

Students' Proficiency in Using the Filipino Language in Academic Communication: A Qualitative Study

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Abstract – *The inability to communicate effectively in the Filipino language affects students' academic performance, self-confidence, and engagement in classroom discourse. This study explored the proficiency of Junior High School students at Basilan State College in using the Filipino language in academic communication. Employing a qualitative research design through in-depth interviews and focus group discussions, the study examined how language, cultural, and educational factors shape students' proficiency. Thematic analysis of the data revealed that most students demonstrate a moderate to high level of proficiency in Filipino language use, though indigenous linguistic backgrounds and limited instructional exposure in the Filipino medium pose notable challenges. The findings reinforce Jim Cummins' Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) theory and underscore the need for culturally responsive language programs in multilingual academic settings.*

Keywords—*Filipino language proficiency, academic communication, qualitative study, Junior High School, Basilan State College.*

I. INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency is a cornerstone of academic success. Students who lack the ability to communicate effectively in the language of instruction are at a significant disadvantage in their academic endeavors [1]. In the Philippine educational context, the Filipino language serves as one of two official languages of instruction, alongside English. However, the degree to which students are proficient in using Filipino for academic purposes varies considerably across regions, particularly in areas where indigenous languages are dominant [2].

Basilan, an island province in the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region in Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), is a linguistically diverse territory. Students enrolled at Basilan State College (BaSC) come from diverse ethnolinguistic groups, including the Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, and Sama communities, where Filipino is neither a first language nor a dominant medium of daily communication. This reality places Junior High School (JHS) students at BaSC in a unique position where proficiency in Filipino academic communication is both challenging and crucial.

Research has consistently shown that students with low proficiency in a language experience anxiety, disengagement, and poor academic outcomes [3]. Fukuda [4] noted that less-proficient students often disengage from language learning and hesitate to seek academic support. Xing and Bolden [5] similarly found that low oral proficiency is associated with heightened communicative anxiety. Meanwhile, studies in the

Philippines have found that proficiency in the Filipino language among students from Visayas and Mindanao remains underdeveloped, largely due to the dominance of regional languages in everyday contexts [6].

Labrador et al. [7] reported that the use and prestige of the Filipino language among the younger generation has been declining, a trend compounded by the increasing dominance of English in academic and professional domains. Bughao et al. [8] further found that many students tend to neglect Filipino in favor of regional or global languages, which weakens their proficiency over time. Despite this, teaching content in the students' native language has been shown to enhance cognitive understanding and academic performance [9], suggesting that a bilingual or mother-tongue-based approach may serve as a bridge to broader Filipino language proficiency.

This study is anchored on Jim Cummins' (1980) Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) theory, which distinguishes academic language proficiency from conversational fluency. CALP encompasses the ability to use language in abstract, cognitively demanding academic tasks — reading, writing, discussion, and argumentation — all of which are central to the learning process at the Junior High School level [10]. Students with high CALP demonstrate stronger engagement in academic tasks and achieve better outcomes.

While many studies on Filipino language proficiency have focused on quantitative measures, there is a significant gap in qualitative explorations that uncover the lived experiences, perceptions, and contextual factors shaping students' proficiency — particularly in Muslim Mindanao settings like Basilan. This study fills this gap by qualitatively examining the Filipino language proficiency of JHS students at BaSC, exploring the language, cultural, and educational factors that influence their communicative competence in academic contexts.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEMS

This study aimed to explore the proficiency of Junior High School students at Basilan State College in using the Filipino language in academic communication. Specifically, it sought to:

1. Describe the profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1 Age
 - 1.2 Gender
 - 1.3 Year Level

2. Explore the students' experiences and perceptions of their proficiency in using the Filipino language in academic communication in terms of:
 - o 2.1 Language factors
 - o 2.2 Cultural factors
 - o 2.3 Educational factors
3. Identify the challenges and facilitating factors that affect Filipino language proficiency among JHS students at BaSC?

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design, specifically using a phenomenological approach. This design was deemed appropriate as it allowed the researchers to explore and understand the lived experiences, perspectives, and meanings that Junior High School students attach to their use of the Filipino language in academic communication. According to Creswell and Poth [11], phenomenological inquiry is well-suited for studies that seek to describe the essence of a shared human experience. In this case, the experience of using Filipino as a medium of academic communication among students from diverse ethnolinguistic backgrounds constitutes the central phenomenon of inquiry.

