



## Learning English as A Foreign Language (EFL): A Narratology

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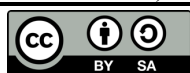
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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed at narrating the lived experiences of a Taiwanese student in learning English as a foreign language, which includes identifying the other means of learning English as a foreign language, the difficulties encountered in learning English as a foreign language and means of overcoming such. This study made use of a qualitative research design, employing a narrative approach, wherein the data were gathered through face-to-face interviews with the participant – a student representative who had been learning English at school since 13. The interview was audiotaped and transcribed, re-transcribed, and re-storied. The study found that other than in formal school, English could be learned through English tutorial classes, reading materials such as books, journals, and magazines in English, making use of internet applications with English as a medium such as Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Instagram, and talk or chat to foreigners. The study also revealed that the learner encountered difficulties in grammar and pronunciations. As observed, the student was not able to communicate in English effectively – with many grammar lapses and mispronunciations. It was further revealed that motivation and constant practice in English communication is seen by the learner as means of overcoming such difficulties. In conclusion, the study drew that foreign language learning is more difficult because exposure to the language is so limited. However, giving more talks to students in the classroom will provide means for students to practice English as a foreign language, as well as exposure to different internet applications with English as a medium.

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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Background of the Study

Comparisons between foreign language and second language learning have been long debated by many scholars (Ringbom, 1980; Stern, 1983; Dingfang, 1994, 2006; Iwai, 2011). Some posit that the same process leads to learning both second and foreign languages while others suggest the opposite that there are factors needing considerations – Wu & Wu (2008), learning environment; Liu (2007), learners' motivation; Patil (2008), objectives of teaching; Dashtestani & Samoudi (2014); the use of technology.

For a clearer view, foreign language learning refers to learning non-native language, which is only learned in a formal classroom and not commonly used in the community. The exposure to the language is lesser than the second language (L2), that sometimes it is connotatively referred to as “alien” language.

Learning the English language is seen as vital for it is becoming the most important language that keeps everyone in the globe connected. It is a first language to some countries, while it is a second or a foreign language to others. However, learning foreign language became more accessible today due to the advent of high-end technology. That is why the education setting has evolved from chalk-board to technology-driven classrooms. Foreign language teaching and learning have changed from teacher-centered to learner/learning-centered environments (Moeller and Catalano, 2015). Further in their study, foreign language learning and

teaching have undergone a significant paradigm shift. Traditionally, learning a foreign language was thought to be a 'mimetic' activity, a process that involved students repeating or imitating new information. It was in the 1950s when the Audio-lingual approach was introduced and promoted the imitation practice in order to learn a language. Later, the Sociocultural Theory (SCT) by Vygotsky came about which states that "participation in culturally organized activities is essential for learning to occur," regards learning as intentional, goal-directed, and meaningful and incidental process, but is always conscious and intentional. Thus, learning from exposure comes about "as part of a communicatively rich human social environment," (Ellis & Larsen-Freeman, 2006).

Chang and Goswami (2011) found that foreign language teaching in many Asia-Pacific countries in recent decades has shifted toward communicative-focused instruction. Thus, countries in the Asia have adopted Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) in the classroom teaching. However, factors have evolved that affected the implementation of CLT. Thus, Chang and Goswami offered practical recommendations for teachers, educators, and policy makers: to further improve teacher training, curriculum design, and situational constraints to ensure success in implementing the CLT approach.

Moreover, in Foreign Language Teaching (FLT), Dingfang (2006) argues, that it should include the following basic functions of classroom instruction: (1) stimulating and maintaining students' strong interest in learning; (2) providing sufficient resources and opportunities for learning; (3) training students' learning strategies in foreign language learning; and (4) helping the students overcome difficulties in learning the foreign language. That is why it is noticeable in the education process today that there is change in the role of the teacher from one of authority to that of facilitator and agent of change. It is then eventually fostering a learner-centered classroom which provides more opportunity for students to talk and less on the part of the teacher.

In Taiwan, English is treated more like a subject to be studied than a living language to be used in everyday speech (Wu & Wu, 2004). In the study of Chia, Johnson, and Olive (2001), they took the Taiwanese students' opinions on (1) the importance of English language use in students studies and their future careers; (2) basic English skills needed in a freshman English course; and (3) suggestions for development of an English language curriculum. Results showed that English was perceived as important for students' academic studies and their future work. Students wanted a basic English language course at the freshman level, naming listening as the most important skill to improve. Students and faculty desired more than one year of English language study. Hence, this implies that English is vital in the education system of Taiwan or other Asian countries because the world is inevitably gearing toward globalization.

