



Filipino Students' Reading Abilities: A Note on the Challenges and Potential Areas for Improvement

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Article History:

Received: March 11, 2023

Revised: April 16, 2023

Accepted: April 29, 2023

Published: June 10, 2023

Keywords:

Filipino Learners,
Literacy Program,
Non-Reader,
Philippine Education,
Reading Comprehension

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Abstract: The reading abilities of Filipino students have been a challenge for educators and policymakers alike. Despite government efforts to improve literacy rates in the Philippines, recent studies have shown that many students need help with reading comprehension, vocabulary development, and critical thinking skills. This research note examines the current state of reading abilities among Filipino students and potential areas for improvement. The poor reading abilities can be attributed to several factors, including a lack of resources and socioeconomic factors. However, there are identified potential areas for improvement, such as promoting early literacy programs, investing in teacher training, and developing reading materials that are culturally relevant and engaging for Filipino students. These findings have important implications for education policies and practices in the Philippines and for educators and researchers seeking to improve reading abilities among Filipino students.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a key to learning in school and throughout life. This skill allows everyone to connect their prior knowledge with their learning, enhance their understanding of ideas and practices, and ensure that these will be passed on continuously to the next generation (Torres, 2019). It is one of the basic skills each student should have to gain knowledge, attain learning, and move on to a higher level in education to live day-to-day life. Reading is the backbone of most learning (Dadzie, 2008), whether in math, science, or even home

economics; hence, it is immeasurably important. Making sense of recorded information can occur through various formats, including printed materials like books and articles and non-printed items like digital media or spoken word recordings. In today's knowledge-based culture, the capacity to effectively absorb and apply this information is a critical talent for personal and professional success.

People read for different reasons and purposes. Some of these include entertainment, relaxation, pleasure, and for knowledge. Issa et al. (2012) elaborate that through reading, the character can build or fix things, experience stories, find out what others trust, and enhance ideas or beliefs of their own. Hence, reading provides the key to all information essential for our daily survival and growth. Moreover, Sari (2017) concluded the importance of reading to us in English class and other subjects, such as mathematics. This skill is needed in literacy to add knowledge of the learned material. It is expected that as students climb the educational ladder, it is associated with more reading as the subject becomes denser and more challenging.

Because most information is delivered through text, reading and comprehension are vital abilities for kids to survive and comprehend how society operates. Reading and writing are regarded as top priorities by the government, organizations, and private persons in the Philippines, indicating a realization of the value of literacy. Identifying the primary idea or notion of what one reads is a fundamental comprehension ability that pupils must acquire. This ability enables individuals to discriminate between vital and nonessential information, including the most significant idea and subordinate details or examples, from a mass of words or sentences. The capacity to recognize the primary concept is a necessary talent that allows pupils to comprehend the central meaning of a text and appropriately interpret it. Students can build a deeper grasp of the subject they read by refining this talent, making them better suited to engage with and contribute to society.

Singh (2011) believes primary concept inference is essential for students when dealing with textual content. This ability enables kids to read proficiently, accurately, and with comprehension, which is necessary to understand their reading topic. Additionally, Yigiter et al. (2005) stressed the role of language teachers in improving their students' reading comprehension. Reading without understanding can be worthless and empty because children may be unable to extract crucial information and concepts from the book. As a result, language teachers play a vital role in helping students develop their reading comprehension skills by providing the required teaching, methods, and support. Language teachers can also help their students improve their reading comprehension by selecting reading materials appropriate for their interests, backgrounds, and reading levels. Students engage with the topic and have a more profound knowledge of it if they do so.

Miciano (2007) presented that in reading, there were two main problems for Filipino learners. The first is that the learners read but need help understanding what they have read. She added that most Filipinos are good at reading for details unless the article explicitly labels it. Filipino, often they but often they miss the main idea. The other main problem is that learners must comprehend the details and get the wrong paper. However, this should serve as a signal for the entire department to concentrate on enhancing and growing the reading habits of students. Reading comprehension levels (literal, interpretive, critical, and

application) must be introduced to students for deeper understanding and better usage of appropriate texts (Gardner & Lambert, 2002). This paper provides the reading comprehension problems experienced by many schools that challenge the educational system in the country nowadays.

