

Looking at the travails and triumphs of foreign language acquisition in non-English speaking countries among the multilingual OFWs

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Abstract: The Philippines is home to more than 120 vernacular languages and two official languages, Filipino and English. In line with this, Filipinos are seen and assumed as fast learners of other languages, especially those Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) living and working abroad in non-speaking English countries. Despite exposure to bilingual or multilingual settings in the Philippines, it does not guarantee an easy grasp of learning a new language, for challenges and struggles inevitably affect many aspects of life. Thus, this essay will help OFWs and language learners to prepare to acquire and learn the language of the host countries whose English is a foreign language, the government agencies responsible for the language training for the workers abroad, and to significantly contribute to the existing language acquisition corpora among adult learners.

Keywords: Foreign language acquisition, Multilingual, Overseas Filipino workers

1. Introduction

The Philippines is a multilingual country. It is home to the Filipino language as the standardized Tagalog and more than 120 languages ranging from the northern tip island of Luzon down to the southernmost hidden gems of Mindanao Island. In addition, English is the second official language and the medium of instruction from grades four (4) to twelve (12) and in higher institutions. Consequently, it makes Filipinos quickly adapt to the language changes in society mainly brought about by globalization and technology. Thus, this presumes that whenever Filipinos go and work abroad, they can learn more efficiently and can speak the language of their non-English speaking host countries compared to other nationalities.

Generally, Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) work as domestic servants, factory and construction laborers, artisans and workers in allied trades, personnel in customer services and business sales, administration support staff, technical and support system experts, professionals, and executives. They are recognized as the nation's modern heroes because of their significant economic contribution to the Philippines. However, an unseen reality also lingers regarding how they face various difficulties in the new environment. According to Ofreneo and Samonte (2005), one of the main challenges is a social and cultural adaptation, including the language barrier. This can be attributed to the lack of the necessary language background or level of proficiency in the native language of their host country before migration or deployment, which causes them to struggle with language barriers that negatively impact their ability to socialize, perform their jobs, and live a high-quality life. Another element also seen is ethnicity as it plays a crucial role in learners' competence (Anas & Nair, 2022). Thus, this essay aims to explore the experience of now then multilingual OFWs with their travails and triumphs in learning the language.

2. Factors of language acquisition

Upon learning the narratives of OFWs before acquiring the native language of the non-English speaking host countries, the researcher realized the difficulties they went through in their daily activities, such as taking public transportation, going and shopping at the market, and haggling among many other things since they have no exposure before deployment. In contrast, the natives of the host country do not know how to speak English. It could be attributed to the reasons that the locals do not need to learn English, or

even if it is their second language, they still do not practice it, and only in schools or lectures do they learn English (Damkor & Terna, 2021). Also, the language barrier continues to be a problem in their workplace. Hence, Novio (2018) mentioned that this struggle was also seen among OFWs in Thailand. The workers' inability to read and speak Thai also constituted a significant barrier to communication with their superiors. Domingo (2017) also stated that language and communication barriers are one factor of cross-cultural adjustment challenges. With these pressing struggles, the OFWs have seen the need to learn their host countries' languages. Seeing the factors such as exposure to the language, interaction with the native speakers and their moral support, and even survival have prompted a faster and easier acquisition and have served as the motivation despite the problems they face.

Exposure is one of the main factors in learning the language since individuals are already exposed intentionally. Also, the researcher has observed that people immersed in the target language quickly learn it. This could be supported by Schumann's Acculturation Theory (1975), asserting that sociocultural factors influence how well a learner picks up the target language. Accordingly, L2 learners will acquire the target language more quickly if they interact more with local speakers. In addition, Discourse Theory also emphasizes the significance of interpersonal connections and group engagement. This means that language learning develops from mastering conversational skills, actions are carried out through communication, and rules for language structure and use are formed through conversation (Cherry, 1979). Relative to the theory is the Interaction Hypothesis claiming that conversational interaction gives students access to valuable, understandable inputs that support SLA (Long, 1985). Upon interaction with the native speakers, undeniably, one could learn by imitating how the native speakers talk, just like the children. Meniado (2019) pointed out that because of language exposure by listening, conversing, or even watching tv shows, allowed them to partly understand just by reading and paying attention to their nonverbal communication.

Furthermore, the researcher believes that one can easily pick up the language with a supportive environment or system, such as from native speakers, family, and friends. According to Meniado (2019), through valuable and understandable input from their friends, co-workers, and other members of the community, learners naturally obtained their L2. This could be attributed to Krashen's (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis that the availability of simple and straightforward input from friendly locals might help learners pick up the language more freely and effortlessly and enable individuals to gain competence and proficiency naturally. On the other hand, survival at work and in the community is also one of the main reasons for foreign language acquisition (Meniado, 2019). This is to avoid the difficulty of public transportation use and being scammed. Also, this means getting more job opportunities. In addition, he also stated that being able to speak different languages allows OFWs to draw in additional clients and serve them better. This was also seen in the study of Akther (2022) that one of the four important roles of SLA is to obtain international work opportunities.

