

College Students' Remote Learning Experiences in Functional English

Princess De C. Puntual^{*1}, Carly Mae J. Suico², Renato P. Yu, Jr.³

¹English and Special Educational Needs (SEN) Department, Al Rawabi Private School, Jebelat Hebshi, Bahrain

²General Education Department, University of Cebu – METC, Cebu City, Philippines

³Ministry of Education, Murcia, Spain

*Corresponding Author Email: puntualprincessde007@gmail.com

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Abstract. This study probed into the lived experiences of purposely selected college students who learned Functional English remotely during the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This phenomenological study employed semi-structured focus group discussions (FGD) with thirty-one (31) students from a state university in the Cebu province. Data was evaluated using Colaizzi's method, leading to the development of five emerging themes: The Road Less Traveled: Shifting to the New Educational Setup; Deep and Lost in the Woods: Impediments in Teaching-Learning Functional English Remotely; Finding a Way or Making It: Perseverance Despite the Challenges in Learning Functional English; The Thrill of the Chase: Real Takeaways From Learning Functional English Remotely; and Charting the Less-Traveled Path: Suggestions for the Refinement of Functional English in the New Setup. The findings indicate that students faced opportunities and challenges while learning Functional English remotely. It suggests that colleges should hold webinars or training for instructors to make the subject more engaging for students, particularly in the new educational context. Teachers are advised to prioritize quality over quantity when assigning activities, enabling students to utilize English in relevant contexts. Additionally, teachers should consider favorable input before assigning tasks to students. Comprehensible input should be applied when designing activities and assignments, ensuring students can effectively engage with the material.

Keywords: Colaizzi's method; Educational setup; Functional English; Phenomenology; Remote learning.

1.0 Introduction

Teachers are essential in adapting to the changes brought about by the coronavirus pandemic, particularly in the education sector. With traditional face-to-face classes halted, institutions have shifted to remote learning methods, including online, modular, and blended formats. This transition is crucial for maintaining educational continuity while ensuring the safety of both students and teachers. Technology has become a vital bridge, allowing virtual education to flourish amid the challenges of the pandemic. The demand for online learning has surged, making it popular and necessary for students to continue their education during school closures.

On the other hand, the rapid implementation of e-learning tools has presented significant challenges. Schools and universities in the Philippines had to quickly adapt their curricula, ensuring that learning competencies were still met despite the abrupt switch. While e-learning tools have played a critical role in facilitating the teaching-learning process, their disconnection from real-world interactions has raised concerns about their effectiveness. Specifically, in the context of Functional English instruction, which integrates essential language skills, the lack of

face-to-face engagement hampers students' confidence and ability to present effectively. This shift can lead to issues with students' identities and personalities, as they miss out on the interpersonal dynamics that traditional classrooms provide.

Furthermore, the learning process is influenced by various factors, including access to technology and the learners' overall well-being. The new educational setup relies heavily on information and communications technology (ICT), which can create disparities for students lacking adequate resources. Emotional and social factors also play a significant role, as many students face psychological challenges exacerbated by the pandemic. Teachers, too, were unprepared for this sudden shift. With these challenges, it is crucial to understand and explore how these college students navigate remote learning, especially in Functional English, which demands active engagement. This phenomenological study aims to investigate the lived experiences of students learning Functional English remotely, shedding light on their complexities and offering insights into how the new educational setup can be improved for better learning outcomes.

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The study utilized qualitative research methods, specifically the descriptive phenomenological design, as it is considered the most appropriate for illuminating profound issues and providing insights that stimulate action. As a distinct research paradigm, qualitative methods offer multiple frameworks for exploring phenomena experienced by individuals. Jackson et al. (2007) described exploring and understanding social phenomena as a significant aspect of qualitative research. This study aimed to apprehend the lived experiences, stories, and narratives of selected college students who have experienced learning Functional English in an online format. Husserl's descriptive phenomenology was employed, allowing the researchers to describe the phenomenon and 'bracket' their biases. Bracketing involves setting aside personal experiences to view the phenomenon under investigation in a new light. This is a critical assumption of Husserl's approach, ensuring that the researchers do not impose their assumptions on the data collection or structure. The goal is to separate prior knowledge of the phenomenon from the informants' descriptions. Therefore, 'bracketing' or 'epoche' is essential for maintaining the validity of data collection and analysis while preserving the phenomenon's objectivity. Husserl believed that researchers' bracketing aids in gaining insight into the standard features of lived experiences (Reiners, 2012). The phenomenon of interest is learning Functional English as an elective course during the new normal, as experienced by selected college students. The study's philosophical assumption is ontological, espousing the idea of multiple realities as perceived by the informants. It also adopts a constructivist perspective, suggesting that a single event can be characterized by "multiple realities or interpretations" rather than a singular, observable reality.

