



# MAGBEBAT ITA: REVIVING THE ETHNOLINGUISTIC VITALITY OF SUBANEN PUPILS THROUGH SONGS

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PUPILS THROUGH SONGS**



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## **Magbebat Ita: Reviving the Ethnolinguistic Vitality of Subanen Pupils Through Songs**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The mainland of Misamis now Ozamiz City is known to be inhabited initially by Subanens. Modernization and other social factors displaced the original settlers to the mountainous areas of the city. Consequently, Subanen culture is adulterated to a great extent. This action research implemented Magbebat Ita (Let's Sing Subanen Songs) as an intervention to revive ethnolinguistic vitality among Subanen pupils in Marcelino C. Regis Integrated School during the SY 2017-2018. Twenty-five Subanen pupils participated in the study. Results reveal that after eight sessions, the pupils were able to sing six Subanen songs, identified body parts, translated English to Subanen words, counted numbers up to 100, introduced oneself, and recited personal prayer using the Subanen dialect. The pupils would have wanted to extend the project and expressed their great interest in participating in another similar activity. Parents noted that their children were very enthusiastic about learning the dialect. The pupils sang Subanen songs and spoke a few sentences in Subanen at home. The study provides information that Magbebat Ita is a good start to reviving ethnolinguistic vitality among the Subanen pupils. A follow-up project focused on developing the communicative competence of the pupils in using the Subanen dialect could be initiated by the school or community.

**Keywords:** *counting numbers, communicative competence, dialect, introducing oneself, personal prayer*

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### **Context and Rationale**

Mindanao has a diverse indigenous group of people called Lumad. They occupied most of the provinces in the island, but are concentrated in varying number along the hills and mountains of Davao, Bukidnon, Agusan, Surigao, Zamboanga, Misamis, and Cotabato (Clariza & Lanzona, 2005). The Subanen is one of the ethnolinguistic groups in Mindanao recognized by the Philippine government (Elago et al., 2013; Pizon et al., 2016). The indigenous people have depended on their traditional knowledge to survive in an ever-

changing world. Even before civilization, tribes in their respective areas have long used their indigenous knowledge for survival (Valdez & Canapi, 2015).

The Subanen - also known as Suba'anun, Subanon, or "people of the river" - is the Philippines's largest tribe, numbering 300,000 scattered across the mountains of the Zamboanga Peninsula (Lu, 2005). The form suba means "(up) stream" in all relevant local languages. The "Subanen" have also been known, in print, as "Subaanen," "Subanon," "Suban-on," "Subano," "Subanun," and, even, in Latinized guise, as "Subanum" (Frake, 2014).

By origin, Ozamiz City was full of natives, particularly Subanos, the freedom-loving people in Northern Mindanao. By history, "Misamis," Ozamiz City's original name is believed to have been derived from the Subano word "Kuyamis," a coconut variety. Through the years, the name persisted as an inference of geographical location. Upon the advent of the Spanish settlers, the word "Kuyamis" easily gave way to the more conveniently pronounceable but corrupted word "Misamis" (City of Ozamiz, 2016).

A study on language knowledge, attitudes, and the ethnolinguistic vitality of four ethnic minority groups of Kazakhstan was conducted. The research findings indicate that the level of knowledge of Russian is high amongst Russians while the other groups studied have low knowledge of heritage language and have mainly shifted to Russian. The knowledge and the use of Kazakh language are low amongst all minorities studied, while the attitudes towards learning Kazakh are generally positive. The analysis of the ethnolinguistic vitality showed that the Russians have high ethnolinguistic vitality with a weak level of ethnocentrism. In contrast, Ukrainians and Poles have low ethnolinguistic vitality indicating a medium danger of assimilation. Koreans have the lowest ethnolinguistic vitality showing a heightened risk of assimilation (Zharkynbekova et al., 2015).

Truku, an endangered dialect in eastern Taiwan, was studied in Truku villages. The results show an apparent intergenerational decline that suggests the need for urgent remedial action if Truku is to survive for another generation. It was predicted that the 10-25 years old Truku would exhibit overall changes or incompetence in the use of phonological and morphosyntactic properties compared to older generations. A modified two-way immersion program and Integrative Community-Based planning was designed and proposed to stem further Truku erosion and to attempt a reversal of a critical shift toward Mandarin (Tang, 2011).

