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## **Voices Of Leadership: Exploring The English Communication Challenges Of School Heads As A Basis For Public Speaking Development Program**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Effective oral communication is central to school leadership, as principals and school heads rely on speech to set vision, manage staff, interact with parents, and represent their schools in public forums. This study explored the lived experiences and English communication challenges of school heads to inform the design of a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato. Using a qualitative phenomenological approach, the study captured the personal and professional narratives of school heads through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis. The findings revealed that school heads faced multifaceted challenges shaped by emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors. Anxiety, fear of mistakes, and embarrassment frequently emerged during formal English communication, affecting fluency, clarity, and perceived leadership effectiveness. Limited exposure to English, inadequate preparation, and insufficient professional training further compounded these difficulties, particularly in high-stakes settings. Despite these barriers,

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school heads demonstrated resilience by employing coping strategies such as careful preparation and rehearsal, emotional self-regulation, adaptive language use, collaboration, and continuous self-improvement. Audience awareness and reflective practice emerged as key mechanisms to navigate linguistic challenges while maintaining leadership authority. Analysis of shared experiences highlighted critical elements for a development program, emphasizing confidence-building as central to reducing anxiety and enhancing self-efficacy. Practice-oriented, real-life leadership scenarios, supportive and non-threatening learning environments, leadership-centered and audience-aware English training, and inclusive, flexible program design were identified as essential for fostering authentic communication and leadership expression. The study concluded that English public speaking challenges among school heads extend beyond language proficiency, involving emotional resilience, identity, and contextual demands. Targeted interventions that combine structured support with opportunities for authentic practice can transform these challenges into growth opportunities, enhancing both communication competence and leadership effectiveness.

Keywords: English communication, school leadership, public speaking, professional development

## INTRODUCTION

### Background of the Study

Effective oral communication is central to school leadership: principals and school heads use speech to set vision, manage staff, interact with parents and stakeholders, and represent the school in public forums. Communication competence—especially proficiency and confidence in English—affects leaders’ instructional leadership, stakeholder engagement, and school outcomes. However, despite the centrality of speaking skills to leadership roles, many school heads report gaps in public-speaking confidence and practical communication training, leaving a training need that, if addressed, could strengthen school-level leadership and student outcomes.

In the United States of America, studies in educational leadership highlight that school leadership is second only to teaching in influence on student learning, and that effective leader communication is a core mechanism through which leaders influence school practice—such as advocacy, motivation, and instructional direction (Wallace Foundation, 2023). Still, recent international reviews point to persistent gaps in formal communication training for school leaders and growing demands on leaders to communicate in multilingual, hybrid, and public-facing settings post-pandemic (Post-Pandemic Communication Study, 2022).

While leadership impact is well documented, there is limited research that (a) centers the spoken communication challenges of school heads specifically, and (b) translates lived-experience narratives into program design for public-speaking development.

On the other hand, research on the Philippine educational landscape reports concerns about English proficiency among learners and educators, shaped by curricular shifts, uneven teacher preparation, and socio-linguistic factors affecting confidence in formal English communication (Viray, 2021). Concurrently, local studies on school leadership emphasize the need for capacity-building programs that reach beyond administrative and instructional competencies to include interpersonal and communication skills (ERIC, 2023). However, limited empirical work documents school heads’ own narratives about English-speaking constraints

(confidence, register, audience, code-switching), and uses those narratives to build tailored public-speaking curricula.

Similarly, research across Mindanao notes that geographic remoteness, multilingual classrooms, and resource constraints increase demands on school heads to be flexible communicators (e.g., switching between mother tongue, Filipino, and English) while also managing community engagement and crisis response. The post-pandemic shift to blended and community-oriented interactions further complicated leaders' communication roles (Post-Pandemic Communication Study, 2022).

However, there is scarce region-specific research capturing how school heads in South Central Mindanao experience English communication challenges in everyday leadership tasks.

Local investigations in South Cotabato have explored language-teaching challenges and teacher communication struggles—especially in far-flung and multilingual communities—and highlighted limited access to professional development and context-appropriate language support (Local Study, 2024). However, there is virtually no local research focused specifically on school heads—their lived experiences, public-speaking apprehensions, and training preferences—despite their key role in representing schools to parents, local government units, and regional education offices. However, no focused narrative inquiry documents school heads' English communication experiences in Sultan Kudarat or uses their voices to co-design a localized public-speaking development program.

