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Jeanette G. Pedriña[1] , Karyll Rose D Digaum [2], Mea Ann M Malcampo [3], Julia Zyraelle D. Pantoja[4], Von Christian L., Ubaldo[5]

[1]. College of Teacher Education and Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines (j.pedrina@usep.edu.ph)

[2]. College of Teacher Education and Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines (krddigaum@usep.edu.ph)

[3]. College of Teacher Education and Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines (mammalcampo@usep.edu.ph)

[4.] College of Teacher Education and Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines (jzdpantoja@usep.edu.ph)

[5.] College of Teacher Education and Education, University of Southeastern Philippines, Tagum City, 8100, Philippines (vclubaldo@usep.edu.ph)

Abstract

This phenomenological study delved into the academic challenges of modular learning of public-school elementary school learners. Validated In-depth interview protocol (IDI) was used to collect the data from ten (10) Grade six learners. Findings revealed that these academic challenges include unfavorable learning environments, reading comprehension issues, lack of motivation, and poor quality of printed learning modules that affect the learners' ability to comprehend and finish the module effectively. Consequently, modular learning allows learners to take responsibility for their learning by utilizing the available answers key, optimizing internet usage, scheduling time properly, and guessing answers. Considerably, the learners used face-to-face conversations, personal messages, and phone calls to communicate their educational queries. Moreover, the structure of self-learning modules facilitates independent study and complicates learners' understanding. It is recommended that there is a need to enhance policies for improving module quality, allocate sufficient funds to improve the printed module quality, conduct relevant teacher training and workshops for developing quality printed modules, and sustain the home visitation program to monitor students' modular learning progress.

Keywords: modular learning, academic challenges, phenomenology

Introduction

The pandemic paused challenges for the education system as it struggled to deliver quality learning experiences. Face-to-face instruction was restricted, making education challenging to continue. In response, educational institutions adopted various social isolation measures and curriculum adjustments (Mohammed et al., 2020) while diverse teaching techniques were implemented in many countries, including non-technological approaches like modular learning, despite initial issues (Anzaldo, 2021). This approach required teachers to develop modules containing learning tasks and activities based on essential competencies, which learners must complete and submit weekly. However, such a shift to modular learning posed challenges for students and teachers. Learners in disadvantaged contexts face additional difficulties due to limited access to essential resources like the Internet and devices (Sarwari et al., 2022).

Various countries have conducted research that has shed light on the complexities of modular learning during this pandemic. For example, obstacles facing teachers and students while implementing

modular learning in Turkey include a lack of interaction and assessment tools that make learners lose motivation and become less autonomous (Kuzu et al., 2022). Also, the Department of Education (DepEd) noted problems facing modular learners, including insufficient study materials, time management issues, and psychological concerns (Cahapay and Rotas, 2022). The findings of Meniano and Tan (2022) also pointed out pupil's lack of understanding of complicated lessons, difficulty managing their time, and difficulty getting assistance from the self-learning modules are evident. In fact, they urged qualitative researchers to support this cause by comprehensively studying learner experiences and conditions (Repe, 2021; De Claro and Ojales, 2021).

This research aimed to provide an understanding of the effect of modular learning on the academic life of public-school elementary learners, which will lead to formulating educational policies to address innovation. By exploring the academic challenges experienced by elementary learners in modular learning, this inquiry sought to contribute valuable insights into adjustments and innovations to be implemented by educational institutions. Specifically, it aimed to find the answers to the following questions:

1. What are the academic challenges encountered by public elementary school learners?
2. How do the public elementary school learners manage to accomplish their modules on their own?
3. How do public elementary school learners communicate their educational needs in accomplishing their tasks in modular learning?
4. How does modular learning influence learners' learning needs and styles?

Review of Related Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic compelled academic institutions to introduce innovative methods like distance learning. This technique allowed educators to take an active role in developing and implementing lessons asynchronously. DepEd implemented various distance learning modalities were implemented by DepEd (Llego, 2020) to continue education but confronted obstacles like technological complexity and limited social interaction (Amir et al., 2020) and performance, enthusiasm, and isolation (El Refae et al., 2021).

