

Integrating Endangered Indigenous Languages into Higher Education Pedagogy: The Case of Sulu State College

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This study examined the integration of endangered Philippine languages—specifically Tausug, Sama, and Yakan—into higher education pedagogy at Sulu State University, focusing on curricular representation, instructional strategies, student engagement, and systemic institutional barriers. Employing a qualitative descriptive design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions, classroom observations, and documentary analysis of syllabi and instructional materials. Findings reveal that local languages remain marginally represented in formal curricula, heavily overshadowed by English and Filipino as primary mediums of instruction. Although faculty recognized the cultural significance of native languages, pedagogical integration was largely unsystematic, restricted to incidental code-switching, informal translations, and ad hoc classroom exchanges. Nevertheless, faculty demonstrated instructional resourcefulness through culturally responsive strategies—such as storytelling, oral history documentation, and mother-tongue creative tasks—which significantly enhanced student comprehension, active participation, and cultural pride. Students consistently reported higher motivation and confidence when indigenous languages were validated in academic settings. However, widespread implementation remains constrained by rigid curricular frameworks, a dearth of localized learning materials, limited faculty development, and heavy teaching loads. The study concludes that while strong educator and student readiness exists, sustaining language revitalization requires institutional policy reforms, localized material development, targeted teacher training, and strategic community partnerships that align local linguistic heritage with 21st-century learning competencies.

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Introduction

Language is more than a communication tool; it is living heritage, a vessel of memory, worldview, and identity. In the Philippines, with its rich tapestry of over 100 distinct languages, many of which are endangered, linguistic diversity is intertwined with colonial histories, migration, and sociopolitical change (Headland, 2003). According to Ethnologue, the number of endangered Philippine languages climbed from 13 to 28 in recent years, with eleven on the verge of extinction (Alejan et al., 2021). This alarming trend signals not just loss of linguistic

variety, but erosion of cultural knowledge, oral traditions, and community cohesion. Educational policy has attempted to address this through Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE), which mandates instruction in the learners' home language in early grades (R. Gonzales, "The elephant in the classroom," DO 16/DO 28). While the policy includes 19 recognized languages, it often overlooks many endangered languages spoken in small, marginalized communities. Critics argue that deploying extinct or hardly spoken heritage languages under MTB-MLE may be impractical and even

counterproductive (Gonzales, 2017). Meanwhile, research in the Philippines and globally has affirmed that integrating cultural contexts and indigenous knowledge into education fosters deeper engagement, identity affirmation, and better learning outcomes. For instance, Flores et al.'s (2025) multi-site study found that higher education faculty who attempted to include indigenous knowledge and local historical narratives in curricula encountered fragmented supports yet reported gains in student resonance and critical thinking. In primary and secondary classrooms, language teachers have integrated storytelling, local values, and indigenous languages (alongside the dominant languages) to scaffold comprehension and foster belonging (Esperanza, 2025). In Indigenous Peoples Education (IPEd) settings, teachers often act as cultural mediators, navigating learners' multilingual backgrounds, resource constraints, and systemic limitations (Sonza & Protacio, 2025). Nevertheless, while prior studies emphasize indigenous knowledge integration, MTB-MLE implementation, and teacher perceptions in basic education, there is a conspicuous gap in empirical research on how endangered Philippine languages, many of which lie outside recognized MTB-MLE languages, can be systematically woven into 21st -Century pedagogical practices (e.g., communicative, technology-enhanced, culturally responsive pedagogy) in higher education or secondary settings. Very few studies disaggregate endangered-language contexts or propose localized, sustainable pedagogical frameworks tailored for such linguistic communities. Further, much of the literature tends to remain descriptive, focusing on either policy critique or anecdotal teacher narratives, but lacks comprehensive investigations linking endangered language integration, classroom practices, student outcomes, and institutional barriers. To address this, the present study was undertaken at Sulu State University, located in a linguistically underserved region, where several endangered languages are (or formerly were) in use among communities. In this study, I investigate how endangered Philippine languages can be preserved and revitalized through systematic integration into 21st-century pedagogical strategies. The research examines the status and challenges of endangered language teaching, explores how teachers incorporate them into modern frameworks (e.g., communicative, tech-enhanced, culturally responsive), evaluates student perceptions, engagement, and outcomes, identifies institutional and resource barriers, and culminates in a localized pedagogical framework that

blends endangered-language integration with relevant contemporary competencies.

