Phonological Challenges of Learners with Special Educational Needs in Higher Education: A Case Study

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Abstract

Aim: Learners with special educational needs, especially those with speech-related conditions such as cleft palate, may experience significant challenges in language acquisition, particularly in phonology and pronunciation. This qualitative study aimed to explore the phonological challenges encountered by learners with special educational needs (LSENs) in English courses.

Methodology: This research utilized a case study design to achieve a deep understanding of the phonological challenges faced by LSENs at Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College.

Results: The study found that learners with cleft palate experience significant difficulties in articulating English consonant sounds such as /s/, /z/, and /t/. These phonological difficulties affect their intelligibility and confidence in oral communication, often resulting in feelings of embarrassment and frustration. Despite this, the learners show resilience and motivation to participate in class, especially when teachers provide a supportive and understanding environment.

Conclusion: Based on the findings, it is concluded that the phonological challenges of LSENs directly impact their English language learning, particularly in speaking. The study recommends targeted training for teachers on inclusive education and speech-related difficulties, and the integration of phonological awareness activities tailored to the learners' needs. Furthermore, parental involvement and emotional support were found to be essential in reinforcing the learners' confidence and language development. This study underscores the importance of a holistic, inclusive approach to support learners with special educational needs in the English language classroom.

Keywords: *Cleft palate, phonological challenges, learners with special educational needs (LSENs), English language learning*

INTRODUCTION

The Philippines, along with many nations, is prioritizing the development of inclusive learning environments within higher education, as evidenced by Republic Act No. 11650, also known as the *Instituting a Policy of Inclusion and Services for Learners with Disabilities in Support of Inclusive Education Act*. This focus on inclusivity is particularly important for students with diverse needs, as it fosters an educational landscape built on equity. As highlighted by Cabañero (2023), inclusive classrooms ensure all students, regardless of background or learning style, have equal access to educational opportunities and can flourish. This focus on equity translates to academic empowerment. By minimizing barriers to participation, learners with special educational needs (LSENs) can fully engage in learning activities and achieve academic success, as evidenced by studies on the positive impact of inclusive environments for all learners (Molina Roldan et al., 2021).

In the context of this case study on phonological challenges faced by learners with special educational needs, fostering inclusivity becomes even more crucial for their academic success in higher education. Learning difficulties, also known as special educational needs (LSENs), encompass a range of issues that can make learning more difficult (Department for Education, 2023). These can include problems with thinking, communication, social skills, or physical needs.

One specific type of learning difficulty that can be particularly impactful in higher education is having trouble with the sound structure of language, or phonology (McBride-Chang et al., 2020). This can make it hard for students to understand and use sounds in words. Phonological skills—the ability to understand and manipulate the sound systems of language—are foundational for successful language development (McBride-Chang et al., 2020). In reading comprehension, strong phonological awareness facilitates phonemic decoding, enabling readers to sound out unfamiliar words and connect written symbols to their corresponding sounds (Melby-Lervåg & Hulme, 2013). This skill also supports the rapid recognition of familiar sight words through sound-symbol correspondence. Together, these abilities contribute to fluent reading, a cornerstone for comprehending the meaning of a text (Zywica et al., 2021).

Phonological skills further play a vital role in vocabulary development. When encountering a new word, the ability to analyze its sound structure (phonological recoding) allows individuals to connect it to existing vocabulary based on familiar sounds (Nagy et al., 2018). This process aids in comprehension and retention of new words.

Finally, phonological skills are crucial for clear oral communication. By enabling individuals to manipulate sounds accurately, they ensure proper word articulation and fluency in spoken language (Snow & Hoeft, 2009). This clear expression enhances the overall quality and impact of communication. In conclusion, phonological skills underpin successful reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and oral communication, highlighting their central role in language learning and effective use.

Learners with special education needs (LSENs) navigate the academic challenges of higher education by developing various coping mechanisms. One prevalent strategy involves planning and prioritization. LSENs often create routines to organize their workload, establish achievable goals, and manage their time effectively (Zywica et al., 2021). This approach helps them stay on top of deadlines and assignments, reducing the stress and anxiety associated with disorganization.