DepEd implemented modular learning as one of the modalities to ensure uninterrupted education during a pandemic. This approach caters to most Filipino learners and is parents' most preferred distance learning method (Bernardo, 2020). However, implementing modular learning faces challenges such as inadequate resources and instructional issues, parental training as learning facilitators (Dangle and Sumaoang, 2020), and difficulties like interactive activities and learner autonomy (Kuzu et al., 2022).

Learners' academic experiences were affected during the COVID-19 pandemic. Several studies conducted showed that modular learning affected the experiences of many learners. Bayucca (2021) found that elementary learners faced significant academic challenges, such as self-guided learning, lack of reference materials, limited guidance, task difficulties, and language barriers. Panganiban and Madrigal (2021) noted that elementary learners in English modular classes face complexity due to vocabulary and fluency issues and challenges like inadequate study time, limited ICT access, ineffective feedback, and resource scarcity (Sutiah et al., 2020). Bustillo and Aguilos (2022) identified issues like inadequate resources, unclear module content, task overload, and mental health problems. Meniano and Tan (2022) found challenging lessons, interruptions, language difficulties, and module quality issues. De Claro and Ojales (2021) highlighted poor time management, while Cortes et al. (2022) underscored the typical challenges encountered in various learning methods.

The COVID-19 pandemic introduced educational obstacles, as Panganiban and Madrigal (2021) found that prevalent negative emotions, injustices, and social concerns during modular learning

significantly affected learners' academic experiences. In addition, Abbas (2021) identified difficulties with reading comprehension, and Mataac (2021) linked declining reading skills with the influence of modular learning, contrasting with Betlen's (2021) finding that students improved academic performance with modular learning. Anzaldo (2021) showcased enhanced time management and family connections among modular learners. Talimodao and Madrigal (2021) highlighted the successful implementation of modular learning. In summary, modular learning aimed to continue education amid challenges, including inadequate consideration of learners' abilities and learning styles and limited support for understanding topics and lessons in self-learning modules.

Utilizing Michael G. Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (TDT), it examines the effects of physical and psychological separation on learning. According to TDT, the physical space between teachers and learners in distance education can create communication barriers and potential misunderstandings (Moore, 1997). This study explains the challenges the learners encounter in the separation between teachers and learners within the context of modular learning. The theory's dimensions are employed to investigate the difficulties faced by learners, strategies used to accomplish modules, communication medium for queries, and the effect of modular learning on various learning styles and needs.

Methodology

This qualitative research study, conducted at a public elementary school during the school year 2022-2023, utilized a phenomenological approach to investigate the academic challenges of grade 6 learners in the context of modular learning. In particular, it used a validated and pilot-tested interview protocol translated into the Visayan language to ensure clarity and a thorough understanding. Ten Grade Six learners from a selected public elementary school participated in the research, meeting the inclusion criteria. Purposive sampling was employed to determine information-rich cases to comprehensively understand the academic challenges of Grade six learners in the selected public elementary school under modular learning. Data were analyzed based on Moustakas' transcendental phenomenology and analysis procedures, which involved thematic interpretation, content analysis, and synthesis of generated themes to represent the participants' academic challenges in modular learning.

The study ensured the trustworthiness of data and its findings through considerations of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability. Notably, it strictly adhered to ethical standards, ensuring respect for participants, obtaining informed consent from parents and assent forms from the learners, promoting goodwill, maintaining confidentiality, and upholding justice in allocating risks and benefits for the elementary learners throughout the research process.

