

Exploring English Proficiency Challenges Among Grade 9 Students: A Phenomenological Study

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Abstract. This study aimed to investigate the lived experiences of Grade 9 students in acquiring English language proficiency. The researcher utilized Colaizzi's phenomenological approach and employed the purposive sampling technique. The participants of the study were seven students from a public high school in Negros Oriental. The researcher used a semi-structured interview as the primary method for data collection. The findings revealed several key insights regarding the lived experiences of Grade 9 students and identified the following three emergent themes reflecting how these students acquire their English language proficiency: (1) The Heavy Cloak of Language, (2) The Dance of Engagement, and (3) Treasures of Learning Tools. The study highlights the complexities of language learning, particularly the emotional and academic challenges faced by Grade 9 students. It emphasizes the interconnectedness of their emotions and educational hurdles, showcasing how factors such as anxiety, motivation, and personal circumstances influence their learning effectiveness. By illuminating these lived experiences, the study aims to provide valuable insights for educators and curriculum developers, enabling them to create supportive learning environments that cater to student needs. Additionally, by addressing the emotional aspects of language learning, the research advocates for a holistic approach to English education, empowering students to navigate obstacles and enhance their proficiency. Ultimately, these findings intend to inform future research and educational practices in language acquisition, underscoring the importance of understanding students' emotional and academic contexts to facilitate success in learning English.

Keywords: English proficiency; Grade 9 students; Language acquisition; Language learning experience; Second language challenges.

1.0 Introduction

English proficiency is a foundation that significantly influences students' academic performance and future educational pathways. English proficiency difficulties can encompass various language skills, including grammar, vocabulary, listening, speaking, and reading comprehension (Ghafar & Raheem, 2023). Globally, numerous studies have reported that students struggle to meet curriculum expectations for English proficiency, especially in countries where English is a second language. According to Nithideechaiwarachok et al. (2022), students' difficulties in English led to low proficiency scores, emphasizing the need for a strong foundation to support higher education. Effective speaking, for instance, is not simply a matter of utilizing words; it requires a complex speech process that accurately conveys the intended meaning. Among these processes, pronunciation stands out as a significant one. Numerous English language learners encounter pronunciation difficulties for various reasons, including the influence of their native language (Nguyen & Hung, 2021).

In the Philippine context, several studies have examined the proficiency levels of Filipino students, revealing significant challenges in mastering the language across various regions. The study by Manuel (2022) highlighted that students encountered difficulties with verbs and struggled with higher levels of reading comprehension, including integration and evaluation. Moreover, factors such as motivation, parental involvement, learning environment, and teaching strategies were identified as key elements in developing English proficiency. The study emphasized that while students have mastered the basics of grammar and comprehension, they require additional exposure to diverse texts and engaging activities to achieve higher proficiency levels (Santos et al., 2022).

Many studies have dealt with students' difficulties with English proficiency (Romero, 2023; Fontillas et al., 2022; Palma et al., 2020; Eslit & Valderrama, 2023; Pablo, 2022). However, most of these studies focus on broad skill areas or general proficiency outcomes without delving into the specific experiences of learning that occur when facing these challenges. There is a noticeable gap in understanding the phenomenological perspective, the contextual experiences that shape and impact students' learning journeys in English. Moreover, few studies have examined how these experiences impact learners of varying developmental ages. Understanding these nuanced experiences could reveal critical insights into students' motivational barriers, emotional responses, and specific needs to address proficiency difficulties.