Metacognitive awareness also plays a crucial role. This introspective awareness allows them to select appropriate strategies for different learning tasks. For instance, a student with dyslexia might utilize audiobooks or text-to-speech software to support reading comprehension (Sorin et al., 2019), while another student who struggles with note-taking might benefit from recording lectures or using mind maps (James, 2020).

Furthermore, actively seeking help from teachers, tutors, or peers emerges as another common coping mechanism. LSENs who are comfortable utilizing available support systems demonstrate a proactive approach to overcoming difficulties and a desire to succeed academically. Knowing about disability services on campus and feeling empowered to seek assistance are key components of this strategy (Scott et al., 2019).

Global studies, such as Novelti et al. (2023), highlight phonological errors of children with intellectual disabilities in special schools. In the Philippines, Leano, et al. (2019) discovered pronunciation challenges faced by Grade 2 Indigenous learners, including difficulties with phonemic manipulations and segmenting sounds within CVC words. Another study by Kilag, et al. (2023) identified factors affecting students and teachers, while Delos Reyes, et al. (2023) highlighted the impact of interest and exposure on English-speaking learners.

Observations by the researchers reveal that learners with special education needs at Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College face challenges in the phonological aspect of language. Given the scarcity of studies on learners with special education needs at the tertiary level, this research aimed to uncover the challenges faced by LSENs at ISPSC through a qualitative research design. Its findings contribute to enhancing different programs, crucial for graduates entering the education sector.

Objectives

The purpose of the study is to investigate the challenges of the LSENs of Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:
1. How do LSENs in higher education view and experience phonological struggles during English courses?
2. What coping mechanisms do LSENs adopt to manage their phonological difficulties in English courses?
3. What teaching strategies and interventions do LSENs perceive as most helpful in addressing their phonological challenges in higher education?

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METHODS

Research Design

This research utilized a case study design to achieve a deep understanding of the phonological challenges faced by LSENs. A case study allows for an in-depth examination of the complexities of these challenges of language acquisition for IP students (Yin, 2014).

Interviews and focus group discussion were the research method which were utilized to gather the necessary data needed for the study.

Population and Sampling

The research took place within Ilocos Sur Polytechnic State College - Main Campus, focusing on learners with special educational needs who are currently enrolled in any program at the institution.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique, was used to intentionally select participants who met specific criteria relevant to the study. The criteria for inclusion were as follows: 1) the participant had an official diagnosis of speech and language impairment recognized by a medical or educational professional, 2) the participant was actively enrolled in a program at the institution, and 3) the participant expressed a willingness to participate in interviews. Students with other types of special educational needs or disabilities, such as visual impairment, hearing impairment, autism, or intellectual disabilities, were excluded from the study. Additionally, individuals without a verified diagnosis of speech and language impairment or those unwilling to participate in the interviews were not included.

The researchers initially selected three participants who met the inclusion criteria. After analyzing their responses, it was determined that data saturation had been achieved, ensuring a comprehensive exploration of the relevant themes with the chosen participants.

Instruments

For triangulation purposes, both Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and in-depth interviews were conducted. The researcher utilized in-depth interviews with the aid of an aide-memoire, which helped summarize key findings and important information about each participant. To support the data collection process, rich conversations and the sharing of personal experiences took place during FGDs and conversational interviews with purposely selected participants. The instruments underwent proper validation process. Experts were requested to assess said instruments, a process which Baligod and Carillo (2023) reiterate as an important part of a research to ensure that only the right and validated instruments are utilized in any academic investigation.

