Improving Language Competence of Grade Seven Learners through the I-READ Project

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Abstract: The Integrative Reading Enhancement and Assessment for Student's Development (I-READ) Project aims to achieve this by providing students with diverse learning experiences that promote critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. The project's primary objective is to equip students with essential language skills that will enable them to comprehend, analyze, and communicate effectively. This study utilized a quasi-experimental research design. The researcher prepared reading material and a questionnaire to determine the performance of grade seven learners, who attended Cumba-Quezon Integrated School, in their language competence. The I-READ Project had a significant impact on the reading skills of the learners in the experimental group, as the learners had significant improvement in their reading capabilities. However, the research was conducted solely on grade seven learners, which limits the generalization of the findings to learners of other grades.

Keywords: Language competence; Integrative; Reading enhancement; Assessment; Development

1. Introduction

Reading plays a pivotal role in developing learners' ability to comprehend complex text structures while also enhancing their academic skills. Successful readers tend to have a deeper understanding as they can absorb intricate concepts, establish connections between various ideas, and contemplate the material while reading [1]. Consequently, to help students improve their comprehension skills, educators must employ teaching methods that promote pre-reading and critical thinking.

Educators and authors should also view reading as a means to engage readers in enhancing comprehension. Students should actively seek relevant details within texts, expand their academic vocabulary, and practice critical thinking [1]. Comprehension involves the capacity to respond effectively to the information presented in text [2]. Reading interventions in classrooms facilitate students' engagement in critical reflection, text understanding, and using reason to formulate appropriate responses to comprehension questions.

Reading is a fundamental component of a child's success in both school and life [3]. Students who encounter difficulties in reading or understanding reading concepts during the early stages of elementary school often

experience demotivation in the classroom and, in some cases, drop out before mastering essential skills [4]. These students may feel that academic success is beyond their reach. Early and persistent reading difficulties can have profound consequences on students' ability to excel in school, their families' quality of life, the socioeconomic well-being of their communities, and more [4]. Reading proficiency forms the foundation of most educational learning, which proves challenging for many students.

Amidst the global upheaval and the numerous challenges facing education, reading provides a simple means to keep students' minds active and focused. Reading enables students to develop vital skills such as analytical thinking, creativity, and comprehension, nurturing their intellectual and literacy-related curiosities. These elements are essential for keeping students engaged in their studies until formal educational systems fully recover.

Many learners struggle with reading and comprehending what they read. As children progress in their education, they transition from learning to read, where they utilize comprehension skills to gain knowledge from texts, to reading to learn, where they master decoding and build fluency and comprehension skills. This reading intervention is anchored in the DepEd "Bawat Bata Bumabasa" (3Bs) reading program, specifically the Integrative Reading Enhancement and Assessment for Student's Development (I-READ) Project. Since the materials used in this intervention are integrative, it is open to all. The selections are integrated into other subjects such as science, history, and values education, allowing other teachers to utilize the materials within their subject. This activity primarily focuses on reading comprehension and assessing students' reading ability, and, therefore, reading selections are used. Given that the students are already in high school, and the activity centers on reading comprehension, it is akin to conducting a standard reading remediation exercise but with a slightly higher level of complexity. Teacher-made integrative and localized reading materials are employed.

Enhancing language competence is a vital objective for educators, as strong language skills are essential for success in various aspects of life. One program that aims to improve language proficiency in Grade Seven learners is the I-READ Project. This project concentrates on enhancing reading, writing, and speaking skills through diverse activities, including storytelling, poetry, and group discussions. The primary goal of the program is to equip students with essential language skills that enable them to understand, analyze, and communicate effectively. The I-READ Project endeavors to achieve this by providing students with diverse learning experiences that foster critical thinking, creativity, and communication skills. Through the I-READ Project, Cumba-Quezon Integrated School is dedicated to nurturing students who are confident, articulate, and proficient in the English language. By prioritizing the development of fundamental language skills, this program aims to provide students with the tools they need to succeed academically and beyond.

2. Literature review

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as the most critical aspect of reading, as it enables readers to accurately extract meaning from written content. To become strategic readers who can select information from the text, build arguments, and engage in critical thinking while reading, students must possess the ability to self-adjust, self-manage, and self-monitor. Providing students with a diverse range of reading and writing tasks that incorporate effective reading comprehension skills is vital in this context [5]. Given that the adoption of effective reading comprehension approaches is crucial for improving students' comprehension levels, language teachers must employ appropriate reading strategies to enhance comprehension and support critical thinking in comprehending challenging texts.

