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Language Practices among Subanen Children in Last-Mile Schools

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ABSTRACT

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This qualitative descriptive-interpretive case study explored the language practices of Subanen children in last-mile schools. Twelve Subanen learners in multigrade classrooms participated through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, informal conversations, and document review. Findings showed that Subanen remained strongest in home and family interactions, while Cebuano, Filipino, and English were more prominent in formal schooling and wider community communication. Learners used code-switching, translation, peer assistance, and their mother tongue as resources for comprehension and participation. However, dominance of school languages, language proficiency gaps, changing language preferences, limited Subanen learning materials, and sociocultural pressures challenged language maintenance. The findings indicate that multilingualism supports learning and adaptation, but sustaining Subanen requires deliberate school-community support, culturally responsive instruction, and opportunities for meaningful use of the Indigenous language.

Keywords: *Subanen, Indigenous language, language practices, last-mile schools, multilingual education*

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Introduction

Language is central to the transmission of identity, culture, values, and social relationships in Indigenous communities. For Indigenous children, the mother tongue is not only a means of communication but also a cultural resource through which knowledge and belonging are developed. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes the importance of Indigenous languages in education and cultural continuity, while McCarty (2020) links Indigenous language education with identity and self-determination.

Subanen children in Misamis Occidental live within a multilingual environment where Subanen coexists with Cebuano, Filipino, and English. The language used by a child can change according to setting, audience, and purpose. At home, the Indigenous language may remain the most natural medium of communication, while school introduces languages associated with formal instruction and assessment. Such patterns reflect the broader reality that multilingual learners draw from several linguistic resources as they move across social domains (García & Li Wei, 2020).

Language use in school is particularly significant because the language of instruction can either facilitate or constrain participation. Cummins (2021), as cited in the thesis discussion, explains that learners' first language can provide a foundation for comprehension and learning. The thesis also connects this principle with Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education and Indigenous Peoples Education, which recognize the educational and cultural importance of learners' home languages.

In last-mile schools, these issues intersect with geographic isolation, multigrade organization, limited instructional resources, and culturally diverse learning needs. Learners may need to understand academic content presented in Filipino or English while relying on Subanen or Cebuano to process meaning. Flexible language practices such as code-switching and translanguaging can therefore become practical strategies for learning. García and Kleyn (2020) and McCarty and Lee (2021), as discussed in the thesis, view such practices as resources that enable multilingual learners to use their full linguistic repertoire.

The benefits of multilingual flexibility, however, coexist with concerns about language maintenance. When dominant languages become associated with schooling, wider communication, media, and employment, younger speakers may gradually use the Indigenous language less often. The thesis relates this pattern to sociolinguistic research on language prestige, utility, and shift (Tupas & Lorente, 2020; McCarty & Lee, 2021). UNESCO (2021) likewise warns that minority languages become vulnerable when intergenerational use and institutional support weaken.

The school can either reinforce or narrow the functions of the Indigenous language. If Subanen is used only in informal conversation but is absent from books, modules, literacy activities, and formal classroom interaction, children may remain oral speakers without developing confidence in reading, writing, and academic use. Culturally responsive teaching is therefore important because it connects school knowledge with learners' language, culture, and lived experiences (Gay, 2010).

The thesis further recognizes that children are active language users. Their choices are influenced by comprehension, confidence, relationships, social expectations, and perceived usefulness. A learner may use Subanen to understand a concept, Cebuano with peers, Filipino during classroom interaction, and English in reading or presentation tasks. This fluid movement is not simply linguistic confusion; it reflects adaptation to a multilingual environment.

Against this background, the study examined language practices among Subanen children in last-mile schools. Specifically, it explored the languages used in daily interactions, the language practices demonstrated in multigrade classrooms, and the challenges encountered in maintaining the Subanen language. Understanding these lived language practices is important for culturally responsive instruction, Indigenous Peoples Education, multilingual pedagogy, and school-community efforts to sustain Indigenous language and identity.

