

Research Paper

A Phenomenological Investigation of Senior High School Learners with Low English Language Proficiency

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Received : September 29, 2022

Revised : February 22, 2023

Accepted : March 9, 2023

Online : March 31, 2023

Abstract

Several studies have been conducted locally to internationally, revealing the deterioration of the English proficiency of Filipinos, especially high school learners. Still, only a few have determined the causes of why it is constantly happening. Hence, this phenomenological study investigated the experiences of public senior high school learners under the Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) track with low English language proficiency to identify various reasons why they are still encountering such problems in English and create an intervention program for them to enhance their skills. Specifically, this research utilized transcendental phenomenology and applied triangulation of the three methods: observations, field notes, and interviews. The researcher followed Colaizzi's Method of Phenomenology, in analyzing and interpreting the data gathered from the individual interviews. Based on the testimonies and shared experiences of the participants, they knew they had difficulty learning English as early as elementary, while others were during their Junior High School (JHS) and Senior High School (SHS) years. In this study, the following themes emerged: traumatic experience, language anxiety, external factors, learners' motivation and interest, self-awareness, academic performance, learning styles and strategies, and the essence and value of the English language. The researcher recommends that teachers address the learners' problems to enhance their English proficiency and academic performance. It was also recommended for future researchers to investigate the teachers' perspective and assessment based on their experience since they are considered one factor in the learners' low English language proficiency.

Keywords: *English Language; Proficiency; Senior High School*

INTRODUCTION

In the Philippines, English is considered a second language. It is included in the educational curricula at the primary, secondary, and tertiary levels (Mariñas & Ditapat, 2000; Solis et al., 2013). It was even indicated in Executive Order No. 210 of the Philippines and Department of Education (DepEd) Order No. 36, S. 2006 that the primary medium of instruction in all public and private secondary schools must be English. The 1987 policy on Bilingual Education also supports this mandate to achieve competence at the national level in Filipino and English. Furthermore, Section 7 of the Article XIV of the 1987 Philippine Constitution declares that English is well-considered valuable in achieving and maintaining economic development and social progress (Department of Education, 1987). Although these were mandated in both public and private schools, still the English language proficiency of the learners, particularly those in public schools, is low. The Philippines' Vice President and concurrent Education Secretary, Sara Duterte, admitted in her speech that the education system failed the teachers, which resulted in the poor academic performance of most learners (Bautista & Aning, 2023). Hence, despite the intensive English subjects offered in schools, learners' English language proficiency is still alarming. The declining ranking of the Philippines in the Education First (EF) English Proficiency Index (2020), in which the Philippines slid down to 27th from ranking 20th in 2019, reflects the problem of low English language proficiency in the country. It declined because of several reasons, such as Filipino learners tend to lose interest in learning the English language or lack of practice. In addition, in 2020, the

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Philippine Institute of Development Studies (PIDS) revealed in one of their first-quarter issues, "Some students lack basic Senior High School (SHS) competency," there were SHS students who could not construct basic grammatically correct English sentences. The study also shows that the problem is evident particularly to the non-Academic track students who submit their outputs for compliance's sake alone. It indicates a problem with the English proficiency of SHS learners, which affects their academic performance in general. Also, many were shocked upon knowing the international organizations' results testing the students' literacy and proficiency. One of these was the results released by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) last December 2019. The Philippines lagged in reading literacy among 79 countries (Balagtas, 2020). Another shocking report was from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study 2019 (TIMSS), which showed that grade 4 learners in the Philippines were classified as significantly lower in Mathematics and Science assessments (Magsambol, 2020). Knowing that the directions, questions, and texts are written in English, their English proficiency affected their assessments. These results from notable assessments and studies were revealed. Yet, the previous administration of DepEd, led by the previous Secretary Leonor Magtolis-Briones, denied that there is no problem with the education system of the Philippines (Galvez, 2019). However, in a recent speech by the DepEd Secretary, Sara Duterte, she admitted that teachers are bombarded with extra tasks affecting their teaching performance. Likewise, only limited learning materials and resources are available for learners from Grades 1-12.

