

PATHS TO READING: APPROACHES BEFORE AND DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT: *This study identified the approaches in reading instruction used by the teachers of the Department of Education from the Primary to Junior High School levels in the four divisions in Region X before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Qualitative Document Analysis and Focus Group Discussion were used to determine the implemented approaches in context-appropriate reading instruction as well as in reading interventions. Notable differences were identified in the types of reading instruction approaches implemented before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Approaches used by teachers during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic are more varied and wider in scope, face-to-face, and are either facilitated by the teacher or done during the independent study while approaches during the pandemic were more limited to virtual learning environments, home reading tasks, and teacher's visitation. Pre-COVID-19 approaches target both individual improvement and group collaboration while approaches during the pandemic only encourage independent and individualized learning. Intervention approaches for students with reading difficulties target mainly word recognition. Parental involvement and coordination with teachers were more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic due to the parents' desire to assist in their children's studies at home and keep track of their progress.*

Key Words: reading instruction, reading approaches, pre-COVID -19, COVID-19 pandemic

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a basic skill that enables people to navigate the community that they are in, from reading street signs to keeping updated on current events and earning a living. In school, proficiency in reading enables the student to grasp and keep track of the curriculum materials, lessons, and other requirements to attain the necessary competencies and advance to the next level. It is a fundamental requirement in educational institutions to ensure that students could master academic content and succeed in their studies [1–3].

Educational systems around the world consider reading not as a separate discipline, but as an integral part of every subject, and hence, a requisite for literacy. Literacy rate reports from the Department of Education for the year 2000 [4] showed a result of 96.6%. However Balinas, et al. confirmed a steady and alarming decline in literacy rate for the past years, with 93.4% in 2009 according to the report of the United Nations Development Report [4]. This high, though the declining rate of literacy, may be reflective of how the country places importance on the development of a literate population but shows an alarming decline at the same time [5]. In the area of reading, the 2018 survey result of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which assessed the extent to which 15-year-olds acquired the key knowledge and skills for global competence, it was found that Filipino students scored much lower in reading compared with most of the countries and economies who participated in the survey [6]. Reading and the development of comprehension skills are reinforced as priority areas because of this, especially in the Basic Education Institutions under the Department of Education [7, 8]. In accordance with the Millennium Development Goal, #2 which is to “Achieve Universal Primary Education” and the Goal “Education for All,” various reading programs have been launched by the Department of Education (DepEd) to make sure that children of school age could take advantage of the benefits of education. The department’s “Every Child a Reader Program” (ECARP) for instance, called for various initiatives to “promote reading and literacy in both English and Filipino, to motivate the youth to

learn from the lives of eminent people, uphold one’s heritage and make reading a shared physical experience.” Hence, some activities such as Read-A-Thon, Drop Everything and Read (DEAR), Big Brother/Big Sister, Pull-out Remedial Class, Five Words a Week, Reading Camp, and other initiatives were implemented in different grades across the regional, division, and school levels [9–12].

With the fact that reading is one of the most basic yet crucial skills, this study aimed to ascertain the strategies in reading instruction utilized by the teachers from the Primary level to Junior High School level in the four divisions in Region X before and during the COVID-19 pandemic. Further, strategies in context-appropriate reading interventions used for students with reading difficulties were also identified and described.

METHODOLOGY

This paper is descriptive in nature and employed the qualitative research design. Focus Group Discussion prompts formulated by Ong, et al. [13] and Qualitative Document Analysis (QDA) [14, 15] were used to identify the strategies implemented by the teachers in reading instruction as reflected in the Study Strategies of the DepEd Curriculum Guide and the Lesson Guides the reading teachers were using. These also helped in providing the context within the research, especially for those strategies used for reading interventions. Focus Group Discussion was also utilized for validation and confirmation of the results.

The respondents were the randomly selected Elementary and Junior High School teachers and reading coordinators under the Department of Education Region X from the Divisions of Cagayan de Oro, El Salvador, Misamis Oriental, and Gingoog City. They were all contacted through text messages, smart mobile phone calls, email, and Google Meet and there were no face-to-face interactions because of the government restrictions during the time of research.

Permission to conduct the study was requested via emails addressed to the Department of Education Superintendents of the different divisions and was granted through confirmation replies and scanned copies of approval letters. Schedules for

the virtual meeting were then set and sent to the teacher participants for data gathering.

