

EXPLORING THE LIVED EXPERIENCES OF ESL TEACHERS IN THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH SUBJECTS

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Abstract

Teaching English has been a major issue in countries where English is not the first language, making it difficult for L2 learners to learn a second language because they cannot use English in real-life situations. However, pronunciation is a significant element of English language fluency. It is considered to be essential for successful oral communication. This paper documented the lived experiences of five ESL teachers in teaching English classes at Eastern Samar State University, Guiuan. This study employed a transcendental phenomenology research design. The five selected teachers teaching English subjects were asked to share their experiences through an in-depth interview in teaching English subjects and their observed students' English language challenges. The data gathered generated five themes, which included sensitivity among students on error correction; divergent attitudes of the students towards pronunciation instruction; pronunciation errors of students in both segmental and suprasegmentals; teacher's ways of dealing with the level of extent of students' fossilization period; and challenges in teaching the English language. The result implies that students' lack of exposure to language learning opportunities contributes to the emerging problem in the fluency of the language. Therefore, challenges to ESL teachers in dealing with students' difficulties in learning the English language.

Keywords: ESL teachers, teachers' experiences, linguistic performance, pronunciation errors, pronunciation teaching strategies

Introduction

English as a second language serves as the medium of instruction in most of the subjects in the Philippines' education curriculum. Moreover, due to a mandate of the new constitution, both English and Filipino are assured to be the official languages of instruction and communication. Beyond that regulation, English is almost always the spoken language in learning after primary school, especially in the country's urban and State Universities and Colleges (SUCs). Further, it serves as a means of communication, especially those citizens from different linguistic backgrounds. Yet, pronunciation is a significant element of language fluency.



Pronunciation plays an important role in communication because pronunciation errors can affect the clarity of a person's delivery. Keshavarz and Abu Bakar (2017) state that pronunciation clarity is a component of communication competence. It is essential for successful oral communication by many L2 users (Celce-Murcia & Brinton, 2010). Furthermore, Gilakjani (2012) opined that “learners with good English pronunciation are likely to be understood even if they make errors in other areas, whereas learners with bad pronunciation will not be understood, even if their grammar is perfect. Since speaking is the basic element when communicating, pronunciation inevitably is seen and discussed by many authors and teachers that have come across it (Poposka, 2017). Based on a statistical viewpoint, English is one of the world's most spoken languages (Jason, 2011), and as such, many people have taken up learning it. In the Philippines, the country uses the English language as an international language for communication because most of the population has a degree of fluency. However, many Filipinos still face difficulties in learning to speak the language. And this is evident, even in college students. Some students are hesitant to express their ideas, especially if they must use the English language. Therefore, it becomes a challenge for ESL teachers to cope with this issue in teaching strategies to learn a second language.

Teaching English is a multifaceted process, and teachers must pay close attention to students' reading, writing, listening, and speaking abilities. Teachers teach these abilities, and students learn them. Mukminin et al. (2022) found that there were challenges that were encountered by English teachers in teaching English language skills to young learners. They found some strategies used by the teachers in solving challenges in teaching English language skills to young learners. For listening skills, teachers did not find too many challenges in teaching the skill. However, for speaking skills, participants said that it was more difficult than teaching listening skills although students were only demanded to be able to mention some simple words.

Further, it was cited by Reinoso, Rengifo, and Chamba (2019) that several teaching strategies and materials help students excel in the ESL classroom, yet learners have difficulty exchanging their thoughts in English. There are many challenges facing foreign language (FL) learners, and the learner struggles with notable challenges. Correspondingly, many English teachers face challenges in coping with students' difficulties speaking the language, especially college students taking up courses requiring them to be fluent in the language. With this, the researcher aimed to discover the English teachers' experiences teaching English subjects and coping with the learners' language difficulties, especially during class discussions.

Teaching English as a second language has been, and continues to be, a challenging endeavor for ESL teachers all over the world, according to Simasiku (2016). In areas where there is little prior knowledge of English as a language, Selim and Tasneen (2016) agreed that teaching English as a second language becomes more challenging for teachers. In most instances, the ESL teachers are non-native English speakers, teaching learners who are also non-native English speakers to learn to speak, read, understand, and write English (Piage, 2018). As a result, ESL instructors deal with a variety of difficulties both inside and outside the classroom (Khan & Khan, 2016). Research reports revealed that ESL teachers face genuine teaching challenges, the majority of which are contextual (Mundy

2008, cited by Khan & Khan, 2016). This is true even if they have received adequate training and are creative.