The revitalization of the Sámi languages is one of the educational measures of the situation in Northern Europe. In considering the critical indigenous education as the starting point, the study revitalized language through intervening structures. The structures provide the tools necessary to use language revitalization as a way to counter assimilation that has affected the Sámi languages severely (Das, 2013).

In the barangays of Ozamiz City, a considerable number of Subanen families thrive. In this school year, 47 Subanen pupils are enrolled in the upper grades of Marcelino C. Regis Memorial School, Kinuman Norte, Ozamiz City. An assessment of the ethnolinguistic vitality of Subanen communities in Ozamiz City revealed an average vitality of the Subanen language in the city with adults and elders as respondents. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as language contact, parental apathy, mixed marriages, and racial discrimination were identified as the contributory factors affecting language vitality (Villanueva & Baluyos, 2014).

Accordingly, literature contains the value system of the people (Biclar, 2015), and for Filipinos, their values system is richly embedded in their songs. Songs are culturally relevant educational resources for literacy programs where young members have the opportunity to learn and appreciate the richness of their cultural heritage (Suminguit, 2003). For minority languages to live, opportunities must be provided for their spontaneous use. The primary purpose of language planning is precisely to give minority languages the prestige and

usefulness, which will help to slow down or stop the language shift (Coluzzi, 2009; David et al., 2009). Programs on the maintenance of minority languages have been made around the world (Cavallaro, 2005). It is vital to maintain mother tongues because language diversity enriches human ecology; languages are expressions of identity; languages are repositories of history and languages contribute to the sum of human knowledge (Crystal, 2013).

The proponents observed that the use of Subanen dialect among the pupils is no longer evident in their communication with fellow Subanen. Hence, there is a need to revitalize the Subanen dialect for cultural preservation and tribal identity. The project employed Subanen songs (in Sinubanong Salugnon) in reviving the ethnolinguistic vitality of Subanen pupils. As an action study, the current project aimed to revitalize the dying Subanen language among the pupil-beneficiaries. The results of the study could be utilized by the school principal and the public schools district supervisor in designing a contextualized, responsive, and community-based basic education curriculum in District 8 of the Division of Ozamiz City.

### **Innovation, Intervention, and Strategy**

Traditional practices play a vital role in the daily lives of people in many areas of the world (Nordin et al., 2012). It is the overall total of the knowledge, skills, and practices based on theories, beliefs, and experiences indigenous to different cultures (Elago et al., 2013). In the same vein, language has been seen as a central pillar of ethnic identity. Heritage languages often face what has been called a language shift, where the dominant language replaces the heritage language. A study investigated the relationship between language and ethnic identity among Gaelic learners living in eastern Nova Scotia was conducted to identify the specific processes of heritage language use. The Gaelic learners were compared to non-learners of Gaelic and French learners living in the same milieu. Path analyses indicated that, among Gaelic learners, there is an initial separation of language and ethnic identity, but that, over time, ethnic identity is a direct outcome of language use (Baker, 2005).

In Malaysia, there are ethnic subgroups that have their associations that focus on retaining their culture. Most of the associations have been focusing their activities on promoting their culture. Language minority groups in Brunei still go on celebrating their traditional festivals, even though, for some, like the Iban, the language still plays a central role. However, as stated above, basically, no language planning is being carried out in Brunei for the local minority languages. Mandarin Chinese is taught in two private schools as an elective subject at the University of Brunei and can be listened to on the radio for five hours daily. Songs in different Chinese dialects are produced in cassettes and CDs (David, 2008). In the Philippines, the Subanen language in Zamboanga del Sur, Mindanao, has been maintained through songs and folk epics (Esteban, 2003; David et al., 2009).

Action research for the development of bilingual literacy education for the Magbikin tribe in Morong Bataan, the Philippines, was spearheaded by the Philippines Bureau of Non-Formal Education (BNFE). The project is an initial effort to address the 11.8 million indigenous peoples (IPs) of the Philippines, who are often the last to benefit from government social and educational services. The study developed a curriculum and literacy learning materials in the language of the target group based on the survey. It used the learning materials in literacy sessions for members of the Magbikin tribe. As a result, two community leaders now served as literacy facilitators and developed local IP curriculum and learning materials. The tribal council regularly meets and discusses plans for the community, and the IP youth group was organized and engaged in the decision-making processes (Malone, 2005).

