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Grappling with the learning modules: Experience of Public Elementary Pupils Attending English Written Modular Classes

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Abstract. Modular Distance Learning is one of the educational trends brought about by the pandemic. The recent use of this model of learning delivery has put teaching and learning into an adjustment period. This particular challenge has been the urgent imperative to have modular classes. It implies designing and organizing for better learning. English is the primary medium of instruction in education, and most of the modules written in the given language posing additional challenges and demands to school learners. Hence, this paper endeavors to investigate the lived experiences of the pupils in answering English-written modules through a qualitative design with a phenomenological approach. The participants of the study were eight Grade 6 pupils determined using the purposive sampling technique with some inclusion criteria. Data were gathered through an in-depth interview and were analyzed using a recursive textual analysis aided by Lichtman's 3c's: coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. The study revealed that quality education in the locality during this time of pandemic is greatly affected by the delivery modality, the curriculum content and standards, educational equipment and resources, competence of parents to give assistance, and the readiness of the learners to read and learn independently.

Keywords. Education, modular distance learning, English-written modules, phenomenological study, Philippines

1. Introduction

Education is the key to success, progress, and development. Education of the younger generation is essential as young people are considered the future of the nation. COVID-19 dramatically changed the economic situation and educational course both in developed and underdeveloped countries [12]. The impossible event became possible when schools were closed and face-to-face instructions were suspended. Almost 80% of the total population of the enrolled students or 1.6 percent of children globally was endangered to be out-of-school youth [36]. The lockdowns magnified the existing literacy challenges and consequently, increased the inequity between children in advantaged or less advantaged literacy environments [14]. The first world countries shape the minds of young people through technology while the third world countries prioritized health care, and have difficulty balancing the different services, including education.

UNESCO recommended the use of distance learning programs to open educational programs and platforms. Meanwhile, the education sector of the Philippines adopted means and programs to address the matter and make learning alive through the use of different learning delivery modalities. Distance learning modalities include modular distance learning, online distance learning, and TV or radio-based instruction. The three modalities use learning modules: modular distance learning (MDL) uses printed modules that facilitate independent learning, and online distance learning (ODL) is sometimes called E-learning where students attend online classes at home and work through digital lessons and assessments. The combination of printed modules and online modalities is called blended learning. Generally, urban areas used online learning. Rural areas used MDL where students use self-learning modules (SLMs) in print or digital format/electronic copy—whichever is applicable in the context of the learner—and other learning resources like Learner's Materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides, and other study materials as provided by the Department of Education. Distance learning was designed to reduce face-to-face contact and support physical distancing while preserving the education of millions of Filipino learners. Department of Education claimed that distance learning modality is most viable for independent learners, and learners supported by periodic supervision of parents or guardians [9].

Education and literacy often intermingle with each other. Whereas literacy refers to reading and writing skills, education means the use of these skills to interpret the real world. Consequently, it is considered the foundation of education [3]. The challenges in the educational system may also affect the reading performances of pupils. According to the International Literacy Association (ILA), the right to read is a basic and important human right that is hard to realize [40]. World Education has made efforts to improve literacy yet presented 250 million children in the whole world to have insufficient literacy skills in addition to the 773 million people who could hardly read and write [42]. Even before the pandemic, the Philippines has been low performing in reading, among the countries and economies which participated in Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018. Results revealed that more than 80% of students in the Philippines did not reach the minimum proficiency level in reading [37]. It also implied that socio-economically advantaged students performed better than disadvantaged students in reading [32]. PISA results also reflected the learners' performance in the National Achievement Test.

The quality of the educational system in the Philippines was even worsened by the pandemic. Since face-to-face was prohibited and education was already in every Filipino's home, parents served as teachers' co-workers in the education industry [6]. Teachers' professional help in the actual teaching was limited and parents played the vital role as home facilitators. Parents who have higher educational attainment which correlates with the family income can provide the pupils with technological equipment and have the capacity to assist them in learning [25]. Consequently, parents who lack the academic knowledge to guide their children and to teach kids complex lessons are challenges in today's educational situations [39]. Same with some other countries, children were able to access distance learning materials but some do not have well-educated parents to help them [14].

Education is highly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic [41]. With the 2018 PISA result in the background and the new normal situation where learners are left on their own to learn at their own pace, several challenges and issues may arise to exacerbate the situation. According to **Dantic** [7], learners who are not capable of independent learning would be a challenge to education in the new normal situation. Hence, the purpose of this study is to explore the circumstances of modular distance learning and to investigate the lived experience of the grade 6 elementary pupils in interacting with the English written modules in a rural area.