This study aligned directly with SDG 4 — Quality Education — by strengthening the capacity of educational leaders, thereby supporting inclusive, equitable, and effective schooling (UN SDG info, n.d.). By targeting leaders in under-resourced and multilingual areas (e.g., Sultan Kudarat), this also contributed to SDG efforts to “leave no one behind” and to reducing inequalities in access to quality educational support (UNESCO, n.d.).

Additionally, improving leaders' communication could indirectly support SDG 8 (decent work and economic growth) and SDG 10 (reduced inequalities) by enhancing leadership and community engagement that underpin education-driven social mobility.

This study explored the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads as a basis for a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program. This also examined the lived English communication experiences, challenges, and development preferences of school heads in South Cotabato to create a contextually grounded Public Speaking Development Program that responds to their voiced needs and the linguistic realities of their school communities.

## **Research Questions**

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads to design a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of school heads in facing English communication challenges in their leadership roles?
2. What personal and professional factors contribute to their difficulties in public speaking using the English language?
3. What coping mechanisms do school heads employ whenever they face English communication challenges in their leadership roles?
4. How might these shared experiences of school heads regarding their English communication challenges inform a public speaking development program?

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

Qualitative research, specifically the phenomenological approach, was employed to explore the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads to design a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

Phenomenological research is a method that aims to delve into individuals' lived experiences to gain deeper insights into how they interpret these experiences. It assumes that individuals employ a universal structure or essence to derive meaning from their encounters. This research examines participants' emotions, perceptions, and beliefs to shed light on the essence of the phenomenon under investigation. An essential aspect of the phenomenological research design is the researcher's obligation to set aside any preconceived assumptions about the experience or phenomenon (Delve & Limpaecher, 2012).

### Participants of the Study

Table 1 displays the participants' qualifications, as determined by the researcher before selecting eligible informants for the study. The study involved fifteen (15) school heads/teacher-in-charge in DepEd Norala District, South Cotabato Division, who met the researcher's specified inclusion criteria:

Table 1. Participants' Inclusion Criteria

Qualifications
Participants: 15 school heads/teacher-in-charge

Current Leadership Position – Participants must be officially designated school heads (principals, head teachers, or officers-in-charge) in the Norala District, Division of South Cotabato, during the school year covered by the study.

Minimum Length of Service – School heads must have served in a leadership role for at least one year to ensure they have sufficient experience in performing communication-related tasks and responsibilities.

Active Engagement in English Communication – Participants must have regular leadership duties that involve English communication, such as conducting meetings, preparing reports, addressing stakeholders, or public speaking engagements.

Willingness to Participate – School heads must voluntarily agree to participate in the study and share their experiences regarding English communication challenges, with informed consent secured prior to data collection.

### **Sampling Technique**

During the conduct of this study, a Purposive Sampling Technique was utilized to carefully select fifteen (15) school heads/teacher-in-charge in DepEd Norala District, South Cotabato Division who met the specific inclusion criteria established by the researcher.

Purposive sampling, alternately referred to as judgmental, selective, or subjective sampling, constitutes a variant of non-probability sampling. Within this approach, researchers exercise their own judgment in selecting individuals from the population to partake in their survey (Alchemer, 2021). This method of sampling requires researchers to possess prior knowledge of the objectives underpinning their study to contact eligible participants through online survey platforms. Researchers use purposive sampling to secure access to a distinct subgroup of individuals, in which all survey respondents are chosen based on their alignment with a specific demographic or criterion.

### **Research Instruments**

In this study, a semi-structured interview was used as an exploratory instrument during both in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) to uncover the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads when designing a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

The validity and appropriateness of this tool were substantiated through a rigorous evaluation process conducted by a panel of experts in the development of relevant research instruments.

### **Data Gathering Procedure**

To ensure the research's reliability, the researcher adhered to a predefined set of procedures. The primary objective of this study was to examine the lived experiences and

communication challenges of school heads when designing a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

In the initial phase, the researcher diligently sought formal authorization from both the Superintendent of DepEd-South Cotabato and the Dean of the College of Graduate Studies (CGS).

This authorization was essential to obtain the necessary permissions for the researcher to conduct the study, emphasizing the importance of ethical considerations

Following this, a secondary authorization letter was sent to the District Supervisor, explicitly requesting access to the specific data required for the research. A meticulously crafted survey questionnaire was developed, evaluated, and then administered to the targeted participants.

The researcher employed the Purposive Sampling Technique in selecting secondary school teachers as participants in this study. Assuming strict adherence to the established EWMCI-Research Ethics Committee, the researcher proceeded with face-to-face interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs).

