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# Challenges and coping strategies of indigenous (Aeta) college students in conversational English

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### ABSTRACT

English has been regarded as one of the most useful languages in the Philippines yet many Filipino students still face challenges in using the language including the Aeta college students. In this study, the researchers described the Aeta college students' challenges and coping strategies in conversational English. The researchers utilized a qualitative-phenomenological research design in this study. They used a validated interview guide to capture the needed data from the Aeta college students. The researchers adhered to purposive sampling in selecting the participants. After the semi-structured interview, the researchers analyzed the data through a thematic analysis. The findings revealed that indigenous students' conversational English challenges include their belief that they have weaknesses in the English language, such as having a poor vocabulary of the language. Their challenges also include their doubts and lack of confidence, They cope with their challenges by researching and watching people on television. They also consult the dictionary. The proposed module to be used by the indigenous students includes grammar, writing, reading, and vocabulary. The researchers recommend that English instructors and professors should use conversational English as an activity in their classes. Also, they should provide more activities to the students where they can improve their speaking skills, confidence, vocabulary, and understanding of English.

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#### **INTRODUCTION**

In the Philippines, English is known as one of the most useful languages. It is used in schools as a means of instruction. It enables Filipino students to grow global competence and achieve their goals. It is also advantageous to Filipinos because it offers job seekers an advantage during the application process. Furthermore, English enables Filipinos to interact with people from other countries. It is assumed to be the universal language. In reality, many Filipinos regard it as a second language. Filipino and English, as specified by law, are the official languages of the Philippines for communication and instruction, according to Section 7 of the 1987 Philippine constitution. Knowing English is like possessing the fabled Aladdin's lamp, allowing one to penetrate the language entrance to international business, technology, science, and travel when compared to other languages of wider communication such as Mandarin, Spanish, French, and even Nihongo. With millions of non-native English language users, English has risen to the level of a "world language" in the last century (Tasnim, 2018).

People enjoy conversing. They enjoy telling each other stories about mundane events in their lives. They enjoy asking questions. They enjoy finding out how to interact with one another. A man may not speak or converse with others for a day, but it is difficult to remain aloof for a week, a month, or even a year without engaging in conversation with others. "No man is an island," as the old adage goes. People must communicate with one another. He wants to socialize in order to live a safe and happy life. The ability to communicate with others is a gift. One can obtain and exchange ideas through a simple conversation. Conversations with the people you care for can be both entertaining and pleasurable. Researchers have spent a lot of time researching conversational English in other nations. Meyer, Blondel, and Mall (2017) replied to the following questions: why is conversational competence growth relevant in higher education? And how could this purpose be achieved? They presented strategies to help language teachers, lecturers, language creation managers, course designers, and policymakers think about these problems. They conclude that, considering the importance, prevalence, and difficulty of conversational interaction, the creation of conversational competence receives inadequate attention.

Most scholars have often been intrigued by the importance of the English language. Good command of English is deemed necessary for a person to be effective in life, whether professionally, personally, or educationally, according to Beirovi (2019). Meeting people from various cultures is also helpful, as it helps in the growth of intercultural communication and teamwork skills. Because of its extensive use in almost every aspect of life, the English language has a unique importance, not to mention that it is widely recognized as a requirement for being a successful person in the modern world. Critical study and planning are necessary to help students become fluent speakers of a language. Zulkefly and Razali (2019) cited Krogh and Slentz (2001) in support of their argument that learning a language is easier when it is complete and appropriate. This means that language should be both meaningful and practical for students. Furthermore, students and teachers find it easier to understand when the language is interpreted in context. Conversations with people in their immediate community are referred to as this.

