The implementation of a validated contextualized reading material to enhance decoding skills of Grade 1 learners

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Abstract: This study implemented the validated contextualized reading material to enhance the decoding skills of Grade 1 learners at Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School, Butuan City Division, for the school year 2023-2024. Using a descriptive- evaluation research design to gather data, the study engaged 32 Grade 1 learners in a remediation program. This study was anchored on Daniel Hull's Contextualized Learning Theory (1995). The baseline assessment of the learners' decoding skills was done through the Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT) during the pretest, and the same tool was used in the posttest after the intervention with the contextualized reading materials. Results showed that before implementing the validated contextualized reading material, 50% of learners were at the word level, 31% were at the letter level, and 19% were at the nothing level. After the implementation, word-level learners increased to 85%, letter-level learners decreased to 16%, and there were 0% at the Nothing level. This difference suggested that all learners enhanced their decoding skills following exposure to the validated contextualized reading material. Furthermore, the paired t-test result (t=2.141; p=.040) confirmed a significant difference in the performance of the learners before and after the intervention.

INTRODUCTION

At present, reading mastery stands out as a crucial skill, playing a central role in academic success, professional achievements, and the overall spectrum of human activities. The capacity to grasp and scrutinize information is essential for retrieving information, engaging in effective interpersonal communication, and perpetually acquiring knowledge. At the core of reading competence resides the fundamental ability for decoding, which is essential for attaining fluency, accuracy, and comprehension in reading pursuits (Ulfaika et al., 2021). Considering the future, the trajectory of information dissemination seems poised for exponential expansion, accentuating the elevated significance of proficient reading skills.

The reading proficiency among first graders at the international level varies widely, with some countries outperforming others. According to Pascal (2020), the average score for first-grade reading proficiency in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2018 was 500 points, mostly from first-world countries, and the lowest-performing countries were from the third world. He further narrated that the PISA reading results reveal significant differences in reading proficiency among participating countries. Consequently, there is a need for targeted interventions and policy changes to address these disparities. Socioeconomic factors play a significant role in reading proficiency.

Furthermore, students from low-income families and those with limited educational resources are more likely to struggle with reading. Effective early childhood education is crucial for developing reading skills. Moreover, meaningful reading experiences foster engagement and comprehension but are difficult to attain if the decoding skill is not strengthened. In addition,

teacher quality is a critical factor in reading instruction. Continuous assessment and monitoring are crucial for identifying and addressing reading difficulties. Finally, collaboration among stakeholders is essential for systemic improvement.

The Philippines, a developing country is one of the lowest scorers in the PISA (Yen, 2023; Bautista, 2023).Reading proficiency among first graders in the Philippines is a complex issue with multiple contributing factors. According to Tomas et al. (2021), only 60% of first graders are in frustration level of reading proficiency. This low literacy rate has significant implications for students' future academic success and overall well-being. Hamburger and Reidy (2022) provide evidence to support the claim that reading proficiency has declined among learners from 2018 to 2022. The disruption caused by the COVID-19 pandemic is likely a significant contributing factor to this decline. The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions to support students who have fallen behind in their reading development.

The Department of Education-Caraga Region has acknowledged its learners' reading difficulties, hence the vital implementation of DepEd Order 14, series of 2023 regarding the BrigadaPagbasa and the Learning Camp to support learners who are yet to grasp the foundational reading skills. DepEd Order No. 16, s. 2012 mandated using the mother tongue as the medium of instruction during the first four years of primary education while students learn Filipino and English as subject areas. However, with the problems besetting the program, the Department of Education must find more effective, efficient, and acceptable implementation methods.

Given the disruptions caused by the pandemic, particularly the prolonged closure of schools in Butuan City Division, reading decoding has emerged as a significant concern. With learners staying at home for an extended period exceeding two years, the learning absorption is reduced, impeding their ability to reach their full academic potential. This situation urged the researcher to conduct this study to assess and make enhancements to the learners' reading through a Validated Contextualized Reading Material that may enhance the decoding skills of Grade 1 learners.

Problem statement

This study implemented the Validated Contextualized Reading Material to enhance the decoding skills of the Grade 1 learners of Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School (DGSES). Specifically, this study sought answers to the following questions:

1. What is the level of decoding skills of Grade 1 learners of Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School (DGSES) before the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material in terms of: nothing level; letter level; and word level?

