

An Ethnographic Study on the Cognizance of the Higa-onon Youth about their Native Language

Junry M. Cacay¹, Evan P. Taja-on^{2*}

¹School of Arts and Science, San Isidro College, Impalambong, Malaybalay City, 8700 Bukidnon Philippines;
<https://orcid.org/0009-0005-5269-0466>

²School of Education, San Isidro College, Impalambong, Malaybalay City, 8700 Bukidnon Philippines;
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2736-6171>

* Corresponding author: metajaon@sic.edu.phail

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Abstract

Speaking a native language expressed a kind of art. The people in Bukidnon primarily speak various languages that contributes to the linguistic diversity of Mindanao, Higa-onon being one of those languages. Speaking the native language is one way of preserving culture. However, with the passage of time and the new social and cultural trends and development, the native language seems to be cast aside by the younger generation. Preserving the Higa-onon tribe's native language enables more meaningful communication and respect for these ties and the legacy of the culture. The study aimed to examine the Higa-onon youths' conservation of the native language. The study uses a descriptive explanatory design to investigate the perceptions and experiences of six Higa-onon students (five males and one female) in learning the native language. The study used a validated questionnaire and conducted semi-structured interviews to collect relevant data from respondents, which were analyzed thematically. The study found that learning the Higa-onon dialectal helps preserve the language and Indigenous culture. The Higa-onon language preserves native stories and community standards. Higa-onon pride comes from language preservation. Moreover, learning Higa-onon made the participants value the language and realize their culture.

Keywords: Higa-onon Language; Native language; Indigenous language; Ethnographic study

Introduction

1.1. Background of the study

There is an importance in speaking the native language, which many consider an art form. Many languages are spoken in Mindanao, mainly by indigenous people in Bukidnon. The native language is vital for preserving the culture. From generation to generation, speaking the local tongue is becoming unrecognized and fading with time. It endangers Bukidnon culture's foundational practices. Many schools encourage students to experience other cultures, which preserves rich knowledge, traditional wisdom, and artistic and creative expressions and ensures the longevity of the native language (Ethnologue, 2015). However, the decline of language practice is becoming a problem among the youth, not just by their lack of recognition as members of their native group. At the same time, the influence of this new generation is constantly affecting the native culture (United Nations, 2016).

Preserving the native language of the Higa-onon tribe allows for more meaningful communication that can facilitate respect for these relationships and the heritage culture as a whole (Treibold, 2020). The United Nations (2016) confirmed that Indigenous languages worldwide are in danger of dying out, with one dying out every two weeks and many more at risk. In addition, the study concerned the Philippine languages of the archipelago's 175 Indigenous languages, endangering 35 and 11 are on the brink of extinction, specifically focusing on the Higa-onon language (Saranza, 2016; Villasin-Young, 2022). The researcher attempts to determine how the native language affects current institutions.

The study anchors on the theory of Manuel (1969) that language is inseparable from a person's daily life and culture. It is through our language that we show who we are. The disappearance of the Higa-onon language risks the whole socio-cultural foundations of our community of speakers. In this study, the researcher finds two variables in connection to the importance of the native language. The first variable, speaking the Higa-on language, refers to speaking the learning language. Second is that speaking the language is credentialed to an individual using language as such.

The primary purpose of this study is to address the gap in knowledge of Higa-onon language preservation in today's generation. Many younger generations are shifting towards using widely spoken languages, such as English, instead of their native tongue. This gap in knowledge and understanding of ancestral languages has resulted in the loss of cultural heritage and traditions, with many indigenous languages being on the brink of extinction. The issue of native language preservation has become increasingly important as people recognize the valuable insights and knowledge that can be passed down through language and culture.

1.2. Statement of the problem

The study investigates the Higa-onon language conservation among selected Higa-onon students in San Isidro College. This research addressed the importance of learning and speaking the Higa-onon language in today's generation. Specifically, it answers the following;

What are the perceptions of the present Higa-onon youth regarding the native language?

What are the experiences of the present Higa-onon youth in learning the language?



2.1. Research design

The study uses a descriptive explanatory design following an ethnographic method to investigate the concept of the study (Creswell & Cresswell, 2017) regarding the learning and use of the Higa-onon language in today's generation. The study investigates the Higa-onon student's perception of the importance of speaking the native language among youth. Although there are other languages of the native tribes of Bukidnon, the study focuses only on the language of the Higa-onon tribe.

