Readiness in Communicating in English as a Second Language

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Readiness in Communicating in English as a Second Language

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Abstract

Due to its foreignness, communicating in English as a second language is fraught with fear and discomfort. This paper’s goal was to consider the issues and implications of the autoethnographer’s communication practice in a college classroom setting as seen through the lens of autoethnography. The study’s methodology included self-reflections, observations, and interviews with some of the participant’s classmates. These were evaluated and analyzed within self and cultural praxis using thematic analysis. The study found that communicating in English as a second language is fraught with readiness issues that are centered on fear and anxiety, giving rise to cultural hybridity through the blending of local and foreign expressions relevant to their social world without encroaching on local sensibilities.

Keywords: cultural mix, language autoethnography, language readiness.

Preludium

I wrote this autoethnography in order to explore the depth of my communication practice centered on the use of English as a second language. The story begins with formal communication spoken dominantly in a classroom setting during my college education. Then, it moves through nurturing interactive activities with my classmates, friends, and teachers who, in one way or another, influenced the way I uttered words, phrases, and sentences. Such experiences became part of my acquired sensibilities foregrounded on a mix of fear and excitement, dismay and accommodation, unleashing a plethora of dialectical agreements and tensions. Thus, the depth of purpose of my autoethnographic sketch is to explore and analyze issues I encountered throughout the communicative journey. The episodes weave as a natural flow of various encounters, accentuating emotional nuances until poignant issues of communicating in a foreign language are raised. The paper’s epilogue highlights cultural symbolisms and representations as it dwells on intricate societal implications, offering transformative solutions towards the end. In the second episode, I will explore familiarity and self-perceived competence issues that relate to second-language communication. The third episode will analyze cultural facets such as colonization and decolonization, and hybrid
communication, while the fourth episode will ponder technological aspects of second-language communication, all viewed from the lens of autoethnography.

My Autoethnography

The Role of English in Society

The Philippines is a country in Southeast Asia where people speak many languages, including the Filipino language, spoken largely by those in the Tagalog region, which includes the capital city of Metro Manila; the Visayan language, spoken by people in the Visayan region situated in the middle part of the country, along with other languages and vernacular dialects spoken in scattered islands of the country. While these languages and dialects are widely dispersed, the English language, as a second language, remains to be the ‘popular’ choice by teachers and students. In fact, English is also one of the official languages in the country.

Where I was born and raised, English was spoken as a second language, a place where English was a glorified language spoken by intellectuals, professionals, and laypeople, but unfortunately, such practice was confined to a few. And others who thought they wanted to develop the art of speaking a foreign language freely, did it during informal discussions with friends who were also second-language speakers. I clearly recall that because I had to think in English, it was a struggle even just to generate ideas in my head. Then, putting them into words required still another cumbersome process of translation, comprehension of speech cues, and attainment of a level of comfort so that I could talk flawlessly. Dismay and resistance followed, and they persisted all the way through my undergraduate studies. However, despite the challenge, I made an effort to persevere by attempting to be more welcoming and tolerant of such a foreign language being incorporated into my life.

English in School and College

No matter what course I was taking, communicating in English was expected in the classroom, being the ‘gold standard’ for effective communication. Given that I was accustomed to speaking my own language, finding it difficult to express myself well in college was a strange experience. I could still remember feeling anxious and desperate; the latter engulfed by a deep yearning to communicate with eloquence since, in my mind, it was the language of intellect.
Since my mother tongue was constantly used in my daily interaction with others, as was previously indicated, I generally felt pushed to convey my thoughts and emotions in a foreign language. Even with the notion that I had official English classes in school from elementary to college, acquiring grammar, literature, and many other English-based education, I was still not on par with the native English speakers I listened to when watching television shows. I sensed prejudice if it was self-inflicted. Such feeling was largely drawn from my innermost struggle to comprehend the message. In fact, there was a pervasive sense of fear and worry every time our class met, which had a significant impact on my vocal communication.

In a more formal situation, oral English communication in college was mostly used for oral reporting and class discussions when I was a freshman. I recall being unable to express myself clearly in front of the class at these times because I was worried that my classmates, who were also second-language speakers like me, would make fun of me or look down on me. Such anxiety made me think that I was a poor public speaker and, therefore, unable to convince my listeners. Nevertheless, my goal has always been to communicate fluently in a second language and to be understood by others. Unfortunately, worry and fear have hindered me from accomplishing this goal.

