

Sociocultural Exploration of Acculturation in English Language Acquisition among Higher Education Learners

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Abstract

Filipino students often experience communication anxiety when using English, which can reduce their participation in classroom interactions and limit opportunities to develop speaking proficiency. Therefore, this study explored how English-speaking skills are developed through language acculturation from a sociocultural perspective. Students from Surigao del Sur, Philippines were purposively sampled to participate in one-on-one interview sessions. There were 18 university students who participated in the study. Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to explore how sociocultural contexts can be used as a mechanism for English language acquisition. The findings revealed that learners develop English proficiency through collaborative classroom experiences, positive learning cultures, continuous opportunities for authentic language use, supportive teacher–student relationships, and participation in academic activities that foster confidence, communicative competence, and academic identity. The study further emphasized that English language acquisition in Philippine higher education should be understood as a process of language acculturation shaped by social interactions and cultural experiences. Accordingly, higher education institutions should create inclusive and supportive learning environments by promoting teacher scaffolding, collaborative learning, interactive instructional strategies, and positive academic communities that encourage active participation, reduce communication anxiety, and enable learners to integrate successfully into English-mediated academic culture.

Keywords: classroom culture, communication anxiety, English language acquisition, language acculturation, sociocultural theory

Introduction

Despite English being widely used as a language in the Philippines, many Filipino students, particularly those whose first languages are Cebuano or Tagalog, continue to experience difficulties in learning and speaking English. Approximately 73% of students report that speaking English is particularly challenging at the secondary level, largely because of communication anxiety, which limits their confidence and willingness to express their ideas (Pontillas & Rodrigo, 2024).

This study aimed to explore the sociocultural processes underlying English language acculturation among higher education learners in the Philippine context. This study may be helpful in assisting schools in designing collaborative, learner-centered, and culturally responsive instructional practices that encourage meaningful interaction, active participation, and authentic language use.

Language acquisition and cultural adaptation are essential processes that influence individuals' identity development, social participation, and overall well-being (Pasquarella et al., 2025). As communities become increasingly linguistically and culturally diverse, it is important to understand how language

learning interacts with cultural integration, social relationships, and everyday experiences to support successful adaptation across different educational and social contexts.

There is a growing need to look on English language acquisition from the stance of sociocultural learning perspective. Language acquisition is understood as a socially mediated process in which learners develop linguistic competence through meaningful interactions with teachers, peers, and members of their academic and cultural communities. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, learning occurs first through social participation before knowledge is gradually internalized by the learner (Gabrielyan & Madatyan, 2025). Consequently, language functions not only as a medium of communication but also as a cultural tool that mediates thinking, identity formation, and participation in shared social practices.

Research has shown that higher levels of English proficiency and self-confidence facilitate communication, social integration, and cultural adjustment, whereas limited proficiency and communication anxiety can hinder participation and well-being (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020; Horne, 2024). Similarly, participatory instructional approaches, collaborative learning, and supportive teacher-student relationships have been found to strengthen learners' confidence, reduce anxiety, and encourage active engagement in English-mediated learning (Norman & Eslami, 2024; Santos et al., 2025).

Philippine schools are now facing the challenge of developing learners who are not only proficient in English but also confident and competent in using the language for meaningful academic and social communication. Although English is widely used as a medium of instruction in higher education, many students continue to experience communication anxiety, limited opportunities for authentic language use, and varying levels of linguistic preparedness resulting from diverse educational and sociocultural backgrounds (Adalia et al., 2026; Bagood & Cerna, 2026; Paraman, 2026; Pontillas & Rodrigo, 2024).

Many Filipino learners come from multilingual communities where local languages or Filipino dominate everyday communication, limiting authentic opportunities to use English outside the classroom. This study sought to understand how Filipino higher education learners experience the process of English language acculturation from a sociocultural perspective. Specifically, it asked questions such as how the use of English in academic settings influences learners' communication, participation, and social interactions; what classroom experiences, teacher support, and peer interactions help them adapt to using English more confidently; and what challenges they encounter during this process, including the strategies they employ to overcome these barriers.

