



TEACHING ENGLISH TO DIBABAWON LEARNERS: INSTRUCTIONAL STRATEGIES IN THE CONTEXT OF AN INDIGENOUS CULTURAL COMMUNITY

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the instructional strategies employed by English teachers in teaching Dibabawon learners within an Indigenous Cultural Community in Kapalong, Davao del Norte. Specifically, it examined teachers' experiences, coping strategies, and insights in facilitating the development of grammar, verb tenses, and sentence structure among learners. A qualitative phenomenological research design was utilized involving ten public school English teachers, with five participants in in-depth interviews and five in focus group discussions. Data were analyzed thematically using Colaizzi's method. Findings revealed that teachers encountered severe linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic barriers affecting learners' English preparedness and classroom participation. To address these challenges, teachers employed culturally responsive and differentiated instructional strategies such as translanguaging, contextualized instruction, scaffolded learning, and collaborative activities. The study emphasizes the critical role of teacher adaptability, culturally responsive pedagogy, and localized instructional materials in fostering inclusive, meaningful language development within indigenous ESL contexts.

KEYWORDS: *Dibabawon Learners, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Instructional Strategies, Translanguaging, Indigenous Education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Teaching English as a Second Language (ESL) to the Dibabawon community in Kapalong, Davao del Norte presents a significant pedagogical challenge due to the stark mismatch between conventional ESL methods and the learners' indigenous language, culture, and lived realities. Standard westernized approaches often overlook the Dibabawon's distinct linguistic background and communal ways of knowing, hindering text comprehension, active classroom participation, and sustainable literacy development. When language instruction is confined to decontextualized drills or rigid syntactic structures, indigenous learners frequently experience linguistic disconnection, leading to low self-confidence and systemic classroom disengagement.

According to communicative language teaching frameworks, language competence develops optimally through meaningful, socially situated interactions where learners actively negotiate meaning and express personal, authentic experiences. In an indigenous educational landscape, this necessitates integrating cultural capital—such as oral traditions, local narratives, and collective dialogue—into the core English curriculum.

While global frameworks promote inclusive education, a notable gap persists between structural policies and actual classroom practices within marginalized communities. In the Philippines, despite comprehensive efforts to scaffold curriculum design, teachers in remote areas report a severe lack of localized

instructional modules and professional training tailored specifically to indigenous learner profiles. This qualitative phenomenological inquiry directly addresses this gap by capturing the authentic, lived experiences of educators on the ground.

Purpose and Research Questions

This study aimed to examine the instructional strategies used by public school teachers to facilitate core language skills specifically grammar, verb tenses, and sentence structure among beginner Dibabawon ESL learners. It further sought to document how educators cope with contextual constraints and resource limitations to derive transformative pedagogical insights. The investigation was guided by three central questions:

1. What are the experiences of teachers in teaching English among Dibabawon learners?
2. How do the English teachers cope with the challenges they encounter in teaching English among Dibabawon learners?
3. What insights can be drawn from the teachers' experiences in handling Dibabawon learners?

2. METHODOLOGY

A qualitative phenomenological research design was selected to discover the essence, depth, and complexity of teachers' daily practices and pedagogical reflections within the indigenous community. This approach focuses heavily on how educators



interpret and actively navigate the linguistic and cultural gaps between institutional English standards and the Dibabawon indigenous background.

Participants and Role of the Researcher

Through purposive sampling, ten (10) public junior high school English teachers from Kapalong were selected based on explicit inclusion criteria: active teaching status, immersion in ESL classrooms, and direct instructional experience handling Dibabawon learners. Five (5) participants engaged in individual in-depth interviews (IDI), and five (5) participated in focus group discussions (FGD).

The primary researcher, an English teacher at Dugayan National High School and a graduate student, served as the primary data collection and analytical instrument. Given the researcher's professional background in a identical school setting, a highly reflexive stance was maintained throughout data analysis. Bracketing techniques, field notes, and reflective journals were rigorously maintained to ensure analytical objectivity and prevent personal preconceptions from distorting the participants' authentic voices.

Data Collection and Instruments

Data collection was executed systematically following formal ethics clearance and multi-level administrative approvals from the Institutional Review Board, institutional leadership, and the Schools Division Superintendent of Davao del Norte. Semi-structured interview guides and focus group protocols explored

adaptive instructional strategies, specific classroom constraints, and cultural factors. To ensure robust data triangulation, individual self-reports were cross-verified using non-intrusive classroom observations and document analysis of teacher lesson plans, worksheets, and school-level division policies.

