

The Untold Stories of English Language Learners in Navigating Linguistic and Social Experiences

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.22646411>

Published Date: 07-September-2026

Abstract: English Language Learners (ELLs) face challenges that extend beyond vocabulary and grammar to include classroom participation, anxiety, social interaction, confidence, and access to appropriate support. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of 20 Grade 7 English Language Learners from Bicos National High School in Rizal District, Schools Division of Nueva Ecija. Participants were purposively selected from four Grade 7 sections based on their English performance and verified experiences of linguistic and social challenges. Data were gathered primarily through semi-structured interviews and supplemented by reflective journals. The interview guide underwent expert validation using the Content Validity Index, with the study reporting an I-CVI and S-CVI/Ave of 1.00. Data were analyzed through thematic narrative analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase framework, with triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing used to strengthen trustworthiness. Findings showed that learners experienced difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, reading, writing, pronunciation, and oral communication, often accompanied by nervousness, shyness, and fear of mistakes. At the same time, learners demonstrated resilience through persistence, independent learning, help-seeking, personal motivation, peer and family support, and recognition of gradual progress. The findings further indicated that supportive teachers, respectful peer relationships, scaffolding, meaningful practice, constructive feedback, and psychologically safe classrooms can strengthen confidence and participation. The study concludes that responsive English instruction should address learners' linguistic, emotional, social, and motivational needs through differentiated and scaffolded practices.

Keywords: English Language Learners; lived experiences; phenomenology; resilience; self-efficacy; language anxiety; responsive instruction.

I. INTRODUCTION

English Language Learners are students whose first language is not English and who must develop English proficiency while simultaneously accessing grade-level academic content. This dual demand requires learners to decode, process, and produce academic language while meeting classroom expectations. The thesis literature describes ELL challenges as multidimensional, encompassing linguistic, psychosocial, and structural concerns such as achievement gaps, under-resourced programs, assessment bias, social isolation, linguistic discrimination, and policy constraints.

The study situates these issues within the Philippine educational context, where learners may experience difficulty expressing ideas in English, managing classroom expectations, and participating fully in academic activities. Emotional and social factors can intensify these difficulties. Anxiety, fear of mistakes, shyness, low self-confidence, and fear of negative evaluation may reduce learners' willingness to participate, while supportive teachers and peers can help create conditions for engagement.

ELLs face challenges that extend beyond vocabulary and grammar. These include achievement gaps, under-resourced programs, assessment bias, social isolation, linguistic discrimination, and policy constraints. Assessments may also conflate

content knowledge with English proficiency (Cho, Kim, & Jeong, 2021)^[1]. In contrast, culturally responsive instruction that recognizes students' linguistic identities can strengthen participation and belonging (Marwah et al., 2025)^[2].

Sociocultural theory and Krashen's affective filter hypothesis emphasize the roles of social interaction, scaffolding, and emotional support in language learning. Learning develops through guided interaction within the Zone of Proximal Development (Vygotsky, 1978;)^[3] while anxiety, motivation, and self-efficacy influence language acquisition and engagement (Deepika & Jennifer, 2026; He et al., 2025)^[4] ^[5]. Critical pedagogy further highlights how underfunded programs, teacher misconceptions, linguistic hierarchies, and biased assessments can reinforce educational inequality. Thus, ELL challenges are multidimensional, involving linguistic, psychosocial, and structural factors shaped by identity, power, and policy.

The study was anchored on Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, and Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory. These perspectives provide complementary lenses for understanding how learners construct meaning through social interaction, how emotional conditions influence language learning, and how beliefs about personal capability develop through experience. The study therefore focused on linguistic experiences, sociocultural experiences, affective experiences, and self-efficacy and resilience.

The findings are expected to inform instructional practices, particularly in lesson design, scaffolding, and learner support. By developing more empathetic, inclusive, and culturally responsive approaches, the study seeks to enhance engagement, language proficiency, confidence, and resilience. Ultimately, it contributes to improving English language education at the local level while providing evidence-based insights for strengthening classroom instruction and student support.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design and Questions

This study adopted a qualitative research approach, employing phenomenology as its primary methodology to explore the lived experiences of English Language Learners (ELLs). Phenomenology emphasizes understanding participants' experiences from their own perspectives, allowing them to describe, reflect on, and interpret the meanings of their linguistic, and social challenges. Through this approach, the researcher uncovered the essence of learners' experiences, capturing not only what they encountered in English classrooms but also how they made sense of and find meaning in these experiences within complex educational contexts (Stolz, 2022)^[6].

The central purpose was to illuminate the untold stories of ELLs and use those narratives to inform more supportive, responsive, and inclusive English instruction.

The research specifically addressed four questions:

1. How may the profile of the respondents be described in terms of age, sex, and grade in English?
2. How do ELLs navigate linguistic and social experiences during classroom discussion, learning activities, and interaction with peers and teachers in English classes?
3. How do ELLs narrate their lived experiences of resilience and self-efficacy as they cope with linguistic difficulties and sociocultural adjustment? and;
4. What insights from their untold stories may inform more supportive and responsive instructional practices in English language education?