2. What is the level of decoding skills of Grade 1 learners of Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School (DGSES) after the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material in terms of: nothing level, letter level, and

word level?

3. Is there a significant difference between the level of decoding skills of the pupils before and after the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material?

4. On the basis of the findings of the study, what action plan may be proposed?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Decoding Skills

Decoding skills play a pivotal role in reading development, and understanding the challenges, importance, and solutions associated with these skills is crucial for promoting literacy. A comprehensive literature review by Schuele& Okuma (2022) identified common challenges to decoding skills, such as phonological awareness difficulties, poor letter-sound knowledge, and fluency deficits. Furthermore, a meta-analysis by Shaywitz et al. (2021) underscored the significance of decoding skills as a strong predictor of reading difficulty, emphasizing that students with poor decoding skills are likely to struggle with fluency, accuracy, and comprehension.

Decoding skills play a critical role in reading comprehension (Cain et al. 2023) and contribute significantly to overall academic achievement (Schwanenflugel and Bryant, 2022). Additionally, a longitudinal investigation by the National Research Council (2021) underscores the enduring relevance of decoding skills for lifelong learning, emphasizing their role in navigating the information age effectively.

Several studies advocated for Specific Instructional Interventions to address these challenges. Explicit phonics instruction emerged as an effective method for enhancing decoding skills, emphasizing the need for structured teaching approaches (Ehri&Snowling, 2020). Similarly, phonemic awareness instruction was identified as a valuable strategy, focusing on developing students' understanding of the sounds in words (National Research Council, 2021). Fluency instruction is also deemed essential, promoting quick and automatic word recognition to allocate cognitive resources for comprehension. Embracing technology, as highlighted in a recent study by Wladis& Hofer (2023), offers a contemporary solution, showcasing how educational apps and programs can engage students in decoding skill practice. These studies underscored the multidimensional aspects of decoding skills, from their challenges to their enduring importance and the effectiveness of targeted instructional solutions.

Contextualized Intervention Materials for Reading
Intervention Materials (IM) for reading in Mother Tongue are fundamental tools addressing the reading difficulties of Grade 1 pupils in the Philippines. As identified by Advincula and Saldajeno (2020), intervention materials effectively enhance the reading achievements of Grade 1 pupils. Their proposed framework aligns CIM development with the Most Essential Learning Competencies (MELC) in Mother Tongue, offering educators an effective blueprint for developing pertinent and efficient intervention materials.

Tomas et al. (2021) reiterated that the causes of the reading problems are the non-mastery of the elements of reading, the presence of learners at risk, and absence of a culture of reading. They further specified that foundational skill gaps, learners-at-risk, and a lack of reading culture are factors that hinder reading. Phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and word recognition are gaps that hinder basic comprehension. Learners-at-risk, including nonreaders and those with special needs, face additional barriers such as poor health and frequent absenteeism. Moreover, the absence of independent reading opportunities, limited materials, and inadequate guidance hinder the development of a reading culture within schools.

Idulog et al. (2023) 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.

Pocaan et al. (2022) stressed that providing reading interventions that are tailored to the needs and status of the learners makes progress in learners' reading ability. Educators should avoid

using the one-size-fits-all teaching strategies and curriculum as it assumes all students learn in the same ways, hence, the intervention.

Salibay (2024) emphasized the critical role of collaborative efforts among teachers, parents, and local government units (LGUs) in addressing reading difficulties on and off campus. By fostering partnerships between these key stakeholders, motivation and support for students can be enhanced, leading to a more prosperous learning environment that facilitates reading development.

The study of Carson (2020) noted that providing contextualized reading material enhances the letter sound skills of the learners. She further said that learners experienced an improvement in letter identification, with their scores closely aligned following the application of the material. Such a move led to heightened awareness of letter identification and sound recognition among the identified learners, which aligns with the intervention's objectives.

The study of Anyiendah et al. (2020) showed that the contextualization of reading interventions influences the word recognition skills of the learners. They noted the importance of teacher training for effective implementation and emphasized the significance of contextualized reading interventions in enhancing learners' word sound recognition skills.

Karageorgos et al. (2020) underscored the critical role of word-sound recognition skills in the broader framework of reading development. Their emphasis on the importance of achieving skills in word recognition highlights its foundational role in subsequent aspects of reading, such as word recognition speed and reading comprehension. Essentially, they suggest that the ability to recognize words accurately serves as a cornerstone upon which higher-level reading skills are built. By prioritizing and cultivating word-sound recognition skills, learners establish a strong foundation that facilitates the fluidity and comprehension necessary for proficient reading.