Data Collection

In gathering the data, the researchers sought approval from the President of the institution, the Dean of the college, and the participants for conducting in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). To aid in the data collection process, thorough interviews and the sharing of personal experiences through FGDs were conducted with purposefully selected participants.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the participants were analyzed using Thematic Analysis applying the Collaizzi's method. Colaizzi's method of data analysis is an approach to interpreting qualitative research data to identify meaningful information and organize it into themes or categories. The data were then collected, read, analyzed, and categorized according to similar ideas and emerging themes. Notable statements from the participants were highlighted to identify patterns and commonalities in their responses. Meaningful insights were drawn from substantial responses and organized into themes. Through this process, the researchers developed thematic interpretations of the participants' situations and experiences, allowing for a deeper understanding of their perspectives.

Ethical Considerations

To ensure the quality, credibility, and ethical integrity of the study, the researcher strictly adhered to established research protocols. Prior to data collection, formal approval was obtained from the institution's president, the dean, and the participating individuals. Informed consent letters were distributed to all participants, allowing

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them to voluntarily signify their willingness to participate in the study.

Upon receiving approval, the researcher coordinated and scheduled both the in-depth interviews and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) with the selected participants. All interviews were digitally recorded to facilitate accurate and complete verbatim transcription. Before any recording commenced, explicit permission was sought from the participants in compliance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012.

To safeguard participant confidentiality, pseudonyms were used during transcription, analysis, and reporting. The identities and individual responses of participants were known only to the researcher and were kept strictly confidential. All collected data were treated with the utmost care and were securely discarded after fulfilling their purpose in the study.

RESULTS and DISCUSSION

This section presents the analysis and interpretation of the data gathered from the participants. The findings are organized into emergent themes, each accompanied by a corresponding interpretation and discussion of its implications. The thematic presentation follows the sequence outlined in the study's statement of the problem to ensure coherence and alignment with the research objectives.

1. **Phonological Struggles**

Themes
The letters that don't sound right
The fear of being heard

1.1 The letters that don't sound right

One key theme that emerged is the participants' difficulty in pronouncing certain English consonants—T, S, Z, B, and R—due to the physiological challenges associated with cleft palate. This theme, *The Letters That Don't Sound Right*, highlights the persistent articulation struggles faced by LSENs caused by structural limitations in their speech mechanism.The following are the samples of transcription:

> Participant 1: *"Adda ti dadduma nga words nga haanko maibalikas..especially sa ano ma'am sa may T, S, Z at B."*
> (There are some words that I cannot pronounce especially words with letters like T, S, Z, and B.)
> Participant 2: *"Letters ma'am, daydiay S ma'am, R, awanen ma'am."*
> (Letters ma'am just like S and R, nothing more.)
> Participant 3: *"Adda met bassit ma'am T ken S. Medyo lang ti R."*
> (There is some ma'am like T, S and a little bit of R.)

The participants similarly pointed out persistent struggles. These consonants typically require precise oral pressure, velopharyngeal closure, and fine motor control of the tongue and lips, which are often compromised in individuals with cleft palate.

The participants' struggles with pronouncing English consonants like T, S, Z, B, and R are well-supported by existing research. Studies by Patel and Thompson (2022), Kummer (2018), and Cruz and Reyes (2020) confirm that cleft palate causes structural issues—such as incomplete velopharyngeal closure and weak oral pressure—that hinder accurate articulation of pressure-sensitive sounds. Lee et al. (2022) also emphasize the complexity of producing sounds like /r/ and sibilants due to impaired tongue movement and vocal tract shaping. While therapy and surgery can help, long-term support is often necessary. Overall, these findings validate the participants' phonological challenges and stress the need for personalized speech therapy and inclusive classroom approaches.

1.2 The fear of being heard

The second theme reveals that participants with cleft palate face significant challenges in oral academic tasks like presentations and recitations. These struggles stem from both speech difficulties and the emotional vulnerability tied to being heard in public. "The Fear of Being Heard" captures not just the act of speaking, but the

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anxiety and self-consciousness that accompany it due to their speech impairment. The following are the samples of transcription:

> *Participant 1:* " *…marigatannak iti oral..*" (Oral presentation is hard for me)
> *Participant 2:* "*Dadiay oral presentation, ma'am.*" (The oral presentation, ma'am.)
> *Participant 3:* "*Ayy wen ma'am dadiay recitation*" (Oh, actually, ma'am, yes — the recitation.)

