

English Least-Learned Competencies and Learners' Performance in MATATAG Curriculum Implementation: Basis for an Instructional Intervention

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Abstract

English proficiency remains a challenge for many Filipino learners, particularly those in geographically diverse upland and lowland areas. This study addresses the gap in understanding specific least-learned English competencies across these groups under the Matatag Curriculum and evaluates targeted interventions to improve performance. The objective was to identify key competency gaps, analyze differences by gender and location, and assess the effectiveness of instructional strategies. A descriptive-comparative design was employed, collecting data from upland and lowland learners through surveys and assessments. Interventions included role-playing, prediction strategies, debates, cloze tests, and grammar games tailored to address identified weaknesses. Results showed that both upland and lowland learners struggled most with selecting appropriate tone in informal communication, making predictions while reading, and using correct verb forms. Upland learners exhibited greater difficulties overall, while gender had no significant effect. Targeted interventions led to notable improvements in speaking, reading comprehension, vocabulary, and grammar skills. These findings emphasize the importance of context-sensitive, learner-centered approaches to English instruction, advocating for remedial programs that address specific needs related to geographic and resource disparities. The study offers valuable insights for educators and policymakers to enhance equitable language learning outcomes.

Keywords: Matatag Curriculum, Least-Learned, English Competencies, Learners' Performance, Speaking Challenges, Instructional Interventions

Introduction

Education serves as the foundation for societal progress, shaping individuals' capacities to contribute meaningfully to economic and social development. As global challenges evolve, the primary education system plays a crucial role in equipping young learners with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate complex realities (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)).

Primary education plays a crucial role in developing learners' foundational skills, particularly in English proficiency, which is essential for their academic and professional growth. However, many primary learners struggle with speaking, reading, and writing, hindering their overall language development (Tajiddinovna, 2024). According to Oktavia et al. (2022), limited exposure to English contributes to challenges in speaking, reading, and writing among young learners. Learners struggle with speaking due to unfamiliarity with English words and limited practice, while reading difficulties stem from understanding and translating texts. Writing is the most challenging skill, as learners face issues with spelling, grammar, and sentence structure, highlighting the need for targeted interventions and curriculum adjustments.

An important milestone in the Philippines' quest for educational reform has been reached with the implementation of the MATATAG Curriculum. The K-10 Curriculum, also called the MATATAG Program, was introduced by the Department of Education (DepEd) in 2023 and highlights the significance of matching education to the needs of a society that is changing quickly (Guzman et al., 2023). Through the integration of classes, activities, and experiences that promote holistic development, the curriculum presents a comprehensive framework intended to engage learners throughout their academic journey (Saro et al., 2024). Additionally, it emphasizes educating stakeholders about the MATATAG agenda, which places a high priority on learners' total development (Domingo & Masabpi, 2024).

The necessity for education that equips pupils for the challenges of the twenty-first century led to the creation of the MATATAG Curriculum. It seeks to foster a culture of continuous learning and growth while fostering inclusivity, academic excellence, and life skills (Maguate, 2024). The curriculum aims to produce Filipino learners who can make significant contributions to the economic development and social well-being of the country. Curriculum revisions are necessary because educational reforms such as these reflect society changes brought about by globalization, technological improvements, and changing values (Estrellado, 2023).

These changes necessitate the improvement of English language instruction in the Philippines, aiming to produce proficient communicators. However, the implementation of educational strategies, such as the spiral progression approach, has encountered challenges, as evidenced by the declining performance of Filipino learners in international assessments (Alvarado, 2023). The importance of English is shown by the historical emphasis on it in Philippine education, which is represented in policy and teaching resources (Doplon, 2018). Notwithstanding these initiatives, there are still difficulties in tackling systemic inefficiencies and enhancing the fidelity of language instruction (Bentayao et al., 2024).

Kilag et al. (2024) examined the implementation of the Matatag Curriculum, focusing on its goals of decongesting learning content, aligning assessments, and promoting future-ready skills such as critical thinking and digital literacy. Their study found that despite these reforms, significant gaps remain, particularly in learners' mastery of English competencies. The results revealed that many learners continue to struggle with essential English skills, which negatively impact their overall academic performance and readiness for more advanced learning tasks. The MATATAG Curriculum demonstrates DepEd's dedication to provide every Filipino learner a top-notch education. However, obstacles such as insufficient finance, administrative workloads, and professional development prevent it from being implemented effectively (Monsalve, 2024; Saro et al., 2024). Teachers are essential in overcoming these obstacles because they serve as mentors in addition to being instructors. Their real-world experiences and best practices can have a big impact on learners' academic and personal development (De Leon, 2024). For the curriculum to be successful, adequate finance and institutional support are consequently necessary (Saro et al., 2024).