This study aims to bridge the gap between students' actual English proficiency and academic curriculum expectations by examining the challenges faced by Grade 9 students. The need for this research stems from the challenges students face in using English effectively, particularly in secondary education, where proficiency is crucial for success. By focusing on their experiences, this study highlights academic barriers, such as trouble understanding subjects taught in English, as well as personal issues like low confidence, limited exposure, and anxiety about using the language. The findings will provide insights to help educators and curriculum developers create a more supportive language learning environment for Filipino students.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

This research employs a qualitative methodology known as descriptive phenomenology, a perspective that gained prominence through the work of Edmund Husserl (1859-1938) (Pula, 2021). Phenomenology is focused on understanding and exploring the daily life experiences of individuals. Since this study examines the lived experiences of Grade 9 students in terms of their struggles with attaining English language proficiency, a phenomenological approach is ideal. The researcher adopted Colaizzi's phenomenological method, which serves as a lens to explore the authentic experiences underlying the phenomenon (Gumarang et al., 2021). Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step process provides a thorough analysis, ensuring each stage aligns closely with the collected data. This method yields a clear and comprehensive portrayal of the phenomenon, supported by the participants' contributions (Morrow et al., cited in Romero et al., 2023).

2.2 Research Participants

In this study, the researcher selected participants from the Grade 9 level who voluntarily identified themselves as having difficulty with acquiring English language proficiency. To obtain the sample, the researcher employed a blend of purposive and snowball sampling techniques. In purposive sampling, participants are chosen based on their expertise or extensive experience with the phenomenon in question, allowing researchers to collect data that closely aligns with their objectives. This method enhances the validity and reliability of findings by focusing on individuals with a direct connection to the phenomenon under investigation (Thomas, 2022). In contrast, snowball sampling involves participants referring to other individuals who also experience the same phenomenon (Gierczyk et al., 2023). In this investigation, the study participants comprised Grade 9 students enrolled in the English subject for the academic year 2024-2025. All seven participants were interviewed until data saturation was reached. Data saturation is achieved when no additional categories, themes, or explanations can be discerned from the data or when the researcher observes repetition or redundancy in the participants' responses (Chitac, 2023). In this study, an 8th participant was interviewed to verify that data saturation had been reached.

2.3 Research Instrument

A semi-structured interview was mainly used for gathering data. The questions, written in English, were open-ended to encourage participants to share meaningful insights on the research topic. The interviews were recorded

automatically using a Voice Memos app on a cellphone, with access to the audio recordings restricted solely to the researcher.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Before the interview, the researcher applied reflexivity, which involves identifying and suspending preconceived beliefs and opinions about the phenomenon under study. The researcher maintained a reflexive journal of these preconceived beliefs so that, from time to time, it was checked and evaluated. This is to ensure that the data gathered are free from biases and presuppositions. The researcher asked all participants to gather in the library and choose a convenient time and place for an interview. Participants usually prefer a quiet setting with minimal noise and crowds. This would help them feel relaxed and safe, allowing them to express themselves openly. Before the interviews began, participants were provided with a clear explanation of the research's purpose and objectives. They were then asked to sign an informed consent form. All gathered information was treated as confidential, and the anonymity of the study was preserved. Participants were reminded that they could withdraw from the study at any time without any consequences.

In phenomenology, the researcher aims to understand the experiences expressed by the study participants and engage with them to gather rich, in-depth descriptions (O'Brien, 2023). To achieve this in the current study, a semi-structured interview method was employed, providing participants with greater flexibility in their responses. By using open-ended questions, participants were free to guide the conversation on relevant issues and provide a detailed description of their experiences. Streubert and Carpenter (2009) also noted that open-ended questioning allows the researcher to follow a participant's lead, seek clarification, and facilitate the sharing of information related to the participant's lived experience.

Each interview began with a greeting, setting the purpose and expectations, and informing the participants that data would be recorded using an audiotape recording device (a cellular phone). The researcher also conducted journaling to ensure that other verbal and nonverbal cues were accurately recorded. A significant demographic profile was also procured, including each participant's age and sex. Each interview lasted approximately 20 minutes to an hour, depending on the participant's level of engagement. The questions covered areas that delved into their lived experiences. During the interview, the researcher primarily sought clarification of the participants' thoughts, used prompts to facilitate the sharing of valuable information, and acknowledged that the points provided were understood. The recordings and transcriptions were cross-referenced to ensure the accuracy of the data transcribed. This was done to ensure that the transcriptions accurately reflected the participants' experiences. Throughout the interview process, the researcher ensured that they displayed appropriate attitudes, including respect, genuine acceptance, and safety.