Literature Review

English language proficiency is essential in successful cultural adaptation by facilitating communication, identity development, and integration into new social environments. Research indicates that higher levels of English proficiency, self-confidence, and acculturation increase learners' willingness to communicate and strengthen their social relationships and cultural adjustment (Aoyama & Takahashi, 2020). In contrast, limited English skills, communication anxiety, and experiences of discrimination can hinder integration and contribute to psychological distress, including anxiety and depression (Horne, 2024).

A sociocultural look on learning emphasized that reasoning, understanding, and memory develop through learners' interactions with parents, teachers, and peers. Based on his take on sociocultural learning, Lev Vygotsky views human development as occurring across cultural, interpersonal, and individual levels, with social experiences serving as the foundation of learning (Gabrielyan & Madatyan, 2025).

Sociocultural theory emphasizes that intellectual development is mediated by social relationships, cultural values, and symbolic tools (Legarde, 2026), particularly language, which enable learners to interpret and engage with their environments. Within this system, students' cognitive growth is shaped by the resources, opportunities, and social practices available within their families, schools, and broader communities, all of which influence the ways they acquire knowledge and develop literacy (Gee, 2023; Kumar et al., 2025).

Recent studies demonstrate that participatory and collaborative learning methods enhance learners' confidence, engagement, and language development in English education. Norman and Eslami (2024) reported that adult multilingual learners developed greater self-confidence and willingness to participate in English learning activities through participatory teaching methods and positive teacher-learner relationships. Likewise, Santos et al. (2025) found that involving learners in the co-design of curricula and program evaluation increased their sense of ownership while reducing learning anxiety. These findings are consistent with the principles of Community-Based Research in Education (Ghisso & Campano, 2024), which views learning as a collaborative process in which learners actively contribute to knowledge construction and participate in shaping educational practices that are responsive to their needs and communities.

Research demonstrates that acculturation plays a significant role in second language acquisition and bilingual development. Jasemi and Gottardo (2023) found that higher levels of acculturation were associated with better English reading comprehension among Iranian immigrants and refugees, highlighting the need for language programs that address learners' diverse linguistic and psychosocial needs. Similarly, Buttler et al. (2023) reported that parental acculturation influenced home language practices and children's heritage language development, emphasizing the importance of culturally responsive educational approaches that recognize the role of family and cultural environments in supporting language learning.

In Gabrielyan and Madatyan (2025), teachers should actively guide and support learners through instruction and collaboration to strengthen their cognitive development and learning abilities. This perspective has significantly influenced education by promoting guided learning and collaborative classroom practices as essential components of effective instruction.

In Masaki (2023), while identity was once primarily shaped by traditional social groups, modern society increasingly requires individuals to construct their identities through personal choices and self-directed behavior. Although these choices are made individually, they remain influenced by learners' sociocultural contexts. Teachers can support identity development by fostering self-regulation and helping students recognize their values, strengths, and goals within their social and cultural environments.

Despite the increasing recognition of sociocultural learning as an effective educational approach in many countries, its application within the Philippine educational context remains relatively limited. Mahilum and Escarlos (2025) emphasized the need to incorporate meaningful social interaction into instructional practices to foster learners' cognitive development alongside their social and emotional well-being. To expand the understanding, the present study explored how sociocultural principles can be applied to English language acquisition by examining learners' experiences of language acculturation within higher education.

Methodology

Research Design

This paper explored the perceptions and experiences of higher education learners about how acculturation in English language acquisition takes place in academic setting with emphasis on sociocultural perspectives. An exploratory qualitative design is an approach used to investigate phenomena that may have received limited attention in a particular context. Exploration aims to discover new insights by examining participants' perspectives, experiences, and interpretations, which identify emerging concepts, patterns, and relationships that may not be evident through structured or quantitative methods (Chavez et al., 2026).