Additionally, Adler (2021) emphasized that the appearance and organization of the reading material were an important consideration in making the reading intervention effective, which can capture the interest and attention of learners, making them more inclined to engage with the material and eventually enhance motivation and create a positive learning environment. It impacts learner engagement, accessibility, comprehension, and retention, all essential components of effective reading interventions.

Alghonaim (2020) highlighted that the relevance of the content of the reading material corresponds to its efficacy and what it measures. When the content of reading materials is closely aligned with the learning objectives and the needs of the learners, the effectiveness of the intervention is enhanced. Accordingly, relevant content ensures learners are engaged and motivated to interact with the material, as they can see its direct applicability to their lives or academic pursuits. It allows learners to connect new information to their existing knowledge and experiences, facilitating a more profound understanding and retention of the material.

Candelaria and Albano (2022) underscored the crucial role of parents in supporting the use of intervention materials in Mother Tongue reading at home. Their insights provide practical tips for parents to facilitate the effective utilization of intervention materials, thereby fostering the reading development of their children.

Moreover, the challenges and opportunities related to the development and implementation of intervention materials, as discussed by Dela Cruz and Gonzales (2020), emphasize the importance of aligning intervention materials with the MELC and tailoring them to the pupils' needs while ensuring their practicality for educators.

Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT)

The Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT) in the Philippines has emerged as a reliable and effective measure for assessing the reading performance of grade 1 pupils, as highlighted by Albano (2022). The study demonstrates the utility of the FLAT in identifying students who require additional support in reading, thereby emphasizing its role in facilitating targeted interventions for struggling learners.

The Department of Education (DepEd) provides official guidelines for the administration and scoring of the FLAT, establishing standardized procedures for its implementation and ensuring consistency in its application. This highlights the commitment of the education authorities in promoting a systematic and uniform approach to literacy assessment among Grade 1 pupils.

Furthermore, the Philippine Association of Teachers of Mother Tongue (PATMT) provides valuable guidance for educators on utilizing the FLAT to enhance mother tongue reading instruction in Grade 1. This signifies the practical implications of the FLAT in fostering an effective pedagogical approach, particularly in the context of mother tongue-based instruction.

The collective results of the studies underscored the comprehensive effectiveness of the FLAT as a robust assessment tool for Grade 1 reading in the Philippine context. Its reliability, effectiveness, validity, and inclusivity make it an indispensable resource for educators aiming to support learners' reading development and effectively address literacy challenges.

The literature reviewed significantly supported the study by providing insights into the development of the Theoretical and Conceptual Framework. It acknowledged the validation and efficacy of contextualized reading intervention. The literature identified the Functional Literacy Assessment Tool to determine the significant difference before and after implementing Validated Contextualized Reading Material. It highlighted the importance of validating instructional materials through expert reviews. These insights guided the study's methodology and suggested the learners' decoding skills were improved and enhanced, demonstrating that using contextualized reading material positively impacts learning.

METHODOLOGY

Research design
This study used a descriptive-evaluative research design to gather comprehensive insights into the prevailing conditions or situations, aiming for detailed description and interpretation. Specifically, it focused on the decoding skills of learners both before and after the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material, which served as a crucial tool for enhancing their decoding proficiency within the MTB-MLE framework

Respondents of the study
The participants in this research were the thirty-two (32) Grade 1 learners, in section Ampalaya of the Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School. The researcher used an intact group of learners. The distribution of respondents is shown in Table 1 below. The learners' decoding skills were identified in the Nothing, Letter, and Word level before and after implementing the Validated Contextualized Reading Material.

Research instruments

The Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT) was used to assess the learner's proficiency levels in decoding skills. The tool was used to conduct both pretest and post-test assessments. The learners' reading proficiency levels were identified to be in the Nothing, Letter, and Word levels.

Additionally, the contextualized reading material used in the study was reviewed and validated by experts in the field to ensure its quality and effectiveness.

