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Research Article

Lived Experiences of Novice Secondary School English Teachers in the Implementation of Modular Distance Learning in the Philippines

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ABSTRACT

As COVID-19 forced schools to shift to distance learning, the modular approach, in particular, became the most viable option for the continuity of learning. However, these sudden changes also brought unique experiences to novice teachers. This study explored the lived experiences of novice secondary school English teachers (NSSET) in Tagum City in implementing modular distance learning (MDL) in the context of the pandemic. Phenomenological inquiry based on Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory was used to explain the experiences of the eight (8) participants. Using validated researcher-made interview questions, virtual in-depth interviews were conducted. Through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step framework, themes that emerged, categorized into five echelons, are as follows: poor cooperation of parents and students, and productive collaboration with colleagues and immediate heads; overwhelming pressure from external sources, and taking direction from others' influence; perpetual communication breakdown, and confronting challenges in the delivery of modular learning; meeting society's expectations; abrupt adjustment to the new normal. These shape the experiences of the NSSET in conducting MDL in the new normal. However, the poor cooperation of parents and students poses the most significant experience for the NSSET. Notwithstanding, novice teachers navigated successfully through these experiences brought about by implementing MDL amid the pandemic.

Keywords: *Distance learning, Modular distance learning, Novice English teachers*

Introduction

The transition into professional teaching is oftentimes the most difficult phase that novice teachers go through. Teaching as a profession is overflowing with challenges, such as lesson

planning, preparation of instructional materials, and managing student behaviors. The term 'novice teacher' refers to anyone who has finished their preservice teacher education

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and has less than three years of teaching experience (Widiati et al., 2018). It is generally common for novice teachers, including novice teachers of English, to manage demands similar to those of their more experienced colleagues.

The sudden shift to distance learning has presented varied challenges to teachers around the world. In Turkey, the study of Sari and Nayir (2020) conducted among 65 teachers found that Internet access, infrastructure, and human resources were the main challenges faced by participants.

In the context of the Philippines, novice teachers are grappling with the demands of modular learning in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department of Education (DepEd) began to offer Self-Learning Modules (SLMs) as a substitute learning delivery modality in the school year 2020-2021 for various types of learners in the Philippines, predominantly through modules. Hipolito (2022) reported that novice teachers cited the inadequacy in parents' preparedness in teaching their children as a major challenge in the conduct of modular learning. Meanwhile, Albor et al. (2021) found that inadequate training in the conduct of distance learning and expenses shouldered personally for the reproduction, distribution, and retrieval of printed modules are among the biggest challenges novice teachers face in delivering modular learning. Lastly, As Mañalac (2021) reported that the writing of the modules is a stressful endeavor, particularly for newly hired teachers.

With the unexpected shift towards the use of modular modality in schools, there is still scarce literature on the experiences of educators in conducting modular learning, especially those exploring the perspectives of novice teachers. Experienced teachers have a strong knowledge base and practical skills to tackle classroom challenges which include assessments, activities, student work, uninvolved parents, uneven participation, and enforcing rules (Talimodao & Madrigal, 2021).

Hence, novice teachers are at a disadvantage in the new normal. Meanwhile, Lomi and Mbato (2020) suggested that further studies be conducted to understand better the realities faced by newly hired teachers who are still novices in the profession. They stressed

that novice teachers face a completely different workplace than the one that they prepared for during their pre-service training and education.

The above-mentioned issues and gaps in literature inspired the researcher to explore the lived experiences of novice secondary school English teachers in Tagum City in the implementation of modular distance learning amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the results generated from this study can help tenured teachers and school administrators better understand novice teachers and help the latter adapt more efficiently with rigors of the profession. Additionally, the results can also serve as baseline data for future studies on novice secondary school English teachers and the conduct of modular distance learning, particularly in language teaching. Finally, it can provide information for review in the training of newly hired secondary school English teachers, particularly on the Teacher Induction Program, and the conduct of modular distance learning.

Domain of Inquiry

This study investigated the Novice Secondary School English Teachers' experiences in the implementation of the modular distance learning during the pandemic.

Methods

This study employed a qualitative-phenomenological research design to describe the lived experiences of novice secondary school English teachers and their interactions with the different actors in implementing modular learning. Phenomenology is the study of consciousness structures through the eyes of a first-person observer. Because it is an experience of or about some object, the intentionality of an experience, or its orientation toward something, is its essential structure (Dabengwa et al., 2023)

Data Collection Procedure

This study aimed to gather data on the experiences of novice secondary English teachers in modular learning. The researcher contacted the Department of Education Tagum City Division Office to identify potential participants,

who were then asked to sign an informed consent form. The study focused on their lived experiences and was conducted virtually, ensuring data was collected without compromising the Department of Health's (DOH) basic health protocols. The data was transcribed, searched for themes, reviewed, and defined. Finally, exemplars were sent to participants for member checking, and they were included in the findings once confirmed to be accurate and correct.

