

## PHENOMENOLOGY OF LANGUAGE SENSITIVITY IN THE CLASSROOM

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### ABSTRACT

*The study examined the phenomenon of language sensitivity in the classroom. Specifically, it identified students' lived experiences of their language interactions with peers and their teachers and developed a language sensitivity model in the classroom. It made use of qualitative design, employing the phenomenological approach by Moustakas (1994) which in this study, essentially focused on the meanings of the experiences of the participants on language sensitivity in classroom context. The study's findings revealed positive and negative experiences of the students as to interactions with peers and teachers in the classroom. Positive experiences are categorized into politeness, while negative experiences are categorized into themes: bullying, profane language, culture-biased language, and sexism. It was further revealed that language sensitivity cycles in the classroom in terms of language interactions with peers and the teacher, and both teachers and students choose positive or negative language interactions. Finally, the study concludes that the more negative language interactions occur in the classroom, the lesser the language sensitivity that arises, while the more positive interactions occur, the greater the language sensitivity that arises.*

*Keywords: Language interactions, Language sensitivity, Lived experiences, Phenomenology*

### INTRODUCTION

Where there is language, there is a phenomenon. Humans are social beings, who make use of language as means of communication – communicate one's being, moral dispositions, capabilities and abilities, and one's freedom of expression in all aspects of life. Indeed, it makes every moment of language use count. For the past decades, research on language was consistently conducted. They all described the complexity of the human language – Cong & Liu (2014) on the complex multi-level system of human language, Mufwene (2013) on the complexity of the evolution of language, and Nettle (2012) on the structural

complexity of human language. Its complexity left researchers with many considerable factors that may affect the use of language, like age, gender, economic status, place of origin, religion, and culture.

Language is man's potent tool because it is impossible to imagine our existence without language. All our forms of expression, such as aspirations, personalities, emotions, achievements, and relationships, are transmitted through language. In the same situation in the school, language facilitates understanding and learning because it is the only means for teachers and learners to exchange information.

In a school, where teachers encounter diverse learners, communication is a practice that



must be carried out with great sensitivity. Considerably, every means of teaching is language; hence, there is a need for language to be expressed appropriately to avoid miscommunication. The school, which can be considered the second home for the learners, is where they spend five days a week more than the days they spend with their families. Thus, interacting with other learners of different cultures, religions, economic statuses, and other aspects denoting differences is inevitable.

It was contended that all teachers are language teachers (Fan, 2013; Crusan, 2017), whether teachers of language subjects or content subjects. The moment he talks during classroom instruction, he is not only facilitating learning but also the acquisition of the language. That is why the language teacher is the number one factor that must emulate sensitivity to language.

Expounding on Stempleski (2003), sensitivity to language may fall into two groups: 1) words that may offend – to avoid using words that might offend or upset other people; and 2) words that avoid giving offense – to use the appropriate words when talking or writing about a sensitive topic. She further identified common sensitive topics such as racial and ethnic groups, gender, age, illness and disability, sexual preference, and titles.

Further, in medicine, language sensitivity is also seen as vital in approaching patients. Aycock et al. (2017) developed the RESPECT model, a mnemonic for Rapport, Environment/Equipment, Safety, Privacy, Encouragement, Caring/Compassion, and Tact. This framework was used to remind health workers about the importance of sensitivity in communicating with patients because it was believed that insensitive use of language could negatively affect patients' outcomes and satisfaction.

The same situation is in the classroom; students are like teachers' patients needing attention as they are involved in the teaching-learning process. Here, teachers need to contemplate the following pedagogical considerations: (1) All teachers are language teachers (Fan, 2013; Crusan, 2017); (2) Every means of teaching is the language which is why there is a need for language is expressed appropriately to avoid miscommunication as

Tejeda & Santos (2014) noted in their study, "only teacher pronunciation instruction is necessary when learning English as a foreign language"; and (3) Language teacher is the number one factor that must emulate sensitivity to language.

Hence, in a school where language facilitates learning, there is more reason to further inform the learners and the teachers about their use of the language – verbally and nonverbally.

Subsequently, Kalinga State University, Philippines, is concerned with the total development of students through quality education. Hence, strategic decisions plan the teacher talk and choose the most appropriate teaching-learning strategy. Teachers do mostly the talking in class, being the number one source of information, and they have their approaches, styles, and techniques of teaching. Hence, students may emulate the teacher's language use unconsciously. That is why teachers need to be sensitive enough to the use of language in class.

Therefore, this study was conceptualized to further disseminate awareness of language sensitivity, especially among students and teachers.

## OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

This study aimed to analyze the lived experiences of the students of Kalinga State University on language sensitivity in the school context.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following:

1. to identify the themes of the lived experiences of the participants in their interactions at school;
2. to determine the essence of the meaning of the experiences of the participants relating to language sensitivity; and
3. to develop a language sensitivity model in the classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

The study made use of qualitative design, employing the phenomenological approach by

Moustakas (1994). The phenomenological approach aims at analyzing the lived experiences of the participants, with which in this study essentially focused on the meanings of the experiences of the participants on language sensitivity in a classroom context.

This study was conducted among Kalinga State University students, using a purposive selection of participants. Faculty contacts from the different colleges identified willing students to undertake the narrative essay writing activity. From there, the researchers chose 4 from each college. Those who willingly underwent the narration activity and who could express themselves well were 25 students, count: College of Liberal Arts (5); College of Business, Entrepreneurship, and Accountancy (4); College of Agriculture (4), College of Criminal Justice Education (4), College of Education (4), and the College of Engineering and Information Technology (4).

Moreover, the researchers used written narrative essays to gather first-hand data on the participants' lived experiences on the phenomenon of language sensitivity. After receiving repetitive responses and there was a high rate of duplication or recurrence of data, the researchers called it saturation and stopped.

Data analysis was partly adapted from the phenomenological research procedure by Clark & Minami (2015) – recorded interviews, transcription, reduction, regrouping, and coding. The only difference with this study is the use of narrative essays or written lived experiences of the participants instead of pure interviews. This is the reason that some students could share their experiences better when it is written. In order not to limit what the participants would be able to share, the researchers gave them enough time to write their experiences which lasted about 40 to 60 minutes.

With that, themes were extracted through reduction and coding. Only the experiences related to the study were extracted on reduction, while on coding, experiences were classified according to themes. Finally, the essence of each theme identified was interpreted according to the questions posted in this study.

Further, ethical considerations were accentuated. Hence, the participants were not forced to undertake in the study unless they were

willing. Even after the conduct of this study, the researcher nor the research assistants were mandated to not use any information of the participants nor the data gathered unless permitted.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

### 1. Lived Experiences of Students as to Phenomenon of Language Sensitivity

It was found that there are 25 common lived experiences of the students as to language phenomena on language sensitivity with their peers and with their teachers; 15 with peers and 10 with teachers, respectively. Language phenomena may imply occurrences in the classroom as uncommonly experienced by students. They may occur at minimal frequency; however, the impact may be greater than their occurrence that they are still lived by the participants up to the very present.

Moreover, language phenomena can also be categorized as to positive or negative phenomena. Under language phenomena with peers, 13 or 75% are negative experiences while only 2 or 15% are positive; and as to the language phenomena with teachers, 7 or 70% are negative experiences while only 3 or 30% are positive (Figure 1).

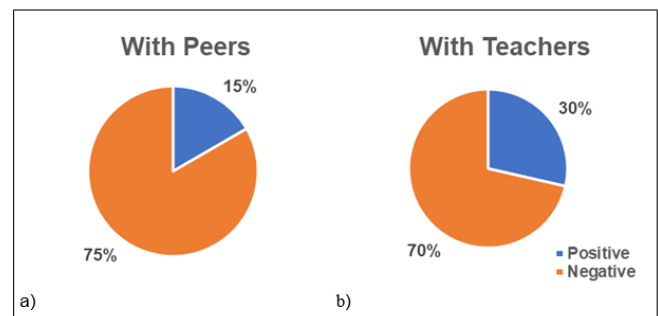


Figure 1. Prevalence of Positive and Negative Language Phenomena

The number of positive experiences under the category with peers (15%) and teachers (30%) implies that the students emphasize their negative experiences more than the positive ones. Medical studies explain that experiences of extreme

happiness, tragedy, or humiliation cause nor-epinephrine release into the brain (Tesh, 2020; Dahl, 2020). The chemical then causes the brain to value such experiences so that an individual may re-live the memories over again. That is why such questions as *“What is your happiest moment or most embarrassing moment?”* are commonly asked in slum books students.

Further on the positive and negative lived experiences, we can label the positive experiences of students with peers and with teachers as to the theme politeness.