Data analyses procedure
This study utilized frequency to present the number of learners at different decoding skill levels and paired t-test to determine the significant difference in the pretest and the post-test data.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Decoding Skills of Grade 1 Learners Before the Implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material

The data uncovered by the researcher revealed that some learners struggled with reading, even after nearly half a school year of instruction. During the pre-test, learners at the Nothing and Letter levels had difficulties recognizing letter sounds and reading words. Some learners at the Nothing level could sound out letters, but with hesitation, even if they decode them correctly. Learners at the "Letter" level could decode simple words like "mata", but they were slow and hesitant in doing so. That is why they remained below the Word level. This was because the assessment criteria required learners to read with ease to be considered at the "Word Level". The learners' confidence or the lack of it was observed as they stuttered and most of the time, preferred not to talk.

This indicates that they had limited reading skills despite the lessons they received. Although some learners could read, the number of struggling readers was concerning. This could lead to further difficulties in their future studies, affect the overall academic performance of the school, and influence the kind of citizens they will become in their community.

As a result, creating a targeted intervention for this problem helped the learners understand their lessons better. It also motivated them to learn more, removing the obstacles to the bright future that awaits them.

The results were consistent with the World Bank's 2022 data on learning poverty, stating that at least 90% of Filipino children aged 10 struggle to read or understand simple text, which has been set even before the COVID-19 pandemic since the pre-pandemic figure pegged learning poverty in the Philippines at 70% (Chi, 2024).

Additionally, Tomas et al. (2021) reiterated that the causes of the reading problem are the non-mastery of the elements of reading, the presence of learners at risk, and the absence of the culture of reading. They further specified the hindering factors of reading, the foundational skill gaps, learners-at-risk, and a lack of reading culture. In addition, gaps in phonological awareness, alphabet knowledge, and word recognition hinder basic comprehension. Learners-at-risk, including nonreaders and those with special needs, face additional barriers such as poor health and frequent absenteeism. Moreover, the absence of independent reading opportunities, limited materials, and inadequate guidance hinder the development of a reading culture within schools. Resolving these issues demands targeted interventions, improved teacher training, and efforts to foster a supportive reading environment.

Furthermore, Idulog et al. (2023) 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.

Decoding Skills of Grade 1 Learners After the Implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material

The researcher found strong evidence of the positive impact of the intervention. During its implementation, learners were shown pictures with names emphasizing the starting letter sounds to help them memorize and understand the sounds. This was done in the first hour of the morning. In the afternoon, during remediation, they were guided to read words using the first letter sound of the pictures combined with previously learned letters. This intervention improved the learners' ability to decode words, as shown by the results. It demonstrated that most of the learners can already read words developmentally appropriate for them. This also revealed that they could now learn more effectively and engage with the learning standards set for them.

Moreover, during the posttest, the learners already at the Word level easily read all the words shown to them. Even though they only needed to read 5 words out of 16 presented, they still wanted to read the rest and enjoyed decoding them. It highlights the importance of additional activities that should be given to them.

Pocaan et al. (2022) emphasized that reading interventions tailored to the needs and levels of learners improve their reading abilities. They argued that educators should avoid using one-size-fits-all teaching strategies and curriculums, as these assume all students learn similarly. This highlights the importance of targeted interventions

Salibay (2024) emphasized the critical role of collaborative efforts among teachers, parents, and local government units (LGUs) in addressing reading difficulties on and off campus. By fostering partnerships between these key stakeholders, motivation and support for students can be enhanced, leading to a richer learning environment that facilitates reading development. This collaborative approach ensures that interventions are comprehensive and holistic, leveraging resources and expertise from various sectors to effectively promote learning continuity and remediation.

Difference Between the Level of Decoding Skills of the Pupils Before and After the Implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material

Before implementing the VCRM, researcher found that the mean score of the learners in letter sound was 4.59 and raised to 5.00 after their exposure to the said material. This may seem negligible, but the standard deviation values revealed that before the VCRM, there was a bigger dispersion of the scores compared to the behavior after the VCRM. This difference indicates that after exposure to the VCRM, all the learners were in the same location in the score continuum. The paired t-test result (t=2.141; p=.040) confirms that there is a significant difference in the performance of the learners in terms of letter sounds. Thus, the null hypothesis is rejected.

During the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material, the learners were guided to read aloud, even though they were sometimes confused about the sounds of certain letters. They often mixed up the sounds of /Bb/ and /Dd/ because the lowercase letters looked similar. However, with daily practice, they improved. Another tricky sound for them was /ng/, as

it was hard to show clearly how the lips should move. But over time, with the help of pictures, they mastered it.

