

Struggling Readers of The English Language: Managing the Challenges and Strategies of Learners

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Abstract — This study determined the struggles of students towards reading English - its management of challenges, and strategies of learners. Being qualitative, audio-recorded interview was utilized to gather data. Participants were six (6) teachers and fifteen (15) learners of grades 4, 5 and 6 of Mayor Santiago Garcia Memorial School of Mati City, Davao Oriental. The six (6) teachers were interviewed after given time to observe their findings of the learners they chose. Data elicited were transcribed in verbatim, confirmed by the participants, coded and categorized, and themed accordingly. The responses were uttered in Cebuano (Bisaya). The researcher translated this into English for easy understanding. Their responses were analyzed and coded into themes: the brain does not work, center of attraction, acting out, it began at home, it continued in school, it's not for me at all, the common feeling, the incompetent me, the limelight, it comes from within, it wasn't nursed well, and they're looking for errors. Overcoming difficulties in English language reading was shared by learners and how they have overcome these through these coping mechanism: acceptance, application, and apathy. The challenges and coping mechanisms of learners in their experiences in English language reading produced the following insights from the learners according to teachers: the compass, the cheerleader, the referee, the English Nazi, and the polyglot.

Keywords — *English difficulties, English language anxiety, reading struggles, second language learning, English as a Second Language*

I. Introduction

Reading is a complex process involving word recognition, comprehension, fluency, and motivation. Reading is more than just making meaning from prints but it involves interaction with the texts. In school, reading is one of the most important skills a learner should develop. Reading is a life skill that will enable learners to extend their concepts and gain information as the basis for other learning. Learning to read is essential to learners' well-being. Reading habit is however the single most important determinant of a student's success in education and in the modern complex society

One can safely say that reading is the backbone of learning Mathematics, Science, Social Studies and other subjects. However, the reality shows that many young learners are experiencing some kind of difficulty and struggles in learning to read, especially in our present world where

there are many distractions like games and other social media, which make their interest in reading suffer. In fact, because of technological development and the widespread use of social media, learners' reading habits are changing.

Today, while technology is slowly taking a steady control over individual lives, the reading habit is fast vanishing. Learners now lack the skill and interest in reading and instead they spend more hours on electronic media, playing online games and browsing their Facebook and Twitter accounts (Adu-sarkodee, Asante, & Akussah, 2019).

This reality is an international scenario. According to the result of the National Assessment of Educational Progress, more than two thirds of all 14-year-old learners in the United States of America (USA) read below grade level, and more than six million learners in the said country between the ages of 12 and 18 are struggling readers. The same scenario is happening in Germany where nearly one-fifth of 15-year-olds in their country are reading below grade level expectations (Kissau & Hiller, 2019).

In the Philippines, the situation is no different from the world. In fact, the government issued policies and programs to keep children in school as stated in Education for All 2015 National Review. Part of it is to make each child a reader by the time he/she completes Grade 1 (Department of Education of the Philippines & UNESCO, 2018). This policy aims to keep children in school and eventually help them succeed in life because children with poor reading skills receive poor grades at school, get easily distracted and frustrated, have behavior problems, seem to dislike school, often fail to develop to their full potential and eventually will drop out of school. (Cayubit, 2021). Thus the Philippine government gave priority on developing learners' ability to read and write to promote effective readers and enhance literacy (Davis et al., 2019).

Apparently, in the Philippines, the ability to read and write is our priority. The government puts effort into promoting effective readers and enhancing high literacy. One can be literate, but not necessarily a reader because reading is a skill that requires the development of a habit that must be exercised regularly, if it is to be retained and enhanced.

Consequently, struggling readers can be considered as having a reading disability. A struggling reader is an individual, with a reading disability, who demonstrates difficulties in reading skills that are unexpected in relation to age, cognitive ability, quantity and quality of instruction, and intervention. The reading difficulties are not the result of generalized developmental delay or sensory impairment (Lundberg & Høien, 2019). Reading disability may be characterized by difficulties in single word reading; initial difficulties decoding or sounding out words; difficulties reading sight words; insufficient phonological processing; that is, the understanding that sentences are comprised of words, words are made up of syllables, and syllables are made up of individual sounds or phonemes.

