MIDDLE-AGED LEARNERS IN LOCAL COMMUNITY COLLEGE ON THEIR BID FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING: A MULTIPLE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative multiple case study aimed to unveil the lived experiences, and coping strategies of five middle-aged learners from local colleges in Davao del Norte: single-male, married working-male, single-parent female, married working-female, and married full-time student female, which were chosen through maximum variation sampling. Their experiences and coping strategies were examined using in-depth Interviews. Data triangulation was done by interviewing each case's family members, colleagues, and friends. Thematic analysis resulted six emergent themes on the experiences: linguistic barriers in communication, strong resolve towards linguistic resilience and growth, aspiration for personal and professional growth, varied ESL engagements, multifaceted support network, and learning challenges. The emergent themes for coping mechanism included reliance on reputable sources, self-directed learning strategies, social support system, optimal use of technology, English language immersion, and stress management technique. The five cases were generally similar in their experiences and challenges, but three cases manifested variation in linguistic barriers, and two for strong resolves towards linguistic resilience and growth. As for coping strategies, five cases adopted varied approaches in time management and prioritization, and three cases differ on self-directed strategies. All cases shared the same coping schemes from the rest of the strategies in dealing language learning challenges.

KEYWORDS: *middle-aged learners, English language, local college, multiple case study, Philippines*

INTRODUCTION

Age has been considered a crucial factor in language learning and acquisition (Prianka, 2018). Adult learners often experience a decline in these abilities, especially after age 25, as they were influenced by linguistic distinction between their first language and the new language, which impacts their speaking proficiency significantly (Vieira, 2022). Despite exposure to the language in educational settings, this linguistic challenge is particularly pronounced among middle-aged learners which affects their confidence and communication skills due to fear of ridicule, lack of self-esteem, and fossilization in morphosyntax and pronunciation (Castañeda, 2017). Nevertheless, Narantuya (2022) still underscores a noteworthy trend in adult education, noting a significant increase of enrollments among individuals aged 40 and above studying foreign languages due to globalization and personal development needs. This surge in admission signals a growing commitment among L2 learners to overcome linguistic barriers and actively engage in language learning within the dynamic landscape of adult education.

Middle-aged English language learners (MELLs) embark on a distinctive educational journey, fraught with a multitude of linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural challenges (Zammit, 2022). This endeavor among adult learners to learn and refine their language skills, for King (2020), presents a unique set of issues as they often confront the need to simultaneously manage work responsibilities, family obligations, and other life commitments.

Middle-aged learners in Africa often hurdled difficulties in learning English. Learners in Kenya have pronunciation errors due to differences in phonetic features, impacting intelligibility and requiring exposure to proficient English speakers (Ombati and Kirigia, 2020). Middle-aged learners in Ghana have struggled in expanding their English vocabulary and are challenged with vocabulary due to L1 interference, impacting phonemes, morphemes, words, sentences, and discourse structures (Dansieh, 2018). Grammatical mistakes in essay writing English are common among adult EFL learners in Nigeria due to lack of motivation and topic relevance awareness, hindering their ability to write acceptable essays (Okpe & Onjewu, 2017), while in

China, pronunciation issues such as adding rhotic sounds, misplaced stress, speaking fast, and ignoring vowels due to dialect influence (Huang, 2023); and speaking difficulties due to anxiety and fear of making mistakes are apparent (Amoah & Yeboah, 2021). Further, Wu (2023) supplemented that Chinese adult learners of English face challenges in producing the voiceless interdental fricative sound // due to tongue placement errors, with an average correct pronunciation rate of only 37%.

In the Philippines, middle-aged students often grapple with communicative tasks due to a lack of linguistic competence and psycho-social fears associated with speaking in different contexts (Separa et al., 2020). English language anxiety is indeed common among adult learners, particularly those in college, because of skill deficiencies, personal insecurities, and fear of judgment (Giray, 2022). Similarly, adult Filipino learners face obstacles in English writing, including insufficient guidance, comprehension issues, and text construction challenges, which was exacerbated by schools' transition to modular learning integrating writing learning as compromising strategy in the pedagogy (Aradillos et al., 2023). In addition, middle-aged learners experience reading challenges due to limited mastery, risk factors, and a lack of reading culture, resulting in frustration (Tomas et al., 2021). In view of these linguistic perplexities, targeted strategies and resources within educational programs are crucial to effectively support Filipino adult learners in their pursuit of English language proficiency.

At one local college in Region XI, English Bridging Program (EBP) was institutionalized as the central initiative to address the prevalent language challenges faced by middle-aged learners in the community. In fact, in 2022, 17 middle-aged students voluntarily participated in the program on their desire to pursue college. However, due to certain factors like inhibition, in fear of possible intimidation, age gap, and the like, only two of them pursued. This reveals a concerning number of students who disregarded their education and pursue their dreams despite their age and personal obligations.

Several research have delved into the distinct aspects on middle-aged learners, including investigations into learning experiences of Korean middle-aged women (Ha, Lee & Heo, 2022), stress response and learning needs (Tsai, 2020), and learning topics and life adaptation (Liangqiu and Zhengqiu, 2019). Only few has ventured on studies that focus on the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of middle-aged learners in a more in-depth form of exploration. There is an urgency to conduct this research because the researcher found a scarce number of study that explores the perks and perils of adult students who continue to enroll and finish degrees particularly in a local community college, with a hope that the results of this study may awaken the educational agency/authorities to design a program that can facilitate the adult learners to learn English language.