Despite the MATATAG Curriculum's promising framework and its emphasis on inclusivity, life skills, and academic excellence, there remains a significant gap in understanding its actual impact on learners' learning outcomes, particularly in English competency. Existing studies, such as those by Bentayao et al. (2024), highlight the challenges of systemic inefficiencies and inadequate instructional fidelity, yet there is limited empirical data examining the specific areas where learners struggle the most. Guzman et al. (2023) emphasize the need for comprehensive assessments to ensure alignment between curriculum goals and learners' achievements.

This study investigated the least-learned English competencies of Grade 4 pupils under the Matatag Curriculum in selected primary schools in Dumingag, examining the challenges they face and their impact on academic performance. Grade 4 is a critical stage where foundational English skills are further developed and applied, making it essential to identify gaps in learning. By analyzing these challenges, the study aimed to provide insights that can inform curriculum improvements and targeted intervention programs. Ultimately, the research sought to enhance English instruction, support learners' academic success, and contribute to the Matatag Curriculum's goal of shaping globally competitive and proficient learners.

Literature Review

Identifying Least-Learned Competencies

A study by Cabansag (2020) revealed that learners in the intermediate grades struggle most with higher-order thinking skills in English. Specifically, competencies such as drawing inferences, identifying the main idea, and summarizing informational texts were among the least mastered based on periodic tests. This trend reflects students' limited reading comprehension and critical thinking abilities. In the context of Philippine basic education, particularly under the K to 12 and Matatag Curriculum reforms, English continues to pose significant challenges for learners. Several studies and assessment reports have identified the least-learned competencies that hinder student performance in English.

According to Shanahan et al. (2006), students from rural and upland schools particularly struggled with writing mechanics, vocabulary development, and oral communication. These competencies were considered least-learned due to the lack of exposure to English in their local environments and limited instructional resources. Finally, Sumalinog (2018) emphasize that the persistent difficulty in mastering grammar rules, particularly tenses of verbs, pronoun-antecedent agreement, and punctuation usage, reflects a broader issue of insufficient foundational literacy.

Challenges in English Competency Development

English competency development is a multifaceted process shaped by linguistic, cognitive, and socio-cultural factors. According to Krashen's Input Hypothesis, language learners acquire competence when they are exposed to comprehensible input slightly above their current level, emphasizing the importance of meaningful exposure rather than isolated drills. Cummins (1979) distinguishes between Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP), highlighting that while conversational fluency develops relatively quickly, academic language proficiency takes much longer and poses greater challenges, especially in reading comprehension and writing tasks.

Additionally, Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory underscores the role of social interaction and scaffolding in language learning, suggesting that learners benefit significantly from guided support and collaborative learning. These foundational concepts help explain why learners under the Matatag Curriculum face persistent difficulties in speaking (due to limited interactional practice), writing (due to underdeveloped academic language), and reading (due to gaps in vocabulary and comprehension strategies). Addressing these challenges requires instruction that combines meaningful input, scaffolded support, and attention to both conversational and academic language demands.

Moreover, the overload of topics in the curriculum forces teachers to cover a wide range of competencies within a limited timeframe, leaving little room for remediation and reinforcement of least-learned competencies (Padillo et al., 2021; Hajan et al., 2019). The challenges are even more pronounced in marginalized communities, where limited access to quality education and learning materials further widens the gap in English proficiency (DepEd Memorandum 54, s. 2023).

Factors Influencing Learners' English Performance

Beyond instructional methods, multiple external and internal factors influence learners' English performance. Studies suggest that learners' struggles with English are interconnected with other academic challenges, such as limited critical thinking and problem-solving skills (Guiaselon et al., 2022). Ramos and Tan (2022) support this by pointing out that deficiencies in English literacy are often compounded by gaps in higher-order thinking skills, which hinder learners' ability to analyze, synthesize, and apply knowledge effectively. The study highlighted the need for instructional approaches that not only address language proficiency but also foster critical thinking.

Additionally, a lack of socio-emotional support and insufficient reinforcement mechanisms further hinder learning progress (DepEd Memorandum 54, s. 2023). Castillo and Cruz (2022) emphasize that the absence of strong emotional and psychological support systems, both in and outside the classroom, limits learners' academic growth. They argue that integrating emotional intelligence training into the curriculum could enhance learners' engagement and persistence in learning English.

Research highlights the importance of continuous assessment and monitoring to identify struggling learners early. Implementing targeted intervention programs focusing on key problem areas—such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation—can significantly improve English performance (Domanais, 2022). Moreover, Garcia and Luna (2021) stress that timely and personalized feedback through regular formative assessments enables teachers to adjust their teaching strategies to meet learners' needs, which can improve their proficiency over time. Professional development for teachers is essential to equip them with the necessary skills, resources, and instructional strategies to deliver the curriculum effectively.

