

Reading performance and difficulties of grade 7 learners: Basis for strategic intervention

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Abstract

Reading is a fundamental skill crucial for academic success and personal development. Despite years of instruction, 106 Grade 7 students at Candon National High School continue to struggle with reading, as evidenced by the Phil-IRI pretest results. The students demonstrated significant difficulties in word recognition, reading fluency, and comprehension. To investigate these challenges and propose potential interventions, the researcher employed a convergent parallel mixed-methods design. Quantitative data were obtained from individualized Phil-IRI posttest assessments, while qualitative data were collected through interview questionnaires. The integration of both data sets provided a comprehensive understanding of the learners' reading difficulties. Findings revealed that students performed Excellent in word recognition with an overall mean score of 4.77, but scored significantly lower in other areas. Emerging in fluency with an overall mean of 2.25 and Beginning in reading comprehension with an overall mean of 1.75. These results indicate that while learners can recognize words effectively, they struggle with reading smoothly and understanding what they read. In conclusion, Grade 7 learners at Candon National High School face notable literacy challenges, particularly in fluency and comprehension. To address these issues, the study recommends incorporating Pictionary as an intervention strategy to enhance the vocabulary skills of the learners. This interactive visual game approach can engage students actively while expanding their word knowledge and improving reading fluency. Future researchers are encouraged to explore the effectiveness of Pictionary and other interactive strategies for supporting struggling readers.

Keywords: Phil-IRI assessment, reading, word recognition, fluency, reading comprehension

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1. Introduction

Literacy, the ability to read, write, and communicate effectively, is a cornerstone of education and personal empowerment. It encompasses not only reading and writing, but also critical thinking, digital literacy, and the capacity to understand and apply information across different contexts. Reading, as a fundamental component of literacy, is a complex cognitive process that involves decoding symbols and constructing meaning. Effective reading requires skills such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, comprehension strategies, and the ability to connect new information to prior knowledge. Reading supports academic, personal, and professional growth by enhancing comprehension, critical thinking, empathy, and creativity. According to Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998), reading is vital for learning across all subjects, while Smith (2004) highlights that it is both perceptual and intellectual in nature. Despite global progress in literacy rates, with UNESCO reporting 86% literacy in 2024 compared to 68% in 1979, challenges persist. Around 754 million adults and 250 million children still lack basic literacy skills.

International assessments like PISA reveal significant literacy challenges in the Philippines. The 2022 PISA results showed minimal improvement from 2018, with less than a quarter of Filipino students achieving the minimum proficiency level in reading, math, and science. Only 24% reached Level 2 in reading compared to the 74% OECD average. Furthermore, Filipino students ranked among the lowest in creative thinking and comprehension of abstract or complex texts. Other assessments, such as TIMSS (2019) and SEA-PLM (2020), also reflect the Philippines' poor performance, with Filipino Grade 5 students ranking near the bottom in reading and math. Only 10% achieved minimum reading proficiency. The World Bank (2022) noted a staggering 91% learning poverty rate in the country, indicating that nine out of ten ten-year-olds struggle to read and understand simple texts.

To address these issues, the Department of Education launched the Basic Education Exit Assessment (BEEA) in 2018-2019 to evaluate learners' critical 21st-century skills. Results showed low proficiency in problem-solving, information literacy, and critical thinking. These findings echoed global assessments and emphasized the urgent need for curriculum reform. Consequently, the MATATAG Curriculum was implemented in the 2024-2025 school year, focusing on applied literacy skills, genre-based learning, and communicative competence in English and Filipino.

Despite reforms, literacy challenges remain. In Candon National High School, 106 Grade 7 students were classified under the Frustration Level in reading based on the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI). These learners showed signs such as monotonous reading, inaudible voice, neglect of punctuation, and lack of comprehension strategies. The persistent reading difficulties highlight the need for targeted interventions tailored to specific learner needs. Teachers play a critical role in identifying these difficulties and employing strategies like guided reading, phonics, and vocabulary building. Understanding the unique struggles of learners at the Frustration Level is essential for crafting effective, evidence-based interventions. With appropriate support, these students can improve their reading skills, perform better academically, and grow into confident, independent learners.

Research Questions - The study aimed to determine the reading difficulties of the Grade 7 Learners of Candon National High School who were pre-assessed with Frustration Level using the Individualized Phil-IRI Posttest Assessment and Interview Questionnaire. Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

- What is the level of reading performance of Grade 7 learners who were pre-assessed with Frustration

Level in terms of Word Recognition, Fluency (Reading Speed, Accuracy, Prosody), and Comprehension?

