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Exploring the Impact of Vernacular Instruction of Student Communication Skills: A Phenomenological Study

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A B S T R A C T

This study aimed to determine the impact of vernacular instruction on students' communication skills and contribute to understanding its effects across educational levels. Focusing on the concepts of vernacular instruction and communication skills, the study employed a qualitative research design using snowball sampling technique. Data were collected through interviews with six senior high school students who experienced vernacular-based instruction during their elementary years. Results showed that vernacular instruction enhanced comprehension and communication in early education but later contributed to difficulties in English and Tagalog expression, vocabulary use, and speaking confidence. Students addressed these challenges through translation tools and support from teachers and peers. The findings suggest integrating vernacular instruction with multilingual language development to better prepare learners for higher education

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INTRODUCTION

Language plays a vital role in teaching and learning because it serves as the primary medium for communication, comprehension, and knowledge acquisition. According to Mukul Mahato (2023), language learning contributes significantly to individuals' overall development by enabling them to express ideas and emotions and establish meaningful social interactions. The use of vernacular or mother tongue as a language of instruction has been recognized for improving students' understanding of lessons and encouraging active classroom participation. However, studies have raised concerns regarding its long-term effects on learners' proficiency in other languages. Thakur (2023) found that while vernacular-medium students benefit from learning in their native language, English-medium students often demonstrate stronger language proficiency, communication skills, and access to educational opportunities.

Similarly, Saquido and Velasco (2024) reported that teachers implementing Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) experienced challenges such as limited instructional materials, difficulties in translating academic concepts, and concerns that prolonged vernacular instruction may affect students' English proficiency needed for higher education and employment. In the regional context, Gomez (2022) found that although vernacular instruction enhanced classroom participation and comprehension, it also created challenges in the development of students' English communication skills, particularly in oral expression and vocabulary use. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of vernacular instruction depends on maintaining a balance between mother-tongue use and exposure to other languages.

Despite the growing body of literature on vernacular instruction, existing studies have primarily focused on teachers' experiences and policy implementation. Limited attention has been given to the lived experiences of students who received vernacular instruction during their early schooling and later transitioned to learning environments where other languages became the primary medium of instruction. This gap highlighted the need for further investigation. By focusing on Senior High School students from selected secondary schools in Parang, Maguindanao del Norte, this study contributes to knowledge by providing a phenomenological understanding of how vernacular instruction influenced communication skills, the challenges students encountered during language transition, and the strategies they used to adapt. Specifically, the study explored the lived experiences of students taught through vernacular instruction in their early years of schooling, examined the pedagogical challenges they encountered upon transitioning to Senior High School, and identified the coping strategies they employed in adapting to a new language of instruction.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

This theory stated that language is a primary tool for cognitive development and social interaction. Learning occurs through interactions with others within cultural and linguistic contexts. In vernacular-based instruction, using the mother tongue helps students understand concepts and construct meaning during their early years of schooling. However, limited exposure to the target language, such as English, may reduce opportunities to develop communication skills needed for later academic and social interactions.

Cummins' Linguistic Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 1979)

This theory proposed that skills and knowledge developed in a learner's first language (L1) can transfer to a second language (L2). A strong foundation in the mother tongue can support the acquisition of English and other languages because both languages share a common underlying proficiency. However, successful transfer requires sufficient exposure and practice in the target language. Without adequate opportunities to use English, students may experience difficulties in developing communicative competence.

Krashen's Input Hypothesis (Krashen, 1992)

This theory asserted that language acquisition occurs when learners are exposed to comprehensible input that is slightly above their current level of language competence. Meaningful exposure and interaction in the target language are essential for developing proficiency. In the context of vernacular-based instruction, while the mother tongue supports content comprehension, limited English exposure may reduce opportunities for learners to acquire the language naturally and develop fluency in communication.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of students who underwent vernacular instruction during their elementary years and its influence on their communication skills in Senior High School. The study was conducted at Parang National High School, Making Integrated Vocational and Technology High School, and Ruth Manion Babao Memorial National High School in Parang, Maguindanao del Norte. Two Senior High School students from each school who experienced vernacular instruction from Grades 4 to 6 were selected through snowball sampling. Data were collected through face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a validated interview guide. Prior to data collection, permission from school authorities and informed consent from participants were obtained. The interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis guided by Colaizzi's seven-step phenomenological method to identify significant themes and patterns from the participants' lived experiences

RESEARCH RESULT

Table 1. The Lived Experiences of Students Using Vernacular Instruction in their Early Years of Schooling

Themes	Description
Vernacular Language as a Foundation for Elementary Learning	The vernacular served as the primary medium for building basic literacy, comprehension, and classroom participation during elementary education.
Limited Oral Communication Skills	Students experienced difficulty expressing themselves orally in English during the transition.
Low Self-Confidence	Limited English proficiency reduced students' confidence in participating in academic activities and classroom interactions.