To preserve the arts and culture of the Indigenous Peoples (IPs) in Zamboanga del Sur, the National Commission for Culture and the Arts (NCCA) opened its Schools for the Living Tradition Gallery in Pagadian City. The gallery served as the center where the artworks

and hand-woven crafts are showcased to popularize the arts and culture of the Subanen, Maguindaoan, and other IP groups in the province. The agency aimed to help the IP communities like the National Greening Program, processing of Ancestral Domain Claims, and others. The agency urged the IPs, especially the young members, to help preserve their culture by learning and using their dialects, dances, songs, customs, and practices (Gumapon, 2015).

The literature provided herein shares the same challenge of the waning language vitality among minority groups. Similarly, the studies provided intervention activities to be able to sustain the vitality of the minority language. In the country, very few studies about reviving language vitality among indigenous people, more specifically among Subanens, were available. This study tried-out **Magbebat Ita** (Let's Sing Subanen Songs) as an intervention to teach Subanen children their language and culture. Appendix A presents the Session Log of the intervention project implemented in this study. The activity includes six local Subanen songs. The songs serve as a springboard in presenting the language or dialect in focus and some cultural implications. Pupils were asked to read, sing, memorize, and answer comprehension questions about the songs. In this intervention package, the level of ethnolinguistic vitality of the pupils was assessed using a researcher-made Criterion-Reference Test (CRT).

### **Action Research Questions**

This study implemented **Magbebat Ita** (Let's Sing Subanen Songs) as an intervention to revive the ethnolinguistic vitality among Subanen pupils in Marcelino C. Regis Memorial School during the SY 2017-2018. The **Magbebat Ita**, as the school's strategy, promotes inclusive and learner-centered education. The study answered the following specific questions:

1. What is the level of ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen pupils before the *Magbebat Ita* project?
2. What is the common reason for the non-utilization of the Subanen dialect among Subanen pupils?
3. What is the level of interest of the pupils in learning the Subanen dialect?
4. What is the level of ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen pupils after the *Magbebat Ita* project?
5. What other remarkable developments are evident among the pupils after the **Magbebat Ita** project?

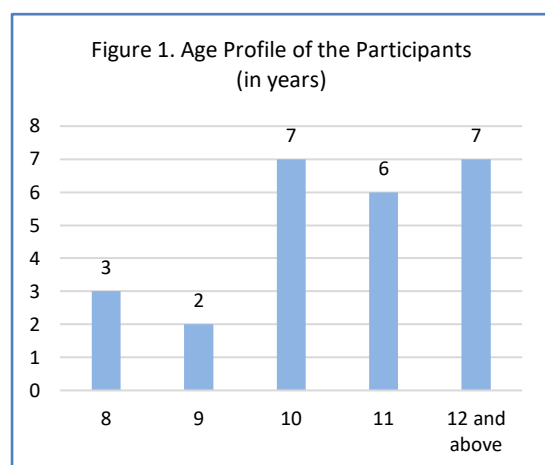
### **Action Research Methods**

**Research Design.** The study is action research by design. Action researches are initiated to solve an immediate problem or a reflective process of progressive problem solving (Chamundeswari, 2013). As a method of organizational development and improvement, action research is often used in educational settings with significant special needs (Sandoval-Lucero, Maes & Pappas, 2013). In this project, the problem of the decreasing level of ethnolinguistic vitality among Subanen pupils was addressed through **Magbebat Ita** sessions.

**Setting.** The study was conducted in Marcelino C. Regis Integrated School (MCRIS). The school is situated at Kinuman Norte, Ozamiz City. At the time of the study, it is the integrated school in the Schools Division of Ozamiz City offering Kindergarten to Senior

School programs. Kinuman Norte is a far-flung village of Ozamiz City about 15 kilometers away from the national highway. It can be reached through “habal-habal” (*single motorcycle*) or a private vehicle. Majority of the residents in the barangay are Cebuanos and minority but of significant number are Subanens. The residents rely on small-time farming for a living to support their daily need and their children’s education.

**Participants.** All Grade IV, Grade V and Grade VI pupils who are members of the Subanen tribe in the village were invited to participate in this project. Hence no sampling technique was employed. Recruitment of the project participants was based on the set inclusion and exclusion criteria. The participant should be a Grade IV to VI pupil of Marcelino C. Regis Memorial School during the school year 2017-2018. He belongs to the Subanen ethnic group based on the school reports, and most of all, willing and voluntarily participate in the project as stipulated in the assent forms signed by the parents and consent forms signed by the participants themselves.