B. Research Participants

The participants of this study were purposively selected Junior High School students enrolled at Basilan State College during the academic year 2024–2025. A total of twenty (20) participants were selected — ten (10) for individual in-depth interviews and ten (10) for two focus group discussions (FGD), with five (5) students per group. Purposive sampling was used to ensure the inclusion of students from different year levels (Grades 7–10), gender identities, and ethnolinguistic backgrounds (Yakan, Tausug, Chavacano, Sama, and others). This sampling strategy enabled the researchers to obtain rich, context-specific data that captured the diversity of student experiences with Filipino language use in academic settings.

TABLE 1. Demographic Profile of Research Participants

Participant Code	Age	Gender	Year Level	Ethnolinguistic Background
P01	13	Female	Grade 7	Yakan
P02	13	Male	Grade 7	Tausug
P03	14	Female	Grade 8	Chavacano
P04	14	Male	Grade 8	Sama
P05	15	Female	Grade 9	Yakan
P06	15	Male	Grade 9	Tausug
P07	16	Female	Grade 10	Tagalog
P08	16	Male	Grade 10	Chavacano
P09	14	LGBTQ	Grade 8	Sama
P10	15	Female	Grade 9	Others
P11–P15	13–16	Mixed	Grades 7–10	Mixed
P16–P20	13–16	Mixed	Grades 7–10	Mixed

C. Research Instrument

The primary instruments used in this study were a semi-structured interview guide and a focus group discussion guide, both developed by the researchers and validated by three (3) expert validators — one language specialist, one

qualitative research methodologist, and one educator familiar with the Basilan educational context. The interview guide was anchored on three thematic areas adapted from the framework used by Misiran et al. [12]: (1) language factors, (2) cultural factors, and (3) educational factors. Each thematic area contained open-ended questions designed to elicit rich, descriptive responses about the participants' experiences, perceptions, challenges, and strategies in using the Filipino language for academic communication.

TABLE 2. Sample Interview Guide Questions by Thematic Area

Thematic Area	Sample Questions
Language Factors	"How do you describe your ability to speak and write in Filipino during class? What difficulties do you encounter when using Filipino in academic tasks?"
Cultural Factors	"How does your cultural or ethnolinguistic background affect your use of Filipino in school? Do you feel comfortable communicating in Filipino with your classmates and teachers?"
Educational Factors	"How have your teachers and Filipino language classes helped or hindered your ability to use Filipino academically? What instructional strategies have been most helpful?"

D. Data Collection Procedure

Data collection was conducted in three phases. In the first phase, the researchers secured written permission from the Office of the School Principal of Basilan State College Junior High School Department. Ethical clearance was also obtained from the institution's research ethics review body. In the second phase, individual in-depth interviews were conducted in a private, conducive setting within the school premises. Each interview lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with the informed consent of the participants. The two focus group discussions were held separately and lasted approximately 60 to 90 minutes each. All sessions were conducted in a combination of Filipino and the participants' preferred language, when necessary, with the researchers serving as interpreters where needed. In the third phase, all audio recordings were transcribed verbatim and translated into Filipino and English where applicable, in preparation for thematic analysis.

E. Data Analysis

The researchers used Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase thematic analysis [13] to analyze the data:

1. Familiarization with the data through repeated reading and note-taking.
2. Generation of initial codes from the transcripts.
3. Searching for themes across the coded data.
4. Reviewing and refining themes.
5. Defining and naming themes.
6. Producing the final report.

Member-checking was conducted by sharing preliminary findings with select participants to verify the accuracy and resonance of the interpretations. Peer debriefing with a qualitative research expert was also employed to enhance the credibility of the findings.

IV. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Thematic analysis of the interview and FGD transcripts yielded three major themes, each with corresponding sub-themes, that characterize the Filipino language proficiency of Junior High School students at Basilan State College in academic communication.

