

## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Communicating with students under the modular distance learning modality in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

Pandemic has allowed government schools in the Philippines to implement Modular Distance Learning (MDL). This has been the most preferred distance learning method among public school learners despite the emergence of communication barriers present in this modality. This study examined how senior high school teachers communicated with their modular distance learning modality students and the challenges they faced when communicating with their students. The researchers used Michael Moore' Transactional Distance Theory, which discusses three types of interaction essential in distance education and how such distance can impact learning engagement as well as the attainment of intended learning outcomes. Basic Interpretative qualitative research designed was employed (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015) using semi-structured interview as data collection technique. Non-probability sampling technique was utilized in determining the participants of the study. Seventeen teachers from Tanza National Comprehensive Senior High School, Tanza, Cavite participated in the study. The interview transcripts were analyzed following the three phases: open coding, axial coding, and selective coding. The themes that emerged were (1) use of Facebook Messenger as the primary medium in delivering instruction, (2) use of interactive platforms, (3) use of Facebook Messenger for feedback and written feedback directly on the outputs, (4) disciplinary actions of teachers limited to available interface for modular distance learners, and (5) lack of instructional materials. Despite the challenges, teachers' innovativeness in communicating with their modular learners enabled them to sustain learning in the midst of the pandemic. The present study may be significant to future researchers who intend to investigate teacher-student communication, even in the post-pandemic period, to see if there are more available and effective modes of communication for both teachers and learners adapt to the phenomena when resources are limited.

**Keywords:** *Communication, modular distance learning modality, modular distance learners, online communication platforms*

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### Introduction

#### Background

Communication in the context of education is tantamount to the effective delivery of instruction which is concretized in the preparation of instructional materials, delivery of content and preparation of tasks and assessments. According to Alawamleh, M., Al-Saht, G. R., & Al-Twait, L. M., (2020), communication creates opportunities for learning to take place while Shan, S., Li, C., Shi, J., Wang, L., and Cai, H. (2014), stated that communication facilitates in clarifying information, generates enthusiasm in learning, and creates positive relationships among learners. People do not only engage in communicating with each other in different ways but also holds communication in a critical position to engagements in teaching and learning new knowledge and skills. Moreover, Alawamleh, M., Al-Saht, G. R., & Al-Twait, L. M., (2020) also pointed out that the success prospects of the teaching and learning interaction inside a classroom heavily depends on the successful transmitting or exchanging of ideas and information between the teachers and his/her students.

In a primer entitled *On Learning Opportunities Shall Be Available* (DepEd, 2020) the Department of Education in the Philippines developed the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan (BE-LCP) to ensure that learning opportunities are provided to the learners through modular modality. Modular learning is a form of distance learning (MDL) that uses Self-Learning Modules (SLM) based on the most essential learning competencies (MELCS) provided by DepEd. The modules include sections on motivation and assessment that serve as a complete guide for the teachers in delivering basic competencies and for the students in acquiring the desired competencies.

The MDL is primarily intended for learners who do not have internet connectivity. Printed or Digital Modules (PDM) which are either delivered to learners' houses or picked up by their parents or guardians at designated places within given schedules. However, there are some subjects which were not distributed or came late. Teachers are the ones who wrote the Learner's Packet (work sheets, activity sheets, self-learning materials). Digital modules (e-modules) are saved in USB/flash drives, CDs, and OTGs (USB On-The-Go). For students to access the content of these materials, they need laptops, computers, or tablets. The e-copy of the learning modules like interactive and inclusive e-books, courseware and other offline content formats are likewise provided. Learners under Modular Distance Learning (MDL) use other resources such as learner's materials, textbooks, activity sheets, study guides, and other study materials.

According to Bernardo (2020), modular learning is the most popular type of distance learning. True enough, in the Philippines, learning through printed and digital modules emerged as the most preferred distance learning method of parents with children who are enrolled this academic year. This is also prevalent among learners in rural areas where online learning is impossible because of internet inaccessibility. According to a *Manila Bulletin* article entitled “Understanding the distance learning delivery modalities” (Codamon, 2020), there are 3,885,427 learners in public school who prefer modular modality as an alternative learning option while about 27 percent preferred online learning; 18 percent, a combination of face-to-face with other modalities; 10 percent, television; 8 percent, other modalities; and 3 percent, radio-based learning (Malipot, 2020).

