



Voices of the Teachers: A Qualitative Inquiry into How Socio-Cultural Backgrounds Influence Teaching English Proficiency among Indigenous Learners in Kalamansig

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat, as they

navigated the complex intersection of standardized instruction and the diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of indigenous Manobo and Teduray learners. Recognizing English proficiency as a critical national mandate, this research aimed to amplify the "voices of the teachers" serving as frontline implementers and cultural brokers in multicultural classrooms. Specifically, the study investigated the pedagogical challenges encountered, teachers' perceptions of how indigenous culture influences student engagement, and the practical, culturally responsive strategies developed to make English learning meaningful. Utilizing purposive sampling, five to eight experienced teachers participated in in-depth, semi-structured interviews and Focus Group Discussions. The gathered narratives were systematically interpreted using thematic analysis. Grounded in Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory, and Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, the research highlighted the profound "epistemological clash" teachers faced, alongside language barriers and a lack of contextualized materials. In response, teachers employed innovative strategies such as translanguaging, localized contextualization, and deep relationship-building to bridge the gap. The findings of this study provided crucial, ground-level insights for the Department of Education, school administrators, and educational stakeholders. By uncovering the daily pedagogical realities and professional agency of these educators, the study advocated targeted professional development and robust institutional support systems for the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPed) Program and fostering a more equitable, inclusive learning environment.

Keywords: *Qualitative inquiry, lived experiences, indigenous learners, English proficiency,*



1. INTRODUCTION

Background of Study

In an increasingly interconnected world, English proficiency was widely recognized as a form of linguistic capital and a gateway to broader socio-economic opportunities (Crystal, 2012). In the Philippine context, this global trend was magnified. As one of the nation's official languages, English was deeply embedded within the educational framework and was considered essential for professional advancement (Bernardo, 2004). The K to 12 Basic Education Program, for instance, explicitly aimed to develop learners' skills to be "globally competitive" (Department of Education, 2013). This national mandate placed a significant and complex responsibility directly on classroom teachers, who served as the frontline implementers tasked with achieving this goal for all students, including those from diverse indigenous socio-cultural backgrounds.

However, this national mandate for English proficiency created distinct challenges for educators, particularly those teaching in multicultural classrooms. In indigenous communities such as in Kalamansig, teachers were at the nexus of two worlds: the standardized, English-centric national curriculum and the rich, diverse socio-cultural backgrounds of their Manobo and Teduray learners (Wa-Mbaleka, 2019).

They had to navigate a complex landscape of differing home languages, community values, and cultural norms that directly impacted classroom dynamics. While national policies such as the Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) Program (DepEd Order No. 62, s. 2011) provided a framework, there was a significant gap in understanding the teachers' own lived experiences, the daily challenges they faced, and the practical, on-

the-ground strategies they innovated to make English accessible and meaningful. This study, therefore, focused on the teachers' voices to understand how they built these crucial bridges to learning.

The municipality of Kalamansig in Sultan Kudarat was a culturally rich area, home to a significant population of Indigenous Peoples (IPs), predominantly from the Manobo and Teduray ethnolinguistic groups (National Commission on Indigenous Peoples, 2021). These communities possessed distinct worldviews and linguistic systems that shaped their children's identity. For teachers in this context, the English classroom represented a critical and demanding intersection. They were professionally responsible for bridging the standardized, English-based curriculum with the lived realities of their indigenous learners, a task that required immense pedagogical skill and deep cultural sensitivity.

While a considerable body of research existed on English language learning in the Philippines, studies had predominantly focused on urban populations or on quantitative measures of proficiency (Salillas, 2020). There remained a noticeable gap in qualitative literature in the pedagogical challenge: the lived experiences of teachers in specific rural settings.

We lacked a deep, narrative understanding of the teachers' perspectives, how they perceived learners' sociocultural backgrounds, the daily challenges they faced, and the practical, on-the-ground strategies to bridge learning.

This study, therefore, sought to improve the "voices of the teachers." It moved beyond a deficit-oriented view of the learner to understand the teaching journey from the practitioners' own standpoints. Through a qualitative inquiry, this research aimed to explore the lived experiences of



teachers as they navigated the intricate relationship between their learners' socio-cultural backgrounds and the demands of English proficiency. The goal was to identify practical, teacher-developed strategies to inform more inclusive and culturally responsive educational practices.