Moreover, Ya (2006), in his study on EFL teachers' perceptions of English language policy at the elementary level in Taiwan, revealed that all ten teachers agreed with the policy for English as a compulsory subject at the elementary level. They observed both positive and negative sides of this top-down policy. It was found out that EFL teachers had to plan their English classes with the constraints on a large class of students with mixed levels of proficiency, limited teaching hours and resources. It was also revealed that parents' expectations and attitudes towards English learning also became an obstacle.

Another noticeable constrain is the difficulty in speaking and articulating English among Taiwanese students. Results show in the study of Chen & Chang (2008) that 36.80% of college students learning English as a foreign language (EFL) in Taiwan indicate English learning difficulties. Foreign language anxiety was the known as source of difficulty, wherein, students tend to have a history of English learning problems -- they obtain low grades, suffer difficulties with classroom learning, and exhibit poor developmental skills. The same result in the study of Hu (2011), wherein, language-specific anxiety was considered to be interrelated with learners' insufficient word bank. Such difficulty is also true to students studying abroad. In 2005, Sawir's study indicated that many international students from Asia, studying in Australia, face serious learning difficulties and lack confidence in speaking. It was further explained in the study that such learning difficulty was grounded in weaknesses in students' prior learning experiences and in beliefs about language learning taught during early education.

With that, the use of personal experiences of students is one significant means of understanding the difficulties in learning English as a foreign language. The students' stories, based on their experiences, may provide basis for language planners and teachers to stratify possible remedies that would help learners overcome the difficulties they may have identified.

The field of narratology is concerned with the study and analysis of narrative texts. It puts under investigation literary pieces of language and yields an understanding of the components in its very texture (Amerian, 2015). According to Creswell (2013), "People live storied lives. They tell stories to share their lives with others and to provide their personal accounts about classrooms, schools, educational issues, and the settings in which they work." This gives the concrete purpose why the researcher delved into this type of research; thus, understanding more the process of learning English as a foreign language through the narration of a Taiwanese student.

### 1.2 Objectives of the Study

This study aimed at narrating the lived experiences of a CJCUC Taiwanese student in learning English as foreign language. Specifically, it sought answers to the following:

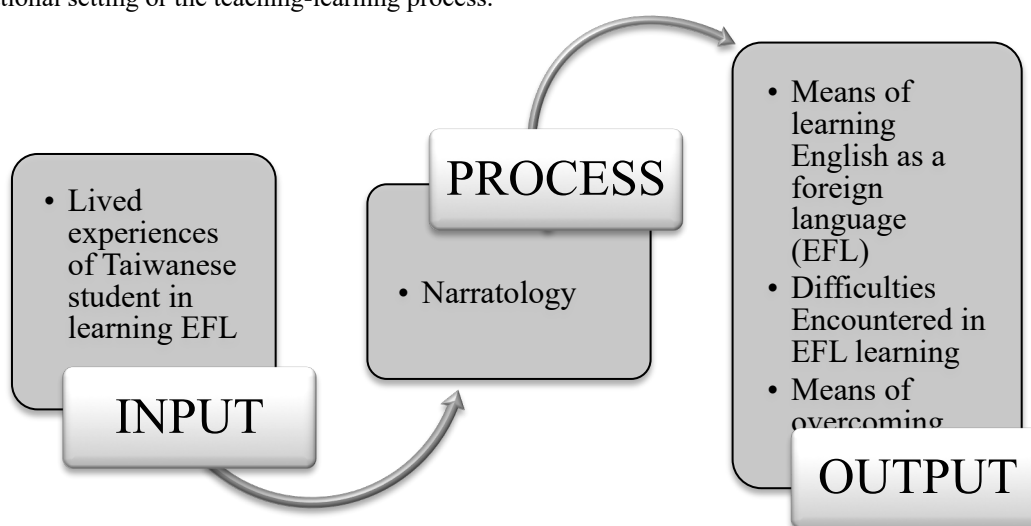
- 1) to identify the other means of learning English as a foreign language aside from school.
- 2) To determine the difficulties encountered by the participant in learning English; and
- 3) to cite means of overcoming difficulties in learning English.