Specifically, it intends to describe the perceptions of the pupils to modular distance learning; its advantages and disadvantages, and the strategies used by the learners to cope with MDL.

2. Method

This study employed a qualitative research design using the phenomenological strategy to explain the experiences of the Elementary Pupils from a rural area. Qualitative research is an effort to understand observable but immeasurable information [26] such as experiences of the people. The phenomenological methodology is a type of the qualitative research model [44] and is an approach [17], used not only to know but also to understand the lived experiences of human beings through conscious logical interpretation and meaning-making [33]. Edmund Husserl (1859–1938), is a philosopher who instituted the discipline of phenomenology and described the experience to entail consciousness or intentionality of thought, perception, memory, imagination, and emotion on a specific event or situation [35]. It is relevant and appropriate to be utilized to describe the phenomena of the elementary pupils in answering English written modules.

The participants for this qualitative inquiry were the Grade 6 pupils determined by using the purposive criterion sampling technique. Purposive sampling also called judgment sampling [31], is a type of non-probability sampling with the main objective which is to produce a sample that can be a rational representative of the population [13] based on the professional judgment of the researcher. In this study, purposive sampling was used to identify sample participants who were intentionally selected based on the following inclusion criteria: They are elementary school pupils from a rural area; the school homogeneously used modular distance learning modality; they are Grade 6 pupils; and, they have parents who had never taken or finished tertiary level of education. They were chosen from the rural area especially that most pupils in the remote areas of the district have not yet mastered the second language. Without the teachers, the children looked upon their parents for help but are expected to hardly perform in the English language.

In gathering the data, the researcher used in-depth interviews, one of the qualitative methods usually done through a face-to-face conversation between a researcher and a participant. In an in-depth interview, words and questions are not predetermined and are less formally structured in order to gather complex information with a higher quantity of opinion-based information [1]. Since the participants are children, this helped them loosen up and freely answer the questions.

Before the interview, the researcher sought the parents' consent and the participant's assent. Upon agreement, the schedule was set for the conduct of the interview. The researcher used the one-on-one style with semi-structured questions format to gather necessary information. With the existence of COVID 19 Pandemic, the researcher observed health protocols such as wearing of face mask and face shield and maintained a 1-meter physical distance with the participant to ensure safety and protection. The researcher discussed with the participant some common experiences during the pandemic to build rapport. Guided by the interview protocol, the researcher explained the purpose of the research, (content, confidentiality, duration, consent, and recording methods), and the use of the data before starting the interview. The interview commenced with the first main question followed by probing questions to clarify points and to extract more information from the participant. During the interview, non-verbal clues that added meaning or reinforced the participant's responses were observed and noted. The saturation point, that is when participants provide the same answers to the same questions even they are rephrased, was reached with the 5th and 6th

participants. Every participant was debriefed after reaching the saturation point. Hence, the researcher ended the interview with the 6th participant.

The gathered data were analyzed through recursive textual data analysis guided by the three C's of Lichtman [21]—coding, categorizing, and conceptualizing. Thorough reading and re-reading were done in analyzing the codes, finding relationships, dividing the codes or grouping them into several categories, and forming concepts from the given categories known as themes.

3. Results

The findings of the study revealed that Modular Distance Learning (MDL) is beneficial to the participants but demands fundamental learning resources for quality learning.

3.1 Modular Distance Learning (MDL) protects learners in studying at home.

3.1.1. Safety of Learners. Amidst the threat of the COVID-19 Virus, the learners feel secured and safe inside their homes. They are not allowed to go out and only their parents go to get and submit the modules. With the fear of the virus, pupils adhere to the implementation of physical distancing and obey their parents in staying home in order not to get in contact with the virus.

“I am far from COVID, because I stay home.”

“I obey my parents and do not go out so I could not get COVID.”

3.1.2. Continuous Education. Education means going to school and attending classes with teachers. During the lockdowns and quarantine periods, schools were also closed and learners were not allowed to go to school to study. Pupils found modular distance learning beneficial because they were able to continue their studies even they just stay home and schools were closed.

“I am happy because I have continued with my studies.”

“Even there's pandemic, I could still graduate.”

3.1.3. Homeschooling. Modular Distance Learning secured the learners to the comfort of their houses and pupils literally perceived modular classes as studying inside the four corners of their homes and not in school. It served as their classroom where their siblings are their classmates and their parents are their teachers. They no longer went out or ride a vehicle and spent some money on transportation. Parents took the modules from the distribution area assigned by the school every Monday and returned them every Friday. The learners have 4 days to answer the modules at the comfort of their homes and with the help of their parents or older siblings. Children find the situation enjoyable and productive as they have time to play with their siblings at the same time help their parents.