2.5 Data Analysis Procedure

In this investigation, the transcripts were analyzed using the data analysis method developed by Colaizzi (See Gumarang et al., 2021; Serafica Operiano, 2024; Awal & Asaduzzaman, 2024). To begin with, the researcher recorded all interviews using the Voice Memos mobile application and transcribed the details verbatim. Following transcription, the researcher highlighted the key statements that offered responses to the study's main research questions. Second, the researcher selected important statements or phrases from the participants' transcripts closely related to the study topic. A careful review of these excerpts was necessary to find key insights that genuinely represented the participants' experiences. The researcher then rephrased these statements from a third-person perspective, interpreting the highlighted excerpts. The third phase involved creating themes based on the constructed interpretations. Fourth, the interpreted meanings were structured into thematic clusters, which then developed into emergent themes. These themes were continuously reviewed and refined against the original transcripts to ensure they accurately captured the essence of the experiences. This repetitive process involved multiple rounds of cross-referencing and validation. The fifth step involved using the results to create a detailed and comprehensive description of how the participants acquired their English language proficiency. The most important step in the sixth stage was to present the participants with the final description of their experiences and solicit their feedback. This ensured that the description accurately represented their experiences. Their comments were carefully recorded. In the seventh step, the researcher integrated any new or relevant data obtained from the participants' validation into the exhaustive description, utilizing this information to enhance the description further and accurately reflect their lived experiences.

2.6 Ethical considerations

The researchers guaranteed that the identities of the participants and their responses were kept anonymous and confidential. They also allowed participants sufficient time to express their experiences without any interruptions. Denzin (2009) highlighted the necessity of safeguarding the safety, rights, dignity, and privacy of individuals involved in the research. Furthermore, it is crucial to reduce any potential risks during the process of gathering their responses.

3.0 Results and Discussion

After an extensive analysis of the transcripts and coding, three (3) emergent themes have been identified, encapsulating the lived experiences of graduate students concerning their engagement with AI in their academic endeavors.

Emergent Theme 1: The Heavy Cloak of Language

The first theme explores the challenges students face in mastering the English language, using the metaphor of a heavy cloak to represent the emotional and mental burdens they carry. The participants described language learning as a complex and overwhelming process. They were filled with insecurities, struggled with new vocabulary, and had difficulties with comprehension. Interviews highlighted how these challenges significantly weigh on the students, causing them to feel pressured and uncertain in their pursuit of mastery. Despite these struggles, there is a clear desire to overcome these obstacles, as students aim to communicate with greater confidence and ease. The theme emphasizes the constant effort required to lift this "cloak" and achieve proficiency in English.

Within this emerging theme, there are five sub-themes: Mountains of Mastery, Shadows of Doubt, The Vocabulary Void, The Labyrinth of Comprehension, and Tides of Peer Pressure.

Theme 1: Mountains of Mastery

This theme explores the seemingly insurmountable challenges students encounter on their path to proficiency in the target language. Students in this research frequently expressed feeling overwhelmed by the sheer volume of content they were expected to master, likening it to an uphill struggle that often discouraged them. Table 1 presents the first subtheme, which illustrates the challenges students face in managing the vast amount of material required for language proficiency.

Table 1. Lived experiences of language learners in terms of overcoming challenges in achieving proficiency

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language learners' lived experiences in overcoming challenges to achieve proficiency	Overwhelming Content Load	Learners often feel burdened by the vast amount of vocabulary	Mountains of Mastery
	Struggles with Fluency and Retention	Difficulty in recalling and applying learned material	
	Motivation and Persistence	Emotional ups and downs, from self-doubt to breakthroughs.	

This statement from the participant revealed that even basic grammar can be a significant challenge in learning a language: English is tough for me, especially with its *grammar*. *I struggle to understand the rules. Sometimes, I make mistakes in using tenses (P1).*

In line with this, Özkayran and Yılmaz (2020) explained that learning a language involves not only grammar and vocabulary but also the development of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. Trying to learn all these at once can be overwhelming for students. Similarly, Hajiyevea (2024) found that viewing language learning as a set of difficult tasks often leads to anxiety and discouragement. This suggests that teachers should create straightforward and transparent steps to facilitate easier learning for students. Zhang et al. (2023) also noted that frustration and discouragement can impair students' ability to perform well and participate in class activities.

