

Unpacking the Challenges: Social Interaction, Language Acquisition, and Cultural Context in Filipino Language Learning Among Grade 2 Special Science Learners

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Abstract

This study explored the struggles of Grade 2 learners in learning the Filipino Language under the Special Science Elementary School (SSES) curriculum at Butuan City Special Education Center. A case study approach explored their struggles in listening, reading, speaking, writing, and understanding in Filipino. Findings reveal that learners faced peer communication barriers due to reluctance to speak Filipino, hindering collaboration. They exhibited a lack of confidence and fear of feedback. Teachers noted limited Filipino use due to English and Bisaya preference. Parents observed the use of code-switching in when talking to their peers. Language learning struggles included spelling, vocabulary, sentence construction, and writing. Cognitive difficulties impacted vocabulary and spelling, while teachers found guiding sentence construction challenging. Parents faced difficulties with phonetic differences and vowel confusion. Most participants found comprehension the most challenging aspect of Filipino language learning. Learners often favor their home dialects over Filipino in class, making comprehension more difficult and increasing reliance on teachers support for their understanding. Educators may foster supportive environments and explicitly teach foundational skills. Curriculum adjustments and teacher training in effective Filipino pedagogy are needed. Parental involvement strategies should address regional dialect influences.

Index Terms: Communication Barriers, Cognitive factors, Code switching, Pedagogical challenges

I. INTRODUCTION

The Filipino language, officially recognized as the national language of the Philippines, plays a central role in shaping national identity, fostering unity, and facilitating effective communication across diverse communities. It serves as a tool for promoting social cohesion and preserving the country's rich cultural heritage (Pineda, 2023). Within the education system, Filipino is used as a medium of instruction, particularly in the early grades, to support students' cognitive development and literacy skills. Republic Act No. 7104 further institutionalizes the use of Filipino in government communication, underscoring its role in ensuring inclusivity and accessibility in civic engagement. The 1987 Constitution, through Article XIV, Section 6, mandates the development and enrichment of the Filipino language by incorporating elements from other Philippine languages, emphasizing its evolving nature and relevance to national progress. In line with this, the Department of Education (DepEd) implemented the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE)

policy through DepEd Order No. 74, s. 2009, which promotes using learners' first language (L1) to enhance understanding and serve as a bridge to learning Filipino and other languages.

Several scholars and educational theorists support the implementation of MTB-MLE and emphasize the importance of using the first language in early education to foster better academic outcomes. Espiña and Ibojo (2023) argue that bilingual strategies, such as code-switching and culturally relevant materials, help learners grasp complex concepts in Filipino. According to Saysi and Batuctoc (2023), prioritizing oral language development through storytelling and songs is essential before transitioning to reading and writing instruction. Brown et al. (2019) also advocate using culturally responsive teaching materials to make learning more meaningful. Gillies (2019) highlights the benefits of interactive and collaborative learning activities, such as group discussions, in promoting student engagement. Lin et al. (2021) emphasize the importance of providing learners with adequate practice opportunities during the gradual shift to Filipino as the primary language of instruction. These studies demonstrate that an inclusive and strategic approach to language instruction can significantly support language acquisition and learning outcomes.

Despite national policies and scholarly support, national and local assessments reveal that many learners struggle with Filipino language acquisition. National studies have found that learners in science-focused curricula, such as those in Special Science Elementary School (SSES) programs, often prioritize science and mathematics, resulting in weaker performance in language subjects (Tan, 2022; Reyes, 2019). These findings are mirrored in the Philippine context, where implementing MTB-MLE has created a greater need for effective bridging programs between learners' L1 and Filipino (Cruz & Santos, 2021). Butuan City Special Education Center (BC SPED Center) presents a scenario concerning the local level. Grade 2 learners in the SSES program struggle with confidently expressing themselves in Filipino, often hesitating to participate due to fear of making mistakes. These learners face pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar challenges, as well as difficulties interpreting social cues and nonverbal communication. Cultural factors further compound these challenges, particularly when Filipino is not spoken at home, leading to a disconnect between the learners' cultural experiences and the classroom environment. This study aims to address the identified gaps by investigating the specific struggles of Grade 2 learners in acquiring Filipino within the context of the SSES curriculum. Preliminary data from the 2024 Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) at BC SPED Center reveal a notable discrepancy in reading comprehension scores: only 39% of Grade 2 learners demonstrated average Proficiency in Filipino, compared to 54% in Sinugbuanong Bisaya.

