

Effectiveness of Explicit Phonics Instruction to the Reading Fluency of Kindergarten Learners

KATHERYN NAZARIO-LAUDE

Teacher II

Western Leyte College

Master of Arts in Education

Major in School Administration and Supervision

katheryn.nazario@deped.gov.ph

Abstract —Providing appropriate and meaningful experiences to kindergarten learners leads to the acquisition of knowledge in reading to make them fluent readers in their grade. Teaching reading fluency using explicit phonics instructions challenges kindergarten teachers because this is the foundation stage in the educational life of the learners. Teachers must be careful in teaching reading because this influences their performance and love for reading. Thus, it is in this premise that the researcher conducted this study to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction in improving the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners. A quasi-experimental research design employing pre-test and post-test Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool and lesson plans using explicit phonics instruction as a strategy in teaching reading fluency to the kindergarten learners coupled with learning activities which emphasize learning fluency were crafted and used. Simple percentage and t-test of mean difference were the statistical tools used to interpret the result of the study. The study revealed a significant difference in the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. The unique backgrounds, experiences, abilities and prior knowledge and the explicit phonics instruction used by the teacher contribute to the improvement of reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners. Thus, the intervention provided by the teacher in teaching reading fluency to the kindergarten learners is effective and recommended to utilized by the teachers in the kindergarten classes.

Keywords — *Effectiveness, Explicit Phonics Instruction, Reading Fluency, Kindergarten Learners*

I. Introduction

Phonemic awareness is one of the best predictors of a student's ability to read fluently. This ability to hear sounds clearly, and to differentiate them, is what allows us to acquire language easily, and this knowledge of language is key to our understanding of what we read. As cognitive neuroscientist Dr. Paula Tallal (2012) explains, "To break the code for reading, a child must

become ‘phonologically aware’ that words can be broken down into smaller units of sounds (phonemes) and that it is these sounds that the letters represent.”

Phonemic awareness teaches students to both hear and manipulate sounds, and to understand that spoken words are made up of sequences of speech sounds. Through research, the researcher learned that **students who were able to identify phonemes rapidly were able to read more fluently because of this rapid processing.** Those students who took longer to process phonemes struggled with comprehension. It appeared that too much attention was required to decode the words, leaving less for interpreting what was read.

Fluent reading relies on students developing their phonemic awareness to the point of automaticity, freeing up their brain energy to easily comprehend what they’re reading. Without securing their sound system by learning to automatically recall the 44 sounds of the English language, students rely on inefficient decoding methods and coping strategies like memorization. These skills may enable them to begin to read but as texts increase in complexity, students’ comprehension begins to break down, as it becomes too challenging to understand what they are reading when they are focused on laboriously decoding every word. If we want students to gain mastery of the 44 sounds, they need to have repeated auditory exposure to each of the individual sounds and learn how to rapidly recognize each sound amongst other sounds.

Oral reading fluency is a key skill, which is a prerequisite for comprehension as emphasized by Tindal et al. (2016) and Rasinski (2014). They believe that fluency as a skill feed into comprehension, which is the goal of reading. According to DiSalle and Rasinski (2017), 90% of comprehension problems are due to the deficiency in oral fluency. Thus, students who have poor reading fluency in their early stage of academic life will likely have problems in later academic stages. For this reason, it is essential to build and develop literacy skills in the early learning stage (Rasinski 2014).

The result of the group screening test among the Grade 2-6 pupils in Macario Elementary School shows that there are a greater number of frustrations and non-readers as compared to instructional and independent readers. The researcher as the school reading teacher analyzes the result and it was found out that their prerequisite skills in reading which have not been mastered by the learners. With this, the researcher crafted this intervention to help the learners overcome the learning losses during the pandemic. Thus, mastery in phonetic awareness is needed to attain reading fluency skills. And it is in this premise that this research is conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction to the reading fluency of the kindergarten learners. A proposed improvement plan was formulated based on the findings of the study.

It is in the rationale that the researcher who is currently a kindergarten teacher in the above mentioned local, would like to delve worthy research undertaking that will benefit herself, the school she is currently teaching and that of her Graduate Program she is enrolled at.

This study evaluates the effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction to the reading fluency of kindergarten learners of Macario Elementary School, Merida District, Leyte Division for School Year 2022-2023. The findings of the study were the basis for the proposed improvement plan.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before the utilization of explicit phonics instruction?
2. What is the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction?
3. Is there a significant difference in the reading fluency performances of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction?
4. What improvement plan can be proposed based on the findings of this study?