Theme 2: Shadows of doubt

The theme "Shadows of Doubt" encapsulates the insecurities and fears that students experience while navigating the complexities of learning English. Many participants articulated anxiety and uncertainty regarding their language abilities. Table 2 presents the second subtheme, Shadows of Doubt, emphasizing participants' feelings of anxiety and uncertainty about their language abilities.

Table 2. Lived experiences of language learners in terms of anxiety and self-doubt

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language learners' lived experiences concerning self-doubt in their proficiency journey.	Fear of Making Mistakes	Anxiety over pronunciation and grammar errors	Shadows of Doubt
	Lack of Confidence in Communication	Hesitation to speak due to fear of judgment	
	Overcoming Self-Doubt	Gaining confidence through practice	

These statements from the participants highlighted how self-doubt can hinder a person from participating or expressing their opinions: *I am excited, but sometimes I get frustrated when I do not understand the topic; I do not know how to express my thoughts in English (P2)*. Such responses reveal that personal fear is a significant barrier to effective language learning for students who hesitate to engage actively in class activities. In line with these thoughts, Liu et al. (2021) stated that anxiety related to language learning diminishes motivation and engagement, creating a vicious cycle where learners avoid participation out of fear of being judged. Similarly, the psychological effects of these "shadows of doubt" are well-supported by educational psychology research, particularly in studies emphasizing the importance of self-efficacy in language learning. Bandura's self-efficacy theory suggests that individuals with a strong belief in their abilities are more likely to embrace challenges and overcome obstacles (Bandura, 2019).

Theme 3: The Vocabulary Void

This theme focuses on the challenges students face when learning and using vocabulary to communicate in English. Many participants shared how difficult it is to understand new words, which sometimes makes them feel inadequate. These struggles illustrate the challenges students face in acquiring the vocabulary necessary to express themselves clearly in English. The theme emphasizes the importance of vocabulary in language learning and the challenges students encounter as they strive to enhance their vocabulary skills. Table 3 presents the third subtheme, The Vocabulary Void, which highlights participants' difficulties in learning and using new words effectively.

Table 3. Lived experiences of graduate school students concerning the effectiveness and accessibility of AI in education

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language learners' lived experiences concerning vocabulary challenges in their proficiency journey.	Difficulty in Retaining New Words	Struggles with memorizing and recalling vocabulary	The Vocabulary Void
	Limited Vocabulary for Expression	Inability to fully articulate thoughts	
	Dependence on Translation	Over-reliance on translating from the native language	

The statements from the participants indicate that the challenge of understanding new vocabulary is significant, as students frequently come across many unfamiliar words: *It is tough to understand different vocabulary. There are so many words that I cannot understand (P1)*. Moreover, the fear of mispronouncing words leads to anxiety, making it intimidating for some to speak in English. Another prevalent issue is the difficulty in comprehending required reading materials, which can be overwhelming for students who struggle to understand the content. In agreement with these outcomes, Alharbi (2021) found that vocabulary knowledge strongly predicts reading comprehension and other total language skills, indicating how students with limited vocabulary are enormously challenged in

academic and social contexts. Similarly, Hu and Nation (2020) argued that "improving vocabulary acquisition leads to better retention among students and increased concentration on strategies that fill gaps in vocabulary." In line with this thought, Kılıç and Uysal (2022) highlighted how a lack of vocabulary can lead to a failure to comprehend and a loss of confidence.

Theme 4: The Labyrinth of Comprehension

This theme highlights the challenges students encounter when interacting with English texts, whether written or spoken. Students express a deep struggle to make sense of the material, often feeling lost in the complexities of reading and listening comprehension. Despite their efforts, they struggle to extract meaning and connect ideas, which leads to frustration. This theme reflects their ongoing challenge to navigate the maze of English content, emphasizing the mental and emotional effort required to understand and process the language effectively. Table 4 presents the fourth subtheme, The Labyrinth of Comprehension, which caused frustration for participants as they faced difficulties in understanding English texts, connecting ideas, and processing spoken and written material effectively.