Participants

The participants in this study were higher education learners from Surigao del Sur, Philippines. Purposive sampling was employed to identify and select participants who could provide rich and relevant

information regarding the phenomenon under investigation (Ahmad & Wilkins, 2025). The selection criteria included the following: (1) currently enrolled in a higher education institution during Academic Year 2025–2026; (2) regularly uses English as a medium of communication and instruction in classroom learning activities; (3) has experienced academic and social interactions that require the use of English with teachers, classmates, or other members of the academic community; (4) is willing to share personal experiences and perceptions related to English language learning and acculturation; and (5) voluntarily agrees to participate in the study by providing informed consent. There were 18 university students who participated in one-on-one interviews.

Instrumentation

Semi-structured interview questions were designed to extract narratives from the participants. The interview guide consisted of open-ended questions that encouraged participants to freely describe their thoughts, feelings, and experiences while allowing the researcher to ask probing and follow-up questions for clarification and deeper exploration of emerging ideas. This enabled participants to express their perspectives in their own words while ensuring that the discussion remained aligned with the objectives of the study (Chavez, 2025). **Table 1** presents the open-ended questions asked during the one-on-one interview sessions.

Table 1. Interview guide questions based on the study objective.

Objective	Interview Question	Purpose
To describe how language acculturation happens in higher education classrooms	1. Can you describe your experiences of using English in your classroom and how these experiences have influenced the way you communicate, participate, or interact with others?	To explore how learners experience English use in classroom interactions and identify the social and cultural processes that contribute to language acculturation.
	2. What classroom activities, interactions with teachers or classmates, or academic experiences have helped you adapt to using English more confidently? Can you share specific examples?	To identify the sociocultural factors, learning experiences, and forms of social support that facilitate learners' adaptation to English language use in higher education.
	3. What challenges have you encountered while adapting to the use of English in your academic environment, and how have you managed or overcome these challenges?	To examine the barriers learners face during language acculturation and the strategies they employ to negotiate linguistic, cultural, and academic demands.

Data Collection

Data collection was carried out through individual semi-structured interviews with each participant. Interviews were scheduled at a time and venue that were convenient for the participants. Interviews were conducted through an online videoconferencing platform to ensure accessibility and continuity of the data collection process.

Prior to the interviews, participants were informed about the purpose of the study and the procedures involved. Upon obtaining their consent, all interview sessions were audio-recorded to preserve the accuracy and completeness of the information shared. Each interview generally lasted between 30 and 60 minutes, although the duration varied depending on the richness of participants' narratives and the extent of discussion generated during the interview.

After the completion of the interviews, the audio recordings were transcribed verbatim to produce accurate accounts from the participants. The transcripts were subsequently verified against the original recordings to ensure transcription accuracy and data integrity. To maintain confidentiality and uphold ethical standards, participants' identities were safeguarded through the use of pseudonyms or alphanumeric identification codes. The verified transcripts constituted the primary qualitative dataset and were subjected to thematic analysis to identify recurring patterns, salient categories, and emergent themes that explained how language acculturation occurs in English language acquisition among higher education learners from a sociocultural perspective.

Data Analysis

Reflexive thematic analysis was conducted to identify, organize, and develop patterns of meaning embedded within participants' narratives. Reflexivity was practiced throughout the analytical process by continuously examining how the researcher's perspectives and decisions influenced data interpretation while striving to ensure that the resulting themes faithfully represented the participants' experiences and the purpose of the study (Toye et al., 2025).

The analysis involved repeated reading of the interview transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by the identification and coding of meaningful statements. Similar codes were grouped into broader categories, from which themes were developed, reviewed, and refined to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives. Throughout the process, the researcher practiced reflexivity by critically examining analytical decisions and interpretations while continuously revisiting the transcripts to ensure that the themes remained grounded in the participants' narratives (Xu, 2026).

Results

Question 1: Can you describe your experiences of using English in your classroom and how these experiences have influenced the way you communicate, participate, or interact with others?

Theme 1: Expanded Classroom Participation

Students perceived that speaking in English enabled them to participate more confidently in class discussions, oral presentations, group work, and other instructional interactions. As learners became more accustomed to using English as a medium of communication, they demonstrated greater willingness to express their ideas, ask questions, provide feedback, and contribute to classroom discourse. From a sociocultural perspective, this language serves as a mediating tool that facilitates meaningful participation in shared learning experiences and supports learners' integration into the academic community.