2.2 Research Locale

The study was conducted at a state university in Cebu province, established in 1944, offering education and technology courses from first to fourth-year tertiary levels. Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021 marked the university's transition to an online, flexible learning environment. Before this shift, the university provided various orientations for instructors and students. The learning management system (LMS) called Odilo was utilized during the first semester to upload and organize learning materials, facilitate the monitoring of online classes, and track student progress. In subsequent semesters, teachers could use any accessible online platform, such as Facebook Messenger, Google Classroom, and YouTube.

2.3 Research Participants

The study's population consisted of selected education students in their third year of college. These informants took the Functional English class in the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, facilitated by a professor who had served at the university for over five years. The Functional English subject was conducted three hours per week over eighteen weeks to fulfill the semester's fifty-four-hour requirement. The professor used the unified syllabus and course pack provided for all university campuses, supplemented by their teaching techniques and approaches in the new educational setup. Since qualitative research does not typically predefine sample sizes, participants were selected until data saturation was reached, meaning no new information emerged (Sargeant, 2012). A sufficient number of informants is necessary to address the research question (Merriam, 2009). In this study, data saturation was achieved with 31 student-informants. Purposeful sampling involved selecting individuals with knowledge or experience in remote Functional English learning (Creswell, 2014). Selection

criteria included: a) taking Functional English as an elective course in the first semester of A.Y. 2020-2021, and b) completing the semester's requirements. Data were analyzed using Colaizzi's seven-step method, which was aligned with Husserl's descriptive phenomenological design.

2.4 Research Instruments

This study employed an in-depth qualitative approach to explore the lived experiences of informants learning Functional English remotely, emphasizing the researchers as the primary instruments in the process. As highlighted by Stewart (2010), the credibility of qualitative research significantly relies on the researchers' skills, particularly in phenomenological studies where in-depth interviews are crucial for eliciting detailed narratives. The researchers aimed to conduct interviews in a natural, conversational manner, fostering a safe environment that encourages informants to provide rich responses. This involved active listening, maintaining a clear line of questioning, and using body language to establish rapport. A researcher-made interview guide featuring open-ended questions was utilized during focus group discussions conducted via Zoom. The guide was validated by a panel comprising a data analyst with a Doctor of Philosophy degree, an internal member with a Doctor in Education from Cebu Normal University, and an external member holding a Doctor of Arts in Literature and Communication. Before the interviews, the study's rationale was explained to the informants, who provided informed consent. Semi-structured interviews, lasting 45 minutes to an hour, were audio-video recorded with the informants' permission and subsequently transcribed. Confidentiality and anonymity were assured, and informants completed a written form regarding their demographic data, stored separately from the interview transcripts to maintain privacy.

2.5 Data Gathering Procedure

This study followed a series of specific steps to obtain its results. A request letter was sent to the campus director, the head of instruction, and the chairman of the college of education to seek approval to conduct data collection for the research. Since the leading researcher is a part-time instructor at the university, she has already established rapport with the faculty and staff. After receiving the necessary permissions, data collection commenced after the first semester of the 2020-2021 academic year. At that point, Functional English had been integrated into the new normal and students had learned it remotely.

Pre-gathering Phase

Before the actual focus group discussion was done, the researchers made sure to acquire the ethics clearance for the study first. This phenomenological study is exempted from ethics review and was granted ethics clearance on February 22, 2021 by the Cebu Normal University Ethics Review Committee (CNU-ERC). Once the ethics clearance was granted, the informants were given a word document with three parts, 'PART I: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form', 'PART II: Demographic Profile for Research Informants', and 'PART III: Interview Guide'. This form was given to the prospective informants and a pre-recorded video explaining the study through the class group chat. The informants were then asked, but not obliged to watch the video and download the informed consent form. The prospective informants were free to refuse to participate in the study if they wished and did not have to give the researchers any reason why they did not want to participate. After watching the pre-recorded video and the students agreeing to participate, the prospective informants filled out the demographic profile in the second part of the informed consent form. The prospective informants were assured that no information from them would be disclosed outside of the research team. The earlier information would be locked in a zipped folder with a password. It was ensured that the students were allowed to ask further questions after completing the forms, signifying that they were interested in participating in the study. When the final informants were identified based on the selection criteria, the research informants then affixed their signatures to the consent form to formalize their participation in the study. The semi-structured interview questions for the focus group discussions were given to the selected informants beforehand to allow them to formulate initial answers before the interview. Before the interview, the students were assured of the confidentiality of the personal data and the interview results. The informants were also assured that the results would not affect their grades in the course subject they were with the primary researcher. The informants were also informed ahead of the schedule of the data gathering and were allowed to ask questions regarding the matter as the informants of the study.

