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Status planning at the grassroots: A phenomenological study of English as a language of business and communication in Philippine barangays

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Abstract

English as a corporate language is a prominent topic across various regions and globally. While many organizations—including businesses, public and private institutions, government agencies, and workplaces in the Philippines—have already adopted English as their official language, discussions about its implementation continue in numerous settings. Establishing English as the corporate language, however, presents several challenges. Using a qualitative approach, the study explored the lived experiences of elected officials and appointed secretaries regarding English as a language for business and communication at the barangay level. The research focused on the provinces of Leyte and Biliran, involving elected barangay officials and appointed secretaries. To determine the number of participants, a saturation process was employed, considering criteria such as age, years of service as a barangay official, educational attainment, and level of English proficiency. The findings reveal that although barangay officials recognize the importance and value of English in business and communication, they encounter difficulties and obstacles in delivering effective services at the barangay level due to limited English proficiency. The lived experiences of barangay officials in Leyte and Biliran highlight the need to revisit the standards and qualification requirements for aspirants seeking elective positions at the barangay level, ensuring they meet the necessary language proficiency and competency standards.

Keywords: Barangay Officials, Biliran Province, Communication, English Proficiency.

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1. Introduction

Status planning deals with the domains of use, and the standing a language has within a given society. This domain points towards activities that can be undertaken to meet specific goals within language planning, helping us understand what is planned and how. The issue of who plans for whom was not considered in detail in the early language planning theory [1]. Rather, it was assumed that planning language was the domain of the official institutions, most often on the national level. Recently, however, it has been convincingly argued that the assumptions of power and agency as exclusive to the state need to be reconsidered (e.g. [2, 3]). Authority has become decentralized, and multiple agencies play out on different levels of social interaction. The same was argued specifically for language planning and policy. In accordance with the changing conception of agency, the notions of macro-, mezzo- and micro-language planning [4] were introduced, pointing to different actors of language planning. The macro level refers to national and supra-national bodies. The mezzo level encompasses organizations operating on regional scope. Finally, the micro level refers to entities acting locally, or to individuals. These distinctions are not always clear-cut, as the levels are intrinsically linked. Microplanning originates in the local community, but 'can only be interpreted within the wider scope of macro-level planning' [5].

Introducing English as a corporate language is a current topic in any part of the country or the world. As much as companies, public and private institutions, government agencies, and everywhere in most working environments in the Philippines have already launched English as corporate language and discussions are taking place in the various workplaces, yet it seems that introducing English as a corporate language is not an easy task, since using English brings both advantages and disadvantages for the work sector [6 - 8]. English enables cross-cultural communication and makes it possible to expand businesses globally. However, using English can also create a barrier [9].

Additionally, written communication is considered one of the most critical competencies for academic and career success, as evident in surveys of stakeholders from higher education and the workforce. Emphasis on writing skills suggests the need for next-generation assessments of writing proficiency to inform curricular and instructional improvement. Written communication involves the ability to effectively convey multiple types of messages, in multiple forms, to varying audiences, through a written medium (see [10]). However, writing is a multifaceted construct and is defined differently among various sources. Notions of what constitutes quality writing vary even among experts [11]. Until recent years, little research has been conducted examining the connection between language and its effects on business [12]. It is argued that there is a "growing need to know more about cultural and linguistic internationalization and standardization" and how to make cross-cultural communication effective [13]. As international communication plays a significant role in the multicultural business environment, there is a definite need to examine the role of English language on business communication. This study focuses on how using English affects business communication in the barangay levels.

The scenario at the local government unit in the Philippines, particularly in the barangay level, is a common picture of where the usual barriers and challenges on the use of English in written communications are encountered by local officials, including the secretary who is in charge, for instance, in the preparation of communication-related documents. Though data is replete on the technical intricacies felt and experienced by the local officials on the use of English in the conduct of their duties and functions especially concerned with business and communication, there has not been sufficiently clear information and data collected which prove as to what and which specific areas are truly problematic.

Previous literature has pointed out that language skills and cross-cultural communication skills are considered essential for expatriates, contributing to better job performance [14]. However, because of internationalization, these skills are not valuable for expatriates only, but for everyone in the work sector particularly those working in the government [15]. Therefore, the first aim of this study is to discuss the role of language skills in cross-cultural business communication. The second aim is to examine what kind of effects English language skills bring on individual level and how language skills are connected to preparing reports and other documents by the barangay officials and advancing career.

This study, therefore, explored the lived experiences of the elected officials and appointed secretaries as regards the use of English as language of business and communication in the barangay level. Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. How do the barangay officials feel about the use of English as a medium in the preparation of barangay-related communication documents (minutes of meetings, resolutions, certifications, etc.)?
2. What are the problems related to the use of language in business and communication encountered by the barangay officials in the preparation of barangay-related communication documents?

How do barangay officials propose to solve the problems encountered in the preparation of barangay-related communication documents?

