

Beyond the Degree: Career Journey and Narratives of Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education (PhDLE) Graduates

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, the career journey and stories of the graduates of PhD in Language Education (PhDLE) are discussed. Emphasis was put on the opportunities and challenges that they faced during their academic years in the Graduate School. This qualitative research adopted the narrative approach in exploring the effect of PhDLE program on professional skills, competences and development of its graduates. Drawing on McAdams' Narrative Identity theory along with Mezirow's Transformative Learning theory, the study concentrates on various factors that the four alumni, as participants in this paper, have experienced. The findings also identified the program's effect on the graduates' research, pedagogical and leadership skills. It is recommended that the experiences of the alumni may be considered in the continuous enhancement of the program.

Keywords: Career Journey, Narratives, Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education, Opportunities and Challenges, Professional Competencies

INTRODUCTION

The Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education (PhDLE) program at the Graduate School of one university in the Southern Luzon, Philippines is offered in accordance with the Commission of Higher Education (CHED) Memorandum No. 53, s. 2007, through the Board of Trustees (BOT) Resolution No. 15, series of 2017. The program aims to provide educators at all levels with a comprehensive academic experience that prioritizes the enhancement of their knowledge and skills in language instruction. It was developed to support the advanced academic and professional growth of educators specialized in language instruction.

The CHED Memorandum Order (CMO) No. 15, s. 2019, and BOR Resolution No. 55, s. 2024 augmented the curriculum in 2024. The legal foundations guarantee that the program stays up-to-date and aligns with the changing demands of the educational environment. It should also maintain the requirements established by CHED and the institution's governing authorities. The frameworks enhance the ongoing development of the program while emphasizing its dedication to academic excellence and significance in the field of language education.

There was only one student who registered during its first year of implementation. It was further followed by three students during the second year, and one more in its third year. After 5 years, in 2023, the program had a total of four graduates, with the first graduate completing the program in 2022 and three more earned their degrees in the following year. Currently, at the time of writing this paper, one student is in the dissertation stage, working on the final requirements for graduation. In addition, the program has seen a positive trend in enrollment, with a total of eight students. This growth reflects the program's increasing appeal and relevance in addressing the needs of educators seeking to enhance their expertise in language education.

Theoretical Framework

This paper employed the Narrative Identity Theory, of McAdams (2003), and the Transformative Learning Theory, of Mezirow (2018). These two approaches explore the processes involved on the concepts from one's personal accounts. It believed on the idea that people's lives are woven in their narratives or stories. Life is the combination and integration of their past, present, and future. It helps them come up with who they are and how they relate to others. This paradigm was used to explore how the alumni of PhDLE conceptualized their career journey in terms of the opportunities they encountered and the obstacles they have won over, to attain success, measured by their achievements. This would imply that the narration of each of the alumni is important in demonstrating their growth as both adults and professionals.

Likewise, the Transformative Learning Theory describes how people reframe their concepts, beliefs and ways of looking at the world in relation to their experiences (Mezirow, 2018). It implies that learning is not only the attainment of knowledge. It becomes a complex event that determines how people perceive and behave towards the environments around them. This holds true in the transition, or a big life altering circumstance or event which leads an individual or a group to rethink about what they already know and understand on a given topic.

The completion of PhDLE program form part to compel graduates to search deeper and conduct self-assessment of their work, their approaches to teaching, and their leadership. It also suggests that such forms of self-examination may lead to mental or behavioral change, hence preparing them to take on responsibilities and create change in their environment. The essence of this research would be to ascertain the impact, if any, of the PhDLE program on the professional behavior, leadership style and career of the alumni of the program. The vision, mission, goals, quality policy statement as well as the core values of the university are also subject of concerns in the discussion of this paper.

Objectives

The study explored the career paths of all the pioneer graduates of the program based on their narratives. It sought to understand the problems and the opportunities that they encountered while under the program. It similarly aimed to assess the role that the program played in their professional skill and competence development. To address these objectives, the research wanted to describe how successful in their professions, are the alumni who earned the PhDLE degree. Furthermore, this paper was meant to be the starting point for further enhancement of the program for the present and future students.