The data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, subjected to comprehensive analysis, and interpreted using thematic analysis.

Ultimately, the data collected from interviews and FGDs were systematically organized, comprehensively analyzed, and interpreted using the thematic analysis approach. This approach was expected to provide a deeper understanding of the issues under investigation.

### **Data Transcription Process**

All gathered raw data from the participants through interviews and FGDs were transcribed using the transcription process of Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). By following these step-by-step processes, the researcher aligned their transcription approach with the guidelines outlined by Kvale and Brinkmann (2009). This rigorous transcription process ensured the trustworthiness and credibility of the qualitative data, which served as the foundation for the subsequent narrative analysis and the meaningful interpretation of the gathered raw data.

These categories were either drawn from established frameworks or custom-crafted to align with the study's objectives. To execute this analytical process, a series of vital steps were meticulously followed:

**Step 1: Data Organization and Preparation.** In the initial phase, all data sources, including interview transcripts, notes from FGDs, and pertinent documents, were thoroughly organized and prepared for analysis. This step ensured the structured arrangement and accessibility of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

**Step 2: Data Immersion.** Subsequently, the researcher deeply immersed herself in the data by reviewing interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process helped her understand the content and context inherent in the collected information (Nowell et al., 2017).

Step 3: Systematic Coding Process. The third step involved commencing a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes encapsulated fundamental concepts, ideas, or themes relating to the role of language in IPed to understand how language is integrated into Indigenous education, its impact on cultural preservation, and the challenges it encounters among IP schools in DepEd Esperanza III in the school year 2024-2025 (Clarke & Braun, 2021).

Step 4: Clustering and Preliminary Themes. Following coding, the identified codes were clustered into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step established an initial framework for organizing the data (Vaismoradi et al., 2016).

Step 5: Theme Scrutiny and Refinement. Following this, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes were scrutinized and refined. Researchers ensured their coherence and clarity, making necessary adjustments as needed. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive label that succinctly represented its content, facilitating easy identification and interpretation (Terry et al., 2017).

Step 6: Linking Data Excerpts. Relevant data excerpts, such as quotations or segments from interviews and FGDs, were selected and linked to the themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes (Nowell et al., 2017).

Step 7: Thematic Analysis. Finally, the thematic analysis transcended superficial identification. Researchers delved into interpreting the significance and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives, ensuring a deeper understanding of the data (Braun & Clarke, 2022).

They identified patterns, correlations, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities involved in implementing IPed programs.

This meticulous and well-structured process of thematic analysis empowered researchers to investigate and comprehend the strategies systematically and approaches teachers employed in addressing the specific linguistic challenges faced by IPed teachers and implementers. Ultimately, this approach yielded valuable insights contributing to the enhancement of intervention programs aimed at addressing the issues on the role of language in IPed to understand how language is integrated into Indigenous education and its impact on cultural preservation among IP schools in DepEd Esperanza III in the school year 2024-2025.

## **Data Analysis**

In this study, which centered on uncovering the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads to design a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato, a content or thematic analysis approach was employed to examine the collected data. This methodology, as described by Flick (2014), Ngag (2023), and Braun (2009), involved the systematic categorization of textual components, including statements, phrases, and words, into organized groupings or categories. These categories were either derived from established frameworks or custom-developed to align with the study's specific objectives.

To execute this analytical process, a series of essential steps was diligently followed:

Initially, all data sources, such as interview transcripts, notes from Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and relevant documents, were meticulously organized and prepared for analysis. This phase ensured the systematic arrangement and accessibility of the data.

Subsequently, the researcher deeply engaged with the data by conducting a thorough review of interview transcripts and FGD notes. This immersive process aided in gaining a comprehensive understanding of the content and context embedded within the collected information.

The third step involved initiating a systematic coding process. Initial codes were generated by identifying meaningful segments or patterns within the data. These codes captured essential concepts, ideas, or themes related to the narratives of the teachers regarding their professional development and its outcomes in teaching effectiveness.

Following coding, the identified codes were grouped into preliminary themes based on shared meaning or relevance. This step established an initial structure for organizing the data.

Next, the emerging themes and their corresponding codes underwent review and refinement. The researcher ensured the consistency and clarity of these themes, making necessary adjustments. Each refined theme was assigned a descriptive name that succinctly represented the content it encapsulated, facilitating easy identification and interpretation.

Relevant data excerpts, such as quotes or segments extracted from interviews and FGDs, were selected and associated with the respective themes. These excerpts served as supporting evidence for the identified themes.