Undeniably, language proficiency in English is one of the solutions to achieving good academic performance because there is an existing relationship between the learners' English language proficiency and their academic performance (Racca & Lasaten, 2016). Since most subjects, especially in the SHS curriculum, are being taught using the English language, low English language proficiency affects their performance in general. Their low proficiency is a barrier to learning their lessons from different subjects. Ozowuba (2018) asserted that the greater the English language proficiency levels of the learners, the higher their academic performance in overall academic achievement. Since it significantly impacts academic performance, teachers should prioritize English language programs in school to increase the English language proficiency of the learners. To address the problem of poor academic performance, teachers should know the possible causes, factors, or reasons for it is necessary to know the existing phenomenon of why learners have low English language proficiency. This served as the main reason for the researcher to conduct a phenomenological investigation to determine the lived experiences of public senior high school learners with low English language proficiency. The researcher believed that uncovering the lived experience of learners would guide the teachers in crafting and successfully implementing English language intervention programs in their schools to improve the learners' literacy skills and academic performance. To investigate the existing phenomenon among public SHS school learners, the researcher formulated the following research questions:

1. How do participants describe their experiences with low English language proficiency?
2. How do participants perceive their experiences with the challenges concerning low English language proficiency?
3. What themes emerged based on the shared testimonies of the participants?

LITERATURE REVIEW

According to Rino et al. (2022), the dominant international language is English. Its importance and significance are vital in the field of education as it is being used in the field of education across the world. In the Philippines, one of the goals of every English teacher is to develop and enhance the learners' English proficiency to produce highly competent learners, which is one

of every school's aspirations. [Blanco et al. \(2022\)](#) concluded that teachers are expected to deliver high-quality instruction to all learners when they exhibit high organizational commitment and teacher empowerment. Aside from that, DepEd aims to achieve capable learners, and teachers' innate mission is to improve the proficiency of every learner, especially in English, Science and Technology, and Mathematics. [Ramadan \(2022\)](#) revealed that in Libyan schools, English language instruction at a young age was supported by the majority of teachers and parents. Likewise, most teachers claimed that introducing English at a young age would improve students' comprehension of various cultures and cognitive ability. Moreover, [Budiarti \(2022\)](#) affirmed that students' intrinsic and extrinsic motivations significantly influence their interest in studying English as a foreign language. Some students were motivated to learn English to get successful in their education, while others wanted to enhance their self-confidence and improve their lives.

However, several aspects must be considered before a learner can have advanced abilities and be classified as genuinely proficient. Also, based on the theories from well-known linguists and psychologists, some factors may affect the learner's language proficiency and how they learn and acquire their second language. Second Language Acquisition (SLA) is a complex and holistic process. A single factor or theory cannot determine its success, and it is not limited to the time spent in the classroom, which indicates that less contact will result in less learning ([De Angelis & Selinker, 2001](#); [Solis et al., 2013](#)). On the other hand, Second Language Learning (SLL) focuses on how learners learn a language and usually refers to the traditional learning of a speech in the classroom ([Singhal, 2012](#)). In the theory of language proficiency, [Cummins \(1992\)](#) revealed two levels of language proficiency which are Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) which pertains to the concept of the learners' informal language, and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), a theory of language proficiency related to the language used in academic settings ([Racca & Lasaten, 2016](#)). [Ozowuba \(2018\)](#) believed that there is a connection between learners' BICS and CALP. [Cummins \(1981\)](#) asserted that the cognitive approach is more effective in learning a new language. In addition, [Lorenzo et al. \(2019\)](#) asserts that it is a rite of passage for students to go from BICS to CALP, from the simple code of early literacy to the complex code of academic life.