B. Environment

The study was conducted at Bicos National High School, a public secondary school in Rizal District under the Schools Division of Nueva Ecija. The school serves learners from diverse linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic backgrounds, many of whom are English Language Learners (ELLs) whose first language is not English.

The researcher has chosen this site because it provides direct access to a population of learners whose experiences align closely with the focus of the study. As an English teacher at Bicos National High School, the researcher has observed firsthand the linguistic challenges, and social experiences students encountered during classroom discussion, learning activities and interaction with peers and teachers in English classes. These included difficulties in expressing ideas in English, managing classroom expectations, while participating in academic activities. Conducting the study in the

researcher's own classroom context allowed for a more nuanced and empathetic investigation, where findings may inform more supportive and responsive instructional practices in English language education.

C. Respondents

Twenty (20) English Language Learners participated in the phenomenological study. They were drawn from four Grade 7 sections—7-Hope, 7-Python, 7-Love, and 7-Faith—with five participants from each section. Purposive sampling was used to identify information-rich participants who had relevant experiences of linguistic and social challenges. Initial selection considered English grades ranging from 75 to 79, followed by screening through a checklist and brief interview. The study also considered observable difficulties in comprehension, class participation, and oral and written expression.

TABLE I: PARTICIPANT DISTRIBUTION

Section	Participants	Share
Grade 7 – Python	5	25%
Grade 7 – Hope	5	25%
Grade 7 – Love	5	25%
Grade 7 – Faith	5	25%
Total	20	100%

D. Instrument: Reliability and Validity

The primary instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide designed to elicit personal narratives about linguistic and social experiences, resilience, self-efficacy, and instructional support. Reflective journals were used as a secondary source for participants who were hesitant to verbalize their experiences in face-to-face interviews. The use of both sources supported methodological triangulation.

Content validity was established through the Content Validity Index (CVI). The thesis reports that expert validators evaluated the interview items for clarity, relevance, language, and ability to elicit responses. All items reportedly achieved an Item-Level Content Validity Index (I-CVI) of 1.00, while the Scale-Level Content Validity Index/Average (S-CVI/Ave) was also reported as 1.00. According to Polit and Beck (2021)^[7], an S-CVI of 0.90 or higher is considered excellent, confirming that the instrument is highly valid and suitable for data collection. A pilot test with two learners was conducted to examine whether the interview questions could elicit rich and comprehensive responses.

For qualitative rigor, the researcher established rapport, used a nonjudgmental interview environment, allowed participants to clarify responses, and employed triangulation, member checking, and peer debriefing. Interviews were conducted from March to June 2026, after school hours, lasted approximately 20–45 minutes, and were audio-recorded with participants' consent.

E. Data Analysis

The study used thematic narrative analysis guided by Braun and Clarke's (2006)^[8] six-phase framework: familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, development of themes, review of themes, definition and naming of themes, and reporting. Interview transcripts and reflective journals were repeatedly read to identify significant statements and recurring patterns. Related codes were clustered into themes, which were reviewed and refined to maintain alignment with participants' narratives. Triangulation across interviews and journals, together with member checking and peer debriefing, was used to strengthen the credibility and trustworthiness of the interpretations.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Profile of the Respondents

The 20 ELL participants were 12–13 years old. The group consisted of 11 females and 9 males. Their English grades ranged from 76 to 79, with a reported mean of 77.65. The participants were selected because their academic performance and screening results indicated relevant experiences of linguistic and social challenges.

TABLE II: PARTICIPANT PROFILE VARIABLES

<i>Profile Variable</i>	<i>Description</i>
Age	12–13 years old
Sex	11 females; 9 males
English grade	76–79
Mean English grade	77.65
Number of participants	20

B. Linguistic and Social Experiences

The narratives showed that learners navigated English classes through a combination of linguistic difficulty and emotional or social pressure. Common difficulties included vocabulary, grammar, comprehension, reading, writing, pronunciation, and oral communication. Participants described difficulty organizing ideas for essays, recalling vocabulary, understanding unfamiliar material, and responding spontaneously during class.

These linguistic difficulties were closely connected with affective and social experiences. Learners reported nervousness, shyness, fear of mistakes, mental blocks, and concern about how classmates might react to their answers. For some participants, the possibility of being laughed at or judged could result in silence or reduced participation. At the same time, peer relationships were not uniformly negative: classmates could also serve as sources of explanation and assistance when a learner did not understand a lesson.

Participant 5, for example, described difficulty speaking and recalling vocabulary and explained that the learner sometimes preferred to remain silent rather than risk being laughed at. The same narrative also showed that classmates helped when lessons were difficult. This contrast illustrates how the classroom social environment can either increase anxiety or function as a support system.

