



Voices from the Margins: A Phenomenological Study of Technical-Vocational-Livelihood Students' Lived Experiences of Disengagement from Language Learning

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Abstract

Language disengagement among Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) students is not simply a matter of low motivation but a complex response to structural, emotional, and sociocultural conditions within the classroom. This study, grounded in Self-Determination Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Emotional Intelligence, explores the lived experiences of fifteen TVL learners through phenomenological interviews and reflexive thematic analysis. Findings reveal that disengagement often stems from exclusionary pedagogies, curriculum mismatches, and symbolic violence that position students as linguistically inferior, leading to feelings of shame, silence, and alienation. Rather than passive withdrawal, students' disengagement reflects an active negotiation of identity and resistance to rigid, top-down instruction that fails to recognize their vocational aspirations. At the same time, learners express a pragmatic orientation toward language learning, viewing English proficiency as a tool for employment and economic mobility rather than academic success. These insights challenge deficit-based narratives and highlight the need for a reimagined, justice-oriented approach to language education—one that affirms students' identities, aligns with vocational contexts, and promotes “linguistic justice-by-design” as a foundation for inclusive and meaningful learning.

Keywords

language disengagement, linguistic justice, phenomenology, educational marginalization, pedagogy

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Introduction

Across the global landscape of education, language learning is often imagined as a gateway—an entry point to mobility, opportunity, and participation in an increasingly interconnected world. Yet for many learners, especially those positioned at the margins of formal academic systems, this gateway does not always feel open. Instead, it becomes a space of quiet struggle, where expectations of multilingual competence collide with lived realities shaped by inequity, exclusion, and disconnection. While global efforts continue to promote inclusive and transformative education (UNESCO, 2023), emerging educational initiatives reveal that even well-intentioned programs may not always translate into meaningful, context-sensitive learning experiences for all learners (Catid et al., 2026). Within this tension, disengagement from language learning surfaces not as mere disinterest, but as a deeply human response to systems that fail to recognize the diversity of learners' needs, identities, and aspirations.

In the Philippine context, this dissonance becomes more pronounced among Technical-Vocational-Livelihood (TVL) students, whose educational paths are shaped by practical goals, socio-economic realities, and culturally situated identities. Language classrooms, however, often remain anchored in abstract and academic traditions that feel distant from these lived experiences. As highlighted by Basa and Bautista (2024), TVL learners frequently encounter linguistic expectations misaligned with their vocational trajectories, while national policies continue to position English as a marker of global competence (Tupas, 2020; Lorenzo & Tupas, 2021). These tensions are further deepened by broader institutional and environmental influences, including the role of instructional support systems in shaping student outcomes (Saro et al., 2025) and the increasing presence of technological distractions that affect learners' engagement and behavior (Da-anton & Dioso, 2025). Within these layered realities, disengagement is not simply an academic issue—it is an emotional and social negotiation of belonging, capability, and purpose.

Despite increasing scholarly attention to language learning and student engagement, much of the literature continues to center on learners in general academic tracks or more privileged bilingual contexts (van Lier, 2021; Cummins, 2022). While studies by Al-Ali and Ahmed (2023), Liu and Wang (2021), and Dewaele and Li (2020) have explored motivation, emotion, and classroom dynamics, the experiences of vocational learners—particularly those who disengage—remain underrepresented. Although recent works have begun to explore challenges in teaching and learning contexts (Cariaga et al., 2025) and emphasize constructivist approaches to knowledge-building (Cariaga, 2025), there remains a lack of integrative, qualitative inquiry that situates disengagement within the intersection of vocational identity, structural marginalization, and emotional realities. Many existing studies remain decontextualized or outcome-driven, often overlooking how disengagement is lived, constructed, and negotiated within everyday classroom interactions and institutional structures.

It is within these silences that the significance of this study emerges. By centering the lived experiences of TVL students, this research seeks to illuminate voices that are often unheard yet deeply meaningful. It reframes disengagement not as a deficit, but as a form of meaning-making shaped by complex social, emotional, and institutional conditions. Through a qualitative, discourse-informed lens, the study contributes to a more humanizing understanding of language learning—one that acknowledges the role of autonomy, context, and emotional experience in shaping engagement. In doing so, it resonates with evolving perspectives on learner-centered and constructivist education (Cariaga, 2025), while offering insights that may inform more responsive teaching practices, strengthened instructional support systems, and inclusive policies. Ultimately, the study reimagines language education not merely as skill acquisition, but as a space where dignity, voice, and possibility are meaningfully restored.

