
**AN INQUIRY ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY: FOCUS ON READING
COMPREHENSION LEVELS OF GRADE SIX PUPILS OF MAGUING ELEMENTARY
SCHOOLS**

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to inquire on the English proficiency focused on the reading comprehension levels of grade six pupils coming from five (5) elementary schools in Maguing, Lanao del Sur in order to find possible remedies to their reading problems, specifically, their low performance in qualifying tests for admissions and scholarship tests such as the Freshmen Entrance And Scholarship Examination (FEASE). The researcher utilized a combination of descriptive and quantitative research methodology in gathering data for this study. A self-made reading comprehension test, based on the learning outcomes prescribed for grade six level was also used. Based on the findings, the respondents were able to recognize and understand surface ideas could identify words or thoughts that are explicit in the passage such as characters and setting. In the interpretive level, the respondents were not able to make it to borderline as shown by their very low scores. In the evaluative level, the respondents were able to relate to the story on which it was based. They have inadequate linguistic competence as shown in their writings; hence, they have performed dismally, especially in the higher reading skills. This poor reading comprehension performance is a serious problem, which requires the commitment and involvement of the teachers, parents and administrators in monitoring the learning progress of the pupils. Thus, the teachers, especially in the elementary level should come with engaging strategies and challenging activities that could hone the learners' reading comprehension skills in the literal, interpretive, and evaluative levels.

Keywords: English proficiency, comprehension, performance, reading

INTRODUCTION

Reading among grade six pupils seems not to be fully developed as manifested in their performance in their grade seven, otherwise known as first year high school, English class. Reading comprehension skills, following instructions, English language vocabulary and schema are the most problematic areas encountered in teaching English. In fact, the previous results of the Freshmen Entrance And Scholarship Examination (FEASE) administered to the Grade Six pupils annually by the Mindanao State University-External Units serve as clear proof of the takers' poor reading comprehension. Obviously, these pupils do not have enough vocabulary and schema that play a vital role in reading comprehension. Not only will they have difficulty in dealing with their future tasks in their English tasks, they will also have difficulty in their other subjects as well because of their poor grasp of reading comprehension.

Students from feeder schools, specifically the elementary schools of Maguing, Lanao del Sur are generally passive readers. This can be considered first-hand information. The researcher has observed this situation up close and personal as a teacher and reviewer in one of the feeder schools of the Mindanao State University. She has seen time and time again how inadequately prepared and ill-equipped the students coming from these feeder schools are. How will they be able to understand instructions when they take the FEASE? How will they be able to do their academic tasks when they are in high school and senior high school? How will they fare when they enter college education?

A basic skill that is a cornerstone of a child's success in school and throughout life, is reading. A child who has not learned to read well, loses opportunities for personal fulfilment and job success (Anderson et al., 2008). Reading in today's world is an important skill for English language learners. It fosters the overall proficiency development and enables access to important information at work and school settings (English Teaching Forum Vol. 47 Number 3, 2009). Reading is one of the most rewarding developments of the individual, expanding his horizons and making it possible to explore the world around or even single out information that is valuable for everyone. A subtle and complex process, reading involves sensation, comprehension, perception, application, and integration (Gatmaitan et al., 1987).

Pupils' interests in reading must be enhanced and motivated to achieve the goals of reading. Then skills must be equally developed as much as possible to apply their skills in their listening, speaking, reading and writing lessons. The selection of textbooks and primary texts, ancillary resources, and materials for classroom use has a weighty impact on student motivations to read and engage with the texts. Texts should be complementary to the students' levels of intellect, and must have appropriate levels of difficulty. Difficulty sources for readers in L2 include background knowledge assumptions, assumptions of culture, complexities in grammar, topic demands, length of texts, updated knowledge, organization, unusual formats and vocabulary. Free-reading materials should be ideally be easily accessible, plentiful, attractive, and available for learners outside of class (Day and Bamford, 1998).

Literature Cited

Numerous studies regarding reading comprehension among pupils and students from all levels of education have been conducted by various researchers. These point to the various strategies and ways that have been used to improve students'/pupils' reading comprehension skills, with varied results.

Caburnal (2009) conducted an inquiry on the possible differential effects of CD-assisted technique on the reading comprehension of Misamis Occidental National High School students, SY 2008— 2009. For this study entitled "Differential Effects of CD-Assisted Technique on the Reading Comprehension of High School Students of Misamis Occidental National High School," Caburnal used quasi-experimental and descriptive-correlational designs as necessitated by the limited number of respondents in the programs of the school.