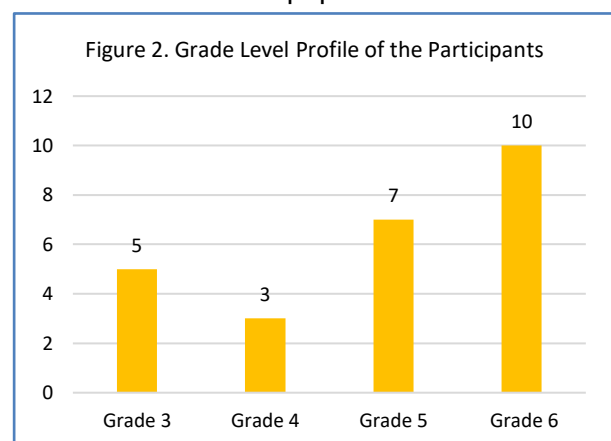


In this study, the distribution of the cohort participants by their demographic profile is shown in Figures 1 and 2. Most of the participants are aging 10 to 12 years old and above and are pupils coming from Grades 4 to 6. However, it can be noted that five (5) pupils are still in the Grade III level. The parents of these pupils personally requested for reconsideration because their children show enthusiasm to participate in the project.

#### Data Collection and Sources of Data.

This action research gathered quantitative and qualitative data. The researchers will review school forms to determine pupils’ ethnicity and

cultural affiliations through documentary review. The identified Subanen pupils were invited to participate in the project. The researchers also interviewed select pupils on the reasons for their non-utilization of the language. The interview also determined the pupils’ interest in learning the language before and after the intervention project. A Criterion-Reference Test (CRT) on the Subanen dialect was developed to assess the ethnolinguistic level of the pupils before and after the intervention. The test was composed of identifying or labeling body parts using the Subanen dialect, translating English to Subanen words; writing number words in the Subanen dialect; filling the blanks in the Subanen song, and writing self-introduction in Subanen dialect.



**Ethical Considerations.** In this particular study, the issues on authority to conduct research, safety, and well-being of the participants, especially the minors, research integrity and originality, and data confidentiality, were resolved. In terms of authority to research this nature, the lead proponent is a Grade V classroom teacher of MCRMS. She is Subanen by birth. She grows in a Subanen community; hence she can speak fluent Subanen language and can explain the cultural implications of the Subanen songs. The second researcher is currently the school head of MCRMS. As a school head, she has the administrative and

supervisory control of all the classes in the school. She is also in the best position to provide technical assistance to the lead researcher.

Pupils' participation in this research project is invitational. Parents' assent and pupils' consent were sought. Assent and consent forms specified the nature of the pupils' participation, emphasizing that they may discontinue their involvement in the project at any rate without any cost. Confidentiality and anonymity were observed in the study by not mentioning the names and participant/respondent identity in any part of the paper. Copyright issues were also resolved by citing the works of the original authors in the final report. Further, the final report was subjected to a plagiarism test before submission and publication of the output.

**Data Analysis.** In analyzing the quantitative data, descriptive statistics such as mean and standard deviation were computed to report the level of ethnolinguistic vitality of the pupils before and after the intervention. In analyzing the gathered data through the interview, thematic analysis was followed.

## **Discussion of Results and Reflections**

### **Level of Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Subanen Pupils before the Magbebat Ita Project**

A pretest to determine the level of the pupils' ethnolinguistic vitality was given to the participants. A 25-item Subanen Language Assessment Test was developed for this purpose. The results of the test (Table 2) reveal the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen language of the pupils. It can be noted that pupils have very low ethnolinguistic vitality level in terms of translating English to Subanen words ( $M = 0.08$ ;  $SD = 0.28$ ) and in writing self-introduction in Subanen dialect ( $M = 0.46$ ;  $SD = 0.58$ ). The pupils have a low ethnolinguistic vitality level along with the competencies of identifying body parts using the Subanen dialect ( $M = 1.17$ ;  $SD = 0.81$ ) and in filling the missing words in a Subanen song ( $M = 1.20$ ;  $SD = 0.93$ ). The pupils got an average ethnolinguistic vitality level in writing Subanen number words.

The findings would mean that the pupils cannot write or speak the Subanen dialect even for common terms for daily conversation. There is, therefore, a need to revitalize the ethnolinguistic level among the Subanen pupils in the school. This finding concords with the results of the previous study, which espoused that there is only an average vitality of the Subanen language in Ozamiz City with adults and elders as respondents. Intrinsic and extrinsic factors such as language contact, parental apathy, mixed marriages, and tribal discrimination were identified as the contributory factors affecting the language vitality (Villanueva & Baluyos, 2014).