In whatever modality schools implement, teaching and learning require effective communication especially in implementing classroom activities because it guarantees fruitful learning to take place. However, communication becomes ineffective when there are barriers. The barriers in communication can be physical, emotional, linguistic, psychological, gender and culture. Moreover, the examples of barriers to effective communication are one-way communication and teacher-centered approach which are known to reduce the motivation for learners (Dinu, 2015). Other barriers to consider are the challenges teachers hurdle in implementing and communicating the modularized instruction. In this aspect, three universities in Ethiopia were assessed in terms of the implementation of modularization and results showed that the instructional process in the modularized program was below the expectation level (Dejene, 2019). Another barrier that played significant result to effective implementation of modularized instruction is the study on the language usage especially on considerable variation in language use in classrooms which seemed dependent on the teacher rather than students (Brevik & Rindal, 2020). Effective communication between teachers and students is intended for creating a positive classroom environment, an element that is usually inhibited by the failure of teachers to engage their students. The result of such is a situation in which students are forced to unduly struggle to maintain focused on the subject matter (Khan et al., 2018) thus, resulting in ineffective communication.

Communication barriers, on the other hand, as in any communication process, exist in distance education because of the physical distance between members, the difficulties of dealing with new media, having time constraints and restrictions, background knowledge of distance education, incompetence in using technology, and the interactivity level in the process (Dabaj & Yetkin, 2011). Put all together, effective distance education process becomes almost impossible. The major constraints which halt

effective communication are technical and web-based issues, however as telecommunication systems improve, new types of communication barriers emerge, such as the need for online training and guidance, ignorance of new technology, a lack of satisfactory technology, participants who resist technological change, difficulty accessing the internet, difficulty analyzing teachers' perspectives, and difficulty delivering system (Isman & Altinay, 2005).

The levels of these barriers, however, may differ in various institutions or in different programs and different delivery systems used. Preventing these barriers in communication can provide a clearer field of teaching and learning experience between the teachers and the learners. Cultural differences can also be a hindrance to efficient communication (Van Hook, 2011). It's possible for both a teacher and a student to have preconceived notions about behavior depending on the culture of the other. When messages are conveyed in a fashion that is unfamiliar to the student's culture, they are frequently misconstrued. In learning, it is critical to dispel misconceptions or biases based on cultural differences.

For effective communication is therefore deemed necessary that teachers re-evaluate the modules and ensure that all the lessons or activities are appropriate to the needs of the learners (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020). Moreover, teachers are recommended to be active online most of the time so they can address the sentiments of some parents and students that call for their patience in attending the students' needs and in urgently responding to queries with regard to learning. The problems encountered by students as regards to modules are the unclear instructions and lack of detailed explanations, so students have a hard time answering those (Quinones, 2020). Also, the pictures in the modules are unclear and the provided answer lines are too short. Based on the experiences of the students, they shared and disclosed the disadvantages of pandemic education on them such as lack of interaction with teachers, communication problems with the teachers, assessments, assignments, time management, and their traditional educational habits. It is critical for the instructor to be able to generate virtual learning materials, develop a new teaching approach through application, and give self-assessment and evaluation. Self-evaluation should be an important part of online distance education (Robles & Braathen, 2002).

However, a study of Akyıldız (2020) indicates that modular teaching is more effective approach in teaching university students in a specific course. Person differences among learners are supported by this style of learning, which necessitates planning for the adoption of the most appropriate teaching strategies in order to help the individual grow and develop at their own speed. It is a free self-learning technique in which practice exercises

receive rapid reinforcement and feedback, motivating pupils and focusing on their interest. In addition, the modular approach increases the likelihood of student participation in the classroom in terms of completing assigned tasks on the spot. As a result, pupils are free to learn in their own way.