Looking back, I believe that my overall inferiority complex had a significant negative impact on my social interactions. My pals who spoke crystal-clear English, started to annoy me a little bit. It seemed trite to me even to hear it. Being around them was something I abhorred. Why? I had a type of self-indignation since I felt little and unimportant around them, and because of this, I had the impression that I didn't want to be exposed to anybody. However, I had a feeling that my friends had known all along because of the way I had refused their invitations to mingle with them.

**Using English Outside the Classroom**

One of the insights I had at that time was that speaking awkwardly in front of my fellow students was a sign of my lack of preparation. Simply put, I wasn’t prepared to speak in English in front of my peers and the teacher in a formal situation. On the contrary, there was a different degree of preparation and comfort when speaking the language outside of the classroom. This was undoubtedly brought on by the casual conversational style and the familiar individuals I was surrounded by. Being around others who shared my interests helped a lot. We would go out to
lunch together and study together at the library; these activities helped me feel at ease using more colloquial and informal English. Around my buddies, who served as my inspiration for being spontaneous, there was absolutely no pressure and a sense of utter peace. In fact, because the classroom environment was no longer informal, I was reluctant to express myself clearly. I had to watch every word, phrase, and sentence I uttered to ensure I was speaking perfectly. I started speaking less frequently and with less enthusiasm as a result of doing this. I was consumed by fear and dread.

**Developing Confidence**

I was more approachable and open with friends during my sophomore year, and I was able to express myself without fear. Although I sensed it at the previous level, my English-speaking ability was severely lacking. My inability to grasp and express myself clearly, as well as my bad word choice, were both results of this inadequate feeling. However, I believed that I was moving in the correct way at the time since I was feeling more competent and more at ease with verbalizing my ideas and feelings. This impression shouldn't be taken as cerebral in the traditional sense; rather, I was internalizing subtleties of language that made me feel more confident and prepared to speak without hesitation. I used to get caught up in the idea of language mastery, where I could mount a successful conversation with anybody I was speaking to. In other cases, I believed that such influence caused me to doubt the validity of meanings since I was no longer in charge of them. In several instances, I purposefully misled my audience by giving them false information to manipulate them. Then, there were other occasions when I was just fostering excellent communication so that my intended messages might pass through.

Some of my classmates admitted they had the courage to talk in English during casual chats with them but did not truly believe they were doing it correctly. In other words, it was more important for them to want to and be willing to express themselves when they spoke in English rather than speaking it correctly. Another classmate remarked something that got my mind going: “Even with the idea that English is not a local language, I still feel the desire to grasp the essence of what it feels like to speak like one.” In other words, motive was a major consideration.
Literature Review

Interconnection is achieved with anyone who speaks English, including those who do not consider it the main language, as it is necessary to reach the outside world, a necessity for progress (Nuriska, 2021). However, foreign language learners (FLL) often come to the classroom with anxiety if anything goes wrong in speaking. Learners have emotional tensions, physiological symptoms, and mental difficulties when they speak English (Maquidato, 2021).

Also, emerging difficulties in English speaking not only involve a lack of linguistic competence but also encompass psycho-social fears of speaking across different communication tasks (Separa et al., 2020). This could be explained by the general idea that communication practice is a wide spectrum of sending, receiving, and understanding the meanings of various messages such that anxiety develops due to the complex process. However, in learning a second language, some learners may overcome problems in saying words or sentences, which can be attributed to competency, thus building a certain level of confidence. Moreover, a student’s environmental context is widely considered to be the most important factor that leads to difficulties in acquiring proficiency and mastering a second language (Ganaprakasam & Karunaharan, 2020). Yashima (2002) illustrates that proficiency, among other factors such as motivation, in the English language increases willingness to communicate (WTC) as English is regarded as a knowledge-based subject needed for achievement and training (Yashima, 2002). Proficiency in the context of Japanese culture is under the umbrella of ‘international posture’ (Yashima, 2002). It can readily be assumed that Japan, being a non-English speaking country, protects its image in the international arena through language training in order to keep up with the global trend. Öz et al. (2015) indicate that the competence of L2 is a strong predictor for WTC among students in Turkey.