### 2. Literature Review

Dewey's (1938) concept of experience was internalized in this study, which lay the underpinning on how and what foreign language learning is.

Dewey's concept of experience states that there is interconnectedness between experience and education. The experiences of the participant in terms of English as a foreign language (EFL) learning were considered in this study, exploring his influences of learning EFL that include his family, teachers, peers, teaching-learning strategies, among others.

The first-hand experience of one participant in a particular university in Taiwan regarding EFL learning can show the general view of the whole education process in terms of foreign language learning. That is why narrative research, where a participant or group of participants share/s their stories, is a viable way to study the educational setting or the teaching-learning process.



**Figure 1.** *Research Paradigm*

Figure 1 provides an overview of the whole concept of the study. Inputs draw insights from the participant's lived experiences on EFL learning and Dewey's concept of experience. These inputs undergo the process of narratological analysis where the data are interpreted after transcribed, re-transcribed, and re-storied. After which, outputs will eventually come out as to means of learning EFL, difficulties of EFL learning, and means of overcoming the difficulties.

### 3. Method

It involved a 25-year-old student who is a presently enrolled in Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan City, Taiwan. He is a student representative of CJCUC, and he had been learning English at school since 13 or since junior high school. It also included one of his teachers and one of his classmates in the interview.

The data were gathered through face-to-face interview with the participant. Aside from the participant, one teacher and moderator, who is a teacher at CJCUC, was present throughout the interview in order to help with the language gap or translate unclear parts of the conversation for better understanding.

In the process, permission was asked first from the participant before conducting the interview. The interview was audiotaped and was then transcribed, re-transcribed, and re-storied.

As for the interview guide, the researcher asked the following main questions in order to elicit answers to the questions posted in this study:

- 1) How and when did you start learning English language?
- 2) Was learning English difficult? What were the difficulties you encountered?
- 3) How did you overcome such difficulties?

The process was adopted from the study of Creswell (2013) which involved the following three stages:

- 1) Interview and Transcription. The researcher conducted face-to-face interview and transcribed the conversations from the audiotape;
- 2) Re-transcription. The researcher re-transcribed the raw data by identifying the key elements of the story. The keys at the bottom of the table of transcription indicates the codes used by the researcher to identify the setting [s], characters [c], actions [a], problem [p], and resolution [r] in the student's transcript; and
- 3) Re-storying. The researcher restored the student's account by organizing the key codes into a sequence.

#### 4. Results and Discussion

This section discusses the findings of the study on the personal experiences of the participant as to learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). It includes discussions as to the themes: (1) Means of learning English as Foreign Language (EFL); (2) Difficulties encountered in EFL learning; and (3) Overcoming difficulties of EFL learning.

##### 4.1 Means of Learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL)

According to British Council -Teaching English, a learner studying in a country where English is the first language has a lot of exposure and so more opportunities to learn. Indeed, such opportunity will always be the best means for EFL learning. However, not everyone can afford to go study in Europe or in America. That is why Communicative Language Teaching is adopted by countries learning English as second or foreign language, and Taiwan is one. In this study, I will try to unravel the actual means of learning English as a foreign language by a Taiwanese student.

There are a lot of means to learn a foreign language like for the experiences of Felix, who is a Taiwanese student of Chang Jung Christian University, Tainan, Taiwan learning English as a foreign language. During our first meeting with our moderator, Dr. Yang, Felix was very approachable and confident in speaking English. He has a lot to say, I believe; and according to him, during the introductory part, it is his first time talking to a Filipino. I am a Filipino, taking my internship in Taiwan that time. He mentioned that Filipinos are really known for speaking English fluently, and he was even amazed knowing that I am teaching English language in the Philippines. I then started to ask the first main question because we were only given an hour for the interview. During our first conversation:

*Abi: How did you begin learning English language?*

*FZ: How? Oh, I go... I went to "quence" school*

*Abi: "Quence" school?*

*FZ: You know "quence" school?*

*Abi: No.*

*FZ: "Pribet" school? Like "pribet" tutor.*

*Abi: Private?*

*FZ: Private. Sorry. Sorry.*

*Abi: Quence School? Is it a name of a School? Where is it?*

*FZ: Maybe you can go to "Quence school" after class or maybe at night. It is one to one. Maybe, not many.*

*Abi: Oh, see, cram school (pertaining to special programs that train students in a short period of time like tutorials). So, when was that?*

*FZ: Thirteen*

*Abi: So, that's way back junior high school?*

*FZ: Yeah. Yeah. Was it when I was thirteen? I went to school also when I was thirteen.*

For a clearer understanding, Felix first learned English when he was 13, in a cram school where he was taught by a private tutor. He went to cram school after his class, specifically at night. There, he experienced being bitten by the teacher with stick on his palm because he cannot get the right answer.