Another theory that helps explain the cognitive aspect of learning and acquiring a language is Jean Piaget's Cognitive Development theory, which argues that language acquisition is within the child's mental development framework. The theory explains that a child must learn and understand the concept before acquiring the specific language ([Bernal, 2014](#)). Also, there are certain stages in which a child learns, develops, and acquires language ([McLeod, 2018](#)). Moreover, learning acquisition is effective socially; thus, the learner's parents, community, classmates, and, most importantly, the teachers will significantly affect their language acquisition ([Solis et al., 2013](#)). The participants' experiences in this study may explain how their English proficiency was influenced or affected during their elementary years. It was argued by [Acero et al. \(2008\)](#) and [Solis et al. \(2013\)](#) that the classroom serves as a venue for language acquisition. It is where the learners are encouraged to listen, read, write, reflect, and the like.

There are notable national and international articles and studies conducted focusing on the learners' English proficiency, revealing their various situations in their countries. One of the national studies conducted is from the [Philippine Institute for Development Studies \(2020\)](#), which exposed the current status of the English proficiency of SHS learners. Also, the study of [Bernal \(2014\)](#) confirms that Junior High School (JHS) learners have difficulty in English, which is not surprising why SHS learners have poor proficiency. Their findings serve as the basis for this study that there are SHS learners with low English language proficiency. Drawn from the findings of the other studies, it was shown that different internal and external factors affect the English language proficiency of the learners. Some of the conducted studies simply identified the factors. They used quantitative methods to collect the data, while others explained how they affect the learners'

English proficiency. Yet, these were done in specific areas from different countries, like the studies conducted by [Chop Ler \(2012\)](#), [Ozowuba \(2018\)](#), and [Garcia \(2019\)](#). The same with the study of [Opetina and Laxa \(2000\)](#), [Chop Ler \(2012\)](#), [Souriyavongsa et al. \(2013\)](#), [Garcia \(2019\)](#), and [Mohammed and Salih \(2019\)](#), this study will investigate the causes, factors, and reasons why students have low English proficiency, the difference was, this study focused on SHS learners. Since the study of [Garcia \(2019\)](#) focused on the aspects of primary education, [Souriyavongsa et al. \(2013\)](#), [Mohammed and Salih \(2019\)](#) chose college students, and [Chop Ler \(2012\)](#) considered teachers as their participants in this study, the researcher focused on interviewing the SHS learners to accurately obtain their personal experiences why they have low English proficiency. Moreover, since [Philippine Institute for Development Studies \(2020\)](#) findings confirmed that SHS learners have low English language proficiency, the researcher believed it is timely and relevant to study and investigate why they have the emerging problem in the Philippine Education system. Therefore, the researcher selected his students who were Grade 12 learners under the TVL track with low English language proficiency in Biñan City Senior High School-Timbao Campus.

RESEARCH METHOD

One of the features that research may be considered successful is by choosing the most suitable method and design; thus, the researcher believed that the qualitative research method is appropriate in this non-experimental study to investigate and understand the lived experiences of public SHS learners under the TVL track with low English language proficiency. This Phenomenological research describes what all the participants have in common as they experience a phenomenon. The essential purpose of this approach is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to illustrate the essence, which is a grasp of the very natural thing ([Cortezano et al., 2021](#); [Creswell, 2000](#)). The description entails "what" and "how" the participants experienced the existing phenomenon. Specifically, the researcher utilized Transcendental Phenomenology, also termed Psychological Phenomenology, which focuses less on the researcher's interpretations and more on describing the participants' experiences ([Moustakas, 1994](#)). Hence, transcendental phenomenology was employed to explore and expose the real-life experiences of the participants.

In this study, Purposive Sampling was applied; thus, the researcher purposely selected and pre-determined the participants. First, the researcher collected and observed the outputs of the learners in their English subject during the start of the first semester of the school year 2021-2022. The researcher asked permission from the students and informed them that their outputs would be used in this study. Consent letters and written consent addressed to the parents and students were obtained. Next, those learners identified as low performers based on their outputs took the English Proficiency Test (EPT) from EF English Proficiency Index, learners identified as Low Proficient in English were the researcher's choices in getting the ten participants. Before determining the final participants of this study, the researcher privately informed the students that their participation must be voluntary. Students who decided to withdraw or discontinue due to some circumstances were not forced to participate. Instead, the researcher proceeded to the other learner suitable to the criteria and identified as low proficient.