Using an autoethnographic lens, since there are many non-Western and non-hegemonic voices in English language teaching (ELT), it is imperative that the field strives toward decolonizing ethnographic studies in ways that allow for the demands and interests of “the researched” to be served rather than (mainly) the needs of the researcher (Stanley, 2019). Although ELT autoethnographers seem familiar with the powerful nature of storytelling and the situatedness of autoethnography in the wider academic literature, an explicit commitment to social justice may be lacking (Stanley, 2019).
Methodological Journey

This study employed a qualitative approach using autoethnography as a process of inquiry. Autoethnography is a research method that uses personal experience (“auto”) to describe and interpret (“graphy”) cultural texts, experiences, beliefs, and practices (“ethno”) (Adams et al., 2017). Autoethnography’s core feature entails the scientist or practitioner performing a narrative analysis pertaining to himself or herself as intimately related to a particular phenomenon (McIlveen, 2008). It is a useful qualitative research method used to analyze people’s lives, a tool that Ellis and Bochner (2000) define as “… an autobiographical genre of writing that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural” (McIlveen, 2008 as cited by Mendez, 2013, p. 281). Autoethnography involves the writer or researcher in crafting creative narratives shaped out of a writer’s personal experiences within a culture and addressed to varied (mostly academic) audiences (Poulos, 2021).

I divided this autoethnography into different sections, most of which were based on self-reflections. First, I focused my narratives largely on recollection of past experiences associated with second-language speaking in a college classroom setting. In doing this, some memories were deciphered and analyzed in relation to the culture surrounding the experience, my classmates, teachers, and friends. I was aware that fragments of those memories comprised the storytelling process while those buried in memory could not be retrieved anymore. In resolving the gap, many facets of the human experience were pondered using observation. This method allowed recollection to flow naturally; in effect, experiential learning manifested along with observation, which was done using my senses.

Next, I collected narrative data using semi-structured interviews with my classmates in order to illuminate deep meanings of shared stories. Data collection was done within a period of three months conducted at a university with five respondents plus me (N=6). A semi-structured interview was a little formal in one sense, but it also allowed for spontaneity since my classmates shared their thoughts with agility. I was quite hesitant in the beginning; however, it turned out to be a fulfilling experience. I asked the following questions in the interviews: 1) How did you feel about speaking in English in class? 2) Did you feel anything in terms of comfort or discomfort, considering it is your second language? Please share your thoughts. 3) If there is anything you want to suggest about speaking in English as a second language in class, what would it be?
In proceeding with the analysis and interpretation of data, I read and re-read the transcripts multiple times, grouped similar and recurring themes, and performed a thematic analysis. As a methodology, thematic analysis is applied to qualitative data such as interviews. It involves familiarization, coding, generating themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing up (Caulfield, 2019). This process was originally developed for psychology research by Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke. However, thematic analysis is a flexible method that can be adapted to many different kinds of research (Caulfield, 2019).

Multiple Perspectives

In order to deepen my understanding of the issues, I asked the questions to my classmates, and I have written their responses below. I mostly asked the questions in English, but in some cases, the Waray-Waray dialect was used for certain words and phrases with an English translation.

1. How did you feel about speaking in English in class?

Participant 1: “It was a mixed feeling of eagerness and shyness. I was eager to speak in English since I was also learning from my mistakes but at the same time, I felt shy knowing that I will be exposing myself with the rest of my classmates.”

Participant 2: “Because I heard my classmates talking in English, there was a deep joy speaking my mind without hesitation. I was moved by the boldness of character; never mind the way I spoke. I wanted to be free and jovial, through language, I felt a sense of pride and freedom.

Participant 3: “In profound ways, I thought speaking in English as a second language was a life-altering moment especially when it was a formal recitation conducted in class. I always sweat off heavily not knowing the right words to say.”

Participant 4: “I always liked to give it a try. It was a learning experience for me.”
Participant 5: “What a challenge for me. I had problems forming my ideas well because the English language was getting in the way. I could not think clearly with so many obstacles coming my way.”

2. Did you feel anything in terms of comfort or discomfort, considering it is your second language? Please share your thoughts.