During

The semi-structured, focus group interview (FGD) through Zoom was conducted using the semi-structured interview guide questions validated by the panel. In the actual FGD, the initial questions that were answered by the informants along with the informed consent form and demographic data were then asked again to gather more in-depth information. This study employed focus group discussion to collect data as it works best for topics that individuals could talk about in their everyday lives—but do not (Macnaghten & Myers, 2004). Because the informants are all enrolled in the same research environment, they are not strangers to one another. They may have discussed the phenomenon at some point, but not in-depth. A focus group is undoubtedly a poor choice for sensitive, intensely personal, and culturally inappropriate things to discuss in the presence of strangers. However, the current study delves into a non-sensitive topic in the company of familiar people. Therefore, holding the FGD would not be detrimental to what the study is trying to find out (Merriam, 2009). Each session of the FGD included at least three (3) students who share similar characteristics. The interview was conducted for 45 minutes to an hour by the principal researcher. To establish rapport, the interview flow started with the demographic questions, including the informants' background regarding their personal data and educational attainment. After the demographic questions and the informed consent reiterated, the researcher began with the actual interview questions when the rapport was established. Informants were encouraged to talk freely and tell stories using their own words. The interview process was made to sound as natural as possible to draw out more realistic experiences from the informants. They were allowed to answer the interview questions in English, Filipino, or Cebuano-Bisaya or a mix of the three to express themselves fully. A constructivist viewpoint underpins this data gathering process since the data obtained from a focus group is socially created within the group's interaction (Merriam, 2009). The goal is to collect high-quality data in a social setting where informants can analyze their perspectives in light of that of others without having to agree or reach any form of consensus (Patton, 2002). Informants are also not required to disagree with each other as the whole process is dependent on the group's dynamics.

Post-gathering Phase

The audio-video recordings were transcribed verbatim, and the information given by the college students was decoded based on the interview. Coding categories were defined by specific thoughts, phrases or patterns (Bogdan & Biklen, 2016). This allowed the descriptive data to be organized in a user-friendly format for further study and evaluation. At the end of each interview, the researcher reminded the informants about her need for a second contact to discuss the study findings and to make sure that the study findings reflect their own experiences. Data saturation was reached with thirty-one (31) college education students. An expert researcher with qualitative research experience also double-checked the transcripts.

2.6 Data Analysis

Colaizzi's seven step process of meticulous analysis provides an extensive understanding of the phenomenon under study. This method depends upon deep first-person accounts of experience verified by the informants who lived it. The following steps represent Colaizzi's process for phenomenological data analysis as used in the study.

Making Sense or Acquiring Feeling for the Protocols

Each transcript was read several times to understand the fullness of the experience as described by each participant. Since the researcher allowed the informants to answer the interview questions in English, Filipino, or Cebuano-Bisaya to express themselves fully, the transcripts were translated by the researcher in a data-driven way. A multilingual (English, Filipino, and Cebuano-Bisaya languages) professional translator and editor validated the translations (Abalos et al., 2016).

Extracting Significant Statements

The researcher reviewed each transcript to "extract from them, phrases or sentences that directly pertain to the investigated phenomenon" (Creswell, 2014). The original transcription, which is a mix of English, Filipino, or Cebuano-Bisaya and their corresponding English translations, was arranged side by side in columns to verify the meaning of the data. Each transcription was analyzed after each interview, and English translations were coded or numbered consecutively. These statements were also recorded on a separate sheet noting their transcript, page, and line numbers.

Formulating Meanings

The third step is formulating the meanings or spelling out the meaning of each significant statement. In this step, the researcher leaps from what the informants say to find what they mean, thus making a “precarious leap”. Colaizzi further explained that in finding these formulated meanings, the researcher must discover and illuminate the hidden meanings considering the various contexts and horizons of the phenomenon described in the original transcript. Furthermore, the researcher “must not formulate meanings that have no connection with the data.” To remain faithful to this description, validation was sought from an expert researcher for the formulated meanings, themes, and the theme clusters that were described in the phenomenon being studied.

Organizing the Clusters of Themes

In this step, formulated meanings were organized into clusters of themes. The process of grouping all formulated meanings into categories that reflect a unique structure of clusters of themes was initiated. Each cluster of themes was coded to include all formulated meanings related to that group of meanings. After carefully reading and reviewing the meaning of the experiences of the study's informants, significant themes were regarded as the central themes of the study. To check the accuracy of the overall thematic map, validation was sought from an expert researcher in qualitative research.

Integration of Results into an Exhaustive Description

All emergent themes were defined and included in an exhaustive description at this analysis stage. After merging all study themes, a whole structure of the phenomenon was extracted. Thereafter, an expert researcher was sought to review the findings in terms of richness and completeness to provide sufficient description and to confirm that the exhaustive description reflects the experiences of the selected college students regarding their learning of Functional English remotely. Finally, a validation to this exhaustive description will be confirmed by the research supervisors or the panel (Shosha, 2012).