"At first, I was really shy to speak in English because I was afraid of making mistakes. But as our teachers kept encouraging us, I slowly became more comfortable joining class discussions."

"Using English in class made me participate more because I realized everyone was also trying their best. It gave me the confidence to share my ideas."

"Before, I just listened during discussions. Now I volunteer to answer questions because I'm more used to speaking English."

Theme 2: Negotiating Linguistic Identity

Students described experiences of overcoming communication anxiety, building self-confidence, and gradually perceiving themselves as capable English users through continuous classroom interactions.

Although many initially encountered linguistic and psychological challenges, continuous exposure to English-mediated learning environments contributed to increased self-efficacy, personal growth, and confidence in communicating with others. Essentially, language acculturation involves not only the acquisition of linguistic competence but also the transformation of learners' self-perceptions and identities within academic contexts.

"In my first year, I was always nervous whenever I had to speak English. After practicing every day, I became more confident and stopped doubting myself."

"I still make mistakes sometimes, but I don't feel embarrassed anymore. I know it's part of learning."

"Before, I avoided talking because I thought people would judge my pronunciation. Now I'm more focused on getting my message across."

Theme 3: Building Social Connections

Students emphasized that using English enhanced their interactions with classmates, instructors, and other members of the academic community by facilitating collaboration, knowledge sharing, and mutual understanding. Learners developed stronger peer relationships, established productive academic networks, and cultivated a greater sense of belonging within their educational environment through regular engagement in English-mediated communication. In this context, language acculturation is fundamentally a social process in which meaningful interactions support both language development and participation in the broader academic culture.

"Speaking English helped me communicate better with my classmates, especially during group activities. We understood each other more easily."

"I became closer to my classmates because we usually use English when working on projects. It made it easier for us to share ideas."

"Whenever we had group discussions, speaking English made everyone participate. It felt like we were all working toward the same goal."

Question 2: What classroom activities, interactions with teachers or classmates, or academic experiences have helped you adapt to using English more confidently? Can you share specific examples?

Theme 1: Collaborative Classroom Engagement

Students described classroom discussions, group projects, peer collaboration, role-playing activities, and cooperative tasks as opportunities to practice English in authentic and meaningful contexts. These shared learning experiences reduced communication apprehension, encouraged active participation, and allowed learners to develop linguistic competence through interaction with others. From a sociocultural perspective, collaborative engagement provides a social environment where language learning is co-constructed through dialogue, negotiation, and mutual support.

"Our group activities really helped me practice speaking English because we had to explain our ideas to each other."

"I became more confident when we worked in groups. My classmates were supportive, so I wasn't afraid of making mistakes."

"Role-playing activities were fun because they let me practice English in real-life situations instead of just reading from a book."

"Whenever we had partner work, I felt more comfortable speaking English because I was only talking to one person before sharing with the whole class."

Theme 2: Teacher Scaffolding

Students emphasized that constructive feedback, encouragement, guided questioning, modeling of appropriate language use, and the creation of a supportive classroom atmosphere strengthened their

confidence in communicating in English. In this process, teachers functioned as facilitators who scaffolded learners' development by providing appropriate guidance and opportunities for meaningful language use. This process enabled learners to progress beyond their current abilities through structured social interaction.

"Our teacher always encouraged us to speak English, even if we made mistakes. That made me feel more confident to try."

"Whenever I couldn't express my thoughts clearly, my teacher helped me find the right words instead of correcting me right away."

"My teacher gave feedback in a nice way, so I didn't feel embarrassed. It actually motivated me to improve."

"When I was struggling during presentations, my teacher encouraged me to continue instead of stopping. That really boosted my confidence."

"Our teacher created a classroom where everyone felt safe to speak English. We weren't afraid of being laughed at."

