

# Improving the Reading Skills of ALS Learners Through Project RICE (Reading Intervention and Comprehension Enhancement)

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**Abstract:** One of the major problems in the education sector is the reading skills of learners. Students enrolled in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) also experienced this scenario due to several circumstances. This study focused on the improvement of reading comprehension skills of ALS learners by means of project RICE (Reading Intervention and Comprehension Enhancement) as well as the issues and challenges. A quasi-experimental design was utilized in this study which was participated by 54 learners, composed of 27 learners under the experimental group and 27 under the control group. The result revealed that the learners in the experimental group changed from frustration level to instructional level after the implementation of project RICE while the learners in the control group changed from instructional level to independent level, thereby signifying a significant difference and the effectiveness of the project. Additionally, issues with time and resources were often encountered by the learners.

**Keywords:** Improving; Reading skills; Intervention; Comprehension; Enhancement; ALS

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## 1. Introduction

Reading skills of learners remained to be a major problem in the education sector. International tests revealed that the reading skills of learners around the world did not improve over time <sup>[1]</sup>. As a matter of fact, the Philippines is currently experiencing a decline in the reading skills of learners as evidenced by the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results <sup>[2]</sup>. The Department of Education (DepEd) felt the urgency to resolve this problem and aimed to direct all efforts toward the improvement of the reading skills of learners.

Reading skills refer to the ability to read, understand, interpret, and analyze written language. Reading skills are essential for academic success, as well as for everyday activities such as reading news articles, understanding instructions, and communicating effectively <sup>[3]</sup>. Reading, as a component of literacy, is critical in the development of other competencies and the enhancement of other higher-order thinking skills for learners of varying ages and situations.

Every learner must be guided toward the attainment of reading competencies even if they have special circumstances. In the Philippines, the Alternative Learning System (ALS) is the avenue for such an endeavor. The Reading Assessment for ALS learners identified struggling readers. The teachers experienced a huge challenge when it comes to the reading skills of learners such as the basic and functional skills that will help learners to be globally competitive. Due to this, reading has been one of the fundamental priorities of the program <sup>[4]</sup>.

Teachers felt the need to exert more effort on the enhancement of the reading skills of ALS learners since this affected the level of academic performance as a whole. Without mastery of reading, the learners will not be able to proceed to more complex tasks or concepts. The learners in ALS cannot fully cope with the demands of the 21st century due to the low level of skills in communication which includes reading <sup>[5]</sup>. This shows that there is a need to resolve this problem, and employ accurate and sustainable solutions.

As an ALS teacher, the author conceptualized a project entitled RICE (Reading Intervention and Comprehension Enhancement) for the learners. In this project, the author envisioned to improve the reading skills of learners by means of comparing the data before and after its implementation. More so, the issues and challenges in terms of reading were determined and addressed to sustain or enhance the project.

## 2. Literature review

Several studies pointed out the problems with the reading skills of students. This can be attributed to the lack of appropriate utilization of the different aspects and elements of reading <sup>[6,7]</sup>. More so, there is a great problem with reading fluency <sup>[8]</sup>. This problem existed among elementary and high school learners. On the other hand, it has been disclosed that there is a problem with the vocabulary of students <sup>[9]</sup>. Lastly, reading comprehension is an ongoing problem <sup>[10]</sup>.

There is a big problem with the reading capabilities of ALS learners. The reading skills of learners remained at the lowest level <sup>[11]</sup>. ALS learners excelled only on the literal side of reading competence. As the level goes higher, the learners faced difficulty in reading. Specifically, the inferential, evaluative, and creative dimensions of reading were not met. This in turn affected the way the students learn and study at school. Therefore, there is a need to have programs that could help learners to improve their reading skills.

ALS learners have difficulties in reading because of insufficient skill in word recognition such as pronouncing incorrectly, and repetition of words <sup>[12]</sup>. Moreover, problems that caused the decline in reading skills were identified. On top of all of these, the lack of materials is the main reason why the reading skills of learners did not improve. Therefore, there is a need to provide materials for reading which can be used in programs.