Results and Discussion

Figure 1 illustrates the themes validating Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (TDT). Academic challenges represent the problems learners face in implementing modular learning, while autonomy refers to the various methods learners employ to complete learning modules independently. In addition, dialogue is essential for addressing learners' educational inquiries, and structure denotes the role of modular learning in accommodating diverse learning needs and styles.
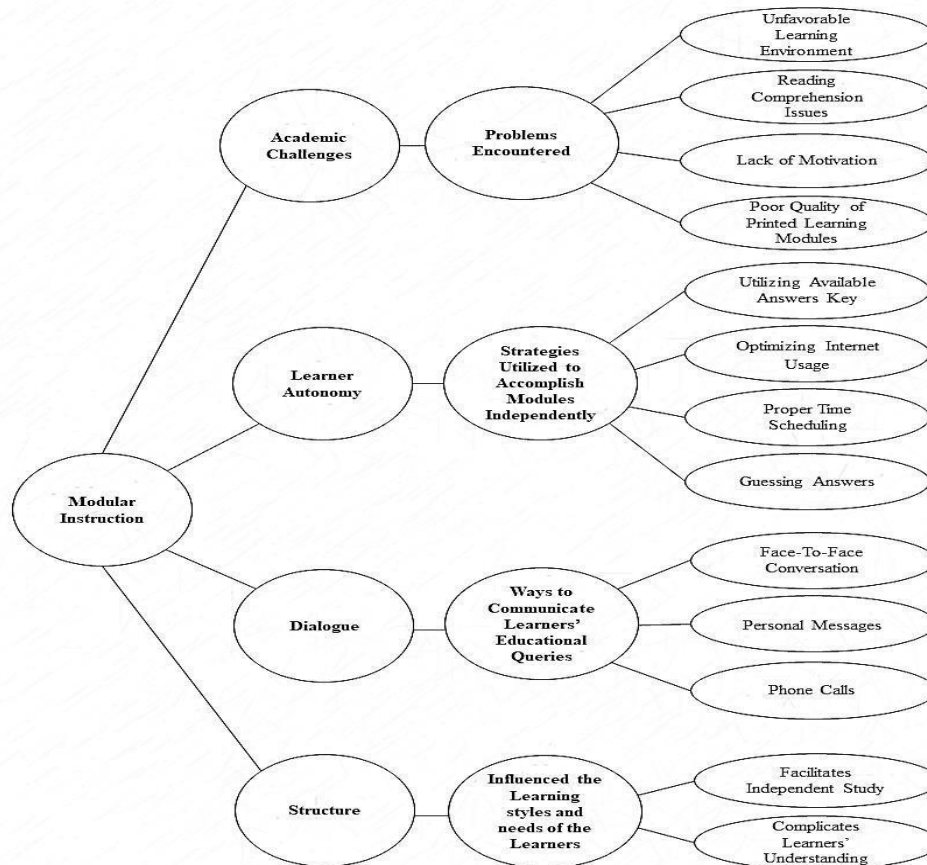
Figure 1. Emerging themes

Four emergent themes emerged from the experiences faced by public-school elementary learners during modular instructions. Within the academic challenges, four cluster themes were identified: *unfavorable learning environment*, *reading comprehension issues*, *lack of motivation*, and *poor quality of printed learning modules*. Learners employ various strategies to manage their modules, encompassing four themes: *Utilizing Available Answer Key*, *Optimizing Internet Usage*, *Proper Time Scheduling*, and *Guessing Answers*. The third cluster pertains to the ways learners communicate their educational inquiries, which comprises three cluster themes: *face-to-face conversations, personal messages*, and *making phone calls*. Lastly, the fourth cluster theme explores how modular learning influences learners' learning needs, encapsulating two themes: *Facilitates Independent and Complicates Learners' Understanding.*

The first theme, *unfavorable learning environment*, summarized the constraints and challenges learners encountered, such as distractions, responsibilities, and household chores hindering effective learning. As they narrated:

> *"a noisy home environment where our neighbors are mostly noisy. The kids were shouting, others were singing in the videoke bar"... (IDIP_10, p174, n10-19)*
> *"I also get disturbed because my grandmother and aunt at home let me do the household chores just like washing the dishes and getting the frying pan, then my friends also called me to play outside." (IDIP_8, p167, n9-12)*
> *Many household chores include washing dishes, cooking rice, buying diapers for my younger siblings, or buying milk..." (IDIP_9, p170, n9-13)*

This suggests that an unfavorable learning environment, encompassing distractions from both internal and external factors like family members, peers, and neighborhood, has been acknowledged as a hindrance to sustaining learners' concentration and successfully finishing module tasks. Emphasizing the importance of a conducive learning environment for completing modular tasks is crucial within the learning process. The results align with the findings of Dargo and Dimas (2021), highlighting the challenges associated with background disturbances and the ongoing effort required for focused learning amid various priorities and distractions.

