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Beyond Language Proficiency: Voices of Junior High School Students in Developing English Communication Skills at Caragasan National High School

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Abstract

English communication competence has become one of the most essential twenty-first-century skills because it enables learners to participate effectively in academic, professional, and intercultural contexts. Despite the continuous implementation of English language instruction in Philippine basic education, many junior high school students continue to experience difficulties in expressing themselves confidently and effectively in spoken English. These challenges are particularly evident in rural public schools where learners encounter limited opportunities for authentic English communication inside and outside the classroom. While previous studies have extensively examined English language proficiency, speaking anxiety, willingness to communicate, and classroom participation using quantitative approaches, fewer investigations have explored how junior high school students themselves make meaning of their experiences in developing English communication skills within their own educational context. This study aims to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students at Caragasan National High School in developing English communication skills. Guided by a phenomenological research design, the study seeks to understand the challenges encountered, coping mechanisms employed, facilitating school experiences, and perceived outcomes of English communication development. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews will be conducted among purposively selected participants who have experienced English communication activities in school. Data will be analyzed using Colaizzi's phenomenological method to generate themes that capture the essence of students' experiences. The findings are expected to contribute to English language pedagogy by providing context-sensitive recommendations for improving classroom communication practices, learner engagement, and supportive learning environments that promote meaningful English language development.

Keywords: *English communication skills, English language learning, phenomenology, junior high school students, communicative competence, English education, Philippines*



Introduction

English continues to function as one of the world's most influential languages in education, international communication, science, technology, business, and global collaboration. As globalization accelerates, English communication competence has become a fundamental skill that enables learners to participate effectively in academic discourse, employment opportunities, and intercultural exchanges. Beyond grammatical accuracy and vocabulary acquisition, English education increasingly emphasizes learners' ability to communicate confidently, critically, and appropriately across diverse contexts. Consequently, educational systems worldwide have shifted from traditional language instruction toward communicative language teaching, recognizing that successful language learning is measured not only by linguistic knowledge but also by learners' capacity to use the language meaningfully in authentic situations. Recent studies have highlighted that willingness to communicate, learner confidence, classroom engagement, and supportive instructional environments significantly influence students' communicative competence in English.

The development of English communication skills has likewise become a priority in Southeast Asian education systems where English serves as a second or foreign language. Although English is integrated into the curriculum from the elementary level, many learners remain hesitant to communicate orally because of language anxiety, fear of making mistakes, limited vocabulary, and inadequate opportunities for authentic interaction. Recent investigations have demonstrated that students' willingness to communicate is shaped by psychological, instructional, and social factors rather than linguistic competence alone. Classroom climate, teacher support, learner self-efficacy, and opportunities for meaningful communication substantially influence students' readiness to speak English.

In the Philippine educational system, English functions as one of the official languages and remains a primary medium of instruction in many learning areas. The Department of Education emphasizes the development of communicative competence through learner-centered and competency-based instruction aligned with the K-12 curriculum. Nevertheless, numerous studies continue to report that many Filipino learners experience challenges in speaking English confidently despite years of formal instruction. These challenges include communication apprehension, pronunciation concerns, limited vocabulary, fear of negative evaluation, and insufficient opportunities to practice English beyond structured classroom activities. Such difficulties are more evident in public secondary schools located in geographically isolated and rural communities where students have limited exposure to authentic English communication environments.

English communication competence has become one of the most significant indicators of learners' readiness for higher education, employment, and participation in an increasingly interconnected global society. The emphasis of contemporary English language education has shifted from the traditional mastery of grammar and vocabulary toward developing communicative competence, which encompasses learners' ability to express ideas appropriately, fluently, and confidently across various communicative contexts. This shift is strongly influenced by the Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) approach, which recognizes language as a tool for authentic communication rather than merely a body of linguistic rules to be memorized. According to Richards (2022), communicative competence integrates grammatical knowledge, sociolinguistic awareness, discourse competence, and strategic competence, enabling learners to communicate effectively in both academic and real-life situations. Consequently, English classrooms are increasingly expected to provide authentic communication experiences that encourage active participation and meaningful interaction.