- What are the reading difficulties experienced by Grade 7 learners who were pre-assessed with Frustration Level?
- What intervention strategy can be recommended to address the identified reading difficulties of the learners?

2. Methodology

Research Design - This study employed a convergent parallel research design, a mixed-method approach that involves collecting and analyzing quantitative and qualitative data simultaneously to gain a comprehensive understanding of a research problem (Creswell & Clark, 2018). Quantitative data was derived from the Phil-IRI Posttest Assessments, measuring the extent of reading performance among respondents. In contrast, qualitative data was gathered through interviews, offering insights into the root causes of reading difficulties. By integrating both data sets, the study ensured stronger validation of findings, enabling the researcher to confirm statistical trends with personal experiences. This revealed factors such as lack of reading interest, vocabulary gaps, and ineffective teaching strategies. The goal of using this design was to harness the strengths of both methods for a holistic analysis (Fetters, Curry & Creswell, 2013), ultimately leading to evidence-based interventions that address not only the severity but also the underlying causes of reading challenges, thereby helping educators tailor strategies to meet the specific needs of struggling readers.

Participants - The study was conducted at Candon National High School, Candon City, Ilocos Sur. The respondents of the study were 79 grade 7 learners of Candon National High School who were pre-assessed under Frustration level. Frustration level on the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) is the lowest reading level, where learners struggle to read and respond to the material. Using purposive sampling, the researcher selected the respondents based on the results of the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) Pretest Assessment. According to Crossman (2020), a purposive sample is a non-probability sample selected based on the characteristics of a population and the objective of the study.

Intervention - Pictionary as an intervention to improve students' vocabulary skills. This interactive drawing game enhances learning by pairing words with visuals, making it easier for students to understand and remember meanings. Research by Chung (2023) and Azma (2017) supports the effectiveness of visual aids in vocabulary acquisition. The proposed offline version will include vocabulary words with corresponding images, helping students recall and use them in context. This approach benefits visual learners and increases motivation through fun, collaborative play. Ultimately, Pictionary offers an engaging, evidence-based method to strengthen vocabulary and boost overall language proficiency.

Instrumentation and Data Collection - The research instrument used in this study was the adapted Individualized Phil-IRI Posttest Assessment, which was utilized to evaluate learners' word reading and fluency skills through oral reading of a given passage, and their comprehension skills through a series of follow-up questions. As the Phil-IRI Posttest was adapted for the purposes of this study, no validity testing was conducted for this instrument. However, to supplement this tool and to gather qualitative data, a semi-structured interview guide was developed and used immediately after the individualized reading assessment. This interview guide aimed to explore learners' reading experiences, difficulties, and strategies in more depth. The interview guide was validated by five (5) experts in the fields of reading education and educational assessment, who provided a validity score of 4.66, described as Very Highly Valid. This validation ensured the reliability and appropriateness of the qualitative data collection tool.

For data analysis, the quantitative data gathered from the Phil-IRI posttest results were analyzed using descriptive statistics, specifically to determine the levels of word recognition, reading fluency, and reading

comprehension of the participants. These results were used to categorize learner performance. Meanwhile, the qualitative data collected from the interview responses were analyzed thematically. This involved organizing participants' responses into emerging themes and subthemes related to their reading behaviors, difficulties, and comprehension challenges. Patterns and commonalities in learner responses were carefully examined to support the interpretation of the quantitative findings and to provide a richer understanding of the learners' reading experiences. To ensure ethical integrity, the researcher strictly adhered to the principles of research ethics. Informed consent was obtained from all participants and guardians, and confidentiality and voluntary participation were maintained throughout the study.

3. Results

Table 1

Level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in word recognition.

Word Reading Score Level	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Excellent	63	79.7
Proficient	14	17.7
Satisfactory	2	2.5
Needs Improvement	0	0
Poor	0	0
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	4.77	Excellent

The table indicates that majority of the respondents demonstrated a high level of word recognition. Out of 79 respondents, 79.7% fall within the Excellent level, signifying that they can recognize words with ease, even unfamiliar or complex ones, with automaticity and minimal effort. Meanwhile, 17.7% of the respondents achieved a Proficient level, meaning they can recognize most words accurately and fluently, though they may occasionally pause or make minor errors with challenging vocabulary. Only 2.5% of the respondents were categorized as Satisfactory level, indicating that while they recognize common words, they struggle with multisyllabic or less familiar ones, leading to occasional mispronunciations or hesitations. Notably, no participants fell into the Needs Improvement or Poor level, which suggests that none of the respondents in the group struggle significantly with word recognition. With the overall mean of 4.77, which corresponds to an Excellent level, the data reveals that the participants have strong word reading skills, with the majority demonstrating proficiency and a significant portion achieving excellence.