The primary purpose of this study is to explore the live experiences of Grade 4, 5, and 6 struggling readers, and to go deeper into the heart of the issue and to bring forth the point of view,

perceptions, insights and feelings of the participants. Exploring means the gathering of data regarding the participants' challenges, coping mechanisms and insights.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by the learners in their English reading class?
2. What are the coping mechanisms of the learners in overcoming their difficulties in English language reading?
3. What are the insights generated from the experiences of struggling readers in their English reading classes?

Struggling readers cannot recognize words quickly and efficiently. They could not demonstrate high word recognition. They possess weak fluency skills. They read with no good expression, intonation, pitch, and phrasing. To add, struggling readers cannot recognize some letters or words like their own name, classroom labels, signs, and other environmental print (Lundberg & Holen, 2019). In the study made by Johnston, et al (2018) emphasized that learners with very weak reading skills have serious academic problems, which can develop into social problems as they reach the middle and high school years. Through years of failure and labeling, they often develop hard shells of resistance to reading. They compensate with strong auditory and observational skills, generally trying to avoid notice. Feeling helpless and hopeless, they may be vulnerable to anti-social behavior.

Moreover, Stanovich (2019) describes the downward spiral of learners who start out having trouble acquiring alphabetic coding skills and recognizing words. With these barriers, they cannot read for meaning, and find reading increasingly unrewarding. They practice less and have more negative experiences around reading. Increasingly, they avoid reading or merely tolerate it, without really engaging in what's being read. Emotional side effects begin to be associated with school, and the entire school experience is impacted.

To escape from this spiral, learners need an instructional environment that fosters the optimism that they can improve. Motivation must be as important a focus as skills development. Effective programs provide learners access to interesting reading materials at their own levels, opportunities to share reading experiences, activities they choose and direct, interspersed with more prescriptive lessons . . . but above all, effective programs provide instructors who convey a message of faith in the student's capability to achieve success

It is critical that learners with reading difficulties and disabilities are identified early so that the appropriate intervention strategies may be implemented. Learners who have a reading disability require explicit and intensive instruction that is ongoing. Classroom teachers continually assess learners' learning in order to inform instruction.

More so, when teachers have initial concerns about a student's lack of progress, there are many things they can do to support the student. It is important to intervene as soon as the teacher recognizes that a student is falling behind. A suggestion also focuses on working together with parents to identify concerns and to develop a classroom intervention plan. In many situations, these interventions may be effective and no further input may be required. Teachers in reading class need also to be assisted in identifying the source of reading difficulty. Because classroom teachers with possible support of a special educator and/or administrator must discuss concerns with parents/guardians, ensure vision, hearing, and medical assessments are up to date, review cumulative records, collect data through informal assessments, document observations, and identify areas of strengths and difficulties. If there is sufficient information, develop a Classroom Intervention Plan. Based on the research, 90 to 95 percent of poor readers, prevention and early intervention provided by well-trained teachers can increase reading skills to average reading levels (Tankersley, 2021).

These intervention programs must combine instruction in reading comprehension strategies, the language cueing systems including phonemic awareness, phonics, syntax, text, and pragmatic and fluency development. However, there is also evidence to suggest that if we delay intervention until nine years of age, approximately 75 percent of the children continue to have difficulties learning to read throughout high school (Tankersley, 2021). Successful intervention requires that teachers understand the reading processes and instruction, think diagnostically, and use this information on an ongoing basis to inform instruction. Struggling readers need multi-level, flexible, small-group instruction balanced with whole-class instruction in which the teacher models and explicitly teaches reading strategies.

This study is anchored on the theory supported by Lev Vygotsky's Social Development theory, which provides the importance of scaffolding lessons in reading by teachers who are considered as the more knowledgeable others or that affect their learners' zone of proximal development in reading. Balaban as cited in To and Vygotsky (2019) further stressed that scaffolding refers to the way the adult guides the child's learning via focused questions and positive interactions (To & Vygotsky, 2019). Likewise, the reading teacher manages the scaffolding process and may also use sources like worksheets, online materials, and televisions ads to scaffold learners' learning.