Recent international studies indicate that learners who frequently engage in communicative classroom activities demonstrate higher confidence, greater willingness to communicate, and improved language proficiency compared with students exposed primarily to teacher-centered instruction. Research conducted by MacIntyre et al. (2020) emphasized that communication competence develops through repeated opportunities for authentic interaction supported by positive classroom environments. Likewise, Dewaele and Li (2021) found that students' emotional experiences in language classrooms significantly influence their willingness to speak English, suggesting that positive learning environments promote communication confidence while anxiety inhibits oral participation.

Horwitz et al.'s Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory continues to explain how anxiety negatively affects language performance by interfering with learners' confidence and cognitive processing. Recent investigations have likewise confirmed that speaking anxiety remains one of the strongest predictors of reduced classroom participation among English learners (Teimouri et al., 2019). Learners who constantly fear committing mistakes often choose silence instead of participating in classroom communication, thereby limiting opportunities for language development.

In the Philippine context, Bernardo and Madrunio (2021) observed that although Filipino students receive years of English instruction, many still hesitate to communicate orally because of limited opportunities for authentic language use outside school. Similar findings by Ganal and Guiab (2023) revealed that students from rural public secondary schools experience greater communication challenges because English exposure is generally confined to classroom instruction.

Collaborative learning strategies such as pair work, group discussions, role-playing, debates, and project-based learning have likewise demonstrated positive effects on oral communication development because they reduce communication pressure while increasing opportunities for authentic language use (Richards, 2022). Such instructional practices align with learner-centered pedagogies promoted under the Philippine K-12 curriculum.

Within the local context of Caragasan National High School in Alfonso Lista, Ifugao, English teachers continuously implement classroom activities designed to strengthen learners' oral communication abilities through discussions, presentations, collaborative learning, and interactive speaking tasks. Despite these instructional efforts, observable differences remain in students' confidence, participation, and communicative performance. Some learners actively engage in English conversations and classroom interactions, whereas others hesitate to express themselves because of fear of committing grammatical mistakes, peer judgment, or lack of confidence. These varied experiences suggest that the development of English communication skills extends beyond language proficiency alone and is deeply influenced by learners' personal, social, emotional, and educational experiences.

Although extensive literature has examined English language achievement, oral proficiency, communication anxiety, and willingness to communicate, much of the existing research employs quantitative methodologies that measure relationships among variables. Comparatively fewer studies have explored the voices and lived experiences of junior high school students, particularly those studying in rural Philippine public secondary schools. Moreover, limited phenomenological investigations have examined how learners themselves describe the experiences that facilitate or hinder the development of their English communication skills. This methodological and contextual gap limits educators' understanding of the complex realities students encounter while learning to communicate effectively in English.

Addressing this gap, the present study adopts a phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students in developing English communication skills at Caragasan National High School. By listening directly to students' narratives, the research seeks to uncover the meanings they attach to their communication experiences, identify the challenges they encounter, describe the strategies they employ to improve their communication abilities, and understand how classroom practices shape their confidence and participation. The findings are expected to provide meaningful insights for English teachers, school administrators, curriculum developers, and educational policymakers in designing learner-centered instructional interventions that foster communicative competence and create supportive English learning environments. Ultimately, this study contributes to the growing body of qualitative research on English language education by demonstrating that effective communication development extends beyond linguistic proficiency toward cultivating confidence, engagement, resilience, and authentic language use among Filipino junior high school learners.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of junior high school students in developing English communication skills at Caragasan National High School. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate because it seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and assign meaning to their lived experiences regarding a particular phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Moustakas, 1994; van Manen, 2017). The study was conducted at Caragasan National High School, located in Caragasan, Alfonso Lista, Ifugao, a public secondary school implementing the Department of Education's K-12 curriculum where English is taught as one of the core learning areas. The participants consisted of twelve (12) purposively selected junior high school students (Grades 7-10) who had actively participated in English language learning activities and were able to articulate their experiences in developing English communication skills. Purposive sampling was employed to identify information-rich participants who possessed firsthand experiences relevant to the phenomenon under investigation, while the final number of participants was determined through data saturation, wherein no new themes emerged from subsequent interviews (Patton, 2015; Saunders et al., 2018). Data were collected using a researcher-developed semi-structured interview guide validated by three experts in English language education, qualitative research, and educational assessment. Prior to the actual data gathering, the interview protocol underwent pilot testing to ensure clarity, relevance, and comprehensibility. Following the approval of the school administration and the acquisition of informed consent from participants and parents or guardians for minors, individual face-to-face interviews were conducted in a quiet and conducive venue within the school. Each interview lasted approximately 40 to 60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' permission while field notes were simultaneously documented. The recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim, and participants were given the opportunity to review their transcripts through member checking to verify the accuracy of their responses. Data analysis followed Colaizzi's (1978) seven-step phenomenological method, which involved repeated reading of transcripts, extraction of significant statements, formulation of meanings, clustering of themes, development of exhaustive descriptions, identification of the fundamental structure of the phenomenon, and participant validation of the findings. To ensure the rigor and trustworthiness of the study, the criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability proposed by Lincoln and Guba (1985) were observed through prolonged engagement, triangulation of interview transcripts and field notes, member checking, peer debriefing, reflexive journaling, and maintenance of an audit trail. Ethical principles were likewise upheld throughout the research process by ensuring voluntary participation, informed consent, confidentiality, anonymity through the use of