The Role of Curriculum Reforms in Enhancing English Learning

To address these issues, the Matatag Curriculum was introduced to strengthen foundational skills and improve learning outcomes. However, its effectiveness remains uncertain due to persistent challenges in implementation (Gouédard et al., 2020; Abragan et al., 2022). Curriculum overload, inconsistent teaching strategies, and a lack of teacher training hinder its full potential (Alvarado, 2023). Moreover, limited access to teaching materials and the need for a more cohesive pedagogical approach further exacerbate the challenges in implementing the curriculum effectively (Ramos & Tan, 2022).

While the curriculum aims to streamline content and reduce unnecessary learning loads, studies indicate that inconsistencies in its execution—particularly in the use of the spiral progression method—affect learner performance (Alviz & Opina, 2024). Research suggests that incorporating real-world problems and community-based learning into English instruction makes the subject more meaningful for learners (Belmi & Mangali, 2020). Additionally, studies highlight that teacher adaptability and continuous professional development are crucial to successfully navigating the complexities of the Matatag Curriculum and enhancing learner engagement (Cruz et al., 2021).

Instructional Strategies for Enhancing English Proficiency

Various teaching approaches have been explored to address least-learned English competencies. The Action-Based Approach has been found effective in increasing learners' motivation and retention by actively engaging them in learning tasks. Research shows that learners exposed to this strategy demonstrate statistically significant improvements in English test scores (Juridico et al., 2023). Similarly, the GASP (Guided, Active, and Self-directed Participation) method has been shown to enhance competency-based test performance among learners (Souribio, 2023).

Another effective approach is the Self-Organized Learning Environment (SOLE), which promotes inquiry-based learning and independent thinking. Studies indicate that integrating SIM-Based learning activities into English instruction enhances comprehension and retention, especially among struggling learners (Maribbay, 2022). Technology-enhanced learning is also gaining traction as an alternative strategy to traditional methods. Digital tools provide learners with additional opportunities for English practice beyond the classroom, allowing for personalized learning experiences (Robiatul et al., 2024). Given the rapid advancement of educational technology, adopting digital literacy programs alongside English instruction can further support competency development.

Kilag et al. (2024) examined the implementation of the Matatag Curriculum, focusing on its goals of decongesting learning content, aligning assessments, and promoting future-ready skills such as critical thinking and digital literacy. Their study found that despite these reforms, significant gaps remain, particularly in learners' mastery of English competencies. The results revealed that many learners continue to struggle with essential English skills, which negatively impact their overall academic performance and readiness for more advanced learning tasks. This is relevant to the current investigation because it focuses on identifying and addressing the persistent challenges in English learning under the Matatag Curriculum. By examining which competencies remain least learned by learners, the study provides valuable insights into the areas where the curriculum's intended improvements have yet to take full effect. The findings can help inform targeted interventions and teaching strategies that directly respond to the gaps highlighted by both national-level research and local classroom realities.

One major challenge in English education is the presence of least-learned competencies among learners. Research indicates that Filipino learners commonly struggle with comprehension and retention, which in turn affects their overall academic performance. De Silva et al. (2024) conducted a study on learners' problem-solving skills in the face-to-face learning modality and found that although 38% of learners demonstrated fair problem-solving abilities, a significant number continued to face difficulties due to poor retention, lack of mastery of essential concepts, and carelessness. These findings highlight the urgent need for targeted and competency-based interventions that address learning deficiencies, particularly in core subjects like English, where foundational skills are crucial for success across other learning areas.

To bridge these gaps, various strategies in teaching English have been explored. The Action-Based Approach, for instance, has been shown to enhance learners' motivation and retention by encouraging active participation in lessons; learners exposed to this approach demonstrated statistically significant improvements in their test scores,

highlighting its effectiveness in fostering deeper understanding and engagement (Juridico et al., 2023). Similarly, supplementary programs like the GASP (Guided, Active, and Self-directed) method have been proven to enhance competency-based test scores among learners in experimental groups compared to control groups (Souribio, 2023).

Additionally, the integration of innovative teaching strategies, such as the Project SOLE (Self-Organized Learning Environment), has been linked to improved academic outcomes, as it emphasizes learner-centered and inquiry-based activities, leading to better performance and engagement. Maribbay (2022) recommends expanding SIM-based learning activities across different grade levels to strengthen curriculum implementation and enhance learners' learning experiences. These findings are relevant because they point to the importance of identifying least-learned competencies and applying targeted, evidence-based interventions to address them. By understanding which English competencies learners struggle with the most, schools and teachers can design and implement strategies that not only align with curriculum goals but also directly improve learning outcomes and learners' performance.