“Modular class is a home schooling where Mama and Papa are my teachers and my siblings are my classmates.”

“We have more time with the family and it is fun because I can play with my siblings. It's good that I could help my parents do some household chores.”

3.2 Modular Distance Learning demands fundamental educational resources

As MDL provides the pupils with convenience, the participants somehow experienced several challenges in answering the modules.

3.2.1. Fluency in the foreign language. Participants are multilingual and most of them speak 2 dialects, a national and an international language. For the reason that they live at the border of province; the participants know, understand, and speak the language of their native town and at the same time, the language of the next town or province. The international language, specifically English, is introduced in the third grade; hence, the participants were minimally exposed to it. Hence, pupils learned limited vocabulary about the given language which generally hindered them to successfully understand, and answer the questions in the modules. Pupils also experienced difficulty in expressing their thought through writing using the English language. They struggle with vocabulary, mechanics of writing and the appropriate use of words in order to express their thoughts and ideas. In addition, pupils revealed that they find narrative text understandable than scientific text. Most said that it is easier to read and answer narrative texts. Texts in Science and Math are often difficult for them to interpret.

“I don’t know how to write “

“I don’t know what words to use in writing.”

“I can’t understand some of the words in English.”

“I don’t know how to write an explanation.”

“I am not sure of the spelling of the words.”

“I don’t know how to organize ideas.”

“It is hard to understand science and math because there are no stories there.”

3.2. 2. Appropriate learning tools. The participants find textbooks helpful in MDL as it provides the answers to some questions in the module. These textbooks referred to the textbooks of the previous grade level which they kept custody and were not able to return to school because of the pandemic. These textbooks in grade 5 became the only reference material, especially to those who do not have any gadget to be used for research.

“It’s very nice to have books.”

“I wish the school will give us books to study.”

Only 3 of the 6 pupils have android phones in the family which were generally owned by the parents and not by the pupil. Out of the 3, only 1 has a good internet connection. In some way, pupils were resourceful to ask for help from their parents and to seek answers from supplementary materials or books. They also learned to use the cell phone for research and some other educational purposes.

“I don’t have a cell phone.”

“...no signal here, you could not research.”

Another struggle that pupil experienced is the insufficient time and space to answer the modules. Family members are active during the day and pupils were distracted when studying; they resorted to studying at night after household chores were done. Common features of the household of the participants were characterized by having a single room as living room, dining room, and kitchen. There has been no enough and comfortable space to study especially during the day. Studying at night also provided the pupils a quiet and peaceful venue for studying since family members were

resting and tables and chairs or the living room in the house are no longer in use. Furthermore, pupils complained about many activities and performance tasks in the module, urging them to study late at night. The great number of activities in each modules emerged to be one of the main problems of the students in the implementation of the MDL.

“I study at night..., because there’s no place for me to study.”

“I can’t concentrate when studying during the day.”

“There are so many tasks to accomplish...so stressful.”

“It is so stressful to study and stay up late at night.”

3.2.3. Necessity of expert’s assistance. Pupils sought help for the explanation of some texts in the modules from their parents for understanding, but most of the time, their parents cannot explain or translate the English words to Hiligaynon. Pupils accentuate that they needed a teacher to guide them with the performance tasks and to explain the questions or to translate the difficult English words into the vernacular for easy understanding. They were eager to find out the correct answers and the correctness or accuracy in doing the tasks. The absence of expert parents or assistance of the teachers made them feel uncertain of their performance and they cannot guarantee if they were learning from MDL. Hence, feedback from experts is needed to guide and facilitate learning.

“I need a teacher to explain the lesson.”

“I want the teacher to guide me with what to do.”

“I’m not sure if what I understood is correct. It’s different to have a teacher.”

“...It’s really nice to have a teacher, because I don’t know if I learned.”

3.3 Pupils employed varied Strategies to survive MDL

3.3.1. Seeking and gaining assistance. In modular classes, answer key is given at the last page of the module but pupils considered it unreliable, since some answers given were not correct. In order to cope with some difficulties, they sought help from their parents or any other competent others in the family. Usually parents couldn’t answer correctly so they resorted to the use of a cell phone for research purposes.

“I asked ‘nanay’ (mother) to explain.”

“I asked my older siblings for help.”

3.3.2. Doing the obvious. Pupils claimed that there are many activities and performance tasks provided in the modules. As they generally study at night time, the limited hours during the night do not give them time to accomplish the tasks as they assert that they don’t have enough time to answer and perform them. To deal with this situation, most pupils copied the key answers in the last page even they knew that those were undependable.

