

Teaching Phonemic Awareness to Filipino Students: Bridging Culture and Pedagogy: A Case Study

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Abstract

This case study explored the issues and challenges in teaching phonemic awareness to Filipino students, specifically on how culture, pedagogy, and instructions work hand in hand. Furthermore, it seeks to explore how educators navigate these challenges, considering linguistic diversity, teaching methodologies, and resource availability. This study implemented a Descriptive-Correlational-Explanatory research design, which was used to determine the cultural and pedagogical issues in teaching phonemic awareness to Filipino students, and analyze their causal relationship. The data used in this study is derived from interviews with randomly selected students and from related literature studies in the same field. Based on the analysis of the data, it was found that teaching phonemic awareness to Filipino students presents unique challenges due to linguistic diversity of the country creating language interference that causes pronunciation difficulties, and assessment anxiety, coupled with lack of resources and training of teachers that further extrapolates the need for a multifaceted educational reform.

Keywords

phonemic awareness, linguistic diversity, pedagogy, phonemes, language instruction

INTRODUCTION

In language instruction, one of the key aspects that drives complete language assimilation and competence among the students is through sound production and expressions of learned symbols and words. This aspect is also called Phonemic Awareness; to be specific, this refers to the ability of an individual to manipulate and work with individual sounds (Phonemes) in spoken words. Expanding on Phonemic awareness, Carruth and Bustos (2019) defined it as the understanding of words constructed through individual sounds and the ability to fully produce them accurately and decode meaningfully in the proper context.

With that basic concept of Phonemic awareness established, a crucial examination of its importance must be done. The importance of Phonemic awareness lies in its nature as the foundation for future reading success as it helps children or individuals understand that words are made up of sounds, or phonemes and that letters serve as the key representations, with that logic, understanding phonemes may also help in vocabulary production and spelling (Heggerty, 2022). To further emphasize the importance of phonemic awareness in vocabulary and spelling, Talbot (2020) stated that recognizing words that consist of phonemes that correspond to graphemes is essential for developing print literacy. The ability to break words down, reassemble them, and modify them to form new or even invented words is a crucial skill in language learning. Another importance lies in the ability of phonemic awareness to allow a smoother communication process in a multicultural setting or context, which is often hindered by mispronunciation (Derwing & Munro, 2015). Phonemic awareness gives students/individuals access to literacy that transcends their native tongue but instead views language as a system that can be used to produce accurate and meaningful discourse across cultures, this notion is supported by the study of Ulloa (2023) which suggests that Phonemic awareness

enhances multicultural communication by improving speech clarity, comprehension, and language adaptability. It helps individuals recognize and manipulate sounds, making learning new languages and respecting linguistic diversity easier. This fosters more transparent communication and deeper cultural appreciation.

The concept of Phonemic Awareness in the Philippine educational landscape is complex because the country itself is shaped by multilingualism, with over 180 languages across the archipelago (The Manila Times, 2023), which alone suggests possible problems in literacy instruction, as evidenced by the study of Leaño et al. (2019) which found out that the distinct pronunciations of letter-sounds, words, and expressions in English, compared to their Mother Tongue and Filipino, pose a considerable obstacle for Filipino learners. This difficulty is compounded by their infrequent engagement in spoken English activities, leading to a weaker grasp of English phonology and ultimately affecting their overall English language proficiency. One step the Philippines took in addressing the possible discrepancy in literacy and phonology is the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy from the DepEd Order 16. s. 2012, which mandates the use of the native language in instruction in the early stages of learning. This approach aims to enhance comprehension and learning outcomes by building on learners' existing linguistic foundations as the bridge in learning English. Studies have shown that instruction in the mother tongue facilitates better understanding and retention of concepts, thereby improving overall academic performance.