Scaffolding is justified as a form of prompting the learners to read based on their existing schema. Karl Jung's Schema Theory provides an archetypal convergence of Vygotsky's theory that propels a connection of meaningful learning experiences, where learners construct their own meanings, in a more constructivist approach of teaching. ("Carl Jung: Analytical Psychology," 1875 as cited by Finn, 2021).

This is also anchored on the traditional theory of reading or the so-called Skill Model wherein it was stated that reading comprehension results in the teaching of reading skills and comprehension separately in a logical and sequential order. This model is also called bottom-up

or data-driven processing model. In this model, letters are taken in a left to right order until such a time that words can be taken as a whole. According to this model, the reader starts reading with letters and, as he attends to them, he begins to have expectations for the words they will spell. As the reader identifies the words, he has further expectations for how they are combined together and what they will mean when assembled into phrases and sentences (Note, 2017).

This study is also anchored on the Psycholinguistic Theory of Reading which states that reading is a process of predicting meaning based on the reader's knowledge of oral language syntax, semantics and phonological cues. Basically, it means that reading is based on the reader's stored knowledge of the oral language (Sheridan, 2018).

This is also based on the more recent theory of reading which is the Schema Theory. According to this theory, the underlying assumption of meaning for the readers does not only depend on the printed material itself, but also in the interaction with the cognitive structure or the schemata or previous knowledge and experiences the reader had in his mind. These schemata are the "ideational scaffolding" that will help the reader understand new information that he will read. So, we can say that the reader's interpretation and understanding of the meaning of the reading material is greatly influenced by the reader's personal background, experiences, knowledge, beliefs and history. As an implication to the teaching and learning process, this theory emphasized that teachers should utilize pre-existing knowledge and experiences of the reader, set clear purposes for reading, and ask appropriate questions before, during and after the reading lessons (Sheridan, 2018).

II. Methodology

This study employs qualitative phenomenological design. This approach collects or gathers, analyzes, interprets, and gives data results that are enabling to answer the research questions and provide further recommendations. It seeks to find out the live experiences and the challenges of struggling readers as they encounter problems and difficulties in their reading class.

The qualitative approach is deemed appropriate for this investigation because Creswell (2019) confirms that it is good to adopt case studies for explorative research, where an analytical approach can be adopted by using theory to collate and investigate experiences or practices.

Creswell (2019) also suggested that the research embark on the quest to understand by entering in the field of perception of participants, seeing how they experienced, live and display the phenomenon, and looking for the meaning of the participants' experiences. Thus, the researcher is interested in this design since Solokowski (2019) believed that phenomenological study contributes to deeper understanding attributed to the individual lived experiences of struggling readers of which according to McBride and Schostak (2018), a quantitative study could not provide.

This study is conducted in the city of Mati particularly in Mayor Santiago Garcia Memorial School. The school is located at Magsaysay, Central, Mati City at Davao Oriental. Purposive sampling is used in the selection of informants.

Participants to this study are the teachers of identified struggling readers of Mayor Santiago Garcia Memorial School of Mati City. Participants are the identified teachers of struggling readers of grade 4, 5, and 6. Struggling readers were identified by the teacher-advisers of the respective grade level who submitted five (5) learners who have grades in English between 75 to 78, and who showed struggles in reading the English language and were interviewed for this study. Aside from these, the key informants are officially enrolled in the identified school, residents of the locality, and willing to participate in the study. The researcher involved fifteen (15) key informants in this study. Seven (7) for the in-depth informants' interview of which Guest et al. (2019) declared more than six (6) is a sufficient number of interviews. According to Guest et al, minimum of six (6) under in-depth interviews will enable development of meaningful themes and useful interpretations. Six (6) teachers were interviewed and participated as participants of the study.

An interview guide is used in the data gathering. This contains three (3) open-ended questions with three (3) sub-questions each that elicit responses on the challenges and coping mechanisms of grade 4, 5, and 6 struggling readers. The interview guide is enhanced by the English master teachers and then validated by the professors at the Graduate School.

Audio recording and field noting were utilized during the participant interviews. Two reading teachers were asked to do hand noting. Tape recording was used accurately to capture the response of the participants.