Modular teaching approach can be applied widely to other fields and subjects as well as in other levels of education because this approach has the ability to fulfill the diversified needs of learning of students of all levels (Sadiq & Zamir, 2014) where parents play a vital role as home facilitators (FlipScience, 2020). Parents or guardians should be responsible for interacting with teachers, barangay representatives, and other stakeholders to acquire the various materials and resources needed by the learner, regularly check the child's workweek plan and make sure that the learner sticks to their schedule. On the other hand, both verbal and non-verbal communication are extremely important for complete transfer/understanding of the content; yet when it comes to the teaching learning processes, verbal communication plays a much more vital role in the transfer of the knowledge (Rawat, 2015) because teachers with good communication skills will create a more successful teaching and learning ambience for the students (Duță et al. 2015).

The foregoing studies underscored the students' experiences and the challenges they encountered under modular distance learning modality but did not emphasize communication mechanisms from the viewpoint of high school teachers. Thus, this study was conducted. The results of the study will reveal how high school teachers communicated with their modular distance learning modality students and the challenges they faced when communicating with their students.

### **Statement of the Problem**

This study attempted to investigate on how teachers communicated with their Modular Distance Learning students. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

1. How did Tanza National Comprehensive High School teachers communicate with learners under modular distance learning modality?
2. What challenges did Tanza National Comprehensive High School teachers face in communicating with their students?

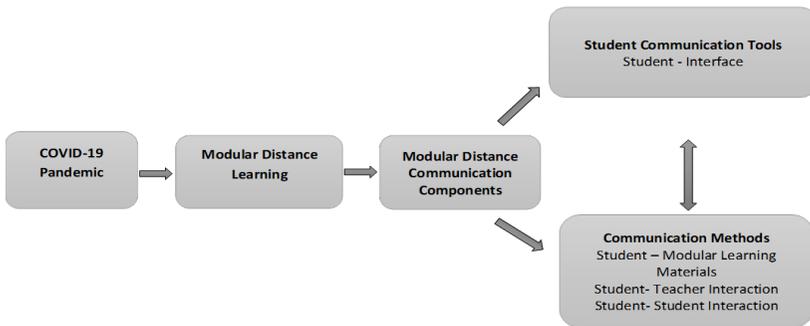
### **Conceptual Framework**

Modular Distance Learning in the time of pandemic is held by communication components which are the basic argument of the Transactional Distance Theory, as articulated by its pioneer Michael G. Moore (1997). Instructors must manage course structure and interactions

to improve students' knowledge in order to reduce transactional distance in teaching and learning programs. In this study, teachers are expected to use components of student-interface as the communication tool while student-content (modular learning materials) interaction, student-teacher interaction, student-student interaction as communication methods. Figure 1 shows the diagrammatic presentation of the conceptual framework of the present study.

As shown in the figure, the COVID-19 pandemic compelled the Department of Education to shift to Modular Distance Learning or MDL modality as an alternative for the pre-pandemic face-to-face modality. The MDL modality has two modular distance communication components such as student communication tools and communication methods which are vital in the delivery of instruction under the MDL modality.

Figure 1  
*Teacher-Student Communication Model of Modular Distance Modality*



### Theoretical Framework

Moore's (1997) concept of "transactional distance" encompasses the distance that, he says, exists in all educational relationships. This distance is determined by the amount of dialogue that occurs between the learner and the teacher, as well as the level of structure in the course design also defines this distance. When an educational program has more structure and less student-teacher discussion, as some traditional distance education courses do, transactional distance increases. Education offers a continuum of transactions from less distant, where there is greater interaction and less structure, to more distant, where there may be less interaction and more structure. Because of the range of interactions that occur between professors and learners in both contexts, the distinctions between traditional and distant programs are blurred. As a result, distance is dictated by the interaction between conversation and structure, not by geography.

Saba and Shearer (1994) carry the concept of transactional distance a step farther by proposing a system dynamics model to examine the relationship between dialogue and structure in transactional distance. In their study, it was concluded that as learners' control and dialogue increase, transactional distance decreases. It is not location that determines the effect of instruction but the amount of transaction between learner and instructor. This concept has implications for traditional classrooms as well as distant ones. The use of integrated telecommunication systems may permit a greater variety of transactions to occur, thus improving dialogue to minimize transactional distance.