Finally, through a comprehensive exploration of the distinctive challenges faced by middle-aged language learners in college, this research may contribute to the advancement of tailored language education programs and support mechanisms, thereby enhancing the linguistic proficiency, personal growth, and socio-economic prospects of this important and growing group.

LITERATURE REVIEW
Middle-aged Learners
Middle-aged learners, typically aged 45 to 60, pursue continuing education and English language acquisition to adapt to life changes and plan for the future. These learners employ cognitive, meta-cognitive, and social learning strategies informed by their age and life experiences (Liangqiu and Zhengqiu, 2019). With the increasing demand for English learning among middle-aged and elderly individuals, systematic studies on their language acquisition have become essential (Ma, 2022; Soataliyevna, 2023). Understanding the motivations of middle-aged learners, who often prioritize self-improvement and personal reasons over work-related incentives, is crucial for successful language learning (Naumčiuk, 2023; Fu et al., 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the shift to online learning, providing an opportunity to examine the experiences and motivations of adult English language learners in this context (Chukwuma, 2020). Searby's (2023) study explored the lived experiences of adult learners during the pandemic, shedding light on their needs, challenges, and persistence motivations in online learning environments. Educators should address learners' psychological needs for autonomy, competence, and relatedness to foster motivation, considering their unique cultural backgrounds (Searby, 2023).

Middle-aged language learners navigate a complex process influenced by various factors, including exposure to comprehensible input, self-directed learning, and socio-cultural contexts (Krashen, 1982; Knowles, 1980; Macaro, 2021). Sociocultural factors such as acculturation and identity negotiations also shape their language learning experiences (Souri & Merc, 2021). Motivations for learning English among middle-aged learners are often multifaceted, combining instrumental and integrative motivations (Hang & Nung, 2023). Effective intervention programs and teaching approaches must consider these diverse factors and tailor instruction to learners' unique needs and contexts (Brown, 2019; Brookfield, 2015). Thus, a learner-centered approach, incorporating real-life contexts and relevant topics, is essential for supporting adult language learners in achieving their language goals.
English Language Learning
Middle-aged learners face a multitude of experiences, challenges and coping schemes in their pursuit of learning English as a Second Language in college. Domysheva and Kopylove's (2021) study investigated the linguistic barriers of adult learners in the development of their writing and speaking skills, which they need in applying for jobs, particularly workplace tasks which involve oral interactions with international partners and clients. In addition, Anh and Nga (2023) discovered that adult learners encounter difficulties with challenging vocabulary words,

particularly technical terms, due to their complexity and unfamiliarity. These challenges stem from various factors, including a poor sound system, a lack of communicative context, a limited vocabulary, insufficient cultural understanding, and a fear of making communication errors, as indicated in the study on English language difficulties.

Ariyan and Vadeeva (2019) stressed that middle-aged language learners strive to develop communicative competence while also pursuing personal development through building self-esteem, confidence, amiability, and emotional intelligence, which ultimately strengthen their stern connections with the world. Additionally, Souri and Merc (2021) added that middle-aged EFL learners in private language schools study English for both career-related goals, such as job opportunities, and personal interests, such as forming friendships, reflecting a blend of instrumental and integrative motivation.

Meanwhile, many authors and researchers such as Kallinikou and Nicolaidou (2019) ; Sadasivan et. al (2021); Nurani & Rosyada (2015); Bake (2018) ; and Abello (2015) , conducted relevant exploration and investigation on the significance of speakers and reading engagement in the development of the communicative skills of middle-aged teacher learners in English. As a result, the exposure of adult learners in speaking and reading activities enhances the communication skills they possess. In particular, the activities do not only upgrade their speaking proficiency, but also help in developing their pronunciation, conversational strategies, and their vocabulary acquisition. In addition, integration of reading activities tailored to learners' needs and fosters collaborative and dynamic learning environments can empower adult learners to think critically and communicate effectively. In essence, a comprehensive approach that links speaking and reading engagements is vital for adult learners to master communication skills effectively.

Adult learners face various challenges in language acquisition, as highlighted in recent literature. Pronunciation hurdles, encompassing confidence issues, teacher proficiency, time constraints, and resource scarcity, hinder effective learning (Jazrawi, 2023). Online English learning exacerbates difficulties with internet accessibility, comprehension of complex materials, and task submission (Assapari, 2021). Malhotra (2022) identifies additional hurdles such as age-related concerns, fear of ridicule, limited oral practice, and motivation issues leading to high dropout rates. Moreover, middle-aged learners contend with time management complexities due to juggling multiple roles (Arnesen, 2019) and may experience memory and cognitive challenges (Berggren et al., 2020; Stebber & Rossi, 2021). Language anxiety, stemming from self-image threats and perceived incompetency, further impedes progress (Brovarska, 2022).

Technology integration, while offering solutions, introduces new obstacles for adult learners, particularly those unfamiliar with digital tools (Helsper & Enyon, 2017). Memory and cognitive decline associated with aging exacerbate learning difficulties

(Park et al., 2022; Craik & Bialystok, 2016). Language anxiety, driven by fear of mistakes, inhibits participation and proficiency (Horwitz & Cope, 1986; Mizuno et al., 2020). Perfectionistic tendencies exacerbate reluctance to err, hindering language acquisition (Liu & Huang, 2021). Mindset towards mistakes impacts willingness to communicate (Rahimi & Abedini, 2021), underscoring the complex interplay between anxiety, mindset, and language proficiency (Gkonou et al., 2017; Juntune & Evans, 2019). These challenges necessitate tailored approaches and supportive environments to foster effective language learning among adult and middle-aged learners.