2.2. Sample and sampling technique

The study used a non-probability criterion sampling to identify the participants who would

participate. The criterion for selecting the participants was a bonafide student of San Isidro College and a native speaker of the Higa-onon language (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). This study focuses on the importance of the native language inherited by the Higa-onon tribe. Language is essential in employing personal identity and will make many opportunities to promote their cultural traits such as clothing and religious rituals.

The researchers interviewed six (6) students for the study. All participants are college students who agreed to provide their narrative and experience in learning the Higa-onon language as a member of the tribe with the researchers. Each participant completed a personal information form, as shown in Table 1.

Table 1.
Self-described profile of the participants

Participant	Gender	Ethnicity	Age (years)	Extent of Ethnicity
H1	Male	Higa-onon	22	Pure Native
H2	Male	Higa-onon	23	Pure Native
H3	Male	Higa-onon	25	Pure Native
H4	Male	Higa-onon	24	Half Native
H5	Male	Higa-onon	22	Pure Native
H6	Female	Higa-onon	21	Pure Native

Table 1 shows that of the six (6) participants, five (5) were males, and one (1) was female. All six (6) participants were members of the Higa-onon tribe. The average age of the participants was 23 years old (the youngest was 21 years old, and the eldest was 25 years old). Of the six (6) participants, five (5) are pure-blooded native members of the tribe, and one (1) is a half-blooded native.

2.3. Research instrument

The research used a researcher-made questionnaire to gather relevant information regarding the study – experts validated the content – gauging the students' perception of the Higa-onon language in today's generation. The study focuses on exploring learning the Higa-onon language of college students; this study clustered the interview questions into two distinct but interconnected thematic categories to help with the first step of



thematic content analysis. The first section of the interview explored the thematic category of each participant's perceptions of learning the Higa-onon language from their personal opinions. The second interview category focused on the participants' experience learning the Higa-onon language. At the end of the interview, the researchers explicitly checked with each participant to find out if they were satisfied with their responses or needed to add anything more to their narratives.

2.4. Data gathering procedure

The study followed an in-depth semi-structured interview format (Yin, 2014) to allow the participants to respond to the interview questions freely from their points of view and to express the importance of the Higa-onon language among the youth. Moreover, the study employed ethnographic interviews, an appropriate research process in a complex and sensitive field of research (Chatterjee & Kumar, 1999) such as the current study. The method collected the participant's narratives and responses to learning the Higa-onon language. The researcher recorded the individual interview sessions with the participants. The interview schedules took between 21 and 29 minutes to complete. The researchers transcribed the interviews into printed transcripts. Each participant had the opportunity to read through their interview transcripts, discuss any discrepancies with the researcher, and approve the accuracy of the transcript from their perspective. This study obtained written consent from each participant giving their permission to record the interview session on a recorder.

2.5. Data analysis

The study focused on the Higa-onon students' perception of the language in the 21st century. The study categorized the participant's responses into a familiar concept using thematic data analysis. The study analyzed the data following two steps. First, the researchers organized the data into categories using the discourse-neutral thematic content analysis method (Wilbraham, 1995). The step involved coding the texts into thematic categories of content-based themes around the narratives of learning the Higa-onon language. The second step involved applying the deconstructive critical discourse analysis, which involves reading the interview texts of the participants (Fairclough, 2003). The step explores and understands each participant's narratives within the context of learning the Higa-onon language. The text used in the analysis is copied verbatim and translated into English with the help of A Higa-onon member.

3. Results and discussion

The research was conducted to study the perceptions and experiences of the Higa-onon youth in learning the native language. The study explored the perceptions of the importance and contribution of the Higa-onon language in modern times and their experience in learning the language. The study used frequencies and percentages to treat the data and analyzed the narrative responses qualitatively of the participants.



3.1. Perception of the Higa-onon youth of the native language

The first thematic category of the perceptions of learning the Higa-onon language among the youth focuses on exploring the participants' insights as they made sense of the importance of the language and the contributions of understanding the language in the

21st century and the community. The development of a personal narrative about the significance and contribution of the Higa-onon language to the community was prevalent in the interviews.

Table 2 summarizes the responses of the Higa-onon youth regarding their perception of the importance of learning the native language. The responses were categorized into similar themes. It can be observed from the result that seven (7) themes were formed from the response of the students.

Table 2.

