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HEARING THE VOICES OF STUDENTS IN THE FAR-FLUNG AREAS ON COMMUNICATION ANXIETY: A PHENOMENOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study aimed to explore and understand the experiences, coping strategies, and insights of junior high school students in the far-flung schools of Davao del Norte regarding communication anxiety when using the English language. In-depth interviews were conducted for data collection, which were then coded and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that students' experiences were characterized by physical and mental signs of anxiety, avoidance of communication opportunities, limited chances to practice English, fear of judgment, and reliance on code-switching. Their coping strategies highlighted the importance of self-motivation, the use of digital resources, seeking help and support from others, and engaging in continuous practice. Furthermore, their insights emphasized the significance of perseverance in making progress, viewing failures as opportunities for growth, employing various strategies, and applying those strategies in real communication settings. Ultimately, the results suggest that providing tailored support and encouraging continuous practice are essential for addressing communication anxiety and improving students' language proficiency. For future research may examine the effectiveness of tailored interventions aimed at reducing communication anxiety and enhancing language proficiency among students, as this could inform more effective educational strategies in improving language learning outcomes and promoting greater engagement in communication activities.

KEYWORDS: *Communication Anxiety, Far-Flung Schools, Junior High School Students, Phenomenology, Davao Del Norte*

INTRODUCTION

In today's education, information and knowledge constitute power and the skills required from a person to be able to access, interpret, and process information. Further, the ability to communicate ideas and concepts, in both written and spoken languages, is essential in the growth and progress of a learner. On the other hand, access to knowledge in the various disciplines is made possible through communication. Hence, a learner that is unable to communicate well in any forms is deprived of a meaningful learning experience throughout the journey. With these being considered, the necessity that learners are able to communicate has become the primordial concern of the education sector, especially in the basic education institutions, around the globe. Otherwise, learners shall be facing communication anxiety brought about by their inability to face challenges relating to imbalances in communication abilities.

Moreover, in China, communication anxiety among students is caused by the lack of creativity and enthusiasm, alongside with their negative attitudes (Pawlak et al., 2020) which affect their ability to learn and eventually results to poor academic achievement and performance in the English subject (Li, 2021). While, in Thailand, communication anxiety of students is a result of several factors which include communication apprehension, fear of negative evaluation, and low self-confidence which generally affect their performance in the subject (Qin & Poopatwiboon, 2023). In fact, 47.6 % of Thai students suffer from anxiety, and among the several reasons is that they experience language barrier which caused blockage in their communication pathways (Rhein, 2022). And, in Indonesia, students' anxiety in speaking the English language is caused by psychological and linguistic factors which include apprehension, fear, and worry that the learners experience when using the language (Fauzi & Asi, 2023). With the foregoing studies being considered, I find the necessity of understanding communication anxiety among junior high school students, especially in far-flung schools, in order to provide the most appropriate intervention and to achieve the desired level of competence in using the English language both in written and oral communication.

Furthermore, in the Philippines, students lack the communicative competence as they show less interest and enthusiasm in their English activities as evidenced in their performance and output submitted. Further, their inability to communicate and express themselves clearly is due to their insufficient vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation (Bautista & Del Valle, 2023). Additionally, students could hardly communicate effectively because they find it difficult to interact with others in different social contexts, and their knowledge about the rules and norms governing the appropriate timing and

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realization of a speech act is somewhat lacking (Lasaten, 2016 as cited in Sivan & Chan, 2022). As such, communication anxieties among junior high school students especially in far-flung schools should be studied in order to build a community of learners where love for the English language is cultivated and, in any way, could not hinder them in expressing their feelings, thoughts and ideas.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to explore and understand the lived experiences of junior high school students in using the English language for communication, generally referred to as communication anxiety in the context of this study, in the far-flung schools of the division of Davao del Norte.

