

# Adapting to the Dominant Language: Challenges and Coping Strategies

Clarisse Joy D. Bakun<sup>1</sup>, Dayang T. Kamlian<sup>2</sup>, Jeffrey A. Rajik<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>Assistant Professors, Language Department, Mindanao State University – Tawi-Tawi

## Abstract

This study investigates students' challenges in academic institutions as they transition to a dominant language. It likewise explores strategies to address these challenges, ultimately enhancing successful integration. It employed a qualitative research design. The 12 participants were selected using purposive sampling. They were Sama students studying at Mindanao State University – Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography, adapting to the dominant language, Sinug. The responses in the focus group discussion were analyzed thematically to identify the challenges and coping strategies the participants faced and employed, respectively. The identified challenges are vocabulary barriers, cultural bias, identity crisis, social isolation, linguistic inequality, and identity formation. At the same time, the identified coping strategies are language immersion, peer support, speaking in the lingua franca, utilizing electronic resources, language exchanges, building vocabulary, and cultural immersion.

**Keywords:** Language adaptation, Challenges, Coping Strategies, Dominant Language, Sinama, Sinug

## 1. Introduction

Acquiring a second language (L2) is never easy. Learners must struggle with new vocabulary, grammar, sentence structure, idioms, pronunciation, and more (Rajik, 2022). In the context of education, the role of language goes beyond mere communication; it shapes identities, influences access to resources, and impacts academic success (Ellis, 2007). In educational institutions where a dominant language prevails, adapting becomes essential for students from linguistic minority backgrounds to engage fully within the academic community (Lou & Noels, 2019). It is often a critical factor in academic success and social integration. Beyond practical advantages, adapting to the dominant language in the academic community also catalyzes personal growth and cultural understanding (Kutor, et al., 2021). Moreover, it has a vital role outside the confines of the classroom to establish connections and access opportunities.

This research study aims to investigate challenges and coping strategies in the dominant language adaptation processes of Sama students at Mindanao State University-Tawi-Tawi College of Technology and Oceanography (MSU-TCTO), where Sinug, which is primarily spoken by the Tausug in Sulu, Basilan and Tawi-Tawi (Estrera & Rajik, 2022), serves as the dominant language spoken by most students, faculty, and staff. The Sama people, an indigenous group in the Philippines, have their unique language, culture, and worldview. In this context, the subjects are referred to as the Sama in Tawi-Tawi and nearby provinces within the Bangsamoro Autonomous Region and Muslim Mindanao (BARMM), who are studying in MSU-TCTO. As they immerse themselves in the MSU-TCTO community, their adaptation experiences within the Sinug-dominant environment warrant further exploration.

The Sama community, predominantly residing in the coastal areas of various regions in the Philippines, has distinct language and cultural practices. Although Tawi-Tawi is home to Sama people, they experience linguistic prejudice because Sinug, not Sinama, is the language of interaction used in commerce, offices, and educational institutions (Rajik & Tarusan, 2023), at least in the capital town, Bongao. Sinama, however, is predominantly spoken by the Sama community, particularly in the island municipalities.

As a locale of the study, the MSU-TCTO community is a multilingual academic environment. It accommodates students from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds. It is a branch campus of the Mindanao State University (MSU) System. One of the key strengths of MSU-TCTO lies in its focus on technology and oceanography. With its abundant marine resources and coastal ecosystems, Tawi-Tawi province presents a unique environment for studying and exploring various aspects of oceanography. This is why many students from different linguistic backgrounds opted to study at this institution.

The existing literature generally lacks specific research on the lived experiences of the students coming from a linguistic minority group who are adapting to the dominant language, specifically within the context of Sama students at MSU-TCTO. While some studies explore language adaptation and cultural assimilation among minority students in different educational settings (Lai, et al., 2015; Makarova & Birman, 2015; Portes, & Rivas, 2011), the unique experiences of Sama students in MSU-TCTO have yet to be examined in depth. This study aims to fill this literature gap by exploring the challenges they encounter and their coping strategies that arise from the adaptation process within the Sinug-dominant MSU-TCTO community.