Furthermore, the English base is firmly established as a route from high school to post-secondary education. Simultaneously, educators are moving away from conventional teaching approaches and toward online learning. English is still very common in Malaysian education, both as a subject and as a medium of instruction. Muuk&Siew-Eng (2015). The researchers confirm that there is a shortage of literature and studies about conversational English in the local area after discussing the above-mentioned insights. Furthermore, no literature or studies have been found regarding indigenous students' difficulties in conversational English, especially the Aetas. According to McHenry, Balilla, Anwar-McHenry, Parkinson, and Banal (2014), the indigenous peoples, specifically the Aeta Magbukn, have been increasingly threatened by non-indigenous communities' expansion of logging, agriculture, and urban development in the last decade, exacerbating historical dispossession, poverty, and discrimination. Though undergoing rapid acculturation (assimilation of mainstream Philippine culture), they continue to struggle for recognition of their relation to and rights to occupy their ancestral forest territories, moving from traditional livelihoods to informal trade, farming, and charcoal activities. They are adapting to meet basic needs and ensure food security during the wet season when they often go hungry. They now have to contend with a number of competing desires and values. Various non-governmental (NGOs) and governmental organizations, for

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example, encourage them to preserve their forest and culture while also sending their children to school, planting non-food timber tree species, and participating in agricultural and commercial activities.

Certainly, Indigenous peoples have fought numerous battles in the past, including those for land, freedom, segregation, poverty, and education. Furthermore, David (2011) revealed that among another group of Aetas, the Acta Mag-antsi, the lack of common historical consciousness leads to a lack of shared learning experience as a people, and thus their inability to institutionalize their own educational frameworks. Their historicity as a people is affected because their definition of time is based on consciousness. These groups tend to be having trouble developing a common historical history as individuals. No single organization is kept alive as a group as they travel about. Zabala and Peol agree with this (2018) Despite the influence of many people around them, the IPS, especially the Aeta, continue to treasure their own culture in terms of religious beliefs, songs, dances, arts, marriage, education, child care, and superstitious beliefs, according to them. They clung to old traditions, focused on their past experiences, and never forgot their history. The Aeta were bullied and humiliated, and they yearned for their life on Mount Pinatubo. They wished for their children to pursue careers as professionals. People must respect their culture and rights, as well as avoid bigotry, sexism, and racism. People must stop being culturally biased.

To back up the researchers' point, Purdie, Ellis, and Stone (2004) argue that for far too long, many teachers and administrators have believed that Indigenous students should be made to fit into the current system rather than the system evolving to meet their needs. Assimilationist thinking, on the other hand, has no place in a latetwentieth-century multi-cultural democracy. Santos (2018) examined "Multiple Intelligences, Language Proficiency, and Learning Styles of Indigenous People: Basis for the Implementation of Intervention Program." Proficiency, she says, is the secret to overcoming obstacles. Learning styles affect how students focus on, process, and learn new and challenging content, and different bits of intelligence help people achieve their full potential. As a result, now that IP students are attending daily school, remediation should be given so that they can cope with the academic demands of schooling. She established the IP students' dominant multiple intelligences and learning styles. She also defined the IP students' proficiency levels in order to create a remediation plan. Her studies included a Multiple Intelligences questionnaire, a VAK Learning Styles sample, and an English Language Proficiency Test. The descriptive statistics, frequency, percentage, chi-square, and ANOVA were used to analyze the data. The respondents' primary intellect is musical, and their primary learning style is visual, according to the findings. The English Language Literacy of the respondents is below average. The three variables do not have a major relationship. According to their styles of intelligence, there is no substantial difference in the respondents' English Language Proficiency level or learning style. Teachers of IP students should be mindful of the learners' dominant intellect in order for them to understand the concepts more easily. In terms of language learning, teachers should concentrate their energies on the development of instructional materials, as the respondents' preferred learning style is visual. This will help them improve their English language proficiency. A remediation training program should be introduced, as well as a module to boost the English literacy level of the IP respondents.

The researchers were able to examine the following as a result of their literature review: First and foremost, the conversation is more than just a casual chat; it can also be used as a language learning exercise and evaluation tool. Second, studies on conversational English have primarily focused on non-indigenous students, especially foreign non-indigenous students.

Many students struggle with language use, especially in English. This topic can be found not only in primary and secondary schools but also in higher education. In light of this, the researchers examined whether Indigenous students are aware of this. The bulk of these Indigenous students live in the mountains of one of the provinces in region three, which is one of the province's most impoverished regions. The explanation reflects the Indigenous People's view of civilization as an issue. However, Indigenous Peoples' struggle does not preclude them from battling poverty and injustice through education. They are also a part of inclusive education, which means they receive the same guidance, therapies, and treatment as all students. However, based on their scores in written quizzes and graded recitations, the researchers note a problem with Indigenous students' academic success.