pseudonyms, secure storage of research data, and participants' right to withdraw at any point without consequence. The study further adhered to the ethical principles of respect for persons, beneficence, non-maleficence, and justice, consistent with the Philippine National Ethical Guidelines for Health and Health-Related Research (2022), thereby safeguarding the rights, dignity, privacy, and overall well-being of all participants throughout the conduct of the research.

Results and Discussion

The phenomenological analysis of the lived experiences of junior high school students in developing English communication skills at Caragasan National High School generated five major themes that collectively describe the participants' journey toward becoming more confident and effective English communicators. The themes include (1) Confronting Communication Anxiety, (2) Building Confidence through Meaningful Classroom Participation, (3) Learning through Teacher Support and Constructive Feedback, (4) Strengthening Communication Skills through Peer Collaboration and Continuous Practice, and (5) Transforming English Communication into Personal Growth and Future Readiness. These themes demonstrate that English communication development extends beyond language proficiency and encompasses learners' emotional resilience, social interactions, supportive learning environments, and authentic communication experiences.

Theme 1. Confronting Communication Anxiety

The participants consistently described fear and anxiety as their initial barriers to communicating in English. They expressed apprehension about making grammatical mistakes, mispronouncing words, and receiving negative reactions from classmates. These emotional challenges often discouraged them from participating in classroom discussions despite understanding the lesson. Nevertheless, many participants emphasized that repeated exposure to English communication activities gradually reduced their fear and increased their willingness to participate.

One participant shared:

"Noong una po, ayoko talagang magsalita ng English kasi natatakot akong pagtawanan kapag mali ang grammar ko. Pero habang paulit-ulit kaming pinapasagot ng teacher, unti-unti akong naging komportable." (Participant 3)

Another participant stated:

"Mas kinakabahan po ako kapag oral recitation. Kahit alam ko ang sagot, minsan hindi ko na lang sinasabi dahil baka mali ang pronunciation ko." (Participant 8)

These narratives indicate that communication anxiety remains a significant obstacle among secondary learners. However, continuous exposure to supportive communication activities enables students to overcome their fears gradually. This finding supports the Foreign Language Classroom Anxiety Theory of Horwitz et al. (1986), which explains that anxiety negatively affects learners' willingness to communicate. Similarly, Teimouri et al. (2019) found that communication anxiety significantly predicts students' classroom participation. The present findings further suggest that anxiety should not be viewed merely as a learner weakness but as a developmental stage that can be addressed through supportive instructional practices.

Theme 2. Building Confidence through Meaningful Classroom Participation

Participants emphasized that regular classroom communication activities became important opportunities for improving their confidence. Oral recitations, role-playing, debates, reporting,

storytelling, and classroom discussions encouraged them to use English in authentic situations. Initially challenging, these activities eventually became valuable experiences that strengthened both their communication skills and self-confidence.