Theme 3: Academic Exposure and Continuous Practice

Students identified activities such as oral presentations, research reporting, classroom debates, academic writing, seminars, and everyday classroom communication as valuable opportunities to practice English in real academic situations. Repeated engagement with these authentic language experiences enabled learners to internalize English as a functional means of communication rather than merely an academic subject. Basically, language acculturation develops through continuous participation in English-mediated academic practices, building both linguistic competence and integration into the academic culture.

"The more presentations we had, the more comfortable I became speaking English in front of other people."

"Writing research papers in English helped me improve because I had to use the language regularly, not just during English class."

"Joining classroom debates forced me to think and respond in English. It was challenging at first, but it really helped me improve."

"Since most of our reports were in English, I eventually got used to organizing my thoughts and explaining them clearly."

"We use English almost every day in class, so it became part of my routine. It doesn't feel as difficult as it did before."

"Attending seminars where the speakers used English helped me become more familiar with academic words and expressions."

Question 3: What challenges have you encountered while adapting to the use of English in your academic environment, and how have you managed or overcome these challenges?

Theme 1: Overcoming Communication Anxiety

Students with fear, nervousness, and self-doubt while adapting to the use of English in academic settings. They reported concerns about making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, or being negatively evaluated by others, which initially limited their classroom participation. However, through repeated opportunities to speak, engage in discussions, and interact with classmates and instructors, they gradually became more confident in expressing themselves. In this process, language acculturation is facilitated by sustained participation in supportive social environments that reduce communication apprehension over time.

"I was really nervous every time I had to speak English because I thought my classmates would laugh if I made mistakes."

"At first, I avoided answering questions because I was afraid my grammar wasn't correct. As time went on, I became less worried."

"Whenever I spoke English, I kept thinking about my pronunciation. Eventually, I realized that trying was more important than being perfect."

"I used to get anxious during recitations, but after joining class discussions more often, I started feeling more confident."

Theme 2: Continuous Learning

Students made efforts to overcome linguistic barriers such as limited vocabulary, difficulties in pronunciation, grammatical inaccuracies, and challenges in comprehending academic English. They described actively improving their language skills through regular practice, reading academic materials, seeking feedback, expanding their vocabulary, and using English in both formal and informal contexts. Adaptation to an English-mediated academic environment is an ongoing developmental process supported by continuous engagement with meaningful language activities.

"I realized that the only way to improve my English was to keep using it every day, even if I made mistakes."

"Whenever I came across unfamiliar words, I looked up their meanings and tried to use them in my assignments and conversations."

"Reading books and journal articles in English really helped me understand the language better over time."

Theme 3: Supportive Academic Communities

Students emphasized the importance of social support in helping learners navigate the challenges of English language acculturation. They mentioned several mechanisms such as encouragement, guidance, and assistance they received from teachers, classmates, and peers, which enabled them to overcome linguistic and psychological barriers. Constructive feedback, collaborative learning, peer encouragement, and positive classroom relationships build a sense of belonging and motivated learners to persist despite difficulties. From a sociocultural perspective, language learning is a socially mediated process in which supportive communities promote both linguistic development and successful integration into the academic culture.

"My classmates always encouraged me to speak English, even when I wasn't confident. They never made me feel embarrassed."

"Whenever I had trouble expressing myself, my friends helped me find the right words instead of criticizing me."

"Our teachers were very patient. They corrected our mistakes in a way that made us want to keep improving."

"I felt more comfortable using English because everyone in our class was supportive and respected each other's efforts."

Discussion

English language acquisition has been widely recognized as a multidimensional process that involves cognitive, social, cultural, and communicative dimensions of learning. In this study, acquiring proficiency in English involves more than mastering grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation; it also requires learners to engage in meaningful interactions, participate in academic discourse, and adapt to the cultural norms and communicative practices not only inside their classrooms but also with English-speaking academic communities.