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Aetas have long fought for themselves to change their living standards through education. Their challenges are similar to those of their teachers. Also at the tertiary stage, this issue continues. According to Santos (2018), language proficiency unlocks the difficulties of Indigenous students, and since they are non-proficient, the researchers interviewed them to explain the problems and coping strategies of Indigenous students in conversational English.

#### **OBJECTIVES**

The researchers aimed to describe the challenges and coping strategies of Aeta college students in conversational English and propose a module to address the challenges that the Aeta college students encounter. Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

- 1. How do the Aeta college students describe their challenges in conversational English?
- 2. How do Indigenous students cope with their challenges in conversational English?
- 3. Based on the findings, what module can be proposed?

#### **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The study was conducted using a qualitative phenomenological approach. The phenomenological approach focuses on the similarity of a lived experience of a certain group (Dela Fuente, 2021). The main objective of the approach is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The researchers used this design because the challenges and coping strategies of the Aeta college students are rooted in their lived experiences in engaging in conversational English. Through the phenomenological research design, the researchers were able to explore the lived experiences of the Aeta college students considering conversational English as the phenomenon.

### **Participants**

The researchers used purposive sampling, where the researchers used the following inclusion criteria: first, they must be Indigenous students, specifically an Aeta. Second, he or she must be a bonafide student in the state university in Pampanga and enrolled as a second-year student. Lastly, he or she must have taken purposive communication. The researchers conducted this study during the academic year 2020-2021.

#### **Instrument**

The researchers used an interview guide which two experts validated. First is a language expert since the phenomenon is a language problem particularly in conversational English. Second is an indigenous people (IP) expert since the participants are Aetas, the researchers respect their culture so they should be guided with the dos and don'ts in dealing with them. The researchers posed questions among the participants that focused on their challenges and coping strategies in conversational English and possible topics and considerations that could be considered in crafting a proposed module for them. The interview guide was:

- 1. What are your struggles in conversational English?
- 2. How do you deal with your challenges in conversational English?
- 3. What are the possible topics/ learning episodes you wish to see in a module for conversational English?
- 4. What are the considerations that you think are beneficial for a module in conversational English?

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#### **Data Collection**

This study consisted of 10 Aeta college students enrolled in an extension campus of a state university in Pampanga, Philippines. The researchers secured a permit from the authorities of the state university. After asking for a schedule of their vacant period to avoid disruptions of their classes, the researchers started conducting the interview to the Aeta college students. The researchers used a mobile phone, notebook, and a pen for recording purposes with the permission of the participants. The researchers explained to the participants the nature of this study and they were informed of their right to withdraw should they feel uncomfortable while the interview is ongoing. During the data collection, the researchers and the participants observed safety protocols in view of the restrictions set by the Covid 19 pandemic.

### **Ethical Consideration**

Since one of the researchers was the coordinator of the center for indigenous people of the state university or the locale of the study, she guided her co-researchers on the "dos" and "don'ts" in dealing with the participants. The researchers adhered to the ethical standards of doing research. Before the conduct of the study, full consent from the participant was obtained, the confidentiality of the research data was ensured by informing them that the information taken from them will be solely used for research purposes only, biases and other misleading information were avoided by analyzing the data taken from the participants objectively; and other works and researches that were used in this study were properly cited (Karakose, Yirci & Kobacas, 2014).

### **Data Analysis**

The researchers transcribed the responses of the participants from the interview utilizing thematic analysis to analyze the transcript of an interview as used by Dela Fuente (2019). To get a feel for all of the transcribed statements, the researcher read them numerous times at first. Significant statements with direct relation to the topic under investigation were extracted from each transcription. The researcher grouped the formulated meanings into subthemes and major themes. To confirm the themes, the researcher went back to the original statements, noticing differences among and between the primary informants and resisting the temptation to dismiss facts or topics that did not fit. To present a thorough picture of the phenomena of elderly people in prison, an exhaustive description of the phenomenon was created. The researcher made certain that when composing the thorough explanation of the phenomenon, every attempt was made to describe it in the most unequivocal way possible. This resulted in the underlying structure by reducing the detailed explanation into a brief, compact statement that caught only the characteristics deemed crucial to the structure of the event under investigation. The final phase in the validation process was to inquire about the findings with the participants.