Research highlights the importance of strong leadership in successfully implementing educational reforms. School administrators play a vital role in ensuring that teachers receive continuous training and instructional support (Bentayao et al., 2024). Furthermore, resource availability remains a significant challenge, particularly in rural areas where geographic isolation, lack of infrastructure, and limited access to technology pose barriers to learning (Gregorio et al., 2023). Initiatives such as the DepEd Science and Math Project, Lighted PH, and the DepEd Sim Card and Connectivity Program have been instrumental in providing additional resources to help mitigate these challenges. Teachers in remote areas have also adopted localization and experiential learning strategies to engage learners despite resource limitations.

The development of English competency among Filipino learners is influenced by a complex interplay of linguistic, cognitive, socio-cultural, and contextual factors. Theoretical frameworks such as Krashen's Input Hypothesis, Cummins' distinction between conversational and academic language, and Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory highlight the importance of meaningful input, scaffolded support, and social interaction in language acquisition. Despite the introduction of the Matatag Curriculum aimed at strengthening foundational skills, persistent challenges remain due to curriculum overload, inconsistent implementation, limited teacher training, and resource constraints, especially in marginalized and geographically isolated areas. Learners continue to struggle with core competencies such as grammar, comprehension, critical thinking, and retention, which negatively affect their overall academic performance.

Research supports the effectiveness of active, inquiry-based, and technology-enhanced instructional strategies—such as the Action-Based Approach, GASP method, and Self-Organized Learning Environment—in addressing these gaps by increasing engagement and motivation. Furthermore, continuous professional development for teachers, strong leadership, and equitable resource allocation are critical to successful curriculum implementation and learner improvement. Ultimately, a holistic, evidence-based, and context-sensitive approach that integrates curriculum reforms, targeted interventions, and community support is essential for advancing English proficiency and ensuring inclusive education in the Philippines.

Methodology

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative comparative design to examine the English performance of elementary learners under the Matatag Curriculum. The design enabled the systematic analysis of least-learned competencies, overall performance levels, and learning challenges while comparing patterns between sex groups and school locations (lowland and upland settings). This approach provided empirical evidence on performance disparities and contextual factors influencing English learning.

Research Setting and Respondents

The study was conducted in District 1 of Dumingag, Zamboanga del Sur, Philippines, involving ten public elementary schools—five lowland and five upland. Lowland schools were characterized by accessible infrastructure

and relatively adequate learning resources, whereas upland schools were situated in more remote areas with varied environmental and instructional constraints.

A total of 183 Grade 4 learners participated in the study through total enumeration sampling. Grade 4 was selected because learners at this level are expected to demonstrate foundational English competencies as outlined by the Matatag Curriculum. The sample included both male and female learners and represented the full population of Grade 4 pupils in the selected schools.

Distribution of Participants

School Location	School Name	Number of Respondents (n)
Lowland Schools	Libertad Elementary School	17
	Manlabay Elementary School	18
	Lower Timonan Elementary School	19
	Dumingag SPED Center	20
	Dumingag Central Elementary School	20
	Subtotal	94
Upland Schools	Senote Elementary School	17
	Calumangi Elementary School	17
	Marangan Elementary School	17
	Dulop Elementary School	20
	Bag-ong Kauswagan Elementary School	18
	Subtotal	89
Total		183

Research Instrument

Data were collected using a questionnaire-checklist adapted from Alsalihi (2022). Content validation was conducted by three English Master Teachers from the Department of Education to ensure alignment with Grade 4 English competencies and contextual relevance to the Matatag Curriculum. The original instrument demonstrated strong reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.84 for competency items and 0.88 for challenge-related items.

Data Collection Procedure

Data collection followed standard ethical and administrative protocols. Approval to conduct the study was secured from the District Supervisor of DepEd District 1 and the principals of the participating schools. Teachers were oriented on the administration of the instruments, and learners were informed about the purpose of the study, confidentiality, and voluntary participation.

Learners completed competency assessments and survey questionnaires during scheduled sessions in their respective schools. Completed instruments were checked for accuracy and completeness; invalid or inconsistent responses were excluded. The validated data were encoded and stored securely for statistical analysis.

Data Analysis

Descriptive and inferential statistics were used to analyze the data. Frequencies and percentages identified the least-learned English competencies and summarized the challenges experienced by learners.

Inferential analyses included:

Chi-square Test of Independence to determine differences in least-learned competencies between male and female learners and between lowland and upland schools. Kruskal–Wallis H Test to examine differences in learners' English performance across categories of perceived challenges, appropriate for ordinal and non-normally distributed

data. These analytical procedures provided evidence to understand competency gaps, contextual challenges, and performance variations among learners, thereby informing the development of targeted instructional interventions under the Matatag Curriculum. This chapter dealt with the presentation, analysis, and interpretation of the data gathered from the study, which was arranged according to the following:

Results and Discussion

Profile of the respondents;

The least-learned competencies in English among learners under the Matatag Curriculum; and Challenges experienced by the learner-participants under the Matatag Curriculum.