The data gathered were accurately transcribed into words by carefully listening to their answers through the use of a tape recorder. Next, in field noting during interviews, non-verbal signs of the participants were considered like gestures and facial expressions. Then every significant statement was highlighted because this provided understanding of the participants' experience in their reading activities. Afterwards, the researcher made cluster themes and emerging themes. These themes were used as bases for the result and discussion of the study.

Qualitative data analysis searches to describe general statements about relationships and themes present on the data. Wolcott (2019) states the term analysis is a generic term that embraces the three basic categories when analyzing data: description, analysis, and interpretation. He suggests these categories are not exclusive; neither visibly separated by a line, yet identifying and distinguishing each one may be useful to organize and present the data. In qualitative data, especially content analysis, the data collection and gathering is simultaneously receiving some kind of interpretation. The reading of the data to follow the criteria to inclusion on the database, leads to initial interpretation and understanding of the concepts, and it depends on the researcher, the analysis can begin while collecting data (Marshall & Rossman, 2019). Reflecting over the conceptual framework, and questioning the data, the ideas emerge on categories through the

engagement with the texts. Categories of inclusive patterns and meaning, yet exclusives, are generated according to the existing framework. In a related strategy, themes are discovered within the data, and the researcher creates deductive constructed analysis (Marshall & Rossman, 2018).

III. Results and Discussion

Challenges encountered by the learners in their English reading class

As narrated by students, and oftentimes commented, these are the challenges they have encountered. The responses were uttered in Cebuano (Bisaya). The researcher translated this into English for easy understanding. Their responses were analyzed and coded into themes: *the brain does not work, center of attraction, acting out oud, it began at home, it continued in school, it's not for me at all, the common feeling, the incompetent me, the limelight, it comes from within, it wasn't nursed well, and they're looking for errors.*

Coping mechanisms of the learners in overcoming their difficulties in English language reading

Overcoming difficulties in English language reading was shared by learners and how they have overcome these through this coping mechanism: *acceptance, application, and apathy.*

Insights generated from the experiences of struggling readers in their English reading classes

The challenges and coping mechanisms of learners in their experiences in English language reading produced the following insights from the learners according to teachers: *the compass, the cheerleader, the referee, the English Nazi, and the polyglot.*

Discussion

Speaking challenges influences motivation for students to practice English but generally has more debilitating effects on the English communication skills of students. Speaking difficulties can be reduced when teachers provide more opportunities, preferably practical situations, for students to practice spoken English, and when students apply personal training in reading in English to assist classroom learning.

Reading difficulties can be reduced when children are introduced to the language at an early age. Reading difficulty is inevitable. It is emphasized in the affective domain and requires psychological effort. Proficiency in reading the language can be attained with increased self-confidence, motivation, and coupled with training. Thus, English teachers need to moderate treatment of students' errors in reading in English, establish a friendly classroom interaction and provide activities which require the students to read in the language more often. To add knowledge on the nature of this study, interested researchers may consider the following;

1. Experiment on activities that may reduce anxiety in reading in English.

2. Consider involving a psychologist to aid in gaining better results and recommendation for teachers and students, aside from present published literature related to the topic.
3. Since the present study has been conducted among elementary students, it is also encouraged to conduct the study among high school and college students as there may be differences in the levels of anxiety according to age and academic levels.

Based on the findings of this study, teachers are not competent to teach speaking comprehension. The future direction is that teachers need a lot of in-service teacher training programs to equip them with appropriate pedagogical skills. These trainings can be done nationally, regionally or at school level. This recommendation translates into suggestions that include the following:

Teachers should be encouraged to work collaboratively in their departments and even in their subject associations to help one another on how to eradicate teaching and learning reading comprehension problems. Moreover, there must be proper supervision in schools to ensure efficient and effective teaching and learning of reading comprehension.

English Language markers, especially those who mark reading comprehension should share with teachers their marking experiences and expectations. This will help teachers to teach their learners along those lines so that they can perform better in English reading comprehension.