Methodology

Design

This study was based on a qualitative design with phenomenological roots, grounded in the ontological view that reality is socially constructed, multiple, and mediated through experience (Creswell & Poth, 2018). It was situated in phenomenology to understand how TVL students experienced, negotiated, and interpreted their disengagement from language learning not as isolated behaviors, but as a lived reality shaped emotionally, socially, and structurally. Operating within a constructionist-interpretivist paradigm, the study emphasized subjective meaning-making and positioned participants as epistemic agents rather than passive data sources (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). It further assumed that disengagement was not confined to a specific time or place but embedded in material structures and discursive regimes such as curriculum demands, pedagogical practices, sociopolitical language ideologies, and power-laden classroom interactions (Bhaskar, 2016; Archer, 2021). These theoretical underpinnings combining constructivist phenomenology with critical realism aligned with the study's overall framework, which drew on Self-Determination Theory, Sociocultural Theory, and Emotional Intelligence Theory to offer a contextual, multi-level, and humanizing exploration of student disengagement.

Sampling

A total of 15 Senior High School TVL students (aged 17–19) from two selected public high schools in the Southern Philippines participated in the study to ensure variation in vocational strands (Automotive, Home Economics, ICT), linguistic backgrounds (Cebuano, Filipino, Chavacano), and levels of language proficiency. The study employed purposive maximum variation sampling to capture diverse types of disengagement and

coping experiences (Patton, 2015). Participants were selected based on either self-identified language learning challenges reported through their own reflections on engagement and disengagement or teacher recommendations, highlighting academic withdrawal or low participation in language-related tasks. Eligible participants were Grade 12 TVL students with at least two consecutive semesters of language instruction and without diagnosed speech-language disorders, in order to focus on socio-affective and instructional disengagement rather than clinical communication difficulties. Although the sample size was relatively small, it was deemed sufficient based on the principle of information power, which prioritizes depth and richness of data over numerical representation (Malterud et al., 2016).

Collection

Data were obtained by the researcher through semi-structured, one-on-one interviews conducted in Cebuano, Filipino, or a combination of vernacular languages, depending on each participant's preference. Interviews lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and followed a piloted interview protocol that aligned with the research questions and theoretical framework. The questions explored student perspectives on classroom experiences, language anxiety, peer interaction, perceived importance of language learning, and coping strategies. The protocol was refined prior to the final pilot trial, which involved three non-participant students, to improve linguistic clarity, cultural sensitivity, and thematic alignment. All interviews were audio-recorded with informed consent, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for analysis while maintaining cultural and linguistic integrity. Ethical clearance was secured from the university's Institutional Ethics Review Committee, and participants' rights were upheld through confidentiality, voluntary participation, data encryption, and debriefing at the end of each session. Participants were also informed of their right to withdraw at any point, and referrals to school guidance counselors were provided for those who experienced emotional distress or fatigue during the interviews.

Data Analysis

The researcher conducted a reflexive thematic analysis (RTA) following Braun and Clarke's (2019) six-phase model. RTA was employed as it provided a flexible yet critically grounded analytical approach suitable for developing theory-informed interpretations of themes rather than offering merely descriptive accounts of participant experiences. The analysis was both inductive and deductive, in alignment with the study's integrated theoretical framework, Self-Determination Theory (SDT), Sociocultural Theory (SCT), and Emotional Intelligence Theory. These frameworks guided the coding process, informed code categorization, supported theme clustering, and shaped the discursive interpretation of findings. Coding was done manually following Braun and Clarke's three iterations of coding open, axial, and selective which enabled the use of analytic memos to document decisions and reflexive insights. NVivo 12 software supported the organization and pattern recognition of codes. To ensure trustworthiness (Guba, 1981; Yin, 2016), the researcher incorporated peer debriefing, member checking where participants reviewed thematic interpretations of their responses and triangulation through concurrent analysis of field notes and non-verbal observations. A reflexive journal was maintained throughout the study to document shifts in the researcher's positionality, emotional responses, and theoretical insights.