Participant 1: “First and foremost, speaking in English in class is a nightmare for me. I am constantly struggling to find the right words.”

Participant 2: “I feel I do not know about the subject anymore because there is always a feeling that speaking in English proves I know what I am talking about.”

Participant 3: “There is a sense of confusion which ultimately leads to stammering because of my inability to choose the right words in English.”

Participant 4: “I would just like to add that it is not just about “feeling” that should be considered, it is really about cultural background of the speaker that will indicate readiness and willingness to speak in the most comfortable manner. Lastly. Even if think I speak well the foreign language, my accent bothers me a lot knowing that it sounds strange.”

I noticed that all the narratives had a common thread: fear of speaking the English language. This fear was to be construed as an impediment to the fluidity of my utterances as well as those of my classmates. In the context of classroom communication, the first vignette, “First and foremost, speaking in English in class is a nightmare for me. I am constantly struggling to find the right words,” illuminated a sense of struggle, ultimately defining a challenging situation. This is a case called xenoglossophobia, the fear of learning and speaking foreign languages (Boettger & Koeltzsch, 2020), which leads to inability and confusion in the second and third narratives: “I do not know the subject....” as dimensions of fear. However, fear can also be downplayed by the desire to learn. Knowing that my classmates felt the “boldness of character” from others created an opportunity to be open and unrestricted.
If xenoglossophobia pervaded, it was overshadowed by the number of speakers willing to give it a try. It made sense in the formation of a social behavior where commonality instigated a flow to follow the trend. In the psychological-sociological tradition of communication theory espoused by Robert Craig (2006), communication as a sociological practice is embedded in the psychological pre-disposition of an individual such that whatever manifests mirrors a person’s facets of psychology.

In a community of second-language speakers, fear instigated a cultural understanding, as depicted in the rest of the narratives. As implied in the beginning of this autoethnography, In the context of the Philippines as a second-language population, there was a growing disparity between good and bad English speakers in the classroom due to socio-cultural, economic, and mobility issues, among others. In the socio-cultural dimension, the composition of the classroom students was diverse, coming from far-flung areas of the city such that residents in the latter could speak better English because they were closer to educational institutions, commerce, and trade hubs with multiple clientele interactions from different backgrounds. With mobility, the interview data suggested that some students visited the United States at some point in their lives, indicating that they spoke and listened to first-language speakers of the English language. Asked about the general sentiment, one replied:

Participant 2: “I found it enlightening, challenging, and exciting to speak the foreign tongue. I was learning a lot from the conversations. The manner, the level of confidence inspired me to imitate. However, I had a deep sense of detachment or discrimination simply because I was a foreigner.”

Discrimination is a general notion of not being the same, so one feels discriminated. Discrimination based on accent happens because everybody has an accent, and yet, discrimination persists in our society (Minton et al., 2014). In the data, accent was mentioned as a deterrent factor that led to discomfort in the overall utterance because it sounded funny. It will be noted that discrimination according to one’s accent triggers intergroup discrimination only among prejudiced individuals because they evaluate native accents as being qualitatively better than accents of immigrants, thereby legitimizing in-group bias (Souza et al., 2016). These findings were true in my class situation, indeed. Being young speakers who spoke the English language, not as native speakers, they even felt discrimination among themselves, as seen in the
disparity between good and bad speakers. In effect, it did not really matter if the speakers were not native; it was discrimination between non-native speakers that caught my attention. Corollary to this, speaking with an accent was an inferiority issue I had to contend with. It was a form of discrimination simply because it was, for me, a language of exclusivity.

In probing deeper about discrimination practices in the classroom, I felt a sense of withdrawal and reservation, knowing that some of my classmates communicated better than me, and I felt excluded. They had the audacity to express without much inhibition, while I had difficulty speaking with logical coherence, and my choice of words was poor, not to mention my accent so ‘provincial’. Hence, I was drawn to self-evaluate and self-criticize my communicative actions, making discrimination more self-induced.

However, throughout the journey of my communication practice in class, I have come to realize the importance of showing what I have without worrying too much about how I will project myself. This sense of positivity has become my guiding light amidst the struggles I had to endure. Towards the end, it was self-indulgence that led to me to think that I was experiencing descrimination, but, really, the feeling gradually disappeared.