Finally, the thematic analysis extended beyond surface-level identification. The researcher interpreted the meaning and implications of each theme within the context of the study's objectives, seeking patterns, connections, and variations within the themes to provide a comprehensive understanding of the teachers' narratives.

This meticulous and structured process of thematic analysis enabled the researcher to systematically explore the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads in designing a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

## **Scope and Limitations**

This study explored the school heads' English communication challenges in the Norala District, Division of South Cotabato, during the school year 2025–2026, to design a public speaking development program. It specifically involved elementary and secondary school heads as participants, as they were the key leaders responsible for communication in academic and administrative settings. Conducted within selected schools in the district, the research employed a qualitative phenomenological design to capture the lived experiences, difficulties, and coping strategies of school heads in using English as a medium for professional discourse, leadership tasks, and stakeholder engagement. Data was gathered through in-depth interviews and thematic analysis to ensure a comprehensive understanding of their struggles and needs. The study was delimited to school heads only, excluding teachers, supervisors, and non-teaching staff, to maintain focus on leadership perspectives. Ultimately, it aimed to identify gaps in English

communication proficiency and provided practical solutions through a context-based public speaking development program that enhanced both professional competence and leadership effectiveness.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The findings reveal that school heads experience multifaceted challenges in using English as a medium of leadership communication, shaped by emotional, cognitive, and contextual factors. Anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and embarrassment frequently arise during formal English communication, affecting fluency and clarity. These emotional responses often lead to reduced confidence and self-doubt, influencing how school heads perceive their authority and effectiveness as leaders. At the same time, school heads demonstrate strong audience awareness by adjusting their language use, simplifying messages, or shifting to Filipino when necessary to ensure understanding and inclusivity. Difficulties in organizing thoughts and expressing complex ideas in English further compound these challenges. Despite these barriers, school heads display resilience by gradually adapting, persisting in leadership roles, and developing personal strategies that allow them to continue leading effectively while navigating English communication demands.

Also, school heads' difficulties in public speaking using the English language stem from a complex interaction of personal and professional factors. Anxiety and fear of judgment emerged as dominant influences, particularly in formal and high-stakes situations involving higher-ranking officials, evaluations, and promotions. Limited exposure to English and lack of regular practice further weakened fluency and confidence, as English is often used only in formal settings rather than in daily communication. Inadequate educational preparation and insufficient professional training in English public speaking also contributed to these challenges, leaving school heads to rely largely on experience rather than structured skill development. Additionally, audience pressure and professional expectations heightened self-consciousness, while cognitive overload from mental translation, overthinking, and mismatches between natural communication styles and formal English demands disrupted clarity and fluency. Collectively, these factors reduced communicative confidence and made public speaking in English a demanding aspect of school leadership.

Moreover, the findings also reveal that school heads employ a variety of coping mechanisms to address English communication challenges in their leadership roles. These strategies include careful preparation and rehearsal, emotional self-regulation to manage anxiety, adaptive language use such as simplification and code-switching, seeking support and feedback from colleagues, and engaging in continuous self-improvement while accepting imperfections. Together, these approaches demonstrate a combination of proactive planning, resilience, audience awareness, and reflective practice, allowing school leaders to navigate linguistic difficulties while maintaining their effectiveness, confidence, and authority in professional settings.

Finally, the analysis of shared experiences of school heads in public speaking highlights the key elements that should inform the design of a development program. Confidence-building emerges as the central focus, as it directly influences effectiveness, anxiety reduction, and self-efficacy. Programs should incorporate practice-oriented, real-life leadership tasks to enhance the practical application of English communication, while maintaining a supportive and non-threatening environment to encourage risk-taking and learning from mistakes. Leadership-centered and audience-aware English training ensures that communication is purposeful, clear,

and contextually relevant. Finally, inclusivity and flexibility are essential, allowing school heads of varying proficiency levels and communication styles to engage fully, accommodate individual needs, and build authentic leadership expression in English.

## Conclusion

The following conclusions were made in light of this study's findings:

English communication challenges among school heads are not merely issues of language proficiency but are deeply connected to emotions, identity, and leadership practice. The persistence and adaptability shown by school heads suggest that with appropriate support, these challenges can be transformed into opportunities for growth.

It is also evident that English public speaking challenges among school heads are not merely language-related but deeply connected to leadership identity, emotional resilience, and contextual expectations.

The findings underscore the need for development initiatives that go beyond grammar and vocabulary by addressing confidence-building, cognitive demands, and the realities of leadership communication in multilingual environments.

