

# ELATION AND GRAPPLE OF ENGLISH TEACHING: NARRATIVES OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS IN SURALLAH II DISTRICT

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## ABSTRACT

In a globalized world, English proficiency is crucial for individuals seeking active participation in various political, economic, and social spheres, serving as a key skill for effective global engagement. This phenomenological study explores the lived experiences, challenges, and insights of junior high school English teachers in the Surallah II District of South Cotabato as they strive to foster language skills among their learners. The purpose of the study is to investigate how teachers navigate the complexities of teaching English in a context marked by significant challenges, including a troubling decline in English proficiency among students, limited instructional materials, and the adverse effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on traditional learning environments. Through in-depth interviews with ten English teachers, this research uncovers four primary themes: (1) insufficient instructional materials that hinder effective teaching; (2) learners' weak foundational skills in English, exacerbated by prolonged homeschooling; (3) students' hesitation and fear of using English during class discussions; and (4) the need for teachers to bridge considerable learning gaps caused by the shift to modular learning. The findings reveal that many teachers are grappling with the dual pressures of limited resources and diverse learner needs, often resulting in low student confidence and motivation in language use. Moreover, the study highlights various coping mechanisms that teachers employ to address these challenges, including strengthening their subject matter expertise through research and training, contextualizing activities and assessments to make learning more relevant, and committing to continuous professional development to refine their teaching practices. Teachers reported employing bilingual instruction and localized assessments, which allowed students to connect with the material more effectively and build confidence in their language skills. The insights gained from this study emphasize the importance of developing self-learning skills among students and adopting a learner-centered approach that encourages active participation. Additionally, the research underscores the need for supportive educational policies and professional development opportunities that equip teachers with the necessary resources and strategies to overcome the barriers to effective English instruction. Ultimately, this study contributes valuable knowledge to the field of English language teaching in the Philippines and offers recommendations for enhancing educational practices, including the promotion of a growth mindset among teachers, the provision of adequate resources and training, and the potential for future quantitative research to broaden the understanding of these challenges across different educational contexts.

**Keywords:** English proficiency, junior high school, phenomenological study, teaching challenges, Surallah II District, coping mechanisms, learning gaps, COVID-19, instructional materials, professional development.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In a globalized world, English proficiency is essential for active participation in political, economic, and social spheres (Marcelo, 2010). As the primary language of international business, banking, science, and technology, English serves as a key skill for individuals seeking to participate effectively on a global stage. Educational institutions bear a crucial responsibility to equip students with skills in critical thinking, problem-solving, digital literacy, collaboration, and both written and spoken English—skills that are indispensable in the 21st century (Shaaban, 2016). In the Philippines, where English serves as a medium of instruction across educational levels, mastering this language is vital not only for personal growth but also for the nation's global competitiveness (Wolff, 2003). However, studies reveal a troubling decline in English proficiency, with over 90% of college graduates falling below expected levels in international communication tests like the TOEIC (Jimenez, 2018; Morallo, 2018). This decline reflects larger challenges within the education system, including limited resources, large class sizes, and varying student backgrounds that inhibit effective English instruction. In Surallah II District, South Cotabato, teachers face these issues acutely. Students often lack confidence and motivation, perceiving English as difficult or intimidating, particularly in oral communication. In response, teachers must adopt innovative approaches, balancing limited resources and diverse learner needs. This study explores these teachers' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, and insights in teaching English to junior high school learners in Surallah II District, providing a lens through which to better understand and address these challenges in the classroom.

## 2. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this phenomenological study is to investigate the lived experiences, challenges, and insights of junior high school English teachers as they work to foster language skills in their learners within the Surallah II District, South Cotabato.

### Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of teachers in teaching English to junior high school learners?
2. What coping mechanisms do teachers employ to address challenges in teaching English?
3. What insights can be drawn from teachers' experiences and challenges in fostering English proficiency?

### Significance of the Study

This study is significant for multiple stakeholders:

Department of Education (DepEd) officials, to develop policies that address resource limitations and curriculum gaps in English instruction.