Table 4. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners Concerning the Challenges of Comprehending English Texts*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences Concerning Comprehension Challenges in English	Difficulty Understanding Spoken English	Struggles with accents, speed, and unfamiliar vocabulary in conversations	The Labyrinth of Comprehension
	Challenges in Reading Comprehension	Difficulty extracting meaning	

The statements of the participants signify that learners often face difficulties with specific aspects of language acquisition: *Reading comprehension is a challenge. Sometimes, I do not understand the meaning of the passages (P2).* Listening exercises can be tiring, and understanding various accents may present challenges, particularly in terms of listening comprehension. Additionally, reading comprehension can be a struggle, particularly when it comes to grasping the meaning of passages, which highlights the difficulty in interpreting written content. These challenges emphasize the obstacles learners encounter in developing proficiency in English.

Theme 5: Tides of Peer Pressure

This theme reflects the anxiety, self-doubt, and fear of judgment that many students experience while learning the language in a classroom setting. These feelings are often seen in expressions of pressure to perform well and the fear of making mistakes, highlighting the emotional challenges students face while actively engaging with the language. Table 5 represents the subtheme, Tides of Peer Pressure, which highlights how peer pressure affects participants by increasing anxiety, discouraging risk-taking, and shaping their confidence in language learning.

Table 5. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners with Peer Pressure and Its Impact on Confidence and Engagement*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences with Peer Pressure and Its Impact on Language Acquisition	Pressure to Perform Well	Feeling the need to meet high expectations	Tides of Peer Pressure
	Comparison with Others	Comparing progress with peers causes self-doubt	
	Social Influence on Learning	How peer interactions can either motivate or discourage learners.	

The statement from the participants reflects the emotional and psychological challenges that students face when learning English: *I know that English is important, but sometimes it is pressuring (P3).* Many students feel uncomfortable expressing their thoughts in English because they are scared of being judged by others. This fear can create significant barriers to their active participation and engagement in class activities. Additionally, while students understand the importance of mastering English, they often feel overwhelmed by the pressure to perform well, which can lead to stress and anxiety. These experiences align with the findings of Liu et al. (2021), who identified foreign language anxiety as a common challenge among language learners. They suggested that social

environments, particularly classrooms where peer judgments and evaluations are prevalent, can amplify these feelings of anxiety and discomfort. In a similar study, Rahimi and Katal (2012) explored the connection between anxiety and self-perceived competence in language learners. Their findings suggest that when students feel insecure about their language abilities, they are more likely to experience pressure and fear of failure, which can significantly hinder their progress.

Emergent Theme 2: The Dance of Engagement

This theme reflects the interactive and dynamic ways in which students participate in language learning. Participants highlighted the importance of collaboration, interaction, and feedback in creating an engaging learning experience. They expressed enthusiasm for engaging in activities that promote active participation, such as group work and peer feedback. At the same time, they emphasized the importance of continuous practice to improve their language skills. This theme encompasses four sub-themes: Symphony of Collaboration, Echoes of Feedback, and Yearning for Practice.

Theme 6: Symphony of Collaboration

The theme emphasizes the value of peer interactions, group activities, and teacher support in fostering a positive learning environment for students learning English. Participants expressed how collaborative learning experiences can enhance language skills by offering opportunities for mutual support, feedback, and collective problem-solving. This theme is mainly reflected in participants' experiences with group study sessions and peer interactions, where they feel more confident and supported in their learning journey. This table illustrates the sixth subtheme, Symphony of Collaboration, which emphasizes the role of peer interactions and group activities in enhancing language skills and fostering confidence.

