

On Breaking Language Barriers: Uncovering College Students' Perceptions in English Language Learning

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ABSTRACT

This phenomenological study explored college students' views, feelings, and insights regarding English language learning. The study was conducted among 10 students enrolled in a Purposive Communication class at Notre Dame-Siena College of Polomolok, South Cotabato during School Year 2023-2024. Using a qualitative phenomenological design, data were gathered through in-depth interviews and analyzed through thematic content analysis. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who could provide rich descriptions of their experiences. Findings revealed that students viewed English learning as a pathway to personal growth, career advancement, and effective communication, while also recognizing barriers such as limited exposure, weak vocabulary, difficulty in constructing sentences, and challenges in writing essays. Participants experienced anxiety, fear of

judgment, low confidence, disappointment, and pressure when using English, particularly during oral activities and public speaking tasks. However, they also expressed gratitude for teacher and peer support and remained motivated to improve. Their insights emphasized collaboration between teachers and students, meaningful improvement through practice, self-compassion, and emotional skill development. The study concludes that English language learning is both a linguistic and affective experience shaped by exposure, support, confidence, and motivation. It recommends supportive, practice-based, and emotionally responsive instruction that helps learners overcome language barriers.

Keywords: *English language learning, college students, language barriers, perceptions, phenomenology, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

English proficiency remains central to academic success, employability, and participation in wider social and professional communities. In the Philippine higher education context, English continues to function as a major medium of instruction, making students' ability to understand, speak, and write the language important for classroom participation and future work. However, language learning is not a uniform process. Students differ in their exposure to English, confidence, vocabulary development, and ability to express ideas in speaking and writing tasks.

The need to examine students' perceptions of English learning is strengthened by concerns about language anxiety and the reported decline or fluctuation of English proficiency among Filipino learners. Previous literature notes that affective factors such as anxiety, motivation, emotion, and attitude influence second-language learning because learners may avoid participation when they fear grammatical errors, negative judgment, or failure during oral communication (Bordios et al., 2022; Giray et al., 2022; MacIntyre et al., 2020). These issues are particularly visible in college classrooms where students are expected to use English in reports, written outputs, class discussions, interviews, and collaborative tasks.

Studies also show that students experience challenges in vocabulary, writing, public speaking, and reading comprehension, which may affect their confidence and willingness to communicate (Brooks et al., 2021; Grieve et al., 2021; Hasnawati et al., 2023; Moses & Mohamad, 2019). Yet, English learning also provides opportunities for personal growth and career development. For many students, English is not only a school subject but a tool for future employment, social interaction, and participation in global communication (Akther, 2022; Chan, 2021; Gautam, 2022).

This study addressed this concern by exploring the lived experiences of college students in learning English. It focused on how students viewed their experiences, how they felt when facing English-learning challenges, and what insights they gained from those experiences. By listening to students' voices, the study offers practical implications for teachers, schools, and language programs that aim to reduce language barriers and create a supportive environment for English learning.

Literature Review

English Language Learning and Student Perceptions

Students' perceptions are important in language learning because beliefs, attitudes, motivation, and prior experiences influence how learners approach English tasks. Learners who see English as useful for academic and career advancement are more likely to persist despite difficulties (Akther, 2022; Gautam, 2022). In higher education, English proficiency supports academic reading, written communication, oral presentations, workplace preparation, and professional interaction (Chan, 2021; Brighton College, 2024).

In the Philippine context, English remains a dominant academic language, but many students still experience hesitation when required to communicate in English. Research on Filipino college students shows that anxiety, fear of mistakes, and lack of practice affect participation in English-mediated classrooms (Bordios et al., 2022; Castro et al., 2023; Valdellon & Lovitos, 2022). These findings suggest that English instruction must address not only grammar and vocabulary but also the emotional and social dimensions of learning.

Language Barriers, Anxiety, and Confidence

Language barriers often appear in vocabulary limitations, difficulty constructing sentences, grammar problems, pronunciation concerns, and weak writing skills. Studies emphasize that vocabulary knowledge supports comprehension and writing performance, while limited vocabulary can restrict students' ability to express ideas clearly (Brooks et al., 2021; Samsidar et al., 2022). Writing difficulties also remain common among English learners, especially when students are expected to produce essays or academic outputs using accurate grammar and organization (Hasnawati et al., 2023; Moses & Mohamad, 2019).