**Language Readiness**

Readiness implies a strong predicament to engage in discursive communication, highlighting a sense of community. With a multitude of communication players, readiness sums up individual behaviors. Willingness to communicate is the final psychological step, the culmination of forces moving toward or away from volitional language use (MacIntyre, 2007, as cited by MacIntyre & Wang, 2021). The statement foregrounds a psychological state of engagement, a sense of belongingness, and, thus, readiness to speak in English.

Moreover, readiness to speak in English language as a second language is a tedious challenge for someone not eloquent enough to speak outside the classroom. Hence, in elucidating the nature of my reality, the philosophy of ontology is worth pondering. Ontology is defined by Crotty (2003, p. 10) as “the study of being.” It is concerned with “what kind of world we are investigating, with the nature of existence, with the structure of reality as such.” Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 83) state that the ontological assumptions are those that respond to the question ‘What is there that can be known?’ or ‘What is the nature of reality?’ In my world, the nature of my personal and subjective reality is an immersion in the uncertainty of self-expression due to
the nature of utterance tinged with discomfort and anxiety as a foreign language is not associated with my everyday reality.

As such, my ability to engage in discursive communication practice became evident in my direct participation in class discussions. Here, Freire’s conscientization, the process whereby an individual becomes engaged with transformative, democratic, and humanistic pedagogical practices, are not mere receptacles of reality but who, as “knowing subjects achieve a deepening awareness both of the socio-cultural reality which shapes their lives and of their capacity to transform that reality” (Freire, 1972, p. 51 as cited by Armitage, 2013), of critical transformation through student reflections are evidently seen as a profound catalyst for educational transformation. Indeed, second-language learning elucidates some challenges in many cultural facets to be exhumed from the depth of colonial experience, but through repeated practice brought upon various educative engagements, communicators rise above such challenges, thus engraving readiness to articulate.

Following such analysis brings upon a cultural fitting as a testament of readiness through language accommodation and absorption. In a world of constant change with nuances of transformation always on the edge for positive renewal, I purge on to rise from inferiority to one with a good sense of cultural understanding.

Since language acquisition is a knowledge process, the discussion of epistemology is deemed important. Epistemology is that branch of philosophy that is concerned with the nature and scope of knowledge, its presuppositions, and its basis with the general reliability of claims to knowledge (Hamlyn, 1967). Following this philosophical assumption, the English language was not perceived as a lived experience in the beginning because it was not attached to my everyday practice. Thus, a lack of readiness meant a lack of automatic communication. In other words, being aware that I was communicating in a foreign language created a disruption in the thinking process where I consciously paused, sighed, and pondered upon words and phrases.

Corollary to this, Bahrani (2011) contends that while acquisition happens when subconscious activity is employed as a technique to embed the language in the individual's mind, making it natural for a person to use, learning needs an individual to make a conscious effort on their behalf to acquire language and focus on structure. Abukhattala (2013) further explains that in classrooms, more learning is required than acquisition, which may hinder the development of
automatic and long-lasting knowledge of a second language. Based on this, English as a second language is not an act of \textit{acquisition} because it does not enter my subconscious.

But how can such a malady be resolved? In the context of cultural appropriation, the foreign language can, indeed, be subsumed into the local expression, making it one with the local sensibilities. In fact, language utterance manifests a semblance of cultural ownership owing to the individual display of articulation, be it correct or erroneous. In Benedict Anderson’s treatise on imagined community, for instance, the foreign is constituted into the lived experience such that, in the end, it becomes one with the local expression. True enough, when two cultures mix together as a form of hybridity, the feeling of strangeness disappears, and the person becomes associated with the other.

Pondering the nuances of communication practice, the following quotations as vignettes are drawn from my autoethnographic stories with analytical discussions thereafter.

Participant 6: “I have always been disturbed in communicating in English because I have always been aware that the language was foreign to me. Anyhow, I managed to create balance and exude readiness by simply assuming it was my natural tongue.”

One might ask, I wonder how thinking affects speech in this sense? For a mother tongue speaker, is thinking faster when I speak the local tongue? In a natural sense, it can be true because words are naturally occurring, and the flow of conversation is a perfect cadence where meaningful utterances are shared using the natural language, where spontaneous words and sentences become a reflection of fast thinking.