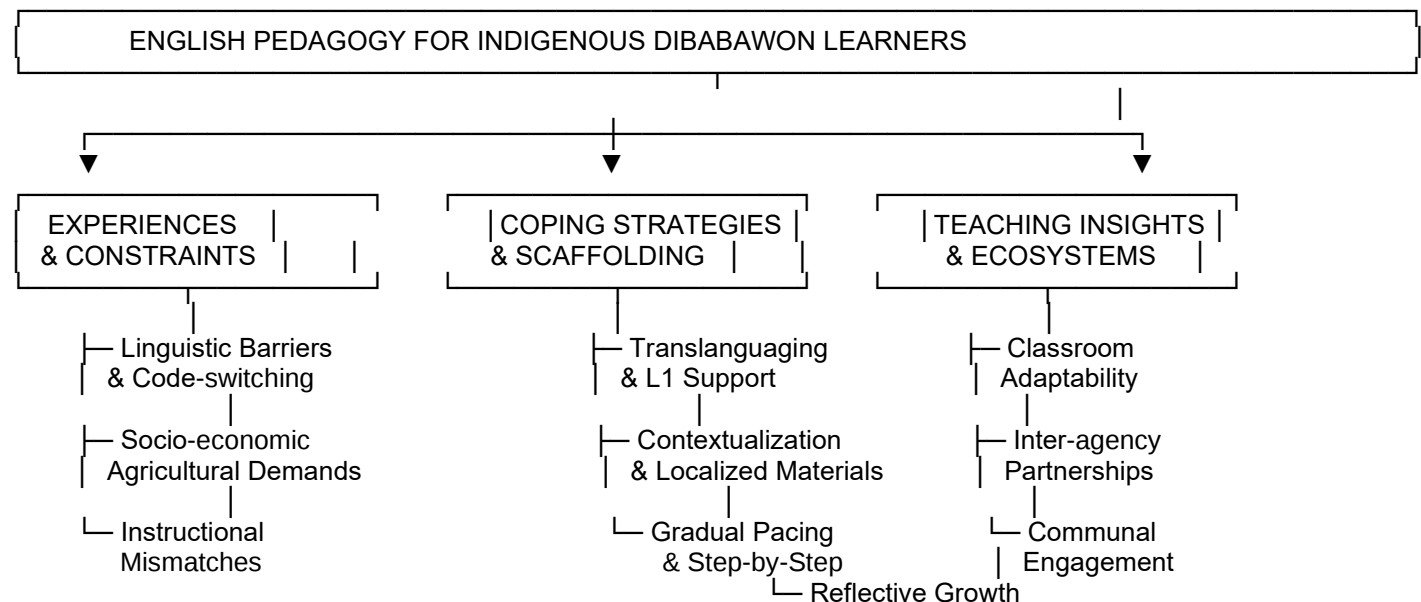
Data Analysis and Trustworthiness

All audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and subjected to thematic analysis utilizing Colaizzi's (1978) rigorous seven-step phenomenological framework. The analytical sequence involved transcript immersion, extracting significant statements, formulating meanings, clustering themes, developing an exhaustive description, identifying the fundamental structure, and executing participant validation.

To satisfy strict trustworthiness criteria, the study incorporated data source triangulation, comprehensive member-checking (allowing participants to review and validate transcribed records), a detailed audit trail, and rich, thick descriptions of the rural teaching ecologies. Participant names and identifiable school characteristics were entirely replaced with pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The thematic analysis of data extracted from the in-depth interviews and focus group discussions yielded prominent emergent themes distributed across the three core research inquiries.



1. Experiences of Teachers: Structural and Pedagogical Constraints

Educators handling Dibabawon learners reported that teaching English transcends simple content delivery, operating as a complex negotiating process shaped by deep linguistic, cultural, and socio-economic variables. The overarching theme, *Structural*

and Pedagogical Constraints in Indigenous ESL Contexts, encapsulates the distinct challenges that impede regular instructional pacing and language acquisition.