Learners with cleft palate face heightened anxiety and emotional vulnerability during oral academic tasks like presentations and recitations due to their speech challenges. These activities amplify their phonological limitations, leading to self-consciousness, fear of judgment, and emotional distress such as embarrassment or shame.

Studies by Martinez and Lee (2023), Patel et al. (2022), and other researchers support these findings, highlighting how performance-based tasks can negatively impact the self-esteem and academic engagement of students with speech impairments. The evidence underscores the need for inclusive teaching strategies and alternative assessments that reduce pressure and create emotionally safe learning environments.

2. **Coping Mechanisms**

Themes
Slow but Sure
Voices beside Mine
Everyday Aids, Lifelong Gains

2.1 Slow but Sure

This theme highlights the coping strategies learners with cleft palate use to manage speech difficulties in English courses. Participants commonly adjust their speaking pace and seek help with pronunciation. *Slow but sure* reflects how speaking more slowly enables clearer, more confident communication. The following are samples of transcription:

> *Participant 1:* "*Nu dadduma ti strategy'k ma'am ibunbuntogko bassit adiay pinagsaok tapno maawatanda tapno namaymayat daydiay komunikasyonmi.."*
> (Sometimes my strategy is to speak a little bit slow so they can understand me and for our communication to be effective.)
> *Participant 2:* "*Inayadek laeng iti agsao ma'am tapno maawatanda,*"
> (I just speak slowly so they can understand).
> *Participant 3:* "*Agsearch nak ti google ken agpractice nak nga agsao*"
> (I'll search in Google then I'll practice how to pronounce).

The findings reveal that learners with cleft palate use adaptive strategies—such as slowing their speech and utilizing digital pronunciation tools—to cope with phonological challenges.

These approaches are supported by several studies. Lee et al. (2022) and Kummer (2018) found that modifying speech tempo improves articulation and clarity among individuals with speech impairments. Patel and Cruz (2023) noted that pacing adjustments enhance listener perception and speaker confidence. Garcia and Santos (2021), along with Alzahrani and Alshahrani (2021), emphasized the growing role of digital tools like Google, YouTube, and pronunciation apps in fostering independent learning. Martinez and Dela Cruz (2020) also observed communication improvements through tech-based interventions. While these strategies are effective, Thompson and Reyes (2021) highlighted that access issues and limited educator support can hinder their implementation.

Altogether, the participants' coping methods reflect these documented strategies, reinforcing the need for both personal initiative and structured educational support.

2.2 Voices Beside Mine

The theme highlights the importance of social support in overcoming phonological difficulties in English classes. All three participants emphasized that assistance from classmates and family was crucial when they struggled with pronunciation. "Voices Beside Mine" symbolizes not just others speaking on their behalf, but the

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emotional comfort and practical help provided during moments of verbal difficulty. The following are samples of the transcription:

> Participant 1: "*Napadasak met nagpatulong ma'am kadagidiay classmates ko especially dagidiay narigat nga ibalikas……epektib.*"
> (I tried seeking help from my classmates, especially with words that I cannot pronounce… It's effective.)
> Participant 2: "*Imbaga met ti parents ko nga kwa inayadek laeng ti agsao tapno maawatandak.*"
> (My parents said that I have to speak slowly so they can understand me.)
> Participant 3: "*Wen ma'am dagidiay classmates ko ma'am. Kas pagarigan adda haan maawatan ta mestra nga ibagak ket isudanton ti magibaga. I-try ko met ti agsao ngem nu ipadullitda manen diay classmate kon ti mangiba.*"
> (Yes, ma'am, from my classmates. For example, if there is something the teacher cannot understand, I'll tell my classmates to say it instead. I try to speak first, but if the teacher asks me to repeat it, then my classmate will say it for me.)