This study addressed that gap by investigating the lived experiences of teachers in Kalamansig. It focused on the challenges they faced rooted in learners' backgrounds, and the unique pedagogical strategies they employed to navigate their classrooms. Aligned with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) 4 (Quality Education) and 10 (Reduced Inequalities), this research aspired to promote inclusive education by supporting its frontline practitioners. The goal was to generate grounded, practical insights from teachers that could inform effective, culturally responsive teaching practices and policies.

Theoretical Frameworks

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (SCT) (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory posited that learning was an inherently social process. Cognitive development was not isolated but was directly shaped by social interaction and cultural tools, primarily language (Vygotsky, 1978). Key concepts included the "More Knowledgeable Other" (MKO), who guided the learner, and the "Zone of Proximal Development" (ZPD), the space where effective learning occurred.

This theory was central to framing the teacher's lived experience. In this study, the teacher acted as the MKO, tasked with creating a ZPD for their indigenous learners. This framework allowed the researcher to analyze the challenges teachers faced when their learners' cultural tools (e.g., Manobo or Teduray language) differed from the

academic tools of the English curriculum. It interpreted the pedagogical strategies teachers described as their practical attempts to build this social and cultural bridge, making learning possible.

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (Bronfenbrenner, 1994)

Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory (1994) conceptualized human development as being embedded within a series of nested environmental systems. These ranged from the immediate microsystem (e.g., family, school) and the mesosystem (the connections between microsystems) to the indirect exosystem (e.g., local policies, community structures) and the overarching macrosystem (e.g., cultural values, national educational policy).

This theory provided a crucial "map" for understanding the teacher's contextual reality. The study used this lens to analyze the teachers' perspectives on the various systems that created challenges and opportunities for them. This included their direct interactions with students (microsystem), their perceptions of the school-home relationship (mesosystem), the impact of school policies and resource limitations (exosystem), and the pressure they felt from national K-12 mandates clashing with local indigenous culture (macrosystem).

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) (Ladson-Billings, 1995)

Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP) emphasized the importance of including students' cultural backgrounds, experiences, and languages as assets and resources for learning, rather than as deficits to be overcome (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995). It argued that learning was most effective when it was connected to the students' lived realities.



This framework served as the central pedagogical lens for analyzing the teachers' practices. This study used CRP to interpret the "lived experiences" of teachers as they described their strategies for teaching English. It provided a foundation for identifying how teachers, in their own words, attempted to validate learners' indigenous identities, utilized culturally relevant materials (or described their struggle to find them), and leveraged the students' first language as a bridge. Their narratives were analyzed as stories of their journey toward (or challenges with) implementing cultural responsiveness.

Research Questions

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of teachers in teaching indigenous learners. Specifically, it sought to answer the following research questions:

1. What were the challenges and opportunities teachers encountered when teaching English Manubo and Teduray learners, particularly in relation to their distinct cultural traits, values and language practices?

2. How, in the teachers' perception, did the Manubo and Teduray learners' indigenous culture (e.g., home language, community values, beliefs) influence their behavior, engagement, and proficiency in the English classroom?

3. What specific pedagogical strategies, innovations, and personal adaptations did teachers employ to bridge the socio-cultural gap and make English language learning meaningful for Manubo and Teduray students?

2. METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically a phenomenological approach, to capture the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers in Kalamansig. A qualitative design was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to gain insights into teachers' professional perspectives, their perceptions of learners' unique sociocultural context, and the pedagogical strategies they developed, rather than limiting the findings to quantifiable variables.

By focusing on their lived experiences, the study sought to uncover the meanings, challenges, and perceptions that could not be fully understood through numerical data (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Braun & Clarke, 2021).

The phenomenological approach was particularly suitable because it explored and interpreted the essence of the participants' lived experiences.

This method enabled the researcher to understand how teachers made sense of their journey of teaching English to indigenous learners, including the pedagogical challenges they faced and the unique strategies they developed. Through rich descriptions and thematic analysis, the study illuminated both the professional struggles and the pedagogical adaptations of these teachers in Kalamansig.

Such an approach ensured that the findings authentically represented the "voices of the teachers," providing valuable insights that could inform more culturally responsive educational practices (Moustakas, 1994; Neubauer, Witkop, & Varpio, 2019).