Transferability, conformability, and credibility established the rigor of the study. Transferability was reflected as the Aeta college students described their challenges and coping strategies in conversational English, which then enabled clusters of meaning and grouping as to the essential themes conveyed. Rechecking technique built the conformability of the findings transcribed during the semi-structured interviews. The researchers presented the transcripts to the participants to verify data for its truthfulness and accuracy, to achieve holistic credibility.

#### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This section explains how the data acquired during the interview with participants on their challenges and coping strategies in conversational English was analyzed and interpreted. The participants' own words are offered to add depth and richness to their descriptions of their experiences.

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### Theme 1: Challenges in Conversational English

In view of the challenges of the Aeta college students in conversational English, they revealed that they believe that English is their weakness, and they admit that they are not fluent in speaking using the same language. Furthermore, they also feel the need to overcome it. Some of the participants also shared that they lack confidence. For them, they consider this as one of their challenges because they feel shy speaking the English language, they do not know how to utter their ideas even though they understand what others are saying to them. The participants' responses dismantled that their doubts hinder them in conversational English. Their doubts are rooted in their thinking that what they might say is wrong and they also consider if their grammar is correct whenever they speak. Based on the interview, the participants shared that they do not have a vast vocabulary. Due to this struggle in vocabulary, they cannot explain further what they want to say using the English language. They cannot also put emphasis on the ideas that they have in mind when they speak because they do not know the right word to say. The findings of this study were found in contrary to Hosni (2014) who cited Ur (1996) who mentioned that there are many factors that cause difficulty in speaking, and they are as follows: first, inhibition, students are worried about making mistakes, fearful of criticism, or simply shy. Second, nothing to say: students have no motive to express themselves. Third, low or uneven participation: only one participant can talk at a time because of large classes and the tendency of some learners to dominate, while others speak very little or not at all. Fourth, Mother-tongue use: learners who share the same mother tongue tend to use it because it is easier and because learners feel less exposed if they are speaking their mother tongue.

**Table 1.** Significant statements on thematic insight (Challenges in Conversational English)

Thoma	Culathamas	Cignificant Statements on Thomatic Legislate
Theme	Subthemes	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight:
		Challenges in Conversational English
(1) Challenges in	(1a) English as their	"English for me it's so hard. English is my
Conversational	Weakness	weakness." (P1)
English		"Challenges ko po is ah (pause for a while) ano
		po kasi ako po kase mahina po kasi ako sa
		English." [My challenge or struggle is that I am
		weak in English]. (P2)
		"Speaking in English and weaknesses." (P3)
	(1b) Lack of Confidence.	"Lack of confidence." (P4)
		"Sometimes, I'm shy to speak English." (P6)
	(1c) Doubts	"Takot po kaming magsalita po ng English kasi
		po baka po maisip naming na mali po." [We are
		scared to speak in English because we fear that we
		are wrong]. (P5)
		"Nagdadalawang isip ka kung tama yung
		grammar." [You are having second thoughts if
		your grammar is correct]. (P10)
	(1d) Poor Vocabulary	"Nahihirapan po akong magbigkas ng other
		words. Yung sa po sa vocabulary po kase po
		nahihirapan po ako magbigkas ng other words. (I
		am having difficulty uttering other words. In
		vocabulary, because I am having difficulty
		uttering other words" (P2)
		"My challenge is sometimes not understanding in
		English." (P3)
		"Lack of vocabulary." (P4)
		"Sometimes sir the other words minsan hindi
		sometimes sti the other words minsul nindi

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kopo	kasi	alam,	minsan	hindi	ako
nakaka	pagsalit	a in Eng	glish (Some	times sir	I do
not kno	ow the	other w	ords, I car	not spea	ak in
English	" (P6)				