Linguistic Disconnect and Interference

Teachers consistently emphasized that the underlying grammatical rules and phonological systems of the Dibabawon language diverge significantly from English, which creates major hurdles for vocabulary building and syntactic formation. Learners regularly rely on direct translation from their first language to English, slowing cognitive processing and introducing persistent grammatical errors during speech and writing. Informants indicated that abstract English terms lack equivalent words in the local dialect, forcing teachers to repeatedly pause instruction to explain foundational concepts. As noted by Participant 008:

"The students take a very long time to understand... you cannot force your standard curriculum because they have had almost zero exposure to English outside school. I struggle deeply because we have to meet strict division timelines for examinations, yet many students cannot comprehend basic reading materials."

Socio-Economic Realities and Absenteeism

The instructional environment is further complicated by the socio-economic conditions of rural Kapalong. Many Dibabawon learners must prioritize familial livelihood over formal education, working actively in agricultural fields or mountain farms (*uma*) to supplement household income. This seasonal agrarian labor results in intermittent school attendance, fracturing instructional continuity and forcing teachers to constantly re-teach fundamental language units.

Cultural Communication Mismatches

Traditional ESL methods often rely heavily on overt, individualized teacher-student questioning, which clashes directly with the cultural norms of the Dibabawon community. Teachers observed that indigenous learners display extreme hesitation, language anxiety, and withdrawal when singled out or called directly by name in front of peers, fearing public error or perceived cultural disrespect. This cultural trait is frequently misinterpreted as a lack of academic capability, when it is actually an expression of communal communication styles that prioritize collective harmony over individual recognition.

2. Coping Strategies: Culturally Responsive and Differentiated Instruction

To overcome these structural constraints, participants developed highly localized, flexible, and adaptive pedagogical interventions. These are grouped under the theme *Culturally Responsive and Differentiated Instruction*.

Systematic Translanguaging and Mother-Tongue Support

Rather than enforcing rigid "English-Only" mandates—which marginalize indigenous identities and heighten language anxiety—teachers utilize planned translanguaging. Instructors purposefully use the learners' mother tongue (*L1*) or regional Filipino to establish a safe cognitive bridge to target English structures (*L2*). This calculated code-switching validates the students' native linguistic identity while ensuring they accurately

grasp complex grammatical abstractions and tense variations without cognitive overload.

Cultural Contextualization and Localized Materials

A cornerstone strategy involves moving past standardized textbook illustrations to embed English syntax directly within the immediate lived experiences of the community. Teachers consciously design custom lesson plans centered on indigenous farming routines, family structures, ancestral land relationships, and traditional storytelling protocols. As documented via Participant 007:

"I always connect the lesson to their cultural experience. I use examples, stories, and situations that reflect the daily lives of my students... such as traditional family roles or local community practices, so they can relate smoothly to the English concepts."

Linking target grammar patterns to familiar communal landmarks transforms abstract semantic concepts into concrete, relatable reference points, increasing student engagement and memory retention.

Gradual Pacing and Scaffolded Material Delivery

Recognizing wide variations in student reading readiness, educators explicitly modified their instructional speed, shifting from fast-paced, teacher-centered lectures to a gradual, step-by-step approach. Lessons are systematically parsed into bite-sized units, moving incrementally from simple, concrete elements to advanced sentence structures. Informant 002 highlighted this deliberate pedagogical transition:

"My approach changed completely when I came to Dugayan. In the private school where I taught before, I could finish an entire chapter in a single fast session. In the mountains, I had to slow down completely. I break lessons down meticulously. My pacing is dictated entirely by the learners' immediate needs, not my own schedule."

3. Teaching Insights: Ecologies of Support and Transformative Professional Development

The ultimate theme, *Ecologies of Support and Transformative Teacher Development*, details the broader systemic lessons and operational frameworks constructed by educators navigating indigenous school zones.

Inter-Agency and Tribal Leadership Partnerships

The study conclusively demonstrated that effective indigenous education cannot occur in isolation within school walls; it requires an active, structured partnership between educational institutions and the broader community. Successful educators explicitly cultivate open collaborative networks with tribal elders and local community leaders. Engaging indigenous leadership secures critical community trust, contextualizes instructional materials, and helps establish home-based support mechanisms that reinforce school attendance.

