



GRAPPLING THE EXPERIENCES OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN ATTENDING ENGLISH-WRITTEN MODULAR CLASS: A PHENOMENOLOGY OF ACADEMIC SACRIFICE

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Abstract:

This phenomenological study explored the experiences of junior high school students attending English-written modular classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. The data were gathered from Grade 9 JHS students at Alagao National High School of General Santos City (formerly General Santos City National Secondary School of Arts and Trades – Extension) in Barangay Lagao, General Santos City, Philippines. Participants were chosen based on inclusion criteria such as being a Grade 9 student, not having cellphones or any online access, being readers under frustration level, and having parents or guardians who had never completed elementary school. Thus, purposive sampling was used to choose the participants. The findings of this study emphasized three major emergent themes as a result of the interviews, and the first theme focused on the participants' viewpoints about homeschooling, safeguarding learners, and the difficulties they have while attending the SLMs. The second theme showed the participants' feelings about attending the SLMs, including their challenges, self-reliance, and feelings of deep regret. At the same time, the final theme emphasized the impact of attending English-written modular classrooms among students as learners who discussed their motivation to study, the value of high-quality reading materials, the need for professional supervision, and their ability to self-direct their learning process.

Keywords: English, English-written modular classes, participant experiences, distance learning, COVID-19 pandemic, phenomenology, Philippines

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1. Introduction

"Education is the passport to the future, for tomorrow belongs to those who prepare for it today." (Malcolm X)

The quote asserts that success, advancement, and development are all contingent upon education; consequently, educated young people will determine the nation's future. However, in 2019, the results of both local and international assessments of learners' performance brought the country's educational quality into sharp focus, revealing the low performance of Filipino students. Subsequently, the Coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic in the Philippines in 2020 severely disrupted the delivery of education and health services. School closures and challenges in implementing distance learning are projected to negatively impact learners' acquisition of knowledge and skills. Furthermore, the lockdown exacerbated existing literacy issues and concerns, leading to greater disparities in literacy among learners (Gallagher, 2020; Cahapay, 2020; Cho *et al.*, 2021).

To enhance the quality of education, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) proposed integrating distance learning programs into educational platforms. In response, the Philippine education system developed various approaches and strategies, notably Modular Distance Learning (MDL), to tackle challenges and ensure learning accessibility. This distance learning method aimed to eliminate face-to-face interaction and promote physical distancing while protecting the education of millions of Filipino students. The Department of Education (DepEd) states that modular distance learning is particularly effective for independent learners who receive consistent guidance from their parents or guardians (DepEd Order No. 14 s. 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

However, the performance of Filipino learners in large-scale assessments, such as the National Achievement Test (NAT), trended toward low competence levels, particularly in Science, Math, and English. Beyond the NAT results, the Department of Education (2018) also highlighted the latest findings from the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development's (OECD) Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA). In this assessment, Filipino learners ranked near the bottom out of 79 participating countries, specifically in reading, Science, and Mathematics proficiency (Briones, 2020).

In the school setting of this study, the results from the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) revealed that 80% of the student population were at the Frustration Level. Students in this category struggle with independent learning, which presents a significant challenge for education in the new normal. Additionally, the proposed Modular Distance Learning (MDL) approach, which includes seven out of nine modules written in English, relies heavily on students' ability to learn independently (Dantic, 2020; Panganiban & Madrigal, 2021).

Therefore, the low assessment results in Reading, Science, and Mathematics among learners in general can pose a considerable challenge not only to the learners but also to teachers and all educational sectors. This persistent underperformance can hinder academic progress, limit future opportunities, and ultimately impact the overall quality of education. Hence, the purpose of this study was to describe the learning experiences of junior high school learners attending English-written modular classes.

This study's analysis of learners' experiences was grounded in several key educational theories. First, the Distance Learning Theory (Holmberg, Keegan, and Rumble, 1986) was central, emphasizing the distinct nature of distance education compared to traditional classrooms. This theory highlights the need for structured and guided learning for geographically separated students. Second, Wedemeyer's (1981) concept of independent learning was incorporated, underscoring the importance of student responsibility and active engagement in their education, particularly in self-paced environments.

