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CLICK TO SKIP: EXPERIENCES OF BLAAN LEARNERS IN LEARNING ENGLISH LANGUAGE DURING NATIONAL LEARNING CAMP ASSESSMENT

Carl Kenneth S. Coronado[1] Mat-English

Graduate School, Sultan Kudarat State University[1]
carlkenneth.coronado001@deped.gov.ph[1]

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Abstract

As an international language, English holds an important role in Philippine education. This subject has been deeply embedded in Philippine educational curriculums in which several subjects are taught using this language. Notably, the Philippines is composed of several ethnolinguistic groups with distinct vernaculars. Thus, this study was conducted to penetrate the experiences of Blaan learners in learning English language during the National Learning Camp Assessment (NLCA). Furthermore, to divulge the factors that exacerbate their challenges and disadvantages. Meanwhile, the study also unveiled the factors that helped them develop their skills in learning the English language. The data revealed that in the case of the Blaan learners, the large disparity between English language and their mother tongue is considerably important. The distinctive nature between two languages constitute to a linguistic barrier. Furthermore, their customary practices such as social isolation resulted to their social disadvantages. In addition, these challenges experienced by the Blaan learners was further exacerbated by their socio-economic status. Their lack of financial stability puts them in a disadvantageous situation due to lack of access to paramount technology materials such as computers and laptops. Meanwhile, despite of these mounting challenges, the Blaan learners highlights their perseverance in overcoming challenges through analytical skills and dedication to achieve personal growth and confidence. These are evident during the conduct of NLCA. The NLCA did not just unveiled the challenges experienced by the Blaan learners, but more importantly it manifest that there is hope through joint effort and collaboration.

Keywords: *English language learning, Blaan learners, National Learning Camp Assessment (NLCA) Linguistic barriers, Socio-economic challenges, Perseverance, Personal Growth*

INTRODUCTION

English, as a global lingua franca has became a vital tool for success in various fields globally. Recognizing this demand, schools and universities integrated English language education into their curricula, aligned with workforce and societal needs (Sofyan, 2021; Roos, 2019). Beyond its professional utility, it facilitated cross-border collaboration, bridged cultural divides, and empowered individuals as global citizens. However, achieving proficiency in English remained a significant challenge for learners

from indigenous communities, due to linguistic, cultural, and educational barriers. Hence, by exploring barriers and successes provided insights into improving English language education for indigenous learners.

The influence of English on Philippine literature, education, and sociolinguistics in South Cotabato was significant. Despite political obstacles, English literature thrived in the early 20th century (San Juan, 2020), and remained central to education (Martin, 2020). However, for indigenous groups like the Blaan in South Cotabato, language proficiency was hindered by urbanization and pressures to adopt dominant languages. Technology played a crucial role in English learning and assessment, this highlighted the need for inclusive education that promoted both English proficiency and the preservation of indigenous languages in South Cotabato (Cummings and Hu, 2021).

The National Learning Camp (NLC), established under DepEd Order No. 014, s. 2023, served as a structured intervention to address learning gaps, particularly among Blaan learners in English proficiency. Guided by DepEd Orders No. 003 and 009, s. 2024, the program promoted collaborative learning, teacher engagement, and resource optimization to enhance students' academic performance. However, challenges such as language barriers, resource limitations, and unfamiliar content highlighted the need for more culturally responsive learning materials.

However, while national learning programs such as the National Learning Camp Assessment aimed to improve language proficiency, there was a lack of qualitative insights into how these programs impacted Indigenous learners' engagement, performance, and motivation (Smith et al., 2021). Understanding the unique needs and challenges of Indigenous learners was crucial in designing more effective and inclusive educational interventions. Further research was needed to explore how these programs can be tailored to better support cultural relevance, accessibility, and learner motivation, ensuring that all students, especially those from marginalized communities, could benefit equally from such initiatives (Lopez, 2022; Brown, 2023).