Formulation of Results into an Exhaustive Description

In this step, a reduction of findings was made, and redundant, misused, or overestimated descriptions were eradicated from the overall structure to identify the fundamental structure. This description was written as unequivocally as possible. To do this, the theme clusters and emergent themes were integrated to form the description.

Validation

The final step in Colaizzi’s method of data analysis is the validation of the findings using the “member checking” technique. This was done by returning the research findings to the informants and discussing the results. A second contact was made with the informants to ensure they were satisfied with the study findings because they reflected their experiences. A 1-hour Google Meet session was conducted by the study's principal researcher with the study informants to discuss the results with them. Out of 31 informants, only 20 could attend the validation due to conflict of schedules. However, since the session was recorded, those who could not attend were still allowed to view it and see the validation that transpired. If they have any clarification regarding the result, these informants were allowed to ask questions by sending the researchers a personal message. In validating the study results, all informants confirmed that their experiences were described accurately and in detail. They declared that no further changes or additions were needed in the study results.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

Conflict of Interest

The informants in this study are the researcher's students in two Pedagogical Content Knowledge (PCK) subjects, ED 319, ‘The Teacher and the School Curriculum,’ and ED 3110, ‘Building and Enhancing New Literacies Across the Curriculum.’ However, the researcher does not teach Functional English. There is no conflict of interest, as their participation in the study did not impact their final grades in ED 319 and ED 3110.

Privacy and Confidentiality

The informants were assured that no information about them would be shared with anyone outside of the research team and the information collected from this research project would be kept private. The informants were informed that any data and details about them would have a number and initial instead of their name. Only the

researchers would know their certain number and lock that information in a zipped folder with a password. These files would not be shared with or given to anyone except the research evaluators or panel. The knowledge the researchers would collect from this research would be shared with the informants before making it widely available to the public. The informants were informed that the study results would be published so that other interested people may learn from the research. Each informant would receive a summary of the results after the study is executed.

Informed Consent Process

The prospective informants were given a word document with three parts, 'PART I: Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form', 'PART II: Demographic Profile for Research Informants', and 'PART III: Interview Guide'. This form was sent through the class group chat of the prospective informants along with a pre-recorded video explaining the study in a language the informants understand. The informants were then asked, but not obliged to watch the video and download the informed consent form. The prospective informants were free to refuse to participate in the study if they wished and did not have to give the researchers a reason why they did not want to participate. A period of 24 hours was given for the prospective informants to think over the presented information. The Information Sheet used the non-technical and straightforward words that include an introduction paragraph containing the name of the principal investigator, name of the organization, purpose and conduct of the study, risk and inconveniences, possible benefits for the informants, compensation, voluntariness of participation, confidentiality, and the contact person in case of queries. The informed consent form would only be signed by the informant along with the demographic profile after ensuring that the informant was already prepared for informed decision making. The informants affixed their signature at the bottom of the consent form confirming that they had read and understood the information sheet for the study and had the opportunity to ask questions. The research informants received a copy of the participant information sheet and the informed consent form.

Vulnerability

The prospective informants are 20-51 years old and are therefore entitled to decide whether to participate in the study. After having been fully informed of what would be asked of them, how the data would be used, and what benefits, compensation, or consequences there could be; the informants provided explicit, active, signed consent to taking part in the research, including understanding their rights to access to their information and the right to withdraw at any point.

Recruitment

The groups that were studied are similar in age and teaching styles used under the study. Prospective informants for this study were readily available since the prospective informants were the primary researcher's students for the first semester of the academic year 2020-2021, specifically in ED 319 and ED 3110 but not in Functional English.

Risks

There were no potential risks to the informants in participating in the research, other than the possible information the participant may deem personal. If the participant felt uncomfortable, they did not have to answer questions or participate in the interview. The informant did not have to give the researchers any reason for not responding to the interview or refusing to participate. The informant could also withdraw their provided data if they changed their mind. It also did not affect the informants' final grades for the current semester in ED 319 and ED 3110.

Benefits

There were no direct benefit to the research informants. However, their participation should help college instructors see things in the students' perspective with regards to learning Functional English in the new educational setup. As a result, college instructors as curriculum implementers will be driven to take initiative or act regarding the students' opportunities or struggles in learning Functional English in the new normal towards curriculum improvement.

Compensation

The informants were not provided any incentive to take part in the research. However, the researchers gave the informants simple tokens for the time and internet expenses they had to participate in the study. The researchers

value the informants' time, so when the prospective informant accepted to participate in the research, the informants were given tokens to express the researchers' gratitude for their participation.