This study aimed at knowing the lived experiences of ESL teachers in teaching English subjects and their observed students' challenges/difficulties in learning the language. The findings of this study could be source data for pedagogical development to address the issue. Specifically, this qualitative study aimed to uncover some existing ideas and experiences teachers have in teaching English subjects guided by the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of ESL teachers in teaching English subjects?
2. How do teachers deal with the difficulties encountered by their students in learning the English language?

Method

A qualitative research design using the transcendental phenomenological method was employed in this study. It is one of the qualitative research patterns that aim to reveal and interpret people's perspectives and perceptions of a specific phenomenon (Yildirim & Simsek, 2005). It is believed that Phenomenologists seeking to explicate "lived experience" need above all to do justice to the phenomenon under study; research methods need to be responsive to the phenomenon, towards capturing something of its "is-ness." (Finlay, 2014); this ensures that the teacher's lived experiences in teaching English subjects are described more thoroughly. This phenomenological approach allows the researcher to have an objective examination of the phenomena. This qualitative inquiry approach was appropriate for this study because the researcher was able to "understand the meaning that participants attribute to those actions- their thoughts, feelings, beliefs, values, and assumptive worlds through face-to-face interview to capture their deeper perspectives or experiences on the phenomenon (Creswell, 2018).

Furthermore, the phenomenological approach allows for opportunities to observe people's experiences where knowledge about a particular phenomenon is limited, and the researchers collaborate with the participants to glean perspectives that may later provide insight (Donalek, 2005). The study participants were purposively selected based on the set objectives and criteria of this present study. The research participants were the five (5) English teachers handling English subjects in Bachelor of Arts in Communication (BA Com), Bachelor of Secondary Education (BSED-English), Bachelor of Tourism (BST), and Senior High School Program in Eastern Samar State University, Guiuan campus. The teachers' ages ranged from the twenties to almost 50, with an average age of 31 years. Their teaching experience varied as well. One teacher had taught for less than two years, while another one had taught for almost 25 years. The average years of teaching experience were eight years. Three of the participants earned Master of Education degrees, while two had units in the Master's Program. These five language arts teachers are an adequate sample for this type of research. The recommended sample size for phenomenological studies can vary greatly between individuals who have all experienced the phenomenon".

The interview is a major data source for this research on lived experience. Thus, in-depth interviews of current ESL teachers will constitute this study's

primary data collection technique in search of the participants' interpretations of their lived experiences. This study used a semi-structured interview guide to gather valuable data and information during the in-depth individual interview on the lived experiences of ESL teachers in teaching English subject-their challenges, and coping mechanisms for the difficulties of students in language learning. The interview guide was composed of two (2) central questions with probing questions based on the sequence of the research questions. The first part was composed of four (4) probing questions to describe "what" the participants have experienced in terms of the phenomenon, and the second part was composed of eight (8) probing questions to describe "how" the participants experienced it.

This study utilized the general interview guide approach to solicit a narrative of participants' lived experiences yet keep consistency and structure in the interview process. The general interview guide approach includes using an outline of questions to ensure that all pertinent topics are covered. In addition, to gather data on the lived experiences of the ESL teachers, an in-depth interview was conducted using a general interview guide to have a deep understanding of teachers' lived experiences. Interviews, which were carried out through audio recording and field note-taking, lasted 15-30 minutes for each teacher.

Then, transcribing the audio-recorded data from the interview, coding the data, and analyzing the data were made. This study drew a conclusion based on the data gathered in the interview. Confidentiality was achieved by not asking the participants to write their names on the consent form; only their signatures appeared. The audio record was coded with numbers to track the participants' identity and labeled as Participant 1 to Participant 5, which only the researcher knows the codes assigned. However, the researcher employed member checking to ensure the validity of the findings. Member checking allows participants to read the final report based on their interviews. Teachers will be asked to comment on the accuracy of the descriptions and themes and have a chance to add any other insights or comments about the report. In adherence to health protocols, follow-up interviews were conducted through phone calls and email correspondence to allow participants the opportunity for member checking.