At this stage in the research, the lived experiences of junior high school students in the far-flung areas on communication anxiety are generally defined as their anxieties on communication in using the English language, in the locale of this research endeavor. Further, their coping strategies are defined as their ways in facing and overcoming the anxieties that they have, while their insights are defined as their lesson learned from their anxieties.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of students in the far-flung areas on communication anxiety in using English language?
2. How do the students in the far-flung areas cope with the challenges on communication anxiety in using English language?
3. What are the insights of students in the far-flung areas on communication anxiety in using English language that can be shared with others?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research design using phenomenological approach. Creswell (2014) as cited in Lima and Newell-McLymont (2021) stated that qualitative research is an effective way understanding and of exploring human or social problem of individuals or groups. Likewise, qualitative study is most helpful when the researcher wants to collect data based on human understanding and perceptions (Stake, 2010 as cited in Lester et al., 2020)). It involves the use of interviews, which were used in this study, to understand and explain the phenomenon being studied (Priya, 2020).

Research Participants

The participants of this study were the 14 junior high school students from the different public secondary schools in Talaingod district, Davao del Norte division. As suggested by Polkinghorne (1989) as cited in Gill (2020), that in phenomenological study, five (5) to 25 individuals who experienced the situation can be interviewed. Similarly, Hennink and Kaiser (2022) stated that this number of participants are good enough to reach data saturation and with the use of one-on-one interviews and focus groups employing open-ended questioning with inductive probing. In relation to the aforesaid, seven (7) participants served as the key informants who underwent In-Depth Interview (IDI) and the other seven (7) participants underwent Focus Group Discussions (FGD).

In selecting the participants, the study used purposive sampling. Creswell (2011) as cited in Nikolopoulou (2023) revealed that this technique involves identification and selection of individuals or groups of individuals that are knowledgeable and experienced with the phenomenon of interest. In relation to the foregoing, the participants of this study were the junior high school students who were in the ranking list, with a general average range of 85 to 90 percent, which were taken from the three far-flung schools of Talaingod district coded as School A, B and C. Finally, these participants were selected based on the recommendations of their English language teachers.

Data Collection Procedures

The data collection for this study followed a systematic process, starting with the
preparation and approval stages. Initially, the manuscript, revised based on feedback from the adviser and expert panel, was routed through the Research Technical Panel (RTP) and checked for plagiarism using Turnitin. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Research Ethics Committee (REC) to ensure participant safety, and authorization was sought from the relevant educational authorities, including the Dean, Division Superintendent, and school heads. Participants were informed about the study through an Informed Assent Form (IAF) and Parents' Informed Consent Form (PICF). After gaining consent, in-depth interviews (IDI) and focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted in person, with interviews recorded for accuracy and confidentiality. The interviews followed open ended questions and were limited to one hour per session to prevent fatigue.

The recorded responses were transcribed and stored securely on a USB drive and computer, with password protection to ensure confidentiality. After transcription, the data was organized according to the research questions. The core themes were then identified through a collaborative process with the adviser to ensure accurate and appropriate analysis of the participants' experiences.

Data Analysis

Data analysis in qualitative research involves systematically organizing observation notes, interview transcripts, and other non-textual materials collected by the researcher to enhance understanding of the research subject or phenomenon (Nuttavuthisit, 2019). Following this, the data was analyzed using thematic analysis and coded according to the specified procedures.

Thematic analysis involves finding, assessing, arranging, and reporting themes found in gathered data (Khadimally, 2015 as

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referenced in Naeem et al., 2023). I did thematic analysis after generating and clustering the core ideas, to identify and summarize the primary themes and essential concepts from the responses that were interconnected. Analysis and interpretation followed.

After categorizing the data, I proceeded to the analysis stage where all categories were integrated into a comprehensive analysis. The analysis progressed from specific to broad concepts. I defined the strings that made up this website, establishing the meaning, structure's logic, and coherence. I identified replies with common fundamental ideas and categorized them to create overarching themes.