Coping strategies are vital for middle-aged language learners grappling with the challenges of acquiring a new language in a college setting. Research by Kalwar et al. (2022) indicates that regular practice, instructor guidance, and code-switching from L2 to L1 are employed by students to overcome difficulties. Martinez (2019) underscores the importance of anxiety-reducing strategies and self-concept management in mitigating language anxiety. Yasuda and Nabei (2018) found preparation, relaxation, positive thinking, peer support, and resignation as effective strategies, with preparation and positive thinking significantly reducing speaking anxiety. Middle-aged learners facing lexical hurdles often turn to various credible sources for support, accessing online materials and seeking help from peers and teachers (Jose, 2016; Shirley, 2019). Furthermore, collaborative efforts between learners and educators, along with the utilization of multiple resources, are crucial for addressing linguistic challenges in adult education (Alharthi, 2016; Arnesen, 2019).

Time management and prioritization prove indispensable for middle-aged learners, enabling efficient task completion amidst numerous responsibilities (Hoo et al., 2022; Rodriguez, 2019). Additionally, self-directed learning strategies empower learners to take charge of their educational journey, setting personal goals, assessing resources, and monitoring progress (Pete, 2016; Margaret, 2020). Moreover, the optimal use of technology, including platforms like YouTube and Google, enhances language learning outcomes (Wang et al., 2020; Ashikin et al., 2022). English language immersion, facilitated by interactions with native speakers and exposure to English media, fosters fluency and confidence (Cochi, 2020; Yusup et al., 2020). Stress management techniques, such as mindfulness exercises and social support, aid in alleviating stress and promoting well-being among learners (Son, 2023; Domingo, 2016). These strategies collectively provide middle-aged learners with the tools and support necessary to navigate the complexities of language acquisition effectively.

Purpose of the Study

This qualitative study multiple case study aimed to describe the experiences, challenges, and coping strategies of middle-aged learners as regards to their learning of English in the local colleges in Davao del Norte. At this stage in research, the language learning of middle-aged learners was defined as the specific process of acquiring, developing, and mastering English language skills among middle-aged learners enrolled in a local community

college. This encompasses various aspects of language acquisition, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, with a focus on English proficiency.

Research Questions
1. How do the middle-aged learners describe their experiences in learning English as a Second Language in a local college?
2. How do they cope with the challenges of their experience in learning English in local college at 40's?
3. What explains the similarities and differences of each case?

METHODS
Research Design
This qualitative study utilized the multiple case study approach. According to Alblooshi (2023), multiple case study approach is very significant in enhancing or ensuring generalizability of the findings, as through this, the researcher can closely study and investigate how the phenomenon is vary or similar across different contexts, settings, situations, or locations. Further, Creswell and Poth (2018) defined multiple case study as a tradition of qualitative research which seeks to delve deeper into the varying realities of a specific phenomenon from the lens and different angles of the unique cases of the participants. The entire endeavor highlights the similarities and differences of all unique cases enjoined in the study, making the in-depth study of the research topic more comprehensive and insightful. Using multiple case study approach in this study granted me the lens to view the unique cases of the participants and gain understanding of the research topic which is the bid for English language learning of middle-aged learners in local college/

Participants
The participants of this study were the five different cases of middle-aged learners in five local colleges in Region XI. They were selected using maximum variation sampling, as it would result in high-quality, detailed descriptions of each case, which are useful for documenting uniqueness and produce important shared patterns that cut across cases and derive their significance from having emerged out of heterogeneity (Patton, 2022). Each case differed in terms of the age, status, and local college institution. The first case is 40-year-old male and single college student. He is a fourth year returning student taking up Bachelor of Agricultural Technology (BAT). The second case is a 47-year-old male and married college student. He is a second-year student taking up Public Administration (BPA). The third one is a 41-year-old female college student, still single with no romantic affair or relationship, but is already a mother of three (3). She is a second-year student taking up Bachelor of Science in Agriculture (BSA). The fourth case is a 47-year-old female college student, married and working at the same time. She is a fourth-year student taking up a Bachelor of Science in Business Administration major in Financial Management. And lastly, is a 42-year-old female, married and not-working college student. She is a third-year student taking up Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness (BSAb)

In general, I had the following inclusion criteria. My participants must be a student in a local college in Region XI. They must be at their 40s (aged 40-49). Further, they should be enrolled in a four-year degree courses during the Second Semester of the Academic Year 2023-2024. For the exclusion criteria, this study did not include college students enrolled in a Private, and State Universities and Colleges. Students enrolled in local colleges outside Region XI, and aged below 40 and beyond 49 did not partake in this study.

Procedure
Human participants were party to in this study, since they were the sources of data in this dissertation. Standard protocols were conformed to in this study. The first step was the obtainment of permission to implement the study. This document was gleaned from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) of the University of the Immaculate Conception in consonance with that of the Dean of the Graduate Studies. Simultaneously, the self-made interview guide was subjected to validation procedure which was spearheaded by the panel members who also functioned as expert validators. After this one, an endorsement letter was requested from my dissertation adviser.

The second step was to seek the permission of the concerned Presidents and Administrators of the five local colleges to give due courtesy to the authorities. Five local colleges within the region were randomly selected, and I contacted in advance the VP for Research and the research coordinators thereof to help me look for the study participants that fit my inclusion criteria. The unit of this study involved people, particularly the middle-aged learners, who potentially had experiences and insights on how their challenges and coping strategies became integral in ensuring their success in developing their English skills.