2. Method

This study employed the phenomenological method as it was concerned with the lived experiences of both the barangay elected officials and appointed secretary regarding the use of English as medium to carry out governmental and information-related tasks at the barangay level. In order to gather the data needed for the study, an in-depth individual interview was conducted. The data were analyzed thematically, focusing on emergent themes concerning

the critical questions in the study. This is founded on a qualitative approach to discovery that appropriately frames the effort within an interpretivist philosophical position focused primarily on the experience and understandings within the barangay officials or local leaders' world. According to Creswell [16] qualitative research is "an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem. The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting" (p. 99). The emphasis is on how individuals construct meaning and knowledge through interactions within the social context which appropriately aligns with this work interest in researching how barangay officials and secretaries feel about the use of English as a medium in the preparation of communication-related documents, what problems related to the use of English in business and communication they encounter, and how barangay officials propose to solve the problems on communication-related documents.

Phenomenological inquiry is utilized to further develop the qualitative frame. This methodology assists discovery and understanding within the data rich environment evolving from the lived experiences of the barangay official and secretary participants. Whereas some methodologies strive to determine opinions and a generalization through hypotheses, a phenomenology seeks to explore contextual meaning through the situational knowledge of those being researched [16]. This study initiates investigatory interest in an area previously unexplored. The researchers look into the local officials to describe how they experience and understand the use of English as medium in the preparation of communication related documents. With a lack of existing research illustrating the interactivity between these two groups, the present study seeks to develop understanding through the lived experiences of the participants and opens the door to continued discovery. A phenomenological approach can contribute to the literature and provide meaning where a void exists due to a lack of available research [16].

Furthermore, the current study follows the guidelines of a traditional phenomenology as described in Moustakas [17] where my role as the researcher is to generate a written description of an individual's external observations and internal process of cognition. Phenomenological reduction prescribes a series of steps and considerations that are included as chronological actions throughout this paper. Creswell [16] recommends first describing the lived experience of interest, working then to dissolve preconceived judgments, acknowledging the realities of this consciousness, and lastly refusing subject-object dichotomy and accepting reality through an individual's experience. As suggested in Moustakas [17] bracketing or focusing the researchable interest, ensures the study design remained methodically connected to the empirical questions while the researchers keep the stories associated with the lived personal experience of the participants. The next step of horizontalization directed the researchers to assign equal value to each developing segment of meaning. These ideas defined the essence of the phenomenon by leading them to focus on their participant's described experiences through the consciousness rooted in their self-awareness. Continued analysis of the data rich material occurred through coding where issue related cluster developments transformed into experiential themes [17]. This effort compelled the researchers to seek sufficient research saturation regarding how local officials experience and understand the use of English as medium of business and communication in the preparation of communication-related documents.

This study took place in provinces of Leyte and Biliran during the second summer of 2018. These two areas are covered since the participants come from the said provinces which also represent the places where the researchers come from. The participants in the study were the elected barangay officials and appointed secretaries. Saturation process was adopted in determining the number of participants. However, considerations were given on the following criteria: age, number of years of being a barangay official, educational attainment, and level of English proficiency. To be able to select appropriate participants and generate intended data, the aforesaid criteria were observed by the researchers since the communication skills, especially writing skills, in English will provide the bases as to the stance of the communication-related documents prepared by the subjects of the study. The composition of the participants is presented in the Table 1.

Individual interview was conducted using a semi-structured interview guide. Data collection for the study occurred through in-depth face to face interviews designed to explore how barangay officials and secretaries feel about the use of English as a medium in the preparation of communication-related documents, what problems related to the use of English in business and communication they encounter, and how barangay officials propose to solve the problems on communication-related documents. The researchers utilized field notes and memoing to ensure preconceived judgments were suspended to focus on the experiences of the local official respondents.

Table 1.
Profile of the Respondents.

Participant	Age	No. of Years of Being a Brgy. Official	Highest Educational Attainment	Elected/Appointed Position in the Barangay
1	40	3	College Graduate	Brgy. Captain
2	34	9	College Graduate	Councilor
3	37	3	College Graduate	SK Chairman/Councilor
4	30	3	College Graduate	Councilor
5	28	3	College Graduate	Secretary
6	45	9	College Level	Councilor
7	59	10	College Graduate	Brgy. Captain
8	51	6	College Graduate	Secretary

On the other hand, to figure out common errors made or encountered by the participants in the preparation of communication-related documents, document analysis of their sample written communications was done. Document analysis is a form of qualitative research in which documents are interpreted by the researcher to give voice and meaning around an assessment topic [18]. Analyzing documents incorporates coding content into themes similar to how focus group or interview transcripts are analyzed [18]. The researchers also used a rubric to grade or score document. Two separate phases of coding will be undertaken for data analysis. Delineating the units of meaning first will enable to begin to condense verbal and nonverbal communications to discover the essence of meaning in the data. Clustering then helps the researchers to search for data groupings that congregate to form ideas related to the research questions. Extraction of general and unique ideas from the interviews which are later condensed into themes is navigated. Themes will be composed into a composite summary of the findings and relate directly to how local officials experience and understand the use of English as a medium of business and communication, specifically in the preparation of communication-related documents.

3. Results and Discussion

After careful analysis and interpretation of the gathered data, the following are the themes that emerged.