Drawing further from the MTB-MLE, Monfero (2023) stated that despite its advantages, several challenges still persist due to the lack of materials and teacher trainings, causing the Phonemic awareness of Filipino students to fall behind. Straying away from the focus on the implication of

multilingualism in phonology, Baog et al. (2023) emphasizes the current situation on education landscape of the Philippines, aside from students, one area that needs focus is on teachers themselves. Teachers can enhance their phonological awareness instruction through professional development programs. Localizing and contextualizing reading materials helps students connect learning to real-life experiences, aiding in accurate sound manipulation and production. Their study also indicated that many Filipino students struggle in phonemic awareness due to the complex interplay of the variations in the Philippine language, coupled with the ill-equipped teachers in the Department of Education, those who lack the necessary training, resources, knowledge, or support to effectively teach phonemic awareness.

With the referenced studies above, the purpose of the present case study is to examine the issues and challenges in teaching Phonemic Awareness to Filipino students and synthesize a conclusion on how to properly address those said issues and challenges in the instruction process.

Objectives

This research explores the key difficulties encountered in teaching phonemic awareness among Filipino learners with emphasis on cognitive challenges such as recognition of sounds and sound blending, and the impact of multilingualism on acquisition. It investigates the manner in which instructional approaches, motivation, and classroom assessment practices influence engagement, confidence, and performance in phonemic activities. Drawing from the insights of students and secondary literature, this study seeks to recommend effective methods of informing curriculum, teacher education, and policy within the Philippine educational system.

Literature

Language Diversity and Instructional Policy in the Philippines

The education system in the Philippines is deeply shaped by its linguistic diversity. Igarashi et al. (2024) indicate that with more than 180 languages being used across the country, the nation initiated a mother tongue-based education policy in 2012, increasing the instructional language to 19 languages at kindergarten to grade 3. The policy is intended to make early foundational skills stronger through synchronization of learning with students' native language, thus improving learning of other languages. Filipino's promotion as the national language—though only indigenous to some 25 percent of the population—has impacted language education by placing utmost importance on its intellectualization in school. But the lack of government assistance, low interest on Filipino literature on the part of the public, and the absence of translation resources remain to impede its scholarly growth (Ivushkina, 2024).

DepEd Order No. 25, s. 1975, both English and Filipino are used as the primary medium of instruction, with regional languages as auxiliary media for early literacy when needed (National Commission for Culture and the Arts Offices, 2025). Such a policy is imbibed in the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) program that is implemented at the national level in all public schools from

Grade 1 to Grade 3. Initial coverage was 12 regional languages and grew to 19 in 2013. MTB-MLE is intended to enhance linguistic diversity and consolidate learning foundations through the use of the first language of students as a medium of instruction. Despite such improvements, Monfero (2023) mentions lingering issues like poor teaching materials and the lack of proper teacher training that have enabled Filipino students to fall behind in terms of phonemic awareness (Meridirie, 2021).

Finally, the language policy of the Philippines encourages bilingualism and multilingualism, with a main concentration on Filipino and English being the dominant languages in the majority of formal situations (Demetrio and Liwanag, 2014)

Literacy Rates and Statistics on Philippines Language Diversity and Phonemic Awareness in Language Acquisition

As stated by the Philippines Statistics Authority (2023), 97.0% of Filipinos are literate and can read and write a short message in any dialect or language. Notwithstanding this high literacy rate in 2020, the Philippines continues to experience a great reading comprehension problem. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) placed Filipino students aged 15 lowest in reading comprehension among 79 nations (Philstar, 2020). Going further, the Philippines had a literacy rate of 99.27% in 2021, but in 2022, the World Bank ranked 90% of Filipino 10-year-olds as poor learners who could not understand simple texts. The learning poverty indicates the difference between simple literacy and reading competency and stresses the importance of greater instructional emphasis. It implies that aside from reading and writing, education should also enhance students' capacity to comprehend and process information (Lu, 2024).

In the Philippines multilingual setting, Eberhard et al. (2021), according to the University of the Philippines - Linguistics Department (2023), declare that there are 186 languages in the country—184 living and 2 extinct—175 indigenous and 9 non-indigenous. It has a large influence on phonemic awareness and language learning. Phonemic awareness has a basic function in language learning, especially in multilingual education. It has been found from studies that early development of phonemic awareness strengthens reading and language ability among Filipino students (Abdon & Barrios, 2022). It facilitates more efficient decoding of words, enhancing understanding and communication skills (Garbo, 2022). In the Philippine education system, in which students learn several languages at once, a sound groundwork on the phonemic awareness of the mother language supports learning Filipino and English (Monfero, 2023).

