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Pedagogical Approaches to Student-Centered Learning in Filipino Instruction: Evidence from a Rural Secondary School in Mountain Province

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Abstract

Student-centered learning has been widely recognized as an effective pedagogical orientation that promotes learner autonomy, engagement, and meaningful knowledge construction. However, empirical studies examining its enactment in Filipino instruction within rural secondary school contexts remain limited. This study explored the pedagogical approaches employed by a Filipino teacher in a rural public secondary school in Mountain Province and examined how student-centered learning principles were operationalized in classroom practice. Using a qualitative case study design, data were gathered through classroom observations, semi-structured interviews, and document analysis. Findings reveal that student-centered learning was enacted through contextualized instruction, dialogic teaching, collaborative activities, and inquiry-oriented tasks grounded in learners' linguistic and cultural experiences. Despite constraints related to resources and geography, the teacher demonstrated strong pedagogical agency by adapting strategies to learners' needs and contextual realities. The study highlights the role of teacher flexibility and reflective practice in sustaining learner-centered pedagogy in rural settings and contributes to the growing body of literature on language teaching and rural education in developing contexts.

Keywords: student-centered learning, Filipino instruction, pedagogy, rural education, teacher agency

Introduction

Contemporary educational reforms increasingly emphasize student-centered learning as a response to calls for more inclusive, participatory, and meaningful teaching–learning processes. In language education, student-centered pedagogy shifts instruction away from teacher-dominated transmission toward practices that foreground learner voice, interaction, and contextual relevance. In the Philippine context, Filipino as a subject plays a critical role in developing linguistic competence, cultural identity, and critical consciousness among learners. However, implementing student-centered approaches in Filipino instruction poses unique challenges in rural secondary schools, where teachers often contend with limited resources, multigrade contexts, and diverse learner needs.

Rural schools in geographically isolated areas such as Mountain Province present distinct pedagogical conditions that require adaptive and context-sensitive teaching practices. While policy frameworks encourage learner-centered instruction, there is limited empirical documentation of how such approaches are enacted in everyday classroom practice in rural Filipino classrooms. This study addresses this gap by examining pedagogical approaches to student-centered learning in Filipino instruction in a rural secondary school. Specifically, it investigates how a teacher operationalizes learner-centered principles amid contextual constraints and explores the implications for effective language teaching in rural settings.

Review of Related Literature

Student-Centered Learning in Language Education

Student-centered learning is anchored in constructivist theories that conceptualize learning as an active, socially situated process in which knowledge is constructed through interaction and experience rather than transmitted from teacher to learner. Within language education, this pedagogical orientation foregrounds learners' active engagement in communication, interpretation, and meaning-making. Instruction is designed to provide opportunities for learners to use language purposefully through authentic tasks that mirror real-life communicative situations, thereby strengthening both linguistic competence and functional language use. By positioning learners as co-constructors of knowledge, student-centered approaches encourage autonomy, critical thinking, and sustained engagement, as learners take greater responsibility for their own learning processes. Empirical research consistently demonstrates that such approaches enhance learner motivation, participation, and communicative competence by fostering interactive and supportive learning environments (Prince & Felder, 2006). Dialogic teaching, collaborative learning structures, and inquiry-based activities are widely recognized as core features of learner-centered language instruction, as they promote peer interaction, reflection, and deeper understanding of language concepts through shared meaning-making.

Contextualized Instruction and Mother Tongue–Based Learning

Contextualized instruction plays a crucial role in effective language teaching, as it enables learners to connect linguistic forms and structures with cultural meanings, social practices, and lived experiences. In multilingual and culturally diverse settings, particularly in rural areas, language learning becomes more meaningful when instruction is grounded in familiar contexts that resonate with learners' everyday lives. Studies in Philippine education emphasize that contextualized and culturally responsive teaching improves comprehension, participation, and learner confidence by validating students' linguistic and cultural identities. In Filipino instruction, the integration of local narratives, oral traditions, community practices, and culturally relevant texts supports not only language development but also cultural affirmation and identity formation. Mother tongue–based and context-sensitive approaches allow learners to draw from prior knowledge and experiences, facilitating smoother transitions to more formal or academic language use. As such, contextualization serves both pedagogical and sociocultural functions, strengthening learner engagement while preserving the cultural relevance of language education.