METHODOLOGY

This research note briefly introduced the emerging concern about the reading abilities of Filipino students. It provided some context and background information on the importance of reading skills for academic and personal success. Besides, the note presented the significance of studying the reading abilities of Filipino students in particular. Existing literature on Filipino students' reading abilities was reviewed, and key challenges and potential areas for improvement were discussed.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading: A Skill for Every “Juan” and “Juana”

Reading is one of the critical skills a learner should familiarize themselves with. This contributes to everyone's success in school. It is considered a prerequisite of all learning areas since it allows every learner to also learn in other subjects in school. Because if an individual has difficulties reading and comprehending what he reads, he will also have difficulties understanding other subjects. Reading does not only about English but all subject requires reading. Elish-Peper (2010) defines reading comprehension as the process of understanding or making meaning when reading. It is one of the competencies in reading that every learner should improve. It is an essential tool in learning that shapes the readers' understanding of the ideas and words. This allows the reader to broaden their vocabulary, understand their reading, and use different mechanisms they might need to improve learning. The capacity to read and comprehend is essential in our daily life. Nevertheless, it takes on greater significance when applied to the educational setting. This leads to lifelong education because it affects the reader's overall personality. Also, Cunha and Capellini (2016) defined reading comprehension as a critical talent and a complicated process with multiple cognitive and linguistic components. Reading comprehension entails recognizing and decoding individual words and comprehending the text's content and context, inferring and drawing inferences, and relating the information to prior knowledge and experience. It necessitates integrating several cognitive and linguistic processes, including attention, memory, inference, vocabulary, grammar, and discourse. Because these processes interact and influence each other in complicated ways, reading comprehension is complex and dynamic.

Singh (2011) has done work on reading, and it shows a good effect on the overall development of students, especially in their academic journey. It was indicated that the ability to comprehend helps the students' academic performance. Similarly, Cimmiyotti (2013) claimed that reading is essential at all levels of the educational system because all subjects in the course require reading, which leads to improved academic achievement. According to Luz (2007), reading is not a habit for many Filipinos, although it is essential

for learning. This is why the Philippines is so uncompetitive in the global economy and why many Filipinos are impoverished and find it difficult to escape. According to Bilbao et al. (2016), some still fall below the proficient reading level even when teachers provide instruction and tactics for boosting students' reading comprehension.

Challenges: Reading Comprehension at Stake

The Philippines' educational system is challenged to produce effective readers. According to the 2019 PISA (Programme for International Student Assessment) statistics, Filipino pupils performed worse in reading comprehension than their international peers. This suggests that there is a need to address the obstacles and possible areas for improvement in the reading ability of Filipino kids. This hinders the schools from meeting their goal of providing quality and well-informed individuals. A study by Mule (2014) shows that inadequate English reading material, improper teaching methodology, and insufficient English language development were causes of reading difficulties. Besides, Lerner (2000) reports that learners who get off to a poor start in reading hardly catch up; poor first-grade readers are likely to continue to be poor readers. Students experience difficulties in reading comprehension because their focus and attention are destructed by cellphones and social media. They spend more time using cell phones rather than reading. Moreover, some parents do not have extra time to teach their children even the basics of reading. They just let their child play on cell phones for almost a day.

Another factor contributing to the country's reading comprehension problem is the COVID-19 pandemic threat, temporarily closing all public and private schools nationwide. Department of Education asked for the cooperation of the parents to continue the deliverable of knowledge from teachers to students through modular distance learning (Caasi & Pentang, 2022). This modular distance learning became a big challenge for teachers, students, and parents, considering that not all parents can teach their children. The pandemic almost slowed down the learning of the child since most students and children did not have enough time to practice reading and comprehension because of too much use of gadgets and social media apps.

One thing also that can be considered why children are having difficulties in reading comprehension is absenteeism, primarily due to the distance of the school from their homes. Some parents need more financial capacity to send their children to school. Some parents just enrolled their child in school to avail 4Ps claims for students and could not teach their child reading because they do not even know how to read. This is so disappointing to know. The 4P's program beneficiaries should be regularly monitored in part of the Department of Education to ensure the fund is not wasted. At some point, aside from the Department of Education, the Department of Social Welfare and Development should also improve its implementation to ensure that the beneficiaries of 4P's are expanding the assistance they receive to the things they should be spending.

A public school teacher handling 30-plus students in one classroom is not a cushy job, particularly in elementary grades with many non-readers and others who have just started practicing to learn reading. The ratio of teacher-students in a classroom is one thing that needs to consider for improvement to provide quality learners at the end of the school

year. It is because children need full attention in the classroom from their teachers. The teachers need to spend time with their students individually to teach and assess their student's difficulties. Besides, there is a rule in the Department of Education that teachers cannot give "failing grades" to children, or else the teachers shall take responsibility for the failure of their students. So, teachers used to pass their students even though they could not move to the following year's level because they did not take responsibility for their failed students in their subject. In this context, it is better to implement the "no read, no pass" policy (Llego, 2014).