In this study, I read and familiarized myself with the data many times. Then, I grouped the common answers to find themes. I looked into the distinct concepts of the data and broke down the data into first-level concepts and second-level categories. After confirming that the concepts were accurate and related to the responses of the participants, I transferred the final concepts and categories into a data table display.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Experiences of Students in the Far-Flung Areas on Communication Anxiety in Using English Language

Theme 1: Physiological and Cognitive Manifestations of Communication Anxiety

Students from far-flung areas often feel anxious when speaking English, which affects both their body and mind. They may struggle to organize their thoughts, get frustrated, or have trouble remembering words. To hide their nervousness, they might smile or try to cover up shaking. Physical signs of anxiety, like sweaty palms or stuttering, are common, especially during class. Students also focus too much on mistakes, which makes it hard to concentrate on what they want to say. They may fear forgetting lines or not making eye contact, sometimes feeling like they want to leave the room. This fear and self-consciousness make it difficult for them to speak freely, leaving them feeling inadequate. This suggests that communication anxiety not only hinders students' ability to express themselves but also affects their confidence and willingness to participate in English-speaking activities, ultimately impacting their overall language development.

Theme 2: Avoiding Opportunities to Participate in Communication Activities

Communication anxiety often leads students in far-flung areas to avoid participating in class to prevent embarrassment. They may pretend to be busy or avoid eye contact with the teacher during recitations. Even when they have ideas, the fear of being judged or ridiculed causes them to choose silence. Some students stop mid-answer or rely on notes to avoid speaking in their own words. This avoidance extends to activities like memorized speeches or discussions, causing students to develop negative views about participation. They would rather be labeled as slow learners than risk making mistakes. This pattern of avoidance not only limits their opportunities to engage with the learning process but also reinforces their anxiety, ultimately hindering their language development and academic progress.

Theme 3: Limited Opportunities to Use English in Various Setting

In far-flung areas, students struggle with English due to limited exposure both at home and in school. English is rarely spoken in their communities, where languages like Bisaya and Ata Manobo are more common, making students feel insecure and anxious when asked to speak English in class. With few chances to practice outside school, their fluency and participation in English activities are hindered. Many students notice their peers also avoid using English, preferring their native languages, which further discourages English use. This lack of practice and the dominance of local languages create a cycle of anxiety and limited exposure to English, making it harder for students to improve their skills.

Theme 4: Developing Fear of Judgment on Poor English Communication Skills

Students in far-flung areas often experience a strong fear of judgment due to their perceived poor English skills, which exacerbates their communication anxiety. They worry about making grammatical mistakes or mispronouncing words, fearing ridicule from their peers or teachers. This fear of being laughed at or criticized frequently prevents them from participating in English conversations. Moreover, the fear of correction, particularly from teachers or classmates, intensifies their anxiety. Even high-achieving students are concerned that receiving corrections will damage their image as capable learners. This implies that the fear of judgment not only hinders students' participation in English activities but also creates a self-perpetuating cycle of avoidance. The lack of practice, coupled with the fear of making mistakes, further diminishes their ability to build confidence and proficiency in the language.

Coping Strategies of Students in Far-Flung Areas with the Challenges on Communication Anxiety in Using the English Language

Theme 1: Recognizing Self-Motivation as Key to Facing Communication Anxiety

Students often face communication anxiety by making an effort to speak, even when it’s hard to find the right words, which helps them build confidence and improve their skills. Answering questions in class or volunteering to speak becomes an important way to regain confidence, and although nervous, they know facing their fear is key to becoming more fluent. They also participate in English events or public speaking to challenge their fears directly, believing it’s better to try, even when unsure, than to regret not speaking. Volunteering in class or at events helps them push past anxiety, improve their skills, and see mistakes as learning opportunities. By embracing these challenges, students gradually overcome their fear of judgment and grow both personally and academically.

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Theme 2: Utilizing Digital Resources to Improve Communicative Competence

Students use digital resources like online content, YouTube, and social media to improve their English skills and overcome language anxiety. By watching anime with subtitles, reading translated novels, and imitating pronunciation from videos, they expand their vocabulary and speaking abilities. Platforms like Google and YouTube help them prepare for class recitations, while social media exposes them to informal language use. Reading novels and using online dictionaries further support their learning, and watching movies with subtitles strengthens their understanding. These digital tools provide opportunities to practice, build confidence, and apply English in real-life situations. This implies that leveraging digital resources not only aids in enhancing English language skills but also offers a practical and accessible way for students to overcome language anxiety by allowing them to engage with the language in a more relaxed, self-paced environment.