As to the sampling method that was employed in this research, maximum variation sampling was applied, given that I looked for heterogeneous information-rich cases of middle-aged learners for my study. Once I shortlisted the prospect participants for my study, I proceeded to the next step.

For the third step, the participants were given a comprehensive orientation about my study in person and online. Individual orientation was done for confidentiality purposes. I introduced myself to my participants and I was frank with my purpose of inviting each of them. I explained to them the purpose and details of my study. Then, I invited them to take part in this study, having met all the criteria that I was looking for among my prospect participants. Once they initially responded affirmatively to the invitation, the middle-aged college students, their family members, friends and classmates signed the informed consent form as attestation to their voluntary participation. Of course, the participants and informants were given the option to refuse in doing so as well as the options to ask questions. Giving them these options further enhanced the ethical criterion of voluntary participation in this study.

The interviews were scheduled at a time that was mostly convenient for the participants. Face-to-face and online interviews were done with the participants while adhering to health and safety standards. Still, they were afforded with utmost care and freedom to withdraw participation or ask questions while the interview was happening. This one was done to uphold the entitlements of the participants for ethical consideration. Coercion was avoided at all costs, and questions during the interview only focused on the English language learning experiences of the middle-aged learners. Their permission was also asked before the interview was recorded. I explained that the purpose of recording such was to help me recall the vital answers of the participants during the interviews. Moreover, the interviews were kept confidential in consideration to their safety and well-being.

After the interviews, I manually transcribed the responses of my participants during the interviews. Before I subjected the transcribed responses to thematic analysis, I proceeded first to the verification process wherein I went back to the participants and asked their aid to verify the accuracy of the transcripts against the responses that they made in the interview. Once they testified to the accuracy of the transcripts by signing the member checking certificate, the transcripts were subjected to data analysis with the supervision of my designated qualitative data analyst.

Data Analysis

The data from the interviews was subjected to thorough transcription, translation, and data analysis to enable the researcher to understand the complexities of the phenomenon in question. In consonance, Maguire and Delahunt (2017) espoused that one of the methods in analyzing qualitative research data is thematic analysis. This is summarized as the endeavor of identifying, analyzing, and presenting patterns that exist within a large amount of data. The thick, rich, and detailed descriptions of the phenomenon will be unlocked through undergoing this process.

In applying the thematic analysis in this dissertation, the proposed model of Braun and Clarke (2006) was emulated in this context. This one indicated that I adhered to the intricate processes of thematic analysis which include the familiarizing of the data, formulating the initial codes, identifying the potential themes, double-checking the themes that were generated, deciding on theme labels, and completing the report.

Ethical Considerations

This paper was evaluated thoroughly by the Research Ethics Committee of the University of the Immaculate Conception based on the ten ethical tenets of research: social value; informed consent; vulnerability of the research participants; risks, benefits, and safety; privacy and confidentiality; justice; transparency, qualifications of the researcher; adequacy of facilities; and community involvement. As such, the study was subjected to careful scrutiny to affirm that the ethical principles were strictly applied in the research process at all times to protect human participants, most particularly those who belong in the vulnerable sectors.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Participants' Profile

As depicted in the Table 1, the five cases of outstanding independent readers were differentiated in terms of their demographics and unique aspects. Case-A is a single male in his 40s pursuing a Bachelor of Agricultural Technology. He has no children and is in his 4th year as a returnee student. Case-B, on the other hand, is a married male in his late 40s studying Bachelor of Public Administration. He has a large family with seven children and is a 2nd-year regular student. Case-C is a single parent female in her early 40s enrolled in Bachelor of Science in Agriculture. She juggles her studies with the responsibility of raising three children while in her 2nd year as a regular student. Case-D is a married, working female in her mid-40s pursuing Bachelor of Science in Business Administration – Financial Management. With two children, she manages her education alongside her career and is currently in her 4th year as a regular student. Lastly, Case-E is a married, non-working female in her early 40s studying Bachelor of Science in Agribusiness. With four children, she balances her studies as a 3rd-year regular student. Each individual's unique personality is shaped by their life circumstances, educational goals, and familial responsibilities, reflecting their diverse backgrounds and experiences.

Table 1. Profile of the Participants in In-depth Interviews

POINT OF SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES	MIDDLE-AGED LEARNER SINGLE MALE (Case-A)	MIDDLE-AGED LEARNER MARRIED MALE (Case-B)	MIDDLE-AGED LEARNER SINGLE PARENT FEMALE (Case-C)	MIDDLE-AGED LEARNER MARRIED WORKING FEMALE (Case-D)	MIDDLE-AGED LEARNER MARRIED NOT WORKING FEMALE (Case-E)
AGE	40	47	41	46	42
SEX	Male	Male	Female	Female	Female
YEAR	4th year - returnee	2nd year - regular	2nd year regular	4th year regular	3rd year regular
CODE	PO1	PO2	PO3	PO4	PO5

Presentation of Findings

Experiences. Using Braun and Clarke's (2006) model of thematic analysis: four themes emerged which explained the experiences of outstanding independent readers in relation to their life skills in reading. As shown in Table 2, these themes are: *linguistic barriers in communication, strong resolve towards communicative goals, aspiration for personal and professional growth, speaking and reading engagements, conducive learning environment, and learning challenges.*

