; Guthrie & Wigfield, 1997, 2000). However, there are also students who are anxious because of the activities done in the classroom.

As accounted in the entries above, students were afraid to express themselves in English during their class because they were scared if others would give negative comments and criticize their grammar. Cubukcu (2007) supported this finding on language anxiety that students were anxious to submit themselves to the class because of their inability to express themselves, presenting in class and committing mistakes. It is then threatening for learners if there are a large number of students in the class. It affects their confidence that others are watching and listening to them. Thus, learning is hampered, and activities became useless.

3. Learners' Beliefs

English learning is viewed to be multi-factorial in nature. One of these factors is learners' belief. This includes how the student sees himself as a language learner. Accordingly, positive students have higher chances of acquiring the language. The more confident they are, the more active they will be in using the language (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003).

A. Good Language Learner

There are only a few students who have an optimal belief about themselves as language learners. These are summed up on their reflections below:

As revealed in their diaries, students who have positive belief as learners of English tend to look at their language skills as more superior than others. This means that they can do better with language related tasks than their peers who are not confident. Kong (2009) discussed that learners shape their learning progress on how they perceive themselves as language learners. In fact, learners' beliefs can also build the

motivation of the students. The positive beliefs language learners hold raise their motivation in learning English (Kong, 2009).

B. Poor Language Learners

Most of the students identified themselves as poor language learners of English. These can be seen in the entries below and how these students conceive themselves as language learners:

Entry # 35

Evidently, students who are reported to be poor language learners pointed out their weaknesses in the language in the aspects of writing, speaking, and understanding English. Their performance was also their bases on how they looked at themselves as language learners. This finding was also true in the study of Ajzen (1988) who found that performance is also a determinant of the learners' belief.

C. Learners' Perseverance Despite Negative Belief

Despite the undesirable belief of students on how they perceive their language learning, they have also shown a positive attitude in learning the language.

The attitude and behavior of students toward the learning of English can help the learners improve their language skills (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003). The learners' knowledge of who they are and what they can do with the English language can help them see how to improve their language skills. In this case, the learners know that they need more time to learn the target language. Thus, if the learners can identify their strengths and weaknesses in using the language, they can capitalize on this to improve their skills.

D. Influence of Belief on Language Learning as Perceived by the Participants

The excerpt below explains the impact of belief as perceived by participants:

How do you consider yourself as a language learner? Are you a good or poor language learner?

Students can examine their beliefs in using the language. In fact, the learners' optimistic belief as a language learner is linked to their self-confidence and the progress of their learning. The more confident their views as a language learner, the more assertive they are in using the language, and the higher is the probability of using the English language. Items number 10, 11, 12 and 13 (see Table 2) verifies the numerical finding of this account. Thus, the learner based this belief on how they experience using English. This finding also supports Tanaka and Ellis' (2003) finding that learners' beliefs are a factor that can affect how well language is learned, for example,

Thus, learners' beliefs depend on the consideration of the learners' ability in exercising the technicalities of the language. Students can rely on how proficient they are in English. Moreover, learners' belief can uplift the intention of the learner to strive hard to be a competent English user. This notion is also similar to the finding of Ajzen (1998) that the belief of the learner may considerably shape the intention and action of the students towards the learning process.

4. Evaluation of Progress and Self-monitoring

Previous research has also shown the importance of self-monitoring in English language learning. It can be a guide for both students and teachers in the learning process (Harris, 1997; Gardner 2000). It is good to note that students were able to evaluate their progress in reading, writing, listening, speaking and vocabulary. They have also pointed out their previous performances in various aspects. Below are the assessments and evaluations of the students on the four macro-skills of learning English in reading, writing and listening.

D. Speaking and Vocabulary

The diaries of the students provided a rich source of information on the evaluation of their English learning. It shows that students were aware of what they have learned and what their language strengths and weaknesses are. Thus, self-monitoring can build learners' awareness in the learning process (Harris, 1997; Gardner 2000). This is because they can assess the particular area they need to improve or in which area they are more effective. In fact, they can even remember particular events or experiences that involved the learning of English. Also, students have written suggestions on what they need to do to improve their English skills.

5. Activities and Strategies

Students can identify the activities inside and outside the school that can help them foster their English learning. Some activities that they have pointed out are tests, examinations, discussions, reading books, reporting and role playing. They also used mediating tools that keep them on track with their learning from computers, films, and other forms of media (Vygotsky, 1962, 1978). Other students used strategies in learning English such as enriching vocabulary, searching the meaning of unfamiliar words when reading, and speaking English as much as possible.

A. Learner's Activities in Class

There are plenty of activities that the teacher utilized in class. However, it is vital to solicit the ideas of students on what particular activities they like for them to be motivated to learn. These activities are documented below:

As revealed in their diaries, students were more used to activities like having tests or written activities. This is because their papers are checked; they can immediately have the feedback. Thus, they can maximize the opportunity to reflect and strive hard if they do not get good marks. Also, they prefer having assignments since they can review their past

lessons, and they find it useful when they have them because it helps them recall their previous activities.

In the questionnaire, items number 22, 23, and 24 (see Table 2.) support the findings that learners have preferences in the English activities. To sum up, the preferred activities of learners should be planned carefully and before they are incorporated in the classroom instruction (Littlewood, 2010; Spratt, 2001). It is important that teachers and curriculum developers should carefully prepare activities that suit an English class.

B. Learner's Strategy

It is evident in the learner's diaries that they have used strategies in learning English. These are shown in the entries below:

When students have already identified useful strategies in learning English they often use it to develop their learning. As revealed in the diary, they used cognitive approach in reading when they encounter difficult words; they search it in the dictionary and look for the meaning. Thus, it is important to practice the use of English in all aspects (e.g., reading, speaking, etc.) where learners used strategies that are effective in learning the target language (Liang, 2009). Others strategies that students used are soliciting ideas from peers when they meet hard to pronounce words, taking down notes to recall important details when reading, looking for grammar references when writing, and practicing the use of English as much as possible. Hence, teachers should also incorporate other learning strategies in the teaching of English in their classes.

Conclusion

The results seem to show that there is no single factor that helps the learners learn English. It is then possible to say that learners learn better when they are strongly motivated; have low-level anxiety towards English; have positive belief about themselves as language learners; can cope with different types of

activities in class, use more strategies when learning English; can monitor their progress; and assess what area of learning English they are more proficient. Also, the role of teachers is essential for learners to learn better inside the classroom.

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Note:

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