In Taiwan, according to Dr. Yang, one of the language teachers at Chang Jung Christian University and an adviser to Felix, kids are enrolled to tutorial classes because almost every parent is working, and they cannot manage dealing with the assignments of their child due to lack of time. Sometimes, the nanny (care-taker) does most of the tutoring when they cannot send their children to cram schools. In most cases, cram school

works, she said. Like the students she handled. Those going for private tutorials are those who perform better in her classes.

Further in our conversation:

*Abi: What are the other ways for you to learn English? Do you learn English only at school?*

*FZ: For no, not. Oh, many many ways...like using internet. Internet is like many apps and some Youtube. You see Youtube, many Youtube as teaching English. But I'm not prefer that, maybe I just to see Voicetube. Just English in Voicetube.*

Another means for him to get to learn English is through the internet, where he usually makes use of the sites: Youtube and Voicetube. These sites make use as well of English language or all instructions can be translated to English. So, there that he gets exposure to the English language. He further explicated that he was actually having fun uploading his voice in the Voicetube and listening to the others talk in English. He showed me how works and I even listened to his uploads. He read an English paragraph in a magazine (though he is rattled because he is trying to talk fast) and then uploaded it in Voicetube. It actually worked. People using the app make use of their voices to upload and comment in the Voicetube. There, he said he was able to recognize terms in English, and it is where he learns better how English words are pronounced.

Thus, while it is true that surfing the internet using technology is much helpful, it is also true that strategies for effective integration of technology in teacher's and student's educational practices such as learning English as a Foreign Language must be considered (Dashtestani & Samoudi, 2014). Therefore, it is advised that learners seek assistance from experts, teachers, or adults regarding the use of technology and be even updated of the new trends if necessary.

Our conversation continued tackling the third means in which he learns English:

*Felix: And you know, I have foreigner friend I talk together in English.*

*Abi: You talk to foreigners?*

*Felix: Yeah..yeah..I talk to foreigners. Maybe just uhh... 10 minutes. Ten minutes to talk...talk just fast. I have Jona, my Indian friend... Mmm I talk to her together in English. I do not know language she is use, but English, we talk together. We communicate.*

The third means is through talking to foreigners. Felix has an Indian friend, Jona, whom he talks to at least 10 minutes a day. Practicing English through constant conversation with native speakers is a well seen as effective means to learning English as a foreign language. However, he knows that that is an insufficient means to practice English, and that it also requires a lot of courage to talk to foreigners for gap will be experience most of the conversations (Alfallaj, 2016), especially when one lacks vocabulary. That is why he also tries reading journals and magazines with English translation. Conversation goes:

*Abi: Other means?*

*FZ: Other means? Ahmm...reading papers. But the paper always show...always perform just a technical words. So... so not... use any words like in common. I'm not... not prefer reading paper.*

*: So talking to foreign people is the best way. More talk...more much advanced. Just keep going.*

*: At school, the environment is so...why I can't hear CJCUC talk jus that? The most you see in the environment, you just learn that.*

*Abi: Why do you think you need to learn English? Is it important? Why?*

*FZ: Mmmm, English? I think it is not important. I don't know if it is necessary for me..for the future..Maybe, later... but today, it is important.*

*: Today...internet...yeah...yeah...communication. English is the basically language to learn, the best global language.*

The above-cited conversation implies that individual learning, specifically through the language skill of reading, is very much helpful as well in foreign language learning. Felix was very determined to find means in order to understand and practice English as he learned in private tutorials. So, he also tries reading journals and magazines with English translations.