Research Objectives

This study aims to investigate how endangered Philippine languages can be preserved and revitalized through their systematic integration into 21st-century pedagogical practices. It seeks to examine the current status and challenges of teaching endangered Philippine languages within educational institutions, with particular focus on how they are represented in curricula and classroom activities. Furthermore, it analyzes the strategies employed by teachers in incorporating endangered languages into modern teaching approaches such as communicative language teaching, technology-enhanced learning and culturally responsive pedagogy. The study also evaluates students' perceptions, levels of engagement, and learning outcomes when endangered languages are embedded in classroom instruction, highlighting their role in strengthening cultural identity and communicative competence. In addition, the research aims to identify institutional, curricular, and resource-related barriers that limit the effective inclusion of these languages in formal education. Ultimately, the study intends to propose a localized pedagogical framework that aligns endangered language integration with 21st-century competencies, ensuring cultural sustainability while enhancing the relevance and inclusivity of language education in the Philippine setting. **Methodology** This study employed a qualitative descriptive research design to investigate how endangered Philippine languages could be preserved and revitalized through their systematic integration into 21st-century pedagogical practices. The design was chosen because it allowed the researcher to capture authentic perspectives of teachers and students, and to describe in detail the strategies, challenges, and opportunities involved in integrating endangered languages in classroom contexts. The study was conducted at Sulu State University, a higher education institution situated in a linguistically diverse region where several endangered languages are still spoken within the community. The participants of the study consisted of language and education faculty members who taught courses in Filipino, English, or local languages, as well as undergraduate students enrolled in these classes during the academic year 2024–2025. Teachers were selected through purposive sampling on the basis of their experience in teaching and their exposure to culturally grounded instruction, while students were chosen through stratified purposive sampling to

ensure representation from various year levels and programs. Prior to data collection, informed consent was obtained, and ethical protocols such as confidentiality, voluntary participation, and the right to withdraw were strictly observed. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews with teachers, focus group discussions (FGDs) with students, classroom observations, and documentary analysis of course syllabi, lesson plans, and instructional materials. The interviews and FGDs elicited participants' experiences, perceptions, and reflections on the use of endangered languages in instruction, while classroom observations documented how teachers incorporated local languages into communicative and culturally responsive pedagogical practices. Documentary analysis further validated whether endangered languages were represented in the curriculum and classroom resources. All collected data were transcribed and subjected to thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework. This process involved familiarization with the data, coding, identifying recurring patterns, reviewing themes, and defining the core categories relevant to the research objectives. Triangulation of data sources (interviews, FGDs, observations, and documents) was employed to enhance the credibility of the findings. In addition, member checking was conducted by presenting preliminary interpretations to selected participants to ensure accuracy and authenticity. Researcher reflexivity was also maintained through journaling and memoing to minimize bias during interpretation. Through this methodology, the study provided a comprehensive understanding of the status of endangered language integration in higher education, the strategies employed by teachers, the perceptions and learning outcomes of students, and the institutional barriers that constrained full implementation. The results informed the development of a localized pedagogical framework that aligns endangered language preservation with 21st-century competencies and inclusive, culturally responsive education.

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Findings and Discussion

Theme 1: Current Status and Representation of Endangered Languages in the Curriculum

Documentary analysis of syllabi, lesson plans, and classroom observations indicates that endangered and minoritized Philippine languages remain peripheral within higher education curricula. In almost all reviewed documents and observed sessions, English and Filipino functioned as the primary media of instruction, reflecting their entrenched status as official languages of Philippine education and governance.

Local languages—specifically **Tausug**, **Sama**, and **Yakan**—were rarely afforded formal instructional space. Instead, their presence was largely incidental: utilized by faculty as brief illustrative examples, in informal translation tasks to clarify complex concepts, or during spontaneous exchanges outside the structured flow of lessons.