In other countries, various interventions were conducted to preserve their language and culture. Like for example, language minority groups in Brunei still go on celebrating their traditional festivals, even though, for some, like the Iban, the language still plays a central role. Mandarin Chinese is taught in two private schools as an elective subject at the University of Brunei and can be listened to on the radio for five hours daily. Songs in different Chinese dialects are produced in cassettes and CDs (David, 2008). In the Philippines, the Subanen language in Zamboanga del Sur, Mindanao, has been maintained through songs and folk epics (Esteban, 2003; David et al., 2009).



**Table 2. Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Subanen Pupils Before the Project**

Subject Matter/Competencies	Mean	StDev	Remarks
Identifying body parts using Subanen dialect	1.17	0.81	Low
Translating English to Subanen words	0.08	0.28	Very Low
Writing number words in Subanen dialect	2.08	0.93	Average
Filling the missing words in a Subanen Song	1.20	0.93	Low
Writing self-introduction in Subanen dialect	0.46	0.58	Very Low

Notes: 0 - 1.00 – Very Low; 1.01-2.00 – Low; 2.01-3.00 – Average; 3.01-4.00 – High; and 4.01-5.00 – Very High

### **The Factor of the Non-Utilization of Subanen Dialect Among Subanen Pupils**

The common reason for non-use of the Subanen dialect among the pupil-participants is assimilation. The pupils confirmed that in the daily family conversation, the Visayan dialect is used. Their grandparents, parents, and neighbors who are Subanen by blood have adapted the Visayan language to be their medium of daily conversation. They only hear their grandparents conversing using the Subanen dialect very seldom. The pupils lamented that they could not use the Subanen dialect as much as they would like to because they do not know the dialect. Their parents did not bother to teach them the dialect.

There are several reasons for language shift and death. One factor that caused language shift and death are language policies. Language policies and speakers' attitudes have contributed to the language shift of minority languages Malaysia, Brunei, and the Philippines. The endangered languages have been revitalized in new settings by making use of a range of literacies. Approaches to language revitalization are categorized according to the extent to which a local language is used. These programs range from total immersion, where the local language is used for all instruction, to partial immersion, where the local language is used together with a majority language (Grenoble & Whaley, 2006; Ting, 2019).

The revitalization of the Sámi languages and support for language domains are central educational measures in Northern Europe. With critical indigenous education as the starting point, the study revitalized language through intervening structures. The structures provide the tools necessary to use language revitalization as a way to counter assimilation that has affected the Sámi languages severely (Das, 2013).

### **Level of Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Subanen Pupils after the Magbebat Ita Project**

At the start of the project, a pretest was given to the participants to determine the level of their ethnolinguistic vitality. A 25-item Subanen Language Assessment Test was developed for this purpose. The results of the test (Table 2) reveal the ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen language of the pupils. It is good to note that the Subanen pupils' ethnolinguistic vitality has improved to Very High level in terms of identifying body parts using the Subanen dialect ( $M = 4.86$ ;  $SD = 0.45$ ) and in writing number words in Subanen dialect ( $M = 4.39$ ;  $SD = 0.97$ ). The pupils got High ethnolinguistic vitality level along the competencies of translating English to Subanen words ( $M = 4.30$ ;  $SD = 1.17$ ), filling the missing words in a Subanen song ( $M = 3.69$ ;  $SD = 1.46$ ), and in writing self-introduction ( $M = 4.04$ ;  $SD = 1.22$ ).

The findings imply that the pupils can translate selected English words to Subanen, label or identify body parts, write number words, fill the missing words in a Subanen song, and write self-introduction using the Subanen dialect. Further, the increased level of ethnolinguistic vitality of the Subanen pupils after the project suggests that the *Magbebat Ita* Project is effective in reviving the Subanen dialect among the Subanen pupils.

The findings of the study are backed up by the idea that literature contains the value system of the people (Biclar, 2015), and for Filipinos, their values system is richly embedded in their songs. Songs are culturally relevant educational resources for literacy program where young indigenous people were given a chance to learn and appreciate the richness of their cultural heritage (Suminguit, 2003). The Subanen language can be maintained through songs and folk epics (Esteban, 2003; David et al., 2009).