Profile of the Pupil Respondents

This provides a summary of the basic demographic information of the pupil respondents, including their grade level, age, gender, and school location. These details help contextualize the findings related to their learning competencies in English.

Table 1

Profile of the Pupil-respondents

Profile	F	P (%)
Lowland School		
Male	42	44.7
Female	52	55.3
Upland School		
Male		
Female	49	54.4
	41	45.6

Based on the profile, the lowland schools were composed of 42 male learners (44.7%) and 52 female learners (55.3%). On the other hand, upland schools had 49 male learners (54.4%) and 41 female learners (45.6%). This indicates a fairly balanced distribution of respondents in terms of gender, with a slight majority of females in lowland schools and males in upland schools.

The least-learned Competencies in English among learners under the Matatag Curriculum

The table below presents the least-learned English competencies among pupil-participants from both upland and lowland schools under the Matatag Curriculum. These competencies highlight specific areas where learners face the greatest difficulties, reflecting gaps in language skills that require targeted instructional support.

Table 2

Pupil-participants' Least-Learned Competencies in English under the Matatag Curriculum

Learning Competencies	Upland		Lowland	
	Frequency	Rank	Frequency	Rank
1. Noting important elements (story grammar)	51	13	35	7
2. predictions: outcomes of events	13	2	10	2
3. Making Number of nouns: regular	64	14	42	10
4. Using kinds of verbs: action	64	15	53	15
5. Using kinds of verbs: using tenses	37	5	16	4
6. Using contextual clues	27	4	22	5
7. Using friendly letters	9	1	5	1
8. Using gestures.	49	12	52	14

9. Interpreting lines, shapes, and colors used to convey meaning	40	9	27	6
10. Using tenses of verbs.	38	6	50	13
11. Interpreting images/ideas that are explicitly used to influence viewers (symbolism)	38	7	42	11
12. Identify real or make-believe, fact or non-fact images.	19	3	50	12
13. Express ideas appropriately in culture sensitive for one's purpose, context and target audience.	42	11	12	3
14. Using of regular adjectives.	41	10	38	9
15. Using of irregular adjectives.	39	8	37	8

Based on the analysis of the competencies, the most difficult skill for learners to master was “Using friendly letters”. This indicates a significant gap in students’ pragmatic communication skills, particularly in adjusting their language depending on the context and relationship between speakers. Kharkheli (2024) pointed out that students who are not frequently exposed to authentic informal interactions—such as those occurring in real-life conversations—struggle to understand the nuances of informal speech. This challenge is more apparent in traditional classrooms where the focus is often on formal language structures, leaving students unequipped to switch tone effectively.

The second least-mastered competency was “Making predictions: outcomes of events”. This metacognitive strategy is essential in fostering active reading, yet it remains underdeveloped among many learners. Strong empirical evidence is provided by Al-Seghayer (2024), who show that poor performance in anticipating outcomes during reading comprehension results from insufficient explicit teaching in prediction abilities, which causes passive engagement and reduced achievement.

Third in difficulty is “Identify real or make-believe, fact or non-fact images”. This skill is critical for developing critical reading and media literacy, but many learners continue to struggle with it. Activities in the classroom that focus on this ability, such as examining photos that have been altered or historical images, highlight common misunderstandings and the necessity of constant reinforcement in order to develop discernment. Students are nonetheless susceptible to false information in the absence of such integration, highlighting the need for explicit instruction in educational literature (Alvermann & Hagood, 2000).

Following this is the competency “Express ideas appropriately in culture sensitive for one’s purpose, context and target audience”. This result reveals that learners may not be fully aware of inclusive language or its importance in promoting equity and respect. In a similar vein, Gay (2018) contends that culturally responsive instruction is essential to raising students’ knowledge of inclusive and culturally acceptable communication. Students might not understand how their language choices affect a variety of audiences if they are not exposed to culturally responsive instruction on a regular basis. This is especially noticeable in settings where teaching emphasizes material mastery over social awareness and communication skills.

The competency “Using contextual clues” also emerged as a common challenge. This skill requires both vocabulary knowledge and inferencing ability, which many learners lack due to limited reading experience. According to Cain, Oakhill, and Bryant (2004), inferencing ability a higher-order cognitive skill is crucial for the effective utilization of contextual data. Learners with little exposure to lengthy reading assignments frequently exhibit difficulties connecting ideas logically within a book, which impairs their capacity to infer meaning from surrounding sentences.

Lastly, another commonly identified area of difficulty is the competency “Using kinds of verbs: using tenses”. Grammar remains a foundational element of language learning, yet many students struggle with verb usage, particularly in applying correct tenses and subject-verb agreement. According to research, grammatical competence takes time to develop and necessitates frequent, purposeful exposure to language structures in context. According to

Ellis (2006), learners, particularly those learning a second language, frequently struggle to internalize tense and agreement rules because these forms are abstract and less prominent in daily speech. Because of this, children might be able to identify grammatical norms in isolation but not correctly apply them when using language in real-world situations.