Table 2.1

Final level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in fluency

Reading Accuracy Level	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Excellent	0	0
Proficient	1	1.3
Developing	19	24
Emerging	44	55.7
Needs Improvement	15	19
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	2.25	Emerging

The reading fluency performance of Grade 7 learners indicates that a significant portion still faces challenges in achieving smooth and expressive reading. More than half of the learners, 55.7%, are at a level where they struggle with fluency, frequently hesitating and lacking expression. Additionally, 19% fall within the lowest level, characterized by slow reading, numerous errors, and a choppy, robotic delivery. While 24% of learners demonstrate moderate fluency with occasional hesitations and some issues with expression, only 1.3% reach a high level of fluency, with minor lapses in speed, accuracy, or expression. No learners have attained the highest level of reading fluency. The overall mean score of 2.25 places the majority in a stage where fluency is still developing, indicating a need for focused interventions to improve speed, accuracy, and expressive reading.

Table 2.2 specifically focuses on the reading speed levels of Grade 7 learners, measuring their fluency based on the number of words they can read per minute (WPM). Among the 79 learners assessed, 50.6% are at the

Emerging level, reading at a speed of 60–89 WPM, while 27.8% fall under the Needs Improvement level, reading below 60 WPM, indicating significant struggles with reading fluency. Additionally, 15.2% of the learners are at the Developing level, reading between 90–119 WPM. Only four demonstrate higher reading speed, with 5.1% reaching the Proficient level (120–149 WPM) and just one student, or 1.3%, attaining the Excellent level, reading at 150+ WPM. The overall mean reading speed of the learners is classified as Emerging (60–89 WPM), emphasizing the need for targeted interventions to improve their reading speed.

Table 2.2

Level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in fluency in terms of reading speed.

Reading Speed Level	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Excellent	1	1.3
Proficient	4	5.1
Developing	12	15.2
Emerging	40	50.6
Needs Improvement	22	27.8
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	2.01	Emerging

Table 2.3

Level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in fluency terms of accuracy.

Reading Accuracy Level	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Excellent	0	0
Proficient	3	3.8
Developing	17	21.5
Emerging	38	48.1
Needs Improvement	21	26.6
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	2.03	Emerging

The data in Table 2.3 focuses on the reading accuracy levels of Grade 7 learners, evaluating their ability to read words correctly. Among the 79 learners assessed, 48.1% fall within the Emerging level, demonstrating an accuracy rate of 80-89%. Additionally, 26.6% are at the Needs Improvement level, with an accuracy rate below 80%, indicating significant difficulties in reading words correctly. Meanwhile, 21.5% are at the Developing level, achieving an accuracy rate of 90-94%. Only 3.8% have reached the Proficient level, with an accuracy rate of 95-97%, and no learners have attained the Excellent level of 98-100% accuracy. The overall mean reading accuracy level is classified as Emerging (80-89%), highlighting the need for interventions to improve learners' reading accuracy.

Table 2.4

Level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in fluency terms of prosody.

Reading Prosody Level	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Excellent	0	0
Proficient	0	0
Developing	57	72.2
Emerging	22	27.8
Needs Improvement	0	0
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	2.72	Developing

The reading performance of Grade 7 learners in terms of fluency, specifically prosody, indicates that the majority fall within the Developing level, with 72.2% or 57 learners. These learners exhibited some monotony, unnatural pauses, and limited expression while reading. A smaller proportion of 27.8% are at the Emerging level, characterized by word-by-word reading with little or no expression and frequent hesitations. Notably, no learners were assessed as Excellent, Proficient, or in the Needs Improvement category, suggesting that while learners are not at the lowest level, there is still a significant need for improvement in expressive reading skills. The overall mean score of 2.72 confirms that, on average, learners are at the Developing level, indicating a need for targeted interventions to enhance fluency and prosody.