Summary of the importance of the Higa-onon language

RESPONSE CLUSTERED INTO THEMES	PARTICIPANT	f	%
Preservation of the language	H1, H2, H3, H4, H5, H6	6	100
Promotion of the Indigenous culture	H1, H3, H4	3	50
Preservation of native stories	H1	1	17
Upkeep of the native community standards	H1, H2	2	33
Mother-tongue of the community	H3	1	17
Employment in a native community	H2	1	17
Sense of pride for the Higa-onon tribe	H5	1	17

Within the thematic category of perceptions of learning the Higa-onon language, seven (7) themes emerged under the importance of learning the language. All of the 6 (100%) participants stated that it is crucial to preserve the language.

H3: ... *Mas madagway ko hadi malipatan sa binukid ha inikagiyon, mas madagway gane ko itudlo pa tungkay hu mga laas taw sa binukid doon hu mga bata dan daw hu mga apo dan. (...it must not be lost when the time comes, or the Higa-onon language must be enhanced as a language, and it must be known to the next generation.)*

H4: ... *Mas madagway gane ko makatuon sa mga kabataan mug ikagi binukid bisan ko kona sidan tungkay ha Higa-onon. (...it is also very important to for them (youth) to know Higa-onon, even though they are not born pure Higa-onon.)*

H6: ... *Bisan iman ko bag o on sa henerasyon mas madagway gihapon ko makatuon ki mug ikagi hu binukid. (...that is because, even if the trend is different because of modernity, it is still important to learn this (Higa-onon) type of language.)*

Several participants (H1, H3, and H4) highlighted the importance of the language as it promoted the Indigenous culture. Underlying these statements, many cultures have integrated with the locality, and learning the culture of one tribe is not that difficult as multicultural communities have expanded in the 21st century (Mila et al., 2021).

H1: *Labi on gayud ta madakol pa gihapon sa mga Higa-onon dini ta Bukidnon ha panday dan pig timaan sa pagka Higa-onon dan. ...*



(That is because there are many Higa-onon here in Bukidnon. And it promotes the culture of the Higa-onon)

Two participants (H1 and H2) stated that language helps keep community standards and practices that can only be expressed and practiced in the native language.

H1: ... *Ta ko amin no mabuhat ha kona madagway maapil no pa sa duma ha utaw/ daw ko hindu ka tag tima maapil pa sidan. Inuhon no pagpasabot ko bisan gane sa inikagiyon dan hadi ka pakatuon. Hadi no ug ka tuin an sa inikagiyandan; ko ino sa igpasabot no... (...if you do something bad, it will bring harm to the community, So, if you don't know the language, how will you defend the ideas to them...)*

For some participants, the other important aspect of learning the language are as follows: Preservation of native stories (H1):

H1: ... *madakol sa mga nanangon ha amin ta ug katun-an daw mga laos ha mga inikagi gabi hu mga laas ha anay ha dun ta ug katun-an hu mga Higa-onon daw Kandan da gayud hayon... (...there are many stories, lessons, and truth that can only be uttered in the native language.)*

Mother tongue of the community (H3):

H3: ... *sa binukid man gud iyan man gud unta hayon ug gamiton taw ha ini kagiyon dini ta Bukidnon... (...the Higa-onon language if we associate it with Bukidnon it it's the mother tongue. That should be the dialect...)*

Employment in a native community (H2):

H2: ... *importante tungkay ha makatuon ka mug binukid labi on gayud ko doon ka makapayaon hu lugar ha kabayaan no ha doon ka magtrabaho... (...it is very important especially when you are assigned to a place where you want to work...)*

Sense of pride for the Higa-onon tribe (H5):

H5: ... *mas madagway ko hadi ta ikagayha sa pagka Higa-onon ta... (...we should not be ashamed being a Higa-onon...)*

Learning the Higa-onon language is crucial because it enables an individual to communicate effectively with those who speak it. The knowledge promotes understanding and mutual respect, improving relations, facilitating diplomacy, and fostering community cohesion. Preserving native languages is essential because they are often part of a community's heritage and cultural identity. Losing a language can have far-reaching consequences, including losing traditional knowledge, customs, and values unique to that community. Maintaining local dialects in modern times is also essential because they offer a unique perspective on history and culture (Alejan et al., 2021; Bonifacio et al., 2021). These dialects often contain words and phrases specific to a particular region and reflect the community's way of life. In short, learning the Higa-onon languages and dialects is crucial to preserving cultural diversity, promoting mutual respect, and providing insight into the human condition (Mila et al., 2021).