Cebuano National High School carried out the National Learning Camp Assessment, with the Pre-Test conducted from March 11 to May 17, 2024, and the Post-Test from July 22 to August 2, 2024, involving a total of 1,179 enrolled students. Of these, 830 students from Grades Seven to Eleven participated, including 260 Blaan learners, who comprised 22% of the school's student population. Notably, 243 Blaan students (93.46%) successfully completed the assessment, demonstrating their perseverance and commitment despite significant challenges. However, 17 Blaan students (6.53%) were unable to participate, primarily due to limited familiarity with technology-assisted assessments and difficulties in navigating computers.

This study addressed this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Blaan learners, highlighting their triumphs and challenges that interplayed between their cultural identity and language acquisition, and provided localized recommendations for more effective and inclusive educational practices. Also, findings can offered valuable insights into the intersection of cultural identity and language acquisition, informed strategies for enhancing English language learning outcomes for indigenous learners. Further, the study contribute to the broader conversation on educational equity by shedding light on the unique challenges faced by Blaan learners, advocated for more inclusive and culturally responsive teaching methods.

Research Questions

This study focused on the triumphs and challenges encountered by Blaan students in learning the English language during the National Learning Camp. Specifically, the study aimed to answer the following questions:

1. How do Blaan learners described their experiences in learning English during the National Learning Camp Assessment?
2. What are the challenges experience by Blaan learners in learning English language during National Learning Camp Assessment?

What strategies do Blaan Learners employ to overcome challenges during National Learning Camp Assessment?

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological design to explore the triumphs and challenges faced by Blaan learners in learning English during the National Learning Camp Assessment. Rooted in Moustakas' (1994), transcendental phenomenology, this approach seeks to uncover the essence of lived experiences as perceived by individuals, free from preconceived notions and researcher bias. It emphasizes the significance of subjective experience in understanding human behavior and consciousness.

Locale of the Study

This study was administered in Cebuano National High School. This school was located in Purok II, Cebuano, Tupi, South Cotabato, Region XII – SOCCSARGEN, Philippines. It has a total land area of 10,000 square meter along the main road of Barangay Cebuano. The school serves as the primary research site, with the total population of 1,179 students in which two hundred sixty (260) were Blaan students with forty seven (47) teachers. Cebuano National High School is a public secondary school - Offers curriculum with focus on Filipino, English, Mathematics, Science, and Social studies. This locale provides a unique setting for studying the triumphs and challenges experience of Blaan students in learning English language, given the cultural diversity and geographic characteristics of the area.

Participants of the Study

The respondents of this study were chosen based on certain inclusion and exclusion criteria to make them relevant and consistent with the research goals. The inclusion criteria were as follows: a) The participant must be a Blaan student between the ages of 13 and 17 years old; b) He or she must be officially enrolled at Cebuano National High School for School Year 2024–2025; c) The participant should have been involved in the National Learning Camp (NLC) Assessment. In accordance with Creswell's (2013) suggestion that qualitative research usually entails 6 to 10 participants, the current study had eight (8) Blaan learners.

Sampling Technique

In this study, the researcher selected the participants using a purposive sampling strategy. Purposeful sampling is a strategy commonly employed in qualitative research to identify and choose information-rich situations to make the most use of limited resources (Patton, 2002). Through this, the researcher chose eight (8) Blaan students who have undergone assessment using the National Learning Camp Assessment. Purposeful sampling, as highlighted by Creswell (2013), is the most suitable method. This approach guarantees the choice of Blaan learners with first hand experiences with the National Learning Camp (NLC) to enable a thorough examination of their successes and setbacks in learning English.

Data Sources

The major research tools used here were a semi-structured interview questionnaire and a guide for the focus group discussion (FGD), all aimed at being context-sensitive to the lived experiences of the Blaan

learners. These instruments were crafted to probe the successes and setbacks in learning English at the National Learning Camp (NLC) while also having room to follow up to gather more details on culturally vital observations.

Data Gathering Procedure

Data were collected through interviews. Participants were selected based on their experience in learning English language as an indigenous learner and their willingness to participate. The interviews explored the students' experiences, triumphs, challenges, and coping mechanism in indigenous educational setting. This rich qualitative data provided the foundation for a thorough analysis using the Phenomenological Method.