## **2. Methods**

A qualitative research design was employed to effectively explore the experiences of the Sama students in MSU-TCTO in suiting themselves to the dominant language. Qualitative methods allow an in-depth understanding of individuals' experiences, perceptions, and subjective realities within a specific context (Lindgren, et al., 2020). The following sections outline the key components of the methodology:

### **2.1. Participants:**

The research involved a purposive sampling technique in selecting the 12 Sama students at MSU-TCTO who have experienced adapting to the Sinug language. The participants were chosen based on their language background (those who initially do not speak Sinug), length of exposure to Sinug, and their willingness to share their experiences.

### **2.2. Data Collection:**

Semi-structured interviews were the primary data collection method in the focus group discussion. The interviews were conducted conversationally, allowing participants to express their unique experiences in terms of challenges and coping strategies. The interview questions were designed to elicit in-depth narratives about the participants' journey of language adoption. Probing questions were used to explore various aspects such as language use, cultural practices, and feelings of belongingness.

### 2.3. Data Analysis:

Thematic analyses were employed to analyze the qualitative data gathered from the interviews. The study involved transcribing and coding the interview data, translating the responses into English, and identifying common themes, patterns, and categories that emerged from the participants' responses. These themes were then organized and interpreted to derive meaningful insights about adopting the dominant language.

### 2.4. Ethical Considerations:

Ethical guidelines were followed throughout the research process. Participants were provided informed consent before their involvement in the study, ensuring their rights to privacy and confidentiality were respected. Likewise, anonymity was maintained by assigning pseudonyms to participants and using generic identifiers in reporting the findings.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The results highlight the challenges and coping strategies faced and employed by Sama students when adapting to the Sinug language.

### 3.1. Challenges Faced by Sama Students in Adapting to Dominant Language

The themes identified under the challenges that the Sama students faced while adapting to the dominant language spoken in MSU-TCTO are vocabulary barriers, cultural bias, identity crisis, social isolation, linguistic inequality, and identity formation. Table 1 illustrates the description of the themes to show how they are different from each other.

**Table 1: Identified Themes for Challenges and their Descriptions**

Theme	Description
Vocabulary barrier	Students struggle with vocabulary in Sinug.
Cultural bias	Students struggle with communication styles, cultural references, social norms, nonverbal communication, and stereotyping.
Identity crisis	Students struggle with conflicting desires to assimilate while remaining true to their cultural heritage.
Social isolation	Students limit opportunities for meaningful interactions.
Linguistic inequality	Students faced discrimination because of their accent and pronunciation.
Identity formation	Students are required to modify their linguistic styles, creating a struggle to maintain authenticity.

The themes identified posed the challenges in the process of dominant language adaptation by the Sama students in MSU-TCTO. For instance, the vocabulary barrier hinders the Sama students' understanding, especially when interacting with Tausug students, faculty, and staff outside the classroom. Participant 4 remarked, "As a Sama student, I do not have a strong command of Sinug and struggle with vocabulary. This has impeded me from articulating my thoughts when talking with Tausug on campus." [All responses were translated into English from Sinama]. The participant's responses addressed the difficulties in language proficiency. The students acknowledged the unfamiliarity with Sinug vocabulary and the struggle to express themselves. In addition, the responses recognized the impact of vocabulary

barriers on confidence and participation in extracurricular activities, which also impede their ability to build strong relationships with peers outside the classrooms.

**Participant 2:** "There are words I don't know and can't understand. It leads to feelings of self-consciousness and reduced confidence when speaking Sinug. This can limit my participation in extracurricular activities."

Cultural bias, as one of the challenges faced by the Sama students, holds back comprehension of context-specific conversations. The participants' responses suggest that the Sinug carries cultural nuances and particular communication styles that differ from Sinama and its speakers. These differences can lead to misinterpretations if one is not accustomed to the Tausug communication styles. They also emphasize the importance of understanding cultural references and idioms specific to Sinug to fully comprehend concepts. It made it difficult for the Sama to fully understand and interpret language usage, potentially hindering their ability to communicate effectively and comprehend context-specific conversations. In addition, the participants faced difficulties in adhering to the norms of the Tausug during communication interactions. Because of unfamiliarity with these social norms, there is a tendency for the Sama to inadvertently violate cultural expectations, use inappropriate language, or struggle to navigate social interactions in the university setting.