Theme 1: Vernacular Language as a Foundation for Elementary Learning

Students emphasized that the vernacular language served as a strong foundation for their elementary education by making lessons easier to understand. Its use enhanced comprehension, minimized confusion, and encouraged greater classroom participation.

Theme 2: Limited Oral Communication Skills

Students experienced difficulties in oral communication due to overthinking, fear of making mistakes, and limited confidence in speaking English. These challenges reduced their willingness to participate in oral activities and classroom interactions.

Theme 3: Low Self-Confidence

Limited exposure to English and Tagalog contributed to students' low self-confidence in oral communication. Fear of committing errors in pronunciation and expressing ideas affected their participation, particularly during discussions and speaking activities.

Table 2. Challenges Encountered by Senior High School Students in Transitioning to Another Language

Themes	Description
Verbal Expression Difficulties	Students struggled to communicate their thoughts effectively using English.
Comprehension Skill Difficulties	Learners experienced challenges understanding English texts, discussions, and instructions.
English-Mediated Instruction Difficulties	Students found it difficult to cope with lessons delivered primarily in English.

Theme 1: Verbal Expression Difficulties

Students encountered challenges in expressing themselves verbally because they were more accustomed to using the vernacular language. The transition to English- and Tagalog-mediated instruction resulted in hesitation, reduced fluency, and lower classroom participation.

Theme 2: Comprehension Skill Difficulties

Students experienced difficulty understanding and using English, which affected their ability to participate confidently in classroom discussions and academic tasks. Limited vocabulary and comprehension reduced their confidence in responding to teachers' questions.

Theme 3: English-Mediated Instruction Difficulties

Students found it difficult to understand lessons delivered primarily in English, particularly when instructions contained unfamiliar vocabulary and technical terms. These language barriers affected their comprehension and overall academic performance.

Table 3. Coping Mechanism of Senior High School Students

Themes	Description
Digital Tools as Self-Study Aids	Learners used online resources and digital applications to enhance language learning independently.
Peer and Teacher Assistance	Students sought guidance and support from classmates and teachers to improve understanding and communication.
Language Readiness for Academic Transition	Learners gradually developed the language skills and confidence needed to meet academic demands.

Theme 1: Digital Tools as Self-Study Aids

Students used digital tools such as online dictionaries, translation applications, educational videos, and AI-assisted resources to improve their language proficiency and better understand academic lessons. These resources supported independent learning and language development.

Theme 2: Peer and Teacher Assistance

Students relied on teachers, classmates, and family members for academic and language support. Seeking guidance, practicing communication, and receiving instructional assistance helped improve their understanding and confidence during the language transition.

Theme 3: Language Readiness for Academic Transition

Students recognized the importance of early preparation in English and Tagalog to facilitate a smoother academic transition. Continuous practice, guidance, and self-directed learning strengthened their communication skills and increased their readiness for higher levels of education.

DISCUSSION

A. Senior High School Students' Experiences in Using Vernacular and Transitioning to Another Language

1. Vernacular Language as a Foundation for Elementary Learning

The findings suggested that vernacular language played a fundamental role in facilitating students' early learning experiences by making classroom instruction more meaningful and accessible. Because Iranun was the language commonly spoken at home and within the community, participants were able to understand lessons, follow teacher instructions, and grasp new concepts with greater ease during their elementary years. This familiarity reduced language-related barriers and enabled learners to focus on understanding lesson content rather than interpreting an unfamiliar language. These findings was supported by Bularon (2025), who emphasized that the strategic use of the mother tongue in early instruction promotes learners' confidence and classroom engagement by helping them comprehend instructions and concepts effectively. Likewise, Ssentanda et al. (2016) argued that mother tongue instruction strengthens learners' reasoning, communication, and problem-solving skills, providing a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