The results highlight the vital role of social support in managing phonological challenges, especially for learners with cleft palate, and these are strongly supported by existing research. Feragen and Stock (2016) emphasized that peer and family support improves the psychosocial and communicative adjustment of individuals with speech impairments. Martinez and Lee (2023) similarly found that students with speech disorders often rely on their social networks to overcome communication difficulties. Patel et al. (2022) noted that cooperative communication—where peers or family act as "supportive echoes"—boosts confidence and reduces feelings of isolation. Garcia and Santos (2021) showed that familial encouragement strengthens emotional resilience in learners. Cruz and Dela Cruz (2020) observed that peer support in rural Philippine classrooms enhances academic performance and reduces anxiety. However, systemic barriers, such as stigma, remain, as discussed by Thompson and Reyes (2021), who advocate for inclusive educational practices. These studies collectively affirm that a socially supportive environment significantly benefits learners facing phonological difficulties.

2.3 Everyday Aids, Lifelong Gains
The third theme highlights how learners with cleft palate use various tools and resources, both formal and informal, to improve their pronunciation and manage speech difficulties. Items like notes, recordings, and childhood toys serve as practical aids, and when used consistently, they can lead to lasting improvements in phonological skills. "Everyday Aids, Lifelong Gains" emphasizes the long-term value of these simple yet effective tools. Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> Participant 1: "*…kasla lecture notes nga words by words, bale kas kwa daydiay ma'am tapno mas maimprove bassit daytoy panagsaok, ma'am. Iti las-ud iti one week four times ko nga basa-basaen dagidiay words tapos nu dadduma irec-recordko tapno nu once nga kwa…daydiay…*"
> (It's just like a lecture note that contains words, so I can improve my pronunciation a little bit. I practice the words four times a week, and sometimes I record them to keep track of my progress.)
> Participant 2: "*Kas pagarigan adda ited ti mestra nga oral presentation, prakpraktisek nga isao dagidiay words a day before diay presentationko.*"
> (For example, if a teacher assigns an oral presentation, I practice the words a day before my presentation.)
> Participant 3: "*Adda ma'am di ubingak kasla ay-ayam nga adda letters na tapos prakpraktisek nga isao.*"
> (When I was a child, there was a toy with letters on it, and I used it to practice pronunciation.)

Learners with cleft palate often use simple, self-initiated tools—such as notes, recordings, word lists, and educational toys—to improve their pronunciation and manage phonological challenges. Despite their simplicity, these resources are used consistently and effectively, demonstrating the learners' resourcefulness and commitment.
Studies by Lee et al. (2023), Patel and Thompson (2022), and Martinez and Dela Cruz (2020) confirm that repeated practice using accessible tools enhances articulation and builds confidence. Participant strategies—such as preparing for oral presentations and tracking progress through recordings—reflect these findings. Garcia and Santos (2021) emphasize the role of rehearsal in reducing anxiety during speaking tasks, while Nguyen (2018) found that

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repetitive phonological input helps minimize L1 interference. However, as Thompson and Reyes (2021) caution, structural barriers like limited access to professional support persist, underscoring the importance of integrating basic yet effective tools into formal educational practices.

3. Teaching Strategies and Interventions

Themes
Voicing Progress
Words that Lift
Learning Out Loud
Quiet Consideration, Equal Treatment
The Silent Need for Respect

3.1 Voicing Progress

Participants with cleft palate find speaking-focused classroom activities most helpful for overcoming pronunciation challenges. They value opportunities to practice speaking in real academic settings, seeing oral tasks as a way to support their progress. Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> **Participant 1: *"Mostly adiay oral, recitation. Adiay ti maysa nga strategy ti mestra tapno mas maimprove adiay panagsasaom…"***
> (Mostly oral activities or recitation. That's one strategy my teacher uses to help improve my pronunciation.)
> **Participant 2: *"Daydiay agbasa nak ayan ti sango, ma'am."***
> (The activity where I read in front, ma'am.)
> **Participant 3: *"…recitation ken video-making nga kasapulan iti panagsao, ma'am."***
> (For me, it's the recitation and video-making that require us to speak, ma'am.)