Table 3
Level of reading performance of grade 7 learners in reading comprehension

Reading Comprehension	Frequency	Frequency Percentage
Advanced	0	0
Proficient	0	0
Satisfactory	15	19
Developing	29	36.7
Beginning	35	44.3
Total	79	100
Overall Mean	1.75	Beginning

The reading comprehension performance of Grade 7 learners reveals that a large portion struggles significantly with understanding texts. Nearly half of the learners, 44.3%, are at a level where they show little to no understanding, struggling to identify main ideas, supporting details, or make meaningful connections. Another 36.7% demonstrated a basic grasp of ideas but face challenges in interpretation, deeper comprehension, and drawing inferences. Only 19% can understand main ideas but still encounter difficulties with details and complex concepts. Notably, no learners have reached a level where they can fully understand, analyze, and evaluate information effectively. The overall mean score of 1.75 indicates that the majority of learners are at the early stages of comprehension development and require substantial support to improve their ability to process and interpret written material.

4. Discussion

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Word Recognition - Word recognition is the ability to identify written words by sight or by connecting spoken sounds with written letters. Interview responses from participants showed that most learners performed at an **excellent level**, easily recognizing words while reading and self-correcting when minor errors occurred. For example, some learners reported rarely struggling with word recognition and could quickly reread and correct misread words. However, a few learners faced challenges, especially with **long or multisyllabic words**, which caused pauses, mispronunciations, or skipping of words. Some also confused similar-looking words, such as “every” and “very,” leading to comprehension issues. These difficulties align with findings from **Toste, Williams, and Capin (2016)**, who noted that learners with reading difficulties often struggle with complex word forms. The study recommends **explicit instruction in syllabification and morphological awareness**, suggesting strategies like teaching word parts and chunking to help improve word recognition. While most learners in the current study excelled in this area, targeted support is essential for those struggling with longer and visually similar words.

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Reading Speed - Reading speed is the rate at which a person reads, usually measured in words per minute (WPM), and is influenced by factors like vocabulary, familiarity with the text, and complexity. While reading too fast can reduce understanding, reading too slowly can affect efficiency. In this study, most learners reported reading at a **slow, deliberate pace**, frequently **pausing** to pronounce words correctly and ensure comprehension. They preferred to read carefully, especially when facing unfamiliar words or long sentences, showing a developing fluency where **word recognition remains a conscious effort**. These pauses were intentional, aimed at minimizing mistakes and improving understanding. For example, learners expressed that reading fast led to confusion, so they took their time to process the text accurately. While this slower pace might reduce fluency, it reflects a strategy to boost accuracy and comprehension. This mirrors **Bulilan’s (2015)** findings, which showed that slower readers often had lower comprehension, highlighting the need to balance speed with understanding. In summary, learners’ slow reading speed is not a weakness but a conscious approach to build fluency and comprehension, especially when navigating difficult vocabulary.

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Reading Accuracy - Reading accuracy is the ability to correctly recognize and pronounce words during reading, which is essential for effective comprehension. In this study, many participants reported difficulties in maintaining reading accuracy, especially when reading aloud. Common issues included skipping unfamiliar words and mispronunciations, particularly with complex vocabulary. These

challenges hinder fluency and disrupt understanding of the text. A significant factor influencing these reading errors was emotional discomfort. Several learners shared that they feel nervous or self-conscious when reading aloud in front of others. This anxiety often leads to more mistakes, as fear of judgment or ridicule from classmates negatively affects focus and confidence. Even students who knew the correct pronunciation admitted to making errors due to nervousness. One participant mentioned avoiding difficult words entirely, while another described making errors simply because they felt shy in front of the class.

These experiences reveal the close relationship between affective factors and reading performance. Emotional barriers such as fear, embarrassment, and anxiety can limit students' ability to read accurately and confidently. Supporting this, Fajardo (2018) found that Filipino learners who experienced high levels of anxiety during oral reading were more likely to make mistakes in pronunciation and word recognition. The study emphasizes the need to create a safe and encouraging classroom environment where students feel comfortable reading aloud without fear of negative feedback. Addressing emotional barriers and providing consistent, supportive reading practice can help improve accuracy, boost confidence, and enhance overall reading fluency for struggling readers.

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Prosody - Prosody refers to the rhythm, intonation, and expression used while reading aloud, playing a key role in fluency and comprehension. It helps convey meaning, emotion, and structure through elements such as pitch, stress, and phrasing. However, findings from the study show that many learners struggle with prosody, often reading in a monotone voice without expression or proper pausing. Most respondents shared that their primary focus is reading words correctly, rather than using appropriate tone or emotion. Learners admitted to skipping punctuation cues, reading continuously without pausing at commas or periods, which results in unnatural phrasing. These issues are especially common among those still developing word recognition skills. Emotional barriers, such as fear of being laughed at, also contribute to their reluctance to read expressively. Nervousness discourages learners from experimenting with tone, leading to flat and robotic oral reading. These findings suggest that while learners aim for accuracy, they often neglect prosodic elements that support comprehension. The study emphasizes the need for explicit instruction on intonation, phrasing, and punctuation awareness. Additionally, fostering a supportive environment can help reduce anxiety and build confidence. Supporting research by Rasinski (2012) also highlights that strong prosodic skills enhance reading comprehension, aligning with the study's conclusions.