METHODOLOGY

This paper utilized qualitative methods with the first step focused on collecting information from the four alumni, through informal discussions of their vast experiences and opinions. Patterns in their career change were evidently marked as themes. The tales and their profiles were further used to evaluate their common skills and accomplishments. They all formed part holistic development during their academic years in the graduate school. Moreover, the concepts derived from the narratives of the graduates provided the researcher significant information to further improve the program.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The career journeys of PhDLE alumni who earned Master of arts in Education (MAED) major in English, from the same university are the focus of discussion in this paper. These alumni currently work for the Department of Education (DepEd). This section explores their roles as mentors to fellow teachers, as well as their tasks to teaching and as leaders. Moreover, the findings discuss the opportunities from the individual narratives that reveal their

phenomenal achievements. Furthermore, their encountered challenges, such as the struggle to fulfill professional and household responsibilities and the challenge for promotion are also covered. The roles played by the PHDLE program on their career development are extensively discussed to encourage both existing and future students. Likewise, the discussion considered evaluation in terms of the program's congruence with the university's vision, mission and goals.

Career Journey of the PHDLE Students

The graduates of the program faced numerous professional opportunities in the academic field. They may function not only as teachers but more so as lecturers or researchers. As teachers and leaders, the alumni of the program have improved significantly with continuous learning by serving as mentors to fellow teachers. They were also able to develop scholars and chanced to participate in research that involved innovative practices. This part covers both opportunities and challenges that the alumni have encountered, based on their post-graduation profile and narratives.

A. Opportunities

The PHLE curriculum offers multiple opportunities for personal and professional development. Integrating research into the classroom, producing teaching resources, and engaging in seminars and research fora enables both students and graduates to further their careers and make lasting contributions to the field of language education. These experiences opened windows for varied opportunities accessible to alumni. They reinforced the link between research and practice in the educational domain. The narratives came together to form three themes under the opportunity category. They include professional recognition through research, improvement of pedagogical methods, and the establishment of a research-oriented career.

Professional Recognition through research

There are very many opportunities for students who registered in the Doctor of Philosophy in Language Education (PHDLE) program, especially when it comes to career development and through research-related endeavors. They often occupy said roles in educational institution. They were given the chance to work in collaboration and some initiatives designed to improve language instruction. While under the program as a student, and working as a teacher, their works frequently involved both governmental and non-government projects, sometimes community based. In there, they were tasked to assist in the crafting of educational resources, policies, and in-set trainings. This participation enhances their professional experience and enables them to favorably influence the wider field of language education.

One of the alumni noted, "I started working on the results of my thesis and dissertation for my developed instructional materials. They are used in the language classroom." This clearly shows how research can be effectively utilized in the language teaching and learning processes, which is the complete end of education. It is a clear indication of the influence that research work completed by student may also possesses viability for instruction and utilization. This also shows how they can be able to apply such knowledge in the creation of practical materials that are effective in language teaching.

Another alumna pointed out that "I have been asked to make presentations in a number of seminars and served as a discussant in research conferences." Such experiences show the appreciation and esteem which suggests that well executed research can form research-oriented alumni in the academic setup. This kind of outcome is a clear manifestation of the university's vision, "a research university with a culture of excellence". As discussed by Smith and Brown (2021), such opportunities enable graduates to build their networks professionally,

practice their skills, and reinforce their position as an authoritative figure in language education.

Improvement of Pedagogical Method or Teaching Practice

Making research applicable to teaching practice is yet another benefit of the PHDLE program. Their research outcomes are so useful that they can be used to enhance ‘best practice’ in the classroom. A case in point would be the student whose research prompted her to develop instructional materials. In most cases, educators use research on practice to enhance traditional practice. By utilizing their graduate studies output to develop instructional materials, they help the field of language education improve its pedagogical practices.