Reading comprehension issues emerge as a second prominent academic challenge faced by Grade six learners in Modular Learning. They shared:

> *"…I was unable to understand stories written in English and Filipino stories, and this prohibited me from answering comprehension questions."* (IDIP_5, p155, n6-11)
> *".My ultimate problem is when I cannot understand what I read in the modules because it was written in English. Due to this, my answers on the activities were incorrect". (IDIP_7, p163, n4-7)*

The experiences of these learners indicate that a significant challenge in understanding lesson content is the inability to read words in both English and Filipino. The findings emphasize that learners struggling with reading comprehension encounter difficulties reading and comprehending words and answering correctly to different module tasks. The results corroborate Abbas' (2021) study, highlighting reading comprehension as a crucial skill encompassing interpreting, analyzing, decoding, and integrating information to fully grasp words, sentences, or compositions within a given context. The lack of reading comprehension is identified as a hindrance, preventing learners from comprehending module content and leading to difficulties in completing assignments, potentially resulting in academic challenges.

Lack of Motivation emerged from Grade six learners' responses, highlighting its crucial role in learning. The findings revealed that elementary learners lacked motivation during modular learning during the pandemic, attributing it to the absence of teachers who typically guide and explain the learning content, leading to diminished attention and concentration.

Participants expressed how the difficulty of the subject and the absence of a teacher significantly affected their motivation in modular learning.

> *"I lost the motivation to answer because I am used to having a teacher who will discuss and explain the lessons to us…"* (IDIP_7, p163, n15-19)
> *"It is difficult for me to answer because I am baffled about the lesson in the module, especially in English; it is difficult for me to understand, so I get confused when answering. However, I want to have teachers… (IDIP_8, p167, n4-7)*

The result is supported by Fajari et al. (2020), underscoring the crucial role of a teacher's presence in enhancing learner motivation and highlighting that learners who receive instruction directly from a teacher are more motivated, engaging in higher levels of learning activities and interaction. In contrast, learners using self-learning modules demonstrated lower motivation levels.

Finally, *poor-quality printed learning modules*, characterized by unclear texts and blurry graphics in the self-learning modules (SLMs), hinder effective learning and comprehension of module lessons. The study emphasized the importance of error-free self-learning modules with explicit texts and illustrations to ensure an effective learning process, as Magsambol (2020) highlighted. However, Hamora et al. (2022) suggested that further improvements are needed to address the complaints of poor-

quality learning modules, including missing items, misalignment of objectives, content, activities, and assessment items, and overall poor writing quality.

The emergence of the theme *'Utilizing the Available Answers' Key'* reflects the array of *strategies employed by learners to complete their modules.* This revealed why learners used answer keys provided in the learning modules and how they associated with the learners' understanding of modular learning. Learner participants asserted during the interview that they relied on the answer keys at the end of the learning modules.

> *"Since I still did not understand the concepts inside the modules, I decided not to read them. Instead, I copied the answer key from the back of the module to answer every question correctly "* (IDIP_8, p167, n41-45) "
>
> *"I did not read the module because I am more confused about its lessons. That is why I just directly scanned the questions in the activity part because there is still an available answer key at the end of the module. I copy it "* (IDIP_9, p. 181, n47-52)
>
> *"Yes, I relied on the answer key most, especially in the difficult subjects like Math, Science, and English. Fortunately, answer keys helped me in answering and finishing the modular tasks on time."* (IDIP_7, p171, n167-170)

The study revealed that Grade six learners from a public elementary school frequently relied on answer keys provided with their learning modules, especially when confronted with challenging module content. This led to a need for more meaningful learning due to dependence on these resources, which fostered dishonesty and laziness. It supported Guangul et al.'s (2020) claim that the absence of teacher guidance and the availability of answer keys can lead to academic dishonesty. Similarly, Rahmawati et al. (2019) pointed out that this misuse of answer keys defeats the intended purpose of self-learning modules and negatively affects meaningful learning outcomes.