Two sections in each of the three programs of the school — Special Science Program, Special Program in the Arts, and Regular Program were assigned randomly to the experimental group and the group that served as the control. The former was exposed to the CD—assisted technique in reading. In the execution of this technique, a recorded selection on CD was played while the readers were reading the selection. After the pretest, the experimental group was exposed to three interventions using the CD-assisted technique to acquaint them well enough with it. This treatment lasted for one week before the posttest was administered to the two groups.

The F-test was used to analyze the difference between the results of the pretest and posttest of both groups on the following comprehension levels: literal, interpretative, and evaluative. The Pearson's Product Moment correlation was employed to correlate the independent variables (age, gender, mental ability, monthly income of the family, and average grade in Grade VI English) with the dependent variable, reading comprehension of the respondents. The study revealed significant differences between between the following: 1) the mean scores of the literal comprehension skills of the experimental and control groups; 2) the means of the posttest on the evaluative skills of the two groups 3) the pretest and posttest scores of the posttest evaluative skills; and 4) the pretest and posttest scores of the post evaluative skills. Mental ability was found to have a low significant correlation with the respondents' reading performance while age had a low insignificant correlation with the same. It was further found that the two groups did not have comparable scores in terms of their literal comprehension skills, implying that the variables may have affected the performance of the students. The experimental group's posttest scores for the evaluative skills showed more significant improvement than that of the control group. This improvement is strengthened by the significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group. This warrants the conclusion that the CD—assisted technique worked for the treatment group in this particular area. Evaluative skills can be enhanced with the aid of the technique on trial in Caburnal's study. As regards the literal and interpretative comprehension skills, the insignificant differences between the scores obtained in these areas could be attributed to some variables. The CD-assisted technique did not have any impact worth noting; it yielded the same result as the traditional techniques.

Mangate (2008) designed a descriptive-correlational study to determine the reading comprehension level of the respondents and what proper teaching intervention strategy could significantly influence their reading comprehension level. The chosen research site was a trade school in Marawi City, the Lanao National College of Arts and Trades (LNCAT). Findings revealed that, both the control and experimental groups failed to make the grades in terms of the three levels of reading comprehension. Females performed better than males in reading. It was, however, surmised that this particular result could be attributed to the specimen texts being more appealing to female readers. In both stories, the protagonists are females representing or exemplifying feminine concerns or interests. The use of teaching strategies (in this case, literary texts) in teaching reading comprehension had an effect on the students. There was a significant difference between outcome of the 7-paired sample T- test for the pretest and posttest of the control group, signifying that the mean score of literal pretest is greater than the mean score of literal posttest. Further, the mean score of application pretest is less than the mean score of application posttest. Regarding the control group's literal pretest and posttest mean scores, the

mean score of the literal pretest is greater. The same group's application posttest menu score is greater through that of the application pretest. This implied that the method of instruction used was not effective since there was no consistent improvement in all levels of reading comprehension.

On the other hand, the T-test results for the paired sample between pretest and posttest scores of the group (experimental) showed that the mean score of literal posttest is greater than the menu score of literal pretest. The interpretative pretest and posttest results suggest a significant difference in the mean score. The mean score of interpretative pretest is less than that of the posttest. The application pretest and posttest results further provide sufficient support or evidence of a significant difference in the mean scores of the students the mean score of application pretest is less than that of the posttest. The total scores of pretest and posttest supported the finding of a significant difference in the mean scores of students on the pretest and posttest; the mean score of pretest total score is less than the mean score of posttest total score. As the foregoing results show, the intervention strategy applied worked to a certain extent for the experimental or treatment group. This conclusion is borne out by the improved scores on the posttest total score. There was a significant difference in all reading comprehension levels in the case of the experimental group. The discernible improvement can be justifiably attributed to the intervention.

Paz (2018) conducted a study to determine the reading comprehension levels in English of Grade 7 students in Caraga State University Philippines. It obtained the respondents' profile and the factors that were perceived as determinants of the students' levels of reading comprehension in terms of reading materials available at school, and reading habits. Data was gathered using a researcher-made questionnaire, which was distributed among 132 participants. There was no significant relationship found between the participants' profile and the factors determining their levels of reading comprehension. Intervention programs are highly suggested to improve the students' reading comprehension.