Cultural bias can also manifest in nonverbal communication, including gestures and voice. For instance, the Tausug shouting during a conversation does not imply they are fighting. And because the Sama are not used to it, they have different interpretations of these nonverbal cues, leading to misunderstandings or awkward interactions in their efforts to adapt to this dominant language. Furthermore, cultural bias can impair stereotypes and prejudice, leading to individuals facing discrimination or biases based on their native language or cultural background. These create additional challenges in adapting to the dominant language as they experience feelings of exclusion or a lack of acceptance within the university community.

**Participant 12:** "I heard some Tausug calling us aho' aho' (aho' means 'yes'), which we perceived as derision. Not only that, but they also even name-call us or assassinate our characters.

Identity crisis, likewise, can create a dilemma between wanting to assimilate into the dominant language's culture and preserving one's cultural identity. The participants acknowledged the internal conflict they experienced between wanting to fit in and be accepted in the dominant language's culture and remaining true to their cultural heritage. It likewise deters language development, adding to linguistic insecurities. They doubt their cultural identity and sense of self, which leads them to question their language abilities in Sinug.

**Participant 6:** "I want to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance within the dominant language's community. I do it by assimilating into their culture. However, I want also to preserve my cultural identity."

Social isolation significantly limits opportunities for the Sama students to experience meaningful interactions in Sinug. The students shared that because they could not speak Sinug, they chose to stay away from their Tausug roommates in the dormitory. Without regular engagement with the native speakers of the dominant language, it became more challenging for the Sama students to practice and develop proficiency in Sinug.

Students also felt that Sinama is subjected to linguistic inequality. Their accent is mainly the target of prejudice. Participant 7 stated, “My Tausug friends always make fun of me because of my accent. When I speak in Sinug, I tend to have a dragging accent.” This linguistic imbalance has contributed to the feelings of exclusion and inferiority among the Sama students when communicating with the Tausug. It has created barriers to effective communication on the part of the Sama, limited participation, and negatively impacted their self-confidence.

### 3.2. Coping Strategies Employed by the Sama Students

Coping strategies are techniques individuals use to deal with the challenges they face when learning the language of a particular community. In the context of the Sama students learning the Sinug language, the strategies they employed to overcome linguistic barriers and facilitate effective communication and integration into the language-dominant environment are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Identified Themes for Coping Strategies and their Descriptions**

Theme	Description
Language immersion	Students engage in conversations in Sinug.
Peer Support	Students seek support from fellow Sama students who have successfully adapted to Sinug.
Speaking in the lingua franca	Students communicate in Filipino, the national language of the Philippines.
Utilizing electronic resources	Students make use of the Sinug-Sinama E-dictionary.
Language exchanges	Students engage in language exchange activities with fluent speakers of Sinug.
Building vocabulary	Students learn new words and phrases.
Cultural immersion	Students participate in cultural activities.

Language immersion is one of the coping strategies employed by the Sama students at MSU-TCTO to adapt to the dominant language, Sinug. The students conversed with native Sinug speakers to learn how to speak the language. Through this, they are acquainted with an authentic linguistic setting that enhances their language-learning experience.

**Participant 3:** “Immersing myself in conversations with native Sinug speakers has been a precious experience. Through regular interactions with them, I have noticed a significant improvement in my speaking in Sinug.”

Participant 3 acknowledged that immersing themselves in conversations with native Sinug speakers has been a precious experience. This demonstrates an understanding of the importance of practical, real-life

interactions in language acquisition. He also emphasized that regular interactions with native speakers positively impacted their language proficiency in Sinug.

The participants also acknowledged peer support as one of the coping strategies they employed in language adaptation. They highlight fellow Sama students' understanding of the challenges faced when learning Sinug. Participant 1 stated, "Peer support from fellow Sama students has played a crucial role in my language adaptation journey. Whenever I face challenges or feel overwhelmed, I turn to my peers who have successfully adapted to Sinug." The student's response indicates that peer support has been effective in helping them overcome obstacles and foster a sense of belonging within the Sinug-speaking institution.

**Participant 9:** "Many older students have adapted to Sinug and are more proficient in the language. Whenever I have questions or need help, I approach them. They willingly share their experiences and provide language learning strategies."