Furthermore, the study utilized John Dewey's (1938) "learning by doing" theory, connecting constructivism and active learning to the distance education context. This perspective suggests that learning is more effective when students actively participate with the material rather than passively receiving information. These theoretical lenses provided a framework for understanding how participants navigate and experience learning through English-written modules within a distance learning modality, considering their autonomy, engagement, and the structured nature of the learning.

This study aimed to understand and describe the lived experiences of Grade 9 learners engaged in modular distance learning, particularly their experiences with English-written modules. The research specifically sought to explore their views, feelings, and the perceived effects of this learning modality and its materials, as well as the benefits, drawbacks, and coping strategies they employed when using English-only MDL and SLMs. The central questions guiding the study focused on how these learners describe their experiences attending English-written modular classes, encompassing their perspectives, emotions, and the impact on their lives as learners.

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled a global shift to remote learning, leading the Philippines to adopt modular classes using self-paced modules. Despite this widespread implementation, the effectiveness of these English-written modules for junior high school learners remains largely unexplored. This research addresses this gap, aligning with the Sustainable Development Goal of ensuring quality education and recognizing the crucial role of English proficiency in the Philippines for future opportunities. Investigating the learning experiences of these students holds global significance, as it can inform the creation of better remote learning strategies and contribute to improved English language proficiency worldwide.

The findings of this study guided policy decisions regarding modular education both during and after the pandemic by revealing factors that influence its effectiveness and highlighting areas for improvement. At a local level, the research enhanced the English language learning experiences of junior high school students in modular classes

by identifying their challenges and suggesting solutions. This led to improved English proficiency, academic performance, and future employment prospects. Moreover, the study offered valuable insights for educators, administrators, and future employers, enabling them to develop more effective programs, teaching approaches, and a deeper understanding of students' learning in this modality. The research also benefited the investigator and provided a foundation for future studies in this area. Ultimately, this study aimed to improve the quality of English language education for junior high school learners in the Philippines and informed the development of more effective remote learning strategies globally.

2. Material and Methods

In this qualitative study conducted at Alagao National High School of General Santos City (formerly General Santos City National Secondary School of Arts and Trades – Extension) during the 2021-2022 school year, the researchers strategically employed purposive sampling to select eleven Grade 9 Junior High School students enrolled in English-written printed modular classes. The researchers targeted a specific group of students who could provide rich and relevant insights into the phenomenon under investigation, aligning with the core principle of purposive sampling, which aims to select participants who are knowledgeable or experienced regarding the topic of interest (Cresswell & Plano Clark, 2018).

The inclusion criteria further refined the selection process, ensuring that the participants shared specific characteristics relevant to the study's focus on learners experiencing challenges with English-written modular materials in a low-resource context. These criteria included being Grade 9 students at the specified school, aged 14-15 without access to smartphones or the internet, identified as Frustration Level readers based on their Phil-IRI results, and having parents or guardians with no formal elementary education. By focusing on this particular demographic, the researchers aimed to gain a deeper understanding of the unique experiences and perspectives of students facing potential barriers to learning through English-written modules in a distance learning environment.

The materials for this qualitative phenomenological study primarily consisted of a validated interview guide/questionnaire designed to elicit the lived experiences of Grade 9 junior high school learners attending English-written modular classes. Data collection methods involved individual in-depth interviews with six purposefully selected students and a focus group discussion with five different purposefully selected students from Alagao National High School of General Santos City (formerly General Santos City National Secondary School of Arts and Trades – Extension). The researcher personally conducted these interviews and discussions, adhering to health and safety protocols, and recorded the conversations to ensure accuracy, later engaging an independent reader analyst to verify transcriptions and a professional data analyst for subsequent analysis and interpretation (Altamony & Gharaibeh, 2017; Goico, 2021).