In relation to an overloaded curriculum, there is a need for key education stakeholders such as the English Language curriculum developers to reduce the number of topics to be taught at Grade10. This will be done in order to accommodate enough time to teach and learn reading comprehension skills and strategies.

It is recommended that schools should ensure adequate English Language textbooks to avoid learners overcrowding on one textbook. The government of Lesotho has established book rental schemes to schools. Similarly, the parents should be willing to pay for those rental books.

Teacher-learner ratio is 1:45 as recommended by UNESCO (2010). However, from the findings of this study, it was discovered that there is an influx of learners in classrooms. It is therefore recommended that the number of learners per teacher be a priority for efficient and effective teaching and learning.

Learners with reading fluency problems do not read smoothly and accurately and that affects their comprehension ability. Concerning the finding and conclusion that learners are unable to read, teachers should find time to drill learners for smooth and fluent reading. The same goes for another finding that learners with comprehension problems do not get support from their teachers. The teachers should support such learners. Perhaps they should find time to give extra classes and assign those learners extra work.

It is further recommended that learners should be exposed to a print-rich environment. This will improve their language proficiency. Extensive readers have wider information, gain wider vocabulary, and have improved language command which help them understand reading passages easily (Hassard, 2019). The schools should have a ready supply of modern novels, newspapers, and magazines so that learners are exposed to a lot of reading. Through reading, learners are exposed to language and that improves their English competence.

Concerning complexity of reading materials, teachers should ensure that reading materials brought to class align with the level of understanding of language for learners. Such reading materials should also have content that stimulates prior knowledge of the learners. This recommendation is made in line with Socio- Cultural theory underpinning this study. The theory highlights that learning should be within the context of the learner for meaningful learning.

With regard to poor comprehension, teachers should provide teaching and learning strategies that promote collaborative modes of learning. This aligns with Socio-cultural theory that during learning, a struggling learner should be supported by the More Knowledgeable Other (adults or peers). When learners are grouped together in a small reading group, that can promote learning ownership, thus better performance.

Based on the findings, learners are not exposed to reading English. It is therefore suggested that learners should be exposed to reading English from as early age as possible. Again, schools should declare schools as English-reading environment (s). Teachers should also stick to English as a medium of instruction and taught as a subject.

This study reveals that for learners to acquire reading comprehension skills and strategies, teachers should teach reading comprehension strategies explicitly. They should first scaffold comprehension activities and slowly pull out from scaffolding to allow learning autonomy. Scaffolding as a teaching technique is supported by Vygotskian Socio-cultural theory.

Lastly, teachers should allow learners to share tasks in their small reading groups. This strategy coils by Socio-cultural theory that knowledge emanates from social contexts and is initially shared with others instead of being plunged upon the mind of an individual.

IV. Conclusion

Fr The studies of Burden (2019), Huimin (2019), and Abdullah, et al. (2020) yielded parallel discoveries when student participants of their studies disclosed that their level of anxiety escalates with the thought of other students being better or more adept in the language than them. Students use classmates as points of comparison and their perceived failure is attributed to the belief that they have less language proficiency than their peers. Ohata (2019) termed this specific anxiety as “the fear of losing ‘face.’ This is particularly experienced by students when their

knowledge and performance in English utterances, grammar use, and other communication means were to be monitored by people around them.

A significant number of the participants also agree that school activities “are not enough” to master the English language. In similar light, related research agrees that many students often complain that they are not given enough chances to practice spoken English, and that opportunities to practice their foreign language skills take place only in the classroom (Gai & Yong, 2020; Liu & Chen, 2019). Additionally, the responses are parallel with the Interdependence Hypothesis pioneered by Cummins which states that proficiency in second language learning will occur, provided that there is adequate exposure to that ‘other’ language either in the school or environment (Hashemi, 2021).

Anxiety takes effect on the English major participants as they are ‘forced’ to accept a role mandated to them despite not having adequate mastery in speaking the language. Fear of being negatively evaluated might become a positive predictor of performance in English (Liu & Huang, 2021). Additionally, the manner of error correction is often cited as a contributor to anxiety. The study of Lucas, et al. (2021) concluded that students are more concerned about how their mistakes are corrected rather than whether error correction should be administered in class.

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