2. Limited Oral Communication Skills

Although vernacular instruction supported learning during the elementary years, the transition to English and Tagalog in senior high school presented considerable challenges in oral communication. Participants reported difficulty expressing themselves during discussions and oral activities because they feared mispronouncing words, being misunderstood, or making grammatical mistakes. These experiences suggested that limited exposure to English and Tagalog during the early years may have reduced opportunities to develop oral fluency before entering higher levels of education. Consequently, learners became more hesitant to participate in classroom interactions that

required the use of a second language. This finding is consistent with Ikuya and Aizawa (2020), who explained that prolonged reliance on the vernacular may influence learners' ability to communicate fluently in a second language despite its positive contribution to early literacy. The study further emphasized the importance of balanced language exposure to support both conceptual understanding and communicative competence.

3. Low Self-Confidence

The findings further indicate that limited use of English and Tagalog during elementary education influenced students' confidence when communicating in higher academic levels. Participants described feeling anxious when speaking in front of others because they struggled to construct ideas, pronounce words correctly, and express themselves accurately in a second language. These challenges often resulted in hesitation and reduced participation in oral activities, suggesting that confidence in communication develops alongside continuous language exposure and practice. Without sufficient opportunities to use English and Tagalog in meaningful contexts, learners may become uncertain about their language abilities and avoid situations that require active verbal participation. This finding was supported by Vacalares (2023), who found that students commonly experienced anxiety, fear of making mistakes, peer pressure, and concern about mispronunciation when speaking English. The study further recommended providing learners with more communicative speaking activities to strengthen both language fluency and self-confidence.

B. Senior High Students' Challenges in Transitioning to Another Language

1. Verbal Expression Difficulties

The transition from vernacular-based instruction to English- and Tagalog-mediated learning created significant challenges in students' verbal expression. Although participants understood lesson concepts, many experienced difficulty organizing their thoughts, selecting appropriate vocabulary, and expressing ideas fluently during oral activities. These difficulties often resulted in hesitation, mental blocks, and reduced classroom participation, indicating that limited opportunities to practice a second language affected their ability to communicate effectively. The findings suggest that while the vernacular serves as a strong foundation for conceptual learning, continuous exposure to English and Tagalog is equally important for developing learners' oral communication skills. These findings are supported by DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017, which emphasizes the integration of meaningful speaking activities, including discussions, role-playing, and collaborative tasks, to enhance learners' oral communication and language proficiency. Similarly, Bukhari (2021) noted that excessive reliance on the vernacular may limit learners' ability to express ideas confidently and fluently in a second language, thereby reducing their participation in oral communication tasks.

2. Comprehension Skill Difficulties

The findings demonstrate that participants encountered comprehension difficulties when lessons were delivered in English, particularly when unfamiliar vocabulary and complex language structures were used. Limited exposure to English during their early years made it challenging for learners to interpret questions, understand classroom discussions, and communicate their ideas effectively. As a result, students often hesitated to participate in reporting activities and classroom interactions because they were uncertain about the meanings of unfamiliar words and expressions. These experiences indicate that comprehension difficulties extend beyond vocabulary knowledge and influence learners' overall academic engagement and confidence. This finding supports De Lemios (2023), who reported that students who experienced Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education demonstrated stronger proficiency in their first language than in English, resulting in challenges in comprehending and producing English outputs. The study further emphasized that learners require continued opportunities to strengthen their second-language proficiency to improve academic performance.

3. English-Mediated Instruction Difficulties

The findings further reveal that learners experienced difficulty understanding classroom instruction when lessons were delivered entirely in English, particularly in subjects involving technical vocabulary and complex explanations. Participants reported that lengthy instructions and unfamiliar academic terms made it difficult to follow lessons and complete learning tasks effectively. These experiences suggest that language proficiency significantly influences learners' ability to process academic content, especially when instruction is delivered exclusively in a second language. Consequently, insufficient comprehension may reduce classroom participation and limit meaningful engagement with learning activities. These findings are consistent with Bacan (2025), who emphasized that learning is hindered when the language of instruction differs from learners' mother tongue, resulting in reduced comprehension and instructional gaps. Likewise, DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017 highlighted the importance of using clear, developmentally appropriate instructional strategies that support learners' understanding, engagement, and successful learning outcomes.