Moore (1989) discusses three types of interaction essential in distance education. First, the learner-instructor interaction is that component of his model that provides motivation, feedback, and dialogue between the teacher and student. Second, learner-content interaction is the method by which students obtain intellectual information from the material and third learner-learner interaction is the exchange of information, ideas, and dialogue that occur between students about the course, whether this happens in a structured or unstructured manner. The concept of interaction is fundamental to the effectiveness of distance education programs as well as traditional ones. Hillman et al. (1994) have taken the idea of interaction a step farther and added a fourth component to the model learner-interface interaction in which the learner must interact with the technological medium in order to interact with the content, instructor, or other learners.

## Methodology

### Research Design

This study employed basic interpretative qualitative research as it aimed to find and comprehend a phenomenon, a process, or the viewpoints and world views of the people involved. (Merriam & Simpson, 2000). The premise that meaning is socially produced by individuals in contact with their reality is central to understanding qualitative research. To find the truth, a variety of constructs and interpretations were used in relation to the experiences of Tanza National Comprehensive Senior High School modular instructors toward communicating with learners.

### Participants and Sampling

Non-probability sampling technique was utilized; selected samples were based on the subjective judgment of the researchers rather than random selection. In this study, the probability of any member being selected for a sample could not be calculated. The researchers used purposive sampling

whereby 17 Senior High School Teachers, all teaching and handling learners under the Modular learning modality were chosen based on the purpose of the study. In order to anonymize participants, they were labelled as participant numbers 1 to 17. Following standard research protocols, permission to perform this study was sought from the senior high school head of Tanza National Comprehensive High School. Moreover, a letter of consent was given and signed by the participants; they were assured of the confidentiality of their responses.

Once the letter was approved, the researcher allotted three weeks, which started April 19 to May 7, 2021, to gather data from 17 senior high school modular teachers through Zoom online interviews and Facebook messenger, and ensured the safety of the participants as well as the researcher.

### Data Collection Technique and Procedure

A research protocol containing ten (10) questions and (10) follow up questions was prepared to serve as a guide in the actual conduct of the semi-structured interview with the 17 Senior High School teacher-participants of the study. The interviews on Zoom were held in April and May 2021 for an average of 30 minutes per interview. The participants gave their consent prior to the recording of each interview session. The semi-structured interview revolved around how teachers of modular modality communicated with their students and the challenges they encountered in communicating with their students. All the recorded interviews were transcribed, and the interview transcripts served as the corpus of the study for analysis.

### Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was done in examining the interview transcripts. The researchers closely examined the data to identify common themes of topics, ideas, and patterns of meaning that arose repeatedly from the transcripts. This analysis was done in three steps. First, open coding was done whereby the textual data were separated into discrete parts. Second, axial coding was done by drawing connections between and among the codes. Lastly, selective coding was done by selecting one central category that connected all the codes from the analysis and captured themes. The criteria for finalizing theme were conceptual congruence, exhaustiveness, and responsiveness to the objective of the study; exclusivity of themes; and sensitivity to the raw data (Ballena & Liwag, 2019).

### Trustworthiness

In establishing trustworthiness, the researchers used the stringent criteria for the conduct of qualitative research, known as credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Lincoln &

Guba, 1985). Data analysis was carefully and painstakingly done in order that the resulting themes, which constituted the findings of the study, were derived and find support from the interview transcripts. A degree of neutrality was shaped by the participants and not researchers' bias.

## Results and Discussion

This section presents the findings of the study which focused on the teachers' communication with learners and the challenges teachers face in communicating with their students who were under the modular learning modality. Three major themes emerged in regard to how teachers communicate with learners and two major themes constituted the challenges that confronted teachers when communicating with their students.

### How Teachers Communicate with Their Learners

A thorough analysis of the participants' responses relative to how teachers of Tanza National Comprehensive High School communicated with their modular-distance-modality learners resulted in three major themes. These are Use of Facebook Messenger as the primary medium in delivering instruction, Use of Interactive platforms, and Use of Facebook Messenger for feedback and written feedback directly on the outputs as shown in Table 1.