Public speaking and oral communication are also major sources of anxiety. Grieve et al. (2021) found that students' fear of oral presentations is linked with embarrassment, fear of judgment, and self-doubt. Similar findings are reflected in studies of English language anxiety, where students tend to avoid speaking when they feel uncertain about grammar or pronunciation (Giray et al., 2022; Hakim, 2019; MacIntyre et al., 2020). These experiences show that language anxiety can limit participation and reduce opportunities for practice.

Support, Motivation, and Social Learning

Supportive learning environments help learners overcome hesitation and build confidence. Teacher feedback, peer assistance, collaborative tasks, and classroom encouragement can reduce anxiety and strengthen engagement (Hattie & Timperley, 2021; Hoferichter et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022). Cooperative learning also allows students to practice language in less threatening settings, making interaction an important element of language development (Johnson et al., 2020).

The study was informed by Social Learning Theory, Sociocultural Theory, Self-Determination Theory, and the Theory of Planned Behavior. These perspectives explain that learners develop skills through modeling, interaction, motivation, autonomy, competence, relatedness, and behavioral intention (Ajzen, 2005; Bandura, 2020; Ryan & Deci, 2020; Vygotsky, 2021). In English learning, students' willingness to practice is shaped by classroom models, teacher support, peer influence, personal confidence, and the perceived usefulness of the language.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. This design was appropriate because the study sought to describe and interpret the lived experiences of college students in English language learning. Phenomenology allows researchers to understand how participants make meaning of a shared experience based on their own narratives (Alhazmi & Kaufmann, 2022; Bonyadi, 2023; Kleiman, 2004).

Research Locale

The study was conducted at Notre Dame-Siena College of Polomolok, Polomolok, South Cotabato during School Year 2023-2024. The locale provided an appropriate setting because the participants were enrolled in Purposive Communication, a course that required them to engage in English-related learning tasks.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The participants were 10 college students enrolled in the Purposive Communication class. They were identified through purposive sampling because they could provide meaningful accounts of their experiences in learning English. Pseudonyms such as Uno, Dos, Tres, Cuatro, Cinco, Seis, Siete, Ocho, Nueve, and Diez were used to protect their identities. Purposive sampling is appropriate in qualitative research when participants are selected based on their capacity to provide information-rich descriptions relevant to the research questions (Etikan et al., 2016; Hennink et al., 2020).

Table 1. *Participant Profile Used in the Qualitative Inquiry*

| Participant Code | Program/Context | Relevance to the Study |
|------------------|---|--|
| Uno | Bachelor of Secondary Education major in Physical Science | Sought to improve English to explain scientific concepts clearly. |
| Dos | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Recognized English communication as important for future teaching. |
| Tres | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Preferred listening but wanted to develop confidence in expressing ideas. |
| Cuatro | Bachelor of Science in Computer Science | Connected English proficiency with technical resources and future work. |
| Cinco | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Experienced grammar challenges but remained motivated to communicate well. |
| Seis | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Balanced academic and personal responsibilities while learning English. |
| Siete | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Reported vocabulary struggles and gradual improvement. |
| Ocho | Bachelor of Science in Business Administration major in Human Resource Management | Linked English with interviews, workplace communication, and documents. |
| Nueve | Bachelor of Elementary Education | Viewed English as a tool for connection and opportunity. |
| Diez | Bachelor of Science in Computer Science | Found English writing difficult but useful for documentation and reports. |

Research Instrument

A semi-structured in-depth interview guide was used to gather data. The guide focused on three areas: students' views of English language learning, their feelings when they encountered learning difficulties, and the insights they gained from their experiences. The instrument was validated by experts and was used to encourage participants to share detailed narratives.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher secured permission from the institution, obtained informed consent from the participants, and scheduled the interviews. The interviews were conducted in a manner that allowed participants to narrate their experiences freely. Responses were transcribed, organized, and reviewed carefully before analysis. Pseudonyms were used throughout the reporting of findings to maintain confidentiality.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed through thematic content analysis. Significant statements were identified from the transcripts, clustered into related ideas, and developed into emergent themes. Thematic analysis was appropriate because it enabled the researcher to identify recurring patterns across participants' narratives while still preserving the meaning of individual accounts (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Byrne, 2022; Maguire & Delahunt, 2017).