Reflexivity

As a researcher embedded in the Philippine educational system with prior experience in TVL pedagogy, the researcher occupied a position of both proximity and privilege. This dual position necessitated deliberate reflexivity to prevent epistemic overreach and assumptions stemming from insider knowledge. A relational stance was adopted, viewing participants not as mere subjects of study but as co-constructors of meaning. Throughout the research process, the researcher critically examined how their academic background, language proficiency, and institutional affiliations might have influenced participants' disclosures and shaped the interpretation of data. Epistemological reflexivity was also essential, as the researcher acknowledged that their understanding of "disengagement" was not neutral but shaped by broader discourses on educational policy, linguistic governance, and equity. Rather than pathologizing disengagement, the researcher approached it as a communicative and political act an interpretation made possible through sustained critical distance and ethical humility.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical integrity was upheld throughout the research process. Approval was obtained from the university's Institutional Review Board, and all procedures followed established ethical guidelines. Participants were fully informed about the study and provided voluntary informed consent prior to participation. Confidentiality was strictly maintained through anonymization and secure data storage to protect participants' identities. Interviews were conducted with sensitivity, respect, and cultural awareness, ensuring a safe and supportive environment for sharing experiences. Participants were informed of their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. In cases of emotional distress, appropriate support was offered, including referrals to school counselors with participants' consent, prioritizing their well-being at all times.

Limitations and Rigor

When scrutinized from a meta-positivist perspective, this narrative study presented certain limitations. While phenomenological research offered a nuanced exploration of lived experiences, it did not yield causally generalizable findings. The study also recognized that language translation was inherently prone to the loss of nuance or interpretive slippages, especially when conveying emotional idioms. Additionally, as a self-report study,

it lacked the capacity to capture non-verbal forms of disengagement (silence, withdrawal) unless ethnographic methods were employed. Nevertheless, the rigor of the study rested in its methodological fidelity, ethical integrity, theoretical triangulation, and reflexive transparency. The research contributed methodologically by offering a critically reflexive, emotionally grounded, and theory-informed account of language disengagement a phenomenological psychological construct that is frequently treated in impersonal and psychometric terms. It further encouraged future inquiries to adopt longitudinal and multimodal approaches in examining language disengagement, particularly in relation to identity negotiation among TVL students.

Results and Discussion

Emerging Themes	Descriptions
Discursive Insecurity and Linguistic Shame	Students internalized fear of public error, leading to self-silencing and avoidance.
Epistemic Alienation	Instructional practices rooted in decontextualized, monolingual academic English resulted in feelings of exclusion.
Social Hierarchies and Symbolic Violence	Language errors were met with peer ridicule, reinforcing inferiority complexes.
Normalization of Disengagement	TVL culture itself deprioritized language learning, reinforcing beliefs that English was unnecessary.
Withdrawal as Resistance	Students practiced silence and withdrawal as protective mechanisms against linguistic anxiety.
Latent Motivation and Aspirational Value	Despite disaffection, many students still saw language proficiency as economically useful.
Structural Instructional Gaps	Students cited absent scaffolding, inattentive teaching practices, and curriculum misalignment.

The thematic findings challenge the conventional structure of language instruction in Vocational Education and expose ideological tensions between academic elitism and functional literacy. This discussion does more than interpret data; it offers a robust, critical exploration of how TVL (Technical-Vocational-Livelihood) learners discursively construct and resist their linguistic realities while navigating systems that simultaneously seek, marginalize, and fail to scaffold their participation.

Central to the theoretical insight is a reframing of literacy not as an academic embellishment but as a tool for survival, a set of communicative competencies essential for employment and social mobility. This is reflected in SP5's statement, "mastery before you move to next level," which positions literacy as stratified and economically situated, directly challenging the curriculum's uncritical commitment to academic linearity. This perspective aligns with Barton and Hamilton's (2000) concept of literacy as a social practice deeply embedded in economic contexts rather than abstracted from them. Similarly, SP15's call for "the basics for beginners" deconstructs the illusion that all learners start from the same linguistic baseline. This framing disrupts technocratic assumptions of curricular equity and resonates with Appadurai's (2004) "capacity to aspire," which argues that the poor often lack institutional opportunities to access aspirational knowledge. Literacy, therefore, becomes a claim to economic self-determination. Language policies in the TVL context must shift from academic assessments to vocational alignment, viewing language as a tool for increasing life chances.

Several participants (SP6, SP10) reject overly complex, abstract assignments particularly those involving academic research or advanced vocabulary arguing that such instruction perpetuates symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991). These students are not "anti-intellectual"; rather, they are resisting epistemic elitism that disconnects content from their lived realities. The desire for "easy words" is not a rejection of learning but a demand for epistemological democracy (Santos, 2014; Saro et al., 2022). SP10's remark that teachers "make us do research" highlights the gap between curriculum expectations and students' limited linguistic capital. This necessitates a pedagogical shift toward epistemic humility and the recognition of hegemonic curricular norms that prioritize accessibility over elitist abstraction.