Yes, these are the reasons for acquiring the language. However, it is also essential to look at the factors that might affect OFWs' learning, mainly internal factors such as age, aptitude, intelligence, learning style, and affective domain. Regarding age, many studies present that SLA is quicker and simpler for kids than it is for adults and the environment is one of the main factors for a child's early language development (Fromkin, Rodman & Hyams, 2014; Genelza, 2022). However, the critical period hypothesis supports that, particularly in syntax and morphology, adults seem to be superior to children since they are exposed to a naturalistic learning setting (Khasinah, 2014). Besides age, aptitude also plays a vital role since it refers to one's ability to learn the language; thus, having a high linguistic ability can facilitate a quicker and simpler learning process (Khasinah, 2014).

Another element is intelligence which refers to acquiring and applying knowledge and skills. According to Gardner (2011), in his Multiple Intelligences, those with linguistic intelligence pay closer attention to spoken and written language and can use it for various purposes to achieve their goals. This was also confirmed by Lawal and Isah (2022) that there is an existence of a positive, strong, and significant connection between cognitive styles and academic outcomes/performance. In addition, learning styles are believed to influence SLA. If it is determined, both language teachers and learners alone can address the need and focus on the strategies to apply. Though it does not guarantee a successful L2, the researcher believes these are effective ways to get the desired outcomes (Khasinah, 2014). Furthermore, the emotional or personality domain of learning is another essential factor that can hinder or facilitate language learning. This includes self-esteem, inhibitions, empathy, introversion/extroversion, aggression, and motivation. If one has a lower rate in any of these, this would also hamper their learning. Orillos (1998) pointed out that a

learner's outlook on learning a second language tends to be more positive and open, and the greater their sense of self-worth is. He also learned that defenses, sometimes known as inhibitions, restrict someone from speaking a foreign language. In addition, if the learner experiences empathy from the TL group, one may not experience insecurity. As a result, he/she will feel comfortable speaking the language. Although there are no established studies regarding extroversion and introversion in SLA, it is implied that they may somehow support social cohesion and dynamism, which are advantageous to language acquisition. Similarly, as aggressiveness increases motivation, it may also aid L2 learning. Spolsky (1989) states that motivation is crucial for successful second language acquisition.

2.1. Coping strategies in learning the language

Faced with these reasons and contributing factors, OFWs have never given up but instead found strategies to overcome communication or linguistic hurdles. The researcher has learned that these are mainly the following strategies: avoidance, seeking help from native speakers who speak English, use of gestures and facial expressions, and use of translation applications or even mass media. Like other individuals, avoiding contact with non-English speaking natives is one of the best strategies to be considered. In addition, if unavoidable, the non-speakers would speak the simple terms in their language and ask them to translate or use the common vocabulary. Thus, this is called syntactic avoidance (Bialystok, 1990). Moreover, Filipinos would seek help from native speakers who speak English to speak and utter words slowly and stress essential words. Another frequently used strategy is gestures and facial expressions. They employ facial expressions and coordinated motions when unable to communicate verbally. Furthermore, the use of translation applications is exceptionally advantageous and is helping learners since this is free and accessible through their mobile phones or laptops everywhere which shows as an inevitable channel of communication for comprehension of cultural ideas from source to target languages (Meniado, 2019; Taiwo, 2022). Another component to look at is the Gratification theory wherein this theory states that audiences use the mass media for their own purposes which include getting information, and messages besides, entertainment, announcements, and advertisements (Aor & Iorember, 2021).

2.2. Insights of the multilingual OFWs

Through reading related studies and listening to the interview, the researcher learned that understanding and speaking a different language is a significant achievement or fulfillment, for it is helpful in the workplace, especially if it is required to speak both English and native languages. Also, it implies more opportunities, such as a language tutor or a translator. It is also helpful for one shop in the market, wherein they could get discounts. However, in some instances do not need to learn the native language of the country, just like the factory workers who do not need communication or interaction with native speakers. There are also language consultants with whom Filipinos can seek assistance if problems arise. In this case, for them learning the language is considered growth or personal development, thus relating it to self-satisfaction (Gonzales, 2010). In addition, it also provides professional and individual growth. The universities or schools wherein they work provide complete funding to attend conferences, workshops, and training domestically and overseas. Thus, teachers would improve their strategies and innovate learning materials to assure their universities that they deserve financial assistance (Novio, 2018). Another insight into learning the language of the natives is acceptance by the locals. Though racism may still occur at some point, the locals greatly appreciate learning their language since one can connect or relate with them. Though language centers already exist in the Philippines, it would be better if language classes besides English are offered and academic institutions must take immediate action by acknowledging their students and the fast-changing social and cultural contexts (Genelza, 2022). Moreover, it is also important to invest in teachers who greatly help since they know the different approaches and characteristics of the teaching process, students, and educational tasks such as the utilization of related technology used in delivery modes (Lasic, 2022; Agalo, 2021). Lastly, OFWs living in English-non-speaking countries should respect and learn the language to fit in with the natives and for other purposes that could contribute.

3. Conclusion

Learning the language of the non-English speaking host countries for OFWs is greatly difficult, along with its different contributing factors. However, on the other hand, it is an advantage for it offers one's growth,

personal and professional, and opens a lot of better opportunities. As a Filipino and a multilingual, this enlightens more on how OFWs acquired the language of non-English speaking nations.

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