The observation was also executed during the individual interviews to document the learners' oral proficiency. Their speaking skills, including body language and word usage, were observed during their interviews. Therefore, the four domains of language proficiency: writing, reading, listening, and speaking, were considered and observed in this study. Moreover, during the interview, field notes were written by the researcher to highlight the main problems of the participants. Field notes helped the researcher document and organize the collected data ([Chiseri-Strater & Sunstein, 1997](#)). These three methods, observation, field notes, and individual interviews, were employed to accomplish procedures in triangulation which helped the researcher achieve a

comprehensive understanding of the phenomena.

The research instrument of this study consisted of fifteen interview guide questions which three experts validated. The validators provided suggestions to improve or consider adding or highlighting during the individual interview. Also, follow-up questions were recommended as needed to clarify or connect the answers of the participants, which may be related to their other answers to different questions. During the interview, the participants were informed that the researcher would record audio or video depending on the participants' preference. The researcher used his mobile phone to record the audio of the interview and also explained that the recordings would ensure accurate transcription and responses, and they would be treated confidentially and with privacy. Moreover, the participants are fragile in terms of their age and level of English proficiency; thus, the researcher was sensitive in asking follow-up questions. Furthermore, the researcher informed the participants that they were allowed to speak using their native language, which is Filipino, to express their ideas, experiences, and emotions completely. To ensure confidentiality, the researcher used pseudonyms and codes to maintain the confidentiality of the identity of the participants. It ensured that their identity would not be revealed during and after their participation. Also, the information that the participants provided and recorded interviews were treated confidentially. The researcher secured all information and data from the participants who were completed at the end of the first semester of the school year 2021-2022.

As to the data analysis, the researcher followed Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological method to reveal the essence or essential structure of the existing phenomenon under investigation among the participants (Morrow et al., 2015). As presented by Morrow et al. (2015), the researcher did the following steps: familiarization with the data, identifying significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing exhaustive descriptions, producing fundamental structure, and seeking verification of the fundamental structure. Lastly, the researcher asked for the participants' consent and approval to confirm if the findings captured their experiences.

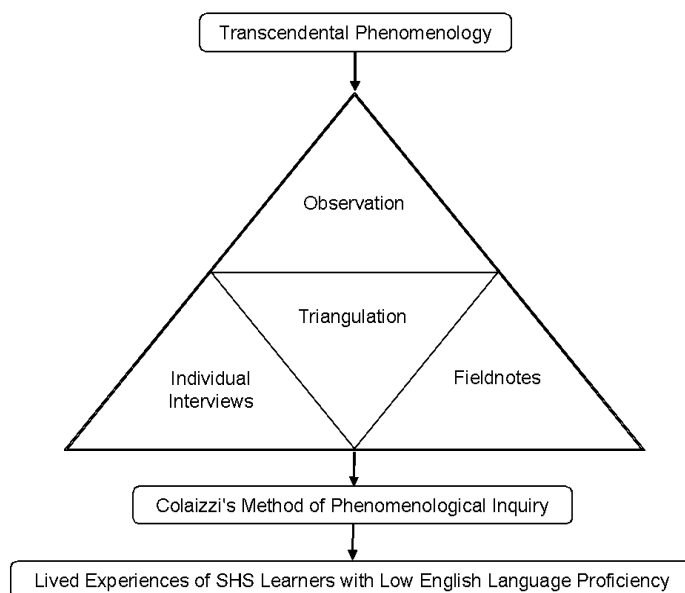


Figure 1. Research paradigm of the study

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This transcendental phenomenological study was guided by this central question: What is the essence of the lived experiences of senior high school learners with low English language proficiency? Following the process of the descriptive phenomenological analysis of Colaizzi, the researcher assembled two hundred and sixty (260) significant statements, seventy-nine (79)

formulated meanings, fifty-four (54) subordinate themes grouped, and eight (8) superordinate themes were developed. Furthermore, the factors they mentioned and agreed that affected their English language proficiency are the following: Teacher factor, peer pressure, being humiliated by other people, low self-esteem and self-confidence, no parent's influence and support, lack of knowledge of the English language, and lack of interaction.