Table 3 summarizes the responses of the Higa-onon youth in their perception of the contribution of learning the native language. The responses were categorized into similar themes. It can be observed from the result that four (4) themes were formed from the response of the students.



Table 3.

Summary of the contribution of the Higa-onon language

RESPONSE CLUSTERED INTO THEMES	PARTICIPANT	f	%
Breaks the boundaries of communication	H1, H2, H5, H6	4	67
Promotes understanding of the culture and language	H1, H4	2	33
Creates the identity of the Higa-onon tribe	H3	1	17
Preserves the local culture	H4	1	17

Within the thematic category of perceptions of learning the Higa-onon language, four (4) themes are under the contribution of learning the language. Four (4) participants stated that learning the language breaks communication boundaries.

- H1:** ... ko pakatoon ka mug ikagi hu binukid madakol sa agka gamitan kona bada inikagiyan daw pagpakig storya. Paka bulig tungkay ta kanit ko inu sa boot daan ig pasabot daw ko inu sa Kandan ug katun-an. Pakabulig daan ha malaag sa pagkabaligayhanon dan...
(...speaking the native language, primarily helps in communication. But not only in communication, but also in the exchange of ideas and in breaking communication boundaries...)
- H5:** ...communication is important because it is a way to communicate and other people especially with Higa-onon tribe.

For some participants, the other contributions of learning the language are as follows: Promotes understanding of the culture and language (H1 and H4):

- H4:** ... Iling taiya pagsaulog taw hu kaamulan pakabulig panday ho matunan taw sa mga kultura dini ta Bukidnon kona iyan da sa Higaunon ta madakol pa baya sa kultura dini ta Bukidnon
(...just like celebrating the Kaamulan, it helps in understanding the different cultures here in Bukidnon...)

Creates the identity of the Higa-onon tribe (H3):

- H3:** ... kanit man gud haiya ha inikagiya, dini ta Bukidnon, kona man gud haiya don ku duma ha kultura kanit man gud haiya. Dapat makatuon ki mug ikagi hu binukid.
(...this is our (Higa-onon) language, it is in Bukidnon, this is not the culture of others. So we must learn the language.)

Preserves local culture (H4):

- H4:** ... sa inikagiyan ha binukid panday paka bulig hu pag Lalang daw pagka langana; labi on gayud sa Higaunon panday paka bulig Kandan ku pag kalangana dan...
(...in speaking the language, it helps in preserving the culture and preserve the truth of being a Higa-onon...)

Learning the Higa-onon language has numerous benefits for both individuals and society. Developing proficiency in the Higa-onon language helps to preserve cultural heritage and promote cultural diversity. It also strengthens the sense of identity and pride within a community. Additionally, speaking the Higa-onon language can improve communication and understanding among community members and enhance social cohesion. Learning the Higa-onon language is an investment in local communities cultural and social well-being (Alejan et al., 2021; Bonifacio et al., 2021; Mila et al., 2021).



3.2. Experience of the Higa-onon youth in learning the native language

The second thematic category is the participants' experience of the youth learning the Higa-onon language, focusing on exploring their methods as they learn the language in the 21st century. The

development of the participants' narratives differs in their experience in learning the Higa-onon language was prevalent in the interviews.

Table 4 presents the summary of the experience of the Higa-onon youth in their learning of the native language. The responses were categorized into similar themes. It can be observed from the result that five (5) themes were formed from the response of the students.

Table 4.

Summary of the experience of the Higa-onon youth in learning the native language

RESPONSE CLUSTERED INTO THEMES	PARTICIPANT	f	%
Realizations of my own culture	H1, H4	2	33
Valuing the language	H1	1	17
Difficult to learn	H3, H4	2	33
Determination makes learning the language easy	H2	1	17
Family and community influences language learning	H2, H3, H4, H5, H6	5	83

Within the thematic category of experiences in learning the Higa-onon language, five (5) themes are under the contribution of learning the language. Five (5) participants stated that in learning the Higa-onon language, their families and community had influenced their learning of the native language.

- H3:** ... *Natimo ko da daan haiya doon ho pigtimaan ko ta madakol ta Kandan mga Higaunon daan...*
(...from my own experience, I just adopted because of the society where I belong. Because mostly, the community are Higa-onon...)
- H4:** ... *Sa kanak laus ha pamilya; ko tag Lalang sidan, Si inay daw si amay, say apo, daw say booy ko tag kalangana sidan binukid man...*
(...But for me, when my family converse with each other, my mother and father, my grandmother and grandfather talk to each other before in Higa-onon...)
- H6:** ... *bisan ha atyuay apa ko tag kalangana ta diya balay tag binukid*

kay, ta si inay daw si amay tag binukid man daan...
(...when I was young, I already know because my mother and father talk to us in Higa-onon already...)