2.7 Rigor of the Study

Research studies must be rigorously conducted to influence a field's practice or theory. These studies must present insights and conclusions accurately for readers, practitioners, and other researchers (Merriam, 2009). Several strategies were employed to ensure the study's validity and reliability, which depicted the situation in sufficient detail. This is for the readers to realize that the substance of this phenomenological investigation makes logical sense. This study conducted member checking, used rich, thick description to convey findings, clarified researchers' bias through reflexivity journal, and a prolonged time in the field of the phenomenon by the principal researcher. The transcripts were also checked for apparent errors, and made sure there were no ambiguities in the definition of codes (Creswell, 2014).

Member Checking

This was accomplished by returning the research findings to the informants and discussing them with them. A second contact was made to ensure that the informants were satisfied with the study findings as they mirrored their own experiences. All of the informants confirmed that their experiences were accurately and thoroughly described, and they declared that no further changes or additions were required in the study's results.

Rich, Thick Description to Convey Findings

Each emerging theme in the study was thoroughly characterized using significant literature and vignettes and then rationalized using relevant literature and studies.

Researcher's Position or Reflexivity

As explained earlier, bracketing eradicates any bias inherent in researcher beliefs and attitudes (Creswell, 2014). This means the researcher must avoid and separate any imposing of their own assumptions on the data collection process or the structure of the data in order to arrive at the pure essences or meanings of the experience. To avoid this occurrence, the main researcher wrote a reflexivity journal, which is a critical reflection that acknowledges her role in the research before interpreting the data.

Prolonged Time in the Field of the Phenomenon

The leading researcher also experienced the phenomenon as she is a teacher of Functional English in the same research environment. Therefore, the leading researcher has some understanding of the phenomenon. However, since reflexivity is used, the informants' experiences in the phenomenon under investigation are reported independently of the principal researcher's assumptions.

Transcripts Checked for Obvious Errors

The researchers manually transcribed the audio-video recordings taken on the day of the focus group interviews and read them several times to ensure that any evident flaws were corrected.

Transparency in the Definition of Codes

This was accomplished by constantly comparing data with the codes and by writing memos about the codes and their definitions repetitively until definite and relevant codes were constructed. A broad inquiry into informants' experiences in learning Functional English despite the new educational setup in the Philippines aided in identifying the transferability of the phenomenon. Specific characteristics of the shared lived experiences of these selected college students in learning Functional English in the new normal can also be generalized to learning any other subjects in the new normal. Some declarations about the professor's facilitation tactics and procedures that may have influenced the experiences of these informants may not apply to the experiences of those students who have a different professor, where the course is facilitated differently. However, specific assertions are more general, reflecting informants' perspectives that may be more transferable to college students who have also experienced the new educational arrangement, which is profoundly new in the Philippine educational system.

3.0 Results and Discussion

Five emergent themes originated from the twenty cluster themes to form the core of the study's findings, which faithfully represent the lived experience of the informants of this study. The following were the emergent themes, which were tagged with metaphorical terms to describe the informants' experiences as a whole: *The Road Less Traveled: Shifting to the New Educational Setup*, *Deep and Lost in the Woods: Impediments in Teaching-Learning Functional English Remotely*, *Finding a Way or Making It: Perseverance Despite the Challenges in Learning Functional English*, *The Thrill of the Chase: Real Takeaways From Learning Functional English Remotely*, *Charting the Less-Traveled Path: Suggestions for the Refinement of Functional English in the New Setup*. The informants' narratives thoroughly explained their lived experiences by extracting significant statements, constructing formulated meanings, and developing cluster and emerging themes. The following section describes the emergent themes based on informant narratives from the interview data.

The Road Less Traveled: Shifting to the New Educational Setup.

Informants reflected on their experiences learning Functional English in the new normal, often comparing it to their previous educational setup. Initially, they felt like adventurers at a crossroads: one path represented familiar in-person learning, while the other led to the uncharted territory of online education. During the COVID-19 crisis, informants recognized the necessity of navigating this new route, sharing diverse perspectives on their experiences. Many found online learning more convenient, citing access to unlimited resources that boosted their confidence in participating in English classes. However, they ultimately agreed that in-person education remains irreplaceable. As informants became accustomed to the online setup, they often reiterated its convenience. They felt empowered by its flexibility, allowing them to manage their time better while supporting their families during difficult times (Shurville et al., 2008). This perspective aligns with findings from Altuwairesh (2021) and Cole et al. (2014), who noted the convenience of online learning as a key benefit.