Theme 2: Coping Strategies in Conversational English

The participants disclosed that one of the coping strategies of the Indigenous students in conversational English is consulting the dictionary. This coping strategy may seem so traditional as it is known that Filipinos always consult the dictionary whenever they encounter unfamiliar words. However, the game has been brought to a new level as the participants still consult the dictionary to seek the meaning of the unfamiliar words using an electronic dictionary. They consult the dictionary through their mobile phones where the Merriam dictionary is downloaded. The participants also added that they do research as part of their coping strategies in conversational English. Researching through reading is one of the receptive skills that allows the participants to gain knowledge in the English language. By reading some English books, they are able to see sentence structures, grammar, and encounter new vocabulary which they may use further in conversational English. Moreover, the participants disclosed that they watch people and television as part of their coping strategies. If reading is deemed to be a receptive skill, the same goes for watching television as it falls under the new macro skill which is viewing. The viewing, then, is categorized as a receptive skill too. On the other hand, Nakhalah (2016) suggests and adopts the following solutions which may help in overcoming such difficulties in conversational English: First, make the students more competent in communicating orally in English by practicing English speaking. Second, students should avoid anxiety by encouraging them to speak fluently even if they make errors or mistakes in their speaking and not to criticize them cruelly, moreover, we should let students avoid the fear of criticism, or simply shy by making them familiar with the person who is talking with. Third, students must have a motive to express themselves. Fourth, encourage learners not to use their mother tongue. Fifth, encourage learners to read more and more to get a high quantity of vocabulary. Sixth, raise the motivation of English speaking. Seventh, provide an environment that may help the students in English speaking. Eight, allow learners to participate in the discourse which may help the students' English speaking. Last, raise the element of self-confidence in the students.

**Table 2.** Significant statements on thematic insight (Coping Strategies in Conversational English)

Theme	Subthemes	Significant Statements on Thematic
		Insight: Coping Strategies in
		Conversational English
(2) Coping Strategies	(2a) Consulting the Dictionary	"Sometimes I read a dictionary to find the
in Conversational		meaning or to find the deeper meaning."
English		(P1)
		"In English I'm not understand but I'm
		trying for me. For in dictionary." [When I
		do not understand English, I still try using
		dictionary]. (P3)
		"Merriam sir, tas dictionary." (P4)
		"Yung ano po yung mag ano ka po sa
		dictionary yung Merriam Webster para
		mas maintindihan." [I refer to the
		dictionary for better understanding]. (P5)
		"Read to book po tsaka dictionary po
		sir." [Reading books and dictioanary, sir].
		(P7)

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(2b) Researching	"Yung hindi kopo naintidihan na words tinitignan kopo sa dictionary or Merriam." [I look into the dictionary the words that I cannot understand]. (P9)  "Find the deeper meaning or para mas magamit kopo siya." [I find the deeper meaning so I can use it]. (P1)  "Nagsesearch po ako sa internet." [I search on the internet]. (P5)  "Nagtatanong po ako sa kapwa ko mag aaral at mga guro po." [I ask my classmates and my teachers]. (P10)
(2c) Watching People on Television	"Manuod ng tv, sometimes Im makiramdam ku kareng aliwang tawu." [I watch tv and sometimes I listen to other people]. (P6) "Nanunuod po ako ng tv, diba po channel 9 english po sila, pinapanuod kopo sila Tas pilit kopo ininintindi kung ano po sinasabi nila." [I watch tv, isn't it they speak English in channel 9? I watch them and I try to comprehend whatever they are saying]. (P7)

Theme 3: Inputs for a Proposed Module

As regards the inputs for the proposed module, the emerging theme has determined that the proposed module should be simple which includes grammar, writing, reading, and vocabulary which aims to provide improvement in the skills needed by the Aeta college students in conversational English. In terms of grammar, when people hear the term grammar, they react differently. Some will react negatively as they may feel frightened. They view grammar as a complex concept that is difficult to learn. On the other hand, people who react positively tend to be part of linguistically intelligent people or language smart. The participants wish to include grammar in the proposed module because for them, they are not good at it. Furthermore, the topics subject-verb agreement and sentence completion are suggested. As previously stated, vocabulary is one of the challenges of the participants. However, this was suggested by the participants as they view it with a silver lining that would help them improve their skills in conversational English. Lastly, reading was suggested by the participants because, according to them, they were not used to reading passages or books in English. On the other hand, they hope that if they will be exposed to reading, they will also improve their skills in conversational English. In relation to this finding, Manuel and Francisco (2016) developed a module in Grammar and Composition II and looked into its effects on the achievement of first-year students of the College of Arts and Sciences. Quasi-experimental design specifically the non-equivalent control group design was used in their study. The respondents were selected from the two classes in English 11- Grammar and Composition II. Twenty were selected and paired through their pre-test scores. One class was taken as the experimental group in which the modular approach was used, while the other class made up the control group in which the lecture method was employed. Two instruments were used to collect data. The first was a 60 – item multiple-choice test and a ten-point essay. The other instrument was a 20-item questionnaire. Frequency counts, percentages, means, and variance were used to describe the gathered data. A t-test for correlated samples was used to determine whether there were significant differences in the pre-test and post-test scores of the control and experimental groups. Their study indicated that there was a significant difference between the post-test scores of the students exposed to the module compared with the ones exposed to the lecture method. This shows that students taught via a module in Grammar and Composition II performed better than those who did not.