"We sometimes use Tausug words to explain concepts, but these are not written in the syllabus or required in class activities."

— Instructor 1 (Interview)

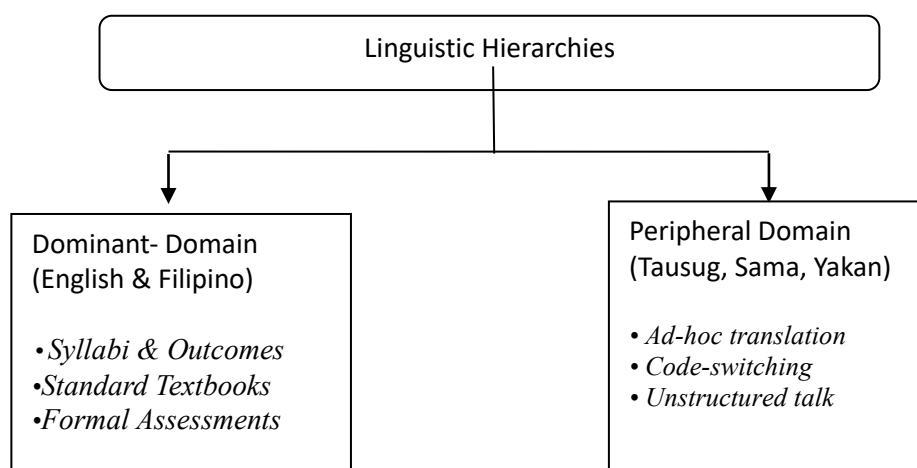
"I rarely see my mother tongue in textbooks. It is mostly English and Filipino, and sometimes it feels like our own language has no place in school."

— Student (FGD 2)

Faculty members acknowledged that these languages are deeply embedded in the cultural identity of Sulu communities, serving as vital repositories of history, tradition, and worldview. However, their inclusion in academic practice remains unsystematic. They are seldom reflected in formal learning outcomes, constructivist assessment designs, or instructional resources such as prescribed textbooks and digital modules.

Educators reported that a lack of clear institutional guidelines and standardized reference materials makes it difficult to move beyond *ad hoc* improvisations. Consequently, while the socio-cultural significance of these languages is widely recognized, they remain structurally invisible within formal curricular frameworks.

Key Insight: This marginal representation underscores a pronounced disconnect between local linguistic realities and institutional policies. Although Sulu State University operates within a vibrant, inherently multilingual community, its higher education framework continues to prioritize national and global languages over regional linguistic heritage.



These findings align with **Hornberger's (2008)** concept of "top-down pressure" in language policy, wherein educational structures prioritize official or global languages for perceived economic competitiveness.

This dynamic echoes **Martin (2018)**, who argued that rigid university curricula in the Philippines relegate indigenous and regional languages to the margins despite their importance to identity formation. Similarly, **Gonzalez (1998)** observed that the historical privileges granted to English create institutional hierarchies that subordinate regional tongues. While **Tupas (2015)** highlighted that Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) reformed basic education, higher education institutions (HEIs) have yet to implement parallel frameworks to sustain heritage languages. Left unaddressed, this institutional omission generates what **Skutnabb-Kangas (2000)** terms "linguistic discrimination," gradually undermining intergenerational language transmission.

Internationally, **UNESCO (2010)** emphasizes that formal education systems serve as critical sites where endangered languages either undergo revitalization or experience accelerated erosion. Privileging dominant languages over localized heritage languages expands what **May (2012)** identifies as "the linguistic capital gap," systematically displacing smaller linguistic communities within academic platforms that ought to serve as preservation hubs.

Theme 2: Pedagogical Strategies for Integrating Endangered Languages

Despite the absence of formal curricular mandates, faculty members demonstrated agency by deploying informal, adaptive strategies to incorporate endangered languages into instruction.

1. Strategic Code-Switching

Educators frequently alternated between English, Filipino, and local languages to unpack dense academic concepts, clarify terminology, and provide culturally grounded examples. Rather than reflecting a linguistic deficit, this practice aligns with **Gumperz's (1982)** view of code-switching as a legitimate, highly contextualized communicative resource.