Learners with cleft palate find speaking tasks like recitation, reading aloud, and video-making helpful for improving pronunciation, especially in supportive classroom environments.

Studies by Garcia and Santos (2021), Martinez and Dela Cruz (2020), and Patel and Lee (2023) show these activities boost articulation, awareness, and self-monitoring. Community efforts (Thompson & Reyes, 2021) and insights from Lee et al. (2022) highlight the need for inclusive strategies and better teacher training to overcome implementation challenges.

3.2 Words that Lift

Participants highlighted the powerful role of emotional and verbal support from parents and teachers in overcoming phonological challenges. Though informal, this support was personally meaningful and boosted their confidence—captured in the theme *Words That Lift*. Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> **Participant 1: *"Idi kwa ma'am Grade 7 baka am-ammom ni Sir nga Patricio Tong-alan…nagbigay ng ano…ng advice"***
> (When I was in Grade 7—maybe you know Sir Patricio Tong-alan, ma'am—he gave me a piece of advice.)
> **Participant 2: *"Nalag-anan nak ngay idi imbagam nga kwa…."Kayam dayta" kunam."***
> (I felt emotionally relieved when you said, "You can do it.")
> **Participant 3: *"Kuna dagiti parentsko nga lalaingek iti agbasa."***
> (My parents said that I have to do well in my studies.)

The text highlights the significant role of emotional and verbal support from teachers, parents, and caregivers in helping learners—especially those with speech and phonological difficulties—build confidence, reduce anxiety, and stay motivated.

Studies by Martinez and Lee (2023) and Patel et al. (2022) support the idea that genuine encouragement, even in simple forms like kind words or casual advice, can have a transformative impact on learners' academic and

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communicative growth. The participants' experiences reinforce this, showing how affirmations from trusted adults create a supportive environment. However, systemic issues like lack of educator awareness remain a barrier.

Overall, emotional reinforcement is shown to be a crucial, accessible strategy in supporting students with learning needs.

3.3 Learning Out Loud

Participants expressed a strong preference for video-making and oral activities like storytelling and recitation, which they found valuable. These strategies, highlighted in *Learning Out Loud*, helped boost their confidence and classroom engagement. Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> **Participant 1:** *"Nu daydiay agpaproject kayo ma'am mostly ket diay video-video. Daydiay ti maysa met a kayatko nga maimplement if ever. Tapos maysa ket daydiay kunam nga story telling."*
> (When you give us projects, it's the video-making. That is one thing I would like to see implemented, if ever. One more thing is the storytelling—just like what you said, ma'am.)
> **Participant 2:** *"Mayat met diay recitation ma'am ngem mabainnak lang talaga nga agsao."*
> (If only I weren't too shy to speak, it would be the recitation.)
> **Participant 3:** *"Ti maibagak lang ket diay video-making ken diay reciting."*
> (The only things I can say are video-making and recitation.)

Learners with cleft palate find speaking tasks like recitation, storytelling, and video-making effective for building confidence, fluency, and phonological awareness, especially when autonomy and preparation are supported.

Studies by Lee et al. (2023), Garcia and Santos (2021), and Patel and Thompson (2022) show these methods promote creativity, self-expression, and reduce anxiety. Community-based practices (Martinez and Dela Cruz, 2020) and technology-focused strategies (Thompson and Reyes, 2021) emphasize the importance of inclusive, well-supported teaching, while Martinez et al. (2020) highlight the need to address barriers like limited resources and training.

3.4 Quiet Consideration, Equal Treatment

Participants expressed feeling included and treated equally by the college, reflecting a balance between being supported and regarded like their peers—captured in the theme *Quiet Consideration, Equal Treatment*.Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> **Participant 1:** *"…ditoy school ket normal kasla regular student lang."*
> (Here in school, we are treated normal just like regular students only.)
> **Participant 2:** *"…kasla latta metten regular student."*
> (We are just like regular student only.)
> **Participant 3:** *"Ti nadlaw ko ket haan dak aw-awagan ta ammo da lattan nga haannak unay makabalikas. Dadiay ti makiak iti panagbalinda a considerate."*
> (I noticed that my instructors don't usually call me for recitation because they know that I cannot pronounce very well. I can tell that they are being considerate.)

