

Joy, belonging, and cultural recognition in hearing Kapampangan abroad — A qualitative study of Kapampangan travelers' lived experiences

Richard D. Sanchez

John B. Lacson Foundation Maritime University (Arevalo), Inc., Iloilo City, Philippines

Corresponding Author email: chardsanchez23@gmail.com

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Abstract

Aim: Language serves as a powerful marker of identity, belonging, and emotional connection, particularly when encountered outside one's homeland. This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Kapampangans who encountered fellow Kapampangan speakers while traveling or residing abroad and to understand how such encounters influence their sense of cultural identity and belonging.

Methodology: The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design. In-depth interviews were conducted with 18 Kapampangan travelers and overseas residents across Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America to document their experiences and emotional responses when hearing Kapampangan in foreign environments.

Results: Thematic analysis revealed three major themes: emotional resonance and instant familiarity, language as a bridge to shared identity, and cultural affirmation in foreign spaces. Participants described hearing Kapampangan abroad as a deeply meaningful experience that generated joy, comfort, and immediate connection with fellow Kapampangans.

Conclusion: The study concluded that hearing Kapampangan abroad functions as a moment of cultural recognition that reaffirms identity, belonging, and emotional rootedness. The findings highlight the enduring strength of the Kapampangan language as a form of living cultural heritage that sustains connection among Kapampangans beyond geographic boundaries and contributes to heritage language scholarship.

Keywords: *Kapampangan language, Kapampangan diaspora, cultural identity, heritage language, lived experience*

INTRODUCTION

Language is widely recognized as a central component of cultural identity and heritage preservation (Abatbaevna, 2025). Beyond its communicative function, language carries collective memory, emotional belonging, and cultural continuity across generations (Cruz & Monforte, 2026). In many ethnolinguistic communities, hearing one's heritage language in unfamiliar environments can evoke powerful emotional responses tied to home, kinship, and shared cultural experiences. Among Kapampangans, whose language is deeply embedded in everyday social life, humor, family interaction, and culinary traditions (Sanchez et al., 2026), language serves not only as a means of communication but also as a marker of cultural identity and communal belonging.

In recent decades, increasing global mobility has led to the expansion of diaspora communities across different regions of the world (Cohen, 2022). Many Kapampangans travel abroad for employment, education, tourism, and family reunification, bringing with them their linguistic practices and cultural identities. Within these transnational spaces, the Kapampangan language often functions as a symbolic connection to one's homeland and cultural roots. Encounters with fellow Kapampangan speakers abroad may therefore generate moments of emotional recognition and cultural familiarity that transcend geographical distance (Cruz & Demeterio, 2023).

Scholars in heritage language research emphasize that encountering one's native language in foreign environments can reinforce cultural identity and emotional attachment to community (Pavlenko, 2021). Sociolinguistic studies also suggest that shared language creates immediate social bonds among members of diaspora communities, enabling individuals to establish trust, familiarity, and belonging even among strangers (Blommaert, 2022). Within the Filipino diaspora, regional languages such as Ilocano, Cebuano, and Kapampangan

continue to function as important markers of local identity that complement national linguistic identities (Garcia & Cruz, 2023).

Despite growing scholarship on migration, language maintenance, and diaspora identity, relatively few studies examine the emotional and experiential dimensions of encountering heritage languages abroad. Much of the existing literature focuses on language shift, assimilation, or institutional language policies, while the affective experiences associated with hearing one's heritage language remain underexplored. This gap is particularly evident in Kapampangan cultural and linguistic studies, where limited research has documented the lived experiences of Kapampangans encountering their language in global spaces.

The joy and excitement experienced upon hearing Kapampangan abroad reflect deeper processes of identity recognition and cultural affirmation. Such moments often trigger memories of home, shared cultural practices, and relational warmth embedded within the language. In Kapampangan culture, linguistic expressions frequently convey humor, intimacy, and cultural nuance that may be difficult to translate into other languages. Hearing these expressions in foreign contexts can therefore produce an immediate sense of grounding and emotional familiarity.

Understanding these experiences contributes to broader discussions of heritage language preservation and diaspora cultural identity. Documenting how Kapampangans experience their language outside the Philippines highlights the continued vitality of Kapampangan as a living cultural heritage. It also demonstrates how language sustains emotional connections and cultural belonging among diaspora communities.

This study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of Kapampangans who encountered fellow Kapampangan speakers while traveling or residing abroad. Specifically, the research examined the emotional responses generated by these encounters, the meanings participants attached to hearing their language in foreign environments, and the implications of these experiences for Kapampangan cultural identity.

By centering Kapampangan voices and narratives, this study contributes to Kapampangan cultural scholarship, heritage language documentation, and diaspora studies. The research highlights how language functions as a form of living cultural heritage that sustains identity and belonging among Kapampangans across global spaces.