This student expressed a strong appreciation and reliance on the peer support system. He recognized the knowledge and proficiency of older Sama students in Sinug and actively seek their guidance and assistance. The student highlighted the willingness of their peers to share experiences and provide helpful resources for language learning. The peer support system is emphasized as fostering collaboration, inclusivity, and a supportive learning environment. This response reflects the significant role of peer support in the student's language adaptation process and their overall positive experience.

In an equal way, students admit that whenever they face difficulty communicating with the Tausug, they tend to shift to Filipino to be understood. Participant 5 detailed, "I initially found it challenging to express myself effectively in Sinug. However, communicating in Filipino allows me to converse more confidently with native speakers who might not understand Sinama fluently. It has helped me convey my thoughts and understand their responses." In this response, the student highlights the role of Filipino as a lingua franca in facilitating communication with native Sinug speakers. The student recognizes the initial difficulty of expressing themselves in Sinug and acknowledges the importance of effective communication. By using Filipino, they can engage in conversations more confidently and understand the responses from native Sinug speakers. The student emphasizes the significance of regular practice and exposure to sharpen their Sinug skills over time.

**Participant 8:** "Speaking in Filipino has been a valuable coping strategy for me when conversing with native Sinug speakers. While I aspire to become fluent in Sinug, I initially struggled to express myself comfortably. However, using Filipino as a bridge language allows me to establish meaningful connections and be understood by native speakers."

Here, the student expresses how speaking in Filipino is a valuable coping strategy. The student acknowledges their aspiration to become fluent in Sinug but recognizes the initial challenges. Speaking in Filipino allows them to effectively communicate and establish connections with native Sinug speakers, even if they are not fluent in Sinug. The student emphasizes the positive outcomes of using

Filipino, including gaining insights into Sinug culture and forming stronger relationships within the community.

Another way to cope with the challenges the Sama students face in adapting to the dominant language is by utilizing electronic resources such as the Sinug-Sinama e-dictionary. Participant 6 conveyed, "Utilizing the Sinug-Sinama e-dictionary has been immensely helpful in my language learning journey. Whenever I encounter unfamiliar words or phrases in Sinug, I can quickly look them up in the dictionary." In this response, the student emphasizes the convenience and effectiveness of utilizing the Sinug-Sinama e-dictionary as a coping strategy for learning Sinug. They appreciate the accessibility of the electronic resource, which allows them to look up unfamiliar words and phrases quickly. The student highlights the benefits of having accurate translations, definitions, and contextual examples, which contribute to a deeper understanding of the language. The convenience and flexibility provided by the e-dictionary are noted as significant factors in supporting the students' language acquisition process.

The participants likewise acknowledge language exchanges with the native speakers of Sinug as one of the coping strategies they employed in learning Sinug. Participant 11 stated, "I actively seek out fluent speakers of Sinug and converse with them. We take turns practicing each other's languages, and they help me correct my pronunciation and grammar." The participant exchanges language with fluent Sinug speakers to practice their language skills. They highlight the benefits of having language exchange partners, including correcting pronunciation and grammar and cultural discussions. The participant also emphasizes the positive impact on their confidence and social integration within the Sinug-speaking community.

The participants are also working on building their vocabulary in Sinug. Participant 10 explained, "Improving my vocabulary has been an essential coping strategy in adapting to Sinug. I've found that incorporating new words and phrases into my daily routine has significantly improved my language skills. One technique I use is creating word lists. This helps me remember and apply the vocabulary in relevant contexts." The response indicates a conscious effort to grow the participant's vocabulary and its positive impact on his ability to express himself with precision and confidence in Sinug.

**Participant 1:** "I regularly learn new words and phrases. For example, whenever I come across unfamiliar words, I look them up and try to incorporate them into my vocabulary."

The participants acknowledge the positive impact of this strategy on their fluency and ability to express themselves accurately in Sinug. They demonstrate a proactive approach to language learning and adaptation by actively seeking out new words and phrases. The responses underscore the importance of vocabulary development and its contribution to overall language proficiency and effective communication in Sinug.

Lastly, the participants have seen the significance of cultural immersion in adapting to the target language.

**Participant 2:** “I actively participate in various cultural activities to immerse myself in the traditions, customs, and values of the Sinug-speaking community. By engaging in these activities, I not only get to learn about the language but also gain a deeper understanding of the local customs and traditions.

