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The Shift of the First Language During Migration

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Abstract: Nine teenage Filipino-Germans were challenged to learn two languages when they moved to Dumaguete City, Philippines. These German native speakers were born in Germany and migrated to the Philippines with their German fathers and Filipino mothers. In this new environment, they have been exposed to communicating in Cebuano, the dominant language, and develop their listening, speaking, reading, and writing English skills in school. The Can-do Scale test of Keijzer (2007) demonstrates their ability to learn a second language, with all responders willing to read, speak, and write in Cebuano and English. Short-term Filipino-Germans (who stayed in the Philippines for less than five years) prefer to listen to German on the radio or television, while long-term respondents (those who lived in the Philippines for more than five years) with dwindling German vocabulary favor listening to Cebuano and English. The study concludes that German respondents have gradually acquired Cebuano and English through time. The long-term migrants have forgotten their first language, as seen in their reading, speaking and writing skills. In contrast, the short-term migrants are still proficient in their first language despite the competition of the other two languages.

Keywords: First Language Attrition, Speaking Skills, Writing Skills, Second Language Acquisition,

Introduction

From the beginning of time to the present, humanity has been characterized by nearly constant migration of large groups of people moving from one location to another for economic and various other reasons. Migration across countries has increased dramatically in recent decades. The growth in the volume of migration has been accompanied by an increase in public and professional interest in the subject, both in terms of the migrants' social and economic characteristics and their motivations and patterns of integration into host societies (Siegel, 2018).

Immigrant integration is aided by language proficiency. It expands job options while also making social and political participation easier. Despite the importance of the language, many immigrants never achieve adequate fluency in the host country's language. As a result, understanding the underlying processes and associated factors is critical for developing language acquisition measures. According to empirical research, immigrants differ in their aptitude to acquire languages, experience with everyday language use, and motivation to learn host country languages (Ispording, 2015).

Some migrants are severely disadvantaged due to a lapse in language learning. The first five years following arrival are crucial for migrants to familiarize themselves with government structures and services. Discontinuity in language acquisition can result in a loss of progress in language classes, leading to discouragement. Social isolation from locals of the host nation, who might be able to assist with informal learning, is also a worry. Immigrants who speak the host country's language have more interactions with local speakers than those who do not, partly because they are more likely to be employed in a setting that needs them to communicate with natives. Migrants with a low beginning level of the host country's language are consequently disproportionately impacted by program closures, both in employment and social integration (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2020).

This study investigates the linguistic journey of nine young Filipino-Germans who arrive in Dumaguete City, Philippines, where the languages spoken in the new environment are unique from their primary language. They need



an extensive vocabulary and a lot of practice to master Cebuano and English to converse with the locals. However, as they learn the new language, they eventually lose their mother tongue (SyGaco, 2020).

The phenomenon of a declining language is known as language attrition. First language attrition (FLA) happens among migrants whose native language proficiency has declined due to their becoming more proficient in their second language. Thus, attrition occurs in varying degrees, from slight modifications to complete loss, temporary or permanent or language death (Dorian, 1981). Language then is acquired in stages by children, which suggests that language competence is layered, and the language loss will work its way from the topmost layer to the bottom (Andersen, 1982).

Monika Schmidt in an article written by (Sophie Hardach, 2018), *Can you lose your native language?* Believes that forgetting the language is attributed when the brain simply "evaporates" over time—the "use it or lose it" concept. Those who haven't spoken their mother tongue in decades can be near-perfect speakers. It appears to be more challenging if the speakers frequently use the language with other bilinguals and then mix and drop terms from their second language whenever they can't think of them in their first language. This means the L1 speaker won't use the "muscles" required to push the second language aside to speak their native tongue.

Hence, the parallel activation of the new languages and their regulation will result in the competition of the languages, thereby affecting the native language during the converging with the second languages (Ameel et al., 2009) and will slow or reduce the lexical access of the language seldom used (Kroll et al., 2015).

