



FACTORS AFFECTING LEARNERS' READING PROFICIENCY AS A BASIS FOR AN ENHANCED LITERACY PROGRAM

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative phenomenological study explored factors affecting learners' reading proficiency through the experiences of eight ARAL reading teachers in a public elementary school in Iloilo City. The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews and analyzed them thematically. The findings reveal that teacher-related, learner-specific, environmental, and socio-economic factors shape reading proficiency. These factors affect the reading proficiency of learners, such as Low learner motivation and participation, limited engagement and practice, while limited instructional quality, due to heavy workloads and insufficient training, hindered effective teaching. Lack of individualized support prevented struggling learners from receiving targeted guidance, and limited vocabulary restricted comprehension. Socio-economic challenges, including poverty, minimal parental involvement, and limited access to reading materials, further affected literacy development. The study recommends a diagnostic-based, learner-centered literacy program with targeted interventions, strengthened teacher training, and increased parental support to improve reading outcomes.

Keywords: *Factors, Learners', Reading Proficiency, Reading, Literacy Program*

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INTRODUCTION

Reading proficiency is a fundamental skill that supports academic achievement, lifelong learning, and meaningful participation in society. In the Philippine education system, however, literacy gaps among elementary learners remain a pressing concern. Despite ongoing reforms by the Department of Education, national and international assessments continue to reveal weak reading performance. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy (ELLN) program highlight persistent deficiencies in comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development.

Research identifies teacher-related factors as major influences on reading proficiency. Maceda (2024) emphasized that instructional competence, effective teaching strategies, and teacher engagement significantly affect learners' reading outcomes, particularly in rural schools. However, inadequate training in differentiated reading instruction often limits teachers' ability to address diverse learning needs (Maceda, 2024). Learner-specific challenges also contribute to poor literacy performance. Tomas et al. (2021) noted that many students struggle with low motivation, weak decoding skills, limited vocabulary, and poor comprehension. These difficulties are compounded by socio-economic barriers such as poverty, minimal parental involvement, and limited access to reading materials (Librea et al., 2023), which reduce exposure to print-rich environments.

In response to these challenges, the Department of Education implemented the Academic Recovery and Acceleration for Learning (ARAL) Program. This initiative uses diagnostic assessments and targeted remediation to strengthen foundational skills in reading.

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Through explicit phonics-based, and multisensory strategies, as well as small-group instruction, the program aims to improve literacy outcomes. Nevertheless, there remains a strong need for culturally responsive and context-sensitive reading programs that incorporate learners' identities and local experiences to ensure sustained improvement in reading proficiency.

This study aims to investigate the factors influencing reading proficiency and use these insights to design a literacy program that will enhance reading proficiency. By anchoring the intervention in empirical evidence and local realities, the program seeks to improve reading outcomes and cultivate an inclusive, sustainable, and empowering literacy culture.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research Methodology

This chapter details the methodological framework of the study, including its design, participants, data collection strategies, research tools, and analytical procedures. At its core, the study seeks to uncover the underlying factors that shape learners' reading proficiency, with the ultimate goal of using these insights to craft a strengthened literacy program tailored for the students of Baluarte Elementary School.

Research Method

This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach, using in-depth interviews to capture authentic insights. The method focuses on observing and recording conditions as they naturally occur, highlighting the influences and connections that shape the phenomenon

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without altering its variables. Its purpose is to build a clear, nuanced picture of the trends and relationships within the group under study (Singh, 2023).

During the interview, both interviewer and participant are seated in a way that allows space for reflection while engaging with the set of questions. The process is designed not merely to elicit answers, but to draw out the participants' essential perspectives on the issue at hand, situating their responses within the broader social context.

Research Design

This study adopted a phenomenological design, a qualitative approach rooted in philosophy that seeks to grasp how individuals make sense of their lived experiences. Rather than imposing external frameworks, phenomenology centers on the subjective lens through which people interpret the world, often revealing perspectives that diverge from conventional views. In this inquiry, the researcher engaged participants through interviews to uncover their impressions, a practice widely applied in disciplines such as psychology, sociology, and social work.

Phenomenology centers on exploring consciousness as it is lived and perceived from the first-person standpoint. Its purpose is to describe experiences as they unfold in awareness, setting aside causal theories and unexamined assumptions to reveal phenomena in their purest form (Biemel & Spiegelberg, 2024).