“I copied the answers in the answers’ key.”

3.3.3. Minimum effort. The LDM learning modules provided an answers’ key at the last pages. Generally, answers presented in the modules were only for objective type questions and leave essay questions for varied answers. In answering the essay type questions, the pupils would commonly try to answer it with two or several words or a sentence only. On the other hand, when they find the question too difficult to answer,

they just left the space blank, skipped the item, and moved to the next task in order to finish the modules.

“I did not accomplish some difficult tasks.”

“I answered essays with 3 or few words.”

I skipped difficult tasks and continued until the last page.

4. Discussion

Amidst the pandemic, students are hopeful to graduate and fulfill their dreams. They are optimistic for a brighter future and hope to get back to the classroom for face-to-face instruction. Their dreams keep them going and comply with the requirements of the grade and in order to pass the level.

Modular Distance Learning (MDL) is beneficial to the participants as it allows them to continue with education and learn in the comfort and safety of their homes. The school restricted the conduct of physical or face-to-face large gatherings and activities that require close contact such as school activities, flag ceremony, field trips, etc. [10]. Classes retreated to the learners' homes which provided protection and safety against the virus. Participants feared the virus and staying at home made them feel protected. The Department of Education Culture and Sports, memo 216 s. 1997 stated that homeschooling is designed to provide an alternative learning system (ALS) for uneducated children who for some reason or for other circumstances cannot avail of the formal educational system [22]. LDM is relative to homeschooling as they shared almost common features. The parents played the roles of the teacher who must be competent and trained for the program. On the other hand, MDL provided the family great time together especially among siblings during the day. This is beneficial to children since they have plenty of time spent with their family where they could play and help in home chores. However, the results of the study implied that learning is not given much focus during the day. In the formal instruction, students spend 6-8 hours studying different subjects, with LDM at home, the participants generally study at night, spending only a few hours studying the modules. In addition, less skilled and untrained parents in LDM left their kids to learn alone or just gave minimum guidance or contribution to the pupils' progress.

Modular Distance Learning demands fundamental learning resources such as language skills and proficiency, appropriate supplementary materials and equipment, and professional assistance in order to achieve a meaningful and effective learning experience.

In the Philippines, English is the language of instruction, and out of 8 subjects in Grade 6; 3 were written in Filipino, and 5 were written in English. In the primary years of education, English is being taught as a second language in Grade I and is being used as a language of instruction in English, Mathematics, Science, and Health starting Grade 3 [11].

Learners in most rural areas found the English language difficult for they were not able to build a large vocabulary of the English language. They are learning if not studying multiple languages. At home, pupils use their mother tongue to communicate with family members. In addition, pupils are also exposed to another language from the neighboring town or province. Pupils' strong knowledge of their native language contradicting the English language used at school can hamper mastery or competence in a single language and can create disorientation, confusion, and misunderstanding [24]. Consequently, pupils asked for the translation of most English words in the module in order to understand and comprehend the ideas presented. Poor vocabulary can also cause difficulty in reading and understanding scientific texts. Research suggests that narratives are easier to comprehend and audiences find them more engaging than scientific texts [5] and it is necessary for the learners to master the intermediate literacy skills in order to understand texts in the discipline [28].

Knowing only a few words hamper the comprehension and communication processes either spoken or written. In foreign languages, limited vocabulary created a gap between what one wanted to express and what he can express [20]. Along with limited vocabulary, pupils were not yet able to develop necessary writing skills. Writing difficulties characterized with little knowledge about effective strategies in writing; less language skill; substantial difficulty with spelling; shorter, less organized, and less coherent paragraphs; many errors in grammar and spelling; and, low overall quality [23] were true to the participants. Worst, participants do not write paragraphs, most of the time they only write few words, not even a sentence, to answer essay questions. Communication through writing is dependent on the adequate vocabulary of the learner, and an essential skill to improve reading performance [27] and writing quality [43].

Learning during the pandemic is greatly different from the past normal learning situations. Children were used to ample learning resources provided by the school and the comfort of studying and learning inside the classroom at the most appropriate time of the day. The pandemic has brought them away from interactive educational tools such as books and libraries, equipment and laboratories; desks and classrooms, performances, events, and school fairs which are facilitative of meaningful and effective learning and wholesome human development.

Pupils need primary educational resources such as textbooks to supplement the modules. Textbooks are also good sources of knowledge since it is more comprehensive than the modules. They are informative, educational, and comprehensively deal with the particular subject according to the standards and requirements of the state [29]. On the other hand; the textbooks used by the pupils are one level behind their grade level. Even these are not appropriate to their grade level still, they found this very helpful. They believed that textbooks could help them learn more and, that they are good supplementary materials to learn in MDL.