Brown and Gullenberg (2011) in *Bidirectional cross-linguistic influence in the event conceptualization? Expressions of Path among Japanese English learners* express that linguistic differences of the first language will pose difficulty in second language acquisition. However, in their study, acquiring the L2 may encourage the monolingual speakers to deviate from their native language due to constant exposure to the second language and will likely result in language attrition of the first language.

It is also noted in the findings of *Modality-Dependent Brain Activation Changes Induced by Acquiring a Second Language Abroad* propose a network for these hippocampus subregions and the modality-specific cortical regions, implying that dynamic encoding and retrieval processes are involved in language acquisition (Sakai et al., 2021).

The earlier paradigm of language forgetfulness and acquisition lies within the external factors such as **critical period** (linguistic processing is slower to older children and adults compared to pre-puberty children since the brain maturation's limitations of language learning and input becomes more difficult after a certain age (Kauffman, 2001); **regression** (language components may decline in the reverse order in which language has been acquired, Jakobson, 1941); **redundancy reduction** (two languages that converge with similar psycholinguistic environment, the speaker is compelled to decipher the repetition of guidelines and purpose of both languages and then simplify the cognitive excess, Selinger, 1989), **activation threshold** (link between the frequency in the use of linguistic item, activation, and availability to the language speaker, Paradis, 1985); **linguistic feature proficiency** (an item in the attriting language similar to the structure of the other corresponding language will more likely be retained than the different language, Andersen, 1982); internal factors include education, length of time, and motivation also affect language attrition.

Jamshidiha & Marefat (2006) indicate that some studies are focused on the length of time the immigrant has been exposed to another language and the level of attrition in the prime language, which eventually will result in the dominance of speech while others contend that time has a limited effect on such phenomenon. Paradis (1997), on the other hand, maintains that motivation is essential in language forgetfulness because of use and disuse. Thus, forgetting the language is triggered by a negative emotional attitude towards the native language, increasing the first language activation threshold. It may be 'retarded' by an optimistic emotional attitude towards the first language, lowering the activation threshold.

Because these factors are interrelated, the Filipino-German adjusting to the new environment may experience a sense of loss. Learning a second language becomes mandatory for the speaker to gain acceptance in the new community. Learning English may not be that difficult since it is taught in school compared to Cebuano, where the mother decides whether to teach her child(ren) the language or not. There are also other issues to consider in the mother's role towards her child(ren)--- does she possess a strong personality, or is she educated?



On the other hand, the German father shapes the speaker's ability to retain German in their family conversations. While in some instances, the German father may decide that the daily family discourse will be English instead of German.

The speaker is also influenced by Cebuano and English speakers outside the home, especially when the second language is used. Close family ties with Filipino relatives will allow the Filipino-Germans to speak Cebuano. The day-to-day activities such as going to school, buying things, or going to church will compel the Filipino-Germans to speak either English or Cebuano. The absence of German newspapers, radio and German friends will also influence their proficiency in the first language (SyGaco, 2019).

Research Methodology

Research Design

The respondents took the Can-Do-Scales designed by Merel Keijzer (2007) from her dissertation *Last in first out? An investigation of the regression hypothesis in Dutch emigrants in Anglophone Canada*. The questionnaire consists of German, English, and Cebuano language proficiency statements. There are five categories: listening comprehension, reading proficiency, speaking ability, and writing proficiency.

Research Environment

The study took place in Dumaguete City, including adjacent areas where the respondents lived Siaton, Dauin, Zamboanguita, Bacong, Valencia, Sibulan, San Jose, and Amlan. Dumaguete City is known as the City of Gentle People and featured as the best place to retire globally. The site is a hub of several German nationals. Cebuano and English are the primary languages spoken.

Respondents of the Study

Nine young Filipino-Germans were born in Germany and migrated to the Philippines. Their first language is German and their second languages are Cebuano and English. They learn German as their first language and, during assimilation, learn English and Cebuano as their second/third language/s. The respondents were chosen regardless of their length of stay in the Philippines. The total number of participants was determined through referrals and snowballing until the results reached the saturation point. The respondents were coded by three-letter initials taken from their names and are categorized as short-term migrants and long-term migrants. Short-term migrants like AJS CSK. JRS and RJS have stayed less than five years in the Philippines, while long-term migrants such as AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, and RAS have migrated to the Philippines for more than five years.