Significant Statements and Formulated Meanings

According to the participants, they already knew that they struggled in learning the English language as early as the elementary level, while some figured it out during their JHS and SHS levels. One of the participants stated, "*When I was in grade 5, I realized that I had difficulty learning English.*" Another experience was shared by the sixth participant, in which her teacher told her that she was struggling in English during elementary. She narrated, "*My teacher in Grade 6 used to tell me that I was committing mistakes in using the English language.*" Their experiences revealed that half of the participants were already aware that they struggled in learning the English language during their elementary level. The first and fourth participants were both on the JHS level when they figured out they had difficulty learning English. Bernal (2014) affirmed that in her study, Grade 7 learners had a below-average level of proficiency in English. In addition, the fourth participant stated a specific instance of when and why he realized that he had a problem, "*When I was in grade 8, I knew that I had difficulty learning English because I was not active in reciting or answering my teacher's questions. Sometimes, when I recited or answered, they humiliated me in our class.*" Lastly, the third and eighth participants admitted the problems they faced with the English language in the SHS program.

In terms of the reasons why the participants have low English language proficiency, they shared some reasons such as no support, influence, engagement from their families, and lack of practice. A participant stated, "*Because we are not speaking or using English at home*", which indicates that her family members are not also using the English language. Hence she was not being influenced to use it as well. Garcia (2019) identified that the number of English speakers in the family or community is included among the external factors which may affect learning a second language. Diaz (2018) also identified that lack of practice is one of the reasons why the English proficiency of Filipinos is declining. It was also revealed that the participants were not focusing on studying and learning English. A participant was also unmotivated as he mentioned, "*I was not able to focus on learning the English language. I did not also have the motivation to study it.*" Garcia (2019) also affirmed her study that the learners' motivation in learning the language is one of the internal factors in learning a second language. Moreover, some of them were embarrassed, which led to a lack of self-confidence and feeling intimidated when using English.

Based on their shared experiences, the participants were victims of bullying and had embarrassing moments which caused them to lose interest in studying the English language. A participant stated, "*Because I am embarrassed, I am also losing interest in studying the English language. It is painful when they humiliate me.*" Another participant provided a specific scenario in which they had humiliating experiences, "*When we were asked to read, like during recitation, once you misread or incorrectly utter a word, my classmates will bully us.*" These instances also led them to have low self-esteem. Since they were not motivated, they were not spending time studying and learning it. A separate participant admitted, "*I am losing my time studying the English language and improving my speaking skills, such as speaking spontaneously.*" They lack practice using the English language, which also causes them to feel that it is challenging to learn it. Through these experiences, they perceived that learning English is challenging. Having these experiences and mindsets, the causes of having low English language proficiency were revealed, which are the following: lack of

practice and exposure to learning the English language, being humiliated, bullied, and embarrassed by others, having low self-esteem and self-confidence, not giving focus and not spending time to study it, and finding it challenging to learn the English language.