### 1.1. Politeness

Politeness is apparent among students and teachers as to the use of polite strategies a) *“Calling someone by surname when in formal situations,”* which is observed in experiences: (1) *“I call my classmate by her name, or I say bes if we are close; if not, I call her/him by her surname, or I say Ms. or Mr”* with peers and (2) *“I like it when my teacher calls me by my surname because it is formal and I feel like I am in the classroom”* and (3) *“Our teachers usually call us by our surnames like ‘Mr. Santos’ or ‘Ms. Mendoza”* with teachers; b) the use of *“courteous words”* in experience (4) *“I use courteous expressions like please, may I, ma’am/sir”* with peers; and c) the *“integration of values through sayings or insights”* in experience (5) *“I am motivated to study when my teacher shares beautiful sayings. I also learn many life lessons from her”* with teachers.

The above-cited experiences draw insights from Yule (2010) that politeness has to do with being tactful, modest, and nice to other people. It implies that the most relevant concept is *“face”* (Brown & Levinson, 1987). He made mentioned that the face is the public self-image. This is the emotional and social sense of self that everyone has and expects everyone else to recognize. Like the teacher and the students, they eventually use politeness strategies to save their faces or public self-image, as previously mentioned. Thus, politeness can be defined as showing awareness and consideration of one’s face. On the other hand, Xi et al. (2015) concluded that politeness is

manifested in classroom talk, such as making effective communication, keeping friendly relations with students, and saving students’ faces.

Moreover, Monsefi & Hadidi (2015) revealed in their study that the use of more polite strategies by teachers positively affected the teacher-student interaction and learning process. As revealed in this study, the teachers only make use of polite strategies (a) Calling someone by surname when in formal situations and (c) Integration of values through sayings or insights. Hence, the more polite strategies are used in the classroom, the more positive effects in the interactions with the students. Teachers’ polite and supportive language can also heighten students’ language sensitivity levels (Banno-oy & Pannogan, 2016).

On the other hand, students’ negative experiences fall on the themes: Bullying, Cultural-biased language, profane language, and Sexism.

### 1.2. Bullying

As to Bullying, as follows are the negative experiences with peers: (1) *“They have been calling me ‘full moon’ because my surname is Bulan (meaning ‘moon’ in their vernacular). I often laugh and smile but they do not know I get hurt too”* and (2) *“When I pass by a group of guys saying ‘papansin lang dayta ta crush naka gamin.” I just felt so small when I heard it that I wanted to shout at them. (Quoted phrase: she is just trying to show off because she has a crush on you)”* while as follows are negative experiences with teachers: (3) *“Being called by our teacher ‘kala kayo lang naglalaing” (you seem you are all smart) is insulting, especially when you hear it often”* and (4) *“One time, our teacher scolded one of my classmates in front of us, and I was the one who felt embarrassed for my classmate. My teacher told her that she is beautiful but cannot answer simple question.”*

Bullying is generally defined as intimidating a weaker person to do something, especially such repeated coercion. Here, we can tell how crucial



the situation in the school is with regards to language usage, knowing that bullying is punishable by law. How much more when the students are outside the school? Outside the school, students are no longer students but free individuals not bound by the rules and policies of the school. That is a factor to be considered. This negative act of bullying implies that there is a big tendency that bullied students will perform less in the classroom because they would become afraid to speak out their ideas. Studies prove that bullied students perform low in their academics – bullying decreases students' scores (Werf, 2014); bullying negatively impacts students' performances (Oliveira et al., 2018; Kibriya et al., 2015).

On the other hand, the above-mentioned experiences of the students revealed that even teachers bully them. In the study of Sanapo (2017), *When Kids Hurt Other Kids: Bullying in Philippine Schools*, it was revealed that the most common type of bullying among schools in the Philippines is verbal bullying. The same among Kalinga State University students, they too experience verbal bullying not only from their classmates but also from their teachers, sometimes unconsciously. Inside the classroom, the teacher is considered to be the second parent for he facilitates and manages the teaching-learning process, and he inevitably teaches the language. As a fact, all teachers are language teachers. The moment he talks during classroom instruction, he does not only facilitate learning but also the acquisition of the language. Hence, students must be verbally bullied by their teachers because they are expected to play a critical part in handling classroom bullying (Yoon and Bauman, 2014) instead of initiating the act.

### 1.3. Culture-biased Language

As follows are experiences of students with peers denoting cultural-biased language: (1) *"Because of our accent from Ibaloi, Mt. Province,*

*we have been branded by our classmates as "annacha-faku;"* (2) *"I feel hurt sometimes when they ask me "Apay madama pelang tribal war yu?"* (Quoted words: *"Is your tribal conflict still ongoing?"*); (3) *"One time, my classmate jokes over the god of the Muslims. He said 'Ala ni Allah' (O, Allah). My Muslim classmate shouted at him using their language, which I think she was really hurt;"* and (4) *"Sometimes, it is unfair when others are saying 'dakayo man nga taga upper, isardeng yun ti tribal wars yu. Mairamraman kami ti gulo yu.'* (Translation: *You, people from the Upper [Kalinga], stop already your tribal conflicts. You are just disturbing us with your conflicts.*) *Though it was jokingly said, it still hurts."* While on the other hand, there is no negative experience encountered about this with their teachers. This just implies that teachers are aware enough of the need of cultural sensitivity in the classroom. However, students need to be educated with cultural sensitivity, especially in the classroom, where they encounter diverse people five days a week.

