



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Acquisition in a Multilingual Context: Challenges and Implications for English Language Learners at Basilan State College

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ARTICLE INFO**ABSTRACT**

Received: MAY 25, 2026

Accepted: JUNE 19, 2026

Keywords

Language Acquisition, Second Language Acquisition, Multilingualism, English Language Learning, Basilan State College

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Language acquisition in multilingual communities presents unique challenges that differ substantially from monolingual contexts. Basilan, a highly multilingual island province in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), is home to speakers of Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, Tagalog, and English, among other languages. This article examines how first and second language acquisition (SLA) processes unfold among students at Basilan State College (BaSC), with particular attention to the influential factors that either facilitate or impede English language acquisition. Drawing on existing theories and empirical studies, the article discusses the roles of age, motivation, affective factors, instruction, and the multilingual environment in shaping students' acquisition of English as an additional language. Implications for English language teaching in higher education institutions in Basilan are likewise presented.

INTRODUCTION

Language acquisition is among the most extensively studied phenomena in linguistics, yet its complexities continue to generate debate among scholars and practitioners. In the Philippines, English occupies a unique position as one of two official languages alongside Filipino, and it serves as the primary medium of instruction in higher education. However, for students in linguistically diverse regions such as Basilan, acquiring English entails navigating a complex web of competing linguistic influences.

Basilan State College (BaSC), the only state college in the island province of Basilan, enrolls students whose linguistic backgrounds are remarkably diverse. Many BaSC students are native speakers of Yakan or Tausug, have acquired Chavacano or Filipino as additional community languages, and encounter English primarily in formal academic settings. This layered linguistic reality means that for most BaSC students, English is not a second but rather a third or fourth language acquisition challenge (a context that existing SLA frameworks must account for carefully).

Krashen (1985) draws a foundational distinction between language *acquisition* (a subconscious, natural process driven by meaningful interaction) and language *learning*, which is a conscious, rule-governed activity typical of formal classroom instruction. This distinction is particularly relevant in the BaSC context, where English exposure is largely confined to the classroom, with limited naturalistic opportunities for acquisition outside of it.

This article builds on the foundational work of Marzuki (2012) and other scholars to examine the factors that influence language acquisition among BaSC students, with special reference to their multilingual backgrounds and the institutional role of BaSC in mediating English acquisition. The goal is to contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of SLA theory and practice in BARMM and similar multilingual Philippine settings.

First and Second Language Acquisition: A Theoretical Overview

Defining Language Acquisition

Language acquisition refers to the subconscious process by which individuals internalize a language to the point of natural use, without necessarily being aware of the grammatical structures they are employing (Krashen, 1985). This contrasts with language learning, which involves explicit attention to form and rule memorization. While both processes contribute to linguistic competence, acquisition is widely regarded as the more durable and communicatively functional of the two.

For students at BaSC, this distinction carries practical weight. A student who has grown up speaking Yakan at home has *acquired* Yakan rather than *learned* it; the same student who studies English grammar rules in a classroom setting is, in Krashen's framework, *learning* rather than *acquiring* English. The challenge for language educators at BaSC, therefore, is to create conditions that foster genuine acquisition rather than rote learning.

First Language Acquisition (FLA)

First language acquisition (FLA) is the process by which children naturally internalize their mother tongue during early childhood. Cook (1969) notes that FLA typically occurs within the first years of life, driven by the child's innate capacity for language and reinforced by constant, meaningful interaction with caregivers. Children acquiring their first language demonstrate remarkable speed and accuracy, attaining near-perfect phonological and grammatical competence without explicit instruction (Lenneberg, 1967).

In Basilan, the first language for many children is Yakan, Tausug, or Chavacano. These languages are acquired in the home and community, forming the linguistic foundation upon which subsequent languages are built. Understanding this foundation is essential for BaSC educators, as it shapes the strategies, attitudes, and prior knowledge that students bring to English language classrooms.

Second Language Acquisition (SLA)

Second language acquisition refers to the process of acquiring any language beyond the first, regardless of whether it is technically the learner's second or fifth language (Ellis, 1994). At BaSC, English functions effectively as a second (or later) language for most students. SLA is generally a slower, more effortful process than FLA, influenced by a wide array of cognitive, affective, and contextual variables (Lightbown & Spada, 2013).