Before the data gathering, the researcher asked permission from the Dean of Graduate Schools of Sultan Kudarat State University to conduct the study. Once approval was obtained, the researcher wrote a letter to the school principal of Cebuano National High School to interview the selected Blaan students.

Further, the participants received an orientation regarding the study's specifics before the interview. During this time, the participants had sufficient opportunity to review and affix their signatures to the assent and informed consent form (ICF). Also, assurances regarding ethical principles, including anonymity and confidentiality, were also provided to the participants. Providing the participants with a preview of the interview enhanced the likelihood that they would provide truthful responses.

Phenomenological Interpretation of the Findings

This study poses a phenomenological inquiry on the lived experiences of the Blaan learners in learning the English language during the National Learning Camp and the assessment that follows upon its culmination. Phenomenological research is a qualitative approach focused on understanding and describing the universal essence of a phenomenon by investigating human experiences and suspending preconceived assumptions (Delve, 2022). It aims to gain deeper insights into how people perceive and understand their experiences by interpreting their feelings, perceptions, and beliefs.

In this study, the aim was to explore the lived experiences of Blaan learners, their parents, and their teachers in relation to the challenges, triumphs, obstacles, the cultural and contextual factors influencing their learning of the English language and the strategies or support systems they need in overcoming the challenges and obstacles. Through a phenomenological lens, the following findings highlight the deep personal meaning and subjective realities that these Blaan students experience in their day-to-day lives.

Blaan learner's experiences in learning English during the National Learning Camp Assessment
Emergent Theme 1: Support Systems

The participants emphasized that several factors contributed to their success in learning English during the National Learning Camp Assessment (NLCA). Notably, the support provided by the academic community, particularly the teachers, was essential. These educators dedicated their time and effort to equip the Blaan learners with the necessary skills to develop their language proficiency. The strategies employed by the teachers not only enhanced the learners' English skills but also created opportunities that helped tilt the balance in favor of the students during the NLCA.

Theme 2: Linguistic Barriers and challenges in adaptation to English

Linguistic difficulties include phonetic variations, unknown grammar rules, vocabulary gaps, and cultural nuances ingrained in the language can make it challenging for non-native speakers to adapt to English. One significant issue is that English's sounds and letters do not correspond exactly, which can lead to unpredictable pronunciation (Derwing and Munro, 2005).

Emergent Theme 3: Cultural and Social Disadvantages

In a classroom setting, effective communication and mutual understanding through English are crucial for fostering fluency. However, this goal is hindered when learners have limited opportunities for face-to-face interaction with teachers or peers in English. As a result, achieving fluency on par with that of a native speaker becomes a significant challenge. These cultural and social barriers not only impede academic progress but also negatively affect students' confidence in using English, highlighting the need for tailored teaching strategies and adequate support systems to bridge these gaps.

Challenges experienced by Blaan learners during the NLCA

Emergent Theme 1: Access and Language Proficiency

Blaan learners face a variety of psychological, socio-cultural, and logistical barriers that hinder their English language acquisition. Among the psychological challenges, anxiety and a fear of making mistakes often discourage them from practicing English in both academic and social settings. These emotional hurdles limit their ability to build confidence and fluency in the language.

Emergent Theme 2: Socio-economic Challenges Impacting English Language Learning

Socioeconomic status plays a pivotal role in shaping English language proficiency, often exerting a more substantial influence than individual aptitude alone. Cultural contexts intersect with economic realities to form a linguistic landscape in which access to language learning opportunities is unequally distributed. As Karademir and Gorgoz (2019) contend, individuals from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds typically face restricted access to quality language instruction, educational resources, and opportunities for authentic language exposure.

Emergent Theme 3: Limited Resources and Social Isolation Affecting English Language Learning

The findings of this study resonate with the work of Francisco et al., (2021), who highlighted that cultural, linguistic, and educational challenges significantly impact the academic performance of Blaan learners. One of the most prominent issues identified is the misalignment between traditional cultural practices and the expectations of formal academic environments, largely stemming from communication barriers and a lack of culturally responsive pedagogical approaches.