One participant explained:

"Kapag lagi kaming may reporting o group presentation, nasasanay na po akong magsalita. Hindi na ako gaanong nahihiya katulad noon." (Participant 5)

Another participant shared:

"Dahil sa mga classroom activities, natututo akong magsalita kahit hindi perpekto ang English ko. Ang importante ay naiintindihan nila ang gusto kong sabihin." (Participant 10)

The findings indicate that authentic communication tasks increase learners' confidence because they provide meaningful opportunities to practice English beyond memorization and written examinations. These results support Communicative Language Teaching, which emphasizes that language competence develops through meaningful communication rather than isolated grammar instruction (Richards, 2022). Likewise, MacIntyre et al. (2020) emphasized that learners' willingness to communicate improves when classrooms encourage active participation and authentic interaction.

Theme 3. Learning through Teacher Support and Constructive Feedback

Teacher encouragement emerged as one of the strongest influences on students' communication development. Participants consistently described their English teachers as facilitators who motivated them to communicate without fear of making mistakes. Constructive feedback, positive reinforcement, and patient correction enabled students to develop greater confidence while continuously improving their communication skills.

One participant remarked:

"Kapag mali ang grammar namin, hindi kami pinapahiya ng teacher. Itinuturo niya kung paano ito itatama kaya mas gusto naming sumagot." (Participant 1)

Another participant stated:

"Mas ginaganahan akong magsalita kapag pinupuri kami ng teacher kahit simple lang ang nasabi namin." (Participant 6)

These findings demonstrate that supportive teacher behaviors contribute significantly to students' communication confidence. Positive teacher feedback reduces learners' affective barriers while promoting greater classroom participation. This supports Krashen's (1985) Affective Filter Hypothesis, which posits that learners acquire language more effectively when anxiety is minimized and motivation is enhanced. Similarly, Mercer and Dörnyei (2020) emphasized that positive teacher-student relationships foster learners' confidence, engagement, and willingness to communicate.

Theme 4. Strengthening Communication Skills through Peer Collaboration and Continuous Practice

The participants highlighted that learning English was not solely dependent on teachers but was also strengthened through collaboration with classmates. Group discussions, pair work, peer correction, and informal English conversations created opportunities to practice communication in a less

intimidating environment. Continuous practice enabled learners to become more fluent and confident over time.

One participant explained:

"Kapag group activity, mas nakakaya kong magsalita kasi nagtutulungan kami. Hindi ako natatakot na magkamali." (Participant 11)

Another participant shared:

"Mas gumagaling ako kapag palagi kong ginagamit ang English. Kahit simple lang, malaking tulong ang araw-araw na practice." (Participant 4)

These narratives indicate that communication competence develops through repeated social interaction and collaborative learning experiences. Vygotsky's (1978) Social Constructivist Theory explains that learning occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable peers and teachers. Likewise, Richards (2022) emphasized that collaborative communication activities promote authentic language use while reducing learners' communication anxiety.

Theme 5. Transforming English Communication into Personal Growth and Future Readiness

Beyond improving language proficiency, participants viewed English communication as an important life skill that prepared them for future academic and professional opportunities. They believed that becoming confident English speakers would help them pursue higher education, obtain better employment, communicate with diverse individuals, and become globally competitive.

One participant expressed:

"Alam kong mahalaga ang English kapag naghahanap na ng trabaho kaya gusto kong pagbutihin ang pagsasalita ko." (Participant 7)

Another participant stated:

"Mas confident na po akong magsalita ngayon kaysa dati. Pakiramdam ko mas handa na akong makipag-usap sa ibang tao." (Participant 12)

The findings reveal that students perceive English communication development as a process of personal transformation rather than merely improving classroom performance. Their experiences demonstrate increasing self-confidence, resilience, and readiness for future challenges. These findings are consistent with recent studies emphasizing that communicative competence contributes to learners' academic success, employability, intercultural communication, and lifelong learning (Dewaele & Li, 2021; Lamb et al., 2022).