2. Contextualized Translation & Oral Storytelling

Instructors drew upon local narratives, oral traditions, and regional histories as entry points for academic content. Storytelling helped bridge theoretical topics with students' lived experiences, supporting **Hornberger's (2008)** *continua of biliteracy* and **Gay's (2018)** framework of *Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (CRP)*.

3. Culturally Rooted Student Artifacts

Faculty occasionally invited students to submit creative or oral performances—such as poetry, traditional songs, or dramatizations—in their native languages. When permitted to use their mother tongue, students demonstrated heightened engagement and deeper critical reflection, consistent with **Cummins' (2000)** *interdependence hypothesis*.

4. Early Technology-Assisted Documentation

A subset of faculty encouraged students to record community elders using mobile devices, capturing oral histories and local folklore. While effective for fostering intergenerational dialogue, these initiatives were often constrained by a lack of digital infrastructure, technical training, and institutional backing—a challenge mirrored in broader Philippine CRP literature (**Paculan & Maguilang, 2024**).

“When I explain abstract concepts, I translate them into Tausug or Sama. The students become more engaged because they understand better.”—Instructor 3 (Interview) “Our professor allowed us to

do a video project using our dialect. It felt good to speak freely in our own language while also showing we can use English subtitles.”

— Student (FGD 1)

Strategy	Primary Pedagogical Benefit	Theoretical Alignment
Code-Switching	Clarifies complex terms, lowers affective filter	Communicative Resource (Gumperz, 1982)
Storytelling & History	Connects abstract lessons to lived contexts	Cultural Continua of Bilinguality (Hornberger, 2008)
Native-Language Outputs	Elevates student participation and confidence	and Interdependence Hypothesis (Cummins, 2000)
Community Recording	Promotes intergenerational knowledge transfer	Culturally Responsive Pedagogy (Gay, 2018)

While these bottom-up initiatives illustrate educator resourcefulness, they remain heavily dependent on individual willingness. Without formal course integration, standardized materials, or administrative support, such efforts risk remaining fragmented.

As May (2012) notes, minority languages frequently suffer from "rhetorical inclusion"—celebrated symbolically but lacking concrete policy support. Tupas (2015) reinforces that localized practices must be systematically institutionalized to resist tokenism and ensure long-term linguistic vitality.

Theme 3: Student Perceptions, Engagement, and Learning Outcomes

Students consistently reported that incorporating local languages increased their motivation, participation, and sense of belonging. Validating their mother tongue within formal academic settings transformed the classroom into an inclusive environment where their heritage was actively recognized.

“I feel proud when my dialect is used in class. It reminds me that my culture matters in school.”

— Student (FGD 3)

“It is easier to answer when we can connect the lesson to our language at home. It makes me confident to participate.”

— Student (FGD 1)

These responses demonstrate that linguistic integration yields distinct cognitive and socio-emotional benefits:

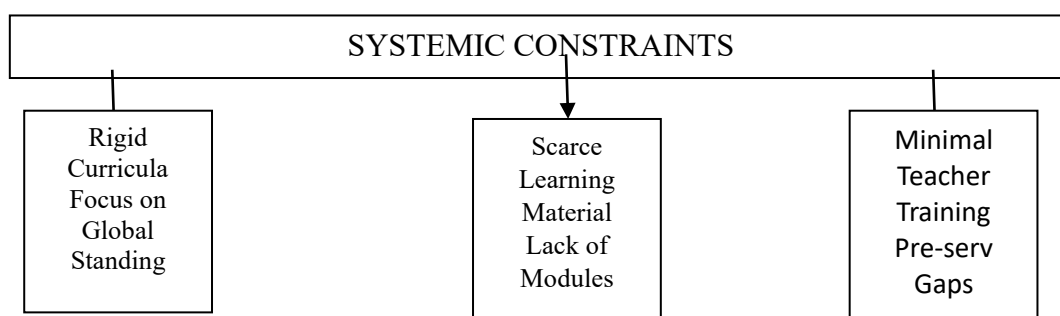
- **Enhanced Cognitive Comprehension:** Moving fluidly between home and institutional languages enabled learners to construct mental bridges between abstract concepts and existing cultural frameworks (Cummins, 2000).
- **Elevated Participatory Confidence:** Having the option to express complex ideas in their first language encouraged students to contribute more frequently to discussions, strengthening peer collaboration.
- **Intercultural Competence:** Using regional languages alongside English and Filipino cultivated what Byram (1997) terms *Intercultural Communicative Competence (ICC)*—the ability to negotiate meaning across diverse linguistic and cultural frames.