Reading comprehension in elementary grade is just part of English subject. The students were given a short story to read, and later, the teacher assessed what the students had comprehended about what they read. In some cases, the students sound like they are reading fluently the text given to them but cannot answer when asked about what they read. Similarly, problems with decoding abilities can make it difficult for youngsters to read smoothly and accurately, affecting their understanding. If they expend all their mental energy attempting to pronounce words, they may not have the cognitive resources to comprehend. Third, a lack of interest and motivation can impact comprehension. Suppose a youngster is uninterested in the topic of a text or does not understand its connection to their life. In that case, they may only partially engage with the material and fail to retain fundamental knowledge. Teachers and parents can help children who struggle with comprehension by giving targeted instruction and practice in vocabulary development, decoding abilities, and strategies for increasing reading engagement and motivation.

Some things can be improved, like growing vocabulary, changing reading speed, and utilizing multiple senses. An extensive vocabulary is especially crucial for reading comprehension because it allows readers to understand the meanings of words in a text. Readers can increase their vocabulary by reading widely across genres and themes, seeking definitions of uncommon words, and using vocabulary-building applications or games. Adjusting the reading pace can also help improve understanding. Some texts may take slower, careful reading to comprehend fully, but others can be read more rapidly. Readers can experiment with different reading speeds to find the one that suits them best. The reader can use what he knows to grasp the material he is reading. For example, a large vocabulary-understanding the meanings of many words can help someone understand a wide variety of texts. Another technique for improving understanding is to use many senses. For example, some readers find reading a text aloud beneficial since it activates their visual and auditory senses. Others may find that taking notes or creating diagrams helps them visualize and retain critical information.

According to the Philippines' PISA 2018 profile, socioeconomic status is a leading factor influencing reading competence in the country, accounting for 18% of the variation in reading proficiency (Juan, December). This is greater than the 12% average for OECD countries. The profile also emphasizes that low-income students are likelier to have lower reading proficiency than their peers. This shows that institutional hurdles may prevent pupils from these backgrounds from obtaining the same learning and development opportunities as their wealthier peers. One reason that could contribute to this gap is the Philippines' high average class size for 15-year-olds, as well as high student-to-teaching

staff ratios in socioeconomically challenged institutions. These circumstances might make it difficult for teachers to give each kid individualized attention and help, especially those struggling with reading or other academic abilities. Investments in education infrastructure and resources, such as recruiting more teachers and reducing class sizes, may be required to address these difficulties and raise reading proficiency levels in the Philippines. Efforts to overcome socioeconomic gaps and provide specialized support for pupils from low-income families may also be required. The Philippines may be able to enhance educational achievements and create more equitable access to opportunities by addressing these variables.

Ropero (2019) reported that fluent reading would only be developed by providing them with text, print, and digital and letting them practice through teacher modeling and shared practice towards independent practice. In today's schools, many children have problems comprehending what they read. Many teachers and parents will confirm that reading problem exacts a period. Reading comprehension requires mental work to keep thoughts, motivation, concentration, and good study strategies. Comprehension is the main component of studying reading. Teaching reading comprehension strategies to pupils at all levels is complex. Teachers need a deep understanding of the text and its context and a good knowledge of the methods. Learning at home during the epidemic presented enormous obstacles for teachers, students, and parents. The deterioration in reading comprehension skills among students is apparent (Ganaden, 2022). However, teachers are doing their best to implement solutions to the problem. The government of the Philippines implemented programs to address this pressing matter of reading problems for children and in response to the need for the teaching and learning process during the pandemic was just started. One of which is the DepEd Order No 45 s. 2022 or Every Child a Reader Program, a national program with its goal that every child will be a reader by the time they finish Grade Three.

Similarly, DepEd NCR established a campaign called "National Capital Region: Championing Reading," with the slogan "NCR to SOAR," to address the issue of non-readers and low academic performance in classrooms. It attempts to revive teachers' and students' enthusiasm for reading while enhancing academic performance. This initiative aims to improve mentors' English language skills through enjoyable reading experiences, promote a rich reading environment in schools, and improve students' overall academic achievement. This curriculum is an excellent first step in building a pool of readers in the classroom to improve their reading and comprehension abilities. The Department of Education swore to continue implementing reforms to improve the country's education quality. Since comprehension is fundamental in learning, DepEd focused on students' reading proficiency. In 2019, DepEd launched the "Hamon: Bawa't Bata Bumasa" to address literacy gaps among learners. In 2020, DepEd used Research O'clock to address the concerns in reading literacy. The DepEd aimed to uplift the education standard with these programs, which could also give better results in future international assessments.

William Teale and Elizabeth Sulzby created the term "Emergent Literacy" to highlight the relationship between a growing child and literacy information from the environment and home literacy practices and experiences. Emergent literacy starts before

the formal academic experiences of the child; it includes concepts about reading and writing before the actual schooling, and it is acquired through the informal and spontaneous learning experiences of the child with significant adults, primarily the parents, caregivers, and other significant adults. Boulhrir (2017) found that students who grew up in literacy-rich environments are motivated readers. This indicates that early literacy exposure to children could lead to a positive attitude toward reading.