Since this study was phenomenological-qualitative, the researcher employed thematic analysis using Colaizzi's (1978) strategy. This study used the seven steps outlined below to analyze the data gathered. First, the researcher read and double-checked the transcribed data to get a general sense of the entire content. Second, significant statements about the phenomenon under investigation were extracted. Third, from these significant statements, meanings were derived. Fourth, the formulated meanings were classified into themes, clusters of themes, and core themes. Fifth, the study's findings were incorporated into a detailed description of the phenomenon under investigation. Sixth, the phenomenon's basic structure was described. The seventh step was to seek validation of findings from research participants by comparing the researcher's descriptive results with their lived experiences.

Some researchers use bracketing to reduce the potentially harmful effects of unacknowledged preconceptions about the research and thus increase the thoroughness of the study. Therefore, to keep away from biases in the interpretation of data and organization of shared experiences from the participants,

the researcher must put aside her own belief about the subject under study to what she already knows about the subject before and throughout the inquiry.

Findings and Discussion

This study raised questions to explore the experiences of ESL teachers on their challenges in teaching English subjects and coping mechanisms with students' difficulties in learning the English language. Based on the informants' responses, the researcher came up with themes using the Collaizi (1978) and Moustakas (1994) method of phenomenological data analysis -thematic analysis approach. In observance of Husserl's transcendental phenomenology framework presented by Moustakas (1994), the following themes emerged. The emerging themes included the sensitivity among students on error correction; divergent attitudes of the students towards pronunciation instruction; common pronunciation errors of students in both segmental and suprasegmentals; teacher's ways of dealing with the level of extent of students' fossilization period; and challenges in teaching pronunciation; its sub-themes: motivation strategies used to cater the interest of the students in English language learning; error correction strategies and diversified pedagogies to eliminate or minimize the students' errors.

Theme 1: Sensitivity among students on error correction

Some teachers doubt correcting a student's errors immediately because they are concerned that doing so may cause them to stop learning. As a result, various considerations must be made before a teacher decides how to handle a student's error, such as when to handle the error (immediately, in the middle of a conversation, or at the end of the session), because some students are open to corrections while others are sensitive or embarrassed. Therefore, Gumbaridze (2012) is of the view that the error correction technique has to be chosen carefully so as not to demotivate students. Students are afraid of speaking the English language not because they are discouraged by their teacher's error correction technique, but because they fear being laughed at by their mates. They assert that they prefer to be corrected by their teacher and not by their mates (Sena, 2020).

Some students are willing to be corrected, but some are hesitant...and they don't speak anymore or stop expressing their ideas about the topic once they are corrected. However, those students willing to be corrected kept on pronouncing the words which they mispronounced after the class (P1)

I would not correct the students in front of the class, but instead, I tried to talk to the student privately and tell them about their pronunciation or grammar errors. They might feel embarrassed in front of the class. Even though the other students have also committed the same errors (P2)

When they mispronounced the word or made some grammar errors, I tried to correct them right away. But if I feel a student is shy, I correct by repeating the word or the correct sentence and address the correction to everybody (P4)

Besides, students' unanticipated attitudes toward error correction or feedback, such as refusing or dismissing the teacher's correction, result from erroneous considerations on these issues. Based on the study findings of

Papangkorn (2015), treating errors after finishing speaking is the most appropriate time; repetition and explicit feedback were the most popular types of feedback among males, whereas metalinguistic feedback was the most favored type among females. Likewise, teachers were the preferred person to deliver corrective feedback to the learners. Similarly, Amador (2008) discovered that practically all students prefer to be corrected by teachers because they are more knowledgeable than their peers.

Theme 2: Divergent attitudes of students toward pronunciation instruction

Teachers observe differing perceptions and attitudes toward pronunciation instruction. Some students react positively if they are exposed to different variety of pronunciation activities. Others are reluctant when it comes to pronunciation lessons. But other students feel pressured in pronunciation study. As teachers shared:

They are excited and willing to learn... (P3)

Some students tend to listen especially when they are interested in talking new words that they will be learning with their correct pronunciation. (P4)

My students welcome the pronunciation study positively and they show a certain level of interest. (P5)

However, in a classroom setting especially when it comes to speaking, teachers observed that most of the students are reluctant, even afraid, to speak because they are unconfident with their pronunciation.