Additionally, performance in the first and second periodic Filipino tests showed minimal improvement, with mean scores rising only from 19.85 to 22.35 out of 30. These findings indicate a need to explore the root causes of these difficulties and design targeted, evidence-based interventions. This study will analyze how social interaction, language acquisition strategies, and cultural context impact Filipino language learning in science-oriented educational environments. The outcomes of this research aim to inform more inclusive teaching practices and curriculum design, ultimately contributing to improved language learning and educational equity in specialized elementary programs.

II RESEARCH ELABORATIONS

This study is anchored in the Social Language Fossilization Theory (Selinker, 1972). This theory addresses the phenomenon where language learners reach a plateau in their language acquisition process, resulting in persistent errors that become resistant to further learning and correction. Language fossilization refers to the process where incorrect linguistic features become a permanent part of a learner's interlanguage, which is the evolving linguistic system that learners create as they progress toward full proficiency in a second language. Despite continued exposure to the target language and instruction, these errors remain fixed and are not easily corrected. The concept of interlanguage, a dynamic linguistic system that learners construct by blending elements of their native language with those of the target language, is central to understanding second language acquisition (Hummel, 2021). This theory, proposed by Selinker (1972), is relevant to the study as it explains the potential stagnation in the language acquisition process of Grade 2 learners under the Special Science Elementary School curriculum. Despite continued exposure and instruction, specific linguistic errors may persist and become ingrained in the learners' interlanguage.

This framework is vital for understanding these learners' struggles, as it highlights the potential for the fossilization of errors. By examining the learners' language development through the lens of fossilization, the study can identify persistent errors and their underlying causes. This understanding can then strengthen the development of targeted interventions and support mechanisms to prevent these errors from becoming permanent barriers to language acquisition. Moreover, insights from the study of fossilization can contribute to the broader body of knowledge on language acquisition in specialized educational settings. This information is valuable for teachers and curriculum developers who aim to create more inclusive and effective learning environments. By addressing the issue of fossilization, the study can ensure that all learners, regardless of their academic program, have the opportunity to achieve full Proficiency in the target language.

In support of the theory presented, the Cognitive Load Theory (Sweller, 1988) explains how the human brain processes information and the limitations of working memory. It suggests that learning is most effective when instructional designs consider the cognitive load imposed on learners, which includes intrinsic (task-related), extraneous (presentation-related), and germane (schema-building) cognitive loads. This theory is connected to the study as it provides a framework for understanding the struggles Grade 2 learners face in acquiring Filipino language skills within the Special Science Elementary School (SSES) curriculum. By recognizing the limitations of working memory, teachers can design instructional materials and strategies that minimize extraneous cognitive load and optimize germane cognitive load, helping learners process and retain new language information more effectively.