The graduates of the program build their teaching philosophy around research that can be applied in practice with a hint of relevance in the classroom and highlighted practices of problem solving to develop critical, analytical, and constructive perspectives with the researched concepts to real-life context. “*Nabigyan ako ng funding sa proposal based on classroom-initiated research*,” this was narrated by one of the graduates who stressed how engagement in research and practice in the classroom can enhance the chances of her professional development and even getting financial support. By literally turning into practice research, such as teaching aids, students assist the sharing of the language education pedagogical practices. The output from their studies is so applicable, that they can be used in the enhancement of a classroom’s best practice.

Johnson and Davis (2022) considered that the academic career development of graduate students has opportunities and challenges, particularly in the field of research. Accordingly, one remarkable achievement is to be able to develop instructional aids out of the findings of research. It shows how research can be applied in addressing issues and improving the practices in any sector of the education system. Likewise, Bastida, Saysi, and Batuctoc (2022) discussed in their paper that most of the time, graduates are known to go out of their way to utilize the results of their research in developing working tools for the language classroom pedagogy. This not only enhances the quality of the teachings but also creates a platform for dynamic change in the teaching methodology with the support of robust research.

Building a Research-Oriented Career

The orientation of PHLE graduates into a research career opened as another opportunity. During the program, students develop abilities and perspectives which enable them to be positioned within the research framework of the academic community and participate in various research-based activities. These commitments in conferences and seminars enable them to present research results and their ideas on language education development as well as to take part in discussions in such a relevant field for them. As one of the graduates noted, ‘the organizer of the conference invited me to become a resource speaker in their next conference’. This would mean that such calls to deliver speeches at professional association meetings are not only a recognition in their trust of the professional’s research but also an avenue for career growth and opportunities.

Furthermore, the PHLE program nurtures students to venture into alternative linguistics and deviate from the conventional language teaching methods. Such graduates who seek new ways of doing things, through their inclusive research, are in good authority to effect change in the discipline. The program allows students to develop new concepts and methods that are expected to improve the effectiveness of teaching and learning, either in the form of instructional materials’ development or innovative ways of conducting research.

The graduates of the program often pursue diverse career pathways, where they may secure positions as lecturers, researchers, or educational administrators, contributing to curriculum development and educational leadership (Smith & Brown, 2021; Johnson & Davis, 2022). Accordingly, they also engage in research roles within educational organizations,

collaborating on projects to enhance language education, with some finding opportunities internationally.

B. Challenges

Graduates of the PhD in Language Education (PhDLE) encountered numerous substantial obstacles. These include both professional and personal factors. The most common attribute is the problem on finances, promotion, limited professional development opportunities and post-graduation promotion. As the number of candidates possessing comparable qualifications rises, numerous PhDLE graduates may encounter circumstances necessitating the acceptance of the said issues posed as challenges.

Constraints in financing and resources

One of the challenges has to do with shortfalls in financing and resources. Research-oriented graduates often have problems in getting funds for their research activities. Such financial limitations can restrict their ability to undertake research or employ creative approaches in language instruction. In most cases, they resort to their personal resources rather than proposing or applying for possible funding. As one of the graduates commented, "My husband supported my studies," which refers to the financial needs during her academic journey. This goes to show that at times, only such personal or outside financial assistance is the only mode of enabling one to successfully complete studies and conduct research work. However, such personal funding options are not always reliable or accessible to all which is a serious challenge.

This kind of problem may create ripple effect which includes quality of research. Another graduate said, "Without additional funding, I could not afford the latest resources needed for my research," and this quote succinctly captures the point explaining how lack of funds may lead to low research results. This generates a situation where only those who have means or funds do feel motivated to pursue advanced research while those who do not have find themselves at a severe competitive disadvantage (Moneva & Jumag, 2020; Smitha, et al., 2023).

Moreover, lack of finances may also lead to restrictive practices. It is common for students to undertake traditional research methodologies because of the high costs associated with those that are innovative. Referring to her financial constraints, one alumna remarked, "Had I been able to gather enough funds, I would have been able to take a practical approach to my research." Large-scale surveys or field works, or even specialized manipulation of data collection and analysis technologies are possible if financing students is an option. This may mean fall back on simple, superficial and less sophisticated research designs which do not fully address the multifacetedness of issues regarding language education.