Methods

The study employed a qualitative descriptive-interpretive case study design to explore the language practices of Subanen children in last-mile schools in Misamis Occidental during School Year 2025-2026. Twelve

Subanen learners enrolled in multigrade classrooms were purposively selected based on Indigenous identity, regular exposure to Subanen at home or in the community, experience with Cebuano, Filipino, and/or English in school, and availability of parental consent and learner assent. Data were gathered through a researcher-developed and expert-validated semi-structured interview guide, classroom observations, informal conversations, and review of relevant classroom documents and learning materials. Interviews were audio-recorded with permission, transcribed verbatim, and translated when necessary while preserving the intended meaning of the participants' responses. Field notes documented classroom interaction and contextual observations. Data were analyzed thematically through familiarization, coding, development and review of themes, and interpretation of recurring patterns. The analysis was informed by Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic approach. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, parental consent, child assent, confidentiality, use of pseudonyms, secure data handling, and the right to withdraw. The study was bounded by the experiences of the twelve participating learners and the selected last-mile school contexts; consequently, its findings are intended for contextual understanding rather than statistical generalization.

Results and Discussions

Languages Used by Subanen Children in Daily Interactions

The first set of findings showed that language use was strongly domain-based. Subanen was most evident in the home, where children interacted with parents, grandparents, siblings, and relatives. Participants described the language as natural, familiar, and emotionally safe. One learner explained, "At home, I am not afraid to speak because everyone understands Subanen" (P05). Another shared that grandparents reminded children to continue speaking Subanen so that the language would not be forgotten (P03). These accounts show that the family remains the primary environment for intergenerational language transmission.

The home setting also supported linguistic confidence. Because family members understood Subanen, children could express ideas without fear of being judged for incorrect vocabulary or grammar. The thesis interprets this as evidence that familiar first-language environments strengthen both language development and emotional well-being, consistent with Cummins (2021) and UNESCO (2021). The persistence of Subanen in family interaction also reflects the importance of community domains in maintaining minority languages.

"Our grandparents remind us to speak Subanen so that we will not forget our language." (P03)

"We learn many words from our elders, especially when they tell stories or give advice." (P04)

The findings further suggest that language maintenance is closely tied to cultural transmission. Stories, advice, family conversations, and everyday routines provide children with opportunities to hear vocabulary and expressions that may not appear in school. This supports the study's argument that the home is not merely a private communication space but an important site for sustaining Indigenous identity and linguistic continuity.

Languages Used by Subanen Children in Daily Interactions

In school, the pattern changed. Filipino and English were used for formal lessons, reading, recitation, and presentation, while Cebuano often served as a common language for wider communication. A participant stated, "In school, our teacher uses Filipino and sometimes English when teaching the lesson" (P01). Another explained that learners were asked to answer in Filipino or English during recitation (P05). These experiences show how institutional expectations shape children's language choices.

Rather than abandoning Subanen, learners frequently combined languages. They shifted to Subanen when clarification was needed and mixed Subanen, Filipino, English, and Cebuano depending on the available words and the person they were addressing. The thesis interprets this code-switching as an adaptive resource rather than a linguistic deficiency. This interpretation is consistent with García and Kleyn (2020) and McCarty and Lee (2021), who frame translanguaging as a way for multilingual learners to mobilize their complete linguistic repertoire.

"Sometimes we mix Subanen, Filipino, and English when we talk, especially in school." (P03)

"We change the language depending on who we are talking to." (P06)

Language choice also reflected perceived usefulness. Some participants preferred Cebuano because many

people in the community understood it, while Filipino and English were associated with schooling and future opportunities. The thesis links these choices to language prestige and practical utility (Tupas & Lorente, 2020). Such flexibility helps children communicate effectively, yet it can also reduce the frequency of Subanen use outside the home if dominant languages consistently provide greater social or institutional advantage.

The community therefore functions as a multilingual contact zone. Children learn and practice languages through neighbors, peers, public interaction, media, and digital devices. This exposure broadens communicative competence, but it also increases pressure on the Indigenous language. UNESCO (2021) emphasizes that sustained use and institutional reinforcement are important if minority languages are to remain strong among younger generations.