School heads manage their own anxiety, adjust to their audience, and seek growth opportunities through collaboration and self-directed learning.

This highlights the value of fostering a supportive environment and promoting continuous professional development, as both personal effort and structured support play key roles in enhancing English communication skills and overall leadership effectiveness.

Finally, effective public speaking development for school heads is not solely about grammar or vocabulary, but about creating a holistic learning experience that strengthens confidence, provides authentic practice, and fosters supportive interactions.

## Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. **Deped** may establish a National English Leadership Communication Program – A structured program specifically designed for school heads that combines confidence-building, real-life leadership scenarios, and audience-aware English training, ensuring consistent support across regions.

3. **School Administrators/School Heads** may practice real-life leadership scenarios in English regularly – engage in mock meetings, reporting sessions, and community presentations to build fluency, reduce anxiety, and strengthen authority in authentic leadership contexts.

2. **Policy makers** can mandate Inclusive, flexible English communication training for leadership progression – ensure training accommodates diverse proficiency levels and leadership styles, making professional development equitable and practical for all school heads.

3. **Future Researchers** may examine the long-term impact of confidence-focused public speaking interventions – conduct longitudinal studies to determine how targeted programs influence school heads’ leadership effectiveness, authority perception, and communication fluency over time.

### **Compliance with Ethical Standards**

In preparation for this study, all plans and recommendations were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc. to ensure compliance with prescribed procedures and protocols. Within the context of the research focused on examining the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads to design a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato, it was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations. Before commencing this study, the following ethical principles were highlighted:

#### **Informed Consent:**

Before participation, consent was obtained from all school heads involved in the study. They must possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits. Furthermore, participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing the participants to withdraw from the study at any juncture without adverse consequences.

#### **Anonymity and Confidentiality:**

To safeguard the identities and responses, rigorous measures were put in place to ensure anonymity and confidentiality.

Rather than using actual names, pseudonyms or codes were used to uphold the participants’ privacy. The collected data was securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

#### **Avoiding Harm:**

Delicate subjects, such as the challenges inherent in their roles, were discussed with meticulous consideration for the potential emotional and psychological impact on the participants. Strategies were in place to minimize distress, and a support system was readily available to assist participants should the need arise.

#### **Researcher-Participant Relationship:**

The researcher maintained a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Any actions that may harm the participants were scrupulously avoided, ensuring their utmost dignity and respect throughout the research process.

#### **Data Protection:**

Adherence to data protection regulations and laws was followed to safeguard the participants' personal information. Stringent measures were employed to ensure the secure storage and transmission of data.

#### Voluntary Participation:

Participants were assured that their involvement in the study was voluntary, devoid of any coercion or external pressure.

#### Researcher Bias:

The researcher remained vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, upholding objectivity and transparency throughout the research endeavor.

#### Institutional Approval:

Before initiating the study, the researcher sought ethical clearance from the pertinent institutional review boards or ethics committees.

#### Honesty and Integrity:

The research findings were reported truthfully and accurately, free from manipulation or distortion to align with preconceived notions or biases.

#### Beneficence:

The potential benefits of the research in educational practices and policies were thoughtfully considered, ensuring that the study contributes to the education system.

#### Cultural Sensitivity:

The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices in the research setting, refraining from imposing external values on participants.

#### Inclusion and Diversity:

The study's structure prioritized inclusivity and diversity, encompassing a wide spectrum of the lived experiences and communication challenges of school heads to design a context-sensitive Public Speaking Development Program among selected secondary schools in Norala, South Cotabato.

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The researcher would like to express his sincere gratitude to everyone who played a part in this journey. Their support, guidance, and encouragement have made this achievement possible. As NELSON MANDELA once said, "Education is the most powerful weapon which you use to

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change the world." This is the trans-formative power of education and individual effort in bringing about global change.

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### **Declaration of AI Tools Utilization**

I hereby declare that artificial intelligence (AI)-assisted tools were used in the preparation of this manuscript strictly for language and technical support. Specifically, tools such as ChatGPT and Grammarly were utilized solely for grammar checking, sentence refinement, clarity improvement, and general organization of ideas. These tools were not used to generate research data, conduct data analysis, produce original research findings, or replace the author's critical thinking, interpretation, and scholarly judgment.

All concepts, research design, data collection, analysis, interpretation of results, and final conclusions presented in this work are entirely my own. I take full responsibility for the accuracy, originality, and integrity of the content of this manuscript. The use of AI tools was limited to editorial assistance to enhance readability and coherence in accordance with ethical academic and publication standards.

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