It is always true that the classroom is a composition of diverse students and teachers. Consequently, teachers' cultural background knowledge provides a valuable contribution in how they run their classrooms (Garcia & Pantao, 2021). According to Rosenfeld & Rosenfeld (2004), the single most powerful lever for getting all students to learn is teachers who are attentive to individual learning variations and use effective, interventionist language, beliefs, and practice with students. Thus, for effective intercultural communication in the classroom, there is a need for teachers to make students understand each other's culture first, and acceptance will follow; because it is in understanding and acceptance that respect comes in.

In the blog *Communication Strategies, Cultural Sensitivity* by DeVito (2011), cultural sensitivity is an attitude and way of behaving in which you are aware of and acknowledge cultural differences. Nevertheless, this is crucial in the classroom because students and teachers may come from different cultures, family orientations, economic statuses, religions, and the like. The experience of one of the participants, her classmate, was mocking their god "Allah" for saying "Alla ni Allah." This alone is a form of verbal bullying mentioned in the previous page, which

results in lower academic performances of bullied students.

Finally, Silinkman (2017) suggested five ways to create a culturally sensitive classroom: 1) Get to know all your students as individuals; 2) Make sure your curriculum is culturally varied and relevant; 3) Be aware of your own cultural biases; 4) Seek input and support from community members; and 5) Make sure students have the choice to create authentic work. With all these suggestions, teachers play a vital role in developing and sustaining a culturally sensitive classroom as facilitators and managers.

#### 1.4. Profane Language

This theme is apparent in following experiences of students with peers: (1) *"I am a girl. It just hurts that most of my female classmates are using 'ukinnana' and 'osiang/osiang mo' as expression (Quoted words are swear words in their vernacular);"* (2) *"I feel insulted when my classmates call me 'uy' or 'sika (impolitely saying 'you!');"* (3) *"It irritates my ears when my classmates say 'I don't care!' 'So what!' 'In Your face;'"* (4) *"Other students are still using bad words like 'bull shit/shet,' 'okens,' 'fuck,' 'in your face,' etc. even inside the classroom;"* and (5) *"Sometimes, I feel like I am the one being talked about by students when they are using gay language, especially when they look at me. I really do not understand all the words in gay language like 'chararat' or 'murata."* On the other hand, they also experience profane language with their teacher, as narrated by one of the students: *"There were times when my teacher comes to class saying 'Apay dambel?' Sometimes, I feel like it is directing to us."* (Quoted phrase: "You think I am dumb?"). This implies that even teachers, sometimes, tend to speak profane language in the classroom.

As explicated by Zhang (2016) on his blog, *The Dissolution of Language Sensitivity*, that the use of obscene language is a consequence of pop culture that deprives students of sensitivity. He, then, emphasized that choice of words means

choosing what is acceptable in social setting.

School is a social setting, for it is where diverse students and teachers inevitably interact. That is why, the more that teachers and students should carry sensitivity to language.

Moreover, language values are also influenced by social and economic forces (Jay, 2008). He further posted those parents in religious communities may want more restrictions on profane language than parents from non-religious communities. Every day, people interact and may influence others in terms of how they speak and the words or expressions they use. Indeed, the environment is one of the biggest factors that may affect language because it is observed that most of the young ones today go out with their friends more often than they stay with their families. Because of the adventurous mind and curiosity of the young ones, they try new trends and fads, including new expressions, in order to gain the attention of their friends or barkadas. Wherein these expressions are maybe vulgar or swear words that are unconsciously learned. Moreover, the aid of technology brought demands for social sites like Facebook, Instagram, Messenger, and Twitter. Consequently, the language used is what people tend to emulate, which most students bring to school.