This difficulty is also shown by Leaño et al. (2019), wherein they discovered that the unique pronunciations of letter sounds, words, and phrases in English—in contrast to those in the native language and Filipino—present strong barriers for Filipino learners. These are magnified by the lack of frequent participation in spoken English activities, resulting in weaker English phonological abilities and eventually influencing overall English language ability.

RESEARCH METHOD

This research utilizes a descriptive-correlational through thematic analysis research design to explore the challenges and problems in teaching phonemic awareness among Filipino learners. The descriptive method determines these challenges through primary sources (student perceptions and interviews) and secondary sources (published studies and online publications). The correlational method explores how these determined challenges correlate with students' phonemic awareness and its implications in language instruction. The study is concerned with three major domains: (1) cognitive and developmental factors, (2) motivation and engagement, and (3) assessment and evaluation. Through the examination of these domains, the study investigates the convergence of culture and pedagogy in language learning in the multilingual Philippine context. The results will help inform policy-making and improve school-level interventions through the identification of programs that target the wide gaps in phonological awareness in the Philippines education system.

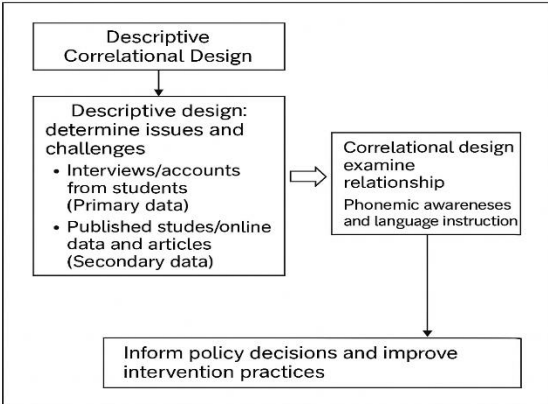


Figure 1. Framework of the Study: Descriptive-Correlational Approach in Analyzing Issues and Challenges in Teaching Phonemic Awareness.

Data Sources

The corpus of this study is derived from primary and secondary sources. The primary data were gathered from six (6) secondary English pre-service teachers from the Bicol Region, Philippines, through a structured survey-interview questions. Using purposive sampling, participants were chosen based on their relevant knowledge and experience in phonemic awareness. This method guaranteed that the data obtained were context-specific and is contextually aligned with the objectives of the study.

Secondary data were gathered through an extensive review of pertinent literature (RRL), which comprised published studies, academic journals, and internet articles on phonemic awareness and teaching language in the Philippines. The secondary sources were employed to triangulate results as well as enhance the analysis of the issue.

No	A. Cognitive and Developmental Factors
1	How do you find learning about phonemic awareness, such as identifying and blending sounds in words? Is it easy or challenging for you?
2	What difficulties do you experience when trying to recognize, separate, or pronounce different sounds in words?

No	A. Cognitive and Developmental Factors
3	How does speaking more than one language affect your ability to learn and understand phonemic awareness skills?
B. Motivation and Engagement	
1	What activities or strategies make learning phonemic awareness, such as sound recognition and manipulation, more enjoyable for you?
2	How do you feel when practicing phonemic awareness skills in class? Does it help you feel more confident in reading and pronouncing words?
3	What encourages or motivates you to actively participate in phonemic awareness activities and exercises?
C. Assessment and Evaluation	
1	How do you feel when your teacher assesses your ability to identify, blend, and manipulate sounds in words?
2	What types of assessments or exercises help you understand if you are improving in phonemic awareness?
3	What challenges do you face when being tested on phonemic awareness skills, such as recognizing and pronouncing different sounds?

Figure 2. Structure Survey Questionnaire

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Issues in Teaching Phonemic Awareness

There are various issues encountered in teaching phonemic awareness to Filipino learners as identified in previous research studies. These issues can be classified into three broad categories: language and dialect concerns, curriculum and instruction issues, and socioeconomic considerations.