Discussion

The findings reveal that the development of English communication skills among junior high school students at Caragasan National High School is a dynamic and transformative process shaped by emotional, instructional, and social experiences. Although learners initially experience fear, anxiety, and limited confidence, supportive teachers, collaborative classmates, meaningful classroom activities, and continuous communication practice enable them to become more confident and competent English communicators. The study further demonstrates that English communication development extends beyond linguistic proficiency toward cultivating resilience, self-confidence, active participation, and readiness for future academic and professional endeavors. These findings affirm the principles of Communicative Competence Theory, Vygotsky's Social Constructivist Theory, *Studies in Interdisciplinary Horizons*

and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, highlighting that effective English language learning is achieved not only through mastery of grammar but also through authentic communication, supportive learning environments, and meaningful social interaction. Collectively, the findings contribute to the growing body of qualitative research in English language education by emphasizing the importance of listening to students' voices in designing learner-centered pedagogical interventions that foster communicative competence in rural public secondary schools.

Conclusion

This phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of junior high school students in developing English communication skills at Caragasan National High School. The findings revealed that English communication development extends far beyond the acquisition of grammatical knowledge and vocabulary. Instead, it is a dynamic and transformative process shaped by students' emotional experiences, classroom interactions, teacher support, peer collaboration, and continuous opportunities for authentic language use. The participants initially encountered communication anxiety, fear of making mistakes, limited self-confidence, and apprehension toward speaking English in front of their classmates. However, these challenges gradually diminished as they actively engaged in meaningful classroom communication activities, received constructive feedback from their teachers, collaborated with peers, and practiced English consistently. The students viewed English communication not merely as an academic requirement but as an essential life skill that strengthens their self-confidence, prepares them for higher education, improves employability, and enables them to participate effectively in a globalized society. Overall, the study concludes that the successful development of English communication skills depends not only on learners' linguistic competence but also on supportive learning environments that encourage authentic communication, reduce anxiety, foster positive teacher–student relationships, and promote active learner participation. The findings further affirm the principles of Communicative Competence Theory, Social Constructivist Theory, and Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis, emphasizing that meaningful communication develops through authentic interaction, collaboration, and emotionally supportive classroom experiences.

Educational Implications

The findings of this study provide important implications for English language teaching and learning, particularly in rural public secondary schools. First, English teachers should design learner-centered instructional strategies that provide frequent opportunities for authentic oral communication rather than relying predominantly on grammar-based instruction. Classroom activities such as role-playing, debates, collaborative discussions, storytelling, oral presentations, and problem-based learning may enhance students' communicative competence while reducing communication anxiety. Second, teachers should cultivate supportive classroom environments characterized by encouragement, constructive feedback, and psychological safety where students are not afraid of making mistakes. Such environments increase learners' confidence and willingness to communicate in English. Third, school administrators should strengthen professional development programs that equip English teachers with contemporary communicative language teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and effective classroom communication techniques. Fourth, curriculum developers may consider integrating more experiential and contextualized communication tasks that reflect students' real-life experiences and local cultural contexts. Finally, the findings highlight the importance of promoting English communication beyond the classroom through English clubs, speech festivals, debate competitions, reading camps, language immersion activities, and other co-curricular programs that provide learners with authentic opportunities to practice the language in meaningful contexts.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of the study, the following recommendations are proposed:

1. **English teachers** should implement more communicative and learner-centered instructional approaches that encourage active participation through authentic speaking activities, collaborative learning, and performance-based assessments to strengthen students' communication competence.
2. **School administrators** should organize regular faculty development programs focusing on communicative language teaching, classroom discourse strategies, language assessment, and the effective integration of technology to enhance English instruction.
3. **Students** should actively participate in classroom discussions, English clubs, public speaking activities, and independent language-learning opportunities to continuously develop their confidence and communication skills.
4. **Parents and guardians** should encourage learners to practice English communication at home by engaging in meaningful conversations, providing access to English reading materials, and supporting educational media that promote language development.
5. **The Department of Education and curriculum planners** should continue strengthening communicative language instruction by providing adequate instructional resources, contextualized learning materials, and sustainable language enrichment programs, particularly in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools.
6. **Future researchers** are encouraged to replicate this study in other public and private secondary schools using larger and more diverse participant groups. Comparative phenomenological studies across urban and rural schools may provide broader insights into contextual factors affecting English communication development. Future investigations may also employ mixed-methods or longitudinal research designs to examine the long-term impact of communicative teaching practices on students' language proficiency, communication confidence, and academic performance.

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