RESULTS

Table 1 shows the different reading approaches employed by the teachers in the four divisions of the Department of Education Region X during their reading classes in the pre-COVID-19 and during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1. Approaches in Reading Instruction for the Primary Grade in Cagayan de Oro, El Salvador, Gingoog City, and Misamis Oriental Divisions

Grade Levels	Pre-COVID-19 Reading Approaches	During COVID-19 Reading Approaches
Primary Grade	CVC approach Fuller approach Marungko Approach Phonics Approach Sight Words Picture Stories Picture Clues/Words Word Definition Word of the Day Daily alphabet letters and sounds routine Videos for Beginning Readers One-on-one tutoring Buddy System/Paired Reading Drop Everything and Read (DEAR) D-STAR approach Giving reading materials to read at home	Giving reading materials for students to read at home Differentiated reading Recorded videos for the parents to assist in instruction Parent-Teacher communication in monitoring reading progress Printed worksheets Video call TPR in online classes

Approaches used in Table 1 coincide with the various research which maintains that reading as early as the Primary grades should cover the foundational reading areas of comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, phonics [16, 17] word study, and vocabulary [18], [19]. Studies that found that many of the reading approaches in Pre-COVID-19 target specific word attack skills such as the CVC approach, Phonics approach, and Sight Word reading were also supported by the results of this study [20, 21]. The Fuller and Marungko approaches were also used by the teachers as recommended approaches by different researchers and by the Department of Education [2, 22, 23] to enhance the automaticity, fluency, and phonemic awareness of beginning readers [16]. Aside from that, routines and drills such as the Word of the Day, Picture Words, and Alphabet and Sounds Routine also serve as reinforcements and in accordance with the findings of Minero [8], who also established that these approaches enhance automaticity and fluency and will later impact spelling skills. This supports the findings of Schaars, et al. [24] who studied the integrated development of word reading and spelling in the primary grades and found that word reading and spelling are significantly related.

Comprehension and vocabulary are developed through showing the pupils videos for Beginning Readers, DEAR and D-STAR approaches, and the Buddy System or paired reading

as found out by Almutairi [25] where pupils learn from their peers and discuss word meaning on their own level. The DEAR approach [26]–[28] was also implemented to help foster a love for reading as in the result of the study of Astuti and da Malta [29] who found out that DEAR increases the level of reading interest of students.

The COVID-19 pandemic brought about drastic changes in the approaches used by teachers. In implementing reading approaches, it is shown that teachers used more generalized approaches such as the use of worksheets and differentiated reading. The Total Physical response approach (TPR) is also used for more content-specific words and still aids in building comprehension and most especially in vocabulary as found out by Cang, *et al* [30]. The video call has also become a reading approach during times of lockdown, and teachers would call pupils with reading difficulties for reading and comprehension sessions and note an improvement in comprehension skills and confidence in speaking, a result similar to Prayudha [31]. Teachers also communicate more often with parents to assist in the instruction of their children [32]. The teacher also requests parents to help in monitoring the reading progress of the pupils. Parents were observed to be very willing to help. Teachers in the FGD stated that vocabulary and comprehension in the primary grades have a strong connection and can already be taught even if the pupils are still starting to hone their reading skills.

Table 2. Approaches in Reading Instruction for the Intermediate Grades in Cagayan de Oro, El Salvador, Gingoog City, and Misamis Oriental Divisions

Grade Levels	Pre-COVID-19 Reading Approaches	During COVID-19 Reading Approaches
Intermediate Grade	SSR (Sustained Silent Reading) Choral Reading KARAOKE Strategy/Singing Makabasa na, May Reward pa Oral Reading Shared Reading Repeated Reading ReVoe (Reading and Vocabulary Enhancement) BHRM (Bring Home Reading Materials) Lunch Remediation Tutoring Sight Words Word of the Day Picture Clues/Words Marungko Approach	Giving reading materials for students to read at home Home visitation to monitor student progress One-on-one approach following Health and Safety Protocols Online class: Word of the Day Online class: Picture Clues/Words

This is the reason why even during the pandemic when they cannot hold face-to-face classes, they still strive to provide activities that call for vocabulary and comprehension skills of students. This is similar to the findings of Jiang and Logan [33] who found out that reading instruction to primary graders via the mediation of vocabulary had an effect on reading comprehension with sizable effects compared with other

indirect approaches. In fact, the majority of the teachers agreed with this.

Table 2 covers the reading approaches used by teachers at the Intermediate levels.

The Intermediate graders are given more complex reading tasks compared with the Primary Graders in the Pre COVID-19 pandemic as evidenced by the greater number of approaches in the list. This is because, during this stage, the students are expected to have gained enough fluency to learn more complex skills other than word recognition.