Language and Dialect Challenges

• Multilingual Environment

The linguistic diversity of the Philippines, with more than 170 languages, makes it a challenging context for teaching phonemic awareness (Faunillan, 2023). Many students speak several languages or dialects at home, which may cause ambiguity while learning the phonemic patterns of a second language like English. This multilingual context requires specific instructional strategies to meet the special phonemic differences between languages (Moats, 2023).

• Influence of Native Languages on English Phonemic Awareness

Native language interference has a major influence on the acquisition of English phonemic awareness by students. Phonetic differences between native languages and English can lead to pronunciation and sound recognition difficulties. For example, some sounds that are included in English might not be included in local languages, making it difficult to distinguish and produce these sounds correctly (Tipan, 2023).

Curriculum and Instruction

• Insufficient Focus on Phonemic Awareness in Current Curricula

Phonemic awareness is not adequately emphasized in the contemporary education curricula, research has shown (Reyes, 2023). This lack causes students to miss foundational abilities that are needed for effective reading and spelling. A lack of systematic strategy to instruction in phonemics undermines the acquisition of key literacy skills (Monfero, 2023).

• *Teacher Training and Preparedness*

The potency of phonemic awareness teaching is also directly related to teachers' skills and knowledge. Much research has established that teachers feel inadequately trained to teach phonemic elements (Moats, 2023). Such inadequacy may result in ineffective methodologies, thereby further inhibiting students' literacy growth (Lexia Learning, 2023).

Socioeconomic Factors

• *Access to Educational Resources*

Socioeconomic inequality is an important factor in the literacy achievements of students. Insufficient access to educational resources, including books and study tools, especially for those residing in low-income neighborhoods, limits practice opportunities for students to exercise and improve their phonemic knowledge (Vetorico, 2023). This resource limitation is a contributor to the growing disparity in literacy competence among students based on varying socioeconomic statuses (Sasam & Arazo, 2023).

• *Home Literacy Environments*

Home context plays an important role in phonemic awareness development. Children whose families lack literacy materials or where there is no cultural emphasis on reading tend to have delayed phonemic abilities (Monfero, 2023). Parents' participation and the access to a collection of reading materials at home are key to developing early literacy.

Cognitive and Developmental Factors

The major problem of phonemic teaching among Filipino learners is their first language (L1) interference. Filipino students are mostly bilingual or multilingual, and their linguistic variation tends to result in phonemic interference, which causes students to fail to correctly recognize and distinguish English phonemes. Students are mostly confused with homophonous phonemes like /f/ and /ph/, /e/ and /i/, or /o/ and /oo/. Also, differences between English spelling and sound—e.g., the use of silent letters—add to phonemic difficulty.

These are echoed by the observations of Olabiyi et al. (2025), where they highlighted that proficiency in oral language plays an important role in the development of literacy among Filipino learners. The effect of the first language on second language acquisition is always an overriding concern. William et al. (2025) further indicated that learners in multilingual settings tend to shift between their mother tongue, Filipino, and English, and this may impact phonemic awareness and identification.

Another dimension of complexity is added by the impact of various English accents. The Filipino learners are often exposed to American as well as British pronunciations, particularly from media and teaching. Derwing and Munro (2005) accounted for the fact that non-concurrent phonological input, i.e., exposure to different accents, leads to unstable internal representations of sounds, which can interfere with phonemic recognition as well as production.

Moreover, silent letters and unknown words can cause ambiguity, further increasing the cognitive burden during phonemic decoding. Interview responses reflect these difficulties and provide insight into the developmental barriers learners face:

Student 1 : "I struggle sometimes with distinguishing particular sounds, particularly the silent letters or sounds and unfamiliar words."

Student 2 : "The problem I always have is when they sound alike, it somehow becomes hard for me to distinguish."

Student 3 : "We all know we have different English pronunciations... I think initially I would get confused..."

Student 4 : "It is hard to pronounce words properly when they almost sound the same."

Student 5 : "I tend to mispronounce words since they do not sound like how they are spelled."

Student 6 : "I can learn phonemes better when I hear them over and over again in various contexts."