We ended with our conversation with Felix explicating about the importance of learning English, that he defined it as the “best global language.” On his opinion, it could be the “best” global language. However, to those who are not even aware of the vocabulary of the English language, it would never the “best global language.” Simply, our knowledge of a language, may it be second or foreign language, would draw an individual with the conclusion that it is the best language or the otherwise. Subsequently, it depends as well on the interest of an individual on a particular language.

In summary, there are four means in which the participant learned English aside from a formal classroom or school. These include: 1) cram school (private tutorial); 2) the internet; 3) talking to foreigners; and 4) reading journals and magazines with English translations.

#### 4.2 Difficulties Encountered in EFL Learning

It cannot be denied that Taiwanese students, particularly in Chang Jung Christian University, still carry their native or regional accent when speaking in English, which is a foreign language to them. That made it very obvious that the participant is undergoing difficulty in learning English. Aside from that, Felix's numerous grammatical errors and rattles can be noticed on the way he makes use of the English language in the following conversation:

*Abi: Was it difficult to learn English? Was it hard?*

*FZ: Mmm, maybe.. maybe at the beginning, it's not...not easy. I always.. uhh.. the teacher of cram school always punch... give me a punch.*

*Abi: (laughing)*

*FZ: because the teacher...if you catch a low grade, lower points, she will give you a punch. Like she use a stick...vigorously. See you a points lower. if she see you the level is not good, she will very very bad, give you more vigorously.*

*Abi: It is really hard to say in English...like you, you're not experience hard speaking. I know my grammar is not good. I do not speak it more frequency...you know..saying it in English with people in the surrounding.*

On Felix's actual experience, he said it was not easy learning English at first, as it is true to every beginner.

Further, the participant shared about the difficulties he encountered while learning English. The process was tough that he encountered a teacher who used punishment as means for him to learn English. Whenever he gets low score, he gets hit of stick on his palm. Well, it is true that the teacher-factor is vital in the field of the educational process. Long (2000) contended that all teachers are language teachers, whether a teacher of language subjects or content subjects. The moment he talks during classroom instruction, he does not only facilitate learning but also the acquisition of the language. Thus, it is just proper that the teacher works out the best strategies in his class for students to communicate well using the medium or media of instruction. However, corporal punishment is not advisable today.

As emphasized by Moeller and Catalano (2015), foreign language learning and teaching have undergone a significant paradigm shift that teaching and learning have changed from teacher-centered to learner/learning-centered environments. Hence, Communicative Language Teaching has been widely recommended in language classes. Chang and Goswami (2011) offered practical recommendations for teachers, educators, and policy makers to further improve teacher training, curriculum design, and situational constraints to ensure success in implementing the CLT approach in Taiwanese English classes.

Another important point here is the grammatical aspect of learning a foreign language. As noticed from the participant, he really is experiencing grammatical constraints -- his inaccurate use of terms and his fragmented spoken words. This could be attributed to the definition on discourse competence by Canale (1983) that it is the mastery of understanding of how to combine grammatical forms and meanings in diverse genres to generate a coherent spoken or written composition. It conforms with Nurmalarasi (2020) that even after being taught the fundamentals in primary school, learners still face challenges that prevent them from fully mastering the language.

Moreover, Montrul (2008) argued that there is incomplete acquisition of language in bilingualism. As observed in the classrooms in Chang Jung Christian University, teachers make use of bilingualism as strategy in teaching English as a foreign language; thus, resulting to less practice of EFL. Another thing is the exposure of the students to the foreign language. Students may tend to practice it in a very limited situation, but their exposure to the foreign language in another thing to consider. It is only appropriate that the students will make use of the language skills as they learn English because that is what is all about language learning.

Finally, Hosni (2014) asserted that speaking problems can be major challenges to effective foreign language learning and communication. English-as-foreign-language (EFL) learners, no matter how much they know about the English language, still face many speaking difficulties, and one significant reason is the lack of exposure to the foreign language. As to Felix's experience in school, he needs to learn English in order to speak with his foreign friends. Hence, on the other way around, he gets to learn more and practice more speaking in English by initiating conversations with his foreign friends face-to-face or virtual. In this instance, the need for mere conversation in English covers the need for structure and grammar aspects of the language as the purpose is for building relationship with other people. Though grammar is much needed for better

understanding, the significance of the purpose for communication with prospect friends still the most important consideration.