Table 1. How Teachers Communicated with Learners under Modular Distance Modality

Themes	Significant Statements
Use of Facebook Messenger as the primary medium in delivering instruction	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teachers give instructions using social media and other messaging tools.</li><li>2. Teachers communicate with the students through group messages.</li><li>3. Teachers and students interact on a Messenger group chat.</li></ol>
Use of Interactive platforms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"><li>1. Teachers give supplemental activities such as media recorded lessons for the students to better understand the lesson.</li><li>2. Teachers interact with the students thru Facebook group, messenger, and Google classroom.</li><li>3. Teachers set rules to be followed by the class.</li><li>4. Teachers create a meaningful and respectful relationships between students and teacher by being friendly to the students</li><li>5. Teachers use Messenger to send a personal message that will motivate the students to study hard.</li></ol>

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Themes	Significant Statements
Use of Interactive platforms	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>6. Teachers make interventions like home visitations, talking to the student's parents or acquaintances and coordinating with the student's adviser.</li> <li>7. Teachers use the Filipino language to communicate with the student even though modules are written in English language.</li> <li>8. Teachers establish rapport to students and their parents to counter the barriers of communication in modular distance modality.</li> <li>9. Teachers ask for a parent teacher meeting or home visitation.</li> </ol>
Use of Facebook Messenger for feedback and written feedback directly on the outputs	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers give feedback about the students' outputs by writing on their papers and sending them a picture of their outputs</li> <li>2. Teachers give feedback to learners through via Messenger, writing feedback on students' activities, and during Zoom meetings.</li> <li>3. Teachers' giving notes or feedback is one of the teacher's strategies especially about their submitted output.</li> </ol>

The use of Facebook Messenger as the primary medium in delivering instruction was the foremost theme that resulted in the analysis. The first theme was supported by significant statements which were ferreted out of their responses. Social media and other messaging tools such as Messenger and SMS were availed of by teachers when they had to communicate with their students. Facebook Messenger appeared to be their primary channel of communication. By using these available tools during the pandemic, teachers could communicate with their students individually and in groups through group messages or group chats. These tools enabled teachers to explain directions step by step for clearer understanding by the students. Teachers communicated to learners of modular learning modality through social media and other messaging tools while some used the voice recording feature of Messenger to communicate effectively. As one of the participants put it succinctly, "It is hard to use chat because you cannot show emotions thus leading to misinterpretation that is why I use voice recording and I call the student and student's parents."

Teachers managed interactions to improve students' knowledge to reduce transactional distance in modular modality. Students, on the other hand, could ask for clarifications regarding the instructions given in their modules or the learner's packets.

The use of Interactive platforms was the second theme that resulted from the analysis. The second theme was supported by significant statements which were generated from the participants' responses. In order to sustain the interactive nature of the learning process, teachers gave supplemental activities such as media recorded lessons for the students to better understand the lesson. They interacted with their students through Facebook group, Messenger, and Google Classroom; using these tools, teachers always reminded their students about reading the learner's packet and their activities to be submitted, and the rules to be followed by the students. Results of the analysis also revealed that teachers established a meaningful and respectful relationship with their students by being friendly with them. Teachers further maintained rapport with them by using Messenger to send personal messages that motivated the students to study hard. For teachers to be able to convey their message with clarity, they used the Filipino language to communicate with their students even though modules were written in English language. In other occasions, teachers said that they used both Filipino and English language in a formal and informal manner. Finally, as an aid to the interactive platforms, participants said that they paid home visits to their students so they would be able to talk with the students' parents. This act of teachers was greatly appreciated by parents especially that the pandemic was not over yet. The teachers' effort of going out of their way when did home visits and talked with the respective parents of their students is recognition of the primary role of parents in modular learning is to establish a connection and guide the student (FlipScience, 2020).

In relation to the foregoing theme, the communication factors tended to be the reason of drop-out of learners in the country of Nepal. Teacher-centered learning and systems were used which led to one-way communication (Dinu, 2015). To avoid students' disengagement, the participants gave supplemental activities such as media recorded lessons for the students to better understand the lesson. The success of students was directly related to the effective communication of the teacher (Khan, 2018). Teachers should be in charge of guiding, supporting, and encouraging students to build knowledge in order to meet the demands of the distance education course, as well as to develop learner autonomy so that learners will be able to achieve their goals (Moore, 1990).