Theme 3: Seeking Aid and Support from Others

Students rely on encouragement from friends who are proficient in English, seeking tips and advice to improve their skills. This support boosts their confidence and reduces the fear of making mistakes. Friends create a comfortable environment with lighthearted teasing, helping students feel more confident and willing to engage in conversations. Additionally, support from teachers and family members plays a key role in easing communication anxiety. Positive reinforcement and constructive feedback from teachers help students improve and shift their negative attitudes toward English. Family members, including teacher relatives, also provide valuable guidance, reinforcing students' belief in their abilities and helping them overcome their anxieties. This implies that the support from friends, teachers, and family members not only reduces students' communication anxiety but also fosters a sense of belonging and reassurance, creating a positive feedback loop that encourages continued practice and participation.

Theme 4: Practicing Constantly to Improve Communication Skills

Practicing constantly is essential for students to improve their communication skills, especially when they are facing language anxiety. Many students in far-flung areas practice by engaging in casual conversations with friends, watching movies with subtitles, or rehearsing monologues in the comfort of their homes. This informal practice reduces the pressure of formal class settings and allows students to make mistakes and learn from them in a non-judgmental environment. By regularly speaking with friends or using online platforms, students can improve their vocabulary, pronunciation, and fluency without the fear of correction. Additionally, some students seek out conversations with native speakers or people with different accents, which exposes them to diverse ways of speaking and helps them become more adaptable in real-world communication. Public speaking activities, when guided by supportive teachers, also provide valuable structured practice that boosts confidence and encourages continuous improvement. Rehearsing scenarios before bed or practicing with native speakers helps students become more comfortable using English in various situations, further enhancing their skills. This implies that consistent practice, whether formal or informal, is key to overcoming communication anxiety and improving English proficiency, as it helps students build confidence, adapt to various communication styles, and reduce the fear of making mistakes in real-life situations.

Theme 5: Using Code-Switching as a Strategy

When students struggle to express their ideas in English, they often switch to their native language, Bisaya, which feels more comfortable and familiar. This shift helps them communicate more clearly, especially when they have trouble maintaining fluency in English. In some cases, students may abandon English entirely to avoid the anxiety of speaking inaccurately. Some even ask their teachers for permission to speak in Bisaya, showing their discomfort with using English in class. This request comes from a fear of making mistakes or being judged, which leads to a reluctance to participate. While switching to Bisaya reduces anxiety, it also limits opportunities to practice and improve their English skills. While code-switching may offer immediate relief from communication anxiety, it is essential for students to gradually increase their English practice in order to build fluency and overcome long-term language barriers.

Insights of Students in the Far-Flung Areas on Communication Anxiety in Using English Language

Theme 1: Importance of Perseverance for Improvement

Students understand the importance of persevering in learning English, even though it’s not widely used in their daily lives. They know that most subjects require English, so they push past their fears and keep practicing, aware that learning extends beyond the classroom. They realize that without persistence, they risk not improving. Overcoming anxiety takes effort, especially since English isn’t common in their community, but they push through discomfort to improve their skills. This commitment helps them overcome communication anxiety and build confidence in using English. This perseverance not only helps students manage their anxiety but also fosters resilience, enabling them to continue learning and using English in diverse contexts, even in the face of challenges.

Theme 2: Taking Failures as Opportunities for Improvement

Students from far-flung areas view communication errors as essential to learning and improvement. They believe mistakes are part of the process and encourage others to embrace them as opportunities for growth. Instead of being discouraged by criticism, they use it as motivation to improve their skills. They welcome corrections, seeing them as chances to progress and understanding that avoiding public speaking only holds them back. They value feedback from teachers, using it to refine their communication skills and not letting negative reactions affect

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their self-esteem. This open-minded approach helps them continuously grow, turning mistakes and feedback into driving forces for confidence and proficiency in English. This perspective not only fosters a growth mindset but also empowers students to be more resilient and proactive in their learning process. By viewing mistakes as opportunities for improvement, students are more likely to engage in English activities and take risks in communication, ultimately accelerating their language acquisition. Their ability to accept and learn from criticism transforms the fear of judgment into a source of motivation, which, over time, significantly enhances their language proficiency and self-confidence.