#### **4.3 Overcoming Difficulties in Learning EFL**

As to overcoming difficulties in foreign language learning, the participant, himself, identified his means of overcoming his difficulties. He says:

*Abi: At first, how did you overcome the difficulty?*

*FZ: Uhh... more frequency. Higher the frequency, you fast learn, and then you can fast learn in the paper...you got question... look at the paper... you can fast learn it. When write down in paper... yeah.*

*: practice makes perfect.*

*Abi: What motivated you to overcome? Learn better?*

*FZ: higher points. I want to be. I am full. I want to be compete...competitive. I want to how compete to everyone.*

*: No punching... yeah... when I get high label... yeah... high score.*

On the conversation above, it can be noticed that his use of the term “frequency” would mean the number of times the participant would do the task. The task here that he was trying to emphasize is the practice of using English as a foreign language, which he identified already in the previous pages: attending tutorials, making use of internet sites with English as medium, talking to foreigners, and reading journals and magazines. Then he made use of the maxim “practice makes perfect” to clearly explain his thoughts. This would just imply the general truth that every success attained is a product of a diligent practice.

Other factor that has helped the participant pursued learning English is motivation. Being motivated to pursue learning, he was not bothered by the whipping on his hands. Instead, he became competitive in class and until he achieved high scores. According to Dornyei (2000), motivation is one of the key factors that influence the rate and success of second/foreign language learning. This becomes the driving force to sustain the long and often tedious learning process. As further emphasized by Ho (2010), demotivation or low motivation has always been at the center of concerns in the English classroom in Taiwan's junior high schools. Hence, the participant was able to learn the basics of English at the age of 13, which is a critical period in learning language as posited by Lenneberg.

Moreover, Dingfang (2006) argues that English as foreign language should include the following basic functions of classroom instruction: (1) stimulating and maintaining students' strong interest in learning; (2) providing sufficient resources and opportunities for learning; (3) training students' learning strategies in foreign language learning; and (4) helping the students overcome difficulties in learning the foreign language. These functions go to all teachers who are handling foreign languages. The interest of students will always be the number one factor that aids learning EFL. Without the interest of the students, it is impossible to learn English easily and enjoyably. On the other sense, resources, learners' learning strategies, and teachers' assistance and motivation are also significant factors that affect productive and effective EFL learning.

Finally, the participant may have not achieved a perfect language competency in English, but still, he continues to practice and expose himself to the language that is foreign to him. Hence, the more that the student is exposed to the language, the more that new vocabulary is learned and that sentence construction would be practiced even with simple sentence patterns.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Learning the English language is seen as vital even by the participant himself, for it is the global language that keeps everyone in the globe connected. It has become the language in the internet and in business affairs and industries across the globe. However, it is not as easy as learning the first or second language, for it is like absorbing new set of vocabulary or new rules of grammatical sentence constructions. On the other hand, age is also a factor because there is a need to consider when the EFL learner began to learn the language. The exposure and practice of the foreign language also need considerations. According to Gass and Schachter (2003), one obvious possibility is that the innate system that guides child acquisition no longer operates in adult foreign language learning. This would easily explain why foreign language learning is often a difficult and unsuccessful task.

Foreign language learning is another process different from native and second language learning as could be learned from the shared story of the participant. It is more difficult for the participant to learn an ‘alien language’ the fact that the exposure to the language is so limited. Hence, motivation becomes the driving force of every foreign language learner. As concluded by Dornyei (2000), even individuals with remarkable abilities cannot attain long-term goals without sufficient motivation, and appropriate curricula and effective instruction are not enough to guarantee student achievement.

Moreover, there is incomplete acquisition of language in bilingualism as emphasized by Montrul (2008). Giving more talk to students in the classroom is also providing a means for students to practice English as a foreign language. The advent of high-end technology leads to the inevitable use of technology-driven educational tools by teachers. Hence, there are now a lot of accessible means for students to learn and get exposed to the English language.

Therefore, as what the participant uses as means of learning the foreign language, students may opt to attend English tutorial classes, read materials such as books, journals, and magazines in English, make use of internet applications with English as medium such as Google, Facebook, Yahoo, Instagram, and talk or chat to foreigners; however, with the supervision of teachers, experts, or adults on the use of technology. Hence, it is advised that learners seek assistance from experts, teachers, or adults regarding the use of technology and be even updated of the new trends if necessary.

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