Participants of the Study

The participants were eight (8) public secondary school teachers from Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat, during the school year 2025–2026. Purposive sampling was used to select participants who met specific criteria, such as having at least two years of experience teaching English or related subjects to indigenous learners (e.g., Manobo or Teduray). This ensured they had direct lived experience of the pedagogical challenges and opportunities in learners' sociocultural backgrounds.

This sampling strategy ensured that participants could provide rich, relevant, and insightful data on the interplay between their teaching practices and the learners' socio-cultural backgrounds (Etikan et al., 2016; Palinkas et al., 2015). The study was delimited solely to these teachers to maintain a sharp focus on their authentic, firsthand professional accounts.

This approach was crucial in a phenomenological inquiry, as it prioritized the teachers' own voices and perspectives, thereby enhancing the depth and credibility of the findings by capturing the essence of their professional reality.

The participants must be:

1. Current Teaching Position: Only teachers who are officially employed in a public school in Kalamansig will be included.
2. Relevant Teaching Experience: Participants must have experience teaching English (or a related subject) to indigenous learners (e.g., Manobo or Teduray).
3. Sufficient Professional Experience: Participants must have a minimum of two (2) years of teaching experience. This ensures they have sufficient lived experiences to reflect on the pedagogical challenges,

perceptions, and strategies central to the study.

4. Willingness and Consent to Participate: Only teachers who voluntarily agree to participate and provide their own informed consent will be part of the study.

Sampling Technique

This method was deliberately designed to select teachers who had direct, lived experience of the phenomenon being studied, the interplay between their teaching of English and the learners' socio-cultural backgrounds. By choosing participants based on specific criteria (e.g., at least two years of relevant experience), the study ensured that the data collected would be rich, deep, and directly relevant to the research questions.

In this sampling method, the researcher needed prior knowledge of the study's purpose to select and approach eligible participants. For this qualitative inquiry, purposive sampling was used to access a specific subset of individuals, public secondary school teachers, as all participants were chosen because they fit a specific profile and could provide deep, narrative insights into the phenomenon.

Research Instruments

A semi-structured interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were utilized in this study as exploratory tools. These methods were used to examine how public-school teachers experienced and made sense of their English language teaching journey in relation to their learners' socio-cultural backgrounds. The goal was to gather rich, narrative data to contribute to the development of more culturally responsive pedagogical strategies and teacher support systems for indigenous



communities in Kalamansig, Division of Sultan Kudarat.

The interview guide and FGD protocol were validated by a panel of evaluators, experts in qualitative research, pedagogy, and instruments.

Data Gathering Procedure

The study's reliability was ensured by the researcher's strict adherence to qualitative protocols. It examined how the sociocultural backgrounds of indigenous learners influenced the teaching of English through the teachers' lived experiences. This ultimately contributed to the development of more culturally responsive pedagogical practices and effective teacher support systems in Kalamansig, Division of Sultan Kudarat.

First, the Superintendent of the DepEd-Sultan Kudarat and the Dean of the CGS were requested to sign a document authorizing the researcher to do the steps to conduct the study.

A second authorization letter was sent to the District Supervisor of the DepEd Kalamansig district. To collect the precise data necessary for this study, a survey questionnaire was created, evaluated, and implemented.

The researcher then selected respondents through purposive sampling from key informants of the study. The researcher then facilitated the face-to-face interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD), adhering to the health procedure.

Finally, the data acquired from the interview and Focus Group Discussion (FGD) were collated, analyzed, and interpreted using thematic analysis.

Data Analysis

A thematic analysis was used to interpret the qualitative data gathered from the teachers' interviews and Focus Group Discussions.

This method involved systematically identifying, analyzing, and reporting patterns (themes) within the data. The researcher coded significant statements, phrases, and ideas from the transcripts into categories. These themes were analyzed directly from the teachers' narratives to the study's objectives, allowing for a deep and authentic understanding of their lived professional experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

Verbal and transcribed interview data were collected from participants to explore the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers in Kalamansig, focusing on their pedagogical challenges and strategies in teaching English as shaped by learners' sociocultural backgrounds.

The interviews and FGDs conducted for this research were used to distill the most salient participant answers into overarching themes.