In this sense, the issue of readiness becomes a natural flow despite hindrances such that language utterance becomes a subconscious activity. Indeed, it results in a natural behavior that even the thought of speaking a foreign tongue disappears. Fluidity and spontaneity become inherent factors of readiness.

Participant 6: “Indeed, I talked faster in my mother tongue. Words and phrases came out naturally without any disruption. This made me realize that I could think faster and much clearer. In the case of speaking in English, the opposite happened.”
Towards the end, readiness is an ultimatum of language proficiency. It is a declaration of being at home with a foreign expression. It no longer bothers my consciousness that the foreign is interfering. It becomes one with myself somehow.

Finally, given the narrative on the nature of knowledge as essentially not a lived experience in second-language communication, somehow, it immerses into the local knowledge via appropriation and absorption. When the foreign language makes its way into the local sensibility, it creates a sense of locality forming part of the lived experience. To me, this is the triumph of my epistemological quest.

**Cultural Hybridity**

In many ways, realizing that English is not my authentic expression makes me feel connected somehow with my roots. This results in an understanding of the foreign and the local, where the latter exhibits some pride. Indeed, when biculturalism manifests, it ignites a cross-cultural consciousness, making me more adept at knowing myself viewed from multiple perspectives. In a world of cultural exchange, it becomes imperative to understand the subtleties of the colonial tongue, even with some reservations, so that my colonial past is not a hindrance anymore; instead, it becomes a cultural weapon of acculturation, the process of group and individual changes in culture and behavior that result from intercultural contact (Berry, 2019).

Testament to the foregoing is this: because living somewhere in the middle develops a different vision from that of persons on either side of the cultural border, the emergence of a hybrid consciousness transcends distinctions. (Marotta, 2021). Historically, colonialism involves not only the extermination and marginalization of indigenous people, but their cultural and economic appropriation. On the other hand, cross-cultural contact—both within and across Western and non-Western civilizations—has also led to many scientific, intellectual, economic, and political innovations (Marotta, 2021). In connection with this, racial discrimination reduces its impact on learning individuals when understanding and appreciation of foreign elements get into the consciousness. In fact, in a classroom context, some of the remedies to address include enhancement of teacher education programs, raising learners’ awareness, raising teachers’ awareness of their responsibilities and students’ rights, institutional warning, punishing ‘discriminating’ teachers, and suspending teachers from work (Sa’d & Eames, 2021).
Following the idea that the internalization of education encapsulates holistic learning in a globalized society, a deep cultural consciousness is mirrored in acculturation such that the localization of international ideals essentially rallies for contextualized learning incorporated into the local consciousness as a product of hybridity. With marginalization slowly disappearing in oblivion, cultural hybridity ushers a sense of communality and engagement where shared language patterns are reflected in norms and practices.

**Futuristic Outlook**

In order to probe deeper into second-language communication, the following recommendations are worth pondering:

- Phenomenological study on the lived experiences of second-language speakers
- Critical study on the factors affecting readiness to communicate a second language
- Collaborative autoethnographic study on second-language communication

**Conclusion**

Speaking the English language as a second language manifests anxiety, resulting in speech discomfort. In the context of classroom communication, factors such as colonial history and a person’s readiness combined together reduce anxiety and discomfort, creating a semblance of cultural hybridity where foreign language appropriation into the local culture instigates a shared understanding of sensibilities such that the foreign gets into the local and the local gets embroiled in a cultural mix.

However, it is rightfully challenging to assert identity formation in second-language use owing to the complex colonial structures and structuring processes that continually emerge in the communication practice. Dialectical tensions cannot be undermined; in fact, such struggles may repress authentic expressions if not critically examined. In these instances, the role of the teacher is critical in upholding the dignity of local sensibilities. Moreover, a robust knowledge of history touching upon globalization through education needs to be nurtured in classroom learning since language issue intersects with overarching narratives of culture and history.

I conclude this autoethnography with a resounding resilience as a learning continuum in second-language communication. In the next episode, I will ponder issues on familiarity and self-perceived competence in second-language communication to be published in a later issue of this journal.
Notes on the Contributor

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