Participants of the Study

The participants of the study were eight Grade 1 to Grade 6 teachers of Baluarte Elementary School involved in the ARAL Reading Program during School Year 2025–2026. All

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participants were female, aged 25 to 42, with teaching experience ranging from 2 to 15 years. They held bachelor's degrees in General Education or Special Education, and some had earned units toward a master's degree. The teachers handled core elementary subjects across different grade levels. Their varied professional backgrounds and experiences provided diverse perspectives on reading instruction, intervention strategies, and the implementation of literacy support programs.

Sampling Design

This study employed purposive sampling, a deliberate selection strategy in which participants are chosen because they embody the specific qualities essential to the inquiry. As Nikolopoulou (2023) explains, this non-probability technique ensures that the sample is composed of individuals whose characteristics directly align with the focus of the research.

Often referred to as judgmental sampling, this technique depends on the researcher's discernment in selecting participants, cases, or events most likely to yield meaningful insights for the study's objectives. Widely used in qualitative and mixed-methods research, purposive sampling is especially valuable when seeking information-rich cases or working with limited resources, though it carries the inherent risk of biases such as observer bias.

Research Instrument

This study utilized researcher-developed tools, specifically an interview guide and classroom observation, as its instruments.

The interview guide contained three core questions aligned with the study's objectives.

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For documentation, the researchers employed voice and video recordings, subject to the consent of participants.

Validity of the Research Instrument

Before establishing the validity of the researcher-crafted interview schedule, it was subjected to careful review by the adviser, the Dean of the Graduate School, and a panel of experts in research, testing, assessment, and English. Each item was examined for clarity, relevance, and alignment with the study’s objectives, with revisions made where necessary.

Validity, in this context, refers to the degree to which the instrument produces meaningful and accurate inferences. For content-related evidence, the structure and wording of the tool must correspond to the defined variables and the population under study, ensuring that the questions genuinely measure the intended constructs (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

Feedback from the validators—including comments, corrections, and suggestions—was incorporated using the framework of Good and Scates (Appendix C).

Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher secured formal approval from the adviser, the Dean of the Graduate School, the Schools Division Superintendent, District Supervisors, School Heads, and the individual participants before proceeding with the study. Interviews were then carried out in schools, communities, or other locations chosen for the convenience of the participants.

Before conducting the interviews, participants were asked to provide written consent through a waiver or permission form.

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The sessions followed an in-depth interview format, with voice and video recordings used—when permitted—to ensure the participants’ responses were captured in full. After completing the series of interviews, the researcher organized and consolidated all collected data for analysis.

Data Analyses

The data collected through in-depth interviews were examined using a thematic lens. This approach, widely recognized in qualitative research, involves tracing recurring patterns and themes within participants’ accounts to build a deeper understanding of their lived experiences (Mason & Francis, 2021). By highlighting shared ideas and insights, thematic analysis reveals the underlying factors that shape the phenomenon under investigation.

This study adopted a phenomenological design to explore how learners experience and make sense of the factors shaping their reading proficiency. At its core, phenomenology seeks to uncover meaning through the lens of lived experience, emphasizing how individuals perceive and interpret their realities. By centering on participants’ perspectives, the approach provides deeper insight into the essence of the phenomenon as understood by those directly engaged with it (Creswell & Poth, 2021).

By combining phenomenology with thematic analysis, this study systematically identifies themes emerging from teachers’ experiences, highlighting the interconnected teacher-related, learner-specific, and socio-economic factors that influence reading proficiency. This approach ensures that the results capture both the personal perspectives of teachers and the broader patterns that shape reading development in elementary education.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the summary, conclusions, and recommendations of a qualitative phenomenological study on learners' reading proficiency, based on the experiences of eight ARAL reading teachers in a public elementary school in Iloilo City. The study found that **teacher-related factors** (competence, instructional strategies, engagement), **learner-specific factors** (motivation, foundational skills, language proficiency), and **environmental or socio-economic factors** (access to reading materials, parental support, economic challenges) influence reading development. The researcher collected data through in-depth interviews, recorded and transcribed the sessions, and analyzed them using thematic analysis to capture teachers' perceptions of learners' reading difficulties. She observed ethical protocols by securing formal approvals from school heads, scheduling interviews during teachers' vacant times, and obtaining consent for recordings and documentation. The findings serve as a basis for developing an enhanced literacy program aimed at addressing the observed challenges and supporting learners' reading growth.