They would feel pressured that they would tell me that they are not good in pronunciation (P2)

My students are reluctant when it comes to pronunciation lesson (P3)

A comprehensive understanding on the part of the students regarding pronunciation instruction, its focus, and ways of dealing with the difficulties of the studies could provide interest to students to participate or respond to tasks and positive attitudes towards language learning. However, according to Jarosz (2019), pronunciation instruction involves both teachers as facilitators of the process and learners who become its ultimate addressees. The importance of teachers and students cannot be overstated, but both groups' independence and dependence are limited by a variety of factors, some of which are out of their control. As a result, how they view pronunciation instruction influences how learners view its importance and relevance. It is difficult to anticipate a different approach from students if teachers do not believe that pronunciation instruction is important and worthwhile.

Theme 3: Common pronunciation errors of students in both segmental and suprasegmentals

Pronunciation is an essential element in the fluency of the language. Teachers found out that most of the students have common errors in both aspects- the segmental and suprasegmental. Teachers mentioned:

They have common errors in terms of some consonant sounds and the critical vowel sound, including the suprasegmental aspects (P5)

They are not conscious of whether the stress is in the correct position in their utterances as long as they can speak (P1)

Students have common errors on the articulation for example in their tongue, they would mispronounce the short vowel /e/ into long /i/; /a/ into /ae/ they would interchange the pronunciation (P2)

Students have common errors in pronouncing the consonants, for example of the sounds /th/ in three becomes /t/ like in tree (P1). Likewise in pronouncing /sh/ into /s/ (P4)

These errors are common, especially on those English consonants not available in the Filipino sound system. Similarly, errors in pronouncing the sound of the consonant labiodental [v] have been found in the study of Hasibuan & Yusriati (2019). On the other hand, Demircioglu (2013) exemplifies the difficulty of English language learners from Turkey in pronouncing diphthongs in English. Errors may source from different interference items and keep in learners' minds their incorrect segmental and suprasegmental aspects (Szypira, 2015).

Theme 4: Teacher's ways of dealing with the level extent of students' fossilization period

Teachers mentioned that the root cause of fossilization is not by giving attention immediately to the errors of the students. It is connected to students 'environment and with their exposure because these errors would not continue until college if this has been corrected earlier. However, teachers positively anticipate that fossilization still has a chance to be eliminated or corrected. As teachers describe:

Some students who already have reached the near fossilization period but most of them are still in the earlier stage, they can still be corrected and can still adopt the corrections made (P5)

I think they just need to be exposed in the speaking of the language (P2)

I think they could adopt as long as there is a practice as long as I will see that they encounter that word more deliberately to be adept in pronouncing those words (P4)

It is believed that to correct linguistic habits is through intensive practice and to overcome interference errors.

Theme 5: Challenges in teaching the English language

Looking beyond the challenges faced by teachers in teaching the English language to embrace the communicative paradigm that emphasizes fluency, meaning, and authenticity. Therefore, ESL teachers should be well-equipped with knowledge and skills in teaching the language to develop the communicative competence of the students.

*All of the aspects of English language learning are crucial for my students, especially those whose foundation in pronunciation is not good (P5)
I observed almost all of these aspects of language, especially in pronunciation, the use of stress; they find it difficult to pronounce the word in identifying the correct position of stress in the word. (P1)*

Teachers shared challenges in teaching English language skills and the teachers' strategies. However, because English is not young learners' first language, teachers found some challenges in teaching speaking to young learners such as young learners did not have much time to learn and speak English. Furthermore, they felt shy to speak English and they tended to be silent when they were learning (Mukminin, 2022).

Sub-theme 1: Motivation strategies cater to the interest of the students in English language learning

Teachers make use of varied strategies and instructional materials to motivate students to learn the English language. Teachers also strategize their teaching through the use of movies, video clips, and varied activities like chants, songs, or rap to elicit the interest of the students in learning the language. As they enumerated;

*I let them watch a movie or a video clip on proper pronunciation. I let them speak in the English language in communicating inside the classroom (P1)
I let my students watch a video clip of a person speaking the British accent and also the American accent so that they could differentiate two bases in pronouncing the English sounds. At the same, they may be able to acquire the language through imitation from the model (P4)
I have presented to them the vowel triangle and taught them about the correct pronunciation of each vowel so that they may have confidence in speaking the language (P2)
I encouraged them to read English books to enhance their pronunciation and further improve their grammatical knowledge (P3)
Teacher-modelling is also effective in teaching phonology because as I observed my students become interested and excited to learn as they listen to me, I would; introduce them to the minimal pairs to distinguish the almost similar sounds. I also exposed them to tongue twisters...and varied activities like chants, songs, or rap (P5)*

Intrinsic motivation among ELLs should be instilled by the teachers first because if this value is developed with them, they will have autonomy in learning and be motivated to learn the language.