Ethical Consideration

The study observed informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity, and voluntary participation. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to decline or withdraw. Their identities were protected through pseudonyms. The study also used participant verification and peer debriefing to strengthen credibility and trustworthiness, consistent with qualitative research standards (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Rose & Johnson, 2020; Stahl & King, 2020).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings were organized according to the three central areas of inquiry: students' views, feelings, and insights regarding English language learning. The thematic analysis produced 13 emergent themes. These themes show that English learning is experienced by students as a process involving cognitive, emotional, social, and practical dimensions.

Views of College Students in English Language Learning

The first set of findings shows that students viewed English learning through both difficulty and opportunity. Their narratives revealed that lack of exposure, limited vocabulary, and difficulty constructing essays made learning English challenging. However, they also viewed English as a means for personal growth, career preparation, and effective communication. This result supports previous studies showing that students' attitudes toward English are influenced by perceived usefulness, exposure, and opportunities for practice (Gautam, 2022; Getie, 2020).

Table 2. *Views of College Students in English Language Learning*

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Exposed less to English and other reading materials for comprehension; failed to understand concepts because of lack of vocabulary; difficulty in constructing words and phrases; difficulty in constructing essays in English correctly. | Lack of Exposure Matters |
| Practiced in front of the mirror to improve speaking skills; tried one's best to write and speak in English; shaped willingness to learn the language after all the difficulties. | Helps Attain Personal Growth |
| Needed to learn the language in preparation after graduation; needed to develop language skills to land a good job; perceived experiences as opening wider opportunities for the future. | Enhances Career Prospects |
| Helps in communicating with others who speak the same language; may enable communication with native speakers when working abroad in the future. | Helps to Communicate Effectively |

The theme ‘Lack of Exposure Matters’ indicates that students’ limited interaction with English reading materials and speaking opportunities affected comprehension and expression. This finding is consistent with literature emphasizing the role of vocabulary and reading exposure in language development (Brooks et al., 2021; Hassan et al., 2021). Meanwhile, the themes on personal growth, career prospects, and communication show that students did not view English merely as a classroom requirement. Instead, they saw it as a skill connected to confidence, employment, and future social mobility, similar to studies that link English proficiency with work transition and opportunity (Akther, 2022; Chan, 2021).

Feelings of College Students in English Language Learning

The second set of findings reveals that English learning generated strong emotional responses. Students felt anxiety, low confidence, disappointment, gratitude, and motivation. Their anxiety was most visible during public speaking, reporting, interviews, and class tasks where they feared being judged for incorrect grammar or pronunciation. This supports studies indicating that fear of oral communication and classroom judgment contributes to language anxiety (Grieve et al., 2021; MacIntyre et al., 2020).

Table 3. *Feelings of College Students in English Language Learning*

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|--|---------------------------|
| Got nervous whenever speaking in public; felt daunted and pressured for not being good in English when reporting in class; felt anxious to speak in a crowd during class. | Anxious when speaking |
| Feared being judged by others when writing and speaking in English; felt pressured to speak in front of teachers; experienced reduced interaction because of ungrammatical sentence constructions. | Unconfident of the Skill |
| Felt disappointed when failing to accomplish a task using the language; felt discouraged during demonstrations for not performing well. | Disappointed when failing |
| Felt delighted with a supportive learning environment; felt happy when taught by classmates; felt pleased to learn concepts in the chosen discipline. | Grateful with the Support |
| Driven to continue learning more words to comprehend concepts clearly; recognized the need to learn the language at their age. | Motivated to Learn |

The emotional pattern in Table 3 shows that students’ difficulties in English were not only technical problems of grammar, vocabulary, or writing. These difficulties also affected self-confidence and willingness to participate. However, the presence of gratitude and motivation suggests that supportive teachers, classmates, and classroom environments helped students continue learning. This aligns with research on teacher and peer support, which highlights that supportive relationships reduce stress and improve learning engagement (Hoferichter et al., 2022; Zhang, 2022).