Internet connection is the modern tool to be productive. In the Philippines only 55% of the Filipinos have access to the internet; the remaining 45% of the citizens lived in the unsupplied or undersupplied communities [4] in the rural areas. This problem is faced by the learners as they struggled with poor or no internet connection. Somehow, gadgets like android phones have the capacity to provide learners the knowledge they sought. Some who have phones realized its other function in researching for answers to the questions or performance tasks in the modules.

Participants live in a rural area which is characterized by poor to medium-income families with parents who mostly were not able to achieve any degree. Parents were supportive of the educational system but could hardly provide the children with the needed knowledge and ideas. Correlatively, learners aspired for the proficient services of a teacher in a learner-centered classroom. Children displayed an eagerness to learn and they needed a teacher who acts as the facilitator of this endeavor [34]. The specific teaching actions and strategies used by the teachers can help learners in the maximum engagement in active intellectual processes, meaningful collaboration with other students, effective reasoning, and focused learning [16]. Some of the things the learners sought in MDL are the teacher's translation of the English words; explanation of the instructions; guidance in doing tasks and performances; and, feedback about their learning performance. In the classroom, instruction teachers could immediately give feedback about students' answers during the discussion and this could give them the idea of their learning progress. The MDL learners significantly need feedback. Feedback is a very important part of effective learning; it facilitates understanding of the subject and gives learners a clear guide on how to improve learning.

Intolerable difficulties in MDL experienced by the participants against their willingness to finish an educational level forced them to use ineffective learning strategies in order to

comply with the requirements in the modules. Modules contain many activities and performance tasks and students struggle with independent learning as they experienced many distractions in studying [6]. Lack of a good and comfortable place to study during the day forced them to study at night spending several hours awake doing the modules. Grade 6 pupils generally age from 6-12 years old should have 9-12 hours of sleep during the night [18][38]. As participants clamor for a number of performance tasks to be done in the module, sleeping late at night alleviated their stress. Lack of sleep can overtire the brain which made the pupils hard to focus and negatively affect their learning performance [15]. Parents' supervision of the children's activities at night and control over their sleep hours is necessary in order for the kids to maintain healthy wellbeing to support effective learning.

Modular instruction is a teaching approach that facilitates independent learning of everything in the module at pupils' own effort and pace [2]. As children were mostly left on their own, they sometimes felt bored or could no longer bear the difficulty of the questions in the module. When they lost their patience and wished to finish the tasks immediately, they resorted to an easy way of accomplishing the module and, that is, through copying the answers of the different activities from the answer's key at the last pages. This situation happens when pupils work under pressure due to the time constraint of the deadline [19]. This practice of answering the modules deprived the kids of reading, understanding, and developing critical thinking processes. Copying which mostly happens in written homework, and which is also similar to module copying, is a severe national problem [30]. Same with examinations, cheating defeats the purpose of answering the questions stipulated in the revised Bloom's taxonomy by Anderson [8].

Skipping essay questions implies several issues about the learner. The main reason why the participants skipped essay questions is their limited vocabulary and writing skills which is associated by their lack of understanding of the question. Pupils failed to develop language and communications skills specifically in writing as reflected in the formative and summative assessment tasks which are contributory to their scores and grade in the subject. Writing is also challenging for learners who have less English vocabulary and difficulty in reading and spelling. Skipping essay questions or answering them with words or a sentence only show that pupils do not know or were not able to learn and master the writing mechanics such as grammar and spelling, use of punctuation marks, sentence combination, and elements of the paragraphs. Elementary Education is a foundation stage where learners have to develop strong writing skills, and valuable learning tools for effective and efficient self-expression and communication.

5. Conclusion

Modular Distance Learning ensures the health, safety, and well-being of the learners as they continue with education in the time of COVID-19. Along with the benefits of the program come the challenges especially with low-income families in the rural areas. The lived experiences of the pupils in Modular Distance Learning (MDL) from this area are complex and demanding. Pupils fall short with vocabulary and needed to develop language fluency and proficiency to understand and to express themselves in both oral and written processes. They struggle to answer the learning modules because of a language problem, scarcity of supplementary materials and resources, and the absence of a competent person to guide them. Hence, quality education in the locality during this time of pandemic is greatly affected by the delivery modality, the curriculum content and standards, educational equipment and resources, competence of parents to give assistance, and the readiness of the learners to read and learn independently.

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