2.1 Design and Procedure

The procedure for data collection began with securing the necessary approvals from the School Division Superintendent and the school principal. Subsequently, the researcher provided informed consent forms to the selected learners and obtained written parental permission, ensuring ethical considerations were paramount. Six participants engaged in individual in-depth interviews, while a separate group of five participants took part in a focused group discussion. A validated interview guide served as the primary instrument to guide the researcher in eliciting rich and detailed narratives from the participants. Throughout the data collection process, the researcher adhered strictly to the health and safety protocols mandated by the local health authorities.

Prior to the interviews and discussions, the researcher conducted a preliminary meeting to orient the participants on the study's purpose, the topics to be discussed, and the types of questions they would encounter. The researcher emphasized the confidentiality and truthfulness of their responses, striving to create a comfortable and trusting environment conducive to open and honest communication. Recognizing the importance of cultural sensitivity, the researcher remained mindful of the participants' social context and cultural background to ensure respectful interaction. Participants were informed that the sessions would be audio-recorded, and they would have access to the recordings.

The analysis of the collected data followed a systematic six-step process outlined by Hirose and Creswell (2023). The initial steps involved organizing and preparing the data, which included transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews and the focus group discussion, as well as organizing any field notes. The researcher then engaged in a comprehensive reading of all the data to gain a holistic understanding of the participants' experiences, noting initial impressions and overarching thoughts in the margins of the transcripts.

The subsequent step involved coding the data, where related segments of text were grouped and labeled with representative words or phrases, often using the participants' own language (*in vivo* terms). This coding process facilitated the classification of the data into manageable units. Following coding, the researcher generated a descriptive analysis of the emerging categories or themes, providing detailed information about the individuals, events, and settings relevant to the study's focus. These themes represented the key findings and were used to structure the results. The final steps involved examining how these descriptions and themes addressed the research questions and interpreting the findings by comparing them with existing literature and relevant theoretical frameworks, ultimately aiming to derive meaning and potential implications for practice and future research.

To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of this qualitative phenomenology study, the researcher prioritized establishing credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability of the data. The researcher addressed credibility through deep engagement with participants and the study's context, potentially employing member checking and triangulation (Adler, 2022). To enhance transferability, the researcher

provided a detailed and comprehensive description of the study's procedures, participants, setting, and assumptions (Stahl & King, 2020), enabling readers to assess the findings' applicability to similar settings. The researcher ensured dependability by meticulously documenting all research processes, including data collection and analysis techniques, and by maintaining a detailed audit trail. Finally, the researcher focused on confirmability by grounding the findings in the data rather than personal bias, strengthening this through clear explanations and a comprehensive audit trail (Adler, 2022).

Throughout this research, the researcher maintained paramount ethical considerations. The researcher ensured voluntary participation by explicitly informing participants of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. The researcher rigorously protected privacy and confidentiality by guaranteeing data security and anonymizing information. Following a thorough informed consent process, the researcher provided participants with comprehensive information before obtaining their signed consent. The researcher ethically conducted participant recruitment using purposive sampling and clearly explained the study's potential benefits. To mitigate potential risks, the researcher consistently reminded participants of their right to withdraw and prioritized their well-being. The researcher also upheld academic integrity by preventing plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification, using detection software and properly attributing sources. Proactively addressing conflicts of interest by adhering to UMERG guidelines, the researcher ensured participant awareness of their withdrawal rights. Maintaining transparency and honesty, the researcher provided accurate information during the consent process and diligently obtained formal permission from relevant authorities to conduct the study.

3. Results and Discussion

This part presents the categorization of data of the participants' lived experiences in attending an English-written modular class. Specifically, to describe their views, feelings and how attending English-written modular class affected their lives as learners.

Table 1 presents the grade 9 learners' views on their experiences in attending an English-written modular class. Several themes emerged, such as homeschooling, safeguarding learners and difficulty in understanding. Their responses to the questions were the basis for establishing the themes.