In addition, lack of funds also restrict participation in professional development activities. Such participation entails traveling, overnight stays, registration, and other related expenses. One alumna stated, "I wanted to go to a conference held outside the country, but I could not bear the costs." In the absence of such opportunities, students are not adequately placed to refine their research ideas, interact with their fellow scholars, or keep up with trends in language teaching. It was fortunate, though, that during the period of pandemic, there were opportunities for virtual presentations.

Reconciling work obligations with personal life

Reconciling work obligations with personal life presents a considerable barrier for PhDLE graduates. The obligations of academia, encompassing teaching, research, and other administrative responsibilities, can result in stress and burnout. Graduates frequently experience the pressure to disseminate their results and obtain financing for their study, so exacerbating the overall stress associated with their positions. The unyielding quest for academic achievement can disturb work-life equilibrium, adversely affecting well-being and job satisfaction.

The simultaneous pressures of graduate school and the workplace, compounded by the realities of the pandemic, can be overwhelming. One of the graduates commented, “*kapagal, ma’am... nakakaiyak*” [exhausting ma’am... heartbreaking], the phrase reflects the emotional and physical toll of these challenges from being a student to a teacher and as a young mother. The said scenario resonates with many educators, especially during the transition to online instruction.

The alumni of the program encountered additional obstacles because of the COVID-19 pandemic. The mode of instruction was changed to multi modalities, and for them as students during that time, online education was employed. The pandemic has necessitated that they adapt to new pedagogical methods and invest in new tools that enable them to communicate effectively with learners in a virtual environment. Decuyper, Grimaldi, and Landri (2020) emphasized the necessity to address the diverse needs and attributes of students in an online environment, which presents inherent challenges and necessitates preparedness and ingenuity from teachers. This environmental adjustment is prolonged and challenging for individuals accustomed to a more tactile interface. These issues must be addressed to provide a system that enables graduates to thrive in their chosen pursuits.

The shift to digital platforms has undoubtedly heightened the obstacles for the graduates of the PhDLE program. They must rapidly acquire proficiency in new technology devices and platforms. For certain students, graduate courses have additional obligations that include significant reading, writing, and dedication to academic endeavors (Singh, Singh & Mishra, 2024). The tagline of the SorSU as *Pamantasang May Puso* [SorSU as University with a heart] adhered to the considerations extended to the alumni of the program through policy-based initiatives that provide considerations to the students of the graduate school.

The Role of the Program in Shaping Professional Skills and Competencies

The PhDLE program has a framework that aimed to enhance the professional competencies and capacities of its graduates. The curriculum integrates theory and practice, that capacitate the students to develop advanced abilities in language instruction, research methodologies, and pedagogical innovative strategies. The alumni are expected to cultivate critical thinking, leadership, and communication skills through collaborative learning and mentorship. Through such, they could effectively execute and manage their distinct tasks in language instruction in their respective classrooms.

Some alumni assume administrative positions inside their educational organizations, as additional tasks, instead of solely teaching jobs. Such responsibilities may include, among others, department coordinator, curriculum consultant, or educational administrators. In these positions, they possess significant authority to modify educational policies and procedures, thereby instituting initiatives designed to enhance the quality of education. This could be related to the institution’s vision and mission, to produce graduates who are globally competitive and research- oriented at the same time.

Their leadership enabled them to develop innovative teaching methods to create an environment conducive to academic excellence for their students. All the four alumni of the program came up with a learning output for language instruction that could be utilized in their respective classrooms.

In this paper, there are five themes that influenced the professional skills and competencies of the PhDLE graduates. Their areas of expertise include language education cognitive or theoretical knowledge, pedagogy and instructional leadership, research and academic work, critical and analytical abilities, and leadership and development.

Theoretical/Academic Knowledge in Language Education

The program gives students a strong background in the theories and ideas on language that are needed to understand on how people learn to read and write. Graduates can participate

in and add to academic discussions in language teaching and research if they have a good understanding of areas like second language acquisition (SLA), sociolinguistics, and psycholinguistics. By looking at these ideas with a critical eye, teachers can come up with better ways to teach languages that meet the needs of all their students.