Sampling

This study utilized criterion sampling to identify individuals based on pre-established criteria which could provide in-depth and precise information regarding the issue being studied (Schreier, 2018). In this case, the participants are novice secondary English teachers conducting modular learning. Additionally, these participants are from public secondary schools in the division of Tagum City who were hired at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. This study chose eight (8) novice secondary English teachers hired to implement modular distance learning amidst the pandemic. They were all newly hired English teachers from secondary schools within the Tagum City division hired from March 2020 to February 2021 during the pandemic.

Instrument

In this study, a researcher-made instrument was used for the in-depth interview. Five (5) interview questions, with additional probing questions, were used to explore the NSSETs' experiences in implementing modular learning. The study instrument was independently evaluated by three experts using qualitative research design. The interview guide was pilot-tested on three separate participants after the comments and necessary adjustments were incorporated to meet the needed validation score. All three participants were secondary English teachers in Tagum City Division who used modular learning. Finally, all observations made during the pilot test were recorded and incorporated into the final research instrument.

Result and Discussion

This section discusses the themes generated from the lived experiences – good and bad – of novice secondary English teachers in implementing the modular approach amid the pandemic. These themes include (a) *poor cooperation of parents and students*; (b) *productive collaboration with colleagues and immediate heads*; (c) *overwhelming pressure from external sources*; (d) *taking direction from others' influence*; (e) *perpetual communication breakdown*; (f) *confronting challenges in the delivery of modular learning*; (g) *meeting society's expectations*; and (i) *abrupt adjustment to the new normal*.

Theme 1: Poor cooperation of parents or guardians

Based on the statements shared by the NTs, their lived experiences in the conduct of modular learning in the new normal was heavily influenced by individuals they personally interact with regularly. One of the commonly mentioned individuals are the parents. Already carrying a major role, parents now have an exponentially more critical role in the conduct of modular learning amid the pandemic. As students are not allowed to report to school, parents are vital in ensuring that the modules are delivered and retrieved. However, some parents fail to properly cooperate with teachers in retrieving and submitting modules. This is an enormous obstacle as this issue can easily short-circuit modular learning.

Some parents do not retrieve or submit their children's modules on time, preventing teachers from performing other responsibilities that are assigned to them. NT2 lamented the inability of some parents to follow the schedule of release and submission of modules:

"Naa pay parents na dili mutunong sa schedule, so di ko kahawa sa akong classroom to do other tasks." (There are parents who do not follow the schedule, so I cannot leave the classroom to do other tasks.)

NT4 revealed that during the schedule of retrieval and distribution of their child's modules, some parents even completely failed to report.

"...there are a lot of parents who do not -- who will not follow the schedules in the distribution."

In addition, NT7 pointed to the fact that some parents completely snub her when asked to retrieve the modules.

"...sometimes [the parents] ignore me and sometimes just keep on saying na 'wala man gud mi time makahapit ma'am'." (Sometimes they ignore me, and sometimes they just say that they do not have time to get the modules.)

NT4, on the other hand, shared that some parents were unfairly demanding. They pressure her to release the modules expeditiously as they claim to have somewhere urgent to attend to.

"There were some parents, ma'am who were who are demanding on especially when they have worked to go to and they are just coming here to get the modules."

Theme 2: Productive collaboration with colleagues, immediate heads

The second theme generated on the individuals with direct interaction with the novice teachers are their colleagues and immediate heads. With the absence of students in the classrooms, the NTs colleagues and immediate heads are the ones they interact with the most in the workplace. Their experiences with their co-teachers were generally positive, citing the openness of their seniors to lend a helping hand whenever the NTs are confused or at a loss for what to do.

During the crafting of the modules, NT6 stated how readily her colleagues helped her.

"Gina-guide po nila [colleagues] ako how to write modules since wala pa naman akong experience." (They [colleagues] guide me on how to write the modules since I do not have any experience.)

NT4, on the other hand, disclosed how generous her colleagues are in letting her use their office supplies and equipment.

"When I lost or when I was running out of papers or bond papers for the printing, ma'am, they

offered it to me ma'am or they offered a printer ma'am for me to use."