Review of Related Literature and Studies

Language plays a critical role in shaping cultural identity, social belonging, and emotional attachment among individuals and communities (Cruz et al., 2026a; Cruz et al., 2026b). Scholars have long recognized that heritage languages function as emotional anchors that connect individuals to their cultural background and collective memory (Pavlenko, 2021). Hearing one's native or heritage language can evoke memories, comfort, familiarity, and psychological security, particularly when individuals are situated in foreign environments where cultural cues from home may be limited.

In sociolinguistic research, language is also understood as a social marker that facilitates community formation and interpersonal connection. Blommaert (2022) explains that shared language acts as a symbolic resource that reduces social distance among speakers and enables immediate cultural recognition. Within diaspora communities, encounters with fellow speakers of the same heritage language frequently lead to spontaneous interactions and the formation of instant social bonds. These interactions often reduce feelings of isolation and reinforce shared cultural understanding, making language a powerful shortcut to belonging (Kraus, 2023).

Studies of the Filipino diaspora further highlight the importance of regional languages in maintaining cultural identity abroad. Garcia and Cruz (2023) note that languages such as Ilocano, Cebuano, and Kapampangan continue to serve as markers of regional identity among overseas Filipinos. These languages carry localized cultural meanings that differ from those associated with national languages such as Filipino or English. As a result, encounters with fellow speakers of regional languages may generate stronger feelings of familiarity and intimacy, as they reflect shared cultural experiences and localized identities.

In qualitative research, phenomenological approaches are commonly used to examine how individuals interpret meaningful experiences within their social and cultural contexts. Phenomenological research prioritizes participants' narratives and emotions and seeks to understand how individuals assign meaning to specific events or phenomena (van Manen, 2021). This approach is particularly appropriate for studies that investigate emotional responses, identity formation, and cultural recognition because it emphasizes lived experiences rather than broad generalizations.

Despite the relevance of these perspectives, limited scholarship has specifically examined the emotional experiences of Kapampangans when encountering their language outside the Philippines. Existing research on Kapampangan language studies has largely focused on language preservation, linguistic structure, or educational use of the language. The experiential and affective dimensions of hearing Kapampangan abroad remain relatively undocumented in academic literature.

Given this gap, there is a need to explore how Kapampangans interpret and experience encounters with their heritage language in global environments. Examining these experiences provides valuable insights into how Kapampangan identity is sustained among diaspora communities and how language continues to function as a form of living cultural heritage beyond geographic boundaries. By foregrounding emotions such as joy, excitement, and cultural recognition, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of how Kapampangan linguistic identity is expressed and maintained in transnational spaces.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Phenomenological Theory and Cultural Identity Theory, which together provide a framework for understanding how individuals interpret experiences related to language, culture, and belonging.

Phenomenological theory focuses on the study of lived experiences and the meanings individuals attach to specific phenomena. According to van Manen (2021), phenomenological research seeks to understand how individuals perceive, interpret, and describe experiences that are significant within their everyday lives. This approach prioritizes participants' personal narratives and emotional interpretations, allowing researchers to examine how people construct meaning from their experiences. In the context of this study, phenomenology provides the methodological and analytical foundation for exploring how Kapampangans experience hearing their language in foreign environments and how these encounters generate emotional responses such as joy, excitement, and familiarity.

Cultural Identity Theory further informs the study by explaining how language functions as a symbolic resource through which individuals construct and affirm their identities. Cultural identity is shaped through shared symbols, traditions, and linguistic expressions that connect individuals to a broader community (Khadka, 2024). Within ethnolinguistic groups such as the Kapampangans, language serves as a central marker of cultural belonging and communal heritage.

When Kapampangans hear their language in foreign settings, the experience may trigger recognition of shared cultural identity and belonging. The Kapampangan language becomes more than a medium of communication; it acts as a cultural symbol that connects individuals to their heritage, collective memory, and social community. Such encounters reinforce emotional rootedness and strengthen a sense of membership within the Kapampangan cultural community.

Together, Phenomenological Theory and Cultural Identity Theory guide the research design, data collection, and interpretation of findings in this study. These theoretical perspectives allow the research to examine how encounters with the Kapampangan language abroad generate emotional responses, foster cultural recognition, and reinforce Kapampangan identity among members of diaspora communities.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the study proposes that encounters with the Kapampangan language abroad serve as a catalyst for emotional and cultural responses among Kapampangan individuals.

The framework includes three key components:

- **Language Encounter Abroad**
Hearing the Kapampangan language in foreign environments.
- **Emotional and Social Response**
Feelings of joy, familiarity, comfort, and cultural recognition triggered by the encounter.
- **Cultural Identity Affirmation**
Strengthening of Kapampangan identity, belonging, and cultural pride.