Data Gathering Methods and Research Instruments

The respondents' linguistic proficiency in each of their three languages—German, English and Cebuano—is examined in the context of their first language attrition. They learn German as their first language and, during assimilation, learn English and Cebuano as their second/third language/s. The respondents were chosen regardless of their length of stay in the Philippines. The total number of participants was determined through referrals and snowballing until the results reached the saturation point. The respondents are coded by three-letter initials taken from their names.

In the Can-Do Scales questionnaire, the respondents' answers were tabulated to determine the average scores of the two groups: the short term migrants (AJS, CSK, JRS, and RJS); and the long term migrants (AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, and RAS) and how these scores were ranked based on the values of the scales of 1-5 to achieve the Wilcoxon rank-sum test. Findings provide their collective views on the four competency skills in German, English, and Cebuano.

The Can-Do Scales questionnaire includes statements concerning German, English, and Cebuano language proficiency. The case participants' perception towards their current language and their native language are evaluated through a 1-5 scale. Below is the range of descriptions:



- 1 = I cannot do this at all
 2 = I can do this, but with much difficulty
 3 = I can do this, although with some difficulty
 4 = I can do this reasonably easily
 5 = I can do this without any difficulty at all

Results

On Listening Comprehension

Table 1 The Listening Competence in German, English, & Cebuano Among Filipino-German Respondents

Respondents	German Average Score	English Average Score	Cebuano Average Score
Short-Term Migrants (AJS, CSK, JRS, RJS)	5 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U1=18	4 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U1=7	2 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U1=0 *some respondents did not answer
Long-Term Migrants (AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, RAS)	3 (I can do this, although with some difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=2	5 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U2=13	4 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U2=18 *some respondents did not answer

Based on the data from Table 1 the listening comprehension aspect of the Can-Do Scales, the short-term migrants selected German as their preferred language because their mental map is still in German: could understand slow or fast German discourse aired over the radio or on TV; and could quickly comprehending extended speeches, formal lectures, and German movies. In short, regardless of the pace and mode of communication, the short-term migrants perfectly understand the German language. This indicates that before migration, all of them have fully acquired their first language and that its structure remains unchanged through time. Thus, English is a secondary choice as they continue to be native speakers of German. Notably, acquiring Cebuano is not part of the short-term migrants' priorities.

Meanwhile, the long-term migrants continue to become bilinguals, juggling English and Cebuano in their everyday interactions. They attained a high average in every communicative situation for both languages, which indicates that they have already forgotten German. They have acquired English and Cebuano because the first is taught in school while the latter is the dominant language spoken in the community. Their long absence from their home country and the unavailability of German TV programs and films and non-use of the language in their new country contribute to the deterioration of the long-term migrants' listening proficiency in German.

According to [Nathan Thomas Adams \(2020\)](#) in his dissertation, *Domestic vs Foreign Immersion Experiences: Listening Comprehension of Multiple Dialects in Spanish*, students who learn the majority of their Spanish in a foreign country often fail to recognize unusual accents. In contrast, students who learn in more diverse areas may not face the same cognitive shock since they have already heard a variety of accents.



On Reading Comprehension

Table 2 The Reading Competence in German, English, & Cebuano Among Filipino-German Respondents

Respondents	German Average Score	English Average Score	Cebuano Average Score
Short-Term Migrants (AJS, CSK, JRS, RJS)	4.58 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U1=18.58	3.54 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U1=5.5	1.54 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U1=2.46
Long-Term Migrants (AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, RAS)	2.5 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=1.4	4.73 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U2=14.5	3.4 (I can do this, although with some difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=16.08

In the reading comprehension on Table 2, regardless of the simplicity or complexity of the topics found in the printed materials in German, the short-term migrants did better than their long-term counterparts. This is because the former has not forgotten their mother tongue despite being away from home for a while. Another factor is their constant use of German in their present home. However, they are also motivated to increase their English vocabulary since this is the language used in school. Unfortunately, this same motivation is not shown in their attitude towards learning Cebuano because the language is not taught in high school or at the tertiary level. Therefore, the short-term migrants found it challenging to comprehend Cebuano reading materials since they have not learned enough language in their daily interactions.