Conversely, some informants found traditional classrooms distracting due to noise and peers, while others struggled to create conducive learning environments at home (Altuwairesh, 2021; Rotas & Cahapay, 2020). The online setup also enabled them to conduct research efficiently, fostering reading, vocabulary, and grammar skills, which they felt made them more productive. Mckeachie and Gibbs (1999) emphasized that effective online teaching requires access to technology, which supports this observation. The online environment also instilled greater confidence in shy students, facilitating participation without the pressure of in-person scrutiny (Altuwairesh, 2021; Sun & Chen, 2016).

However, some informants expressed concerns about the lack of face-to-face interaction with teachers and peers, asserting that in-person education is still vital for effective learning. They noted that specific lessons are better understood through a teacher's gestures and direct communication, as Kohnke and Jarvis (2020) highlighted the challenges of teaching skills without personal connection. Moreover, the absence of real-time interactions in group activities was a drawback of online learning. Informants reported difficulty focusing during online classes due to household distractions, echoing the findings from Rotas and Cahapay (2020) regarding balancing schoolwork and home responsibilities. These insights suggest that the transition from traditional to online learning cannot be seamless, as mastery of competencies may be compromised (Ogena et al., 2020). Despite the potential for e-learning to grow in importance, studies indicate it is unlikely to fully replace traditional classroom settings (Kulal & Nayak, 2020).

Deep and Lost in the Woods: Impediments in Teaching-Learning Functional English Remotely.

Informants shared various challenges while learning Functional English in the new educational setup. A lack of teacher guidance led to tasks being completed merely for compliance. They recognized personal learning difficulties, signal issues, and environmental distractions as key factors that diminished their enthusiasm for the subject. The teacher's absence was particularly detrimental; initial online meetings dwindled, leaving students to navigate tasks independently. As noted by Khan (2017), Rotas and Cahapay (2020), and Thumvichit (2020), reliance on text-based instructions can create confusion, especially for those with reading comprehension challenges.

The role of the instructor is critical in online education, as students expect guidance and facilitation (Ragan, 2015). Many informants indicated that communication was ineffective, often reduced to minimal interactions like

"waving" digitally. This lack of meaningful engagement resulted in a sense of detachment. The informants also struggled to seek help, frequently receiving no responses to their inquiries. This aligns with findings from Coman et al. (2020) and Rotas and Cahapay (2020), which noted that some professors provide inadequate learning support in online contexts. Delays in response can hinder student progress and contribute to dissatisfaction (Ragan, 2015).

Additionally, anxiety regarding their online schedules and tasks was another challenge, as informants often felt uncertain about expectations. They noted that links provided for resources were frequently broken or inaccessible, further complicating their learning experience. Such findings support Baticulon et al. (2020) and Ragan (2015), emphasizing the importance of clear communication of expectations. The absence of social interaction in class activities was also a concern, with tasks completed individually, limiting collaboration. Thumvichit (2020) highlighted the challenges of promoting communicative interactions in the current setup, while Kohnke and Jarvis (2020) noted that lack of two-way communication hampers effective teaching. Informants also faced personal learning challenges, such as speech difficulties and physical strain from prolonged screen time, which negatively impacted their performance. Bailey and Lee (2020) suggested that conversation classes may struggle under asynchronous learning conditions. Rotas and Cahapay (2020) noted that remote learning could jeopardize students' physical health, leading to eye strain and headaches.

In summary, the challenges identified by informants in their online classes contributed to negative perceptions of their learning experiences. Many reported completing tasks solely for compliance, feeling demotivated and pressured by the demands of online education, a sentiment echoed in studies by Coman et al. (2020), Kunarsi (2021), and Rotas and Cahapay (2020). The lack of balance between assigned tasks and available time and technological challenges has further complicated their learning journeys.

Finding a Way or Making It: Perseverance Despite the Challenges in Learning Functional English.

Despite facing challenges on their unfamiliar journey, informants persisted in learning Functional English. They attributed their resilience to their initiative and the camaraderie with classmates, fostering a determination to meet the demands of their online English class. Many expressed a newfound appreciation for English, mainly through engaging with level tasks they found compelling for their learning. Informants recognized that the rewards of this endeavor are accessible, but require courage and self-initiative. Some mentioned performing the viral TikTok flight attendant challenge as part of their assignments, which they found particularly difficult due to time constraints. They emphasized the importance of perseverance and maintaining a positive outlook when faced with challenges, echoing findings by Mallillin et al. (2021) that a strong desire to learn can help students overcome transitional difficulties.

These informants shared techniques for coping with remote learning, noting that taking initiative and collaborating with peers significantly impacted their success. They believed that many issues, particularly the lack of support from their Functional English teacher, could be addressed through self-discipline and initiative. Informants highlighted the necessity of self-directed learning, especially when their teacher was unavailable. They took responsibility for interpreting instructions and sought additional resources, such as educational videos, to overcome personal learning challenges. This aligns with the perspective of Pokhrel and Chhetri (2021), which indicates that students with a growth mindset can adapt more readily to new educational scenarios.