Participants emphasized "conversative practice" (SP12) and "conversation mastery" (SP14), reframing orality as a counter-hegemonic tool. In TVL contexts, fluency is not about mastering Shakespearean language or syntactic precision—it is about interacting with customers, engaging employers, and gaining access to global labor markets. This echoes Canagarajah's (2020) view of survival discourse and hooks' (1994) assertion that to speak is to claim

political space in a world designed to silence. Language instruction should prioritize functional conversational fluency over literary or academic discourse, recognizing oral mastery as a form of vocational capital.

Themes of teacher availability (SP7) and emotional closeness (SP4) emphasize a critical need for pedagogical empathy. In an era of rigid syllabi and mechanized pacing guides, TVL learners seek a humanized teacher presence one who can “stay close” and “simplify” instruction. This aligns with Noddings’ (2012) ethics of care, which conceptualizes learning as relational rather than transactional. It also reflects Foucault’s (1991) critique of institutional surveillance, where traditional classrooms police correctness instead of fostering dialogic spaces for linguistic growth. Teachers should be repositioned from evaluators to empathetic allies in students’ linguistic journeys.

SP4’s reflection, “I use the words that I use when we have done activities and writing sentences in our daily accomplished tasks” recasts language learning as an apprenticeship within vocational practice. Language is not learned in isolation, but through authentic engagement in TVL tasks such as care work, culinary arts, construction, and mechanics. This echoes Lave and Wenger’s (1991) theory of situated learning, which posits that knowledge is acquired through social participation. Language instruction should be vocationally integrated, with modules embedded in specific TVL strands to develop communication as situated competence.

Participants such as SP13 and SP15 called not only for pedagogical reform but for institutional change. They advocated for formal policies that explicitly support language learning in TVL contexts, including teacher re-design and curriculum restructuring. These are governance claims not technical suggestions. Such calls resonate with Ball’s (2012) treatment of educational governance as a power-laden arena where policies reflect whose knowledge counts. The students’ assertions that their knowledge matters must be validated in curriculum and policy. Institutional policies must affirm TVL learners’ inclusion, supported by teacher professional development tailored to their contexts.

Perhaps the most radical student demand is the plea for “more time in the basics” (SP10). In a system driven by productivity and speed, this is a call for slow pedagogy (Berg & Seeber, 2016) a pedagogical approach that values depth over breadth and prioritizes the dignity of linguistic development. Time, as Rosa (2020) notes, is political. SP5’s call for “adjusted time until learners reach their potential” challenges the chrono-normativity of rigid schooling timelines that disregard learners’ varied starting points. Time should be conceptualized as inclusive, not standardized, enabling learners to develop linguistic competence at their own pace.

The thematic findings reveal a critical truth: TVL learners are not disengaged because they lack interest, but because the design of engagement excludes them. Their discourses critique a system that favors abstraction over application, elitism over accessibility, and speed over solidarity. They envision a model of language learning that is human, vocational, inclusive, and intentionally slow. This research contributes to the discourse on vocational education and language instruction by advancing the notion of “linguistic justice by design” where pedagogy, policy, and power intersect to serve the most linguistically marginalized. By foregrounding the lived experiences of TVL learners, this study calls on educators, policymakers, and scholars to not only identify what students need, but to recognize what they know and to co-create language classrooms that build bridges to futures of dignity and work.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that TVL students are not inherently disengaged but are navigating a system that marginalizes their linguistic realities through academic elitism, structural gaps, and a lack of contextualized instruction. Their silence, resistance, and calls for basic, functional, and conversational language instruction signal a demand for linguistic justice that affirms their vocational identities and economic aspirations. Far from being apathetic, these students articulate a vision of language learning rooted in care, relevance, and inclusion where orality is valued, time is flexible, and pedagogy is humane. To serve them effectively, language education must shift from rigid academic norms toward vocational alignment, relational teaching, and policies that honor the knowledge and lived experiences of the marginalized. This conclusion affirms that equitable language instruction is not a matter of simplifying content but of redesigning systems that truly serve all students.

Based on the findings, it is recommended that language instruction for TVL students be restructured to prioritize functional communication, vocational relevance, and relational pedagogy. Curriculum developers should embed language learning within specific TVL contexts, ensuring that tasks mirror real-world scenarios in caregiving, culinary arts, construction, and other vocational strands. Teachers must receive professional development centered on empathy, slow pedagogy, and culturally responsive strategies that value orality and everyday language use. Educational policymakers should revise language standards and assessments to move away from abstract academic benchmarks toward inclusive, practical competencies. Finally, institutional reforms must ensure that TVL students are not only supported linguistically but also recognized as capable agents in shaping their educational futures.

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