Strategies employed by the Blaan learners to overcome challenges during the National Learning Camp Assessment.

Emergent Theme 1: Patience and Dedication in Overcoming Language Barriers

The findings of this study echo previous research that underscores the impact of cultural barriers on learners' integration into English-speaking environments. These barriers often limit opportunities for authentic interaction and the practical application of the target language (Awan et al., 2023; Janardhan, 2024). Nevertheless, despite these challenges, Blaan learners demonstrated remarkable personal growth and resilience. Their accomplishments reinforce the value of English language proficiency as a vital tool for academic advancement and broader socio-economic mobility (Rattan, 2023).

Emergent Theme 2: Overcoming Language Barriers through Analytical Skills and Focused Effort

Difference in language is obvious, which simply can be categorized as native language or non-native language for learners. The main challenge stemming from difference in language is that sometimes it is difficult for learners with one native language to quickly grasp the central meaning(s) of the communication from learners with a different native language (Gunawardena, Wilson, and Nolla, 2003; Plump, 2007; Yang, Olesova, and Richardson, 2008). Furthermore, a closer examination of the connection between learning English language and socio-economic status, Language proficiency shows how income

inequality can exacerbate language obstacles, which impacts an individual's capacity to engage in a global society that is more interconnected (Flores and Rosa, 2019).

Emergent Theme 3: Personal Growth and Confidence Building through Perseverance.

The Blaan learners encountered a range of internal and external challenges as they worked to learn the English language, particularly during the National Learning Camp Assessment (NLCA). Poverty, deeply rooted in their educational and social backgrounds, was a significant factor that impacted their ability to compete academically, particularly in English. Many of these students come from poor families and have limited access to essential resources, including modern technologies such as laptops and computers. This lack of access further compounded their difficulties in learning English, as technology is increasingly crucial for both learning and assessments in today's globalized world.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study, the National Learning Camp Assessment highlighted both the triumphs and challenges faced by Blaan learners in acquiring English language skills. On the positive side, many learners demonstrated increased confidence, improved vocabulary, and a growing ability to express themselves in English through structured support and culturally responsive teaching strategies.

The experiences of Blaan learners during the National Learning Camp Assessment (NLCA) revealed a rich narrative of resilience, adaptation, and cultural identity in the context of learning English. Their reflections highlighted not only the difficulties they faced—such as linguistic barriers, unfamiliar teaching methods, and limited resources—but also the positive aspects of their journey, including increased self-confidence, supportive learning environments, and moments of achievement in language acquisition.

Recommendations

The academic struggles often originate from people who came from poor communities with less capability to support education. Thus, the researcher recommends the following;

1. The Department may implement context-specific, mother tongue–based multilingual education (MTB-MLE) programs supplemented with culturally relevant English learning materials and teacher training to directly address the linguistic and cultural needs of Blaan learners.
2. It is suggested that curriculum planners can integrate structured digital literacy modules into the basic education curriculum, specifically tailored to the needs and contexts of indigenous learners, and to ensure equitable access and effective use of technological tools in learning environments.
3. Educational leaders may equip the teachers with necessary skills and knowledge in both English language proficiency and technological literacy through trainings and seminars. Also, the Department of Education should provide additional necessary educational material for both learners and educators.
4. Teachers can create a support system focusing on educational aid for learners who not just belong to a cultural minority but most especially those who belong to a poor household. The academic community may develop linkages and partnership with public and private sectors that could support students with their necessary needs.
5. The Guidance office may conduct peer support programs for learners that are vital to boost their confidence. Furthermore, the researcher also recommends that the academic community should develop more inclusive teaching methods and activities for learners.

6. It is suggested that the Department may intensify the Information and Communication Technology (ICT) subjects for learners and further provide additional computers for every school that could be utilized by both teachers and learners.
7. Future researchers can venture to a more comprehensive study about the cultural and economic background of Blaan learners that contributes to their psychological feeling of intimidation and subordination towards other learners.

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