Despite the challenges posed by unclear instructions and limited teacher engagement, informants found ways to work independently and develop their skills. They emphasized that collaboration among classmates was crucial for understanding and completing tasks, reinforcing the importance of building a supportive online learning community (Sun & Chen, 2016). Informants acknowledged that their teacher's engagement heavily influenced the quality of their learning experience. They expressed that more explicit instructions and guidance would have enhanced their understanding and application of the course content, aligning with findings from Coman et al. (2020) regarding the need for effective teaching strategies in online environments.

Many informants reported that independent learning activities often involved applying higher-order thinking skills, helped them improve their vocabulary and writing abilities. They recognized that these activities prepared them for future challenges in a globalized world, supporting the notion that Functional English is essential for developing contemporary skills (Khan, 2017). Some informants noted a gradual improvement in their English

skills due to the emphasis on autonomous learning. They found a growing interest in tasks like creating conversation scripts, which encouraged them to read more and step outside their comfort zones. This aligns with Thumvichit (2020), emphasizing the need for students to enhance their communication skills actively. Overall, these informants transformed challenges into opportunities for growth, demonstrating their ability to adapt and thrive in a new learning environment.

The Thrill of the Chase: Real Takeaways From Learning Functional English Remotely.

Having navigated the unfamiliar path of learning Functional English, informants reflected on the significant influence of their experiences. They recognized that, regardless of whether they return to this path, they have gained valuable insights that will benefit their future teaching careers. They believe this journey has provided guidelines for future educators to establish effective communication with students while remaining technologically competent. Informants emphasized the importance of communication skills in becoming productive teachers, noting that they should model effective communication for their future students. They acknowledged that effective communication is crucial in teaching-learning, confirming Ragan's (2015) assertion about the importance of understanding discourse rules for effective online communication.

Moreover, the informants highlighted the necessity of learning higher-level English, as it aids their studies and future careers (Mahmood & Lohar, 2020). They viewed their learning experiences as essential preparation for providing a better teaching-learning process in the future. Most informants stated that their Functional English learning experience helped them clarify the type of teacher they aspire to be. They compared different teaching strategies encountered online to determine which would best serve their future students. This adaptability will give them an advantage in managing students in an increasingly digital educational landscape.

Many informants also recognized the importance of being digitally savvy, having learned to utilize various online tools and technologies. They believe this firsthand experience will enhance their teaching effectiveness and adaptability in the evolving educational field (Thumvichit, 2020). As they envision the future of education, informants consider the potential of digitally driven classrooms, where students may learn from home rather than traditional classrooms. They feel prepared for the challenges of future teaching roles, echoing Simon's (2012) view that teachers can transform their professional identities by embracing digital competencies. These insights align with Bada et al. (2016), who argue that universities must fully embrace technology in pedagogy to enhance the teaching-learning process. Overall, informants believe their experiences taught them that life is 10% what happens and 90% how they react, reinforcing the importance of adaptability and a positive mindset.

In facing the challenges of remote learning, informants learned the necessity of self-study when teachers are unavailable and emphasized the importance of maintaining enthusiasm for learning. They recognized that patience, responsibility, and good time management are key to overcoming obstacles in the new educational setup. These findings are consistent with research by Coman et al. (2020), Kunarsi (2021), and Rotas and Cahapay (2020), which highlighted students' difficulties in adjusting to new instructional schedules. Informants concluded that thriving in this environment requires responsible learning and proactive engagement, rather than complaints about assigned tasks.

Charting the Less-Traveled Path: Suggestions for the Refinement of Functional English in the New Setup.

Informants who have navigated the unfamiliar path of learning Functional English expressed a desire to prevent future students from feeling as lost as they once did. They offered suggestions for professors to enhance the online teaching of Functional English, effectively charting a map for future learners. These informants emphasized that professors teaching skill-based subjects like English should be more engaged, available, and considerate of their students. They believe increased teacher involvement is crucial for a successful teaching-learning process in the new educational setup. Ragan (2015) supports this by highlighting that proactive course management strategies can significantly improve the student learning experience.

One informant noted the importance of live discussions, stating that the absence of real-time interactions made it challenging to grasp the material. This finding aligns with Coman et al. (2020), who argue that videoconferencing can enhance understanding and information processing. Furthermore, fostering dialogue during live discussions

is essential for effective learning, as stated by another informant, echoing the need for teachers to humanize their teaching tactics (Pacansky Brock et al., 2020).