In the Middle East, issues of ethnic and national identity are more complex than most. The largest Aramaic speaking community in the world today resides in Sweden. It is this Swedish community where parents encouraged their children and teenagers to use the language in their daily life, and they were required more training and immersion for it to become their everyday language (Svetlova, 2012).

**Table 3. Ethnolinguistic Vitality of the Subanen Pupils After the Project**

Subject Matter/Competencies	Mean	StDev	Min	Max	Remarks
Identifying body parts using Subanen dialect	4.86	0.45	3	5	Very High
Translating English to Subanen words	3.26	1.17	1	5	High
Writing number words in Subanen dialect	4.30	0.97	2	5	Very High
Filling the missing words in a Subanen Song	3.69	1.46	1	5	High
Writing self-introduction in Subanen dialect	4.04	1.22	1	5	High

Notes: 0 - 1.00 – Very Low; 1.01-2.00 – Low; 2.01-3.00 – Average; 3.01-4.00 – High; and 4.01-5.00 – Very High

### Interest in Learning the Subanen Dialect

In terms of interest in learning the Subanen dialect (Sinubanong Salugnon), the pupils (25 of 25 or 100.00 %) expressed that they are very much interested in learning it. They will participate or join if somebody would teach them the dialect. They also commented that as a member of the Subanen tribe, they need to learn or relearn their dialect. The pupils have also articulated that they would like the project to be extended and expressed their desire to participate in a similar activity in the future. Majority of the participants said:

*“Ganahan jud ko kaayo nga makatuon ug Subanen.” (I like to learn the Subanen dialect.)*

*“Moapil jud ko puhon kung naa na pod pareha ani, Ma'am.” (I will join or participate if there is a project like this in the future.)*

*“Para sa ako-a nga Subano, guikinahanglan jud nga makabalo ko ug Sinubano” (A Subanen like me should know how to speak the dialect.)*

### Other Remarkable Developments Evident in the Pupils after the Magbebat Ita Project

In a casual interview with the parents of the participants, the parents noted that their children were very enthusiastic about learning the dialect. The pupils sang Subanen songs and spoke a few sentences in the Subanen dialect at home. A mother narrated:

*“Sigi nalang kanta kanta akong anak ug Sinubano Maam. Mag-estorya ug mag ihap-ihap, mag Sinubano na.” (My child always sang Subanen songs. She talks and counts numbers in Subanen language.)*

*“Nalipay baya pod ko Maam nga nakakat-on sila ug Subano kay pure baya gyud nga Subano ang lolo ug lola aning mga bata-a.” (I am happy Maam that they learn Subanen because their grandparents are full-blooded Subanens.)*

In addition, per observation of the participants, the sessions enable the pupils to count numbers up to 100 in Subanen; write and speak self-introduction, and write and say a personal prayer in the Subanen dialect.

## **Reflections**

Twenty-five Subanen pupils participated in the study. Before the project, the pupils have a very low level of ethnolinguistic vitality identifying body parts using the Subanen dialect. They also have low vitality levels in translating English to Subanen words, writing number words in the Subanen dialect, filling the missing words in a Subanen Song, and writing self-introduction in the Subanen dialect. After six (6) sessions, the pupils' ethnolinguistic vitality increased significantly to high and very high. They were able to sing six (6) Subanen songs, identified body parts, translated English to Subanen words, counted numbers up to 100, introduced oneself, and recited personal prayer using the Subanen dialect. The pupils would have wanted to extend the project and expressed their great interest in participating in another similar activity. Parents noted that their children were very enthusiastic about learning the dialect. The pupils sang Subanen songs and spoke a few sentences in Subanen at home.

The conduct of the ***Magbebat Ita*** provided insights that the project is a good start of reviving ethnolinguistic vitality among the Subanen pupils. The project also reawakened the interest of the Subanen to maintain the vitality of their dialect or language. The school or community could initiate a follow-up project focusing on developing the communicative competence of the pupils in using the Subanen dialect.

## **Action Plan**

Once the study is completed, and the final report is approved by the Schools Division Research Committee, the research output will be presented in the School Learning Action Cell of the research locale and one of the in-service training activities in District 8. The results will also be shown in the Management Committee Meeting. Presentation to research conferences and publication of the paper will also be tried out by the researchers. Replication of the study to other schools with a sufficient number of Subanen children will also be ventured. The Subanen songs collected, printed, and or recorded, will be submitted to the Education Program Supervisor in charge of the Learning Resource Materials Development System for validation. Once the songs are quality assured, they will be introduced to teachers teaching MTB-MLE subjects.

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