School administrators, to assist teachers with resources, training, and support in curriculum delivery.

Junior high school English teachers, as the study provides a reflection of challenges and effective practices that could enhance classroom experiences.

Learners, to understand the role of effort, attitude, and support in improving English skills.

Future researchers, who may extend this investigation to explore challenges in other grade levels, regions, or language learning contexts.

### Definition of Key Terms

English Teaching: Instruction that encompasses fundamental skills in reading, writing, and speaking English, supported by structured lesson planning and adaptive teaching methods to enhance student engagement.

### Review of Significant Literature

English language teaching in the Philippines has evolved, facing obstacles from funding shortages to limited instructional resources. Early English instruction emphasized grammar, with little focus on conversational skills, a model that is still reflected in modern classrooms (Arriola, 2017). Despite the Philippines' reputation as an English-speaking country, proficiency levels are declining, with recent surveys showing a steep drop in confidence in speaking, writing, and comprehension skills (Garcia, 2007). Students and teachers in non-native English-speaking countries like Turkey and Indonesia encounter similar issues, from limited teaching time to large class sizes, low student motivation, and inadequate facilities, all of which affect language acquisition (Songbatumis, 2017; Yusob, 2018).

Teaching English in Surallah II District reflects similar difficulties, with students often feeling intimidated by speaking activities. Lack of confidence and fear of making mistakes lead to passive engagement in class, especially during speaking exercises. Teachers need additional training, resources, and classroom strategies to encourage active participation, promote vocabulary retention, and foster communicative confidence.

### Theoretical Lens

This study is guided by Canale and Swain's (1980) theory of communicative competence, which underscores four core components: linguistic, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic competencies. These competencies reflect the diverse skills English teachers must cultivate in their students. By utilizing this framework, the study delves into the specific classroom experiences, coping strategies, and instructional techniques teachers employ to foster these competencies and how they adapt their teaching to address challenges in student engagement, motivation, and learning progress. The goal is to identify gaps in instructional practices and enhance support mechanisms for teachers, thereby contributing to the broader development of English proficiency in Philippine classrooms.

## 3. METHODS

This chapter explores the research methodology, covering the design, role of the researcher, participants, data collection, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations, all focused on examining the experiences of English teachers in the Surallah II District, South Cotabato.

### Qualitative Methods and Research Design

The study adopts a phenomenological approach to deeply understand the perspectives and experiences of junior high English teachers facing teaching challenges. Three primary qualitative methods—participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus groups—were selected. Each serves distinct purposes:

Participant Observation: Used to observe behaviors in natural settings, helping to capture authentic actions within the teachers' typical environments.

In-Depth Interviews (IDI) Utilized to explore sensitive, individual histories, and personal insights.

Focus Groups: Conducted to draw out cultural norms and group dynamics, revealing collective views on teaching challenges.

This approach is guided by paradigms, or core beliefs, shaping the methods chosen. As Stanage (1987) notes, paradigms reflect "models to follow," with Denzin and Lincoln (2000) supporting the role of paradigms as "basic sets of beliefs" driving research action.

### Philosophical Assumptions

The study's philosophical framework is grounded in four assumptions essential for qualitative inquiry:

**Ontology (Nature of Reality):** Reality is subjective and multiple. Creswell (2012) highlights the varying realities of individuals in a study, where each participant's perspective adds depth to understanding teaching experiences.

**Epistemology (Nature of Knowledge):** The researcher engages closely with participants to gather firsthand information, aiming to lessen the distance between researcher and participant, as Guba and Lincoln (1985) propose. This study's interactive approach emphasizes the researcher as an "insider" to better capture the teachers' lived realities.

**Axiology (Role of Values):** Creswell (2013) asserts that values shape qualitative research. In this study, the researcher openly reflects on and respects each participant's values and views, preserving the integrity of participant contributions.

**Rhetoric (Communication Style):** A personal, narrative style is employed to convey findings in a relatable, informal manner, supporting a more authentic and vivid presentation of teachers' experiences.