Theme 3: Utilizing Various Strategies to Improve Communication Skills

Students use online platforms to practice English by watching videos or reading articles that interest them, making learning more engaging and less stressful. Watching videos with English subtitles helps them learn grammar, vocabulary, and punctuation in a fun, real-life context. This mix of entertainment and learning makes the process more enjoyable and approachable. Social media also offers a relaxed way to improve skills, as students engage with English content like memes, posts, and videos on platforms like Facebook and Instagram. Following English-speaking influencers or watching English melodramas allows students to learn in an interactive, informal way. By combining fun with education, students improve their English without the pressure of formal study. This suggests that leveraging digital platforms not only enhances language acquisition but also promotes consistent practice, making language learning a more integrated and enjoyable part of daily life.

Theme 4: Applying Strategies Learned in Communication Settings

Applying strategies learned in communication settings is crucial for students to improve their language skills and overcome communication anxiety. By actively engaging in real-life situations, such as classroom discussions, group projects, or public speaking, students can refine their ability to express ideas clearly, manage conversational flow, and adapt their communication style to fit different audiences. Strategies like active listening, taking pauses to gather thoughts, and using non-verbal cues help reduce stress and boost confidence. Additionally, applying these strategies in informal settings, such as peer interactions or social media, allows students to practice in low-pressure environments, further reinforcing their skills. This process of trial and error in diverse settings enables students to gain valuable feedback, make adjustments, and develop a deeper understanding of effective communication. Implication: Regularly applying these strategies in real-world settings not only enhances language proficiency but also cultivates the confidence and adaptability needed to navigate various communication challenges.

Implications for Teaching Practice

The results of this study underscore the need for creating a supportive and non-judgmental classroom environment that helps alleviate communication anxiety, especially for students in remote areas. One key recommendation is to integrate activities that promote active engagement and collaboration, such as group discussions, peer interactions, and role-playing exercises. These activities offer students a safe space to practice speaking without the fear of being judged, thereby reducing anxiety and encouraging risk-taking. By fostering an atmosphere where mistakes are seen as part of the learning process, students will feel more comfortable expressing themselves and gradually build their language skills. Teachers should also emphasize that language learning is a journey, and improvement comes with consistent practice, which helps students overcome their fear of failure. Encouraging students to share their thoughts without the pressure of perfection can nurture a positive attitude toward language acquisition and improve their confidence.

Furthermore, the integration of technology into teaching practices is vital, particularly for students in remote or under-resourced areas. Online platforms, mobile applications, and multimedia resources can create a more interactive and flexible learning environment that caters to various learning styles. Technology allows students to practice at their own pace, offering immediate feedback that helps them refine their skills. In addition to traditional lessons, these digital tools provide an avenue for students to engage with English outside the classroom, reducing anxiety by offering a more relaxed space for practice. To further reduce communication anxiety, teachers can incorporate virtual meetings or conversation platforms where students can engage with native speakers or peers from different regions, giving them exposure to diverse accents and communication styles. This will not only build students' proficiency but also allow them to practice language use in real-life situations.

Another crucial aspect is fostering a positive feedback culture in the classroom. Teachers can play a vital role in encouraging students to view corrections as opportunities for growth. Providing specific, constructive, and positive feedback helps students feel supported rather than discouraged. Instead of focusing on what went wrong, teachers should emphasize areas of improvement and acknowledge progress. It is also important to model the process of giving and receiving feedback effectively, so students understand how to approach mistakes constructively. Teachers can encourage students to reflect on feedback and actively apply it to their language practice, fostering a growth mindset. This approach will build resilience and motivate students to persevere despite setbacks, reducing their anxiety around making mistakes.

Finally, informal and fun activities that promote English language use outside of structured lessons can further alleviate communication anxiety. Teachers can encourage students to engage in activities such as watching English-language videos,

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playing educational games, or participating in online forums or social media groups where English is used in a relaxed context. Connecting learning with students' personal interests will make the language practice more enjoyable and less intimidating, encouraging regular use of English in real-life situations. Such informal language exposure allows students to internalize vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammar in authentic settings, leading to better retention and greater confidence in their abilities. By incorporating both formal and informal methods of learning, teachers can offer a holistic approach that enhances students' communication skills and reduces anxiety.

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