One of the graduates said that she had a better idea of how language shows culture. She said, "I could understand the learner better when I dig on the type of language he or she already knows." Sociolinguistics is the best way to explain what happened here. It explains how social and cultural factors in language use affect things like code-switching, dialectal differences, and linguistic identity.

Furthermore, "It is important to understand where the multilingual learners are coming from," said by one of the alumni. This means that the curriculum stresses how important it is to recognize the different things that affect language growth. It looks at how cognitive, social, and cultural factors affect how people learn and use languages, especially when they are in situations where more than one language is spoken. If teachers understand these dynamics, they can create effective and inclusive learning environments.

This point of view is important for teachers who work with students who speak more than one language because it helps them understand how these students manage and express their identities through language. Sociolinguistics is an important part of teaching languages because it shows how society works by expressing the views, values, and traditions of the people who speak it. Knowing this connection, teachers can create culturally responsive lessons that consider and include the different language and cultural backgrounds of their students (Saputra, Rahmadeny, & Jazzawi, 2019).

Pedagogical Expertise and Instructional Leadership

The development of research competencies helped the students to offer innovative perspectives in the field of language instruction, which is also a key objective of the PHDLE curriculum. The alumni gained the competencies to formulate, implement, and disseminate unique research that tackles contemporary challenges in language acquisition and pedagogy. They were earned through coursework in qualitative and quantitative research approaches. This is somehow relevant to the quality policy statement of the institution which states, "SorSU shall transform knowledge through research... as it adheres to statutory and regulatory requirements of its system".

All four graduates were able to complete and publish for international readers, their respective research. Those research articles are relevant to the field of English or language-related fields. It is safe to mention that their academic qualifications and professional expertise attained during their studies, have significantly enhanced their professional competency being a PHDLE alumni. They possess sufficient competence to both teach and do research, given their broad experience in language and several research domains. "I have been assigned to teach practical research after graduation," one of the alumni declared, showcasing the trust of her immediate superior of her knowledge, not only to apply theories to practice but more so in its transfer to their learners in the basic education level. This idea was supported by Mezirow, (2018) who opines that the enhancement of professional standing, would enable the participants to engage in evidence-based decision-making. This would imply that they could also contribute to policy-making and gain recognition as leaders in the educational sector.

Research Proficiency and Academic Scholarship

Some academic competencies are anchored on research-related competencies concepts. They would enable the students (now as alumni) to establish innovative perspectives in the field of language instruction. Their proficiency in academic study may be enhanced and eventually contribute to their professional standing. This would somehow allow for further involvement in evidence-based decision-making and contributions to policy development in educational settings.

The insights of the alumni on language instruction and acquisition, for them to become more innovative, are based on the program's focus on research and academic competencies. Students received comprehensive instruction in qualitative and quantitative methodologies, which likely equipped them to undertake original research on pertinent challenges in the field. This competency enhances their professional capabilities and aids in the implementation of evidence-based practices and the formulation of policies in educational environments.

One student expressed, "My research on students' reading experiences, using audio-assisted materials, led to my designation as the *Brigada Pagbasa* coordinator." This would illustrate how their research fed and fortified their professional practice while simultaneously enhancing educational activities and community engagement. The said concept would hold true in the mission of the university that aims for "research-based quality education, innovations, and collaborative extension services" all aiming for a "sustainable national and international development".

Critical Thinking and Analytical Skills

The program's requirements to promote critical thinking and analytical skills, are essential to address challenges in language instruction. Students develop the capacity to utilize rigorous, evidence-based methodologies for addressing language-related issues through critical discourse analysis, policy evaluation, and curriculum assessment. Understanding of Philippine English is a legitimate and evolving language, as part of the foundation subject, World Englishes would have provided learners with a culturally relevant foundation for creativity and in-depth analysis. Understanding its significance relieves the pressure from the traditional influence of native English speakers. The alumni humbly shared that they better understand their learners who are not "quite fluent" to pronouncing English terms. That said, they also become compassionate in teaching, through understanding of the concept that Filipino speakers of English are under the 'outer circle', based on the classifications discussed by Braj Kachru, cited in the paper of Balasubramanian, (2022).