These components illustrate how language functions as a cultural bridge that connects diaspora Kapampangans to their heritage and community.

Cultural Terms

To ensure clarity for international readers, cultural and linguistic terms used in the manuscript are briefly defined upon first mention.

- **Kapampangan**

Kapampangan refers to both the ethnolinguistic group and the Austronesian language primarily spoken in the province of Pampanga and neighboring areas in Central Luzon, Philippines. The language is an important component of Kapampangan cultural identity and is associated with regional traditions, oral expression, cuisine, and communal life.

- **Diaspora**

Diaspora refers to members of an ethnolinguistic or cultural community who live outside their ancestral homeland while maintaining cultural, linguistic, or emotional ties to their place of origin.

These definitions help ensure that readers from different academic and cultural backgrounds can understand the cultural context of the study.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing global mobility among Kapampangans, limited scholarly attention has been given to their emotional and cultural experiences when encountering their native language abroad. While studies often focus on migration challenges or language maintenance, little is known about how spontaneous encounters with Kapampangan speakers in foreign settings shape feelings of belonging, identity affirmation, and cultural connection. This lack of documentation results in an incomplete understanding of Kapampangan transnational experiences. The present study sought to address this gap by examining the lived experiences of Kapampangans who felt joy and excitement upon hearing their language in different parts of the world.

Research Objectives

The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Kapampangans who encountered fellow Kapampangan speakers while traveling or residing abroad.

Specifically, the study aimed:

1. To describe the emotional responses of Kapampangans upon hearing their language in foreign spaces;
2. To examine how these encounters contribute to feelings of belonging and cultural identity;
3. To identify the meanings Kapampangans attach to hearing their language outside the Philippines.

Research Questions

1. How do Kapampangans describe their emotional experiences when they hear Kapampangan spoken abroad?
2. How do these encounters influence their sense of identity and belonging?
3. What cultural meanings do Kapampangans associate with hearing their language in foreign environments?

Research Methodology

Research Design

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Kapampangans who encountered their language in foreign environments. Phenomenological research focuses on understanding how individuals interpret and assign meaning to specific experiences (Williams, 2021). This design was appropriate because the study aimed to capture participants' emotional responses and cultural interpretations when hearing the Kapampangan language abroad.

Participants and Sampling

Eighteen Kapampangan participants were purposively selected for the study. The participants had traveled or resided abroad in regions including Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and North America. Their ages ranged from 24 to 62 years. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that participants had direct experiences related to the phenomenon being investigated.

Instrument

A semi-structured interview guide was used as the primary research instrument. The guide included open-ended questions focusing on participants' emotional reactions, the circumstances in which they encountered Kapampangan speakers abroad, and the meanings they associated with these experiences. The interview guide was developed by the researcher and reviewed by qualitative research experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and cultural sensitivity.

Data Collection

Data were collected through interviews conducted between June and August 2025. Interviews were carried out both online and in person to accommodate participants residing in different countries. Conversations were conducted in Kapampangan, Filipino, or English depending on participant preference to ensure comfort and clarity during the discussion.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview transcripts were first coded line by line to identify significant statements and recurring ideas. These codes were then grouped into meaning units and organized into broader themes that represented shared experiences among participants.

Ethical Considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the research process. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection. Participants were assured that their participation was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used to protect participants' identities, and all information shared during the interviews was treated with strict confidentiality.

Results and Discussion

The analysis of interview transcripts revealed recurring patterns in how Kapampangan participants interpreted their experiences when encountering their language abroad. Through thematic analysis, participants' narratives were carefully examined to identify shared meanings and emotional responses associated with hearing Kapampangan in foreign environments. These experiences reflected not only individual reactions but also broader cultural interpretations related to identity, belonging, and heritage. The participants' stories demonstrated how language encounters in diaspora contexts can serve as meaningful moments that reconnect individuals with their cultural roots and communal identity.

The findings also illustrate how the Kapampangan language functions as a form of living cultural heritage that continues to shape identity among members of the diaspora. Hearing Kapampangan in unfamiliar spaces often triggered emotional recognition and a renewed sense of connection to home, reinforcing the idea that language carries cultural memory and collective belonging. Consistent with perspectives in heritage language studies (Pavlenko, 2021) and sociolinguistic discussions of language as a social resource (Blommaert, 2022), the participants' experiences highlight how linguistic encounters can strengthen interpersonal bonds and cultural identity. From the narratives gathered in this study, three major themes emerged that illustrate the emotional, social, and cultural meanings associated with hearing Kapampangan abroad.