Some shared the same testimonies that their teachers served as one of the factors that affected their English language proficiency. A sixth participant stated, *"I think it is a teacher factor because I got embarrassed before by my teacher."* It was unfortunate that instead of being there to help the students, as shared by the participants, they were humiliated instead by their teachers. [Diaz \(2018\)](#) also argued that the teacher factor is one of the ultimate factors that cause students' low English proficiency. The next factor is peer pressure, in which the classmates and friends of the participants affected their English language proficiency. The sixth participant shared, *"Sometimes, my friend is also teaching me, though he/she also insults or makes fun of me whenever I commit mistakes,"* and the seventh participant mentioned, *"I am pressured because they might laugh at me."* The third factor is their experiences: being humiliated by other people, whether by their teachers, classmates, or friends. Likewise, the next factor is having low self-esteem and self-confidence. The seventh participant added, *"I do not believe in myself too. I feel like the people around me are laughing when I speak English."* No parent's influence and support are also common to the participants as the factor that affected their English language proficiency. The first participant bluntly stated, *"Our parents did not influence us to use the English language, and they are not teaching us."* Aside from that, the last participant shared, *"I do not interact with other people because I always stay at home,"* which led to another factor: lack of interaction. As revealed previously, the number of English speakers is one of the external factors affecting someone learning a second language. Moreover, similar to the study of [Souriyavongsa et al. \(2013\)](#), students' lack of background knowledge of the English language affects their English proficiency. One of the instances mentioned was from the eighth participant, *"For me, the problem is that I have difficulty understanding the meaning of the words,"* which reveals that the participants admitted that they lack basic knowledge of English.

The participants identified similar factors that affected their English language proficiency and English language learning. Specifically, here are the factors that influenced the participants in learning the English language: No time, focus, and interest in studying the English language, being humiliated, learning through online games, family factors, having no support from anyone, afraid of using the English language, lack of self-esteem and self-confidence, relying on translation, and no social interaction. Among these, the most commonly formulated meanings are no time, focus, and interest in studying the English language and lack of self-esteem and self-confidence. The first participant expressed, *"I do not have a high interest in studying English."* Likewise, the sixth participant affirmed, *"Sometimes, I am afraid to speak or use the English language because I might be judged by other people."* The case study from [Chop Ler \(2012\)](#) also revealed that the attitude toward English is one of the five major problems that affect students learning English. If the students will not change their attitude toward learning the English language, such as spending time and showing interest, just like what the seventh participant stated, *"In learning, it is no longer my teacher, the factor is myself because I do not give time to study the English language,"* their English proficiency will not change.

During the interview, all the participants cited issues, struggles, and challenges in studying and learning English. The researcher also mentioned specific areas and the macro skills to verify coming from the participants if they are struggling with them too. As a result, they identified and confirmed the following problems and difficulties in English: spontaneous speaking, correct pronunciation, stuttering, grammar, constructing sentences, writing in general, vocabulary, particularly with high-level words, comprehension, reading, and reading comprehension. The participants were dealing with their problems in learning the English language. Most of them are

watching videos, using google translate, performing and trying to improve their macro skills, and asking for assistance. Three participants stated that they watched videos to help deal with their problems. The first participant testified, *"Sometimes, I watch tutorials about the correct usage of words on Youtube."* While some participants indicated that they were using Google translate.

In the latter part of the interview, the participants shared their desire to enhance their English communication skills and improve their level of English proficiency. Most of the participants preferred to have one-on-one and face-to-face tutorial sessions. The first participant stated, *"I prefer face-to-face like the one-on-one tutorial for me clearly understand the lessons, and I can also ask my teacher when if there are topics that I can't comprehend."* At the same time, some wanted to improve their skills with their peers who have the same low English language proficiency and are eager or interested in learning the English language. The sixth participant highlighted, *"I also want an English tutorials class with my peers with low English language proficiency at eager/interested to learn English."* Only the eighth and ninth participants chose self-study to improve their English language skills. *"I will strive to learn more words. For now, I want to have self-study,"* the ninth participant shared.

Lastly, the participants gave messages to young learners who do not have an interest in learning the English language. After analyzing the responses and significant statements, the researcher highlighted three (3) formulated meanings which are the following: (1) Learn the English language because it is crucial and beneficial in every stage and aspect of life; (2) Study the English language to boost your self-confidence; and (3) Enhance your skills by striving harder, listening, and asking teachers for help. As the eighth participant shared, *"At an early age, study the English language so that you will not experience the situations that we are experiencing now."*

