

# The Construct of Gender and Ethnicity in Language Proficiency of Post-Colonial Filipino ESL Learners

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## Abstract

Gender and Ethnicity are essential constructs considered to be interwoven with each other. They are imperative considerations in the study of language learning. However, there remain a dearth of investigations on language proficiency that have accounted both gender and ethnicity, specifically among post-colonial Filipino ESL learners. Against this context, employing a quantitative research design, the study investigated the difference in the English Language proficiency across gender and ethnicity. This cross-sectional investigation involved 620 secondary schools students sampled across three major ethnic groupings. The data revealed that there is gender difference in the English Language Proficiency (ELP) favouring the females. However, no significance is found between ELP and the variable ethnicity. Educational implications are provided for the findings.

**Keywords:** Gender, Language, English, Ethnicity, ESL learners

## Introduction

The study of gender and ethnicity as influencing factors to learning a second language (L2) has expanded over time. Both gender and ethnicity play vital roles as social constructs. As such, gender and ethnicity have become imperative variables in the investigations of carried out by different researchers. As proof, in the investigation of Torres and Alieto (2019a) with four hundred (400) pre-service teachers in two (2) state universities (one set in Luzon and the other in Mindanao), respondents' acceptability of Philippine English was explored in terms of difference according to gender. Additional is the investigation of Torres and Alieto (2019b) with one hundred sixty (160) senior high school students which investigated the difference on the gender difference of English motivation and self-efficacy among respondents. Another is the research work of Alieto (2018) involving one hundred twenty (120) prospective teachers who are at their penultimate year. The said study investigated the gender difference on the language attitude of the respondents towards Mother Tongue (MT) used as language of instruction (LoI) and MT as a subject. Moreover, the study also probed into the difference on willingness to teach in the MT and to teach the MT as a subject across gender. Extending the list is the investigation of Rillo and Alieto (2018b) which enlisted fifty-eight would-be English language teachers. The study looked into determining whether the respondents are positive or otherwise towards teaching Philippine English as a variant of English inside the classroom. Additionally, the investigation of Devanadera and Alieto (2019) with forty (40) children aged 5 to 6 years old explored the difference on lexical production across gender.

On the other hand, as regards the idea of being an extensively investigated construct, the same holds true with ethnicity as a variable. Example is the study of Wilson& Rodkin (2013) which aimed to determine whether or not ethnic segregation is associated with social status of the fourth and fifth grade African American and European American

children. The same study sampled across 713 children aging 9 to 11. Another example is the study of Green (2015) with 297 students enrolled in the pharmacy program. The study explored the contribution of ethnicity and English proficiency on the academic performance and progress of the respondents.

However, there remains to be few studies conducted on determining the English proficiency (EP) difference of Filipino high school learners across gender and ethnic groupings. With this need, this current investigation intends to explore the gender and ethnic differences on EP.

## **Review of Related Literature**

### **Proficiency in the English Language**

The belief that English is the most beneficial language to learn remains prevalent. The reason behind this is that English is perceived by many as the only language merchandisable in the world (Tupas, 2015 cited in Somblingo & Alieto, 2019). Thus, the dedication of educational systems, such as that of the Philippines, to train and develop proficiency in the English language among Filipino learners remains to one of the top goals. In fact, Abdon, Maghanoy, Alieto, Buslon, Rillo and Bacang (2019) explained that students, in the country, are faced with the need to attain competency not only in one language instead at the very least two languages – in the mother tongue and in the English language. Moreover, it can be noted, although the landscape of language-in-education in the country has recently been changed eventuating from the implementation of the K-12 curriculum which gave prominence on the use of mother tongue in early education, that the aim to attain good proficiency in English is still the primary concern of many teachers across the countries. Supportive of this is the point that the founding of the first language, which led to the teaching of the mother tongues in school, is founded on the idea that such would mean to better learning of the English language.

The appreciation and valuing afforded towards English is also contended to be based on the role it plays and the dimensions in which it is used. This means that because English is the language of chosen and used in schools and workplaces (in most cases) developing proficiency in it became an essential concern. Further, it could not be denied that since content subjects such as mathematics, science, and history among others uses English as medium of instruction the need to acquire proficiency in the said language greatly impacts performance in different subjects. With these mentioned benefits of gaining proficiency in English, although the enumeration is limited, are enough to logically believe that investigating proficiency in the English language of students in the post-colonial period is a relevant concern.