Table 6. Lived Experiences of Language Learners on the Importance of Collaboration in Language Learning

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences with Collaboration and Peer Support in Language Acquisition	Group Study Sessions	Collaborative activities help learners exchange knowledge.	Symphony of Collaboration
	Mutual Motivation	Inspiring each other	
	Peer Support	Classmate support in learning and confidence-building	

These statements from the participants suggest that collaborative learning through group study sessions fosters a more supportive learning environment: *My classmates are willing to participate in group studies. It is easier when we help each other (P6)*. Participants emphasized the value of working together, noting that mutual assistance among classmates enhances their understanding and makes studying more manageable. Similarly, Lightbown and Spada (2021) postulated that cooperative activities, such as group discussions and peer reviews, play a crucial role in enhancing both language production and comprehension. These activities allow learners to engage actively with the target language in authentic and meaningful contexts. This aligns with the participants' reflections, as they emphasized that working closely with peers and receiving feedback from instructors significantly contributed to the improvement of their English language skills.

Theme 7: Echoes of Feedback

This theme examines the importance of feedback in language learning, highlighting its role in enhancing English proficiency. Participants claimed that feedback, whether from teachers, peers, or self-assessments, is essential in identifying areas for improvement and tracking progress. They noted that constructive and timely feedback helps them recognize their mistakes and motivates them to enhance their skills. However, some participants also expressed that without clear and helpful feedback, their learning process can become confusing or stagnant. Table 7 presents the seventh subtheme, "Echoes of Feedback," which highlights how participants rely on feedback from teachers, peers, and self-assessments to improve their language skills and track their progress.

Table 7. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners on the Importance of Feedback in Language Learning*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences with Feedback in Language Acquisition	Role of Feedback in Improvement	Helps learners refine their language skills	Echoes of Feedback
	Teacher Feedback	Guidance from instructors on grammar, pronunciation, and fluency	
	Motivation and Confidence	Encouraging feedback boosts confidence	

These statements from the participants suggest that while they appreciate the support provided by their teachers, they also face limitations in receiving individualized attention and detailed feedback: *'My teachers are supportive, but sometimes they do not have time to assist. ' They only discuss what we do (P5).* Some participants feel that teachers, though supportive, often lack the time to offer personalized assistance and tend to focus on general discussions of tasks. Additionally, there is a desire for more comprehensive feedback on assignments to help improve their work. On the positive side, students acknowledge the value of organized practice sessions, particularly for speaking, which significantly aid in improving their language skills. In line with these findings, Csizér and Albert (2024) emphasized that the purpose of error indication is not only to point out the incorrect expression but also to provide learners with an idea of how to improve it. This highlights the importance of not only identifying errors but also providing guidance on how to correct them, thereby offering learners strategies to avoid similar mistakes in the future. Feedback plays a crucial emotional role in the learning process; inadequate or poorly delivered feedback can lead to frustration and feelings of inadequacy, while constructive, actionable feedback fosters confidence and enhances learner engagement. Similarly, Li et al. (2019) posited that encouraging self-reflection and providing feedback with a clear improvement strategy makes the learner more independent and self-assured. Reflecting on similar observations, Tian and Zhou (2020) emphasized the importance of peer feedback in developing critical thinking and communication skills. When students receive feedback from peers, they are exposed to diverse perspectives and gain a deeper understanding of the material, thereby enhancing their overall learning experience. Therefore, a combination of teacher and peer feedback forms a robust support system that fosters language proficiency and personal growth.

Theme 8: Yearning for Practice

This theme emphasizes the importance of practical language use in enhancing English proficiency, particularly in speaking and real-life contexts. Participants expressed a strong desire for more opportunities to actively practice the language. They noted that the limited chances for practice in class often led to frustration and a sense of inadequacy, hindering their progress and confidence in using English effectively. Table 8 presents the eighth subtheme, Yearning for Practice, which explores how participants seek more chances to use English to improve their proficiency and confidence actively

Table 8. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners on the Importance of Practice in Language Acquisition*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences with the Need for Practice in Language Acquisition	Active Language Use is Essential	Practical application is key to improving English proficiency	Yearning for Practice
	Desire for More Engagement	Students actively seek more speaking and interaction opportunities	
	Frustration and Self-Doubt	Lack of practice leads to uncertainty and lower confidence.	