Clustering Themes

These cluster themes were identified: traumatic experience, language anxiety, external factors, learners' motivation and interest, self-awareness, academic performance, learning styles and strategies, and essence and value of the English language. Based on the shared experiences and testimonies of the participants, most of them experienced being distracted, degraded, humiliated, embarrassed, and bullied because they had difficulty understanding and using the English language. These traumatic experiences also served as reasons for having negative feelings toward learning the English language. Their unfortunate experience also made them perceive they were not good at English. Thus they are stuck to that mindset. Since the participants admittedly had low English language proficiency, their attitude toward learning and using the English language resulted in language anxiety. Their self-confidence and self-esteem were affected, so some participants decided to avoid speaking, reciting, and participating in class. Some are also intimidated by others because they are afraid to commit mistakes and be embarrassed.

After analyzing the participants' experiences, it was evident that they identified various external factors that serve as the reasons for low English language proficiency. Among these are the teachers, peers, family, number of speakers of the English language in the family or community, lack of interaction, and the natural distraction such as noise from the community. For the internal factors, learners' motivation and interest are emphasized, making or breaking their English language proficiency. Since the participants had unfortunate experiences learning the English language, their motivation and interest were affected. In addition, they had a negative attitude toward learning the English language, like it is challenging to learn. They also shared that they could not find any motivation to increase their interest in learning. However, some gave some advice: to be motivated, focused, and interested in learning English. Through these, learners may be able to improve their proficiency.

During the interviews, it was evident that all the participants perceived their problems in English. They were also mindful of the importance and benefits of having good English communication skills. Thus, the participants have self-awareness of their low English language proficiency and reflection to improve their skills. Given that all the participants lack knowledge of the English language, their academic performance and English proficiency are affected. Most participants shared that they have difficulty reading and writing, and their outputs, especially now that they are studying in MDL, were not satisfactory. Based on the observation conducted by the researcher, most of the participants did not accomplish their written outputs and just answered the objective type of test in which the answers were given in the module. After hearing the participants' problems, they also shared their learning preferences. The learners' learning styles and strategies must be considered and remedied to improve their English proficiency. Hence, the researcher asked the participants how they wanted to enhance their skills. It would be beneficial and serve as the basis for creating the intervention for SHS learners. Adjustments in implementing the intervention must be considered since some learners prefer to study one-on-one while others desire to be with their peers. Finally, all participants realized the essence and value of the English language in life. They realized that good English communication skills are essential in their studies, daily life, and future. After sharing their realizations, they reminded others, particularly learners struggling to learn the English language, to be motivated and strive harder to learn. Their messages were shared with the young and other learners so they would not have regrets in the future and not experience what the participants experienced.

Exhaustive Descriptions

By merging themes, complete descriptions of the participants' lived experiences were obtained. The themes were categorized into two groups focusing on what (textural) the participants experienced and how (structural) they experienced. Composite textural and structural descriptions discuss the exhaustive descriptions, which is the fifth stage of Colaizzi's descriptive phenomenological data analysis.

Composite Textural Description

In this study, the composite textural description concentrated on the group description of "what" the participants experienced with low English language proficiency. Likewise, it is a narrative that explains participants' perceptions of a phenomenon. The researcher provided related answers to the participants when they had problems saying what they wanted to say or answer. Through this, the researcher gathered more specific information that would be useful in identifying particular difficulties, reasons, factors, challenges, and even potential solutions for the participants in dealing with their problems in learning the English language.

All the participants admitted that they have difficulty learning English, which results in low English language proficiency despite being already in the senior high school program. Most of them figured it out when they were at the elementary level. The participants identified some external and internal factors concerning the factors that affect their English language proficiency. The first category includes the following: teacher factor, peer pressure, family, number of speakers of the English language in the family or community, being humiliated by other people, lack of knowledge of the English language, lack of interaction, and the natural distraction such as noise from the community. In contrast, the learners' motivation and interest were highlighted for internal factors, including their low self-esteem and low self-confidence. The participants' attitude toward learning English is also part of the internal factors.