Table 1: The Grade 9 Learners' View on Their
 Experiences in Attending English-Written Modular Class

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|-----------------------------|
| Answer it at home. We just answer it at home. For us to answer at home. Answer the modules at home. | Homeschooling |
| We are at home. Safe. Just to be safe from COVID-19. We are safe from COVID-19. We are safe at home. But at least we are safe at home. | Safeguard Learners |
| It's difficult because the topic is no longer discussed... It's difficult and stressful... The modules are difficult, especially when written in English. | Difficulty in Understanding |

The first main theme describes the participants' view on their experiences in attending English-written modular classes with several emergent themes such as homeschooling, safeguarding learners and difficulty in understanding. Most of the participants shared their views and understanding of what a Self-Learning Module (SLM) is, which led to describing SLM as homeschooling. Additionally, safeguarding the learners from COVID-19 is the second emerging theme. According to the participants' verbatim account, attending the module is beneficial because the participants are at home and secure. The third emergent theme that emerged is the difficulty of understanding. In the verbatim accounts of the participants, the difficulty of the English language was mentioned a lot of times, which only indicates that participants have found difficulty in attending English-written modules.

A recent study examined the impact of homeschooling on academic achievement and social development among elementary learners in India, and the study found that homeschooling was associated with higher academic achievement and better social development compared to traditional schooling (Chauhan, Chauhan, and Meena, 2022). However, in this study, although learners were comfortable at their homes, they were still challenged because of the difficulties of attending the modules, especially since most of the modules were written in English. Furthermore, their parents only assist them in obtaining and returning the modules from and to school, but as to the lessons/topics, their parents leave it to the participants themselves.

In the Philippines, learners feel safe and comfortable within their homes despite the COVID-19 Virus threat. Only their parents go to obtain and turn in the modules; they are not permitted to leave the house. Due to their dread of the infection, learners follow the use of physical separation and obey their parents' orders to stay at home to avoid coming into contact with the virus (Panganiban & Madrigal, 2021).

Due to lockdowns, coronavirus transmissions in the Philippines have dropped to an average of fewer than 2,000 new cases per day between November 2020 and February of this year (Rampal *et al.*, 2022).

The difficulty of the language emerged as the third overarching issue. The difficulty of the English language was brought up frequently in the participants' verbatim descriptions, indicating that they had trouble following English-written modules.

English is the most widely used medium of instruction in the Philippines. It is more often used in teaching than the national language, Filipino. Except for Filipino, Araling Panlipunan, and ESP, all topics are taught in English (Abuga, Brillantes, Dialino, Lucaas, Molina, & Tandoc, 2019).

Table 2 presents the grade 9 learners' feelings on their experiences in attending an English-written modular class. Several themes emerged, such as confusion with the SLMs, self-reliance and regrets. Their answers to the questions served as the foundation for developing the themes.

Table 2: The Grade 9 Learners' Feelings in Attending English-written Modular Class

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|--|------------------------|
| It's hard to understand. It's hard. There are many more modules. | Confused with the SLMs |
| We practice studying by ourselves. No one will help us. No one helps me sometimes. | Self-reliance |
| Read books...we wish it was when we were still in elementary school...we. Learned how to read well... Always read Ma'am. | Regrets |

While the second main theme is the participants' feelings on their experiences in attending English-written modular classes, with the following emergent themes such as confused with the SLMs, self-reliance and regrets, the participants reported that during the Covid-19 pandemic, they encountered numerous challenges of which they were confused while attending to SLMs especially when it is written in English Language. The next theme that emerged is self-reliance. It is quite noticeable that there were participants who relied on themselves alone while attending their SLMs, and they continued expressing their feelings towards it. The third theme under the participants' feelings towards attending English-written modular classes is the feeling of valuing reading. As mentioned above, reading is crucial and acts as a fundamental building block for learning.

On top of that, learners taking part in homeschooling found it difficult to adjust to because they had not been given any preparation through simulations or other methods. Learners claimed that SLM attendance was much more stressful than being in regular classrooms. Common justifications for these included things like, "MDL take out the privileges of having friends to mingle with and being stuck alone with nothing but SLMs. Normal classes may have been difficult, but having friends makes it so much more tolerable and less stressful (Gueta & Janer, 2021).

The emergent theme of self-reliance in self-learning modules (SLMs) emphasized the importance of developing independent learning skills among learners. Self-reliant learners understand how to locate and apply resources to gain skills and knowledge.