On the other hand, the long-term migrants preferred reading English materials because these are easy and frequently used in school. They are now accustomed to short or long texts in English but rarely read German or Cebuano texts. Most of the long-term migrants who left Germany at a very young age no longer hold any German reading material. AMR and RAS, whose parents continue to motivate them to speak in German, may have earned a high rating in German. Still, the collective preferences of the long-term migrants reflected low average and small values in the rank-summary test in the language.

Meanwhile, in *Strategies for Teaching Reading Comprehension to Children of Migrant Workers*, Dianne Pennington (2020) discusses that in a small independent school district in California's Central Valley, many migrant students fail to fulfill state content standards reading and legibility. According to a previous study, if a student is not fluent in fifth-grade reading abilities, this person will not achieve academic achievement.

On Speaking Skills

The short-term migrants, as shown in Table 3, who are still adept in German can sustain any speaking engagement with German native speakers, whether done spontaneously or involving technical discussions, confidently expressing their opinions on the topic at hand. In all communicative situations involving speaking, all the short-term migrants rated 5, meaning they could do all the speaking tasks without difficulty.

Both short and long-term migrants share the same interest in the English language. The long-term migrants who acquired English ahead of the short-term migrants scored higher in English and Cebuano. The former speak Cebuano like native speakers since this is the language they use every day to communicate with their friends and the public. At the same time, the short-term migrants struggle to speak the dominant language in the community. Because speaking in English is obligatory in school conversations, discussions, and reporting, both groups are motivated to converse in English without any prodding from anyone.



Table 3 The Speaking Competence in German, English, & Cebuano Among Filipino-German Respondents

Respondents	German Average Score	English Average Score	Cebuano Average Score
Short-Term Migrants (AJS, CSK, JRS, RJS)	4.75 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U1=18	4.2 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U1=6	1.6 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U1=3
Long-Term Migrants (AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, RAS)	2.3 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=2	4.4 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U2=14	3.7 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U2=17

As they became more conversant in English and Filipino, the long-term migrants' German fluency conversely deteriorated. They could no longer carry a conversation because they had to process the words first by translating them to English, Cebuano, or their equivalent. As a result, only two long-term migrants still speak German well.

The [Migration Observatory \(2019\)](#) reports that respondents may understand the first language at home in various ways. For example, some would say the language most usually spoken in the family (i.e. the main language, while others may respond chronologically. The question does not aim to elicit the respondent's first language or native language by asking about the language spoken at home, but some individuals may perceive it that way. There is also considerable doubt about how single multilingual respondents may perceive the term of a language spoken 'at home.' We use the words 'main language at home' and 'primary language at home' interchangeably throughout this briefing, but we recognize that respondents may understand these terms differently.

On Writing Proficiency

The Filipino-German respondents' writing proficiency in three languages presents exciting contrasts in Table 4. The short-term migrants claim they can still write suitable compositions in German whether these write-ups are simple or difficult. They consider it effortless to write essays, reports, and letters in German, even if they require many details. Their still daily use of their mother tongue allowed them to maintain good writing proficiency in German.

Table 4 The Writing Competence in German, English, & Cebuano Among Filipino-German Respondents

Respondents	German Average Score	English Average Score	Cebuano Average Score
Short-Term Migrants (AJS, CSK, JRS, RJS)	4.7 (I can do this without any difficulty at all) Rank Sum Test U1=19	4.0 (I can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U1=7	1.0 (I cannot do this at all) Rank Sum Test U1=2
Long-Term Migrants (AMR, BMH, LOL, OMD, RAS)	2.0 (I can do this but with much difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=1	4.5 (can do this fairly easily) Rank Sum Test U2=13	2.89 (I can do this, although with some difficulty) Rank Sum Test U2=18

In terms of English, the short-term migrants continue to acquire the language fast like the long-term migrants. This is because their academic life emphasizes writing in English in all genres. In some items, the short-term migrants have the same average as the long-term migrants, but in general, the long-term migrants have a



higher proficiency in the English language. Not surprisingly, the first group considers English their second preferred language for writing. Writing in Cebuano is very difficult for these recent migrants because they have learned spoken Cebuano only so far; never written, considering that this is not required in the academic setting.