Optimizing Internet usage emerged from the direct responses of the participants. Learners utilized online search engines and learning materials to understand concepts and finish learning tasks. The learners shared that:

> *Sometimes, if the lessons in the modules are challenging, I will search on Google, and after finding the answer "* (IDIP_7, p163, n33-36)
>
> *"If there is no answer key, I use Google on the computer and then search the module questions. Also, there is an app that I take pictures on the questions in the module, then it directly answers."* (IDIP_9, p181, n53-56)

The study findings indicate that a significant portion of grade six students at a public elementary school rely heavily on internet resources, notably Google, to navigate complex topics encountered in self-learning modules. This is consistent with the research conducted by Raja and Nagasubramani (2018), highlighting the positive and negative sides of using the Internet in education. While it can help students understand and remember things better, too much dependency can harm learning results. Similarly, Rapti et al. (2022) drew attention to the prevalence of misinformation and fake news online, highlighting the potential negative impact on learners' ability to access accurate and reliable information, thereby compromising the effectiveness of their learning experiences and the attainment of learning outcomes.

In addition, elementary school learners noted the importance of *proper time scheduling* to balance playtime, household chores, and academic responsibilities. This participant expounded:

> *"I will start by tidying my bed and washing the dishes. After that, I will study, have some free time, play in the afternoon, rewash the dishes, and cook the rice before returning to my studies."* (IDIP_7, p.164, n84-88)

> *"I do have schedules; every afternoon I just sleep, then in the morning that's the time I answer my modules, same goes in the evening." (IDIP_1, p.146, n44-46)*

The findings showed the importance of time scheduling to manage homeschoolers' significant time. Most public Grade 6 learners balance their time. They can manage their academic and leisure time and track their academic progress to ensure that their outputs and replies in assessment activities are suitable. This validates what Ahmad et al. (2019) posited, that distance learners manage their time effectively. Learners exhibit improved outcomes by dividing tasks and setting learning objectives. Moreover, despite its challenges, Sari and Nayır (2020) emphasized the need for learners to rely on self-discipline during home-based learning. Nonetheless, their discipline to a structured schedule is associated with improved learning outcomes, underscoring the significance of self-driven time management in attaining academic success.

Guessing answers in accomplishing modular tasks reflects low learner motivation to deeply comprehend the lessons and complete tasks effectively. This underscores the crucial role of learner motivation in providing accurate responses. Feedback from participants indicated a need for further clarification on module responses.

> *"Sometimes, I will guess my answers because I quickly get tired and lose my drive to answer. I did it to submit it on time. Sometimes, I think of the solutions faster so I would finish answering the questions quickly, giving me more time to play." (IDIP_7, p163, n44-49)*
> *"Yes, I tried; I submit the activities without answers and even answer them through guessing because I find it very difficult since the test papers and the modules have an unclear text and the questions are complex, ..." (IDIP_9, pp171, n64-67).*

The findings revealed that Grade six learners at a public elementary school do not favor modular learning and require motivation to engage with learning tasks, citing difficulty in perceiving questions and resulting loss of motivation to respond. This aligns with Whitehead and Britson's (2022) findings, noting a decline in learner motivation over time, potentially due to feelings of discouragement. Anzaldo (2021) found that not all learners consistently complete their modules, with many doing so merely for compliance. Overall, the study identified key themes in learner approaches to module completion, including reliance on answer keys, internet use, time management, and

When it comes to ways of communicating learners' educational queries, face-to-face conversations with family members became their immediate source of answers and knowledge during modular education. The majority of learners admitted to seeking help from their families. They responded that:

> *"I asked help from my older brother and mother, especially on topics that were hard for me to understand, like Mathematics. Sometimes, I will bring my module and then show it to them so they can see if my answers are correct. Moreover, if my answers were incorrect, I will immediately ask for their assistance to make it right." (IDIP_2, p149, n75-80)*
> *"I called my mother and older sister if I needed help, especially if I struggled to answer the modular activities. It was good that they were willing to help me because they witnessed how hard it was for me to answer the tasks stipulated in the modules." (IDIP_3, p151, n69-73).*

Grade six learners at a public elementary school rely on parental support to complete tasks, primarily through face-to-face interaction and assistance in understanding module lessons. This

underscores the importance of parents and family members having adequate knowledge or utilizing available resources to assist learners. These findings are consistent with Guan's (2021) study, which highlighted the benefits of family involvement in learning, including providing additional explanations for unclear concepts. Malabarbas et al. (2022) further emphasized the significant impact of parental presence and involvement on learners' academic progress, emphasizing the positive influence of their guidance and support to their children.

Personal messages were identified as another strategy for inquiring about their learning concerns. This can be done through text messages and messenger chats. Communication between teachers and learners was crucial for learning and completing modules, with most learners using Messenger and similar channels to reach out to their teachers.

> *"If I need help understanding the module and other learning materials that my teachers gave me, I will ask her about it, especially if I need clarification. I borrow my mother's cell phone, and I text her what the meaning of it is." (IDIP_9, p173, n142-146)*
> *"Since modular distance learning started, I cannot ask my teacher easily if I had a query in the lesson because she is no longer in front of us in the classroom; that is why I chatted with her through Messenger since we are Facebook friends already." teachers gave me, I will ask her about it, especially if I need clarification. I borrow my mother's cell phone, and I text her what the meaning of it is." (IDIP_9, p173, n142-146*

Grade six learners at a public elementary school relied on personal messages for assistance in modular learning, particularly when their families could not address their queries. During the pandemic, phone texts and Messenger communication were crucial for clarifications and feedback. This underscores the significance of teacher-learner communication, as supported by Alawamleh et al. (2022), for improved learning outcomes. Moreover, Natividad (2021) found that teachers use Facebook Messenger as the primary medium and interactive platform for delivering instruction in implementing Modular Distance Learning (MDL) in the Philippines.

In addition, most learners shared that they called teachers to ask academic questions, making *phone calls*.

> *"If I get confused and I do not understand the learning module and my sister also does not understand it, I call my teacher during noon, and I ask her about the lesson I struggle with, and she will explain it." (IDIP_10, pp177-178, n169-173)*
> *"I borrowed my mother's cellphone because it always has an e-load. Then I called my teacher, and she explained it to me ..." (IDIP_9, p172, n141-146).*

The study highlighted the importance of teacher assistance through phone calls for grade six learners in modular learning, emphasizing effective communication for better learning outcomes. This corroborates with Castroverde and Acala's (2021) findings, which noted that learners without stable internet access rely solely on phone calls for effective communication with teachers. It further emphasizes the necessity of validating learners' progress through effective communication in distance learning.

In general, learners used a variety of communication ways to address their queries to their teachers. The findings also indicated that parents should be involved in their child's learning process. In an optimistic view, these results emphasized the importance of how learners communicate their needs to complete the learning tasks**.**

Implementing modular learning and utilizing printed and self-learning materials have been challenging and beneficial for learners. This modality has garnered praise and criticism from various

stakeholders, requiring evaluation of its quality, flexibility, and effectiveness in meeting learners' needs and interests. It outlines two (2) themes; *Facilitates Independent Study* and *Complicates Learners' Understanding*. These themes provide insights into the structure of modular learning and its alignment with learners' preferred learning styles.

The participants' ability to independently monitor their learning process was crucial in fostering their independence as learners. They noted that self-directed modules *facilitate independent study* without parental or teacher supervision. Some emphasized that they effectively grasped lesson content by implementing strategies that support independent study.