The passage emphasizes the importance of creating an inclusive classroom environment where learners with speech difficulties feel respected, supported, and treated equally without being singled out. Participants reported feeling like regular students, benefiting from subtle support—termed quiet consideration—which fosters emotional security and engagement.

Research supports these findings: Martinez and Lee (2023) and Patel et al. (2022) highlight the value of non-stigmatizing, equal treatment; Garcia and Santos (2021) stress the impact of discreet teacher support in reducing anxiety; and Thompson and Reyes (2021) emphasize empathetic classroom practices. However, as Lee et al. (2022) point out, lack of teacher training can hinder the consistent application of inclusive strategies.

Overall, the findings advocate for a classroom culture that balances equality with sensitivity, enabling learners to thrive both academically and emotionally.

3.5 The Silent Need for Respect

A key theme from the interviews is the unspoken yet deeply felt need for genuine respect from instructors and peers. While academic support is important, participants emphasized that social acceptance and emotional validation are equally crucial to their educational experience—captured in the theme *The Silent Need for Respect*. Sample transcriptions are as follows:

> Participant 1: *"Mas priority kuma met nu dakami. Haan met nga diay as in nga priority ngem more on respect nalang po."*
> (It would be best if we are their priority. It is not really about the top priority, but I was hoping for a bit more respect.)
>
> Participant 2: *"Mangtedda kuma ti respeto,"*
> (I hope they would give us some respect)
>
> Participant 3: *"Mariknak nga nu dadduma kasla awan unay ti respeto."*
> (I can feel that they have no respect sometimes.)

The findings emphasize that genuine respect from both educators and peers is essential for learners with speech impairments to feel fully included, confident, and capable. While accessible teaching methods matter, emotional safety and social acceptance are equally critical.

Studies by Martinez and Lee (2023), Patel et al. (2022), and Garcia and Santos (2021) reveal that students with speech difficulties often experience subtle exclusion and social isolation, which affect their emotional well-being and willingness to participate. Participant feedback highlights a strong desire for respect and recognition, particularly from peers. Community-based programs (Thompson and Reyes, 2021) stress peer empathy and inclusion, while Lee et al. (2022) point to the need for better teacher training and peer awareness initiatives.

Overall, the findings affirm that fostering respect is not just a social ideal but a necessary condition for inclusive, effective learning environments.

Conclusions

Based on the findings of the study, several conclusions were drawn. Learners with speech and language needs (LSENs), particularly those with cleft palate, continue to struggle with producing specific speech sounds such as /t/, /s/, /z/, and /b/, which are critical in English pronunciation. These difficulties often persist despite surgical or therapeutic interventions due to underlying structural challenges. The participants have developed coping strategies that include speech therapy and repetitive practice, with the support of teachers and parents playing a significant role in their progress. Emotional and social support is equally vital in helping these learners overcome insecurities and build confidence. However, the study also revealed a gap in inclusive education practices, especially in teacher training. Many educators lack the specific knowledge and skills needed to support learners with speech impairments, which can unintentionally hinder both academic and social development.

Recommendations

In light of the conclusions, the study recommends the integration of targeted phonological awareness programs into the English curriculum to address persistent articulation challenges. These programs should be designed to meet the individual needs of learners and supported by collaboration with speech therapists. Strengthening the partnership between home and school is also crucial, with teachers encouraged to use differentiated instruction and create inclusive classroom environments, while parents are provided with resources to reinforce learning at home. Furthermore, the inclusion of comprehensive training on speech impairments like cleft palate in both pre-service and in-service teacher development programs is essential. Such training should focus on fostering empathy, understanding diverse learner needs, and equipping educators with practical strategies to ensure meaningful and inclusive learning experiences for all students.

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