### Data Collection

A seven-step data collection process structured the study:

**Site Selection:** Participants, all junior high English teachers in the Surallah II District, were selected based on location relevance.

**Access and Rapport:** Approvals were secured from the Schools Division Superintendent and principals, and rapport was built to gain participant trust.

**Purposeful Sampling:** Ten informants were selected for their direct experiences with the challenges being studied.

**Data Forms:** The primary method was the Virtual In-Depth Interview (IDI) due to pandemic restrictions, focusing on in-depth participant responses.

**Recording Procedures:** Protocols were followed to document each interview and observation, ensuring all data was properly recorded.

**Field Issues:** Data collection challenges were noted, including the need to adapt to virtual formats.

**Data Storage:** Davidson's (1996) database guidelines were used for secure and organized data storage, facilitating future reference.

To comply with COVID-19 protocols, data collection was conducted through virtual means, maintaining physical distancing requirements.

## 4. DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis involved organizing responses into meaningful themes using thematic content analysis. Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method:

**Familiarization:** Data was repeatedly reviewed to deepen understanding.

**Generating Initial Codes:** Basic data segments were coded to identify interesting features.

**Searching for Themes:** Codes were grouped into broader themes.

**Reviewing Themes:** Themes were refined and structured into a thematic map.

**Defining and Naming Themes:** Each theme was defined to convey its essence.

**Producing the Report:** A narrative was crafted to communicate findings clearly and compellingly.

**Document Analysis** complemented interviews by reviewing teaching materials and training records to confirm data consistency. Triangulation—using varied data collection methods and environmental factors (e.g., different times, days, settings)—helped strengthen findings, enhancing the study's validity by capturing multiple dimensions of the teachers' experiences.

### Trustworthiness

The study's trustworthiness was established through four key criteria:

**Credibility:** Honesty and rigor ensured results aligned with participants' realities, maintaining internal consistency as defined by Lincoln and Guba (2000).

**Transferability:** Findings are presented so that they may be applied in similar educational contexts, enabling potential generalization for other teaching environments.

**Confirmability:** The researcher minimized bias, ensuring interpretations remained true to participants' perspectives. An audit trail was maintained to document decisions and support the neutrality of findings.

**Dependability:** By thoroughly documenting research methods and analysis, the study can be repeated with consistent results. The use of a secure database aids in verifying all collected data.

### **Ethical Considerations**

Ethical guidelines were rigorously followed, ensuring that participants were fully informed about the study's purpose, their roles, and data usage. Informed consent was obtained, detailing the study scope, data anonymization, and confidentiality protocols. Ethical approval was obtained from the Rizal Memorial College ethics committee to affirm compliance with academic and ethical standards.

### **Research Participants**

Ten junior high English teachers from Surallah II District participated, with selection based on a minimum of two years' experience and relevant English teaching credentials. Sample size was determined by the principle of saturation, where new insights ceased emerging from additional participants. This aligns with Creswell (1998), who suggests five to 25 participants for phenomenological studies.

### **Role of the Researcher**

The researcher maintained an active but non-intrusive role, prioritizing participant comfort and safeguarding data integrity. Recognizing the personal nature of some teaching challenges, the researcher adhered to protocols approved by an ethics review board, ensuring participant protection throughout the study.

## **5. RESULTS**

### **Overview**

This chapter presents the findings from in-depth interviews with English teachers in the Surallah II District, exploring both the rewarding and challenging aspects of their experiences. Four primary themes emerged from the data: insufficient instructional materials, learners' weak foundational skills, students' hesitation to use English, and efforts to bridge learning gaps exacerbated by the pandemic. Additionally, the chapter discusses various coping mechanisms teachers have adopted to address these challenges and insights gained about professional development and innovative teaching.