Sanopao (2016) conducted a school-based action research to address the effect of reading fluency and comprehension remediation in learning ESL. The researcher further determined if the reading program of Kimagango High School has significant impact on the reading comprehension skills of the students. The participants in the study are the 34 students of Grade 7 Amethyst of Kimagango High School, Kimagango, Midsayap, Cotabato, Philippines. Results showed that the in-house reading program of the school had a significant effect on the reading comprehension skills of the students, with females scoring higher than males.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a combination of descriptive and quantitative methodology in gathering data for this study. Descriptive method of research was used to describe and determine the following: the demographic profile of the respondents using a modified personal background questionnaire, patterned after that of Balut (1985) and Araya (1999); the respondents' reading comprehension in terms of the literal, interpretative and evaluation levels using a self-made questionnaire based on the learning outcomes prescribed for English Six level; their English

proficiency levels focused on the reading comprehension using a modified version of the English Language Proficiency Tests (ELPT) of the Language Center in the Mindanao State University. Moreover, the quantitative method through the use of statistical tools such as frequency and percentage distribution, and weighted mean was used to elucidate the findings of this study. For triangulation, the researcher made use of interview and classroom observation to validate the responses of the respondents.

This study covered five (5) elementary schools of Maguing, Lanao del Sur, namely: Bolao-Dilausan Central Elementary School, Borocot Central Elementary School, Candanga—Malungun Elementary School, Malungun Elementary School and Siawadato Elementary School. They serve as the feeder schools of MSU-Siawadato Community High School, which administers the Freshmen Entrance And Scholarship Examination (FEASE) under the guidance of the Office of the Vice Chancellor for External Units. These pupils are required to enrol at the MSU- Siawadato Community High School Summer Bound Program offered every summer for the incoming 1st year and 4th year high school students. The results of the FEASE manifested that the respondents need further help in order to improve their performance, particularly in the reading comprehension area which is a predictor or determiner of success in the higher year levels. Ostensibly, one of the main objectives of requiring these pupils to take the FEASE is to attract and encourage them to enrol in MSU-Siawadato to provide them access to quality education.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were the 70 Grade Six pupils of Maguing Elementary schools namely: Bolao-Dilausan Central Elementary School, Borocot Central Elementary School, Candanga—Malungun Elementary School, Malungun Elementary School and Siawadato Elementary School. As earlier explained, only seventy (70) Grade Six pupils enrolled for SY 2011-2012. This is evident in the following pupil distribution by school: Siawadato Elementary School has the highest number with 35 students; Malungun Elementary School with 17; Borocot Central Elem. School with 13; Bolao — Dilausan Central Elementary School with 12; and Candanga — Malungun Elementary School listing only 9 students. Due to this small number, they were all taken as respondents for this study.

To gather the needed data for the demographic profile of the respondents, the researcher utilized a modified personal background questionnaire, patterned after that of Balut (1985) and Araya (1999). There was no separate questionnaire for Socio—Economic Status (SES) / family status, since it was included in the participants' background questionnaire modified by the researcher. The SES comprised the educational attainment, occupation, and monthly income of the respondents' parents.

For the reading comprehension levels of the respondents, a modified reading comprehension test based on the learning outcomes established for Grade Six level, as well as a modified English proficiency test patterned after the Mindanao State University's English Language Proficiency Test (ELPT) were administered at the start of the study. The ELPT consists of the Test of Language Use (TLU) and the Test of Spoken English (TSE) as well as the Test of Written

English (TWE). These tests were used to reinforce the data on the reading comprehension levels of the respondents.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS

The study was an attempt at a kind of assessment. It aimed to describe and determine the English proficiency levels focused on the reading comprehension levels such as literal, interpretive, and evaluative levels of the respondents. Who are incoming students of MSU-Siawadato in the following year. Specifically it also described the socio-demographic profile of the respondents in terms of age, family size, gender, parents' occupation, income, and educational attainment. The study was prompted by the poor performance of the respondents in the FEASE. An adapted and partly self-made questionnaire patterned after Balut (1985), Araya (1999) and Estrada-Manubag (2005) and another self-made reading comprehension test prescribed for Grade Six level was designed for the purpose of determining the performance of the respondents in the three levels of reading comprehension - literal, interpretive, and evaluative. The analysis and interpretation of data gathered yielded the following:

1. Many of the respondents, 27 (36%), are 13 years old followed by those aged 12 and 14 respectively, and only 1 (1.5%) to both 9 and 15 years old turned up. This could only mean that children in rural areas like those covered in the study begin schooling at age 7 and reach Grade Six at age 12-13.
2. Majority of the respondents, 45 (64%) are females and only 25 (36%) are males which only confirms or validates the consistently reported numerical dominance of females in school.
3. Many respondents, 30 (43%) belong to families with 7-9 family members. Meranaos prefer large families for socio-economic reasons.
4. Many of the respondents, 32 (46%) have fathers who finished elementary because majority in the area are farmers, being blessed with fertile farm land.
5. Many of the mothers, 27 (38%) finished elementary grade only and this is the reason why majority of them, 51 (73%) are jobless or are limited to being housekeepers.
6. Majority of the fathers, 54 (77%) are farmers because majority of them, 52 (74%) finished elementary grade only. The data on fathers' occupation and educational attainment show congruence or agreement.
7. Majority of the respondents' mothers, 50 (71%) are jobless or are housekeepers because many of them finished only elementary or high school at the most. The data on mothers' occupation and educational attainment show congruence or agreement.
8. Majority of the fathers, 50 (71%) are receiving income below 5,000 pesos because most of them are farmers who do not own the land they till, hence they only get a share or portion of the harvest.

9. 9, Majority or 47 (67%) of the mothers have an income below 5,000 pesos because most of them are housekeepers.
10. As the classroom observations revealed, teachers used the traditional (structured— based) method or the deductive method- Most of the time, the teacher does the talking; student talk is very limited or minimal.
11. The respondents' performance in the English language proficiency test is dismal. All the scores obtained were below the cut-off score of 43/85. They were all assessed as Novice-Mid. With evidence from the TWE part of the ELPT, the kind of English produced by the respondents is a pidginized form of the language. This denotes a reduced or simplified variety not unlike the pidgin developed by people who do not speak a common tongue and must make shift by developing a contact language to be able to communicate with one another.
12. The respondents found comprehension at the literal level easier compared to
13. interpretive and evaluative level. This implies that the respondents are able to recognize surface ideas or information They could identify words thought of the passage. They can identify words, main ideas, characters, setting and the series of events. In the interpretive level, the respondents were not able to make it to borderlines they got very low scores on the interpretive part of the test. In the evaluative level the respondents were able to relate to the story on which the story was based. However, teachers in the elementary level must balance their questions in terms of literal, interpretive and evaluative questions to develop better comprehension. This result was used as basis for performance in the reading comprehension test:

For the literal level, the boys obtained 76 and the girls obtained 180. For the interpretive level, the boys scores dropped to 44 while the girls plunged to 33. For the evaluative level, the boys scored slightly 61 while girls scored 100 (30%).

As to the weighted mean for the boys, comparing to three levels of reading comprehension test is the result 65.5 (35%) and as to the weighted mean for reading comprehension test is 124.9 (65%) for the girls. As to the standard mean for the boys, comparing to the three levels of reading comprehension test, the final result is 56.7; for the girls it is 108/160 or (65%). In short, these pupils performed well in the literal level, but registered a low performance in the interpretive and for evaluative level they turned in an average performances.

CONCLUSIONS

The respondents' demographic profile, particularly then families' socio—economic status, revealed an immediate environment that is not nurturing or supportive enough in fostering love and motivation for, or interest in, reading. Parents of the many respondents finished only elementary or high school at most. Most of these parents are farmers. The home of such families is not expected to be high print or acquisition-rich. The family's very limited income does not have room for needs other than basic ones — e.g., learning aids or materials and special forms of remediation like tutorials to address the problem of some children/pupils.

Moreover, the limited educational attainment of those parents does not make them competent caretakers of their children. They cannot exert positive influence on the latter in the area of interest under study — e.g. reading. Parents cannot give or transmit to their children what they themselves do not have. Allowances must of course be made for exceptions. The failing scores of the respondents on the ELPT provide intimations, or hint at, reading comprehension problems. Interest in language and the ability that this develops is essential to interest in reading and the development of reading skills. Poor or limited proficiency inevitably spells poor or limited reading comprehension. Pupils who find the language foreign or as undecipherable as Egyptian hieroglyphics will find reading a torture. This is borne out by the respondents turning out to be not too good in reading comprehension performance in the interpretive level.

It was found out also that majority of the respondents were good in literal comprehension while in the interpretive their performance was low and in the evaluative they got an overall score that can be qualitatively described as only average. The results of the tests administered are symptomatic of an alarming condition which demands remedial measures. The respondents like the UTC Developmental Campus students in the study of Panbangan (2009) are at risk of learning difficulties or even disability when they enter high school. In fact, there is even serious doubt about them qualifying for admission to secondary education.