These statements from the participants suggest that there is a lack of speaking opportunities in the classroom, which hinders participants' ability to use and develop their English-speaking skills: *The speaking practice is lacking. We do not have much opportunity to speak in English in class (P6).* Additionally, there is a sense of discomfort and anxiety associated with using English, primarily due to the fear of being judged by others. These factors contribute

to students' reluctance to engage in speaking activities and hinder their confidence in using the language in real-life situations. In line with these findings, Nguyen and Hung (2021) demonstrated in their study that students who regularly engaged in group discussions, debates, and language exchange practices showed significant improvement in speaking skills. Given that a lack of speaking practice is a common challenge faced by many participants, it inhibits fluency. It transforms language learning into a purely conceptual experience rather than a practical one. Similarly, Santos et al. (2022) found that students who had opportunities to write and speak about personal experiences or engage in experiential learning activities retained more vocabulary and developed a better understanding of grammar. In this regard, the participants' desire for more practice extends beyond simply completing exercises in the classroom; they also seek opportunities to connect real-life experiences with formal education.

Emergent Theme 3: Treasures of Learning Tools

This theme highlights the various tools and resources that students utilize to enhance their English proficiency. Many students utilize digital platforms, such as language learning apps like Duolingo and Grammarly, to engage in interactive exercises and receive valuable feedback. This theme encompasses three sub-themes: Digital Pathways to Knowledge, Tales that Resonate, and Bridges of Language Exchange.

Theme 9: Digital Pathways to Knowledge

This theme examines how participants utilized digital tools and online resources to acquire English language skills. It demonstrates the positive impact of digital platforms on their language learning experiences, highlighting how these resources have supported and enhanced their language acquisition skills. Table 9 presents the ninth subtheme, Digital Pathways to Knowledge, which explores how participants utilize various online tools and platforms to enhance their English learning experience.

Table 9. Lived Experiences of Language Learners on Their Use of Digital Tools for English Learning			
Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Experiences with Digital Tools in Acquiring English Proficiency	Use of Digital Tools	Learners utilize online platforms to improve their English skills	Digital Pathways to Knowledge
	Accessibility and Convenience	Online tools allow learners to study anytime and anywhere	
	Enhancing Language Acquisition	Digital resources support learning	

These statements from the participants suggest that they actively seek various resources to enhance their English language skills: *Support from peers is great. They have many ideas that help with my studies (P7)*. Some participants are interested in enrolling in online courses to improve specific areas such as speaking and writing. Additionally, platforms like YouTube are recognized for their usefulness in providing valuable learning materials. The support from peers is also highly valued, with students acknowledging how collaborative environments and the exchange of ideas contribute positively to their studies. Correspondingly, Shamsuddin et al. (2024) introduced an interactive nature to their approach, which accommodates various learning styles and paces. This allows students to engage with the learning environment in a way that suits them best, utilizing tools such as online language learning applications, e-books, and educational videos. Ciftci (2024) supports this finding, noting that language learners who regularly engage with digital media, such as videos and podcasts, experience significant improvements in vocabulary retention and listening comprehension. This is attributed to their exposure to authentic language use, which enhances their understanding and retention of the language.

Theme 10: Tales that Resonate

This theme demonstrates that storytelling, personal narratives, and cultural experiences have a significant impact on the students' learning of English. Participants emphasized how engaging with stories through reading, listening, and speaking helped them better understand the language and retain their knowledge. Before discovering the impact of these storytelling methods, many found it challenging to connect with English in a meaningful way. However, exposure to these stories made the language feel more relatable and easier to grasp. Table 10 presents the tenth subtheme, "Tales that Resonate," which explores how participants engage with storytelling, personal narratives, and cultural experiences to enhance their English language learning.