The approaches enumerated by teacher participants for this level started with Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) which is among the most recommended strategies for this level [34–36]. Other approaches which have been well-researched are Choral reading as described by Minero [8], shared or paired reading [37, 38], and oral reading. Other approaches included the integration of music, giving of rewards for reading achievements, and Reading and Vocabulary enhancement. Some approaches which are mentioned in the lower grade levels such as the Marungko Approach, Picture Clues/Words, and Word of the Day are used for reading interventions for students who are having some difficulties in reading [16, 39]. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the main approach of teachers for their reading instruction is the Home Reading approach. This is the only approach they used during the full lockdown when they were not allowed to go to their students’ residences to monitor student progress. When some of the restrictions were lifted, and teachers were allowed to visit their students, teachers visited their students individually to monitor their progress while strictly observing the health and safety protocol required by the government. In a later part, there were online classes where the teachers were finally able to meet their entire class and apply approaches such as Word of the Day and Picture Clues/Words in their reading instruction.

Teachers were also asked how they chose these approaches and many of them presented theories of comprehension. This supported the study of Estrella [2] indicating the readiness and knowledge of the teachers in reading instruction[2], stating that teachers choose a reading approach based on theories that they know and on what they think was needed by their students.

It was found that most of the teachers implement their reading lessons using approaches that have been anchored in reading theories, although different teachers also adhere to different theories of reading instruction [40, 41]. Hence it is not surprising that there are different approaches and strategies that reading teachers implement, given that there were also various attributions to learning theories. There are, however, notable similarities in this level when it comes to the choice of a specific approach for a target skill. The teachers explained that their choices are also affected by the In-Service training that the department provides them.

Reading interventions still included the Marungko and tutorial reading and mostly targeted word recognition leading to fluency and automaticity. Teachers explained that they still use these approaches for students with reading difficulties at this level especially those who were struggling as beginning readers even before the pandemic started. When teachers were already allowed to do home visitations, they said they prioritized the struggling readers so they could develop word

recognition skills and be more adjusted when face-to-face classes would be implemented.

Table 3. Approaches in Reading Instruction for the Intermediate Grades in Cagayan de Oro, El Salvador, Gingoog City, and Misamis Oriental Divisions

Grade Levels	Pre-COVID-19 Reading Approaches	During COVID-19 Reading Approaches
Junior High School	Silent Reading Oral Reading Popcorn Reading Paired Reading Reading and Vocabulary Class Recitation Recorded Audio Clips Comprehension and Vocabulary Check Free Reading Time Think-Pair-Share Context Clues SRA Kit Cooperative Reading Project Individual Learning Project Modular/Home Reading Project LEARN Basa ni ELSA Reading Hub CNR Project Audiolingual Fuller Approach Tutorial Reading/ Remediation	Reading Comprehension approach Giving reading materials with comprehension questions for students to read and answer at home Virtual reading to assess comprehension

Table 3 contains the reading approaches used by teachers in their Junior High School classes. Silent and oral reading is the most common reading approaches used by the teachers in all the schools involved in the research during the Pre-COVID 19 pandemic [34], [35] followed by paired and class reading. Reading and vocabulary is also a well-used approach and aims to balance the development of fluency and comprehension [8], [26]. In fact, even in silent and oral reading approaches, comprehension questions are still asked after students read passages to ensure understanding of the text.

Popcorn reading is also done at this level despite literature which does not favor this; but as described by the teachers, this approach did not prove to be very threatening to students because they have already developed enough fluency to have confidence in reading their piece [42]. In fact, the students find Popcorn reading exciting as the better readers could “show off” their reading skills and the rest of the class could also have a chance to participate as anyone could be called to read the next part [43, 44].

Paired reading is also a frequent approach, and teachers usually pair the better readers with those who are not faring well with reading or comprehension and as an aid to fluency as Topping [38] found out in his study. Some teachers find this effective for building comprehension skills because the pairs could talk about the text on a more relaxed level which might not be easy

to attain with teacher-student conversation as they knew they were not being graded when they converse with each other [37].

The different reading programs of the Department of Education (DepEd) are also well-implemented at this level and usually come with pre-/post-tests and recommended reading and comprehension materials. Other more general approaches used in reading are the use of context clues [12], class recitation, the use of audio clips, and the provision of free-reading time for the reading interest of the students. Other teachers also use the SRA reading kit.

It is notable that some reading approaches such as Audiolingual and Fuller approaches are still used at this level for intervention which suggests that up to this level, there are still struggling readers.

During the lockdown due to the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers implemented the Home Reading approach. They also held virtual classes where they integrated reading activities and comprehension checks which they considered as a priority.

For both the approaches before the COVID-19 pandemic and the New Normal, teachers implemented mostly those covering the metacognitive domain, where students are given opportunities to monitor their understanding against some pre-set goals. This is similar to the findings of Baharuddin, et al. who discovered a vast set of activities geared toward the metacognitive approach [46]. However, this domain was not given much attention in the study of Babashamashi [45] and was suggested to account for the persistent reading difficulties of some of the students.