Teacher Agency in Rural Education

Teacher agency refers to educators' capacity to exercise professional judgment through informed, reflective, and context-responsive instructional decision-making. In rural education settings, teacher agency is particularly significant because teachers often operate within conditions marked by limited resources, geographical isolation, and diverse learner needs. Rather than serving merely as implementers of prescribed curricula, rural teachers frequently act as curriculum interpreters and instructional innovators who adapt pedagogical strategies to local realities. Research indicates that reflective practice and pedagogical adaptability enable teachers to sustain

instructional quality despite structural and material constraints (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Through continuous reflection on learner responses and instructional outcomes, teachers refine their approaches to ensure relevance, inclusivity, and effectiveness. Consequently, teacher agency becomes a central mechanism for implementing student-centered pedagogy in resource-constrained environments, highlighting the pivotal role of teachers as active agents of change in rural education contexts.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative case study research design to examine pedagogical practices within a real-life classroom context. The case study approach was appropriate because it allowed for an in-depth and holistic exploration of student-centered instruction as it naturally occurred in Filipino classes in a rural secondary school. By focusing on actual classroom interactions and instructional processes, the design enabled a nuanced understanding of how pedagogical strategies were enacted within specific contextual conditions. This approach was particularly suitable for capturing the complexity of teaching practices in rural settings, where instructional decisions are shaped by both learner needs and environmental constraints.

The study was conducted in a rural public secondary school in Mountain Province, Philippines, a setting characterized by geographic isolation and limited instructional resources. The participant was a Teacher III handling Filipino classes at the junior high school level. The teacher had several years of teaching experience in rural schools and was directly involved in lesson planning, classroom instruction, and instructional decision-making. The participant was purposively selected due to professional experience and active engagement in implementing learner-centered strategies, making the site and participant appropriate for examining student-centered pedagogy in a rural Filipino classroom.

Data were collected through multiple qualitative methods to ensure a comprehensive and credible account of instructional practices. Classroom observations were conducted to examine teaching strategies, learner participation, classroom interactions, and the overall flow of instruction. Semi-structured interviews were used to elicit the teacher's pedagogical beliefs, instructional challenges, and reflective insights related to student-centered learning. In addition, lesson plans and instructional materials were analyzed to provide further evidence of how learner-centered principles were planned and enacted in classroom practice. The use of multiple data sources allowed for triangulation and strengthened the credibility of the findings.

Data analysis was conducted using a thematic, inductive approach. Observation notes, interview transcripts, and instructional documents were carefully reviewed and coded to identify recurring patterns and meaningful units related to student-centered pedagogy, contextualized instruction, and teacher agency. Codes were compared across data sources and gradually organized into broader themes through constant comparison. Triangulation and iterative review of the data enhanced the trustworthiness of the analysis by ensuring that interpretations were grounded in consistent and convergent evidence from observations, interviews, and documents.

Results

Findings indicate that student-centered learning in Filipino instruction was enacted through four interrelated pedagogical practices: contextualized teaching, dialogic interaction, collaborative learning, and adaptive instructional decision-making.

The first theme, **contextualized and culture-responsive pedagogy**, highlights how student-centered learning was enacted through the integration of learners' everyday experiences, community realities, and culturally familiar situations into Filipino lessons. Instructional content and examples were deliberately drawn from learners' local environment to make abstract language concepts more meaningful and accessible. One participant explained, "*Mas nagiging malinaw ang aralin kapag ang halimbawa ay galing sa karanasan ng mga bata sa kanilang komunidad*" (P6). Another shared, "*Kapag pamilyar ang paksa, mas aktibo silang sumasagot at mas mahaba ang kanilang paliwanag*" (P3). A third participant noted, "*Mas nagiging kumpiyansa ang mga mag-aaral dahil pakiramdam nila ay bahagi ng aralin ang kanilang kultura*" (P9). These responses indicate that contextualization enhanced comprehension, confidence, and learner participation by validating students' lived experiences and cultural identities.

From an interpretive standpoint, contextualized instruction functioned as a key mechanism for deepening engagement and promoting meaningful learning in Filipino instruction. By situating language use within familiar

social and cultural contexts, learners were able to connect linguistic forms with real-life meanings, supporting both comprehension and expression. This finding aligns with studies emphasizing that culturally responsive and place-based pedagogy improves learner engagement and academic understanding, particularly in rural and linguistically diverse settings (Bartholomaeus, 2006; Howley, Howley, & Johnson, 2014). In language education, contextualization has been shown to strengthen learner motivation and identity affirmation, reinforcing the effectiveness of student-centered approaches grounded in learners' sociocultural realities.

The second theme, **dialogic and participatory learning practices**, reflects the emphasis on interaction, discussion, and shared meaning-making in the Filipino classroom. Instructional strategies prioritized questioning, group discussions, and opportunities for learners to articulate ideas, rather than relying solely on teacher-led explanations. One participant stated, *"Mas pinipili kong magtanong upang mag-isip ang mga mag-aaral at magbahagi ng kanilang opinyon"* (P6). Another observed, *"Kapag may talakayan, mas nagiging buhay ang klase at mas maraming mag-aaral ang nakikilahok"* (P2). A third participant shared, *"Kahit ang mahiyain ay natutong magsalita kapag may gawain na may talakayan"* (P5). These accounts demonstrate that dialogic practices fostered confidence, inclusion, and active learner participation.