C. Senior High Students' Coping Mechanisms in Transitioning to Another Language

1. Digital Tools as Self–Study Aids

The findings indicate that participants relied on various digital tools to address the language difficulties they encountered during their transition to English- and Tagalog-mediated instruction. Translation applications, online dictionaries, Google, AI applications, educational videos, and English learning applications enabled students to independently clarify unfamiliar words, review lesson content, and strengthen their vocabulary beyond classroom instruction. These digital resources provided learners with flexible opportunities to study at

their own pace, allowing them to reinforce concepts that they found difficult to understand during class. The findings suggest that technology serves as an effective learning support that promotes independent language development and complements formal classroom instruction. These findings are consistent with Sari et al. (2020), who reported that digital literacy enhances students' self-directed learning by enabling them to organize, implement, and evaluate their own learning processes. Their study further emphasized that digital tools strengthen learners' readiness for independent learning and support continuous academic development.

2. Peer and Teacher Assistance

The findings demonstrate that support from teachers, classmates, and family members played an essential role in helping participants overcome language-related challenges. Learners sought clarification from teachers, asked classmates for assistance when lessons were difficult to understand, and practiced English with family members to improve their communication skills despite feelings of hesitation and embarrassment. These supportive interactions created opportunities to clarify misunderstandings, reinforce classroom learning, and gradually build confidence in using English and Tagalog in academic settings. The findings highlight the value of collaborative learning environments in promoting language development and encouraging active classroom participation. These findings support Liu et al. (2024), who explained that supportive interactions with teachers and peers strengthen learners' motivation, resilience, and willingness to engage in language-learning tasks. The study further emphasized that collaborative learning contributes to both emotional support and successful language acquisition.

3. Language Readiness for Academic Transition

The findings further suggest that early preparation and continuous exposure to English and Tagalog are essential in helping learners adjust to the increasing language demands of higher education. Participants recognized the importance of practicing the target language through reading, regular conversations, and exposure to educational materials before entering senior high school. Such experiences gradually enhanced their confidence, communication skills, and readiness to participate in academic activities conducted in a second language. These findings imply that language readiness is an important factor in ensuring a smoother transition from vernacular-based instruction to English-mediated learning. This finding is supported by Chandra (2020), who emphasized that language readiness strengthens learners' communication skills, classroom participation, and academic performance. The study further demonstrated that structured language readiness activities significantly improve learners' confidence and prepare them for the linguistic demands of formal education.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study examined the experiences of senior high school students who received vernacular instruction during their early years of schooling and explored how this influenced their communication development as they transitioned to another language of instruction. The study highlights that vernacular language serves an important role in establishing learners' understanding, participation, and connection to classroom learning during the early stages of education. However, the transition to English and Filipino as dominant academic languages requires additional support, as learners may experience difficulties in expressing ideas, comprehending lessons, and communicating confidently.

The study concludes that vernacular instruction should not be viewed as a barrier to language development but rather as a foundation that needs to be complemented with gradual exposure to other languages. A balanced multilingual approach may help learners maintain the advantages of their first language while developing the linguistic skills necessary for higher academic demands.

Based on these conclusions, teachers are encouraged to apply gradual language transition strategies by incorporating learners' vernacular language as a support while progressively increasing opportunities for English and Filipino communication. Classroom activities such as discussions, presentations, collaborative tasks, and guided speaking exercises may help strengthen students' confidence and language proficiency. Schools may also consider providing teacher training on multilingual teaching approaches, scaffolding strategies, and culturally responsive instruction to better address learners' linguistic needs.

Future studies may further investigate language transition experiences among students from different linguistic communities and educational contexts. Researchers may also explore the effectiveness of specific interventions designed to improve students' second-language communication skills after receiving vernacular-based instruction.

ADVANCED RESEARCH

This study was limited to six senior high school students from selected secondary schools who experienced vernacular instruction during their early years of schooling. Since the study employed a phenomenological approach, the findings focused on the personal experiences and perceptions of the participants and may not represent the experiences of all learners from different linguistic backgrounds.

Future researchers may expand the scope of this study by involving a larger number of participants from various communities and language groups to gain broader perspectives on the long-term effects of vernacular instruction. Further studies may also explore the experiences of students who received instruction using other local languages to determine similarities and differences in language transition challenges. Additionally, future research may examine specific educational interventions, such as multilingual teaching strategies and language support programs, that can help learners develop stronger communication skills while maintaining the benefits of their first language.

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