The increase in the level of decoding letter sounds after the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material suggested that the intervention had a positive impact on learners' literacy skills. This indicated that the material effectively supported learners in acquiring or improving their ability to recognize and pronounce letter sounds. It implied that targeted interventions, such as using validated contextualized reading materials, can be instrumental in addressing reading difficulties and promoting skill development among learners.

Additionally, the comparison between pre- and post-implementation periods stressed the importance of evidence-based approaches in education and the potential benefits of implementing such interventions in educational settings. Hence, the Validated Contextualized Reading Material enhanced the learners' decoding abilities, considered as a critical component of literacy development.

This finding corroborates with the study of Carson (2020), wherein she noted that providing contextualized reading material contributes to enhancing the letter sound skills of the learners. She further said that learners experienced an improvement in letter identification, with their scores closely aligned following the application of the material. Such a move led to heightened awareness of letter identification and sound recognition among the identified learners, which aligns with the intervention's objectives.

Further analysis in the word sound shows that before the VCRM implementation, the mean score was 3.25 and after the VCRM exposure was 4.50. This marked score difference is supported by the standard deviation values, which show that before the VCRM, there was a greater dispersion of the scores compared to the dispersion of the scores after the exposure to the VCRM. The paired t-test result (t= 5.086; p=.000) confirms that there is a very significant difference between the word sound performance of the learners before and after the implementation of the VCRM. Thus, the null hypothesis was rejected.

During the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material, especially when reading words from Activity 3 to Activity 6, learners were amazed at how they decoded the words by combining the sounds of the letters. Initially, they read the words without understanding their meaning. However, as I repeated the words and explained the meanings, they simply smiled, showing they were happy they could read those words. Simply giving them the meaning of their decoding motivated them to decode more words.

The substantial difference observed in the word sound performance of learners before and after the implementation of the VCRM signals a notable shift in their reading proficiency. This difference featured the transformative impact of targeted interventions on learners' ability to decode and comprehend words effectively. It suggested that the VCRM played a pivotal role in bridging gaps in word recognition skills, thereby empowering learners with the foundational literacy competencies essential for academic success. The significant improvement in word sound performance highlighted the effectiveness of evidence-based literacy instruction strategies and emphasized the value of tailored interventions in addressing students' diverse learning needs. By fostering a supportive learning environment and providing meaningful resources, such as the VCRM, educators can facilitate meaningful progress in students' reading abilities, ultimately nurturing their overall literacy development and educational attainment.

The study of Anyiendah et al. (2020) also showed that the contextualization of reading interventions influences the word recognition skills of the learners. They noted the importance of teacher training for effective implementation and emphasized the significance of contextualized

reading interventions in enhancing learners' word sound recognition skills. Their findings underscored the pivotal role of teacher training in ensuring the success of such interventions, highlighting the need for educators to be equipped with the necessary skills and strategies to implement contextualized reading programs effectively.

Karageorgos et al. (2020) underscored the critical role of word-sound recognition skills in the broader framework of reading development. Their emphasis on the importance of achieving skills in word recognition highlights its foundational role in subsequent aspects of reading, such as word recognition speed and reading comprehension. Essentially, they suggest that the ability to recognize words accurately serves as a cornerstone upon which higher-level reading skills are built.

By prioritizing and cultivating word-sound recognition skills, learners establish a strong foundation that facilitates the fluidity and comprehension necessary for proficient reading. This perspective aligned with the widely acknowledged notion that proficient reading is contingent upon the seamless integration of various reading components, with word-sound recognition skills serving as a fundamental precursor to overall reading proficiency.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of the study, several important conclusions were derived. First, the Grade 1 learners at Don Gaudencio Santos Elementary School (DGSES) were not yet ready to read and comprehend sentences, which could potentially lead to difficulties in their studies.

Second, the significant improvement observed in the learners' decoding skills after the implementation of the Validated Contextualized Reading Material (VCRM) confirms that contextualized reading materials serve as an effective tool for enhancing early literacy development. Third, the notable differences in letter and word sound recognition before and after the use of the VCRM further indicate its effectiveness in improving the learners' decoding skills.

Lastly, the implementation of the VCRM through a structured action plan is essential in addressing the learners' reading challenges. By employing systematic assessment, intervention, and monitoring, targeted support can be provided, leading to measurable improvements in decoding skills. This highlights the importance of a well-planned, evidence-based approach in strengthening early literacy development.

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