II. Methodology

Design. This study employed the quasi-experimental research design utilizing the pre-test and post-test to evaluate the effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction to the reading fluency of kindergarten learners for School Year 2022-2023. Macario Elementary School, Merida District, Leyte Division is the main locale of the study. The 29 kindergarten learners enrolled in the said locale for School Year 2022-2023 are the main respondents of the study. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) tool based on DepEd Order No. 57, series 2015, "Utilization of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Math Assessment (EGMA) Tools for System Assessment", is used as pre-test and post-test before and after the intervention was given. A student's ability to read fluently, comprehend what they have read, and successfully convey their information is assessed on the EGRA, a standardized reading test. Lesson plan using explicit phonics instruction as a strategy in teaching reading fluency to the kindergarten learners coupled with learning activities which emphasize learning fluency were crafted and used during the data gathering as intervention for the study. A matrix of activities was crafted to guide the teacher-researcher the flow of her study. This research focused on evaluating the effectiveness of explicit phonics instruction to the reading fluency of kindergarten learners through the pre-test and post-test and its significant difference. A Proposed Improvement Plan based on the findings of the study is the output.

Sampling. There are 29 kindergarten learners involved in this study. The research instruments were administered face-to-face with consent from the Local IATF and strictly following the prescribed Health Protocol during the face-to-face classes.

Research Procedure. The researcher prepared the research design and tools utilized in the study. Approval and recommendation from the Panel of Examiner of the Graduate Studies was

sought. A letter request to conduct this study was forwarded to the Office of the Schools Division Superintendent. Upon approval, permission from the District Supervisor and School Head was secured before the actual gathering of data. Orientation of the participants and administration of the pre-test was done face-to-face after the approval of the permit from the parents of the respondents. After accomplishing the pre-test, intervention was given within four weeks. The utilization of explicit phonics instruction and interactive learning materials in teaching fluency in the kindergarten classes was emphasized in the study. After the four-week intervention, the post-test was administered. Results of the tests were collected. Data were tallied and submitted for statistical treatment. Analysis and Interpretation of Data. Making of Proposed Improvement Plan followed.

Ethical Issues. The researcher properly secured the permission to conduct the study from the authorities through written communication. In the formulation of the intervention materials that was used in the study, the use of offensive, discriminatory or other unacceptable language was avoided. The respondents' names and other personal data were not included in this study to protect their privacy. Participation of the respondents was also voluntary. Orientation was conducted for the respondents with their parents. In the orientation, issues and concerns were addressed and consent to be included in the study were signed. The researcher-maintained objectivity in analyzing and discussing the results. All authors whose works were mentioned in this study were properly quoted and were acknowledged in the reference.

Treatment of Data. Simple Percentage was employed to evaluate the pre-test and post-test reading fluency performances of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. **t-Test of Mean Difference** was used to determine the significant difference in the pre-test and post-test reading fluency performances of the kindergarten learners.

III. Results and Discussion

Table 1
Pre-Test Performance of the Kindergarten Pupils in Reading Fluency

Score Range	Description	PRETEST	
		Frequency	%
18-21	Excellent	0	0
13-17	Very Good	1	3
9-12	Good	8	28
5-8	Fair	16	55
1-4	Poor	4	14
Total		29	100
Weighted Mean		7.28	Fair

Table 1 presents the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. It was revealed on the table that among the 29 kindergarten learners tested, 1 or 3% got a score of 13-17 which is interpreted as very good, 8 or 28% got a score of 9-12 which is good while 16 or 55% got a score of 5-8 which is fair and 4 or 14% got a score of 1-4 which is poor. The reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before the utilization of explicit phonics instruction got a weighted mean of 7.28 which is interpreted as fair. This means that the level of reading fluency of the kindergarten learners is considered adequate or satisfactory. At this level, the kindergarten learners demonstrate some foundational reading skills and understanding, but they need instructional intervention to help them improve their performance. This implies that teachers must formulate activities and utilize teaching strategies and techniques which will help them in teaching reading fluency to achieve mastery. Reading fluency speaks to the pace, flow, intonation, and automaticity of a learner's oral reading. Wilson (2012) believes that fluency is a complex process that requires visual, orthographic, phonological, semantic, conceptual, and articulation processes to function together at a high level. However, fluency requires that they work quickly and precisely. The researcher explains that fluency is at the center of reading by linking word recognition to comprehension. It is thought that fluency is an indicator of students' available cognitive capacity for use in reading processes (Reutzel et al., 2014). As students interact with more complex texts, fluency will continue to be additionally valuable.

Table 2
Post-Test Performance of the Kindergarten Pupils in Reading Fluency

Score Range	Description	POST-TEST	
		Frequency	%
18-21	Excellent	27	93
13-17	Very Good	2	7
9-12	Good	0	0
5-8	Fair	0	0
1-4	Poor	0	0
Total		29	100
Weighted Mean		19.41	Excellent

Table 2 presents the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. It was revealed on the table that among the 29 kindergarten learners tested, 27 or 93% got a score of 18-21 which is interpreted as excellent while 2 or 7% got a score of 13-17 which is interpreted as very good. The reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction got a weighted mean of 19.21 which is interpreted as excellent. This means that after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction in teaching reading fluency, the performance of the kindergarten pupils increases. This implies that the strategies and techniques used by the teacher in teaching reading fluency and the learning materials and activities provided to the kindergarten learners contribute to the attainment of goals in this study making the utilization of explicit phonics instruction an effective. Phonics instruction shapes readers foundationally as it develops phonemic awareness and decoding skills (Sonnenschein et al., 2010). Wilson (2012) explains that decoding skills enable readers to read fluently, which bridges phonics to comprehension. This supports readers as they apply meaning to text, which aids in comprehension (Wilson, 2012). A variety of phonics methods exist (Campbell, 2018). Whether foundational knowledge is taught explicitly, implicitly, or incidentally may impact the strategies applied and the achievement level of an early reader (Faust & Kandelshine-Waldman, 2011).