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Fluency - Many learners in the study reported difficulties with reading fluency, which includes reading with speed, accuracy, and expression. Their oral reading was often slow, hesitant, and choppy, largely due to unfamiliar vocabulary, low confidence, and limited practice. Learners described reading word by word without natural rhythm or phrasing, which hindered comprehension. Anxiety when reading aloud, especially in front of classmates, was a common issue, causing some to focus more on avoiding mistakes than on fluency. Several admitted to skipping reading practice outside the classroom, contributing to their struggles. Despite these challenges, a few learners expressed a willingness to improve and showed early signs of developing fluency. The findings underscore the need for consistent reading practice, supportive classroom environments, and fluency-building strategies like repeated reading. This aligns with Alarcon's (2016) study, which found that lack of practice and emotional barriers led to slow, disjointed reading among Filipino high school learners. Encouraging learners to read regularly and creating a safe space to practice can help reduce anxiety, boost confidence, and improve fluency over time. Ultimately, developing fluency is essential not only for smoother reading but also for better comprehension and overall literacy growth.

Challenges of the Grade 7 Learners in Reading Comprehension - Reading comprehension involves understanding, interpreting, and analyzing written text by connecting ideas, making inferences, and grasping both surface and deeper meanings. In the study, most learners reported difficulty comprehending English texts, even if they could read fluently or decode words. Many struggled with identifying main ideas, understanding supporting details, and inferring meaning. Learners expressed that unfamiliar vocabulary often disrupts their understanding, causing them to lose the overall idea of the text. While some relied on pictures or guessed

meanings based on familiar phrases, they admitted that their comprehension remained unclear or incomplete. A number of learners also found it difficult to infer information or understand implied ideas when answers weren't explicitly stated. These responses suggest that reading is often treated as a mechanical process, focused on decoding and pronunciation, rather than a meaningful act of understanding. Limited vocabulary, unfamiliarity with abstract concepts, and a lack of strategies for deeper analysis were key barriers. Studies by Palacios & San Pedro (2022) and Solitana & Generoso (2019) confirm that Filipino learners commonly face these challenges. Both studies emphasize the need for contextualized reading strategies, targeted vocabulary instruction, and critical thinking development to help learners improve comprehension and achieve better academic performance.

5. Conclusions

- Grade 7 learners at the Frustration Level show significant challenges in word recognition, fluency, and comprehension, often reading below the expected speed. Their limited vocabulary and difficulty processing complex ideas hinder their ability to understand and infer meaning from texts.
- Learners reported low confidence when reading aloud, frequent mispronunciations, and struggles with comprehension. These difficulties are largely due to unfamiliar vocabulary and an inability to grasp deeper meanings in the text.
- The combined data reveal that Grade 7 learners face serious reading challenges in speed, accuracy, and understanding. Emotional factors like nervousness and cognitive barriers such as limited vocabulary further impact their confidence and motivation to read.
- A multi-tiered reading intervention is needed, including daily practice in word recognition, fluency, and comprehension strategies. Supportive environments and vocabulary-focused activities can boost both reading skills and learner confidence.

5.1 Recommendations

- Implement targeted interventions focusing on vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension strategies. Use word recognition drills, reading aloud, and inference-based activities to support learners at the Frustration Level.
- Create a supportive reading environment where learners feel safe making mistakes. Use context clues, visual aids, and repeated reading to build vocabulary and fluency, alongside comprehension strategies like summarizing and questioning.
- Apply a holistic approach that combines academic and emotional support. Offer explicit vocabulary and comprehension instruction, and provide a safe space for learners to practice reading in small groups or individually.
- Use a multi-tiered strategy with daily practice in word recognition, fluency, and comprehension. Address emotional barriers through supportive peer sessions and reinforce vocabulary with context-based learning and graphic organizers.
- Strengthen collaboration among teachers, parents, and school leaders to support reading development at home and school. Encourage regular communication and promote literacy through programs like book clubs, along with teacher training in effective reading strategies.

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