Table 10. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners on Their Engagement with Storytelling for English Learning*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Experiences with Storytelling in Acquiring English Proficiency	Emotional Connection to Language	Learners connect deeply with English through relatable, real-life stories	Tales that Resonate
	Personal Narratives and Cultural Experiences	Stories create meaningful engagement	

The statements of the participants indicate that they have different preferences regarding the types of stories they find valuable for learning: *I like relatable stories (P4)*. Some participants are interested in stories that teach moral lessons or offer insights into ethical and wise living. In contrast, others prefer stories that are relatable and connected to their personal experiences. Both types of stories emphasize the importance of creating meaningful content that resonates with students, whether through life lessons or personal relevance. In line with these findings, Nguyen et al. (2020) postulated that storytelling not only enhances linguistic skills but also boosts cognitive abilities by fostering a more profound understanding through emotional and cultural engagement. By immersing students in stories, they connect with emotions, contexts, and character perspectives, which significantly strengthens both comprehension and retention. Similarly, Perry (2021) emphasized that culturally relevant narratives bridge theoretical knowledge with practical application, allowing learners to see language in action within real-life contexts. This type of learning is deeply rooted in cultural and social contexts, as students are regularly exposed to how language is used in everyday life. Additionally, McCracken (2024) explained that "the low-stakes, meaning-focused environment allows students to practice both receptive and productive skills, which reduces their anxiety and helps them connect more deeply with the material." This approach enables students to engage more fully, improving their understanding and emotional connection to the content.

Theme 11: Bridges of Language Exchange

This theme highlights the importance of cooperative learning and peer-to-peer interactions in language development. Participants emphasized that working with classmates and external partners helped them improve their English skills. These interactions provided valuable opportunities to practice, exchange ideas, and receive feedback, which contributed to their language growth. Table 11 presents the eleventh subtheme, Bridges of Language Exchange, which explores participants' experiences with cooperative learning and peer interactions in developing their English proficiency.

Table 11. *Lived Experiences of Language Learners on the Importance of Language Exchange in English Proficiency Development*

Subject Probed	Core Ideas	Code	Essential Theme
Language Learners' Lived Experiences with Peer Collaboration in English Proficiency Development	Cooperative Learning	Peer engagement enhances language skills	Bridges of Language Exchange
	Feedback and Corrections	Peer feedback improves grammar, pronunciation, and fluency	
	Peer-to-Peer Interactions	Peer interactions offer real-world language practice	

These statements from the participants suggest that they place significant value on external support and collaboration in their language learning journey: *It is very nice to have a language exchange partner; we could practice together. Sometimes, my siblings and I practice English conversations together. It is suitable for improvement (P7)*. The use of language exchange partners and peer interactions, such as practicing with siblings, is considered beneficial for enhancing language skills. Additionally, seeking help from family members, like having parents review assignments, highlights the importance of external guidance and support in the learning process. These interactions contribute to students' development and confidence in using the language. Correspondingly, Bui et al. (2021) emphasized the benefits of peer cooperation, stating that reciprocal teaching allows students to engage in mutual learning. This process not only benefits the learners but also strengthens their understanding of the language. By teaching others, students reinforce their language knowledge, which promotes better retention and greater confidence in using the language. Language exchange, in particular, reduces anxiety and fear of making mistakes, as it fosters a collaborative environment where learners share the same goals and support each other's growth. Similarly, Ji et al. (2022) highlighted the significant impact of collaborative involvement on enhancing

both language acquisition and emotional engagement in the learning process. Their findings emphasize that working together in a supportive environment plays a crucial role in fostering deeper language learning and greater student motivation.

4.0 Conclusions

The study on Grade 9 students' English proficiency provides a clear picture of how language learning challenges extend beyond linguistic difficulties, encompassing emotional barriers such as self-doubt, anxiety, and a fear of judgment. These internal struggles can prevent students from engaging in classroom activities, hindering their progress. Peer interactions, such as group work, provide a supportive environment that boosts confidence and motivates students to practice more. The study also highlights the importance of external resources, such as language apps and online platforms, in enhancing language skills, although access to these tools can be unequal. The findings suggest that a holistic approach combining psychological support, social interaction, and accessible learning resources is key to enhancing students' English proficiency.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

The authors confirm equal participation in all aspects of this work. Each has reviewed and approved the final version.

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7.0 Conflict of Interests

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

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