TABLE 3. Summary of Themes and Sub-Themes

Major Theme	Sub-Themes	Frequency of Mention
Theme 1: Linguistic Challenges in Filipino Academic Communication	1.1 Limited Filipino vocabulary; 1.2 Code-switching as a coping strategy; 1.3 Difficulty in formal written Filipino	High
Theme 2: Cultural Identity and Language Attitudes	2.1 Pride in indigenous language; 2.2 Perceived social stigma in Filipino use; 2.3 Motivation linked to cultural integration	Moderate
Theme 3: Role of Educational Environment in Proficiency Development	3.1 Teacher modeling and support; 3.2 Limited Filipino instructional materials; 3.3 Filipino language activities as enabling factors	High

Theme 1: Linguistic Challenges in Filipino Academic Communication

Most participants acknowledged significant linguistic challenges in using Filipino for academic purposes. Students reported difficulty in constructing formal sentences, limited vocabulary in Filipino, and frequent resort to code-switching — mixing Filipino with their native languages or English — as a coping mechanism during classroom discussions and written tasks.

Participant P03 articulated this experience: *"Naiintindihan ko ang Filipino pero pag kailangan ko na magsalita o sumulat nang maayos para sa klase, nahihirapan ako. Mas madali para sa akin ang Chavacano."* ("I understand Filipino but when I need to speak or write properly for class, I find it difficult. Chavacano is easier for me.")

This aligns with Somblingo and Ricohermoso [14], who found that first-language dominance significantly affects second-language proficiency. It also corroborates the findings of Fukuda [4], who observed that less-proficient learners experience inhibition in using the target language in formal settings.

Theme 2: Cultural Identity and Language Attitudes

Participants expressed a strong sense of pride in their indigenous languages and cultures, which, for some, created an internal tension when asked to use Filipino exclusively in academic settings. However, several students also expressed a desire to master Filipino as a vehicle for broader social and academic integration.

Participant P06 shared: *"Proud ako na Tausug ako. Pero gusto ko rin matuto ng magandang Filipino para makapag-usap nang maayos sa ibang tao at sa mga guro."* ("I am proud to be Tausug. But I also want to learn proper Filipino so I can communicate well with other people and teachers.")

This finding resonates with Tana [6], who identified cultural background as a significant factor influencing Filipino language proficiency among secondary students. It also reflects Rao's [15] assertion that language proficiency is deeply tied to cross-cultural communication and integration.

Theme 3: Role of the Educational Environment in Proficiency Development

Students consistently identified their Filipino teachers' instructional practices as either enabling or constraining their language development. Those who reported having supportive, communicative teachers who modeled proper Filipino use and encouraged classroom participation demonstrated greater confidence and self-reported proficiency. Conversely, students whose Filipino language classes relied heavily on rote memorization and grammar drills reported lower engagement and motivation.

Participant P07 noted: *"Mas natututo ako sa klase ng Filipino kapag aktibo kaming nagtatalo at nagtatanong. Hindi lang lecture."* ("I learn more in Filipino class when we are actively debating and asking questions. Not just lectures.")

This finding is consistent with Banditvilai [16], who demonstrated that active, blended instructional approaches significantly enhance student language skills. Melegrito [9] also found that instructional medium and teacher practice directly influence students' proficiency and academic engagement.

TABLE 4. Representative Participants' Quotes by Theme

Theme	Participant Code	Key Quote (Filipino/English)
Linguistic Challenges	P03	"Nahihirapan ako sumulat nang pormal sa Filipino." ("I find it difficult to write formally in Filipino.")
Linguistic Challenges	P02	"Code-switching nalang ako kasi kulang ang vocab ko sa Filipino."
Cultural Identity	P06	"Proud Tausug ako pero gusto ko matuto ng Filipino para sa paaralan."
Cultural Identity	P09	"Minsan nahihiya akong magsalita ng Filipino dahon baka mapagtatawanan."
Educational Environment	P07	"Mas natututo sa aktibong klase, hindi sa diktasyon lang."
Educational Environment	P10	"Yung guro namin, lagi siyang naghihikayat na magsalita sa Filipino."

V. CONCLUSION

This study explored the Filipino language proficiency of Junior High School students at Basilan State College through a qualitative phenomenological approach. The findings reveal that while students possess a foundational understanding of the Filipino language, their proficiency in using it for formal academic communication is significantly shaped by three interrelated factors: linguistic background and vocabulary limitations, cultural identity and language attitudes, and the quality of the educational environment.

In alignment with Jim Cummins' CALP theory [10], the study affirms that academic language proficiency is a developmental process that requires deliberate instructional support, particularly in multilingual and multicultural settings like Basilan. The strong dominance of indigenous languages such as Yakan, Tausug, and Chavacano in students' daily

lives does not preclude the development of Filipino proficiency but necessitates culturally sensitive and communicative pedagogical approaches.

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