Cooperation is also paramount in the printing of modules, where supplies are limited. NT1 revealed that she and her colleagues created a printing schedule.

"We scheduled since we only have limited printers, we scheduled like for Monday, English and Filipino will use the printers then so on and so forth."

Meanwhile, NT3 shared how grateful she was for the trust given by her department head.

"So far, we are okay. We help each other. I am thankful for our department head for teaching me what to do. She is training me by letting me do things I do not know before, like being the technical person behind our LAC sessions, or during COT."

Theme 3: Overwhelming pressure from external sources

As the newbies in their work environment, NTs often grapple with the need to prove their worth to the people around them, especially to their school heads. Despite the lack of direct interaction with their principals, the participants shared that their experience in the conduct of MDL is heavily influenced by the former. Although their school heads do not micromanage them, they feel the stress of living up to the expectations.

NT2 shared that, in spite of rarely crossing paths with their school heads, she feels the weight of excelling in her work.

"We don't often see her [the principal]. Yet I can feel pressure from in my work. I personally feel the unnecessary pressure."

Meanwhile, NT3 highlighted that she feels pressure from another individual. She mentioned that she grapples to meet the standards of her department head.

"Diha ma pressure ko [expectation of department head in facilitating programs] nga dapat buhaton jud nako akong di gud ingon na best kaa ma'am pero atleast di maulawan atong department." (I feel pressured because of the

things I needed to do to the best of my abilities so that our department will not fail.)

Despite existing completely outside of the schools where the NTs teach, education planners and evaluators pose significant pressure for the participants. NT3 expressed how nerve-racking visitations from the division are.

"Whenever there are visits from the division or regional office, I personally feel the unnecessary pressure. We do all the work from cleaning, structuring our classrooms, to paper works...it is tiring thinking we have modules to face beside those works."

NT6 pointed out that education evaluators induce immense pressure when they are checking the modules crafted.

"Super, super pressured by evaluators in writing module."

Theme 4: Taking direction from others' influence

Contrary to the pressure that the NTs feel from their school heads and educational planners, another theme that emerged was the participants' willingness to follow others. They shared that they respect and appreciate the influence from their colleagues, the school principal, and other stakeholders. Knowing that the still have much to learn in the performance of their different functions, the NTs expressed that they allow others to influence how they go about in the conduct of MDL.

NT5 noted the positive influence of their school principal towards them.

"I know that our principal is very supportive on our ways of handling our students and our parents, po."

Meanwhile, NT6 shared how her co-teachers accommodated her and helped train her in crafting the modules.

"I think from my colleagues [influence] because they have, yung parang nag tra-train na sila for writing modules and then ako parang kinuha lang nila ako ba parang wala akong background magsulat nang modules." (I think from my colleagues [influence] because they have helped train me for writing modules, and

then they took me in despite not have any background on writing modules.)

Another influence that the participants highlighted were the personnel from the division office. NT7 disclosed the guidance she receives from them.

"Division [personnel] in DepEd they are always there to guide us on whatever challenges that we face especially in this new normal that we are still adjusting because this is still new to us."

NT6 also shed light on how the education evaluators aid her in the crafting of the modules.

"The evaluators, gina guide po nila ako how to write modules since wala pa naman akong experience." (The evaluators guide me on how to write modules since I do not have any experience yet.)

Another stakeholder that influences the conduct of MDL, according to NT2, is the local government unit.

"LGU, yeah, are in a way of help to us. It is inspiring me to do better in my work because I am not alone, the other stakeholders are helping the learners to continue their studies."

Finally, NT6 pointed to some parents that she scarcely meets but still influence her performance. Their feedback, according to her, is important.

"Some parents...I can say, we can't interact everyday... however their feedbacks really affect my performance. ...I can assess myself in my performance on how to handle that through those feedbacks given by the parents."

Theme 5: Perpetual communication breakdown

In a vastly different educational environment compared to before the advent of the pandemic, the importance of establishing a constant line of communication with the students is paramount. With students confined in their own homes, the traditional channels of communication (i.e., face-to-face) have been scrapped almost entirely in favor of digital platforms. In the context of the participants, this means that

they communicate with their students, as well as the parents, mostly through Messenger, a popular online messaging application that is installed in smartphones.

NT5 voiced her concern about the use of the Messenger app in communicating with her students.

"However, my only concern is that messenger is the only way of communication as what I said a while ago again that most of my students are not online all the time."

NT1 also shared the challenge of relying on the use of the Messenger app.