A critical concept in SLA is the role of *comprehensible input*, language that is slightly above the learner's current competence level (Krashen, 1985, *i+1* hypothesis). In the BaSC classroom, ensuring that English input is comprehensible without being oversimplified is a persistent pedagogical challenge, particularly in content-area subjects where both language and disciplinary concepts are new to students.

FACTORS INFLUENCING LANGUAGE ACQUISITION AT BaSC

Several factors shape the nature and pace of language acquisition among BaSC students. These factors, as identified in SLA literature, interact with the specific sociolinguistic realities of Basilan to produce outcomes that are distinct from those observed in more homogeneous linguistic settings.

Age

Age is among the most widely discussed variables in SLA research. The Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), first proposed by Lenneberg (1967), posits that language acquisition is most efficient before puberty, after which neurological plasticity decreases and acquisition becomes more effortful. Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003) provided critical empirical evidence questioning the existence of a sharp critical period, suggesting instead a gradual decline in acquisition ease across the lifespan.

For BaSC students, who are typically between 17 and 25 years of age, this has significant implications. Most have passed the putative critical period for effortless language acquisition. Johnson and Newport (1989) found that individuals who begin learning a second language after puberty rarely attain native-like proficiency, particularly in phonology. This is consistent with the observable reality at BaSC, where students often demonstrate a strong L1 accent when speaking English and face difficulties with English phonological distinctions that do not exist in their native languages.

Nonetheless, older learners possess compensatory advantages. Ehrman and Oxford (1995) note that while younger learners are more likely to attain native-like pronunciation, older learners bring superior metacognitive strategies, greater world knowledge, and stronger analytical skills that can accelerate grammatical comprehension. BaSC educators can leverage these adult learning strengths by incorporating explicit grammar discussion, strategy training, and content-based instruction into the English curriculum.

Motivation

Motivation is widely recognized as one of the strongest predictors of SLA success. Gardner and Lambert (1972, as cited in Dörnyei, 2001) distinguish between *integrative motivation* (the desire to identify with the target language community and *instrumental motivation*) the desire to acquire language for practical benefits such as employment or academic achievement.

In the BaSC context, instrumental motivation predominates. Students frequently cite career advancement, passing licensure examinations, and academic performance as primary drivers of their English language efforts. Dörnyei (2001) argues that instrumental motivation, while powerful in the short term, may be less sustaining over the long course of language development than integrative motivation. Cultivating a genuine appreciation for English as a medium of intellectual and professional engagement (rather than merely a hurdle to pass) is an important goal for BaSC's BAELS Department.

Affective Factors

Krashen (1985) proposes the Affective Filter Hypothesis, which holds that emotional states such as anxiety, low self-esteem, and low motivation act as a "filter" that impedes the intake of comprehensible input. When the affective filter is high, learners may receive input but fail to internalize it effectively.

Among BaSC students, English language anxiety is a documented and observable phenomenon. Many students report feeling embarrassed or fearful when required to speak English in class, particularly those whose home languages are phonologically and structurally distant from English. Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986) identify foreign language anxiety as a distinct form of situational anxiety with measurable negative effects on language performance. Creating a low-anxiety classroom environment (through supportive feedback, meaningful communicative tasks, and culturally responsive teaching) is therefore not merely a matter of student comfort, but of pedagogical effectiveness at BaSC.

Instruction

The nature of formal instruction plays a decisive role in SLA, particularly for learners whose opportunities for naturalistic acquisition are limited. Long (1983, as cited in Lightbown & Spada, 2013) argues that *interaction* is the mechanism through which acquisition occurs, as negotiation of meaning during communication drives learners to notice gaps in their linguistic knowledge.

At BaSC, English instruction occurs primarily through teacher-fronted lectures and written exercises, with limited structured opportunities for genuine communicative interaction. Shifting toward more communicative language teaching (CLT) approaches (including task-based activities, pair work, debates, and academic writing workshops) could better support acquisition processes. The BAELS Department is positioned to lead this pedagogical transition, ensuring that classroom instruction at BaSC aligns with contemporary SLA principles.