Informants also suggested that teachers clarify tasks and engage in meaningful conversations to build personal relationships. Thumvichit (2020) notes that professors often struggle to develop deeper relationships with students in asynchronous settings. Encouragement from teachers during challenging times, particularly regarding financial and personal issues, was also highlighted as vital for student morale (Kunarsi, 2021). To enhance the teaching-learning process, informants recommended that teachers explore alternative methods of lesson delivery, such as pre-recorded lecture videos. They found these resources more straightforward to learn from than live discussions, supporting the findings of Chung et al. (2020) that students prefer pre-recorded content over live sessions.

Recognizing teachers' various obligations, informants suggested that clear communication about scheduling conflicts is essential if live discussions are not possible. They stressed the importance of immediate feedback on assignments to identify areas for improvement. Doucet et al. (2020) emphasize that timely feedback is crucial for effective learning. Additionally, informants pointed out that strong guidance in Functional English is vital for their future careers. Mahmood and Lohar (2020) affirm that learning higher-level English significantly benefits students' academic and professional endeavors. These informants called for greater empathy and understanding between teachers and students, noting submission deadlines and internet access challenges. They suggested that teachers listen to students' concerns and offer flexibility.

Furthermore, informants advised teachers to establish a good mix of online discussions and assignments to ensure a balanced workload. They echoed the notion that students' basic needs, including reliable internet access, must be prioritized for effective online learning (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). The informants also recommended that teachers use clear, student-friendly language when giving instructions, as misunderstandings can lead to frustration (Khan, 2017). They emphasized collaboration and communication between professors and students, essential for fostering a sense of belonging online (Coman et al., 2020).

In conclusion, most informants suggested that teachers should create tasks that promote student collaboration to enhance speaking skills and make assignments more manageable. Thumvichit (2020) supports this by indicating that collaborative online learning can foster student connections, making learning more engaging and effective.

Implication

Presenting phenomenological data is an ethical endeavor to reflect informants' experiences accurately. Descriptive phenomenology focuses on describing rather than explaining, with bracketing used to maintain fidelity to the informants' perspectives. The informants, all students from the same state university in Cebu Province but from diverse degree programs and English language backgrounds, shared everyday experiences that revealed essential themes. The study's findings emphasize the need for improved teaching strategies and course delivery in Functional English. It highlights the importance of instructor involvement, availability, and compassion, especially in unfamiliar educational settings. In conclusion, the lived experiences of these college students in remote Functional English learning provide valuable insights. The emergent themes suggest that instructors, universities, and curriculum developers should evaluate and refine the online Functional English instruction course syllabus.

4.0 Conclusion

This phenomenological research highlights college students' lived experiences learning Functional English online, emphasizing several significant contributions. First, the study provides deep insights into the challenges and successes students encountered, revealing their perceptions of online learning and the critical role of instructors. The findings underscore the importance of instructor engagement, availability, and empathy; students noted that a supportive teacher significantly enhances their learning experience. Furthermore, the research advocates for improved teaching strategies, including clear communication of expectations, timely feedback, and diverse instructional tools, such as pre-recorded lectures and visual aids, to cater to different learning styles. It suggests prioritizing meaningful assignments that promote real-life applications of English rather than an excess of tasks that can lead to student frustration. Additionally, the research encourages educators to reflect on their practices

and adapt to the evolving educational landscape, recognizing the value of student feedback in shaping effective teaching strategies.

Based on these insights, institutions should prioritize teacher training to enhance online delivery methods and foster a supportive online learning environment. Educators are encouraged to implement diverse teaching strategies and focus on the quality of assignments to improve student engagement and learning outcomes. Future research should explore areas such as optimizing comprehensible input in online Functional English instruction, conducting a SWOT analysis of the challenges and opportunities in teaching this subject, and analyzing the role of Functional English skills in various professional contexts. By examining college students' written outputs through a functional approach, educators can better understand the application of English skills. These recommendations aim to inform curriculum development and teaching practices, ultimately enriching the educational experience in Functional English courses.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

Each author's contributions significantly enhanced the research's quality and depth. Puntual, as the principal researcher, conducted the interviews, ensuring that the informants' voices were accurately captured. She also transcribed and translated the manuscripts from Cebuano-Bisaya to English, facilitating a clear understanding of the data for a broader audience. Additionally, Puntual conducted member checking interviews, allowing informants to validate the findings and ensuring authenticity in the representation of their experiences. Suico played a crucial role in extracting significant statements from the data, carefully editing and finalizing the formulated meanings to ensure clarity and coherence. This meticulous attention to detail helped refine the interpretations of the informants' experiences. Finally, Yu organized the clusters of themes emerging from the data, integrating these results into a comprehensive description that encapsulated the essence of the findings. This systematic approach provided a structured framework for understanding the complexities of the informants' lived experiences in learning Functional English. Together, these contributions created a well-rounded and insightful exploration of the phenomenon.

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