### **Insufficient Instructional Materials**

English teachers expressed concern over the lack of adequate instructional materials in the K-12 curriculum, noting limited resources like textbooks and supplementary materials. This scarcity has hampered effective teaching, as teachers had to rely on the internet for resources, which presented challenges for students with limited digital literacy or a reliance on gadgets for entertainment rather than learning. Research supports this issue, noting similar concerns about limited resources and outdated pedagogical methods in other countries.

### **Weak Foundational Skills Among Learners**

Students' foundational skills in English were notably weak, especially due to prolonged homeschooling during the pandemic.

Many teachers utilized bilingual instruction to accommodate students from diverse linguistic backgrounds and incorporated basic vocabulary building and simple translation to facilitate comprehension. This approach helped teachers make connections with students' existing knowledge, though gaps in reading comprehension, writing, and critical thinking remained prominent.

### **Hesitation and Fear in Using English**

Teachers observed that students were often reluctant to speak in English due to fear of making mistakes and being mocked by peers. This hesitation impeded classroom discussions and limited students' engagement with the language. Teachers noted that student participation improved only when they felt confident about their answers, often switching to their native languages for complex responses. Similar findings from international studies highlight a need for supportive environments to encourage language use without fear of embarrassment.

### **Bridging Learning Gaps**

The pandemic's shift to modular learning created significant learning gaps, especially in foundational English skills. Teachers found that returning to face-to-face instruction added challenges in remediating these gaps, but many were motivated by the visible improvement in students' performance. Educators focused on adjusting their lessons to address these learning gaps by using remedial instruction and contextualized assessments to meet learners' unique needs.



## Coping Mechanisms for Challenges in English Teaching

### Teachers employed several strategies to adapt to challenges in English teaching:

**Strengthening Subject Expertise:** Teachers actively engaged in positive reframing, interpreting challenges as opportunities for growth. They employed strategies such as paraphrasing, providing definitions, and using multimedia resources to bridge gaps in comprehension and encourage student engagement. Many also leveraged video lessons to make concepts more accessible.

**Contextualizing Activities and Assessment:** Teachers found success in contextualizing lessons by combining English with students' native languages. They designed culturally relevant and localized assessments, helping students relate to the content and grasp language skills more effectively. Bilingual instruction was noted as a practical way to make English more accessible to students from various linguistic backgrounds.

**Learning, Relearning, and Unlearning:** Committed to their professional development, teachers continued to refine their methods, embracing changes and new insights to improve English instruction. By relearning curriculum fundamentals, they helped students connect current content with prior knowledge, especially important after two years of modular learning.

### Insights and Reflections on Effective English Teaching

Through these experiences, teachers gained critical insights into effective English teaching:

**Emphasis on Assessment and Monitoring:** Teachers recognized the importance of regular assessment and feedback in identifying students' progress and areas needing reinforcement. Using learner-centered approaches, they promoted self-learning and leveraged technology to engage students actively.

**Professional Development Planning:** Teachers emphasized the role of continuous professional growth through webinars, seminars, and online resources. They found that e-learning and webinars provided flexibility and enhanced their teaching repertoire, enabling them to meet students' evolving needs effectively.

## 6. DISCUSSIONS

The study summarizes key findings on the experiences and strategies of junior high school English teachers addressing the learning gaps exacerbated by two years of modular learning due to COVID-19. The study reveals four main themes of challenges: insufficient instructional materials, students' weak foundational skills in English, hesitation and fear among students in class discussions, and the need to bridge learning gaps effectively. Teachers have adapted by enhancing their content expertise, contextualizing activities and assessments, and continuously developing professionally to address the learning gaps.

**Implications:** The study emphasizes the importance of developing self-learning skills in students, encouraging a learner-centered approach, and continuously supporting teachers with training and resources. The role of monitoring and assessment is essential to evaluate and guide learners' progress in achieving quality education.

**Future Directions:** Recommendations include promoting a growth mindset among teachers to innovate within curriculum constraints, providing adequate resources and training, and conducting further quantitative research nationwide for broader insights. This approach aims to enhance teaching quality in English and support both students and teachers in overcoming the post-pandemic learning gap.

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