They have a natural desire to stay informed. Simply said, self-reliance is the capacity to do tasks and make judgments without relying on others. Self-reliance is an important attribute to foster in youngsters nowadays (Emerson, 2019).

The emergent theme of regret among participants emphasized the importance of prioritizing reading instruction in elementary school. The participants have shown their regrets about not learning how to read correctly in their early years, which they thought could have helped them with their current academic comprehension and performance, and this also emphasized the important role of early development of literacy in supporting academic success and lifelong learning.

Table 3: Impact of Attending English-written Modular
Class to the Lives of the Grade 9 Participants as Learners

| Clustered Themes | Emergent Themes |
|---|-----------------------------------|
| Enhance English skills a little. Know the English language better and be fluent. Know a few words deep in English | Motivation |
| Very nice to have books. Hope the school will give books to study. Provisions of books that are easy to read. | Significance of reading materials |
| The need for a teacher to explain the lesson. Want of a teacher to guide. There should be a real teacher | Expert's assistance |
| Can finish studies. Fulfill the dream of life. Finish school to help parents. For a family to help them. To finish and not give up. | Self-determination |

Table 3 presents the impact of attending an English-written modular class on the participants' lives as learners. Four themes emerged, such as being motivated to develop their proficiency in the English language, the significance of reading materials, the expert's assistance, and self-determination. Their answers to the questions served as the foundation for developing the themes.

The last theme described the impact of attending an English-written modular class on the participants' lives as learners. Four themes emerged, such as motivation, significance of reading materials, expert's assistance, and self-determination. The first theme emerged is motivation in developing their proficiency in the English language. The participants found it challenging to communicate their ideas in English both orally and in writing. They have trouble with vocabulary, and reading Math texts might be challenging for them. Thus, the participants targeted to enhance their fluency in the English language. The second theme that emerged is that the participants found significance in reading materials. Participants in MDL found books useful since they are looking for the solutions and topics to some of the module's questions. These volumes referred to the preceding books, which they had in their possession but were unable to use again due to the pandemic. The third theme is the realization of expert assistance.

Participants have asked their parents to assist them in comprehending some of the materials in the modules, but most of the time, their parents were unable to do so or translate the writings into Cebuano. Participants emphasized the necessity for an instructor to assist them with the performance tasks, clarify the questions, or translate the challenging English vocabulary into the local language for simple comprehension. This last emergent theme is evident in the participants' responses.

The emergent theme of motivation to develop English language proficiency among participants highlighted the importance of supporting multilingual learners in their language learning journey. A recent study found that providing language support for multilingual learners can significantly improve their language proficiency and academic performance (Kim and Kwon, 2022).

The appropriate learning materials, as suggested by the participants, emerged as the second theme. Books are helpful to MDL participants since they include the answers to some of the module's questions, and these notions were referred to in the earlier books, which they also had but couldn't use again because of the pandemic. The Internet can provide a person with 100,000 answers, but reading a book, which is single-topic material, can provide a person with the correct one, and it contains all the expertise and facts linked to your topic (Arrieta, 2020).

The emergent theme of the important of expert assistance emphasized the importance of having access to knowledgeable teachers who can provide guidance and support learners to process their learning and the participants in the study expressed a need for teachers who can help them with explain questions, performance tasks, and translate difficult English words into their local language for better understanding. In which, a recent study supports this claim, as it found that teacher support was one of the factors in improving learners' academic achievement, guidance and motivation (Kusuma, Riyanto, and Mustafidah, 2021).

The last emergent theme is self-determination. It emphasizes the importance of developing a sense of control among learners in their own learning and life goals. The participants in the study expressed a strong will to finish their studies and help their parents, despite them facing various challenges and frustrations and when frustrated learners demonstrate that they can take move or initiative, plan, and make decisions, other learners' perceptions of them and their expectations of them are altered (Madan and Bhalla, 2021; Chiu, 2022; Ryan, & Deci, 2019).