Table 3
Test of Difference between the Scores in the Pre-Test and Post-Test
Performances of the Kindergarten Pupils in Reading Fluency

Aspects	Test Scores		Computed T	Critical T	Decision	Interpretation
Kindergarten Pupils Experimental	Pre	7.28	1.771	0.614	Reject H ₀	Significant
	Post	19.41				

Table 3 presents the test of difference in the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. It was revealed on the table that the test of difference in the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction has level of significance of 0.05 or rejection level while the t-critical value of 0.614 in the t-distribution. Based on the data presented and statistical bases and analyses, the data resulted in a computed value of t of 1.771 which means null hypothesis is rejected. This means that there is a significant difference in the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. The unique backgrounds, experiences, abilities and prior knowledge and the explicit phonics instruction used by the teacher contribute to the improvement of reading fluency performance. Moreover, the utilization of explicit phonics instruction has helped the kindergarten learners improve their reading fluency performance as it is shown in the mean of the pre-test of 7.28 which increases to 19.41 in the post-test after giving the intervention. According to Reutzel et al. (2014) explicit instruction is highly recommended by the National Reading Panel. The researchers also present information that describes explicit phonics as a powerful and effective model for teaching a vast array of skills and strategies. A study carried out by McGeown & Medford (2014) found that students who are taught with a systematic synthetic phonics approach are likely to access letter sound knowledge and short-term memory to blend sounds into unknown words. This suggests that reading instruction methods should be considered and analyzed to develop understanding of the variation in early reader's acquisition and development of reading skills. Furthermore, it should be considered as instruction is developed. The instruction is proven to mold the reader.

IV. Conclusion

The study revealed a significant difference in the reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners before and after the utilization of explicit phonics instruction. The unique backgrounds, experiences, abilities and prior knowledge and the explicit phonics instruction used by the teacher contribute to the improvement of reading fluency performance of the kindergarten learners. Thus, the intervention provided by the teacher in teaching reading fluency to the

kindergarten learners is effective and recommended to be utilized by the teachers in the kindergarten classes.

V. Recommendations

11. Utilize the proposed improvement plan formulated.
12. Implement explicit phonics instructions to help the reading performance of learners improved or be continually sustained.
13. The Department of Education may fully support the continuing professional development of students based on the principle of lifelong learning and DepEd's commitment to the development of teachers' potential for their success in the curriculum.
14. Conduct related free training and seminars to the kindergarten teachers to help empower and sustain their knowledge in teaching reading fluency.
15. Teachers must extend extra time in teaching to the struggling readers to improve the reading fluency performance of the learners.
16. Teachers must be knowledgeable in providing additional learning support materials to the pupils.
17. Teachers must attend training or LAC sessions on the proper utilization of explicit phonics instructions.
18. School Heads must conduct regular monitoring to teachers.
19. Technical assistance should be provided to the teachers especially on the new trends in teaching reading fluency and other reading skills, and
20. Future researchers should replicate this study to include different locales and include different variables aside from the mentioned in this study.

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AUTHOR'S PROFILE**MS. KATHERYN NAZARIO LAUDE**

The author is Mrs. Katheryn Nazario Laude. She was born on November 10, 1990 at Joaquin Compound, Alabang Muntinlupa, Manila. She was married for 2 years with Mr. Joshua James D. Laude and has one child. She's presently residing at Purok 1 Brgy. Macario, Merida, Leyte. She finished her elementary education at Merida Central School, Poblacion, Merida, Leyte in the year 2001-2002 and continue his quest for education and able to finish his secondary education at Merida Vocational School, Merida, Leyte in the year 2005-2006. She enrolled and finished her Bachelor in Elementary Education at Visayas State University, Isabel Campus. in the year 2017-2018. She took up Master of Arts in Education major in Supervision and Administration at Western Leyte College of Ormoc City Inc. in 1 year and finished her course with complete academic requirements at Western Leyte College of Ormoc City, Inc.

She was teaching in a remote area for two years as Grade- IV teacher at Minesite Elementary School in the year 2019-2021. After two years she was transferred and was teaching in her own locality at Macario Elementary School as a kindergarten teacher. After she graduated with her bachelor's degree, she then took the Licensure Examination for Teachers on 2018 and passed the LET on the same year. She then applied in DepEd on 2019 even without teaching experience and was hired on the same year. She is now currently teaching in her own locality at Macario Elementary School as a kindergarten teacher. She also attended a series of webinars/seminars and training courses to increase her professional growth as a teacher.