Because reading comprehension involves numerous complex components, including cognitive, linguistic, and

sociocultural factors, language teachers may face challenges in developing effective reading strategies [6]. Reading comprehension necessitates the coordination of various linguistic and cognitive processes, encompassing word reading skills, working memory, inference construction, comprehension monitoring, vocabulary, and prior knowledge, among others [7,8]. For young learners, reading comprehension represents a critical cognitive skill that underpins academic success and eventual participation in most adult responsibilities [9].

As a multifaceted cognitive skill, reading comprehension demands not only linguistic knowledge, such as vocabulary and grammar proficiency but also cognitive and metacognitive skills, including higher-order comprehension abilities like drawing inferences [10,11].

Deciding which comprehension processes to emphasize in the classroom can be challenging, given that comprehension relies on a spectrum of linguistic abilities, cognitive processes, and knowledge sources. Identifying which components are crucial for monitoring requires identifying "pressure points" that, when modified, would significantly impact students' comprehension ability [12]. These components should be considered essential for reading comprehension, personalized to each individual, and used as flexible learning objectives.

The term "reading comprehension" often refers to the process of completing readings. It is well-established that proficient readers must understand what they are reading and deduce its meaning. This is achieved by placing a strong emphasis on determining the meanings of words, sentences, and related paragraphs [13]. It is concluded that students should not only understand the meaning of individual phrases, paragraphs, and texts but also the author's intent. Reading for comprehension involves reading for knowledge, understanding, and enjoyment. Consequently, the process is more intricate than merely interpreting individual words. Reading proficiency's primary goal is not to understand every single word in the reading material but rather to grasp the authors' intentions [14].

When a learner struggles with reading, professionals and other stakeholders, such as family members, should collaborate to gather information that characterizes the issue in observable terms. Various data collection techniques can be employed depending on the type and severity of the reading difficulty. For instance, monitoring students' participation in oral reading and comprehension activities may fall within the purview of reading coordinators or reading experts, serving as an excellent starting point for data collection. Interviews with teachers and students can be valuable in understanding perceived literacy proficiency standards and identifying effective actions to achieve learning objectives. The Academic Skills Problems Workbook includes examples of teacher and student interviews [15]. Depending on the students' needs, systematic observations along with interviews can be sufficient. They can also assist the team in determining appropriate reading assessments that address specific issues and provide baseline performance measurements. Informal reading inventories, curriculum-based measures, miscue analysis inventories, criterion-referenced exams, and standardized diagnostic reading achievement tests are examples of reading assessment types.

3. Research objectives

This study aimed to determine the extent of content knowledge, technology utilization, and strategies in reading and its impact on students' achievement. Specifically, it attempted to answer the following research questions:
   (1) Determine the performance of grade 7 learners in reading using reading materials based on:
        a. Pre-test result
        b. Post-test result
   (2) Compare the pre-test and post-test results

(3) Ascertain the experiences encountered using the reading materials

4. Methods

4.1. Design

This investigation employed a quasi-experimental research design. While quasi-experimental research lacks complete control over experimental settings, it shares several characteristics with experimental research [16]. It is utilized to explore causal relationships between variables when random assignment to conditions is not possible or ethical. Two key elements absent in quasi-experimental designs are the random assignment of individuals to experimental and control groups. Using this research design, the reading skills and comprehension of grade seven learners were assessed through pre-test and post-test scores.

4.2. Sampling and instrument

Purposive sampling was used to select individuals based on the researcher's objectives and controls. Typical individuals from the population were chosen for inclusion when there was strong evidence of their representativeness [17]. This study involved grade seven learners at Cumba-Quezon Integrated School. The researcher prepared reading materials and a questionnaire to assess the language competence of these learners. **Table 1** shows the reading levels of the grade seven learner population and respondents (those who consent to participation).

Table 1. Population number, respondents number, and their reading levels

Level	Population number	Respondents number
Frustration	27	24
Instructional and Independent	35	24
Total	62	48

This study employed reading materials and a questionnaire that underwent validation and reliability testing. Data was collected using a questionnaire, which consists of carefully designed questions used to gather information from respondents. The use of questionnaires facilitated the coding and computer-based analysis of responses.