Language Practices in Multigrade Classrooms

The second major finding concerned the ways learners used their languages to understand lessons in multigrade classrooms. Subanen frequently served as a cognitive anchor. When a lesson was difficult, learners translated instructions, thought through ideas in Subanen, or asked classmates to explain concepts in the language they understood best. One participant said, "Sometimes I translate what the teacher says into Subanen so I can follow the instructions" (P03). Another reported thinking about difficult content in Subanen before answering (P05). The thesis relates this to research showing that the first language can support the organization and construction of knowledge (Cummins, 2021; Heugh, 2021).

Code-switching was also a regular classroom practice. Learners attempted to respond in Filipino or English but shifted to Subanen or Cebuano when they lacked the vocabulary needed to express an idea. This flexible language use helped maintain participation and reduced the cognitive burden of strict language separation. The thesis notes that multilingual education research cautions against rigid separation of languages when learners can use their full repertoire to support deeper understanding (Flores & Schissel, 2021).

"I use Subanen to understand, but I try to answer in Filipino or English, so I mix them." (P02)

"I mix languages when I am not sure of the correct words in English." (P04)

These practices show that multilingualism functions as a learning strategy. Learners were not randomly mixing languages; they were selecting linguistic resources according to what helped them understand, communicate, and complete academic tasks. The ability to move between languages therefore supported both comprehension and participation.

Language Practices in Multigrade Classrooms

Peer assistance was especially important in the multigrade setting. Older or more proficient learners helped younger classmates understand instructions and difficult concepts. Participants described asking classmates to translate or explain lessons in Subanen. One learner stated, "The older students help us understand the lesson by explaining it in Subanen" (P01), while another said that explanations were easier to understand when classmates used their own language (P02).

Group activities created additional spaces for the Indigenous language. Learners reported discussing tasks in Subanen so that everyone could follow the activity. Such interaction demonstrates the social dimension of learning: understanding was often constructed collaboratively rather than individually. The multigrade classroom, despite its instructional complexity, can therefore provide opportunities for peer scaffolding when learners are allowed to draw on familiar languages.

"When we work in groups, we talk in Subanen so everyone can understand." (P05)

"We help each other by discussing the lesson in our language during activities." (P06)

Teacher support also shaped language access. Participants reported that teachers sometimes translated difficult ideas into Subanen, mixed languages, or used examples related to community experiences. The thesis connects these practices with multilingual pedagogy and culturally responsive teaching (Lucas & Villegas, 2020; Gay, 2010). When teachers recognized learners' linguistic resources, children were better able to connect academic content with familiar knowledge.

However, the need for translation also revealed an instructional gap. Some learners became quiet when they did not understand English or Filipino. Others feared making mistakes. Dewaele and Li (2020), as cited in the thesis, identify language anxiety as a factor that can reduce willingness to communicate. Thus, multilingual support is not only a comprehension strategy; it can also protect participation and confidence.

Challenges in Maintaining the Subanen Language

The third major finding showed that maintaining Subanen was challenged by the dominance of other languages in formal schooling. Participants observed that teachers commonly used Bisaya/Cebuano, Filipino, and English, while Subanen was used less often during formal lessons. One participant stated, "We hear more Bisaya in class than Subanen" (P03), while another explained that Subanen was usually used with classmates rather than as the language of the lesson (P06).

This unequal distribution of languages can gradually narrow the functions of Subanen. When children consistently encounter other languages in textbooks, instruction, assessment, and public interaction, they may come to associate those languages with academic success and social mobility. The thesis connects this pattern with research showing that regional or dominant languages can displace Indigenous languages in public and educational domains when intentional preservation efforts are weak (Dunstan, 2021; Tupas, 2021).

Language proficiency gaps also affected participation. Learners reported difficulty expressing ideas in English or Filipino even when they understood the lesson. Some remained silent because they were unsure of vocabulary or afraid of being laughed at. Macaro (2021) is cited in the thesis to explain how limited proficiency in the language of instruction can constrain both comprehension and academic expression, while Dewaele and Li (2020) highlight the effects of language anxiety.