Insights of College Students in English Language Learning

The third set of findings reflects students’ realizations about how they could improve in English. Their insights emphasized collaboration, meaningful improvement, self-compassion, and emotional skills. Students recognized the importance of teacher guidance, practice-based activities, reading, watching videos, using online platforms, and self-reflection. These findings support language-learning perspectives that emphasize interaction, strategy use, feedback, and self-regulation (Hattie & Timperley, 2021; Oxford, 2020; Zimmerman & Schunk, 2021).

Table 4. *Insights of College Students in English Language Learning*

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|--------------------------------------|
| Develops the skill with the help of instructors and teachers; improves language performance with simulations, mock activities, and similar teacher-led tasks. | Promotes Collaboration from Teachers |
| Continues learning the language despite obstacles; finds ways to learn through movies and books; uses online platforms to learn new vocabulary. | Makes Meaningful Improvement |

| | |
|---|---------------------------|
| Avoids being too hard on oneself; takes time to cry or calm oneself before performing; treats failure as an opportunity to learn; overcomes challenges to improve school performance. | Practices Self-Compassion |
| Boosts self-confidence and trust in one's ability to overcome speaking fear; feels confident when listeners pay attention to a report; feels pleased with gradual skill development. | Develops Emotional Skills |

These insights show that students' English-learning experiences resulted in practical and emotional learning. Collaboration with teachers helped students see the value of guided practice, while self-directed activities such as reading, watching videos, and using online tools helped them expand vocabulary and comprehension. The theme on self-compassion is significant because students learned to manage fear, disappointment, and embarrassment rather than abandon learning. This finding is consistent with research on self-compassion and foreign language speaking anxiety, which suggests that learners benefit when they treat errors as part of growth rather than as personal failure (Sönmez & Kurtoğlu, 2021).

Synthesis of Findings

Overall, the results show that students' English language learning is shaped by the interaction of exposure, confidence, support, motivation, and emotional regulation. Students recognized real barriers in vocabulary, writing, and speaking, but they also acknowledged that English supports personal development, career readiness, and communication. Their emotional experiences reveal that anxiety and fear of judgment can limit participation, but support from teachers and peers can sustain motivation. These findings affirm that English instruction should be both skill-based and learner-sensitive, addressing the language competencies and emotional needs of students.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that college students perceive English language learning as a meaningful but challenging process. Their views show that limited exposure, vocabulary deficiencies, and writing difficulties hinder their confidence and classroom participation. At the same time, students recognize English as a tool for personal growth, career preparation, and effective communication. Their feelings reveal that anxiety, fear of judgment, and disappointment are common when they are required to use English in speaking and writing tasks. However, these negative emotions are balanced by gratitude, motivation, and a desire to improve when students receive support from teachers and peers. The insights of the participants indicate that English learning becomes more effective when instruction promotes collaboration, provides practical opportunities for improvement, encourages self-compassion, and develops emotional skills. Therefore, English language learning should not be treated only as mastery of grammar or vocabulary but as a holistic process involving confidence, motivation, social support, and emotional development.

Recommendations

English teachers should design supportive and practice-oriented language activities that allow students to speak, write, and make mistakes without fear of judgment. Mock interviews, simulations, guided presentations, peer conversations, and reflective writing tasks may help students strengthen both competence and confidence.

Schools should provide English enrichment programs that address vocabulary development, academic writing, oral communication, and public speaking anxiety. These programs should include peer mentoring and teacher-guided activities to promote collaboration and reduce language barriers.

Teachers should integrate emotional support into English instruction by encouraging self-compassion, affirming gradual progress, and helping students view mistakes as part of learning. Such practices may reduce anxiety and build students' willingness to use English in real-life situations.

Students should be encouraged to engage in self-directed English practice through reading, watching educational videos, using digital vocabulary tools, and practicing speech in low-pressure environments. These strategies can increase exposure and improve language confidence over time.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies with larger groups of students, different programs, or mixed-method designs to compare perceptions across disciplines and to examine how specific instructional interventions affect confidence and English proficiency.

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