Peer Collaboration and Reflective Professional Practice

Faced with a lack of standardized division modules, teachers rely heavily on internal horizontal support networks. Educators

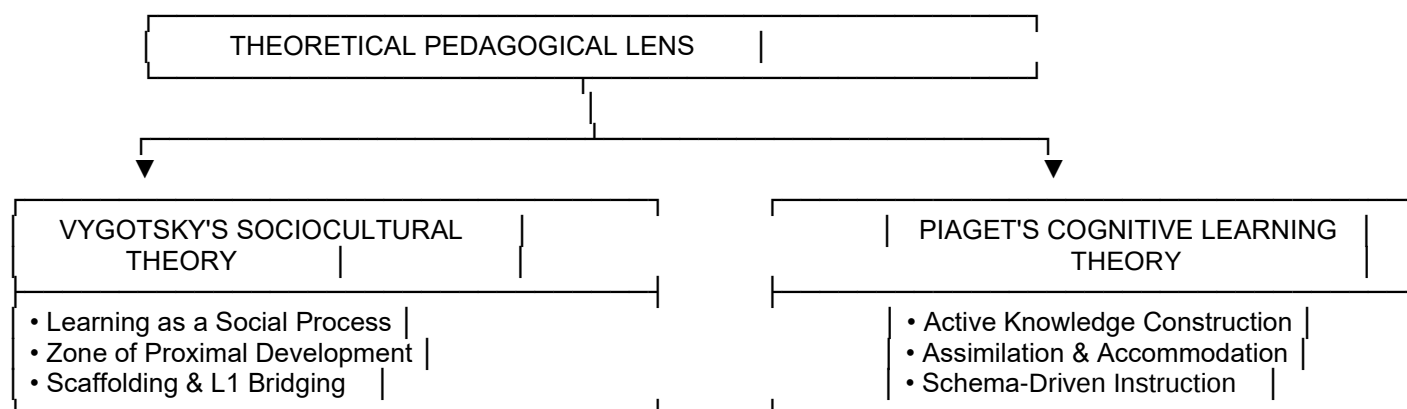


frequently meet with senior colleagues to share localized worksheets, discuss cross-cultural classroom behavior, and co-author culturally appropriate lesson plan templates. Furthermore, participants actively pursue advanced graduate studies (such as Master of Arts in Teaching programs) to deepen their theoretical knowledge of second language acquisition and multi-cultural instruction. This continuous loop of action and reflection transforms classroom adjustments from ad-hoc coping

mechanisms into a deliberate, long-term professional development practice.

4. THEORETICAL SYNTHESIS

The empirical findings of this research strongly intersect with established cognitive and language acquisition frameworks:



- **Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory:** This framework posits that language acquisition is an inherently social process, optimized through interactive dialogue and guided expert assistance within the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). In this study, the systematic use of planned translanguaging, peer group work, and contextualized scaffolding provides the exact social mediation required to transition Dibabawon learners from dependent processing to confident, independent English application.
- **Piaget's Cognitive Learning Theory:** This theory establishes that individuals construct knowledge by actively integrating new information into existing cognitive schemas. By grounding abstract English rules in familiar community traditions, agricultural schedules, and local stories, educators allow learners to link unfamiliar linguistic features to their deeply embedded prior cultural schemas, facilitating meaningful cognitive assimilation and long-term language retention.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This phenomenological study demonstrates that teaching English within an indigenous cultural community requires moving away from rigid, one-size-fits-all mainstream pedagogies. Instead, it demands teacher flexibility, deep cross-cultural awareness, and adaptive classroom techniques. While severe linguistic, geographical, and socio-economic realities restrict instructional delivery, utilizing culturally responsive approaches—such as planned translanguaging, customized pacing, and contextualized instruction—effectively reduces student anxiety and builds language proficiency. Ultimately, language learning is enhanced when a strong, collaborative ecosystem connects teachers, peer networks, school leaders, and tribal authorities.

Based on these insights, the study offers the following actionable recommendations:

1. **Curriculum Localization:** Institutional authorities should formally support the design, publication, and use of localized, context-sensitive ESL modules that reflect the heritage and daily lives of the Dibabawon people.
2. **Professional Development Expansion:** The Department of Education should fund targeted teacher training seminars that equip rural educators with concrete strategies for multi-cultural classrooms, specifically in translanguaging and scaffolding methodologies.
3. **Formal Tribal Collaboration:** School administrations should build structured communication channels with indigenous leaders to align school expectations with local realities, reduce chronic absenteeism, and encourage parent involvement in language learning.
4. **Future Research:** Longitudinal studies should be conducted to track the long-term impact of these culturally responsive strategies on the English reading and writing proficiency of indigenous learners as they progress through higher grade levels.

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