### **Gender**

Gender, indeed, is one concept that is complex to explain and understand (Bilaniuk, 2003). It means for the author that gender is not as simple as male and female, but one that is related to other social construct like religion, ethnicity among others. Similarly, Aydinoglu (2014) explained that gender and sex are two distinct things - while sex refer to the classification that relates to biological state of being a male and a female, gender on the hand is beyond the dual classification. However, Gormley (2015) argued that gender is the division made that separates male from female. At this juncture, the study adopts the definition that gender simply means being male and female as oppose to using the term sex. It as acknowledged that semantic difference may exist, but gender carries a euphemistic characteristic- hence the preference in this study. The main argument in the investigation of gender difference on English proficiency is that it is a variable extensively studied by renowned authors like Lakoff (1975). Over the years, investigating the influence of gender on different language-related constructs remain to be of interest among different researchers. Illustrative of this claim is the investigation conducted by Bacang, Rillo and Alieto (2019). The empirical study investigated and analyzed the influence of gender as regards the use of rhetorical appeals, hedges and boosters in argumentative essays. The study concluded that males prevalently use logical appeals; on the other hand, females extensively use emotional appeals in developing their essays. Addedly, females were found to use more hedges and boosters in comparison to their male counterparts. Another example is the experimental research of Ramos, Miñoza and Alieto (2019) which, as one of the goals, investigated the effect of gender (male and female) in the writing skills of the college students. However, the results of the said study disclosed that gender was found to have no influence on the writing skill of the respondents. Additional to the list is the investigation of Berowa, Ella and Lucas (2019) which determined the offensiveness of swear words as perceived by males and females. The study revealed that females are more offended with swear words than males. These list, although far from being exhaustive and complete, suggests that gender as a variable is an essential factor to consider and account. Therefore, in this present investigation, it is taken to

be a main variable in the investigation of learners' English language proficiency.

### **Ethnicity**

As an identity, ethnicity is a sense of belonging of a person within an ethnic group. Ethnicity is a shared ancestry or genealogy. Ethnic group may be traced back belonging to one family tree. There are blood relations as that of the Indigenous Peoples (IPs). People who belong to the same ethnic groupings have commonalities in their language, way of living, tribe, beliefs, and ideals. Ethnicity could also be an association or allegiance of group of people sharing the same cultural traditions, religious beliefs and social traits that is different from the others. Ethnicity is also a cultural phenomenon that characterized distinct populations. It is often based on religion, beliefs and customs as well as memories of migration or colonization (Cornell & Hartmann, 2007).

In the Philippines, with its 7107 islands ethnic groupings can be associated with the so called paternal lineage. Maternal lineage was also noted for the purpose of census. With this, either of the parents who is a member of an Indigenous group, belong to one ethnic identity. The different ethnic categorization in the Philippines was given by the NCIP or the National Commission on Indigenous Peoples and the NCMF or the National Commission on Muslim Filipinos whose responsibility is to safeguard the rights intended for these marginalized groups.

### **Research Questions**

The present study intended to answer the following specific questions:

1. What is the English proficiency of the respondents?
2. Is there a significant difference on the English proficiency of the respondents when data is grouped according to gender (male and female)?
3. Is there a significant difference on the English proficiency of the respondents when data is grouped according to ethnicity?

### **Hypotheses of the study**

$H_0$  – There is no significant difference on the English Proficiency of the respondents across gender.

$H_0$  – There is no significant difference on the English Proficiency of the respondents across ethnicity.

## **Methodology**

### **Research Design**

The study employed the use of a descriptive-quantitative research design. The study is noted to be descriptive as it intends to simply collect, tabulate and interpret data with the use of simple statistics to determine a phenomenon or trend (Johnson, 2000 cited in Perez & Alieto, 2018; Calderon, 2006 found in Rillo & Alieto, 2018a). Moreover, data utilized in the study come from secondary sources, the students' report card and were gathered through a short period of time; hence, the study is identified as cross-sectional (Setia, 2016 cited in Buslon & Alieto, 2019). Additionally, the study is considered to be non-experimental as no establishment of control group was realized and neither was there a use of treatment (Alieto, 2019).

### **Data Source**

Data gathered from the report cards are from 620 high school students aged 11-19 [Mean (M) = 14.26, Standard Deviation (SD) = 1.60] enrolled in a state-managed institution. In addition, the respondents' distribution in terms of ethnicity is as follows: 155 or 15.6% declared themselves as *Bisaya*, 358 or 35.9% reported to be *Chavacano*, and 107 or 10.7% are *Tausug*.

### **Data Analysis**

From the report cards of the students, only the final grades of the students in the subject English were taken and coded for analysis. The final grade is the average of four (4) rating periods. Moreover, gender is coded as: (1) for male and (2) for female. On the other hand, ethnicity is coded as: (1) for *Bisaya*, (2) for *Chavacano*, and (3) for *Tausug*.

Moreover, for the interpretations of the arithmetic score of the respondents' EP, the following scale, as provided

by Ronda (2012): Beginning (B) – grades below 75%, Developing (D) – 75% to 79%, Approaching Proficiency (AP) – 80% to 84%, Proficiency (P) – 85% to 89%, and Advanced (A) - 90% above.

### Procedure

Letters were sent requesting permission to access students' report cards. Upon approval, the researchers set a schedule with focal teacher assigned to assist the researcher. In the collection of the data, only the needed data was taken including respondents' gender and ethnic grouping. However, neither name nor other marker of identity was taken for confidentiality purposes.