#### 1.5. Sexism

Another identified theme category of the students' negative experiences is Sexism in language. Sexist language is apparent in the following experiences with peers: (1) *"I feel embarrassed when my classmates talk about green jokes like when they are talking about reproductive organs but using terms like 'talong' (eggplant) and 'parya' (bitter gourd);"* (2) *"My classmates are so green-minded. They were saying 'birdy' (connotatively means the male genitalia), 'utong mo' (string beans in Ilocano; nipple in Tagalog).* On the other hand, students also experience sexism in language with their

teachers, as what narrated by one of the students: (1) *“There was actually a time when I feel shy to talk in class because they are all girls, including my teacher. That is why attention is on me sometimes. My teacher always mentions ‘Mr. \*\*\*\*\*, the thorn among the roses,’ when calling for me.”*

The above-narrated lengthy statements from the students lead to the definition of sexist language by Lei (2006) as a language that expresses bias in favor of one sex and thus treats the other sex in a discriminatory manner. In most cases, the bias is in favor of men and against women. Rahman (2013) posited that our words, our sayings, our songs, our jokes, our stories, and poetry all carry the values which construct gender. Hence, Gender must be considered in all language expressions, especially in schools where language facilitates learning.

With all the above-mentioned experiences of the students and corresponding insights from experts, the study then foregrounds the general essence of their experiences that language sensitivity should be taken seriously in school. It should be alleviated, if not eradicated, because bullying, profane language, sexism, and cultural-biased language may affect relationships between and among students and teachers and the teaching-learning process.

If students are insensitive to their use of language, they tend to bully. They may consciously or unconsciously use cultural-biased or gender-insensitive, and they may see profane language as just expressions. In that case, more misunderstandings may exist between and among students and teachers. The students’ negative experiences may lead to a lack of concentration, shyness, and timidity, which may result in poor academic performance. That is why the very essence of this study is to instill in the mind and hearts of the students and the teachers why language is needed to be sensitive.

## 2. The Language Sensitivity Model

The model of language sensitivity is illustrated in Figure 2.

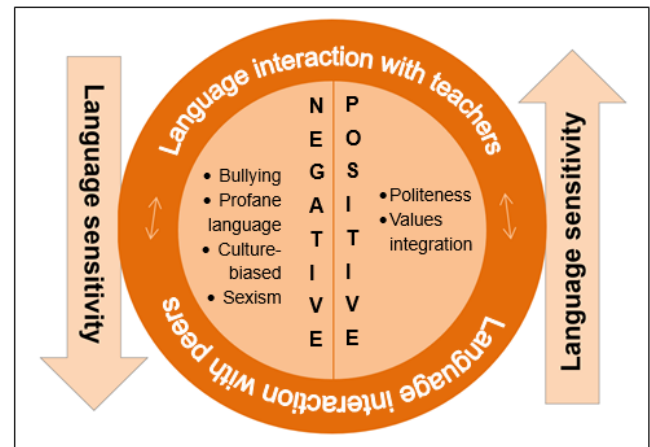


Figure 2. Language Sensitivity Model

Just like a wheel, language sensitivity cycles in the classroom regarding language interactions with peers and the teacher. Both teachers and students choose positive language interactions (politeness or values integration) or negative language interactions (bullying, profane language, culture-biased, or sexism). The more positive language interactions occur, the greater the language sensitivity is developed, while the more negative language interactions occur, the lesser the developed language sensitivity.

Moreover, developing language sensitivity is a matter of choice on the part of the learner and the teacher. Language sensitivity does not demand an individual to choose positive interactions because it is laden with other factors such as age, environment, family orientation, or beliefs. Thus, there is a great tendency that language sensitivity will increase or decrease depending on the frequency of choice by the teacher or the students to entertain negative or positive language interactions.

## CONCLUSIONS

Language sensitivity is a language phenomenon in the classroom as interactions occur between and among students and teachers. Positive and negative interactions may shape

these language phenomena. Positive language interactions arise when teachers and learners make use of politeness and integrate values into language use. On the other hand, negative language interactions may arise when teachers or students bully, or use profane language expressions, sexist language, or culture-biased language. These also imply that the greater positive language interactions occur, the higher language sensitivity is developed; while the greater negative language interactions occur, the lesser language sensitivity is developed.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings and the conclusions drawn, the following are therefore recommended:

1. Gender and development should not just be the only issue to be integrated into the curriculum but also issues on language sensitivity like bullying, profane language, and culture-sensitive language. These are vital issues in developing effective and productive classroom interactions. If communication is healthy, students also become effective communicators, resulting in good academic performance. Hence, it is suggested that education planners and administrators would plan to integrate these issues across the curriculum; and
2. It is also suggested that follow-up research on identifying the level of language sensitivity and the factors affecting language sensitivity among students be conducted to provide statistical data as a basis for mapping out programs and interventions for effective and productive interactions between and among students and teachers.

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