4.3. Data collection and analysis

To achieve the study's objectives, the following steps were undertaken: First, the preparation of reading materials for assessing the reading skills and comprehension of the learners. Next, the development of a questionnaire to measure the challenges encountered in using instructional and reading materials. To ensure valid and reliable results, the researcher sought guidance from the school head where the study was conducted.

The I-READ Project was used to determine the reading proficiency of grade seven students by comparing pre-test versus post-test and assessing challenges in progress monitoring. Both intuitive and strategic analyses were conducted to draw comprehensive conclusions and recommendations. Pre-intervention and post-intervention assessments measured the language competence of grade seven learners.

4.4. Statistical tools

The researcher employed appropriate statistical tools to analyze the collected data, including the weighted

mean which was used to determine the overall sentiments of respondents regarding various study factors, a *t*-test employed to calculate differences among the study's variables at crucial inferential, and lateral levels, and scoring of responses which used a four scale to aggregate responses for analysis and interpretation (Table 2). A *P*-value of less than 0.05 indicated a statistically significant difference.

Table 2. Scoring of responses

Scores	Definition
For experiences	
1.00 – 1.75	Strongly disagree
1.76 – 2.50	Disagree
2.51 – 3.25	Agree
3.26 – 4.00	Strongly agree
For reading level	
< 7	Frustration
8–14	Instructional
≥ 15	Independent

4.5. Ethical Consideration

It is imperative to explain the project's objectives, procedures, potential risks and benefits to the parents or guardians of the children involved. Informed consent should be obtained before any project participation. Maintaining students' confidentiality and privacy is essential, and all data collected should be handled in accordance with the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (RA 10173). Care should be taken to ensure the project benefits all children, regardless of socioeconomic class, race, or other demographic variables. Rigorous standards for data collection and analysis should be maintained to ensure the accuracy and reliability of results. The methods used to assess language competence should be valid and appropriate for the age group under study.

5. Results and discussions

In this section, the study's findings and discussions are presented, with the study's objectives addressed in chronological order.

5.1. Reading skills level of grade 7 learners
5.1.1. Pre-test result

The reading skills of learners were a primary concern following the resumption of in-person classes, with a specific focus on grade 7 students' reading proficiency in this study. Table 3 displays the identified levels based on the pre-test result.

Table 3. Pre-test result

Group	Mean	Interpretation
Experimental	4.21	Frustration
Control	13.08	Instructional

The table indicates that the pre-test reading scores of the experimental group's learners placed them at the "frustration" level. This suggests that these learners had limited reading abilities and required intervention or programs to enhance this aspect. This limitation may be attributed to their limited exposure to guided reading activities during the pandemic classes, where instruction was primarily modular.

Conversely, learners in the control group were assessed at the "instructional" level, signifying that their reading skills had improved. However, they had not yet reached the "independent" level, indicating a need for further effort. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that students who receive traditional face-to-face instruction in reading tend to achieve better outcomes than those exposed to online or computer-based instruction. The pandemic's modular mode of instruction likely contributed to the limited exposure to guided reading activities and the lower reading achievement of learners in the experimental group.

5.1.2. Post-test result

Following the implementation of the I-READ Project, a post-test was conducted by the researcher to assess its effectiveness in enhancing the literacy skills of learners. Table 4 presents the post-test result.

Table 4. Post-test result

Group	Mean	Interpretation
Experimental	8.00	Instructional
Control	15.46	Independent

The table shows the post-test results for both groups. The control group achieved the "independent" level, while the experimental group reached the "instructional" level. Although the learners in the control group had slight improvement from the "instructional" to the "independent" level, those in the experimental group progressed significantly from the "frustration" to the "instructional" level.

This indicates that the learners have developed a good level of reading skills, but further efforts are needed to attain the "independent" level. The use of the I-READ Project appears to have contributed to the improved performance of the experimental group, as this intervention helped enhance their reading skills. This finding aligns with previous research, which showed that a reading intervention program significantly improved the reading abilities of struggling readers, outperforming conventional classroom teaching methods. The intervention program provided specific instruction, feedback, and practice opportunities, which benefitted the struggling readers.