There were several problems with the reading skills of learners <sup>[13]</sup>. The problems encountered by the learners are mainly focused on the materials and their personal backgrounds. It is difficult for the learners to process the texts given to them. Finding the main idea of the paragraph is one of the obstacles in reading. Plus, the lack of sufficient informational materials caused the learners to have poor reading competency.

The effectiveness of a reading project was explored in order to improve the reading skills of students <sup>[14]</sup>. The result of the study revealed that those schools that underwent the project excelled in reading. On the other hand, the reading performance of schools that have no existing reading project is declining. It is noticeable that the learners who participate in the project have above-average levels of reading skills. It was also implied that the teachers should be equipped to conduct similar projects for the benefit of the learners.

## 3. Research objectives

This study focused on the issues and challenges of reading among ALS learners. This was conducted through

the assessment of the reading skills of learners through the implementation of project RICE. Specifically, the aims of this study were:

- (1) To assess the level of the reading comprehension skills of ALS learners before and after the implementation of project RICE based on pre-test and post-test results.
- (2) To compare the reading comprehension skills before and after the implementation of the project.
- (3) To determine the issues and challenges of the reading comprehension skills level of ALS learners.

## **4. Methods**

This section presents the research design, subjects of the study, the instrument, and procedures used in gathering the data as well as the statistical tools to treat the data.

### **4.1. Research design**

This study utilized a quasi-experimental research design which is a type of research design that allows investigators to evaluate the effectiveness of interventions, treatments, or policies in real-world settings. Unlike experimental designs, quasi-experimental designs do not involve the random assignment of participants to different groups, and the researcher must rely on pre-existing groups or naturally occurring events for comparison<sup>[15]</sup>. Using this research design, the reading skills level of ALS learners were assessed using the pre-test and post-test scores. These scores were compared within the control and experimental groups. On top of this, the issues and challenges which are prevalent to the current situation were also taken into consideration. This research design was appropriate to the attainment of the objectives of this study as mentioned above. This allowed the collection of necessary data and verification of the effectiveness of the project used to improve the reading skills of ALS learners.

### **4.2. Sampling**

This study utilized purposive sampling. The best way to study a problem was to use the whole population, which was not always possible<sup>[16]</sup>. In this study, the sample size was 54 taken from the total population of 75. The sample was taken based on how many learners attained a particular reading level. The control group was composed of 27 ALS learners who were in the instructional level of reading. On the other hand, the experimental group was composed of 27 ALS learners who were in the frustration level of reading.

### **4.3. Instrument**

This study utilized a test and a questionnaire. The test was used to determine the level of reading skills of learners before and after the implementation of project RICE. This instrument was distributed as pre-test and post-test. On the other hand, the questionnaire was used in identifying the issues and challenges met by the learner in reading. The instruments were also validated, and reliability testing was done. Experts from the field were asked to review the questionnaire and provide comments and suggestions. The result of the validation was taken into consideration. Reliability testing was done in which the instrument was distributed to 20 non-participants and the reliability coefficient was computed. Lastly, the final copy of the instruments was produced.

### **4.4. Data collection**

The permission to conduct the study was asked from the School Division Superintendent Officer-in-Charge in Lipa City. Upon approval, the research instruments were distributed with the consent of all the participants of the study. Pre-test was given to the learners in the control and experimental groups. After this, the project was

conducted which catered the learners in the experimental group. After the project was conducted, the post-test was administered. A questionnaire was distributed to identify the issues and challenges in reading.

#### 4.5. Data analysis

To interpret the data collected, the statistical tools used to answer the research questions were composite mean and paired *t*-test. Composite mean was utilized to assess the reading skills level of ALS learners before and after the implementation of project RICE. The *t*-test was used to compare the scores of the control and experimental groups on the two periods of study. The issues and challenges were quantified using composite mean. To score the responses, the following range and verbal interpretation were used. 1.00–1.75 is never, 1.76–2.50 is rarely, 2.51–3.25 is often, and 3.26–4.00 is always.

#### 4.6. Ethical considerations

When conducting research, ethics should be taken into consideration for the integrity of science, respect for human rights and dignity, and cooperation between science and society<sup>[17]</sup>. These guidelines guarantee that research subjects’ participation is free, informed, and secure. The goals of the research and the ethical research methods and procedures should be balanced. Moreover, research is important in society, and it did not allow the research to violate the dignity or human rights of the study participants.