Most participants used translation to understand the English language and as a tool to

express themselves. Based on the testimonies of the participants, they struggle in writing, particularly in constructing sentences and grammar. Some are also working on speaking, specifically speaking spontaneously using the English language. Finally, all the participants realized the value of having good communication skills. They also gave messages to the learners who are also struggling in studying and learning the English language that they thought would be convincing to change their mindsets and attitude toward the English language.

Composite Structural Description

Creswell (2013) confirmed that the structural description accounts for "how" the experience happened. The composite structural descriptions of the participants were written through the initial and main themes and elaborated through the significant statements and formulated meanings. In addition, it discusses the meanings of the participants' challenges, essential experiences, and perceptions of participants on the phenomenon.

Based on the participants' responses during their interview, some shared their experiences of why they knew and admitted that they had difficulty learning English. They also explained why they have low English language proficiency. Most of them shared unfortunate experiences of being humiliated, degraded, and embarrassed by their classmates and teachers, which caused them to lose confidence and have low self-esteem until now. At a very young age, some participants experienced bullying because they made mistakes in using English. Hence, they get intimidated by others because they do not believe in themselves, especially when speaking. When asked in English, they did not know what to say and felt shame about that experience. It was also significant among the participants' frustration with the factors affecting their English proficiency and language learning.

Fundamental Structure

In this stage, statements of the structure were made to fully describe the participants' lived experiences of having low English language proficiency. The participants perceived their situation, and they were aware of it. Since most of them had traumatic experiences that they will never forget and served as their reasons for negative feelings toward learning the English language, their attitude towards learning and using it resulted in language anxiety. Various external and internal factors have caused them to have low English language proficiency. Unfortunately, the participants' academic performance was affected because they lacked knowledge of English. Learning styles and strategies must be considered and remedied to improve the learners' English proficiency. Most of all, the participants realized the essence and value of the English language and had good communication skills.

CONCLUSIONS

All of the participants of this study admitted that they have difficulty studying and learning the English language, resulting in their current situation, which is having low English language proficiency. Some figured out they had problems in English during elementary, while others during JHS and SHS. The testimonies of the participants described their experiences with low English language proficiency as difficult, challenging, and frustrating. Their traumatic experiences, such as being degraded, humiliated, and embarrassed by their teachers, peers, and even their family members, were why their English language was affected. Likewise, they shared other factors, such as lack of motivation and interest, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem. As a result, they had language anxiety. When asked in English, they tend to be intimidated and overthink that they might make mistakes in using English. Hence, they are afraid to express themselves because they know that other people will make fun of or laugh at them when they commit mistakes, whether in

speaking, reading, or writing.

Based on the participants' shared testimonies, they perceive their experiences with the challenges of low English language proficiency with three main points. Firstly, all the participants are fully aware of their situations. Then, they also know that they lack knowledge of the English language, which affects their academic performance. The participants' academic performance was also low in their present situation. They even stated that their low English language proficiency affects their academic performance. In identifying their preferred learning strategies, most participants want to improve their English communication skills through one-on-one, face-to-face tutorials. After recalling their experiences, analyzing their current situation, and understanding possibilities for the future, the participants realized how important it is to have good English communication skills. Though they are currently facing the challenges of having low English language proficiency, they still want to improve their skills to achieve their goals in life.

LIMITATIONS & FURTHER RESEARCH

This study was limited to the lived experiences of SHS learners in public schools with low English language proficiency. Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations were proposed:

1. The policymakers and curriculum implementers of the Department of the Philippines must conduct further investigations on the on-the-ground issues of the learners, teachers, and school managers on the existing problems of low English language proficiency to implement suitable interventions.
2. For future researchers, since the teachers are considered one of the factors why the learners have low English language proficiency, it is recommended to investigate their perspective and acknowledge the existing phenomenon.
3. Also, future researchers may conduct studies focusing on elementary or junior high school learners using different methods such as observation and in-depth interviews with their parents or guardians and in their communities to explore more of the reasons why learners have low English language proficiency since there is no existing study to explain the phenomenon, especially in the Philippines.

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