"Sometimes I know the answer, but I cannot say it in English." (P03)

"I do not raise my hand because I am not confident in Filipino." (P09)

These experiences demonstrate that language choice has direct educational consequences. When learners cannot use a familiar language to demonstrate understanding, assessment may reflect language proficiency as much as subject knowledge. A more flexible multilingual approach can therefore improve equity by allowing learners to access content while gradually developing competence in school languages. Challenges in Maintaining the

Participants also described changing language preferences. Bisaya/Cebuano was often used with friends and community members because it was widely understood, while Filipino and English were associated with school and future employment. One participant explained that English was important for school and the future (P04), while another observed that Filipino and Bisaya were useful because many people understood them (P05). The thesis interprets these attitudes through the perceived prestige and utility of dominant languages (May, 2020; Tupas, 2021).

Several learners noticed that their use of Subanen had already declined. One said, "Sometimes I forget some Subanen words because I always use other languages" (P08). Another observed that younger children increasingly spoke Bisaya rather than Subanen (P11). These accounts suggest that language shift is not an abstract future concern but a process that children can already observe in their daily lives.

Limited instructional resources further weakened opportunities for language maintenance. Participants reported having few or no books, modules, or formal lessons in Subanen. One learner stated, "We do not have books written in Subanen, so we use Filipino or English materials" (P01). Another said that they were not taught how to read or write in Subanen (P05). Without written materials and formal literacy opportunities, the language may remain restricted to oral and informal domains.

"Most of our learning materials are in English or Filipino, not in our own language." (P02)

"Subanen is not part of our lessons, so we rarely use it in school." (P04)

Media and peer influence added further pressure. Children were exposed to Filipino and English through videos, phones, television, and online content. They also adjusted to the language of friends to participate in

conversations. These patterns demonstrate how language shift can be reinforced simultaneously by schooling, media, peer networks, and wider community communication. The thesis therefore argues that family use alone may be insufficient without stronger institutional support.

Overall, the results reveal a dual reality. Multilingual competence gives Subanen children valuable communicative and academic flexibility, but the unequal status of the languages can place the Indigenous language at risk. Sustainable support requires schools to treat Subanen not merely as a fallback language for clarification but as a legitimate resource for learning, literacy, identity, and cultural continuity.

Conclusions

The study concludes that the language practices of Subanen children in last-mile schools are multilingual, adaptive, and strongly shaped by the domains in which communication occurs. Subanen remains most stable in the home and family, where it supports everyday communication, emotional security, cultural knowledge, and intergenerational connection. Cebuano, Filipino, and English become more prominent in school, public interaction, and media-related contexts because they carry wider communicative and institutional functions. In multigrade classrooms, learners actively use their linguistic repertoire to make learning possible. Code-switching, translation, thinking through ideas in Subanen, peer explanation, and teacher-mediated multilingual support help children understand lessons and participate. These practices show that the mother tongue remains cognitively and socially valuable even when it is not the principal formal language of instruction. At the same time, the continued maintenance of Subanen faces significant pressures. Dominant school languages, limited proficiency in Filipino and English, anxiety during classroom communication, changing language preferences, lack of Subanen learning materials, media exposure, and reduced intergenerational use may gradually narrow the language's functions. The findings therefore suggest that multilingualism should be supported without allowing the Indigenous language to become invisible in formal education.

Recommendations

Teachers in last-mile and multigrade schools should continue using flexible multilingual strategies, including translation, contextualization, peer-assisted learning, and purposeful use of Subanen to support comprehension and participation. Schools should develop or localize age-appropriate Subanen reading materials, vocabulary resources, stories, and culturally relevant learning activities. Teacher capacity-building should include culturally responsive pedagogy, Indigenous Peoples Education, and practical strategies for managing multilingual classrooms. Parents, elders, and community members should be encouraged to sustain regular Subanen use at home and to participate in storytelling, cultural activities, language documentation, and school-community learning initiatives. Education authorities may strengthen institutional support by providing resources for Indigenous-language materials, teacher development, and culturally grounded programs. Future studies may examine language practices in other Subanen communities and follow younger speakers over time to better understand patterns of maintenance, shift, literacy development, and identity.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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