The participants should participate voluntarily and without pressure. The privacy and confidentiality of the respondents should be protected. The information collected will be held by processed in accordance with RA 10173 of the Data Privacy Act of 2012. It is crucial to make it clear to participants that declining to take part in the study has no negative effects or repercussions. The respondents knew the purpose, benefits, risks, and funding behind the study before they agreed or declined to join. The participants’ information in this study was kept private from the others. In order to prevent connecting personally identifiable information to other data, participants’ information was anonymized. Any harm, either physical, social, psychological, or otherwise, was kept to a bare minimum. The author made sure her work is original and free of research misconduct or plagiarism and accurately communicated her findings.

### 5. Results and discussion

This section presents the key findings of this study based on the objectives. Analysis and interpretation were included to provide general insights of what was revealed through this research.

#### 5.1. Level of reading comprehension skills of ALS learners

The reading comprehension skills of learners were assessed before the implementation of the project. This served as the baseline data of the study which determined the problem underlying the reading comprehension of ALS learners. Table 1 shows the pre-test result on the comprehension skills of ALS learners, while Table 2 shows the post-test result on the comprehension skills of ALS learners.

**Table 1.** Pre-test result on comprehension skills

Group	Mean	Interpretation
Experimental	2.00	Frustration
Control	5.56	Instructional

The table reveals that the learners in the experimental group were at the frustration level in terms of their comprehension skills while the learners in the control group were at the instructional level. This suggests that the students in the experimental group have a long way to go in terms of reaching the independent level of reading comprehension skills. This also implies that there were students who needed intervention in terms of reading comprehension. This may be attributed to the fact that the ALS learners have been in several circumstances that did not allow them to enjoy the privilege of attending formal school which makes their exposure to reading limited.

**Table 2.** Post-test result on comprehension skills

Group	Mean	Interpretation
Experimental	4.93	Instructional
Control	6.89	Independent

In the post-test, the experimental group landed in the instructional level. This implies that the students in the experimental group attained a good level of reading comprehension skills after the application of project RICE.

On the other hand, the control group was identified as independent. This implies that the control group continuously improves as they attend classes. The result for both the control and experimental groups may be attributed to the added learning acquired from both the class activities and the project. This result was supported by the findings that there was a big problem with the reading capabilities of ALS learners <sup>[11]</sup>. The level of reading skills of learners remained to be at the lowest aspect. ALS learners excelled only on the literal side of reading competence.

## 5.2. Comparison of pre-test and post-test results of the experimental and control groups

Through project RICE, the author tried to improve the reading comprehension skills of learners. To further validate its effectiveness, the results of the pre-test and post-test were compared. Table 3 presents the comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores of ALS learners in both experimental and control groups.

**Table 3.** Comparison of pre-test and post-test results

Group	Computed value	<i>p</i> value*	Decision on $H_0$	Interpretation
Experimental	-15.873	0.000	Reject	Significant
Control	-10.090	0.000	Reject	Significant

\*Significant at  $p < 0.05$

The table shows the comparison of the pre-test and post-test scores of both control and experimental groups. The *p* value of 0.000 for the experimental group revealed that there was a significant difference in the reading comprehension skills of the learners before and after the application of project RICE. This implies that the utilization of the project impacted the reading comprehension of learners.

In the same way, the control group showed a significant difference on their scores in their pre-test and post-test. This implies that continuous guidance through normal class instruction also helped the learners in improving their reading comprehension skills. The nature of their situation allowed them to still learn independently.

This result was supported by the findings of the effectiveness of a reading project in order to improve the

reading skills of students <sup>[14]</sup>. The result of the study revealed that those schools that implemented the project excelled in reading. On the other hand, the reading performance of schools that have no existing reading project was declining.

### 5.3. Issues and challenges

The ALS learners were asked regarding the issues and challenges that affected their reading comprehension skills, as shown in Table 4. This study showed the frequency of encountering such challenges which added more substance to the present study.