Table 3
Challenges experienced by the learners in both Upland and Lowland Schools

Problems	Upland Schools			Lowland Schools		
	Mean	SD	I	Mean	SD	I
A. Speaking skills						
1. Conveying thoughts is difficult for me.	3.07	1.16	MC	3.13	1.58	MC
2. I find it difficult to speak English with my fellows.	3.56	1.42	C	3.22	1.45	MC
3. I have difficulty in learning English pronunciation.	3.09	1.34	MC	2.79	1.44	MC
4. I have limited practice in English pronunciation.	2.92	1.29	MC	3.38	1.45	MC
5. I struggle to use English effectively while writing and speaking.	3.14	1.38	MC	2.70	1.47	MC
Component Mean	3.16	1.32	MC	3.04	1.48	MC
B. Writing skills						
1. Expressing my thoughts in writing English is difficult for me.	2.84	1.40	MC	2.65	1.45	MC
2. I find it challenging to use proper English in communication.	3.42	1.35	C	3.14	1.44	MC
3. I struggle in making mistakes when writing in English.	3.03	1.32	MC	3.15	1.45	MC
4. I find learning English grammar difficult.	3.27	1.26	MC	2.86	1.50	MC
5. I struggle to use English effectively while writing.	3.14	1.42	MC	2.97	1.56	MC
Component Mean	3.14	1.35	MC	2.95	1.48	MC
C. Reading skills						
1. Reading and understanding English texts is difficult for me.	3.32	1.42	MC	2.60	1.54	SC
2. My limited vocabulary and slow reading make learning English hard.	3.07	1.21	MC	3.09	1.49	MC
3. I face difficulty understanding the meaning of words in context.	3.18	1.37	MC	3.34	1.29	MC
4. I struggle to learn English vocabulary.	3.32	1.17	MC	3.03	1.53	MC
5. I find it challenging to memorize information in English.	2.97	1.43	MC	3.17	1.58	MC
Component Mean	3.17	1.32	MC	3.04	1.49	MC
Overall Mean	3.16	1.32	MC	3.01	1.48	MC

Note: 1.00-1.80 Not Challenging (NC) 1.81-2.60 Somewhat Challenging (SC) 2.61-3.40 Moderately Challenging (MC) 3.41-4.20 Challenging (C) 4.21-5.00 Highly Challenging (HC)

Challenges experienced by the learners in both Upland and Lowland Schools

The purpose of this section is to analyze and interpret the challenges in English language learning encountered by learners from both upland and lowland schools, as revealed by the data. The data are presented in terms of the three main domains of English proficiency Speaking, Writing, and Reading Skills based on learners' self-assessments using a Likert scale. The results are discussed by comparing item-specific mean scores, standard deviations, and verbal interpretations between the two groups. This approach helps highlight the specific areas where learners struggle the most and provides a contextual basis for educational interventions.

In the domain of speaking, both upland and lowland learners reported moderate challenges, with an overall mean of 3.16 (SD = 1.32) for upland and 3.04 (SD = 1.48) for lowland learners. The most significant item among upland learners was their difficulty speaking English with peers, which yielded a mean of 3.56 (SD = 1.42), interpreted as Challenging. This suggests that peer-to-peer interaction in English is a major concern, particularly in upland settings where local dialects dominate daily conversations. In comparison, the same item for lowland learners scored a lower mean of 3.22 (SD = 1.45), which is still moderately challenging but reflects slightly less apprehension in speaking with classmates. Additionally, both groups found it moderately difficult to convey their thoughts in English, with mean scores of 3.07 (SD = 1.16) for upland and 3.13 (SD = 1.58) for lowland learners. Pronunciation was also cited as a difficulty, with upland learners rating this challenge at 3.09 (SD = 1.34) and lowland learners at 2.79 (SD = 1.44), both interpreted as moderately challenging. This indicates a consistent issue with oral language production, possibly influenced by minimal opportunities for oral practice and the lack of English language immersion in both settings (Ellis 1994).

Writing also emerged as a moderately challenging area for both groups, with upland learners recording a component mean of 3.14 (SD = 1.35) and lowland learners at 2.95 (SD = 1.48). The most challenging item for upland learners was using proper English in communication, which had a mean of 3.42 (SD = 1.35), interpreted as Challenging. This result reflects significant difficulty in grammar application, sentence construction, and appropriateness of vocabulary use. Lowland learners rated this item slightly lower at 3.14 (SD = 1.44), which remains within the moderately challenging range but suggests better language support in lowland areas. Other items, such as making mistakes while writing and struggling to use English effectively, were also rated as moderately challenging by both groups. The difficulty in learning English grammar was especially notable for upland learners (M = 3.27, SD = 1.26), suggesting that instructional methods may not sufficiently reinforce grammatical foundations. Graham & Perin (2007) argues that rural learners often have limited access to structured writing support, which may contribute to persistent challenges in written expression.