Implications

With the findings and conclusions, the following implications were drawn. Reading comprehension is one of the areas in reading instruction program for elementary grades that need the immediate and serious, sustained attention of both school administrators and the teachers. To reiterate, the language skills of the respondents are qualitatively described as poor, and their reading comprehension level nearly as poor or below average. Since the vital role of language in the learning process is an incontrovertible fact, these are only two possibilities when they get into a high school class: swim or sink. Their case can be compared to the immigrants in the United States who are placed in the default mode of bilingual program known as subversion. Secondary education being more cognitively and linguistically demanding, the possibility of failure or sinking is greater. Few are expected to survive as they negotiate the rough passage from the first through the fourth/fifth year. The number of dropouts is likely to rise as these ill-prepared, limited English proficient students, plod their way to the higher grade levels.

These are disturbing implications. The locus of the problem must be determined and attacked with appropriate measures or strategies. It could be something in the learners' background and home, immediate environment and beyond this, the macro—context which encompasses the school and the kind of learning environment it provides, and further, the kind of support the larger community extends to the education of the young.

Pupils should be provided with sufficient reading materials by their teachers for them to develop interest in reading and be motivated to read more and more. Only through increased time given to reading can those pupils upgrade their comprehension level. It is known that much of the schoolwork depends on one's reading comprehension since this is an essential tool for

learning in all subject areas, hence, the urgency of this concern. On reading skills depends students' academic achievement or success.

Among the three levels of reading comprehension, the respondents proved more developed in the literal level. This implies that the pupils who participated in this study have the ability to understand the "simple facts" or surface information that were clearly stated in the passage like matters of place and time or what, when, what, and WH questions and they could recall such details. There is no problem with memory or retention. What is evident is, these pupils need further training in the interpretative and evaluative levels which involve higher order skills and processes like referencing, analysis, establishing relationships, and drawing conclusions.

Teachers need to provide more opportunities for vigorous exercise or practice through evaluation on these levels to sharpen the pupils' critical thinking. They should, perhaps, reflect on their own approach and strategies to make sure that these stimulate or motivate their pupils to rise to the higher levels. Like writing, reading requires strong motivation. Young learners can be aided with proper scaffolding and guided in their passage through their zone of proximal development. With the ZPD, the pupils are guided to perform above their level of individual competence and with the help of some mediational tools can reach beyond their present capability. Failure to develop necessary skills predictably results in failure for the Grade Six pupils in the secondary level. The commitment and involvement of parents, teachers and administrators are of the essence. Reading materials to enhance reading skills must be made available to learners, for a start. There should be more reading—based activities.

Recommendations

Based on the findings, conclusions and implications of the study, the following recommendations are advanced.

1. Parents should take an active role in encouraging, motivating and providing the needs of their children pertaining to reading materials and activities. Parents are the best advocates of their child's education.
2. These pupils should be given more support in learning the English language skills since language is an indispensable tool for learning. They cannot go far without mastering this tool.
3. Teachers should go the extra mile by extending remedial time to pupils who are not doing well in class. They must take more seriously the 'to child left behind' motto.
4. Teachers should provide interactive, integrative learning situations for the pupils. They could also provide training in cognitive and metacognitive learning strategies. They should try out interactive reading and other approaches or techniques like games to promote interest in learning the English language with young learners,
5. English teachers and parents should work in concert in monitoring and following up of pupils' performance. Teachers should devise creative means for encouraging reading of a variety of reading materials,
6. Teachers should help develop a positive attitude towards reading English materials to improve pupils' reading comprehension especially in the interpretive and evaluative level.

Teachers can, perhaps organize a Readers' Club/ Readers' Hub/Booksale that puts on display and give access to a variety of printed reading materials.

7. Teachers must be updated on the current trends in teaching. They must be fully aware of suitable approaches and methods for reading and creative thinking. Attending seminar-workshops and other training programs can address this need.
8. Parents themselves must educate and empower themselves so they could perform their tasks or responsibility as caretakers and advocates for the education of their children. Reading materials like books, magazines, journals and encyclopedia must be made available to these pupils at home to "open the magic casements" and new horizons for young learners.
9. School administrators should strictly supervise their teachers so that effective teaching—learning process is ensured.
10. School administrators are encouraged to have a reading clinic for their late bloomer pupils to promote higher learning, or a reading hub to provide every learner the opportunity to explore the wonders of reading.
11. For further study, the following topics are suggested:
 - a. A study on the teachers' methods and approaches — actual classroom practices used in the classroom;
 - b. A study on the behavior, attitudes, and motivation of the pupils towards reading and English language learning.
 - c. A study on factors affecting the reading performance of the Grade Six pupils.
 - d. A study on Grade Six pupils learning strategies, particularly those having to do with English language learning and wading.
 - e. A study on the teachers' teaching strategies, practices and materials used in classroom

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