Interpretively, dialogic instruction strengthened student-centered learning by positioning learners as active contributors to classroom discourse and co-constructors of knowledge. Such practices are consistent with research highlighting the value of dialogic teaching and collaborative learning in language education, where interaction is central to developing communicative competence and critical thinking (Alexander, 2008; Prince & Felder, 2006). In rural contexts, participatory approaches are particularly significant as they create inclusive learning environments that encourage learner voice and reduce dependence on rote or passive learning. The findings affirm that dialogic pedagogy is a critical feature of effective student-centered Filipino instruction.

The third theme, **teacher agency through adaptive and reflective instruction**, underscores the teacher's role in sustaining student-centered learning despite contextual constraints. The teacher demonstrated flexibility by modifying strategies, adjusting activities, and improvising materials based on learner responses and classroom conditions. One participant explained, *"Kapag hindi epektibo ang isang estratehiya, agad kong binabago ang gawain"* (P10). Another remarked, *"Kailangan talagang maging flexible lalo na kapag kulang ang kagamitan"* (P3). A third participant reflected, *"Mahalaga ang paghinay pagkatapos ng klase upang malaman kung ano ang dapat baguhin sa susunod"* (P4). These responses highlight reflective practice as central to instructional decision-making in a rural setting.

From an analytical perspective, teacher agency emerged as a decisive factor in maintaining pedagogical effectiveness. Reflective and adaptive practices enabled the teacher to respond constructively to resource limitations while preserving the principles of student-centered learning. This finding is consistent with research on rural education, which emphasizes that teachers often act as instructional leaders and innovators who adapt curricula and pedagogy to local realities (Azano & Stewart, 2016). Sterling (2010) similarly argues that reflective practice supports sustainable and transformative pedagogy. The results affirm that in resource-constrained environments, student-centered learning is sustained not merely through materials or policy mandates but through teachers' professional agency and reflective judgment.

Discussion

The findings demonstrate that student-centered learning in Filipino instruction is feasible in rural contexts when it is anchored on pedagogical flexibility, contextualized teaching, and strong teacher agency. In this study, learner-centered practices such as dialogic questioning, collaborative tasks, and inquiry-oriented activities created spaces where students actively interpreted texts, expressed viewpoints, and negotiated meaning with peers, rather than merely receiving information. This aligns with constructivist perspectives that conceptualize learning as socially mediated and strengthened when learners participate in authentic meaning-making processes (Allen, 2022; Do, 2023). Consistent with research on active and inductive learning, student-centered approaches tend to increase engagement and motivation because learners are positioned as co-constructors of knowledge and are given opportunities to explain, justify, and apply ideas in contextually meaningful tasks (Prince & Felder, 2006). Importantly, the emphasis on contextualization in the rural Filipino classroom using familiar community experiences, culturally resonant examples, and locally intelligible situations reflects the documented value of culturally responsive and place-based pedagogy in rural and linguistically diverse settings, where relevance and cultural affirmation can improve participation and comprehension (Bartholomaeus, 2006; Howley et al., 2014; Lopez, 2020).

Teacher agency emerged as a central factor in sustaining student-centered instruction, particularly under conditions of limited resources and structural constraints. The teacher's reflective and adaptive decisions modifying tasks, re-sequencing lessons, and improvising materials to match learners' needs illustrate how rural educators often function as curriculum interpreters and instructional designers, not simply implementers of prescribed routines. This finding is consistent with rural education research showing that teacher agency supports instructional continuity and quality by enabling teachers to respond creatively and responsibly to local conditions (Azano & Stewart, 2016). It also resonates with evidence that reflective practice is closely tied to teachers' capacity to adjust instruction and maintain learner engagement, especially when classroom realities require flexible expertise (Reichenberg, 2022; Purnama, 2025). Taken together, these results reinforce a key implication in the rural pedagogy literature: effective teaching in rural schools is not determined solely by the availability of resources, but by the teacher's professional judgment, adaptability, and capacity to design context-responsive learning experiences that keep learners actively involved and meaningfully engaged (Howley et al., 2014; Kong et al., 2022).

Conclusion and Implications

This study provides empirical evidence that student-centered pedagogical approaches can be effectively implemented in Filipino instruction within rural secondary schools. Contextualized teaching, dialogic interaction, and collaborative learning, supported by strong teacher agency, contributed to meaningful learner engagement despite resource limitations.

Implications for practice suggest the need to support rural teachers through professional development that emphasizes reflective practice, contextualization, and learner-centered strategies. **Implications for policy** include recognizing teacher agency as a critical component of instructional quality in rural education. Future research may involve multiple sites or mixed-methods designs to further examine student-centered language pedagogy across diverse rural contexts.

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