This study is also reinforced by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978). Vygotsky's sociocultural theory posits that learning is a socially mediated process. It emphasizes the role of social interaction, language, and culture in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky, children learn through interactions with more knowledgeable others (MKOs), such as teachers, parents, and peers. These interactions occur within a specific cultural context, which shapes the tools and symbols used for learning. A key concept in Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the gap between what a learner can do independently and what he/she can achieve with the guidance and support of an MKO. Scaffolding, a process where the MKO provides tailored support to the learner, helps bridge this gap and help him/her reach his/her full potential. Supporting studies highlight the relevance of Vygotsky's theory across diverse learning contexts. This sociocultural theory is highly relevant to this study as it provides a framework for understanding the struggles faced by Grade 2 learners in the SSES curriculum in acquiring Filipino language skills. The theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction, language, and cultural context in learning, which are all crucial factors in language acquisition. Furthermore, the ZPD and scaffolding concept highlights the need for tailored support to help learners bridge the gap between their current abilities and their potential.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative case study design to investigate the challenges faced by Grade 2 learners in acquiring the Filipino language within the Special Science Elementary School (SSES) curriculum at Butuan City Special Education Center. The research involved in-depth interviews with a purposively selected sample consisting of five Grade 2 students, two Filipino language teachers, and five parents. The interviews followed a structured protocol to explore issues related to social interaction, language learning processes, and the influence of cultural context on Filipino language acquisition. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcribed data were then subjected to rigorous coding and thematic analysis to identify key patterns and extract meaningful insights into the learners' experiences and perspectives. The investigation aimed to uncover the specific obstacles encountered by academically advanced young learners in developing Filipino language proficiency within an educational setting that emphasizes science and mathematics instruction.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the thematic Analysis through codes, categories, and themes. The data were analyzed to provide research implications and insights that can contribute to developing Grade 2 learners under the Special Science Elementary School curriculum in learning the Filipino language.

Qualitative Findings. What are the struggles experienced by Grade 2 learners in the Special Science Elementary School curriculum in relation to Filipino language learning along with;

1. social interaction;

Table 1. Thematic Analysis of the struggles experienced by Grade 2 learners under the Special Science Elementary School (SSES) curriculum in relation to Filipino language learning, along with social interaction

Participants	Code	Category	Theme	Description
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Learners L 1, L 2, L 3, L 4, L 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language shift to Bisaya in response to peers • Lack of observable response to spoken Filipino • Reliance on copying peers' answers • Experiencing boredom during reading 	Reluctance to use Filipino with peers	Peer Communication Barriers	Learners prefer their home dialects over Filipino in class, relying heavily on teachers for content understanding. Anxiety about mistakes reduces their willingness to speak, prompting them to minimize visibility in group work to hide comprehension gaps.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frequent requests for sentence explanations from the teacher • Dependence on English translations • Waiting for teacher examples before answering 	Dependence on teacher help	Teacher–Learner Dynamics	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reluctance to mispronounce • Feelings of embarrassment when corrected • Hesitation in answering due to fear of mistakes • Speaking only when called upon • Keep nodding despite lack of comprehension • Avoidance of reading long texts aloud • Delegating writing tasks to others in group work • Maintaining silence to avoid slowing down the group. • Maintained silence during group work • Experiencing boredom during reading 	Shyness and fear of negative feedback	Lack of Confidence & Fear of Feedback	
Teachers T1, T2,	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited opportunities for casual conversation in Filipino among Peers 	Restricted conversational practice	Limited Use of Filipino	In school, Filipino remains secondary, reinforcing their restricted proficiency. Some attempt to use it but often mix it with English or
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strong preference and consistent use of English within the household • Passive exposure in Filipino across the primary areas of a child's social life 	Primary household language influence	English Dominance	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lack of interest in engaging with various forms of Filipino media 	Disconnection from Filipino media	Media Disinterest	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Classroom focus prioritizes English, Science, and Math over Filipino 	Curriculum prioritization impact	Filipino as Secondary Subject	vernacular, reflecting a fragile grasp of the language.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Minimal exposure and need for Filipino in the local community Weak integration of Filipino into daily social interactions 	Limited real-world application	Limited Exposure	
Parents P1, P2, P3, P4, P5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaking more confidently in English than in Filipino 	Limited Filipino fluency	Language Confidence	Their daily lives offer limited exposure to Filipino, with rare casual conversations in the language, primary use of English at home, and little engagement with Filipino media.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> No fluency in Filipino 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaking Bisaya at home 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Combined usage of English and Filipino 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Struggles with word choice Uncertainty of Filipino expressions Struggles to express ideas in Filipino 	Obstacles of Filipino	Communication Effort	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use of English to explain Filipino thoughts Self-correction when unsure Combining English, Filipino, and Bisaya when talking 	Language mixing in speech	Multilingual Adjustment	