Sub-theme 2: Error correction strategies

Teachers used different strategies to deal with pronunciation and grammar errors of students. However, they correct students' errors in different ways. As they narrate:

I let them use technology-the online Merriam Webster where they can hear the correct pronunciation (P3)

I use audio-visual, to let them hear the correct pronunciation of words and correct expressions (P1)

I correct their errors by explaining to them the rules of grammar so that they know where and why they commit errors (P2)

I do believe that correcting the students at once is still effective so that they won't be able to forget how the word/s is properly produced and structured, anyway the correction is not just intended for the one who committed it but to everyone in the class and let everybody join the drill repeatedly (P5)

Errors are regarded as a natural part of the learning process, with the teacher performing the role of facilitator, providing help when necessary, and creating a supportive environment in which students can obtain a successful enhanced learning outcome (Zublin, 2011). In an ESL classroom, students may become familiar with a variety of correction approaches during their learning process, including self-correction, peer correction, group correction, and teacher correction. Study findings of Papangkorn (2015), explicit corrective feedback is the most preferred by the students, it suggests that the females want to have an opportunity to repair their errors, but they also want to obtain a clue about their errors. Therefore, the teacher should select the option(s) that best meet the student's needs. Students' affective filters are frequently high, making them ignorant of corrective feedback and so sheltering under a negative attitude that obstructs the resolution of language acquisition issues.

Sub-theme 3: Diversified pedagogies to eliminate second language learning errors

Teachers make use of different methods, approaches, and strategies to eliminate or minimize the students' errors. Some teachers conduct remedial classes and communicative activities like role-playing, dramatization, English games, and pronunciation drills to improve their fluency in the language.

I also emphasized the words which are mispronounced and tell them how it should be pronounced correctly...also through constant practice (P1)

I think that is to expose the students more to practice speaking the language (P2)

Constant use of the target language with a consciousness of the proper pronunciation of the words and meaning-focused will surely eliminate the problem (P5)

Every Friday, we have our spelling activity and let them read the words and practice (P3)

I used a direct method that is to use English only in the classroom. I also use role-playing, dramatization, games using the English language. (P1)

Through verbal reading, call the students to recite (P3)

I used the tongue twister drill. They would recite it in front of the class individually. Also the use of reading passages, then videos. (P2)

I have tried the use of drills, use of video clips to let them imitate the video (P4)

The use of phonetic transcription, auditory reinforcement or audio-lingual approach, multimedia reinforcement, and communicative approach (P5)

Teachers deal with students' errors through the use of appropriate instructional materials and strategies. Errors that may cause problems in understanding of listener" and "frequent spoken errors" should be treated (Papangkorn, 2015). In pronunciation classes, there is a need for materials that integrated attention to pronunciation with other teaching objectives and provide short activities to focus on pronunciation specifically on suprasegmentals, that is, intonation and voice quality which deal with students' English pronunciation (Yates, 2001).

Conclusion

Further, this study, concluded that despite English being one of the official languages of instruction, still, students find it difficult to speak fluently the language, especially in their respective class activities. However, teachers made an effort to address these difficulties through the use of diversified pedagogies to cater to the student's learning difficulties in language acquisition and in addressing student's errors (i.e. pronunciation, grammar). Though, students have different takes or attitudes toward error corrections. Therefore, teachers should have to integrate error correction strategies that would create a positive impact on students; likewise, for early repair of grammar errors in students' utterances. Moreover, students preferred the teachers instead of peers to correction on their pronunciation knowing that teachers have more knowledge about the aspects of language compared to their peers. Further, based on the research findings, students have pronunciation difficulties that tend them not to participate in some of the classroom activities especially if it requires to use of straight English.

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