**Participant 9:** “It helps me to appreciate the nuances of Tausug culture and enables me to connect with native speakers on a more profound level. Additionally, being involved in these activities allows me to build relationships with the community members and helps break down any initial barriers.”

In these responses, the participants highlight the significance of cultural immersion as a coping strategy for adapting to Sinug. They emphasize their active participation in cultural activities. The participants recognize that engaging in these activities provides them with a deeper understanding of Sinug culture, allowing them to appreciate the language and connect with native speakers on a more personal level. Furthermore, they note the social benefits of cultural immersion, such as building relationships and breaking down barriers. These responses highlight how cultural immersion contributes to language and cultural adaptation, fostering a sense of belonging and integration within the Sinug-speaking community.

#### 4. Conclusion

This research explored Sama students' challenges and coping strategies in adapting to the Sinug language. The difficulties identified include vocabulary barriers, cultural bias, identity crisis, social isolation, linguistic inequality, and identity formation. These challenges significantly hinder the students' integration into the Sinug-speaking academic community.

However, the participants demonstrated resilience and determination by implementing various coping strategies. These strategies encompass language immersion, peer support, speaking in the Lingua Franca, utilizing electronic resources, language exchanges, building vocabulary, and cultural immersion. Through these coping strategies, the participants actively engaged in language and cultural activities, fostering their language proficiency, and enhancing their understanding of the local customs and traditions.

The findings of this research highlight the importance of providing resources and support systems to aid Sama students in overcoming the identified challenges. By addressing the vocabulary barrier, cultural bias, and linguistic inequality, educational institutions and communities can create an environment that encourages inclusivity and facilitates adaptation.

This research stresses the significance of language proficiency, cultural understanding, and integration. By employing effective coping strategies, Sama students can navigate the complexities of adapting to the dominant Sinug language and culture, fostering a sense of belonging and identity within the Sinug-speaking community. It is hoped that the findings of this research will contribute to a more inclusive and supportive environment for Sama students and similar linguistic minority groups in their pursuit of adapting to dominant languages.

#### 5. References

1. Ellis, R. (2007). Educational settings and second language learning. *Asian EFL Journal*, 9(4), 11-27.



2. Estrera, E. G., & Rajik, J. A. (2022). Modality in Bagobo-Klata and Tausug. *The Archive*, 2(1), 1-86. <https://journals.upd.edu.ph/index.php/archive/article/view/9331/8247>
3. Kutor, S. K., Raileanu, A., & Simandan, D. (2021). International migration, cross-cultural interaction, and the development of personal wisdom. *Migration Studies*, 9(3), 490-513. <https://doi.org/10.1093/migration/mnz049>
4. Lai, C., Gao, F., & Wang, Q. (2015). Bicultural orientation and Chinese language learning among South Asian ethnic minority students in Hong Kong. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism*, 18(2), 203-224. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.887054>
5. Lindgren, B. M., Lundman, B., & Graneheim, U. H. (2020). Abstraction and interpretation during the qualitative content analysis process. *International journal of nursing studies*, 108, 103632. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ijnurstu.2020.103632>
6. Lou, N. M., & Noels, K. A. (2019). Sensitivity to language-based rejection in intercultural communication: The role of language mindsets and implications for migrants' cross-cultural adaptation. *Applied Linguistics*, 40(3), 478-505. <https://doi.org/10.1093/applin/amx047>
7. Makarova, E., & Birman, D. (2015). Cultural transition and academic achievement of students from ethnic minority backgrounds: A content analysis of empirical research on acculturation. *Educational Research*, 57(3), 305-330. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00131881.2015.1058099>
8. Portes, A., & Rivas, A. (2011). The Adaptation of Migrant Children. *The Future of Children*, 21(1), 219-246. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41229018>
9. Rajik, J. A. (2022). Second language lexical acquisition: The case of extrovert and introvert children. *Psychology and Education: A Multidisciplinary Journal*, 4(4), 414-423. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7087757>
10. Rajik, J., & Tarusan, M. A. (2023). A Grammar Sketch of Southern Sinama Language. *International Journal of Linguistics Studies*, 3(1), 09-61. <https://doi.org/10.32996/ijls.2023.3.1.2>