Table 2. Experiences of Middle-aged Language Learners in Local College

Essential Theme	Core Ideas
Linguistic Barriers in Communication	• catching off guard with unfamiliar and obscure words • finding it difficult to construct sentences properly • struggling in grammar as the first language is Bisaya • having weaknesses in pronouncing English words correctly • having difficulty in expressing oneself orally in English • having difficulty on how to make a communication letter, the technical terminologies to be used. • struggling in keeping correct spelling and pronunciation of English terms.
Strong Resolve towards Linguistic Resilience and Growth	• having the determination and will to compete with the younger generation in order not to fall behind • having high aspiration and determination to develop communicative competence • having determination to exert effort in learning the language • developing love to communicate to enrich English skills and build interpersonal relationship • making self-sacrifice and fortitude to strive for the goals to learn and improve English. • becoming courageous to face criticisms and comments of others as adult learner of English • having a positive outlook and determination in life despite busy schedules
Aspiration for Personal and Professional Growth	• being challenged to learn English to improve public speaking skills • being encouraged to learn English to improve hosting skills • having self-motivation and significant aspirations for personal growth • gaining confidence in oneself by facing visitors in school • constantly communicating through social media to improve communication skills • making extra effort to study more and become adept in English • being encouraged to learn English to achieve competence in office's paper works • having motivation to learn English to respond interview questions accordingly when landing a job
Varied ESL Engagements	• participating in classroom and school activities • reporting actively to practice and develop English speaking skills • attending and participating in a seminar or a contest in school during Intramurals, like oration or extemporaneous speaking. • participating in interviews as assessment on speaking proficiency • joining or participating literary events during intramural like scrabble • having wide exposure to English reading materials like books and modules that develop vocabulary • reading dictionaries to understand meaning of unfamiliar words
Multifaceted Support System	• having good teachers • having helpful classmates • having home as platform to practice speaking skills • living in countryside free from noise for concentration • having exposure to technology for development of research skills in English. • having school facility for drills to improve fluency and articulation

Learning Challenges	• lacking focus and time due to life responsibilities like balancing time between family, work and school • having weak memory and thought process as compared during younger years • struggling with technology, especially in power point presentations • struggling with using cellphone due to age-related vision problems • feeling anxious when answering questions in class • expecting to get embarrassed when reporting, sharing insights, reciting orally, among others. • having inferiority complex with intelligent classmates in the classroom

Linguistic Barriers in Communication. The participants presented more than one statement connected with linguistic obstacles they encountered in expressing themselves both in written and oral form. Cases A, B, C, D, E had their own stories to tell as to the difficulties they face or experience when using English across diverse communication context. In fact, Case B had this to say:

> I struggled when I enrolled again after graduating in 1993 and returning to college in 2021. I felt like I didn't have any stock knowledge left. However, I tried my best with my studies, even though I was busy. I have dreams for the future; I know I need to keep growing. (P02_RQ1.S1)

Strong Resolves toward Linguistic Resilience and Growth. All five participants revealed that what keep them stimulated in learning English despite their age in college are their perceived attitude, characteristics, and beliefs. Common among them is their determination, positive outlook, and will to exert efforts to learn English. In other words, they have their respective strong resolve towards their communicative goals - that is to improve English skills. Case D gladly remarked that she strives communicative goals by being courageous to face criticisms and comments of others. In detail she said:

> Many people may comment or say things about why I chose to go to school, but I simply don't pay attention to them. I just strive hard because I really need to finish my studies and develop my English skills. If I don't go to school, I won't know anything, I'll fall behind, and I'll feel very helpless. (P04_RQ1.S2)

Aspiration for Personal and Professional Growth. The participants have common motivations and inspirations that encourage them to learn English at this stage of their life. Accordingly, they are making efforts and sacrifices to learn English because they wanted to achieve significant change and development in the personal and professional aspects of their life. Case E confirmed this by emphasizing:

> It's really important. I was motivated to learn English because it's extensively used in job applications, understanding instructions, and answering questions. (P05_RQ1.S3)

Varied ESL Engagements. All participants value this as an essential opportunity to engage to learn English especially on the development of vocabulary and oral communication skills. Accordingly, joining and participating in classroom and school activities like oral recitation, reporting, literary contests such as oration and extemporaneous, and seminars and training help improve speaking skills. Meanwhile, having wide exposure to English reading materials like books and modules, and dictionaries develop to enrich vocabulary and unfamiliar words. Case B demonstrated his exposure by engaging into oral reporting, and shared:

> I'll never forget that time during the reporting. It was a great opportunity for me to practice my speaking skills. Using a laptop to prepare for my reports was crucial. We needed to answer questions about our reports, study them, and then immediately develop our comprehension and understanding in English. I also asked for help from my classmates since they had laptops. Additionally, the method used by our teacher to require us to report in English also helped in developing our English-speaking skills. (P02_RQ1.S4)

Multifaceted Support System. With no hesitations, the participants shared their respective experiences as regards to the impact of their environment on their bid for language learning. All of them have similar responses and revealed that the school through its competent teachers, facility, and classmates, home, and exposure to technology help them a lot in their pursuit of communication skills. Combination of these elements constitutes a conducive learning environment for middle-aged learners in college. Case A, for instance, conveyed:

> The school has been a great help to me, especially with their English learning system. The teachers effectively implement the curriculum, ensuring students understand the lessons well. School activities such as intramurals and organizational events like literary competitions also contribute significantly. As a leader in our organization, even though we may not be participants, we still learn because we supervise them during practice and rehearsals. We observe and apply the techniques they use to deliver presentations effectively in English. Additionally, the school facilities have also been immensely helpful. (P01_RQ1.S6)