3.1. Theme 1. Attitudes Towards English

3.1.1. English Use is Beneficial

Participants believed that English is most advantageous, especially in the effective delivery of services at the barangay level. Participants answered:

"Oo, kay kun may nabisita nga mga turista deri naawod an brgy. opisyal pag-atubang kay maaram man hiya mag-English."

(Yes, because when tourists come, officials do not shy away from them because they can speak in English.)

"Mayda gad. Labi na kun mayda mga bisita nga mga foreigner/Non- Government Organization. Or pagconstruct hin mga resolution labi na kay English it gamit. Deri man Waray-waray it pag ayad hin resolution."

(There is; especially when foreigners or Non-Government Organization come and visit us. Even in crafting resolutions since English is used and not Waray-waray.)

"Oo, dako nga bulig ini. Importante ini labi na yana nga panahon haros tanan na gamit an English."

(Yes, this is a big help. This is very important since now a days, English is used all the time.)

"Madaliay pagsurat or paghimo han report kun gamit an English kumpara han vernacular."

(It is easier to prepare the reports using English as medium than the vernacular).

3.1.2. English as Barrier in Doing Business at the Barangay Level

Although the participants acknowledge the benefits of being able to speak and write in English, unfortunately the language is seen as a barrier in doing successful business at the barangay level. Such problem exists in both oral and written barangay transactions. Respondents shared:

"Han akon pagserbi ha barangay nakurian aka labi na paghimu hin report kay usa ha mga surat tikang ha MLGOO in sinurat ha English."

(As barangay official, it is hard for me to write a report since one of the letters coming from the MLGOO is in English.)

"Ha siyahan ha paghimo ko hint minutes han amon session ngan paghimu hin balaud or Brgy. ordinances."

(First, when it comes to writing the minutes of the meeting/session and when crafting barangay ordinances.)

"Yes, I have. When I talk to foreigners in English I cannot understand very well, especially the foreign words."

"...communications coming from the MLGOO those are all crafted in English how could we be able to submit a good report if we cannot understand the communication?"

"Yes, it is hard to speak in English if you do not know the meaning of the words you're saying."

"So far it only affects during the preparation of reports or documents which should be written in English."

"The barangay officials have a hard time in passing laws or ordinances."

3.2. Theme 2. Problems Encountered by Barangay Officials in Preparing Documents

Participants revealed that their command of the English language, particularly its grammar rules, needs to be developed. Specifically, they encounter errors and/or problems with regard to the following aspects, namely: subject-verb agreement, spelling, punctuation, function words (e.g. prepositions, conjunctions), and technical vocabulary. Respondents shared:

"Kay waray man gud ka develop hin hag-id an akon grammar ha English."

(I don't have very good foundation of the English grammar.)

"Usahay nakukurihan ako han vocabulary, grammar, pati gamit han there and their".

(Sometimes I have difficulties in vocabulary, grammar and the use of there and their).

3.3. Theme 3. Proposed Solutions to the Problems Encountered

3.3.1. Capability Building Trainings/Seminars for Barangay Officials

The participants proposed the need to conduct trainings and seminars to capacitate barangay officials in the preparation of barangay-related documents and other business transactions done at the barangay level. Participants shared:

"Magkamay-ada hawa la nga training para han kada tagsa nga committee para mahibaro kun uunanhon paghimo han kada tagsa nag report."

(There should be separate trainings for each committee concerning the preparation of reports.)

"Training/Seminar, there is a need for more English language materials and more practice is needed to enhance the language skills."

"Karuyag namun nga magkaada hin brochures, English learning materials para makat unan pa namun iton English para liwat maupay an amon paghimo hiton mga reports".

(It is our desire to have brochures and English learning materials for us to learn more of the English language which could improve our reports).

3.3.2. High School Graduate/College Level/College Graduate Barangay Officials

Participants see the need for a more stringent policies and guidelines in relation to the guidelines and policies for filing the certificate of candidacy among aspirant barangay officials. One participant said:

"Magka-may ada balaud nga an mega makandidato ka Barangay official kinahanglan high school graduate."

(There should be a law or provision that the candidate for barangay official should be at least a high school graduate.)

"Mas maupay gud kun an mga nadaragan na mga barangay opisyaes mga propesiyonal or college graduate kay makuri liwat kun diri hira mag aram han English kay naapektuhan an ira trabaho."

(It is better if a barangay official aspirant for any elective position is a professional or college graduate because it will be quite difficult for his/her part without knowledge or skill in English language; thus, his/her work will likely suffer).

4. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study provides a description of the lived experiences of the elected officials and appointed secretaries as regards the use of English as the language of business and communication in the barangay level. The results of the study revealed that barangay officials acknowledge the importance and value of English in business and communication but due to their limited knowledge and proficiency of the English language they encountered difficulties and challenges in the effective delivery of services at the barangay level.

The lived experiences of barangay officials in the provinces of Leyte and Biliran served as an eye-opener to revisit the standards and qualification requirements set to be complied by the aspirants for any elective positions at the barangay level. Additionally, results can be the bases in crafting intervention plans for capacitating barangay officials in preparing communication-related materials initiated by the education sectors to strengthen community linkages and partnerships.

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