Students from low-income backgrounds who do not have a supportive family and school environment that encourages a growth mindset are likelier to have lower reading comprehension scores in the PISA 2018 (Cruz, 2021). This suggests that factors beyond just socioeconomic position can also play a significant role in shaping students' academic outcomes. Students with a growth mindset tend to be more resilient and motivated in their learning, which can lead to better academic performance over time. It may be necessary to provide targeted interventions at the family and school levels, to support students from low-income backgrounds in developing a growth mindset and improving their reading comprehension skills. This could include initiatives to promote parental involvement in education, such as parent-teacher conferences and workshops, and programs to provide students with additional support and resources, such as tutoring or mentoring programs. Addressing the multiple factors contributing to educational disparities, including socioeconomic position, family and school environment, and growth mindset, may improve reading comprehension outcomes and promote more equitable access to education for all students in the Philippines.

Rooms for Improvement: “Juan” and “Juana” can Cope!

Many Filipino pupils, particularly those from low-income families or living in remote places, face severe barriers to accessing reading materials. Students should be given various reading materials, such as books, newspapers, and online resources. This can be accomplished through various channels, including school libraries, community activities, and collaborations with non-governmental organizations. Reading comprehension should also be prioritized in the curriculum. Instructors can utilize several tactics to help students increase their comprehension skills, such as visual organizers, summarizing, and critical thinking tasks. These strategies can assist pupils in comprehending and analyzing the meaning behind the words. Furthermore, increasing the use of Filipino as a medium of instruction can assist pupils in enhancing their reading ability. While English is an official language in the Philippines, it is not the first language spoken in many homes. Utilizing Filipino as a medium of instruction can assist students in better understanding complicated sentence patterns and terminology. It can also aid in preserving the Filipino language and culture while studying English as a second language.

Adults must accompany the child with the helping hands of the teacher. Parents and teachers should have consistent communication and partnership for the child to help the learners build up a decoding capacity, likewise having the option to become skilled and competent readers. Thus, the reading process occurs when there is reading comprehension. Catts and Kamhi (2017) pointed out that education should make students fluent in reading. Reading proficiency is a necessary prerequisite for academic success and lifelong learning.

As a result, educators must prioritize and invest in excellent reading instruction and support for all kids, especially those who are struggling or on the verge of falling behind. Teachers' relationships with their students impact students' learning and motivation. Positive teacher-student connections have been linked to higher academic achievement, greater engagement, and reduced behavior problems and mental distress. This has been widely supported by numerous research studies in literacy that show students are more academically successful when they feel welcomed, esteemed, and provided with materials that challenge them. Hence, their knowledge, experiences, and interests are enriched. When these attitudes, behaviors, and curriculum considerations are missing, there is an excellent chance that children may resist learning, especially those with culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds. This stresses the importance of expectations and relationships between teachers and students in a classroom.

In the literacy field, comprehension is primarily identified as the goal of reading (Duke & Pearson, 2009; Duke et al., 2011). While it is correct that comprehension is of utmost importance, it was argued that in the classroom context focusing on students' fluency did not limit students' development as readers, particularly for those who were asked to read aloud. The concern is the importance of providing all students opportunities to assume the role of readers in this classroom by giving all students a chance to read aloud in class. Literacy can empower individuals and communities to achieve sustainable development and improve their lives (International Literacy Association, 2015). Those who are literate can understand and communicate well with others in their community. This can lead to improved collaboration and cooperation in community projects, ultimately contributing to long-term development. Besides, literacy can help people become more informed and aware of their rights and duties, allowing them to engage more actively in decision-making processes that influence their lives and communities. Furthermore, literacy can give individuals the skills and knowledge they need to pursue education, training, and work opportunities, leading to enhanced economic stability and a higher quality of life for themselves and their families.

CONCLUSION

Reading plays an essential role in everyone's life. Reading comprehension broadens our ability to analyze things and everything that happens in our environment. It is not only involved in our English subject, but all subject requires reading comprehension. The fact cannot be hidden that almost everything requires comprehension. An individual must be trained and learn techniques in comprehension. Many educational programs have already been established to help the school provide quality students who can read fluently and comprehend what they read. Department of Education must assess why the Philippines still ranked last among 79 countries in reading comprehension, after all the programs implemented to boost students' reading ability and comprehension. Factors that may consider are that the programs are not effective enough to solve the reading comprehension problems or are poorly implemented among all schools in the country. There may be lapses in part of the educational system in the country. Not implementing the "no read, no pass" policy leads to passing those students who cannot even do the basic reading. Besides,

parents also have lapsed for not some parents who depend on their child's learning from the teachers, considering that learning the child should be started at home with their primary parents. Generally, it is concluded that teaching and learning a child should be a partnership responsibility of both teachers and parents.

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