Learning Challenges. These five middle-aged learners in local colleges have experienced challenges and drawbacks that tested their will and determination to pursue learning English. They have encountered a multitude of challenges when it comes to balancing their time between home and school obligations. Juggling household tasks alongside academic responsibilities proved to be a daunting task for them. Furthermore, they all grappled with cognitive and memory issues, making it

challenging to comprehend intricate English concepts and retain the information provided in their studies. This struggle often resulted in frustration and feelings of inadequacy. Moreover, the fear of committing linguistic errors added an additional layer of anxiety for them. They worried about not being able to articulate their thoughts effectively or convey their ideas accurately due to language barriers, which hindered their confidence in participating in class discussions or expressing their opinions freely. This language anxiety further exacerbated their learning experience, making it even more challenging to overcome their academic hurdles. Case C emotionally stated her struggles and said:

> Balancing my time between my children and my studies is a significant challenge. I struggle with providing for my children's needs as a single parent. Although I receive income from our farm on weekends, making a living is still incredibly difficult. Another challenge is the ease of forgetting things, especially as one gets older. The sacrifices I make are truly significant. On weekdays, I stay in a boarding house for school, and then on Fridays, I return home to take care of my sibling's child as a sideline to earn money, which I then use to provide for my children's school expenses. Usually, I spend my Sundays doing laundry for my children's clothes because I study during weekdays. Life is challenging, and managing time effectively is crucial. I also struggle with making PowerPoint presentations for reports and research. It's a challenge, especially considering our age. Finally, there are times when I feel afraid to speak in case my English gets mixed up or I make mistakes. I get embarrassed or anxious in front of my classmates, especially those who are really good at English. I worry that they might bully me or laugh at me if I make mistakes in my responses or if my grammar is wrong. (P03_RQ1.S7)

Coping Strategies. Meanwhile, the coping strategies of middle-aged learners in association to their learning of English in Local Community Colleges were also unveiled in this study. As shown in Table 3, four emerging themes were presented: *reliance on reputable sources; time management and prioritization; self-directed learning strategies; social support system, optimal use of technology, English language immersion, and stress management techniques.*

Table 3. Coping Strategies on the Challenges of Middle-aged Learners in Local Colleges

Essential Theme	Core Ideas on Coping	Challenges
Reliance on Reputable Sources	• brainstorming with classmates • asking questions to smart and fast learners' classmates • searching and optimizing internet connection to identify and understand meanings • looking up in the dictionary	Linguistic Perplexities
	• conducting research in the library • consulting an expert co-worker to clarify teachers' inputs • internalizing in oneself to understand difficult concept • asking for clarification to instructors	Instructor's ambiguous inputs
Self-directed Learning Strategies	• going to the library to search for meaning • practicing to gain confidence in expressing ideas • listening attentively to the teacher's explanation • reading a lot to understand deeply what has been read, and for retention • inquiring from classmates to catch up missed lessons and reminders • listing down unfamiliar words and important information in notes and handouts	Cognitive Setbacks
Social Support System	• having supportive friends and classmates when struggling with school tasks	Hefty academic workloads
	• having immediate family for encouragement, moral and financial support • seeking help from expert relatives, and co-workers,	Stressful moments and frustration
	• having competent and approachable instructors when struggling with speech, written outputs, in grammar, pronunciation • seeking assistance from daughter in college on techniques and methods to present report in English	Communication Oversights

Optimal Use of Technology	• watching commercials, TV shows, and news to update and enhance vocabulary • following educational vlogs in Facebook to cultivate English skills • using Grammarly to check grammatical errors • using ChatGPT to gather information and explanation • searching in Google, YouTube for English topics and lessons	Grammatical deficiencies
	• using social media for communication with friends and classmates to catch up missed lessons	Absence in class
	• observing and learning to make PowerPoint presentations from classmates • seeking assistance from family to use LMS like google meet and google classroom	Lack of technology literacy skills
English Language Immersion	• exposure to public, such as hosting events • using English in conversation at home • using English in daily life practices like going other places • having friends and classmates to practice communication skills • communicating constantly with foreigners to develop speaking and writing skills • conducting interviews using English in Agricultural extension subject	Lack of communicative competence
Stress Management Technique	• taking a rest and sleep • setting mind to relax • participating in leisure activities from the office to unwind	Excessive paper works
	• seeking Divine Providence through prayer • bonding with my friends • remaining steadfast to overcome challenges • surpassing moment of downfall through positive mindset • joking and employing entertaining technique to ease nervousness	Frustrations, self-doubts, and language anxiety

Reliance on Reputable Sources. In some circumstances, the participants offered many statements related to coping with a linguistic perplexity, and their instructors' ambiguous inputs. Cases A, B, C, D, and E each used their unique coping mechanisms to overcome this obstacle while still pursuing their studies as middle-aged learners in College. Case D, for instance, stated:

> I felt stressed during the explanation by the teacher, and no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't understand. So, what I did was I researched at home. Then, when I was assigned to create a letter by my colleague at work, I felt overwhelmed, and my head was spinning. It took me half a day to complete the letter because I didn't know where to start. What I did was, I read through it and searched on Google. Finally, I had it checked by my expert co-worker especially when I need clarification on the teachers' inputs in English. (P04_RQ2.S1)

Self-directed Learning Strategies. When dealing with cognitive setbacks like being confronted with difficult lessons, topics, and concepts in English, they resorted to their specific self-directed strategies such as going to library to search for meaning, listening attentively to teachers' explanation, reading a lot, listing down unfamiliar words, making further inquiry on classmates, and gaining confidence before speaking through practice. Case A illustrates this by putting emphasis on the following:

> I found ways to learn how to read. If I have difficulty understanding a story. I always make an effort to find ways to help myself. I do not give up immediately because I believe there is always a way. (P02_CQ2.S2)