One alumna stated, "Philippine English enables learners to recognize the extensive applications of the language rather than be limited by potential misunderstandings." This perspective would suggest that learning English in the Philippines enhances its scope, confidence, and creativity of learners. This would further imply that through some authorized and contextualized language practices may encourage students to engage more readily. This may be through discourse, critique, and argumentation, that would eventually alleviate concerns on the use of language. The above statement is relevant to the institutions' core values, with the acronym, "HEART" that stands for Humility, Excellence, Accountability, Resiliency and Trustworthiness.

Moreover, discourse analysis methods, particularly in the teaching of English in the Philippines, enables critical thinking skill development. Professors make use of Philippine English to help students think and debate profoundly and constructively without being subjected to biases. This fosters deeper understanding, self-articulation, strengthens cultural identity and empowers people to positively engage in global issues. As proposed by Fairclough (2013), these skills are important to the design of appropriate language policies and programs to meet the changing demands of learners and the community.

In relation to this, Gilbas (2015; 2024) highlights the contribution of teaching materials with local content to cultural and language identity preservation. Her studies show that using Philippine English in teaching materials not only affirms the students' language identity but improves their participation in the academic discourse. Likewise, contextually appropriate texts and discourses should be used in teaching so that students can achieve the goals set for international communication while using the local language, gaining confidence and competence to use English in various situations (Estremera & Gilbas, 2022; Gilbas, 2018).

Leadership and Professional Development

The PhDLE program emphasized nurturing leaders with the capacity to take up tasks such as master teachers, academic coordinators, and educational consultants. Northouse (2021) states that additional tasks may serve the purpose of instructing persons towards reaching targets by means of promotion, problem-solving, and decision-making processes.

The skills obtained by the alumni of the program helped them grow professionally that led to their contribution to institutional development. An alumna stated, “I have been promoted from my role of Teacher 1 to Master Teacher 1 after I earned the PHDLE degree”. This would indicate her advancement in the profession. This promotion confirms the goals of the program and instills in the alumni’s competence and confidence as they are ready to embrace responsibilities of leadership.

Finally, the alumni of the PhDLE program could be considered ready and equipped with the knowledge and skills to hold the position as head of language curricula. The promotion of a teacher to Master Teacher 1 level shows that graduates do not just become successful in their professional life, but also advanced their organizations and education in general. They are ready to promote the effective language policies and promote changes in them. The important aim of the program is to enable students understand leadership theory, management techniques, and professional ethics which are invaluable in the promotion of educational changes and language policy advocacy (Glickman, Gordon, & Ross-Gordon, 2018).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the graduates of the PhD LE program can pursue a variety of employment options, especially in the academe. The graduates’ qualifications suffice for them to hold academic employment as researchers, mentors and leaders. They indeed form an integral part in the adoption of innovations in teaching methods and the achievement of academic excellence. Also, as mentors and researchers, these graduates actively engage themselves in improving student learning and promoting the development of new education approaches. Likewise, the program plays a crucial role in increasing professionalism and competences of educators, academicians, and leaders.

The program’s well-designed curriculum encourages pedagogic invention, improves theoretical language teaching skills, and develops research skills. It also promotes the ability to think critically, honed their leadership skills, and global competence which prepare the graduates to address complex educational problems in various intercultural contexts. Furthermore, it is marked with a global perspective in terms of academic work and practice which enable educational practitioners to meaningfully contribute to changes in language education policy and implementation of language curriculum on different levels to develop and sustain language education in the world context.

To efficiently equip learners with the skills that they need for modern classrooms, it is deemed necessary to enhance the PhDLE program by promoting joint ventures, focusing more on teaching tools, and to increase the number of conducted and published research endeavors. Also, other education programs and additional support in various means can increase the immersion into leadership training, enhance the role of alumni as such, and increase their engagement. These efforts will ensure that the graduates will be readily fit to steer and grow the language teaching profession.

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