**Table 4.** Issues and challenges in reading comprehension

Issues and challenges	Mean	Interpretation
1. Insufficient free time for after-school reading activities	3.11	Often
2. Uncomfortable reading situations brought by poor lighting, and noise and distractions	2.81	Often
3. Confusion and inability to understand the words used in the text	2.80	Often
4. Inadequate variety of books or other reading materials	2.72	Often
5. Difficulty in staying engaged in reading the text	2.70	Often
6. Inability to find reading materials that can provide psychological comfort and support	2.69	Often
7. Poor eyesight, eye strain, headache, and other forms of discomfort experienced while reading	2.61	Often
8. Conformity to peers' view of reading and expectations	2.52	Often
9. Lack of interest in the topic of reading material and difficulty in absorbing the information	2.48	Rarely
10. Insufficient support and guidance of family in developing the reading skills	2.44	Rarely
11. Insufficient knowledge on the importance and benefits of reading	2.24	Rarely
12. Difficulty in text processing due to speech and hearing disability	2.15	Rarely
13. Different approaches to literacy brought by culture differences	2.15	Rarely
14. Negative perception about reading	2.11	Rarely
15. Inconsistent progress toward reading goals	2.09	Rarely
Grand mean	2.51	Often

The learners often have insufficient free time for after-school reading activities. They often had uncomfortable reading situations brought by poor lighting, and noise and distractions. ALS learners got confused and were unable to understand the words used in the text. More so, there was an inadequacy in the variety of books or other reading materials. Learners also experienced difficulty in staying engaged in reading the text. This result implied that the ALS learners found it hard to balance their work and study time.

On the other hand, it can be noted that the learners rarely encountered difficulty in text processing due to speech and hearing disability. There was a rare occurrence of problems with different approaches to literacy brought by cultural differences. Negative perception about reading was rarely encountered. More so, inconsistent progress toward reading goals was rarely experienced.

In general, it was revealed that ALS learners often encountered issues and challenges in reading through project RICE. It cannot be neglected that the learners have encountered some issues or challenges. This means that there were still some problems in achieving good reading comprehension skills. The result implied that the difficulty of the learners in enhancing their reading comprehension skills was addressed by the project. The implementation of such activities enhanced the skills of learners and catered to their varying needs and



preferences. This may be attributed to the evaluation of the scenario and application of relevant strategies towards better reading skills of learners. However, the target was to eliminate these issues and challenges.

This result was supported by the findings that ALS learners have difficulties in reading because of the lack of materials <sup>[12]</sup>. There were several problems with the reading skills of learners <sup>[13]</sup>. The problems encountered by the learners were mainly focused on the materials and their personal backgrounds.

## **6. Conclusion and recommendations**

### **6.1. Conclusion**

This study focused on the reading comprehension skills of learners as it was tested before and after the implementation of project RICE. Moreover, the challenges encountered by the learners in attaining a good reading comprehension skills level were also discussed in this study. This section presents the conclusions made based on the objectives of this study.

- (1) The ALS learners in the experimental group were in the frustration level while those in the control group fell under the instructional level of reading comprehension skill before the implementation of project RICE.
- (2) The implementation of project RICE helped the ALS learners to improve the level of their reading comprehension skills wherein the experimental group attained instructional level while the control group attained independent level.
- (3) ALS learners can learn how to read on a day-to-day teaching and learning basis due to their nature.
- (4) ALS learners faced challenges on allocating time for reading as it conflicts with work schedules.
- (5) There are limited reading resources that ALS learners can use.
- (6) Eye health condition of ALS learners affected the attainment of good reading comprehension skills.

### **6.2. Recommendations**

This section presents the recommendations which can help to address the issue of low reading comprehension skills of ALS learners.

- (1) ALS leaders may establish a system on assessing the reading comprehension skills of learners before enrolment to allow more time to devise strategies to address said issue.
- (2) ALS leaders may consider initiating more reading programs for ALS learners.
- (3) Teachers may utilize project RICE to help their students to attain better reading comprehension skills.
- (4) Teachers may provide more reading materials for ALS learners.
- (5) Future researchers may conduct similar studies with a wider scope to further assess the challenges encountered by learners in attaining better reading comprehension skills.

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## Disclosure statement

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