5.2. Comparison of pre-test and post-test results

To further assess the project's effectiveness, comparisons were made between the learners' pre-test and post-test scores. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Comparison of pre-test and post-test scores

Group	Computed value	P-value	Decision on H_0	Interpretation
Experimental	9.609	0.000	Reject	Significant
Control	7.766	0.000	Reject	Significant

The table demonstrates that when comparing the pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental and control groups before and after the implementation of the I-READ Project, the experimental group's P-value

is 0.000, disproving the null hypothesis. The pre-test and post-test results of the learners indicate a significant improvement, suggesting that the adoption of the I-READ Project enhances students' reading abilities.

A substantial difference was also observed for the control group, indicating that students who are proficient readers continued to benefit from classroom instruction. Even without the project, in-class instruction enhanced the students' existing reading skills. This finding is consistent with previous research, which concluded that guided reading programs positively affected learners' reading achievement, especially in the early grades, offering them a conducive environment to improve their reading abilities.

5.3. Experiences encountered in the reading materials

This section highlights the experiences of learners during the implementation of the I-READ Project, which helped identify areas for improvement and refine strategies used. Table 6 presents the experiences encountered by learners.

Table 6. Experiences of learners

Experiences	Weighted mean	Verbal interpretation
(1) I am fluent in both Filipino and English languages.	3.42	Strongly agree
(2) I am open and eager to learn more about the topic.	3.44	Strongly agree
(3) I have infinite access to reading materials.	3.33	Strongly agree
(4) I have good reading comprehension skills.	3.31	Strongly agree
(5) I can read for extended periods without experiencing physical discomforts such as headaches or eye strain.	3.31	Strongly agree
(6) I have an interest in the reading material.	3.23	Agree
(7) I receive adequate and effective reading instruction.	3.19	Agree
(8) I can maintain my focus while reading, even in noisy and distracting environments.	3.19	Agree
(9) I can easily understand complex vocabulary words.	3.17	Agree
(10) I have good reading habits.	3.13	Agree
Composite mean	3.27	Strongly agree

The students strongly agreed that they were proficient in both Filipino and English languages, were open and eager to learn, had access to a wide range of reading materials, and possessed good reading comprehension skills. Additionally, they strongly agreed that they could read for extended periods without physical discomfort, such as headaches or eye strain, indicating favorable experiences with the reading materials provided.

However, the only agreement was found regarding maintaining focus while reading, even in a noisy and distracting environment, as well as easily understanding complex vocabulary words. Furthermore, they only agreed that they have good reading habits. These results suggest that students have encountered some challenges in maintaining focus, establishing reading habits, and expanding their vocabulary.

In general, learners had a positive experience with the reading materials, likely attributed to the materials' features that facilitated skill acquisition. These results also indicated the need to enhance students' reading habits, in line with previous findings, which emphasized the relationship between good reading habits and improved reading skills.

6. Conclusions and recommendations

6.1. Conclusions

The following conclusions are drawn based on the findings of this study:

(1) The learners in the experimental group exhibited limited reading capabilities before the intervention, whereas those in the control group were at an "instructional" level but had not reached the "independent" level.

(2) The implementation of the I-READ Project significantly improved the reading capabilities of students in the experimental group, leading to a transition from the "frustration" level to the "instructional" level.

(3) Learners reported positive experiences when using the provided reading materials. They felt fluent in both English and Filipino, were open to learning, and had access to a wide range of reading materials.

(4) To further enhance their reading skills, learners should work on improving their reading habits.

(5) The results suggest that the implementation of the I-READ Project has a beneficial impact on enhancing the reading proficiency of grade 7 students. However, addressing issues related to sustaining focus, developing reading habits, and expanding vocabulary is essential for continued improvement.

6.2. Recommendations

Based on the study's results, the following recommendations are proposed:

(1) Conduct a comprehensive assessment of learners' reading abilities to develop tailored interventions.

(2) Integrate the I-READ Project into the regular reading program to continuously enhance learners' reading skills.

(3) Encourage learners to cultivate positive reading habits, such as allocating time for daily reading, reading for pleasure, and actively engaging with texts.

(4) Explore additional opportunities to expose learners to guided reading activities, including small group discussions, peer reading, and book clubs. Consider implementing blended learning approaches that combine online and offline reading activities to offer more opportunities for learners to develop their reading skills.

(5) Future research endeavors may expand the scope to further assess learners' reading comprehension skills and language competence, aiming for more comprehensive insights.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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