Surprisingly, students who had explicit phonemic training made more significant pronunciation accuracy gains than students who were exposed to English passively. This would suggest that direct, systematic instruction is key to overcoming the cognitive and developmental obstacles of phonemic awareness.

Motivation and Engagement

Student motivation and classroom engagement are among the primary driving forces for successful phonemic awareness instruction. Most students perform well when learning is familiar and interactive. Students continuously said that the inclusion of popular songs, games, videos, role-playing, and group drills in phonemic lessons made learning fun and memorable. These engaging methods minimize stress and create an interactive environment where students feel more at ease to practice pronunciation.

This preference for active learning approaches is consistent with the research of Wardana (2022), who found that students taught through organized phonological awareness activities showed enhanced motivation and accuracy in speaking skills. He stipulated that these methods, when enriched with feedback and interactional features, maintain students' interest in speaking exercises.

Students also shared that teacher support and immediate correction while practicing with drills or performance tasks assisted in alleviating their fear of error. This is similar to the findings of Rokhman et al. (2020), who established that a learner's skill in distinguishing and manipulating phonemes enhances significantly as long as instruction is complemented by instant scaffolding and responsive feedback.

In addition, the use of digital resources—interactive whiteboards, apps based on phonemes, and audiovisual resources—seems to cause interest and strengthen the identification of sound. Alhums (2021), in research with EFL first graders, found that Interactive Whiteboard-supported lessons of phonemic awareness showed more engagement, improved attention capacities, and faster recall of the phonemes.

The same feeling is reflected in the student interview extracts below:

Student 1 : "It's more enjoyable when we learn through songs and games. I can remember them better."

- Student 2 : "With group exercises involving phonemic drills, I feel less anxious about getting things wrong."
- Student 3 : "I am encouraged when teachers provide feedback and encouragement. It makes me more confident in my pronunciation."
- Student 4 : "Learning through videos and interactive materials is easier."
- Student 5 : "I like learning phonemes when we conduct role-playing exercises."
- Student 6 : "I prefer to do phoneme practice when we do it in actual conversations, not only in drills."

Last, a scoping review conducted by Wang & Wang (2024) illustrated that East Asian classrooms that incorporate motivation-promoting practices—like collaborative drills, dramatization, and contextual application—exhibited increased phonemic awareness and decoding ability gains. The outcomes strongly support the integration of student-centered interaction approaches in Filipino classrooms.

Evidently, motivation is not just an incidental result of an enjoyable class—it is an important pedagogical aid in aiding students to hold on, implement, and develop their phonemic awareness, particularly in EFL/ESL environments. When students are engaged actively, they are much more likely to absorb the phoneme-sound correspondences required for correct pronunciation.

Assessment and Evaluation

The interviews identified that test anxiety greatly impeded student performance in phonemic awareness. The students were afraid of being judged for mispronunciation and would rather have practice-based or informal oral assessment methods. This is supported by a study conducted by the National Center for Biotechnology Information (NCBI, 2025), where language anxiety and its influence on language proficiency was discussed, identifying that language anxiety correlates with lower language proficiency and inhibits learning and enhancing language abilities.

Later studies confirm the above findings. In 2023, one study of Indonesian EFL students established a strong negative relationship between speaking apprehension and pronunciation accuracy, which shows how anxiety negatively affects learners' speaking (Mamang et al., 2023). Likewise, a 2024 research study with ESL students found that extreme anxiety while engaging in speaking and listening tasks impacted pronunciation skills negatively, confirming the negative impacts of language anxiety on oral proficiency (Islam et al., 2024).

New assessment paradigms have also been promising to mitigate anxiety. For instance, a 2022 experimental study discovered that AI-augmented video feedback used in online pronunciation activities decreased foreign language anxiety noticeably, enhanced learner attitudes, and enhanced performance (Alvarez Valdivia et al., 2022). In addition, studies on language assessment literacy (LAL) among Chinese university students by Weng & Liu (2024) show that while greater comprehension of the assessment process heightens motivation to learn a foreign language, it actually does not lessen test anxiety directly—underscoring the necessity for both enhanced assessment literacy and anxiety-reduction measures in instructional practice.