Social Support System. All the participants considered this to be an important takeaway that they use in handling hefty academic workloads, stressful moments, frustration, and communication oversights. As can be seen in the table, there are five core ideas developed in relation to the social support system as theme of the coping strategy that each participant used in hurdling these challenges in language learning journey. As disclosed in the result, these five cases have established common support network such as having supportive friends and classmates, competent instructors, and immediate family who provided the much-needed support when they are confronted with psychological issues, overloaded works, difficulties in both oral and written communication. Case C passionately stated the following in this resource regarding his coping schemes employed to communication problems, as well as anxiety and frustration:

> My instructors, even though they're younger than me, have been incredibly supportive. They really push me, especially during moments when I feel hopeless about learning or when I struggle with English. They encourage me to keep fighting. I truly see the help from my relatives, classmates, and friends because of them. They give me the confidence

and motivation to learn. Whenever I encounter difficulties in storytelling, writing, grammar, or pronunciation, they are always there to help and guide me. (P03_RQ2.S2)

Optimal Use of Technology. They learn to take advantage on the benefits of technology to their language learning journey in the most optimum way. As coping to deal with grammatical deficiencies, they watch commercials, TV shows and news, follow and obtain relevant inputs from Vlogs, and search in Google and YouTube for English topics. What resonated me most is their disclosure on their usage of Artificial Intelligence like Grammarly and ChatGPT to organize sentence structure and gather significant and immediate information and explanation on ambiguous or complicated linguistic inputs emanated from the class. Further, due to overlapping schedules and family emergencies, they could not attend classes, and to catch up on missed lessons, they communicated with their classmates through their group chat in messenger. Case A elaborated:

> Commercials, TV shows, and news have also helped update and enhance my vocabulary. In terms of technology, I use apps like Grammarly to check my grammar, and I also use ChatGPT. It's very easy to use—just one instruction and the information or explanation is provided right away. However, I don't just copy and paste; I still read through the responses. I simply use it to get ideas. (P01_RQ2.S6)

English Language Immersion. As presented in the table, the participants extensively engage in public events, enhancing their language skills and cultural exposure. This immersion extends to home environments, where English conversations become commonplace, fostering proficiency and a supportive learning atmosphere. Additionally, individuals integrate English seamlessly into daily life practices, such as navigating various settings and interacting with English-speaking communities, promoting practical language application and fluency. Social interactions with friends and classmates serve as pivotal platforms for honing communication skills and language proficiency in diverse contexts. Moreover, constant communication with foreigners proves invaluable in refining speaking and writing abilities, contributing significantly to their overall language development. Lastly, one participant gains practical experience by conducting interviews in English for agricultural extension subjects, reinforcing language learning within vocational settings. Case D shared her experience and how she took her daily communication with foreigner shapes her communication progress. She said:

> I also use English, especially when I go to different places. The things I've learned from school really come in handy when interacting with people. Also, continuously communicating with foreigners has significantly helped in developing my English speaking and writing skills. (P03_RQ2.S8)

Stress Management Techniques. This theme was explored through a study with several core ideas emerging as effective strategies for dealing with excessive paper works, frustrations, self-doubts, and language anxiety. One participant reported utilizing a variety of techniques to manage excessive workloads, including taking breaks and prioritizing rest and sleep, found solace in setting minds to relax, and engaging in leisure activities outside the office to unwind. In addition, seeking Divine Providence through prayer was also a prevalent coping mechanism among participants, spanning across multiple cases. Social support proved invaluable, with bonding activities with friends identified as a source of comfort and relief. Remaining steadfast in the face of challenges and maintaining a positive mindset were highlighted as crucial factors in overcoming moments of downfall and self-doubt of the two participants. Lastly, employing humor and entertaining techniques to ease nervousness emerged as effective strategies to alleviate language anxiety. Case D, in detail shared that:

> I balanced my time between my child, our household chores, and school. It was really exhausting, and there were moments when my body felt like giving up. When I was too tired, I just lay down. I set my mind to relax. Sometimes, we would go out for leisure at the office. Of course, managing my work, school, and household responsibilities remained a priority. (P04_RQ2.S2)

Similarities and Differences. As part of the cross-case analysis, similarities and differences among cases are analyzed in the context of English language learning of middle-aged learners. It can be generally inferred that although most of the cases were similar, there are also notable differences of their experiences and challenges identified in this study. As depicted in Table 4, Cases A, C, and D struggle in understanding unfamiliar and technical words; B and E struggle in pronunciation; case B has grammar difficulties; case D was challenged on writing communication letters due to technical terminologies; and case E is problematic in spelling. Cases A, B, and E manifested strong determination to learn English; Case C communicates English to build interpersonal relationships; and Case D strives for communicative goals by facing comments and criticisms courageously. Further, Case B, C, and E learn English for personal growth, while A and D learn English for professional development. It is also noted that all participants shared the same reading and speaking engagements and deemed a conducive learning environment as factor in learning and developing English skills. They also shared the same learning challenges, however, case D has never experienced trouble in technology adaptation due to her exposure at it at her workplace.