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**Table 3.** Significant statements on thematic insight (Inputs for a Proposed Module)

Theme	Subtheme	Significant Statements on Thematic Insight: Inputs for a Proposed
(3) Inputs for a Proposed Module	(3a) Grammar	Module  "Yung sa grammar din po pwede din po natin isama." [We can also include grammar]. (P1)  "Grammar po." [Grammar]. (P2)  "Ano sir yun nga yung grammar para mas lalo tayong maenhance or matuto lalo." [Grammar, so we can improve and learn better]. (P6)  "Yung mga grammar po."  [Grammar, sir]. (P8)  "Ano po yung grammar po sir minsan po nahihirapan po."
	(3b) Writing	[Grammar, we find it difficult sometimes]. (P9)  "Kung nagsusulat po kami ng English." [If we were writing in English]. (P1)  "Paghakbangin ang paggawa ng essay." [Improve our writing skills in essay]. (P10)  "Pag nag essay po sa English." [Essays in English]. (P2)  "Essay ng English kasi po simpleng English lang po nagagawa ko." [Essays in English because I can only construct simple essays]. (P8)  "Yung paggawa din ng essay." [Essay writing, too]. (P9)
	(3c) Vocabulary	"Paghakbangin ang paggawa ng essay." [Improve our skills in constructing essays]. (P10)  "Yung paggamit po ng vocabulary." [The utility of vocabulary]. (P2)  "Vocabulary words para matuto tsaka para masanay tayo." [Vocabulary words so we will learn and will get used to them]. (P6)  "Pero yung malalalim po." [Highfalutin words]. (P8)  "Yung mga ano po simple words papunta sa difficult word diba po may mas malalim na words pa po yung ibang English words." [I hope it will range from simple to complex]. (P9)

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(3d) Reading	"Lesson is reading reading the
	book." (P3)
	"About pagbabasa po talaga." [It's
	really about reading]. (P4)
	"More on reading po ap ag English
	po." [Reading which is focused
	more in English]. (P5)
	"Nagbabasa." [Reading]. (P7)

#### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The researchers conducted this study to describe the challenges and coping strategies of the Aeta college students enrolled in an extension campus of a state university in Pampanga, Philippines. The researchers conclude that the Aeta college students encounter challenges in conversational English because of their belief that they have weaknesses in the English language, poor vocabulary, their doubts, and lack of confidence. The Aeta college students feel the need to overcome these challenges by researching, watching people on television, and consulting the dictionary. A proposed module should be simple which includes grammar, writing, reading, and vocabulary which aims to provide improvement in the skills needed by the Aeta college students in conversational English should be developed. With these conclusions of the study, the researchers recommend that the instructors and professors should engage students in different activities like debate, brainstorming, speech delivery, role-playing, dialogue, spelling activities to improve their conversational skills. Furthermore, the researchers recommend that English instructors and professors should use conversational English as an activity in their classes. Also, they should provide more activities to the students where they can improve their speaking skills, confidence, vocabulary, and understanding of English.

#### **IMPLICATIONS**

The findings of this study amplify the implications of the challenges of the Aeta college students in conversational English to their performance and ability to acquire English as their second language. Furthermore, the findings of this study calls for the attention of other researchers to focus on the marginalized people of the country to propose policies, interventions, and programs that will alleviate the quality of their lives. Generally, there is a need for English teachers to focus on the speaking skill of the Aeta college students. Through the findings of this study, English teachers may address the challenges that the Aeta college students encounter by providing activities that would improve their conversational English skills. The inputs for the proposed module in this study could guide English teachers in crafting the module which is deemed to benefit the Aeta college students.

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