The use of Facebook Messenger for feedback and written feedback directly on the outputs was the third theme that resulted from the analysis. This theme was supported by several significant statements as reflected in Table I. Teachers gave their feedback on the outputs of their students in two ways, namely, online and in writing. They sent their feedback electronically

through Messenger and when they held their Zoom meetings. Additionally, teachers gave their feedback by writing directly on the written outputs of their students; they took photos of these written feedback and sent the same to their respective students. In so doing, teachers took the responsibility of monitoring the progress of the learners (Dangle & Sumaoang, 2020).

The three foregoing themes are a manifestation of what Dabaj and Yetkin (2011) claimed that institutions offering distance education try and find the most effective program and make sure that it is a sufficient replacement for face-to face education.

### Challenges That Teachers Encounter When Communicating with Their Learners

A thorough analysis of the participants’ responses relative to the challenges that teachers face in communicating with their modular-distance-modality learners resulted in two major themes. These are disciplinary actions of teachers limited to available interface for modular distance learners and lack of instructional materials as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. *Communication Challenges Encountered by Teachers*

Themes	Significant Statements
Disciplinary actions of teachers limited to available interface for modular distance learners	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Students who do not have the means to connect to any social media platforms.</li> <li>2. Teachers’ difficulty in getting contact information about their students.</li> <li>3. Teachers build a respectful teacher-student relationship where rules are laid down for clarity.</li> <li>4. Teachers seek the help of the adviser to deal with the barriers of communication.</li> </ol>
Lack of instructional materials	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Teachers give Instructions by using the essential learning competencies by the DepEd and by explaining the content of the discussion.</li> <li>2. Teachers discuss activities that really help the students to fully understand the lesson</li> <li>3. Teachers provide instructional videos from YouTube, links of instructional materials, and other elements of multimedia as students’ supplemental materials.</li> </ol>

Disciplinary actions of teachers limited to available interface for modular distance learners was the first theme that constitutes the challenge encountered by teachers in communicating with their modular-distance-modality learners. This challenge was supported by the significant

statements that were derived from the participants' responses as shown in Table 2. Teachers build a respectful instructor-student relationship where rules were laid down for clarity on the group chats because it is the available medium which needed constant reminders. Some students did not have the means to connect with their teachers through any of the social media platforms. This predicament challenged teachers reach their students by sending SMS messages and/or by calling their parents to update them on their children's performance in online/modular classes. In the absence of contact details of some students, teachers sought contact information from the friends of said students so that they could communicate with them. Such This added to the challenge that teachers faced when communicating with their students. Teachers sought the help of the respective advisers of their students in order for the former to be able to deal with communication barriers they encountered with their students.

The lack of instructional materials was the second challenge that resulted from the analysis. Modules were deemed not sufficient to be able to develop the essential learning competencies of students as outlined by DepEd. Surprisingly, one participant said that "Not all has modules, some have learner packets, and these learner packets are not all printed some are provided with digital copy which are for some inaccessible." Learner packets were different from modules which were written by designated Division module writers. For teachers to cope with such a lack, they had to provide instructional videos from YouTube, links of instructional materials, and other elements of multimedia as students' supplemental materials. Content and discussion were further clarified by teachers due to the lack of content material and delivery. This helped the learners for them to fully understand the lesson.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

Teachers' efforts to communicate with their modular-distance-modality learners are indispensable especially now that distance education is offered by default in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The use of Facebook Messenger, interactive platforms, and other social media platforms which are within the reach of both teachers and their students facilitate communication between them. Communication with their students include feedback which could be conveyed through the same e-platforms. Communication between and among teachers, students, and parents are substantial in modular distance learning. Despite the challenges that arose from the use of said platforms and from the lack of instructional materials, teachers still needed to find ways to be able to cope with these

challenges. Thus, delivering quality education in the midst of the pandemic is still essential.

The present study may be significant to future researchers who intend to investigate teacher-student communication, even in the post-pandemic period, to see if there are more available and effective modes of communication for both teachers and learners adapt to the phenomena when resources are limited. Lastly, quantitative researches may be done to gauge the effectiveness of the communication strategies used by teachers of modular learners.

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