In sociocultural perspective, higher-order cognitive processes originate within social interactions and are subsequently internalized by individuals. This perspective explains that learning is fundamentally

shaped through social mediation and collaborative engagement with others (Osei-Himah & Naah, 2026). For example, Filipino students develop linguistic competence by actively interacting with teachers, classmates, and the broader academic community, where language serves as a tool for communication, meaning-making, and knowledge construction. Students acquire English not only through formal classroom instruction but also through continuous participation in academic discussions, collaborative projects, oral presentations, and other English-mediated learning experiences. These interactions expose learners to the linguistic norms, communicative practices, and cultural expectations associated with English use in academic settings.

An essential component of effective English language acquisition is the development of positive culture. Culture refers to the shared values, beliefs, norms, traditions, and practices that are cultivated over time and guide the behaviors and interactions of members within the educational community. Members should uphold common values and fulfill their respective roles in promoting the effective implementation of the educational process (Marisa & Santi, 2024). In English language acquisition, a positive learning culture is characterized by mutual respect, inclusivity, encouragement, collaboration, and acceptance of mistakes as part of the learning process. Such an environment reduces learners' anxiety and creates psychological safety, enabling them to practice English more confidently without fear of criticism or ridicule. From a sociocultural perspective, this positive culture facilitates language acculturation by promoting meaningful social interaction, active participation, and a sense of belonging, allowing learners to internalize English as a functional medium for academic and interpersonal communication.

A positive learning culture should also foster the development of students' academic identity. In this study, it was observed that as students engage in meaningful classroom interactions, receive constructive feedback, and experience encouragement from teachers and peers, they gradually develop a stronger sense of belonging within the academic community. This process strengthens their confidence in using English to communicate ideas, solve problems, and participate in scholarly activities (Hashmi, 2026).

Furthermore, effective English language acquisition also requires the provision of meaningful and continuous learning opportunities that allow students to actively use the language in authentic communicative contexts. Learners benefit from regular opportunities to engage in classroom discussions, collaborative projects, oral presentations, academic writing, and other interactive activities that encourage meaningful language use. These experiences enable students to apply their linguistic knowledge, receive constructive feedback, and gradually develop fluency and communicative competence (Marisa & Santi, 2024).

Being the individuals who interact most directly with learners, teachers are the primary drivers of English language acquisition and language acculturation within the classroom. Teachers shape the learning experiences that influence how students develop linguistic competence and adapt to the academic culture associated with English. For example, teachers are expected to establish classroom norms, create opportunities for meaningful interaction, and cultivate an environment in which learners feel encouraged to participate, ask questions, and express their ideas without fear of negative comments (Merdiaty & Sulistiasih, 2024; Sholeh et al., 2024).

A sociocultural perspective on English language acquisition in the Philippines remains relatively underexplored in existing literature. Although numerous studies have examined English proficiency, instructional strategies, language attitudes, and learning outcomes, comparatively few have investigated how social interactions, cultural experiences, and academic environments shape learners' adaptation to English within higher education.

This study recognizes that English language acquisition not only about the mastery of linguistic structures, but it also involves a dynamic process of language acculturation. This process is influenced by learners' interactions with teachers, classmates, and the broader educational environment. Based on sociocultural perspective, meaningful participation in classroom discourse, collaborative learning

experiences, supportive teacher–student relationships, and positive academic cultures primarily contribute to learners’ confidence and language competence.

Conclusion

From a sociocultural perspective, improving education requires shifting the focus from teaching English as a set of linguistic rules to creating learning environments where language is acquired through meaningful social participation.

The findings suggest that higher education institutions should cultivate inclusive classroom cultures that encourage active participation, collaborative learning, and authentic communication while minimizing learners’ fear of making mistakes. Teachers should serve as facilitators who provide scaffolding through constructive feedback, guided interaction, and emotionally supportive instruction that strengthens learners’ confidence and academic identity.

In addition, curricula should incorporate interactive activities such as group discussions, debates, presentations, peer collaboration, and research tasks that provide continuous opportunities to use English in real academic contexts.

Educational institutions should also promote supportive academic communities where learners feel respected, connected, and encouraged by both peers and instructors, recognizing that language development is built through shared experiences and social interaction. Sociocultural learning believes that higher education should enhance not only English language proficiency but also learners’ confidence, sense of belonging, communicative competence, and successful integration into the academic culture.

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