Student Response on Assessment Anxiety

- Student 1 : "I feel anxious during oral exams because I think that people are judging my pronunciation."
- Student 2 : "I tend to avoid answering for fear that I might mispronounce words."
- Student 3 : "Practice rather than mere tests would suffice."
- Student 4 : "Pre-test oral practice would prepare me better."
- Student 5 : "Practicing through recording my pronunciation improves me."
- Student 6 : "I would like informal pronunciation testing."

Combined, the student feedback and literature indicate that assessment anxiety is one of the primary obstacles to successful phonemic awareness. To counteract this, incorporating low-stakes, practice-based assessment techniques—like informal oral testing, self-monitoring, and constructive video feedback—combined with teacher training in pronunciation assessment may raise confidence and performance levels. Too many students experience anxiety when being orally tested, as they are concerned that errors in pronunciation are an indication of their lack of proficiency in English. This tension is amplified by the high expectations that English major students are subjected to, such that they feel they must prove themselves to be nearly native speakers in phonemic awareness. Consequently, they tend to shy away from oral activities or have difficulty while taking tests.

Based on the answers in the interviews, it can be gleaned that most of the difficulties in assessment and evaluation occur externally and internally, indicating that there is a need for more teacher training.

CONCLUSION

Phonemic awareness instruction for Filipino students has its own set of challenges based on linguistic variety, pronunciation barriers, and test anxiety. But the use of effective and interactive methods can greatly enhance the learning process. Tailor-made instructional techniques, supportive evaluations, and an encouraging learning atmosphere are critical to assist learners in building stronger phonemic abilities, thus increasing their proficiency in English. Enhanced access to locally applicable resources and the use of multiple teaching styles further assist learners in crossing these barriers.

This research highlights the challenges of teaching phonemic awareness in the Philippines' multilingual environment, with more than 170 languages forming a complex linguistic terrain. Interference of languages and differences in phonetic structures make it difficult to learn phonemics, while inadequate curriculum stress and inadequate teacher training lead to literacy gaps. Socioeconomic factors, including limited access to learning materials, also inhibit students' participation in phonemic activities and reading acquisition. In spite of these challenges, studies prove that novel strategies—like multisensory instruction, the use of technology, and peer tutoring—can strongly improve phonemic awareness and literacy.

Overcoming these challenges needs a holistic, multi-faceted approach incorporating curriculum design, teacher training, and better resource allocation. Incorporating phonemic awareness as early as in the beginning of schooling,

giving formal training to teachers, and making use of electronic resources can make students' phonemic abilities stronger. Of equal significance is developing a facilitative learning environment wherein learners are at ease to engage without the threat of criticism, engendering more confidence and literacy achievement. The results suggest the necessity for systematic and integrated instruction in phonemic awareness that provides all Filipino learners, regardless of linguistic heritage, with equal access to develop key reading and language skills.

To enhance phonemic awareness teaching in the Philippines, there should be prioritization of curriculum reforms that include well-structured phonemic learning strategies, especially at the early educational levels. The creation of localized and culturally sensitive phonics materials will assist in narrowing the discrepancies between students' home language and English literacy. Furthermore, professional development programs should be enhanced to prepare teachers with good methodologies for teaching phonemic awareness within a multilingual context. Offering ongoing training in the areas of phonological instruction, phoneme recognition strategies, and classroom-based evaluation will allow instructors to provide better instruction. Peer-assisted learning strategies can also be put into practice at schools, where students may work together on phonemic exercises to build their skills through interaction.

Technology needs to be utilized in order to maximize phonemic teaching, especially in underserved communities where access to conventional learning tools is not available. Digital software, speech recognition programs, and interactive phonics packages can enable student-centered and inclusive learning opportunities for learners. In order to counteract socioeconomic inequalities, government and schools need to collaborate to supply phonemic learning materials to resource-scarce schools. Moreover, promoting community participation, especially parental participation in early literacy training, can complement phonemic development in the home environment. An integrated strategy that synchronizes curriculum redesign, teacher education, technology integration, and accessibility of resources will be the key to enhancing phonemic awareness teaching in the Philippine education system.

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