In the aspect of coping schemes, although all cases seek clarification through the internet, dictionary and teachers, case A, C, D, and E used to brainstorm with classmates when faced with linguistic perplexities. D and E ask questions with smart classmates, cases A and D do internalization, and D consults expert colleague to clarify ambiguities. It is also revealed that all cases have distinct ways of dealing conflicting schedules and overlapping responsibilities. Meanwhile, case A, B and go to the library to quench ambiguous English concepts; case C reads a lot

to deal cognitive setbacks; case D listens attentively to teacher's inputs; and case E practices her materials to gain confidence in expression ideas. Additionally, all participants converged in deeming friends and family as their social support system in learning English. However, differences are apparent in the use of technology, although all of them search in Google and YouTube to address grammar issues, case A used Grammarly and watches commercials, TV shows and news to enhance vocabulary; case B maximizes social media to catch up lessons; case C observes classmates and learns to make PPT presentation; case D follow educational vlogs; and case E seeks family's assistance to navigate LMS. It is also evident that all participants immersed themselves in English thru practice and use of English at home. Lastly, case C, D, and E pray to ease stress; while case A bonds with friends, case C jokes and employ entertaining techniques, and case D takes rest and relaxation to ease stress, frustrations and anxiety.

Table 4. *Similarities and Differences of Experiences and Coping Strategies of Outstanding Independent Readers in Secondary Schools*

Themes on Experiences and Coping Strategies	Case Unit	
	Similar	**Different**
Experiences:		
Linguistic Barriers in Communication	A, C, D	
	B, E	
		B
		D
		E
Strong Resolve towards Linguistic Resilience and Growth	A, B, E	
		C
		D
Aspiration for Personal and Professional Growth	B, C, E	
	A, D	
Varied ESL Engagements	A, B, C,D,E	
Multifaceted Support System	A, B, C,D,E	
Learning Challenges	A, B, C,D,E	
		D
Coping Strategies:		
Reliance on Reputable Sources	A, B, C,D,E	
	A,C,D,E	
	D,E	
	A, C	
		D
Self-directed Learning Strategies	A, B, C	
		C
		D
		E
Social Support System	A, B, C,D,E	
Optimal Use of Technology	A, B, C,D,E	
	A, E	
		A
		B
		C
		D
		E
English Language Immersion	A, B, C,D,E	
Stress Management Technique	C,D,E	
		A
		C
		D

Implications

The experiences and coping strategies shared by the middle-aged language learners in Local Community Colleges in Davao del Norte offer a balanced and intricate view of implications for the teaching practice. This sheds light on how educators, academicians, and the institutions at large can effectively extend support to this demographic. By adopting strategies such as reliance on reputable sources, time management and prioritization, self-directed learning, etc., middle-aged learners can effectively navigate the challenges prevailing in the process of learning and acquiring English as a second language, while balancing other responsibilities and commitments as family member and worker. These strategies will help learners to stay focused and abreast on their goals and manage their studies alongside their personal and professional obligations and aspirations.

One of the vital approaches to sustaining learners of middle age is providing access to relevant resources and boosting technology skills. This appears necessary because not only do the valuable materials need to be sorted but also the use of electronic devices require guidance on navigating them for language learning and practice. Overall, raising awareness with reference to the significance of digital skills can assist learners in making full use of the range of their options. As a result, they will feel more capable and effective in pursuing language goals.

Further, the role of a supportive social network cannot be disregarded and understated L2 journey, as it offers middle-aged learners with a relevant opportunity for encouragement and meaningful practice. Whether through teachers, peers, family members, or language communities, this linkage fosters a collaborative learning environment that promotes language proficiency and builds confidence in multicultural communication setting. Engaging also with others facilitates middle-aged learners to gain insights into cultural nuances and context and tailor one's communication that demonstrates utmost respect and understanding towards each other's diverse nature and culture.

Stress management techniques, as evident in the study, are essential tools for middle-aged learners to maintain and sustain focus and productivity amidst the complexities of overlapping responsibilities and conflicting schedules. As such, educators must provide authentic resources and necessary guidance on managing learners' stress so that they will be able to maintain a healthy disposition as anxiety associated with language learning is significantly reduced or lessened. By prioritizing well-being, these types of learners are better equipped to succeed in their respective studies.

The relevant findings and results of this study suggest the need for a quantitative research approaches to explore and look into further details the various themes, which can serve as variables in a survey questionnaire instrument to better understand the learning experiences and coping strategies of middle-aged learners. With the specific emerging themes, future research could assess how these coping strategies vary across different settings and contexts, such as in online language courses, community-based programs, or in workplace-based learning. This would surely help uncover how situational and environmental factors may impact the experiences and coping strategies of this demographic. Furthermore, this study paves way for opportunities to expand the scope of research participants and include other groups of middle-aged learners across diverse cultural and linguistic frame of references and backgrounds. This larger perspective could possibly lead to valuable insights into the universal and context-specific factors that significantly influence the learning experiences and coping strategies of middle-aged learners pursuing learning in English as Second language.

CONCLUSIONS

The experiences and coping mechanisms of middle-aged learners in local community colleges present both the challenges and successes of their English language learning journey. While facing setbacks, many of them have adopted specific measures that are appropriate to their respective characteristics and preferences. This study allowed me to gain a fuller insight into their experiences, leading to a deeper understanding of the complexity of language acquisition process for individuals aged 40s.This type of research is challenging; however, it was rewarding as it has revealed significant experiences, challenges and coping schemes that everyone across ages must reflect and leverage to navigate English language learning journey successfully. I realized that strong will and determination, coupled with the initiatives to utilize available resources effectively, supportive social system, and above all the providence of God as potent stress technique to manage frustrations and anxieties, nothing is impossible to achieve. Learning English knows no age and boundaries. We just have to pursue what we aspire for so we can achieve our communicative goals and savor the benefits it could offer us wherever we are, and whoever interlocutors we are dealing with the use of English for various purposes.

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