The findings reveal that Grade 2 learners experienced various challenges in the Filipino language along with social interaction. Several themes and categories emerged from the coded data, highlighting shared patterns across participants. The data affirm the lived experiences of learners, teachers, and parents. The learners struggled with their speaking skills and showed reluctance to use the Filipino language when communicating with peers, which led to peer communication barriers (theme-Peer Communication Barriers). This hesitancy negatively impacted their collaboration and participation in group activities (theme-Collaboration and Participation). Many learners expressed shyness and a fear of receiving negative feedback from their teachers, indicating a lack of confidence and fear of feedback (theme-Lack of Confidence & Fear of Feedback).

During the interview, one of the learner-participants answered, *“When I don't understand it, I want to ask, but I'm too shy to stand. I try to stand up even though I'm shy”*. The response meant that because she is not really good in Filipino, *“I think some words teachers don't understand because I'm not really good at it”*. These challenges are particularly evident in the learners' reluctance to use Filipino in peer communications, leading to decreased participation in group activities and heightened anxiety about receiving negative feedback from teachers. These findings align with Lev Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which emphasizes the critical role of social interaction in cognitive development. According to Vygotsky (1978), the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) represents the range of tasks that a learner can perform with guidance but not yet independently. In this context, the learners' hesitancy and lack of confidence suggest they are operating within their ZPD regarding Filipino language skills. Teachers have observed that students acquire limited opportunities to practice speaking Filipino, primarily due to a preference for English and Bisaya in both classroom settings and daily interactions (theme- Limited Use of Filipino). This limited application of the Filipino language in local contexts hinders learners' ability

to express themselves effectively. According to a teacher-participant, “*Filipino is just a subsidiary to English. Yes, it's like Filipino is just a requirement. One of the subjects, they really have no interest in it.*”

Parents have also noted that their children struggle with word choice and often mix languages or do code-switching (theme-Language Mixing in Speech) when communicating, indicating difficulties in articulating ideas solely in Filipino. As said by a parent-participant, “*What we did is like a translation of the Filipino word to English because it's much easier for him to comprehend the English definition*”. This implies that learners are able to express their ideas and thoughts more effectively when they code-switch. When Filipino is translated into English, the message becomes easier to understand. These findings support the study of Manuel (2024) that code-mixing and code-switching can help keep both the Filipino and English languages actively engaged in a learner’s cognitive system. It will aid activation, which may support balanced language development across both languages, it enhances cognitive flexibility—an essential skill in language acquisition. This will help learners better understand complex grammar and expand their vocabulary in both Filipino and English. As supported in the study of Macaro (2021), Strategic Language Mixing exposes learners to a more diverse and enriched linguistic input. This bilingual exposure introduces a broader range of vocabulary and grammatical patterns, which can accelerate language development, especially in contexts where English is learned as a second language.

The findings further support Larry Selinker's Interlanguage Theory, (Selinker, 2015) which explains that learners develop a unique linguistic system that combines elements of their native language and the target language, shaped by psychological and social factors, making it a crucial concept in second language acquisition. However, Maranan et al (2025) suggest that while code-switching can aid understanding, over-reliance on it might impede the development of full proficiency in the second language (Filipino in many Philippine college settings), particularly speaking and listening skills. In much the same way, Selinker also suggests that interlanguage, which evolves over time can sometimes become fossilized, meaning certain errors or patterns remain permanent and prevent full mastery of the new language amongst learners.