Scope and Limitations

This qualitative study explored the lived experiences of public secondary school teachers in Kalamansig, Sultan Kudarat, during the 2025-2026 school year. It specifically focused on their perceptions, challenges, and pedagogical strategies, and how indigenous learners' socio-cultural backgrounds influenced the teaching of English proficiency.

The research was delimited to the in-depth narratives of selected teachers who met the inclusion criteria, such as having significant experience (e.g., two or more



years) teaching indigenous learners, particularly the Manobo or Teduray. Their first-hand professional accounts were considered central to the inquiry. Therefore, the study did not measure student proficiency through standardized tests or make quantitative comparisons. The findings were intended to provide deep, contextual insights into pedagogy rather than broad generalizations.

To achieve this, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. In-depth narratives were collected through semi-structured interviews and focus group discussions to understand how these teachers experienced, interpreted, and navigated their English language teaching journey. To maintain a clear focus on the "voices of the teachers," the study was delimited to these practitioners. It did not include students, parents, or school heads as primary respondents.

This focused approach was necessary to generate authentic insights from the frontline, which could guide the development of more effective teacher training and culturally responsive educational practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Teaching English to Indigenous students in Kalamansig required a transition from standard curricula to a culturally responsive, multilingual approach to overcome significant socio-cultural and geographical barriers. Learners faced a heavy cognitive "relay effect" as they navigated English as a third or fourth language, often struggling with phonetic structures and limited exposure. Furthermore, deeply rooted values of cultural humility and respect for elders frequently manifested as classroom silence, which was often misinterpreted as a lack of interest rather than a fear of social judgment or a perceived distance from an "elite"

language. To counter these challenges, educators successfully bypassed traditional methods by integrating ancestral storytelling, local metaphors, and translanguaging, which effectively transformed students from passive learners into "cultural experts". Ultimately, the study underscored that instructional success was dependent on pedagogical flexibility to accommodate the digital divide and the labor cycles of local farming and fishing communities.

English acquisition among Indigenous students in Kalamansig was a complex navigation of linguistic barriers and deeply held cultural identities, where English often functioned as a "perishable" skill due to the lack of reinforcement outside the classroom. The study identified that profound structural and phonetic differences between mother tongues—such as Maguindanaon, Teduray, and Manobo—and English led to "triple translation" fatigue and physical struggles with pronunciation. Furthermore, traditional values like *hiya* (humility) and collectivism often resulted in "polite silence," as students feared that individual participation or speaking out could be perceived as boastful (*pagmamayabang*) or lead to social risk through criticized accents. This cultural mismatch was exacerbated by a clash between the "trial and error" nature of Western pedagogy and Indigenous learning styles that prioritize observation before action. However, the data highlighted that anchoring English in local contexts—such as ancestral storytelling or describing familiar processes like harvesting and fishing—effectively broke this silence by transforming students into content experts, thereby providing them with the confidence to engage with the language.

A paradigm shift in Kalamansig, where educators utilized Indigenous identity as the primary vehicle for English acquisition rather than forcing students to abandon their heritage. This was achieved



through "Ancestral Scaffolding," where local folklore and tribal history served as foundational texts, allowing students to master story logic in their home language before transitioning into English.

To further reduce anxiety and honor collective identity, teachers implemented "Duyog-style" collaborative learning and localized games, moving away from individual reporting to lower the students' affective filters. Additionally, the deliberate use of translanguaging and code-switching empowered students by validating their native languages as academic tools, fostering psychological safety. Finally, by extending instruction to the physical environment and analyzing traditional chants as "English Literature," educators anchored vocabulary in daily realities like farming and weaving, effectively transforming the English language into a practical tool for describing the students' own lived experiences.

Sustaining English language programs in Kalamansig requires a holistic systemic framework where institutional support, community partnership, and the fulfillment of basic needs converge to ensure academic success. The findings suggest that effective instruction depends on administrative flexibility that moves away from "one-size-fits-all" mandates toward localized, IPED-aligned curricula, while also requiring the "psychological lubricant" of tribal leaders' blessings to validate English as a tool for empowerment rather than a threat to cultural roots. Furthermore, the data underscores that physical readiness is a prerequisite for high-level cognitive tasks, meaning that school feeding programs and health services are essential for students to focus on linguistic complexities.