"Since we also have a group chat in my advisory, but some of them cannot read the announcements, ... I cannot really rely on the group chat of the students since not all of them kasi wala silang load siguro (they probably do not have cellphone load) during the schedule so I have to personally call parents."

NT8 pointed out that in her school, securing a stable internet connection or even a signal for phone calls is a huge challenge.

"Honestly ma'am kay naa gyud mi sa area nga walay signal so lisud jud ang social media didtoa lisud jud silay even gane ang pagtext namo lisud gane sa pag text lang so how much more kung when it comes to mga internet na." (Honestly Ma'am, there really are areas without a signal, so it is difficult to use social media there. Even texting is a chore, how much more when it comes to the internet connection.)

NT3, meanwhile, pointed out that power outages are a common occurrence in her school. This adds another hurdle in trying to communicate with the students.

"Kusog man sya [internet connection] didto pero naa lang juy time na kanang lain man gud didto ma'am na mohangin lang gamay no kay mo brownout..." (It [internet connection] is quite stable there but there are times when brownouts can occur due to winds.)

As NT6 stated, even during times when students have access to the internet, they leave the teacher's message at 'seen' without responding.

"Na sini seen lang nila [students] talaga ako." (They [students] just leave my messages at 'seen'.)

Theme 6: Confronting challenges in the delivery of modular distance learning

The bigger factor that shaped the experience of the novice teachers is the myriad of obstacles that plagued the delivery of MDL. Brought about by a combination of factors such as the school system and the inadequate resources, the participants recounted how their conduct of MDL was full of adjustments. Aside from adapting to the individuals they interact with, the NTs had to get accustomed to the realities of working in a public school. They disclosed that they had to grapple with the lack of supplies, seemingly unending tasks, and confusions in the implementation of MDL.

NT2 disclosed that the implementation of MDL was affected by the lack of funds in the school.

"(There is) insufficiency of materials and budget that we have in our school..."

NT1 revealed that she had to expend money from her own pocket to supplement the lack of supplies.

"Yes, opo [I get from my own pocket]. Sa kuan lang man po (only during) ...During the exams, we need bond papers, since we have to give the exams, one is the one para ma-measure talaga natin (so we can really measure it)."

NT3 meanwhile, pointed to the fact that their undergraduate training is different from what she is now doing in MDL.

"We were trained during college of the pedagogy and all only on face-to-face classes. We also applied that during practicum. But I never learned about modular approach on distance learning."

On the sorting of the modules alone, NT4 reported feeling overwhelmed due to the large quantities of modules that need to be sorted.

"It is we're having a hard time in sorting the module, because during our own on-site schedule [sic] we cannot always finish all sorting"

the modules. So, in our, during our work from home, we can sometimes go here in school."

NT4 also expressed that it can sometimes be exhausting as she distributes and retrieves the modules.

"I have encountered in terms of module distribution and retrieval is that I cannot really distribute the modules 100% or cannot retrieve the modules 100% before because, there are a lot of parents who do not follow the schedules, in the distribution and in the retrieval."

Grading students' returned modules is a completely different area unto itself. NT3 reported that she feels tired due to a pile of modules she needs to check and grade.

"Naa ju'y time ma'am ba nga kanang sa kadaghan na ganig papel na checkonon na napundo na ma'am ba murag usahay kapoy kaayo." (There really are times where there are so many papers piling up that need to be checked, that it becomes too tiring sometimes.)

NT3 highlighted that peripheral responsibilities such as cleaning the classroom also add to the toll brought by the MDL.

"We do all the work from cleaning, structuring our classrooms, to paper works...it is tiring thinking we have modules to face beside those works."

If she is not done with her responsibilities during work hours, NT5 shared that she brings her work back to her home.

"Whenever we are on site, we should finish all our work related to the sorting of modules, checking of modules because in my case ma'am if ever I can't check all the answer sheets, I would just bring it home."

Another facet of the delivery of MDL is the challenge of following the strict health protocols imposed by the government. NT3 aired her concern because some individuals do not follow the protocol when going inside the school or submitting modules.

"Moagi sila [the parents] didto ma'am ang uban mo shortcut murag dili kaau sya ingon ma strictly followed ang entrance og exit... kay dili magdala og ilahang ballpen which is dili dapat

maghirmanay og ballpen." (They [the parents] enter the school and some use the shortcut – the do not follow the designated entrance and exit. ...[parents] also do not bring their own ballpen, but [the protocol dictates that] ballpens should not be shared.)