Qualitative Findings. What are the struggles experienced by Grade 2 learners in the Special Science Elementary School curriculum in relation to Filipino language learning along with:

2. language learning;

Table 2. Thematic Analysis of the struggles experienced by Grade 2 learners under the Special Science Elementary School (SSES) curriculum in relation to Filipino language learning, along with language learning

Participants	Code	Category	Theme	Description
Learners L 1, L 2, L 3, L 4, L 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty in understanding some Filipino words 	Limited word knowledge	Vocabulary Acquisition	Filipino learners struggle with vocabulary, avoiding hard words, which makes reading and storytelling tough.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Perceived some words as deep and complex 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Tendency to skip unfamiliar words 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Required multiple readings for comprehension 	Text interpretation challenges	Reading Comprehension	Pronunciation and spelling issues slow fluency, while Bisaya influence makes sentences tricky. They can read Filipino but don't fully understand it because the curriculum assumes they already know the language well.
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty grasping the main idea 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Inability to retell stories 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mispronunciation leading to incorrect spelling 	Pronunciation & Spelling	Oral & Written Form Difficulties	
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty in articulating long words 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Confusion with similar letters 			
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Pausing in mid-word during speech 			

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaving blanks in writing due to spelling difficulties Mixing English and Filipino words Use of sentences lacking connectors Providing only single-word answers in writing Opting to write in English Answering in English despite being asked in Filipino Requesting English translations from friends Mental translation from English to Filipino 	<p>Spelling & sentence construction</p> <p>Mixing languages for comprehension</p>	<p>Writing Difficulties</p> <p>Code-Switching</p>	
Teachers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Difficulty in understanding unfamiliar Filipino vocabulary Interference of native Sinugbuanong Binisaya Structures in Filipino processing Pronunciation and comprehension of long, multisyllabic Filipino words Discrepancy between Cebuano sounds and Filipino spelling conventions Hesitation and difficulty in constructing original and grammatically correct Filipino sentences 	<p>Novel vocabulary acquisition</p> <p>Mother Tongue Cognitive Transfer</p> <p>Reading fluency and decoding</p> <p>Orthographic encoding barriers</p> <p>Independent language production</p>	<p>Vocabulary Struggle</p> <p>Bisaya Interference</p> <p>Reading Difficulty</p> <p>Spelling Confusion</p> <p>Sentence Difficulty</p>	<p>Writing is tough due to sentence, spelling, and punctuation struggles. Without beginner lessons, they can't build strong Filipino skills, making them less confident than in English.</p>
Parents	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reads without comprehension Needs translation to understand Limited vocabulary Deep Filipino words taught in school Assumption that learners already understand Filipino Lack of entry-level words Leap of Filipino teaching straight to concepts Absence of step-by-step instruction compared to English 	<p>Comprehension gap</p> <p>Lack of foundational support</p>	<p>Reading Comprehension</p> <p>Curriculum Design</p>	<p>They struggle with reading due to limited vocabulary and reliance on translation. Teaching skips basics, jumping to concepts, causing spelling, writing, and punctuation issues.</p>

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Difficulty in spelling due to vowel confusion (E/O vs. I/U) ● Able to spell but not understand ● Struggling in writing complete sentences ● Forgets punctuation and indentation ● Challenges in constructing ideas 	Hurdles in writing skills development	Writing and Structure Difficulty
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Reads well aloud but cannot explain meaning ● Able to understand when listening but not when reading ● Need to understand context clues ● Struggles with instructions 	Surface-level reading skills	Vocabulary and Interpretation

The findings show the different struggles encountered by Grade 2 learners in their acquisition of the Filipino language, particularly in spelling and sentence construction (theme- Vocabulary Acquisition). These linguistic difficulties extend beyond individual struggles, as evidenced by shared concerns among learners, teachers, and parents. The learners exhibit frustration in spelling and constructing coherent sentences (theme-Writing Proficiency) reflecting the cognitive demands of language learning at an early stage. An account of a learner-participant expressed, *"I struggle to find the spelling and I struggle what words to write. And also because I don't know the meaning ...because I can misspell a lot of things."*

Teachers, meanwhile, contend with hesitation and difficulty in guiding learners toward composing original, grammatically sound Filipino sentences, (theme- Sentence Difficulty) highlighting pedagogical concerns in language instruction. A teacher- participant recounted, *"Okay, the more that we have difficulty in writing because as I have said, they don't have the schema or the prior knowledge on the words that they are going to use in constructing their sentences for them to be able to write a paragraph, even a short paragraph on that matter because they lack words to be used in writing. The more that they have difficulty in writing"*.