DISCUSSION

Many approaches used across the different levels in the Divisions of Cagayan de Oro City, El Salvador, Gingoog City, and Misamis Oriental were very similar. The Buddy system also called Paired or Shared reading approach is used at the Primary, Intermediate, and Junior High School levels across the different divisions of the research area. This is accomplished by pairing a good reader with another who has some reading difficulties. Since they are each given a role to play, the teachers believe that the buddies usually strategize communication in a way that facilitates comprehension of a reading text. Paired reading is also a way for the better student to share strategies with his/her partner or buddy. Teachers reinforce learning by letting the better reader facilitate the discussion and the other reader share with the class the result of their discussion. This way, the feeling of insecurity would be eradicated because even when partnered with a classmate that is definitely better than him/her, the student also has an important part to play.

The Home Reading approach allows the student to independently answer materials requiring skills ranging from simple vocabulary to comprehension questions that measure critical, analytical, and evaluative thinking. In fact, this is an approach that was used even before the COVID-19 pandemic. Sustained Silent Reading (SSR) is an approach that is similar to the Drop Everything and Read (DEAR). Students are given 10-15 minutes of silent, uninterrupted reading time every day to encourage reading for enjoyment and general love for reading.

With these similarities, it can be inferred that the different divisions are knowledgeable and supportive of the different reading programs of the Department of Education. The teachers are also knowledgeable of the different theories behind the strategies they use. This is also evident in the Focus Group Discussion because they would comment that they trained on particular approaches during their In-Service Training.

Other reading approaches used for reading intervention included the Marungko approach, Fuller approach, Tutorial reading, Picture Clues, and Sight Words. As seen in the previous tables, Fuller Approach is used even in Junior High School which implies that even at that level, there are still students with reading difficulties. Hence, even with the use of mainstream reading approaches, some intervention approaches are also implemented to accommodate those who have difficulties and assist them to adjust and adapt mainstream approaches.

The COVID-19 pandemic restricted the use of the various reading approaches and resulted in more or less uniform approaches in reading instruction across the three levels. The Home Reading Approach was implemented to address the need for instructional materials to reach the students despite the restrictions and health protocols. Students were given reading materials which included the text and comprehension questions. They were also given the option for virtual reading sessions, especially at the higher levels. This is the most commonly implemented approach across the different grade levels.

One unique approach during the pandemic as described by the teacher participants is the strong parent involvement in terms of coordination and even in assisting instruction. In fact, teachers record videos and send them to the students and ask the parents to assist in the instruction because the teacher does not have enough time to call every student every day for a reading session. Teachers communicated more with the parents during the pandemic as compared with the pre-COVID-19 years to make sure that their pupils and students are really performing the activities sent to them. This was a common approach across the four divisions involved in the study.

This implies that parents were very willing to assist their children in any way possible and want to keep track of their progress.

The pre-COVID-19 reading approaches used by teachers in reading instruction are very different from those used during the pandemic. The former used more varied approaches, were either teacher-led or student-centered, and were wider in scope while the latter implemented more limited approaches and are geared towards independent and individual learning. The mode of implementation was also different considering that most of the approaches during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic were done face-to-face and encouraged both individual efforts and group collaboration while during the pandemic, approaches were either done as a class through virtual learning environments or individually through the teacher's home visits or giving of reading materials and are clearly for individual development only. The range of materials also follows the same pattern, with the former having a wide range of collections, and the latter limited to just a few materials that were either teacher-

made (school-based, district-based, or division-based) or taken from online sources.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The data gathered led to the following conclusions:

There are many similar strategies that teachers from the four divisions of the Department of Education Region X implemented as promoted by the department which indicates that they are supportive of the different DepEd programs.

Reading strategies used by teachers during the pre-COVID-19 pandemic is more varied, wider in scope, mostly done face-to-face and designed for both individual and collaborative learning while those implemented during the pandemic were more limited to virtual learning environments, home reading tasks, and individual teacher's visitation to encourage independent and individual learning.

There are still struggling readers until the high school level which needed intervention strategies across the four divisions that target word recognition, fluency, and automaticity.

Parent involvement and parent-teacher coordination were more evident during the COVID-19 pandemic due to their desire to optimize their children's studies at home and keep track of their progress.

It is recommended that further research be done in this field, especially in determining whether a link exists between the strategies and student achievement in reading and in ensuring that strategies are implemented vis-à-vis the present curriculum. Coordination with parents should also be maintained to sustain the existing degree of parental involvement established during the pandemic.

Further research is also recommended to look into the institutionalization of the approaches that were used during the COVID-19 pandemic to ensure that the different schools have uniform means of implementation.

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