The long-term migrants, on the other hand, find writing in German complex. Except for AMR and RAS, who continue to use German, the others have problems retrieving German words explaining why they rated themselves at the last level of the Can-Do Scales - "we could do it but with much difficulty" - and selected English as now their first language. The language they used in writing exercises was never German and Cebuano. Though a little better than the short-term migrants in their score average, the long-term migrants still struggle with writing in Cebuano.

On the other hand, in *The development of written expression in immigrant children from 6 to 9 years old*, authored by [Elisa de las Fuentes Gutiérrez \(2020\)](#), she talks that the growth of written expression during the initial years of elementary school has given these pupils the skills they need to communicate more effectively. From the first to the third year, there is a growth in written expression that allows pupils to articulate better the linguistic acts performed for communication. Students in the third year of primary school have more communication resources and, as a result, can engage in more linguistic activities geared at communication, even within the same text. Third-year students' expanded vocabulary, combined with the production of more complex sentences, allows them to create more useful communicative texts that express more relevant communication ideas.

The majority of the texts exhibited typical oral language qualities, indicating that immigrant students learning the language in the classroom strive to communicate in writing using tools they are already familiar with from verbal language. This is because oral language norms and codes are acquired out of necessity before written language norms and codes, allowing immigrant kids to cohabit in the classroom and, as previously said, covering the affective needs of all children aged 6 to 9. These children's written work has a single effect: the texts mirror those used in colloquial oral communication as if they were having a face-to-face conversation with the interlocutor ([de las Fuentes Gutiérrez, 2020](#)).

Conclusion

This study has recognized that first language attrition happens when the speakers migrate before puberty and occasionally practice the language. During their adolescent years, the respondents who have moved to the Philippines when acquiring their first language are already cultivated and can still preserve or speak in their primary language. Conversely, individuals who left Germany during their childhood and communicated in English and Cebuano have nearly forgotten their first language. Furthermore, the longer the respondents remained in the Philippines and the more they have integrated with the local speakers, the more they also utilized their second languages, in this situation, English and Cebuano. Their non-use of their first language also determines eloquence in the second language among respondents. To most respondents, the individuals who no longer practice German become more proficient in their acquired second language, English.

Learning about a new environment, new rules of behavior, and new cultural expectations is a difficult task. Furthermore, one of the most challenging barriers to overcome is the language barrier. It's the inability to articulate one's own opinions, thoughts, and feelings. The speakers are frustrated, defeated, and disappointed due to this. On the other hand, there is evidence of language acquisition learning and growth. Some immigrants eventually stop identifying with their own culture and begin to accept the new roles and identities of the host culture. In contrast, others refuse to let go of their own.

Recommendation

Since language attrition is gradual, Filipino-German respondents, especially long-term migrants, should relearn their mother tongue by taking German lessons offered in Philippine universities. Going back to Germany and staying for a couple of months is another option to restudy German. By having German formulaic chunks, respondents can now read e-books e-newspapers in German and watch movies and films in the language through cable TV subscription or listen to German music by downloading songs from the Internet. Other than that, the respondents can also create a German club in Dumaguete and meet once a week to plan their socio-civic activities and, at the same time, to converse in German. Moreover, they can watch German online tutorials like Duolingo and watch and



download German conversations or interactions from social media such as YouTube. They can also call their friends and relatives in Germany more frequently and speak in German. Or, if they want face-to-face interactions, they can go to the restaurants in Dumaguete frequented by German nationals and talk to them in German. By doing all these, the long-time Filipino-German migrants will have frequent access to their first language and will reacquire German in their mental lexicon. At the same time, the more recent ones will continue to immerse themselves in their native language while also becoming more competent in English and Cebuano.

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