Parents similarly face challenges in assisting their children, particularly in spelling, due to vowel confusion (E/O vs. I/U), which emphasizes the phonetic complexity of Filipino orthography (Writing and Structure Difficulty). According to a parent- participant, *"As for speaking, I guess what I really notice in this is that our language at home is Bisaya. And Bisaya is more, the pronunciation of Bisaya words is stronger. The accent is stronger as compared to Filipino. So, there are really words that when he pronounces it, there is a strong accent, a strong Visaya accent in his pronunciation."* These findings show a need for re-evaluating and adapting current pedagogical approaches and curriculum design to better support foundational Filipino language acquisition. There is a need for research focusing on effective early literacy instruction in Filipino, particularly addressing the identified areas of vocabulary acquisition, writing proficiency, and difficulties with sentence structure and spelling. Specifically, the prevalence of vowel confusion (E/O vs. I/U) highlights the necessity for studies investigating explicit and systematic phonics instruction tailored to the tinges of Filipino orthography.

Furthermore, the teachers' reported hesitation in guiding sentence construction suggests a need for research into effective strategies for teaching early writing skills in Filipino, including scaffolding techniques and explicit grammar instruction appropriate for this age group. These implications align with several key theories in language acquisition and literacy development Stage Theories of Literacy Development (Indrisano,1995). These theories emphasize the importance of foundational skills in early literacy. The difficulties in spelling, sentence construction, and vocabulary acquisition suggest that the learners may not have a strong grasp of these foundational elements in Filipino. Research should focus on developing and implementing instructional strategies that systematically build these foundational skills before moving on to more complex concepts. Supported by Cognitive Load Theory (Paas et al., 2023), learners' frustration in spelling and constructing sentences, along with the teachers' hesitation, may indicate that the cognitive load imposed by the current instruction is too high. Research could explore ways to break down complex tasks into smaller, more manageable steps and provide explicit instruction to reduce cognitive overload.

Majority of the participants find comprehension as the most struggling aspect in Filipino language learning. Learners often favor their home dialects over Filipino in class, making comprehension more difficult and increasing reliance on teachers for

understanding. This aligns with the Language Transfer Theory of Odlin (1989) where familiarity with a first language influences second-language learning. Anxiety about making mistakes discourages speaking, leading students to withdraw in group activities, which reflects Krashen, (1982) Affective Filter Hypothesis, cited in Gozali (2016) suggesting that emotional barriers hinder language acquisition. Additionally, studies on Filipino language learning strategies highlight that understanding is the most challenging skill compared to listening, speaking, writing, and reading, due to gaps in foundational instruction and exposure. Without structured support, learners struggle to process Filipino effectively, reinforcing the need for adaptive teaching methods.

IV. CONCLUSIONS and RECOMMENDATIONS

The struggles experienced by Grade 2 learners in the SSES curriculum highlight significant barriers to Filipino language acquisition, affecting their social interaction and the development of essential language skills. Their reluctance to engage in Filipino with peers and underlying anxieties impede collaborative learning. Deficiencies in vocabulary, reading comprehension, and basic linguistic structures, exacerbated by limited exposure in school and home environments and a potentially demanding curriculum, further compound these challenges. While code-switching offers a temporary aid to understanding, it may hinder the attainment of full Filipino Proficiency. To address these issues, it is recommended and encouraged to implement targeted foundational Filipino instruction, increase opportunities for communicative practice, foster a supportive learning environment, and re-evaluate curriculum design to ensure a stronger emphasis on early language acquisition.

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