Multilingual Background and Code-Switching

A factor particularly salient at BaSC is the students' multilingual repertoire. Unlike learners in bilingual (L1-English) contexts, BaSC students operate across multiple languages daily. Research on multilingualism suggests that the presence of multiple prior languages can both facilitate and complicate additional language acquisition. Cenoz (2003) finds that multilingual learners often demonstrate greater metalinguistic awareness and communicative flexibility than bilinguals, advantages that can benefit English acquisition when properly channeled.

However, frequent code-switching among Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, Filipino, and English can also create interference patterns in phonology, syntax, and lexis. Cummins' (1979) Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis offers an important insight: proficiency in one language provides a foundation (the *Common Underlying Proficiency*) that supports acquisition of additional languages, suggesting that strengthening literacy in students' home languages may indirectly enhance English acquisition at BaSC.

The Critical Period Hypothesis in the Basc Context

The Critical Period Hypothesis remains a central theoretical debate in SLA research. Lenneberg (1967) originally proposed that the window for optimal language acquisition closes at puberty, after which acquiring a language to native-like levels becomes progressively more difficult. Subsequent studies have either contested or nuanced this claim. Hyltenstam and Abrahamsson (2000) argue that native-like attainment in a second language is extremely rare among post-pubescent learners, even those with decades of exposure. Conversely, Ioup et al. (1994) documented the case of an adult learner who attained near-native proficiency in Arabic in a naturalistic setting, challenging the notion of a hard biological constraint.

For BaSC, the CPH debate translates into practical questions: Should the institution concentrate resources on intensive English immersion during the early college years? How should instructors respond to persistent pronunciation and grammatical fossilization in older students? The scholarly consensus, reflected in Hakuta, Bialystok, and Wiley (2003), suggests that while full native-like acquisition is unlikely for post-critical-period learners, high functional proficiency is entirely achievable given adequate input, motivation, and quality instruction.

Snow and Hoefnagel-Hoehle (1978) found that in the early stages of SLA, older learners outperform younger ones on many measures, benefitting from their cognitive maturity. This finding is encouraging for BaSC's predominantly adult student population: with structured instruction and a supportive environment, meaningful and functional English acquisition is well within reach.

IMPLICATIONS

The analysis presented in this article yields several concrete implications for English language education at Basilan State College.

First, instruction must be communicative and interactive. Given that BaSC students have limited naturalistic exposure to English outside the classroom, instruction must compensate by providing rich, meaningful, and interactive language use opportunities within academic settings. The BAELS Department should prioritize communicative language teaching methodologies across all English courses.

Second, affective support is pedagogically essential. English language anxiety among BaSC students is real and consequential. Faculty should be trained in strategies for reducing anxiety, validating students' multilingual identities, and building confidence through scaffolded speaking and writing tasks.

Third, the multilingual context should be treated as an asset, not a deficit. The linguistic diversity of BaSC students (their competence in Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, and Filipino) represents a rich cognitive and communicative resource. Curriculum designs that build on students' existing linguistic knowledge (e.g., cross-linguistic comparisons, translanguaging activities) are likely to be more effective than approaches that simply suppress L1 use.

Fourth, motivation must be cultivated beyond the instrumental. While career and academic goals effectively mobilize students' short-term efforts, the BAELS Department should also create

opportunities for students to engage with English as a language of intellectual inquiry, creative expression, and cultural exploration (building more integrative forms of motivation over time).

Fifth, ongoing research at BaSC is needed. The SLA literature is largely drawn from North American and European contexts. Research grounded in the specific sociolinguistic conditions of Basilan (including the roles of Yakan and Tausug as L1s, the influence of the BARMM educational context, and the particular challenges of English-medium higher education in post-conflict communities) is essential for developing locally relevant and evidence-based language education policies.

CONCLUSIONS

Language acquisition is a multifaceted process shaped by age, motivation, affect, instruction, and linguistic environment. For students at Basilan State College, the complexity of this process is amplified by their multilingual backgrounds and the particular sociolinguistic conditions of Basilan. This article has argued that SLA theory, when applied attentively to the BaSC context, yields insights that challenge simplistic assumptions about English learning and point toward more nuanced, culturally responsive, and pedagogically effective approaches.

The BAELS Department at Basilan State College is positioned at the frontline of this challenge. By integrating communicative instruction, affirming students' multilingual identities, reducing language anxiety, and fostering deeper motivational engagement with English, BaSC can equip its graduates with the communicative competence required for professional success (while honoring the rich linguistic heritage of Basilan).

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