> *"Yes, I learned something from the module because activities were placed after the discussion part. Aside from that, the pictures and illustrations in the modules also helped me better understand the lessons." (IDI_4, p155, n155-159)*
> *"Modular is fine for me because it made me understand some lessons on my own, and it was helpful for learners like me because we can think clearly at home. As a result, I can comprehend the lessons well." (IDIP_2, p149, n94-97).*

The findings highlighted that Grade six participants from an elementary public school demonstrated their commitment to understanding the contents of the modules through strategies tailored to their individual needs and learning styles, fostering independence in their learning process. This is supported by Almusharraf (2020) who emphasized that autonomy influences learners' motivation, suggesting that motivated learners tend to be more independent in their learning. Muslimin and Harintama (2020) highlighted that independent learners actively find solutions to address queries and academic challenges. Irgatoğlu et al. (2022) supported this idea, emphasizing that learning independence during the pandemic allows learners to plan, monitor, and guide their learning process through preferred methods. Similarly, Yanti et al. (2021) emphasized the importance of self-directed learning in enabling learners to learn independently.

Learning the subject matter was essential, especially in modular learning, which requires the learner's focus and attention. With the difficulties in understanding the learning material and the complexity of the lessons in modular learning, we can infer that the level of learners' understanding of the topics in the module is undeniably low compared to learning in the face-to-face setting.

The participants' responses voiced how *modular learning complicates their learning* based on their situation and learning conditions.

> *"I have a hard time understanding the lessons; I got confused because of the insufficient examples given or examples and lessons are hard to comprehend." (IDIP_4, p152, n4-6)*
> *"I find it hard to understand lessons in Mathematics. When I was in Grade 4, I almost fainted because I over-fatigued due to the difficulties I encountered while helping my mother in our business and, at the same time, answering my modules. I cannot understand the lessons I was learning." (IDIP_2, p147, n4-9).*

The findings indicate that modular learning instruction causes challenges to learners' understanding due to insufficient examples and complex concepts. These results emphasize the significance of providing effective learning materials and instruction in modular learning. Tailoring modules to learners' styles can facilitate task completion, enhance lesson comprehension, and guide learning effectively. This is in congruence with the findings of Hamora et al. (2022). The need for modules to have more examples and align them with learner preferences presents significant challenges in modular learning, especially in the context of restricted face-to-face interaction during the pandemic.

Implications for Theory

The study focused on understanding Filipino learners' academic challenges in modular learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings align with Michael G. Moore's Transactional Distance Theory (1997), highlighting how modular learning poses academic challenges affecting learners' progress. Moreover, the study contributes to existing empirical data by shedding light on how modular learning bridges the gap between learners and teachers during the pandemic, exploring communication methods, task completion, and module effectiveness.

In addition, the study's research is aligned with Moore's theory, generating emergent themes that contribute to understand learners' challenges. These include issues with the learning environment, reading comprehension, motivation, and module quality. Learners' strategies for independent module completion, such as using answer keys and optimizing internet usage, and their communication methods, such as face-to-face conversation and personal messages, were also examined. These findings validate Moore's Transactional Distance Theory, indicating the complex interplay of factors affecting learners' experiences in modular learning.

Implications for Practice

In addressing the challenges of Grade six learners at a public elementary school, several recommendations are proposed for the Department of Education Division Office of Tagum City, school heads, and teachers. Clear guidelines should be implemented, and more examples should be included to aid comprehension. These can enhance the quality of modules. It is crucial to review learning contents before dissemination to minimize errors. Adequate funding should be allocated for printing high-quality modules, alongside investments in upskilling module writers to handle evolving academic demands effectively.

School heads are urged to provide instructional support to teachers through mentoring and professional development activities. Continual reinforcement of home visitation activities can monitor learner progress and sustain motivation. Teachers may create class schedule templates and task checklists for learners' organization and time management and establish effective communication with parents. Improving the quality of printed modules is essential, ensuring error-free reproduction for better comprehension.

Implication for future research

Future researchers could expand the scope by involving other stakeholders, such as parents, guardians, and teachers, to understand their challenges in implementing modular learning. By considering different angles, researchers can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the various challenges and opportunities presented by modular learning. This inclusive approach can unravel new insights and potential solutions to improve academic instruction and address the diverse needs of learners.

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