### Statistical Tool

To determine the gender difference on the EP of the respondents, T-test for independent samples was used. In addition, to determine the difference of the respondents' EP across ethnic groupings, one-way analysis of variance (one-way ANOVA) was employed.

## Results and Discussion

### English Proficiency of the respondents

To determine the respondents' EP, the final grades in English were tabulated and computed. The data was analyzed using descriptive statistics [mean (M) and standard deviation (SD)]. Table 1 shows the analysis and interpretation.

Table 1

#### *Respondents' English Proficiency*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Interpretation
English Proficiency	85.39	5.692	Proficient

Legend: Beginning (B) – grades below 75%, Developing (D) – 75% to 79%, Approaching Proficiency (AP) – 80% to 84%, Proficiency (P) – 85% to 89%, and Advanced (A) - 90% above.

The table exposes the EP of the respondents. On the average, the respondents are noted to be 'Proficient' in the English language. However, the standard deviation suggests that the distribution of the grades is highly dispersed. In fact, the lowest grade noted is 71 while the highest grade is 98.

Further probing of the data revealed that 13 of the respondents have a level of proficiency below 75% and determined as '*beginning*'. In addition, one hundred eight (108) of the respondents are noted to be of '*developing level*'. On another hand, one hundred twenty-five of were determined to be at the '*approaching proficiency*' level. As regards respondents' at the level characterized as '*proficient*', two hundred twelve (212) were identified. In addition, the remaining number of respondents (160) is at the '*advanced*' level.

It can be inferred from the data that most of the respondents are able to obtain favorable level of English proficiency. This means that respondents find benefit in learning the language. It is speculated that the respondents associate the language with economic and symbolic gains, and because of this association they are positive and motivated towards learning it (Tupas, 2015).

### Gender Difference on EP of the respondents

To determine the gender difference on the EP of the respondents, the final grades were analyzed using the statistical treatment known as t-test for independent sample. Table 2 provides the analysis and interpretation.

Table 2

#### *English Proficiency of the respondents across gender*

Variable	Mean	Standard Deviation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Gender	Male (1)	83.46	0.000*
	Female (2)	86.72	

\*significant at alpha = 0.01

Table 2 presents the gender difference on the EP of the respondents. The statistical treatment of the data revealed that there is a significant difference on the EP of the respondents favouring the females. This suggests that the females are at an advantage in terms of English language proficiency as compared to their male counterparts in the study.

The result of the study suggests a difference in the language interest between the male and female respondents. Women are noted by research (e.g. Gal, 1978; Wang & Ladegaard, 2008; Zhang, 2011) to really differ with men in terms of language learning motivation, preference and use. Zhang (2011) explained that females prefer to learn 'high' or 'prestigious' languages while males prefer learning local ones. This result, to an extent, reflects the said report as females are showing higher EP when compared with those of the males in this study.

### **Ethnic Difference on the EP of the respondents**

To determine the ethnic difference on the EP of the respondents, the final grades were analyzed using the statistical treatment known as one-way analysis of variance also known as one-way ANOVA. Table 3 shows the analysis and interpretation.

Table 3

#### *English Proficiency of the respondents across ethnic groupings*

English Proficiency	Mean Square	Sig.
Between Groups	67.62	0.124
Within Groups	32.28	

Table 3 gives the ethnic difference on the EP of the respondents. The data revealed that there is no significant difference on the EP of the respondents when data are grouped according to ethnicity. This means that ethnicity is not a variable influencing significant difference on EP. The reason seen to explain this is that the respondents coming from different cultural grouping have similar intention in learning the language. Learning English is important for many reasons. One and perhaps the greatest is that it is the main language used to teach other subjects in school. Because of this, if students do not learn the language well, it would mean academic failure. Thus, as students aim to pass and even excel in academic, English learning is an essential thing to realize for all students regardless of ethnic grouping.

### **Conclusion**

This investigation on the English language proficiency of high school students across gender and ethnic grouping provides reasonable conclusions: One, although most of the students have a favorable level of proficiency in the language in question, they are yet to develop total mastery of the English language. Second, the study confirms the existence of gender difference on the ELP with females having the advantage. Last, ethnicity is not a factor influencing significant difference on the ELP of the respondents.

### **Pedagogical Implications**

Drawn from the findings of the study, the following implications are provided: One, as males are found to be less proficient than females in the study, teachers take time to reflect as regards the different language activities provided or given inside the classrooms. This means that performance and outputs directed towards certain language-proficiency goals should not be the kind that would favor a particular gender. This means gender-fair approach should be a main consideration for teachers in planning, devising and carrying-out tasks. Two, the result of the study suggests that females prefer learning English. Hence, teachers must provide lectures on the importance of gaining proficiency in the English language. However, the lectures must be supplemented with different real-life language use and performance which would lead students to find 'true' importance and need for the target language. This practice would lead students to appreciate learning the language regardless of gender and ethnic grouping.

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