Theme 7: Meeting society's expectations

Even though they are still novice teachers, the participants felt the palpable pressure of living up to the lofty expectations of the society towards educators. NSSET understood that their role in the conduct of modular distance learning in the shift of educational system is entirely altered. Despite this fact, society still expects the underprepared novice teachers to perform like their more experienced peers.

NT1 shared that she already feels the pressure to perform.

"The pressure is really visible since they're expecting me to be like mom, but for myself, I'll just show them what I can do pag may pinagawa sa kin yes lang ng yes since yun din ang advice sa akin (if they give me something to do, I will just say 'yes' since that is the advice I get)."

NT2, meanwhile, asserted that teachers must be the paragon that society can look up to.

"It is my role really to put my heart in doing my task as a teacher for me to, for me to I mean, for me to continue the legacy of giving a quality education to the students."

However, NT6 believes that the expectations of some members of society towards teachers are sometimes too high.

"I think if you are a teacher parang taas yung expectation nila sayo parang hindi ka pwedeng parang teachers is a role models parang ganun. Highest standards. Yes ma'am parang napaisip ako ba't ba pag teacher hindi naba pwedeng magkamali." (I think if you are a teacher, they have really high expectations of you, like a role model. Highest standards. Yes Ma'am, it makes me think why teachers are not allowed to make mistakes).

NT5 highlighted the level of patience and understanding that teachers need to show.

"...so I should be responsible all the time, be understanding. [As teachers] we should be considerate."

NT3 also expressed that she feels the need to be competent in writing as a teacher in DepEd.

"Dapat hawud kag writing and everything so, mao to ma'am pressure kaaau sa akong part labi na nisulod nako DepEd." (You have to be good at writing and everything, so that is why, Ma'am, I am really pressured especially because I am now in DepEd.)

On the other hand, NT6 feels 'degraded' due to some of the negative comments hurled towards teachers on social media.

"Parang na dedegrade din ako kasi parang nawalan sila nang respeto kasi nga daw tuma-tanggap tayo nang sahod din wala daw tayong trabaho." (I also feel degraded because some people seem to lack respect, insinuating that we receive our salary without working.)

Meanwhile, NT1 described the adjustment she had to undergo in following national guidelines.

"Yes. So, the policy on the No Child Left Behind was a big challenge for novice teachers, because this novice teachers, like me, have no experience yet on how to fully contact learners who reside in far-flung areas."

Theme 8: Abrupt adjustment to the new normal

Being called into the profession during a tumultuous adjustment period that nobody foresaw, the participants expressed the need to adjust to the demands of their profession. Although they already expect that they will have to make some adjustments as a newly-hired professional teacher, the present scenario and the shift to modular distance learning fast-tracked this process. With less than a year of actual teaching in the public institution and dealing with other stakeholders to draw upon, they march head-first into an uncharted territory.

NT3 shared that, because the implementation of MDL was not part of her undergraduate

training, she felt that it was necessary to be better in every aspect.

"Be more innovative, creative, resourceful in delivering module or making supplemental activities."

Additionally, NT4 disclosed that with perseverance, she could adjust to the demands of modular distance learning.

"Despite the modular approach that we have adopted we were able to adapt the challenges."

Meanwhile, NT6 expressed that novice teachers like her need to willingly accept responsibilities assigned to them.

"kung anung task na ibinigay sa kanila parang e accept mo lang kasi dun naman tayo nag go grow as a teacher." (Whatever task that are given to them [novice teachers], they [sic] should just accept it since that is how we [sic] grow as teachers.)

As for NT1, she shared a crude but experience-based advice with the adjustment towards MDL.

"So if we can't change the situation, changed our attitude towards the situation."

Acknowledging that the students also had to adjust to the massive changes caused by the new normal, NT7 stated that she has to be more patient.

"I always try to compose myself and always keep in mind that I always have to be understanding when it comes to dealing with my students, and I have to be resilient as well."

Conclusion

The study found that novice secondary English teachers struggled with poor cooperation from parents and students, as well as with colleagues and immediate heads. These findings align with the results of the study of Mañalac (2021). They also felt pressure from external sources and were willing to heed advice from colleagues and stakeholders. Meanwhile, similar to the findings of Sari and Nayir (2020), communication breakdowns and challenges in implementing modular learning were common,

with inadequate infrastructure and lack of supplies. Despite these challenges, they showed great readiness to meet societal expectations. Meanwhile, the study recommends engaging in the Teacher Induction Program, maintaining open communication with school heads and administration, strengthening alternative communication channels with parents, and incorporating training on modular learning in Field Study courses to better prepare pre-service teachers for the new normal.

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