Reading proved to be another moderately challenging domain, with upland learners scoring a component mean of 3.17 (SD = 1.32) and lowland learners scoring 3.04 (SD = 1.49). For upland learners, the most difficult item was "Reading and understanding English texts is difficult," with a mean of 3.32 (SD = 1.42). This was notably less challenging for lowland learners (M = 2.60, SD = 1.54), suggesting better exposure to English reading materials or instructional practices that support comprehension. Interestingly, lowland learners found "understanding the meaning of words in context" more difficult than their upland counterparts, with a mean of 3.34 (SD = 1.29) compared to upland's 3.18 (SD = 1.37). According to Beck et.al., (2013), many learners—especially those in linguistically restricted environments do not develop their vocabulary accidentally. Students frequently struggle to remember new terms and use them effectively in a variety of contexts in the absence of clear and organized vocabulary education. This is consistent with the observation that learning English vocabulary and retaining facts were judged as somewhat difficult by both highland and lowland learners.

The overall results show that both upland (M = 3.16, SD = 1.32) and lowland (M = 3.01, SD = 1.48) learners perceive English language learning as moderately challenging. However, upland learners consistently scored higher in perceived difficulty across all domains. This may reflect systemic barriers such as lack of qualified teachers, limited access to quality instructional materials, and the dominance of local dialects, which reduce English language exposure. According García & Wei, (2014); Cummins, (2000) regional disparities in English education quality often correlate

with socioeconomic factors and geographic isolation. Thus, there is a pressing need for differentiated instructional approaches, increased oral and written English practice, and enhanced reading interventions tailored to the specific needs of upland and lowland learners.

Table 4

Test of the Significant Difference on the Least -Learned Competencies in Matatag Curriculum Between Male and Female Participants

Sex	Mean	χ^2 (Chi-square)	df	p-value	ε^2 (Epsilon Squared)
Male	49.55	0.345	1	0.557	0.00189
Female	50.45				

H₀₁: There is no Significant Difference in the Least-Learned Competencies in the Matatag Curriculum Between Male and Female Pupil-Participants.

Understanding whether gender influences learning outcomes is essential in tailoring effective educational interventions. In the context of the Matatag Curriculum, this study sought to determine if there is a significant difference between male and female pupil-participants in terms of their least-learned competencies in English.

Table 4 presents the results of the chi-square test assessing the significant difference in the least-learned competencies in the Matatag Curriculum between male and female pupil-participants. The mean score for male participants was 49.55, while the mean score for female participants was slightly higher at 50.45. However, the difference in scores was not statistically significant, as indicated by the chi-square value, $\chi^2(1) = 0.345$, $p = .557$. The effect size, measured using epsilon squared ($\varepsilon^2 = 0.00189$), suggests a negligible effect.

Therefore, the null hypothesis (H_{01}) stating that there is no significant difference in the least-learned competencies between male and female pupils in the Matatag Curriculum is retained. This implies that sex does not significantly influence pupil performance on the least-learned competencies within the context of the curriculum.

This aligns with existing literature which indicates that gender alone is not a strong determinant of academic performance. Voyer & Voyer, (2014) highlight those variables such as the quality of instruction, learning resources, and socio-economic background often play more significant roles than sex in shaping student achievement. Thus, educational interventions under the Matatag Curriculum should be inclusive and designed to support all learners equitably, rather than being gender-specific.

Table 5

Test of the Significant Difference on the Least -Learned Competencies Between Schools in Lowland and Upland Areas.

Group	Mean	Kruskal-Wallis Value	P-value	Decision
Upland	8.69	2.94	0.0037	Significant
Lowland	9.87			

H₀₁: There is a significant difference in the least-learned competencies between schools in lowland and upland areas.

The Kruskal-Wallis test was conducted to determine whether there is a significant difference in the least-learned competencies between schools located in lowland and upland areas. The analysis yielded a Kruskal-Wallis value of 2.94 with a p-value of 0.0037, which is below the 0.05 significance level. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected, indicating a statistically significant difference in the mastery of least-learned competencies between the two groups. The mean score of students from lowland schools was 9.87, while students from upland schools had a lower mean

score of 8.69. These findings suggest that learners in lowland areas performed better and encountered fewer difficulties in mastering the identified competencies compared to their counterparts in upland areas.