3. Implications for Practice and Future Research

Based on the lived experiences of the eleven participants in this study, several key implications for educational practice emerge, particularly concerning English-written modular distance learning. The challenges associated with homeschooling in this context highlight the need for educational institutions to provide robust support systems for parents opting for this modality. This includes offering training, readily accessible materials, and expert guidance to ensure a more effective learning environment at home,

mirroring the personalized instruction and flexible pacing often found in successful homeschooling models.

To better safeguard learners in remote learning environments, educational institutions and policymakers must prioritize their well-being and equitable access to learning resources. This involves not only establishing safety protocols for any necessary physical schooling but also ensuring all learners have the digital devices and reliable internet connectivity required for effective engagement with self-learning modules. Where digital access remains a barrier, the provision of high-quality printed modules becomes a crucial alternative to ensure learning continuity.

Addressing the difficulties learners face in understanding English-written self-learning modules (SLMs) necessitates a concerted effort from educators and policymakers to design more accessible and comprehensible materials. This includes using appropriate language and terminology, strategically incorporating visual aids, and simplifying complex concepts. Providing targeted support and resources for learners with reading or language comprehension challenges, potentially including materials in their native language, can significantly enhance learning outcomes and promote equitable access to education.

Learners' confusion with the structure and content of SLMs points to the need for a more student-centered approach in the design of instructional materials. Educators and policymakers should prioritize creating SLMs that are well-organized, visually engaging, and provide clear, step-by-step explanations to improve student comprehension and motivation. Furthermore, offering readily available support mechanisms, such as easy access to teachers for clarification and supplementary resources, especially in learners' native languages, is crucial for those struggling with independent learning.

Fostering self-reliance among learners engaged with SLMs requires educators and policymakers to actively develop students' self-directed learning skills. Given the reduced direct teacher interaction in this modality, equipping learners with strategies for managing their learning, setting achievable goals, and reflecting on their progress is paramount. Integrating self-directed learning strategies into the design of SLMs and providing learners with resources like online tutorials and guidance on time management and goal setting can significantly enhance engagement and achievement.

Finally, addressing the feelings of regret expressed by some learners underscores the critical importance of prioritizing early literacy development. Educators and policymakers should actively implement evidence-based reading instruction practices in elementary schools, such as the five essential components recommended by the National Reading Panel. Providing consistent access to high-quality and engaging reading materials can cultivate a love of reading and build a strong foundation for lifelong learning, ultimately improving learners' ability to navigate and succeed with self-learning modules in later grades.

To build upon the findings of this study, future research should address its limitations, particularly the small sample size, which limits the generalizability of the results to all Junior High School learners in the Philippines. Future studies could employ

larger and more diverse samples, including participants from remote areas, and utilize a wider range of survey methods to include learners without internet access.

Furthermore, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the learning experiences, future researchers could benefit from employing triangulation by integrating qualitative data with quantitative data. This mixed-methods approach can help confirm findings, identify potential biases inherent in a single methodology, and provide a more robust and nuanced understanding of the challenges and benefits of English-written modular distance learning for Filipino junior high school students.

4. Concluding Remarks

This research illuminated several crucial themes and practical implications concerning participants' experiences with English-written modular classes. To enhance traditional education, personalized instruction, individualized learning pace, and greater flexibility are essential. For successful homeschooling, providing parents with adequate resources and support is vital. Prioritizing the safety and well-being of both learners and educators necessitates the careful consideration and implementation of alternative learning modalities like self-learning modules by policymakers and educational leaders during crises.

However, ensuring equitable access to digital devices and reliable internet connectivity for all learners is paramount for the effective utilization of self-learning modules. Moreover, educators and curriculum developers must meticulously consider the language and complexity of SLMs to guarantee accessibility and comprehensibility for all students. Emphasizing the provision of sufficient, high-quality reading materials, particularly at the elementary level, is also critical. Finally, fostering learners' self-directed learning skills is crucial for their ability to manage their education, set attainable goals, and engage in critical self-reflection. By actively addressing these themes, educators and policymakers can significantly improve student engagement, motivation, and overall learning outcomes within Modular Distance Learning.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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