For some participants, the other experiences of learning the language are as follows: Realization of my own culture (H1 and H4):

- H1:** *Sa pinaka una gayod madakol sa ug katun-an ko ha ug ka aha ko doon hu kanit ha kultura...*
(The first thing is you will realize many things and make connections of your own culture...)

Difficult to learn (H3 and H4):

- H4:** *sa kanak ha naagiyan sa pug kinanao hu binukid; panday tungkay malugon. Lugay a panday nakatuon madakol panday sa ug paman-agbol daw apa nakatuon...*



(Well, my experience in learning the Higa-onon language, it is not easy...It takes time for me to learn...)

Valuing the language (H1):

- H1:** ... Ugka ugsakan no panday kahulugan sa natun-an no ta ug kaaha nu Kandan ha panday dan gayud pigtimaan sa pagka Higaunon dan...
(...you give more value to the language you practice because you will expand what you will learn from the Higa-onon...)

Determination makes learning the language easy (H2):

- H2:** ... kona on panday malugon ta kanak sa pugkananao hu binukid. Kona man malugon sa pugkinanao hu binukid dependi da gayud hayon hu utaw ko mabaya mug kinanao hu binukid...
(...it not anymore a challenge for me to learn Binukid. It is easy to learn, it is up to the person if they are determined to learn...)

Generally, the study observed that Higa-onon youths have varying experiences in learning their native dialects. Some may have been exposed to the Higa-onon language early on and developed strong language skills. Others may have only been exposed to the Higa-onon language later in life, causing difficulties in developing proficiency. The family and community significantly impact the learning of the Higa-onon language by providing support and creating an environment for its use. When the family and community regularly use the native language in their daily lives and encourage its use. In that case, the youths are likelier to continue developing their language skills. Additionally, cultural events and celebrations can promote and preserve the Higa-onon

language as an essential part of the community's identity (Alejan et al., 2021; Bonifacio et al., 2021; Mila et al., 2021).

4. Summary and conclusions

The study ascertained the importance of learning the Higa-onon language to preserve the language and promote the Indigenous culture. Additionally, the language helps in preserving native stories and community standards. Preserving the language creates a sense of pride for the Higa-onon tribe. Learning Higa-onon helps people converse with others who speak it. Knowledge fosters understanding, respect, diplomacy, and community unity. Native languages are often part of a community's traditions and culture. Losing a language can lead to losing a community's traditions, customs, and values. Native dialects offer a distinct viewpoint on history and society; hence they must be preserved. These dialects reflect the communities' way of life. Knowing the Higa-onon languages and dialects is essential to conserving cultural diversity, encouraging mutual tolerance, and understanding our shared human experience.

Moreover, the language helps break the boundaries of communication, promotes the understanding of the local culture, and creates the identity of the Higa-onon tribe. Individuals and society benefit from learning the Higa-onon language. Higa-onon language proficiency preserves cultural heritage and promotes cultural diversity. It strengthens community pride and identity. Overall, understanding Higa-onon improves local communities' cultural and social well-being.

The participants' experiences learning the Higa-onon language made them value the language and helped them realize their sense of culture. However, learning the language is a complicated process, but



determination and community influence help in learning the Higa-onon language. The overall finding indicates that the answer varies from one participant to another. Nonetheless, the participants have their perceptions and experiences in learning the Higa-onon language. Higa-onon youth learn their local dialects differently. Some may have learned Higa-onon as children. Others may have been introduced to Higa-onon later in life and have difficulty learning the language—family, and community significantly impact by supporting and fostering Higa-onon language use.

The result of the study helps guide the learning of the Higa-onon language as an evidence-based strategy to improve the preservation of the Higa-onon language and the native Bukidnon language as a whole. Also, the study provides rich evidence-based research, especially on the perceptions and experience of learning the Higa-onon language of the youth in the 21st century. In addition, the research paper provides additional knowledge to the dearth of literature on learning the Higa-onon language or, generally, the native Bukidnon Language as a whole. The study recommends to explore other perceptions of the youth on the language of tribes of Bukidnon.

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