This disparity in academic performance may be attributed to several contributing factors such as limited access to quality learning materials, lack of teacher training opportunities, geographic isolation, and socio-economic challenges often experienced by students in upland communities. Specifically, the most difficult competencies for both groups were observed in areas requiring higher-order thinking skills, including critical reading, logical writing structure, and oral communication.

These gaps were more pronounced in upland schools, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions. Addressing these disparities calls for increased support from educational policymakers through contextualized teaching approaches, provision of resources, and capacity-building initiatives to promote equity and inclusive quality education for all learners, regardless of location (UNESCO, 2017; Darling-Hammond, 2015).

Table 6

Imposed Instructional interventions to improve the learners' performance

Identified Least-Learned Competencies	Objective	Proposed Intervention	Strategy / Activity	Target Group
Select appropriate tone and mode for informal communication	Improve awareness of tone and formality in communication	Conduct functional language sessions	Role-playing conversations, tone-matching games, situational dialogues	Upland learners
Explain the purpose of making predictions while reading	Develop reading comprehension and inferencing skills	Implement prediction strategy workshops	Think-Pair-Share, anticipatory reading questions, guided story prediction	Upland & Lowland learners
Distinguish facts from opinions in informational texts	Enhance critical thinking and analytical reading skills	Conduct fact-opinion distinction modules	Fact vs. Opinion sorting games, analyzing short articles, debate activities	Upland learners
Identify culture-sensitive and inclusive statements	Promote respect and inclusivity through awareness of diverse cultures and perspectives	Conduct inclusive communication workshops	Storytelling from different cultures, inclusive language awareness sessions, "What's wrong with this statement?" critique activity, role-playing inclusive scenarios	Upland learners
Identify antonyms using contextual clues	Build vocabulary and semantic understanding	Vocabulary context clues training	Word-matching, opposite word pair building, cloze tests using antonyms	All learners
Use the correct form of verbs in a sentence	Strengthen grammar and sentence construction	Grammar enhancement classes	Verb tense exercises, fill-in-the-blanks, group grammar games	Upland & Lowland learners

The instructional interventions can be employed to improve the learners' performance in English under the Matatag Curriculum

A series of focused instructional interventions were created and put into practice to address the identified least-learned competencies among upland and lowland learners. All students, regardless of background or geography, had access to instruction catered to their individual needs thanks to these interventions, which were based on well-established pedagogical theories and inclusive educational practices. Functional language sessions included role-playing, dialogue simulations, and tone-matching activities to help learners improve their informal communication skills and gain confidence while interacting with others. Prediction strategy workshops employing Think-Pair-Share methods and guided reading exercises were held to improve reading comprehension. These activities encouraged students to actively engage with texts and improved their capacity to deduce meaning, make use of contextual cues, and expand their vocabulary (Nation, 2018).

Fact-opinion distinction modules, such as sorting games and staged debates, encouraged students to assess material, justify their reasons, and engage in critical thinking. To promote inclusivity and cultural sensitivity, workshops included storytelling, inclusive language sessions, and critiquing activities to assist learners recognize different points of view and become more conscious of multicultural communication patterns.

Contextual antonym training, cloze exams, and interactive word games helped students extend their lexical vocabulary while mastering meaning in context. Finally, grammar proficiency—particularly in verb forms and tense usage—was addressed via targeted exercises and interactive grammar games, which provided learners with repeated practice and instant feedback to improve accuracy and application in both spoken and written English. These interventions represent learner-centered, interactive, and scaffolded instructional techniques, which are congruent with educational theories that promote active participation, contextualized practice, and inclusive education (Vygotsky, 1978; Nation, 2018; Celce-Murcia et al., 2010).

These interventions were tailored for upland, lowland, or all learners, based on their performance needs, promoting equitable and inclusive learning environments.

Conclusion

From the findings of the study, the following conclusions are generated:

1. The nearly balanced gender distribution among respondents ensures that the findings are reflective of both male and female learners, allowing for inclusive analysis of learning challenges under the Matatag Curriculum.
2. The shared top five least-learned English competencies between upland and lowland learners indicate systemic gaps in English instruction, emphasizing the need for curriculum refinement and focused teaching strategies both upland and lowland.
3. Upland learners consistently reported greater challenges in speaking, writing, and reading, suggesting that geographical and resource disparities significantly impact language learning. Tailored interventions are crucial for bridging this performance gap.
4. Gender was not a determining factor in the mastery of English competencies among Filipino learners
5. A significant difference was observed between upland and lowland schools in terms of learners' mastery of English competencies, suggesting that geographical context such as access to resources, learning environments, and language exposure affects English performance under the Matatag Curriculum.
6. The implemented interventions effectively addressed key learning gaps, with improvements observed in speaking, reading, vocabulary, and grammar skills. Targeted strategies such as role-playing, prediction activities, debates, cloze tests, and grammar games contributed to enhanced English proficiency among learners.

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