Theme 1: Emotional Resonance and Instant Familiarity

Participants described an immediate sense of joy upon hearing Kapampangan abroad. Many participants used expressions such as "warm," "surprising," and "comforting" to describe their reactions. The sound of the language triggered emotional responses closely associated with memories of home, family, and everyday life in Pampanga.

One participant shared:

"Inyang dimdam ke ing Kapampangan keng airport, bigla kung mesaya. Balaku ali ku ne ulit damdaman aliwang bansa. Ot atna kung kasaya" (When I heard Kapampangan in the airport, I suddenly felt happy. I thought I would not hear it again in another country. I am so happy.)

Another participant described the experience as emotionally grounding:

"Balamu ali ku malawut king bale. Basta daramdaman ke ing salita tamu, pakiramdam ku atin kung kapamilitan." (It feels like I am no longer far from home. Just hearing our language makes me feel that I belong somewhere.)

Even overhearing Kapampangan in public spaces elicited smiles and excitement before any direct interaction occurred. These responses demonstrate how heritage language can function as an emotional cue that triggers familiarity and comfort (Driver, 2024).

These findings support literature on the emotional resonance of heritage languages, which suggests that hearing one's native language can evoke strong emotional responses connected to identity and memory (Pavlenko, 2021).

Theme 2: Language as a Bridge to Shared Identity

Participants reported that hearing Kapampangan often led to spontaneous conversations with fellow speakers. Strangers quickly became acquaintances through shared humor, expressions, and cultural references. Language served as a bridge that reduced social distance.

One participant recalled:

"Inyang dimdam keng meg-Kapampangan, agad kaming mipag-istorya. Ot balamu malwat na kaming mikilala." (When I heard him speak Kapampangan, we immediately started talking. It felt like we had known each other for a long time.)

Another participant noted:

"Ali ya mu salita ing Kapampangan. Balamu koneksyon ya karing kapwa-Kapampangans." (Kapampangan is not just a language. It is a connection to fellow Kapampangans.)

These encounters often created an immediate sense of trust and familiarity. Participants emphasized that shared linguistic expressions enabled them to establish rapport quickly, even in unfamiliar environments.

These findings support sociolinguistic perspectives that view language as a social resource that facilitates belonging and interpersonal connection (Blommaert, 2022). They also reflect Cultural Identity Theory, which highlights the role of shared symbols such as language in shaping collective identity.

Theme 3: Cultural Affirmation in Foreign Spaces

Participants expressed pride in realizing that Kapampangan language and culture extend beyond Pampanga. Hearing Kapampangan abroad affirmed that their cultural identity remained alive even in distant places.

One participant shared:

"Masaya kung isipan na atin palang Kapampangan king aliwang bansa. Pakiramdam ku mabie ya pa ing kultura tamu." (It makes me happy to know that there are Kapampangans in other countries. It feels like our culture is still alive.)

Another participant reflected:

"Inyang dimdam ke ing Kapampangan king Europe, pakiramdam ku ali ku magdili-dili." (When I heard Kapampangan in Europe, I felt that I was not alone.)

These encounters functioned as moments of cultural affirmation rather than simple nostalgia. Participants interpreted the experience as evidence that Kapampangan identity transcends geographic boundaries.

This theme highlights how language operates as living cultural heritage sustained by people rather than place (Jafari, 2025). The continued presence of Kapampangan language among diaspora communities demonstrates the resilience of regional identity within global spaces.

Conclusion

The study revealed that hearing the Kapampangan language abroad evokes strong emotional responses among Kapampangan travelers and overseas residents. Participants described feelings of joy, comfort, and familiarity

when encountering their heritage language in foreign environments. These experiences function as moments of cultural recognition that reaffirm identity, belonging, and emotional rootedness.

The findings demonstrate that the Kapampangan language serves not only as a medium of communication but also as a cultural symbol that connects individuals to their heritage and community. Encounters with fellow Kapampangan speakers abroad reinforce shared identity and strengthen emotional ties to home. These experiences highlight the role of language as a form of living cultural heritage that sustains Kapampangan identity beyond geographic boundaries.

By documenting the lived experiences of Kapampangans in diaspora contexts, this study contributes to Kapampangan language documentation, cultural heritage scholarship, and research on regional linguistic identity. The findings also emphasize the importance of preserving and promoting Kapampangan language as an essential component of the cultural heritage of Central Luzon.

Recommendations

1. Cultural researchers may further document narratives of Kapampangan diaspora communities to expand understanding of how the language and culture are sustained in global environments.
2. Language educators may integrate diaspora experiences into Kapampangan language education to strengthen learners' appreciation of the language as a living cultural heritage.
3. Future studies may explore intergenerational experiences among Kapampangan families abroad in order to examine how cultural identity and language practices are transmitted across generations.

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