These empirical observations align with Nolasco (2008), who argued that integrating local languages bridges the gap between community-based knowledge and formal schooling. Furthermore, Kramsch (1993) underscores that language and culture are fundamentally inseparable; every communicative exchange carries cultural meanings that shape understanding.

When HEIs provide structured space for endangered languages, they move beyond basic skill acquisition to foster culturally grounded, critical thinkers (Hornberger, 2008; Tupas, 2015).

Theme 4: Institutional, Curricular, and Resource-Related Barriers

Faculty and administrators cited four interconnected, systemic barriers that hinder the formal integration of endangered languages into higher education:



1. **Curricular Rigidity and Policy Weight:** Standardized course designs prioritize English and Filipino to support national unity and international competitiveness, leaving minimal flexibility for regional languages (Martin, 2018; Gonzalez, 2016).
2. **Scarcity of Localized Instructional Materials:** Standardized textbooks and digital references are almost exclusively published in English or Filipino. Developing context-specific materials imposes an uncompensated labor burden on faculty (UNESCO, 2010).
3. **Gaps in Professional Preparation:** Pre-service teacher education rarely covers methodologies for integrating endangered or regional languages, leaving educators without specialized pedagogical tools (Tupas, 2015).
4. **Workload and Time Constraints:** Heavy teaching loads and rigid coverage requirements limit the time available to design, translate, and assess localized learning activities (Paculan & Maguilang, 2024).

"The syllabus is packed, so even if I want to use Tausug more, I need to follow the course outcomes."

— Instructor 2 (Interview)

"We don't have books written in our dialect. Teachers have to create their own materials, which takes too much time."

— Student (FGD 4)

These findings highlight a central structural paradox: while grassroots readiness among faculty and students is high, institutional frameworks continue to favor national and global languages over regional preservation.

Without policy intervention, resource allocation, and sustained capacity building, language integration will remain limited to temporary, individual efforts (Hornberger, 2008; May, 2012).

Theme 5: Toward a Localized Pedagogical Framework

Despite systemic constraints, study participants articulated a clear vision for integrating endangered languages into higher education systematically rather than treating them as optional supplements.

"If there were modules or digital apps in Tausug, it would help us learn both language and culture while also practicing technology skills."

— Student (FGD 2)

"We need institutional support—training, workshops, and materials—so that endangered languages are not just add-ons but really part of the curriculum."

— Instructor 4 (Interview)

Strategic Recommendations for Institutional Implementation

- **Co-Designed Localized Materials:** Develop peer-reviewed textbooks, digital modules, and open educational resources (OERs) in Tausug, Sama, and Yakan to support structured learning (Nolasco, 2008).
- **Targeted Professional Development:** Establish institutional workshops focused on Culturally Responsive Pedagogy, Multilingual Task Design, and Technology-Enhanced Language Learning (Hornberger, 2008).
- **Community-Engaged Partnerships:** Partner with local cultural leaders, elders,

and tradition keepers to authenticate oral histories, indigenous knowledge systems, and instructional content (McCarty, 2013).

- **Alignment with 21st-Century Competencies:** Reframing heritage languages as dynamic tools for digital archiving, media production, and intercultural communication, ensuring their relevance for contemporary learners (May, 2012; Tupas, 2015).

By embedding local languages into formal course design, higher education institutions can safeguard regional heritage while advancing Skutnabb-Kangas' (2000) concept of *linguistic human rights*.

Transforming universities into spaces of active language preservation ensures that heritage languages serve not merely as historical artifacts, but as living mediums for academic inquiry, identity formation, and community empowerment.

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