By prioritizing specialized professional development in translanguaging and celebrating qualitative "milestone moments" of student confidence

over standardized scores, educators in these Indigenous communities' function as nurturers who prioritize cultural pride and self-worth as the foundation for linguistic fluency.

A profound transformation in professional identity among Kalamansig educators, who viewed themselves not merely as English instructors but as "cultural bridges" and mission-driven mentors dedicated to Indigenous empowerment. The findings suggest that these teachers prioritized a "student-first" reciprocal learning approach, where they became learners of tribal culture to better facilitate a "global voice" for their pupils without replacing their native identities. This pedagogical shift moved away from rigid, high-stakes testing toward a nurturing, "safe space" environment characterized by patience, servant leadership, and a "second parent" level of emotional support. Ultimately, the data interpreted the teachers' success as being inextricably tied to the students' self-efficacy, defining professional achievement through the visible increase in a learner's confidence and ability to advocate for their own heritage through a new linguistic medium.

Conclusion

The acquisition of the English language among Indigenous learners in Kalamansig was deeply intertwined with their home languages, community norms, and cultural identities.

Instead, English instruction was successful when it was culturally responsive, leveraging indigenous knowledge, allowing translanguaging, and respecting local values like collectivism.

Teaching English in remote indigenous communities was a collaborative and mission-driven endeavor. It required strong institutional backing, community



partnerships, and educators who acted as patient, culturally sensitive bridges to empower marginalized learners without erasing their roots.

Recommendations

1. For Policy Makers and DepEd Officials, they may provide dedicated budgets and resources to develop localized, inclusive learning materials rather than relying on generic central office modules. Ensure curriculum flexibility and adjust the Classroom Observation Tool (COT) so that instructional guidelines do not conflict with the strategic use of mother-tongue instruction and translanguaging. Expand and sustain school feeding programs, acknowledging that fulfilling basic nutritional needs is an absolute prerequisite for students to focus on academic lessons like English grammar.
2. For School Administrators, they may organize specialized professional development for teachers that focuses specifically on handling multilingual indigenous learners and applying culturally responsive pedagogy in the Kalamansig context. Actively foster partnerships with local Datus, tribal elders, and Indigenous Peoples Mandatory Representatives (IPMRs) to gain their blessing, ensuring the community views English as an empowering tool rather than a cultural threat. Support school events (such as celebrating IP Day) that showcase indigenous talents, traditional dress, and beliefs to affirm the learners' identity and sense of belonging.
3. For Teachers, they may actively integrate local folklore, traditions, and metaphors into lesson plans to bridge complex English concepts and make lessons more relatable. Shift away from individual reporting toward group-based activities, such as "Duyog-style" or community circle learning, to respect the students' collectivist nature and reduce their fear of judgment. Allow students to process complex ideas or brainstorm in their mother tongue first

before translating their thoughts into English, thereby lowering anxiety and cognitive load.

4. For Future Researchers, they may conduct longitudinal studies on the effectiveness of specific localized pedagogical innovations (e.g., game-based learning like "Kalamansig Henyo" or story-based instruction) on the measurable English proficiency of IP learners. Investigate the development, implementation, and effectiveness of localized instructional tools, such as the proposed tri-lingual dictionary (English-Filipino-Manobo Dulangan), to aid both teachers and students in multilingual classrooms.

Ethical Considerations

Before beginning the study, the complete research plan was submitted to East-West Mindanao Colleges, Inc. for final approval to ensure compliance with all institutional procedures.

The researcher secured consent from all participants (and assent from the learners themselves), guaranteeing that all data were provided voluntarily. No individual was coerced into participating, and their right to refuse was fully respected.

Interviews and Focus Group Discussions were conducted using a validated guide in a setting chosen by the participants to ensure they felt safe and comfortable. All risks were minimized, and participants had the right to review the data they provided. The sessions lasted between 30 to 60 minutes, and all participation was completely voluntary.

The researcher offered a small token of appreciation to acknowledge the participant's time and effort. In compliance with the Data Privacy Act (DPA), all collected data were treated with confidentiality. No identifying information



was disclosed in the study's findings to protect the privacy of all individuals involved.

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AI Tools Declaration

I do hereby declare the use AI tools, such as Gemini AI and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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