The findings revealed that a complex interplay of multiple factors influences learners' reading proficiency: **teacher-related factors**, **Learner-specific factors**, and **environmental and socio-economic factors**.

The eight teacher-respondents, all female with diverse teaching experiences ranging from 2 to 15 years, reported that heavy workloads, limited preparation time, and lack of designated reading personnel constrained their ability to provide effective and individualized instruction. While academically qualified, some teachers expressed the need for specialized

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training in differentiated reading strategies, remediation planning, and culturally responsive instruction. These challenges often led to less effective lesson delivery, limited guided practice, and reduced support for struggling readers, demonstrating that instructional quality and teacher engagement are critical determinants of learners' literacy outcomes.

Learner-specific factors were also identified as major contributors to reading difficulties. Many learners displayed low motivation and engagement in reading activities, often prioritizing gadgets or social media over printed texts. Decoding challenges, limited vocabulary, and language-related difficulties—especially in English—were prevalent, particularly among upper-grade students who were expected to have foundational literacy skills. These deficiencies hindered reading fluency, comprehension, and self-confidence, with some students unable to recognize basic letters or read simple words. Additionally, minimal preparation for reading tasks and negative attitudes toward lengthy texts further limited learners' practice and mastery of reading skills.

Environmental and socio-economic factors compounded the challenges to reading proficiency. Many learners lacked access to reading materials at home, and parental support was often minimal due to work demands or limited literacy. Poverty-related challenges, such as hunger, irregular attendance, and household responsibilities, further restricted learners' opportunities to practice reading and engage cognitively with texts. Consequently, learners often relied solely on classroom-based instruction, which was insufficient to address their diverse literacy needs, underscoring the interplay of home and school environments in shaping reading outcomes.

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Conclusion

The findings suggest that enhancing reading proficiency requires a holistic approach addressing teacher, learner, and environmental factors simultaneously. Teacher competence and engagement are foundational; however, without adequate institutional support—including professional development, reduced workload, and additional personnel—teachers cannot provide the individualized instruction necessary for struggling readers. Emotional rapport between teachers and learners also emerged as a key factor, indicating that supportive and encouraging classroom environments can motivate learners to participate actively in reading tasks.

Learner motivation and engagement are equally critical. The increasing attachment to gadgets and social media reflects a generational shift in attention and reading habits, which reduces exposure to print materials and limits practice. Targeted interventions, such as early phonics instruction, vocabulary enrichment, and structured reading programs, are essential to strengthen foundational literacy skills and build learner confidence. Programs that focus on individualized remediation from lower grade levels can prevent the accumulation of literacy gaps over time.

Environmental and socio-economic realities highlight the importance of community and parental involvement in literacy development. Learners with minimal home support or limited access to reading materials are disadvantaged despite classroom efforts. Enhanced programs that integrate home and school literacy activities, community reading initiatives, and culturally relevant materials can bridge this gap. Addressing these external factors is crucial for equitable

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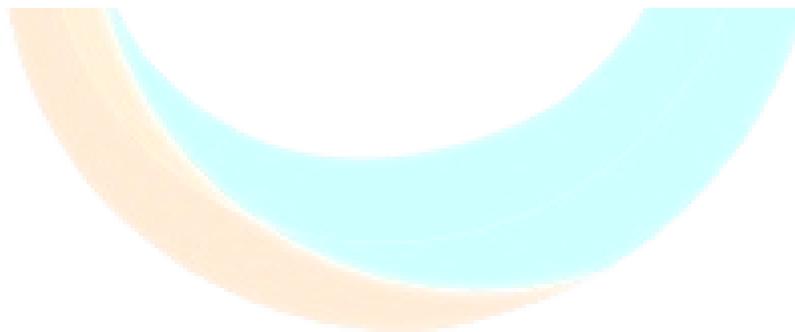
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and sustainable improvements in reading proficiency, ensuring that all learners have the opportunity to develop essential literacy skills.

Overall, the convergence of these factors results in low reading fluency, poor comprehension, and limited vocabulary among learners. These findings underscore the need for an enhanced and responsive literacy program that addresses both instructional and socio-economic realities.



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