The findings are consistent with the thesis literature on speaking anxiety, fear of negative evaluation, and confidence. They also support the study's sociocultural perspective: English learning is not experienced only as an individual process but is shaped by interactions with teachers and peers. A supportive environment may make linguistic difficulty more manageable and encourage learners to take communicative risks.

C. Resilience and Self-Efficacy

Despite the challenges they described, the participants demonstrated resilience through persistence, repeated practice, independent learning, help-seeking, motivation, and recognition of gradual improvement. Rather than viewing difficulty as a reason to stop, many learners continued to read, review lessons, practice speaking and writing, ask for assistance, or prepare for upcoming lessons.

In general, the participants demonstrated that self-efficacy and resilience developed through encouragement, persistence, and active efforts to overcome difficulties in learning English. One participant initially doubted their ability to take a leadership role in an English activity, but teacher encouragement and reminders to be patient and trust in oneself helped strengthen their confidence. Continued practice in speaking and writing further contributed to greater confidence, patience, and responsibility. Similarly, participants showed resilience by using positive self-talk, seeking assistance when needed, and independently using digital learning resources. The participant's efforts to continue trying, ask for help with spelling, and preview lessons reflected a growing sense of responsibility for learning and a belief that improvement could be achieved through continuous effort.

Across the narratives, self-efficacy appeared to grow through actual experiences of progress rather than through confidence alone. Successful completion of tasks, improved communication, repeated practice, teacher encouragement, peer assistance, and family-related motivation provided learners with reasons to continue. This finding supports the study's use of Bandura's Self-Efficacy Theory and its emphasis on mastery experiences, encouragement, and persistence.

D. Insights for Supportive and Responsive Instruction

The untold stories point to an instructional approach that addresses both language development and the conditions under which learners use English. The first implication is the need for diagnostic assessment and learner profiling so that teachers can identify proficiency levels, strengths, linguistic backgrounds, and specific areas of need.

Second, differentiated and scaffolded instruction should provide targeted support in vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and speaking. The narratives suggest the usefulness of repeated exposure, clear explanations, examples, graphic organizers, sentence starters, guided practice, rehearsal, and opportunities for gradual participation. Teachers can also use lesson previews and accessible learning materials to reduce uncertainty before demanding oral responses.

Third, the classroom should be psychologically safe. Learners need opportunities to make mistakes without being humiliated. Constructive correction, respectful peer interaction, encouragement, and positive reinforcement can help transform mistakes from sources of embarrassment into opportunities for learning. Participant 12's narrative, for example, showed that teacher encouragement increased confidence and willingness to speak, while reviewing lessons and learning from mistakes helped the learner feel more prepared.

Finally, instruction can build on learner autonomy and family support. Independent reading, reflection, self-monitoring, goal setting, and appropriate use of digital resources can extend learning beyond the classroom. Family encouragement and meaningful reasons for learning can further sustain motivation. Overall, responsive instruction should treat ELLs as whole learners whose linguistic, emotional, social, and motivational needs are interconnected.

IV. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

A. Conclusions

1. The experiences of the Grade 7 ELLs were shaped by developing English proficiency and their second-language background. Their linguistic profiles are therefore important for matching instruction to learners' needs and contexts.
2. Learners experienced difficulties in vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, reading, writing, comprehension, and speaking. These difficulties could affect confidence and participation, especially when combined with fear of mistakes or negative peer evaluation. Supportive teachers, peers, and positive classroom environments helped reduce anxiety and encouraged participation.
3. Resilience and self-efficacy developed through persistence, independent learning, help-seeking, encouragement from teachers, peers and family, and recognition of progress. Learners' confidence was strengthened when they experienced manageable success and saw evidence that continued effort could produce improvement.
4. Effective English instruction should respond to linguistic, emotional, social, and motivational needs. Differentiated and scaffolded activities, meaningful practice, constructive feedback, learner autonomy, and psychologically safe classrooms can support language proficiency, confidence, resilience, and meaningful participation.

B. Recommendations

1. Teachers should conduct diagnostic assessments and learner profiling to identify learners' proficiency, strengths, needs, and linguistic backgrounds. School administrators should support this work through professional development and appropriate instructional resources.
2. Teachers should adopt differentiated and scaffolded instruction, particularly in vocabulary, grammar, reading, writing, and speaking. Activities should provide manageable opportunities for practice and participation while reducing unnecessary performance pressure.
3. Teachers should establish psychologically safe classrooms where mistakes are treated as a normal part of language development. Respectful peer interaction, constructive feedback, encouragement, and gradual participation should be intentionally incorporated.
4. Learner autonomy and family support should be promoted through independent reading, reflection, self-monitoring, appropriate digital resources, and opportunities for English exposure at home.
5. Teachers and school leaders should strengthen learner-centered and inclusive practices, while future researchers should examine responsive English instruction across different grade levels, school settings, and learner contexts.

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