IMPROVEMENT OF READING SKILLS: ITS IMPORTANCE OF READING COMPREHENSION FOR ELEMENTARY SCHOOL LEARNERS

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the views of teachers on their experiences and strategic ways on enhancing their students reading comprehension. These data are the experiences, strategic method, and insights of teachers as reading facilitators. In exploring the experiences of the eight (8) participants, I employed the qualitative – phenomenological study of which primary instrument of data gathered utilizing in- depth interview method. On the participants' experiences in teaching their students to comprehend, the following were the emergent themes namely: students lack of vocabulary, reading motivation and slow reading fluency. Further, teachers coped the challenges by their strategic application in order to improves their students reading comprehension. Llikewise, based on the analysis, there were three themes that emerged on their strategic way which are: visualization strategy, questioning strategy, and making-connection strategy. These following strategies helps the students in enhancing of their reading comprehension. Upon the application of the following strategies, teachers shared their insights about these. We come up with two themes implies namely: development of learner's critical thinking skills and enhancement of student's concentration. And with this, strategies on reading comprehensions that are used is to assist struggling readers in improving their students reading skills. The results of the study may be use for publication in a reputable journal.

Keywords: improvement, reading comprehension, reading skill, visualization, phenomenological

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills that everyone should possess, as it is integral to daily life. It helps us become more knowledgeable about what is right and wrong and keeps us informed about current events through news and articles. Reading begins at home and is further developed in school, where it is essential for students to acquire new knowledge and information. According to Brown (2007), reading is the most critical skill in the educational context, often used to assess students' overall language ability.

However, the essence of reading diminishes if students lack comprehension. Reading comprehension is a crucial learning skill, involving the ability to extract and construct meaning through interaction with written language (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013; Wong, 2011). This includes understanding word meanings, analyzing authors' viewpoints, and gaining new vocabulary. Effective comprehension helps learners quickly locate pertinent information, exclude irrelevant details, and identify key information to focus on, which is essential for achieving educational goals and expectations.

A qualitative study in Michigan identified common reading problems that negatively impact elementary students' comprehension. Researchers developed an effective reading comprehension strategy, benefiting both students and teachers. Ruiz (2015) noted that teaching students to interact effectively with written passages through interactive strategies helps them recall what they read and understand the passage's meaning.

In Cebu City, Philippines, educators use various approaches to teach comprehension. Research findings suggest that innovative methods, enriched reading activities, and differentiated instructions are necessary to meet diverse learners' needs and strengthen basic reading comprehension. Similarly, in Sto. Tomas, Davao Del Norte, the 4R strategy (Read, Retell, React, and Reflect) has positively impacted grade school students' reading comprehension.

Theorists and researchers emphasize using different reading strategies to improve comprehension, from traditional methods like scanning and skimming to advanced strategies that activate background knowledge (Azizi & Hamedani, 2016; Tadayonifar et al., 2021). Learning materials also play a critical role; Niatu and Puji (2018) stressed the importance of selecting appropriate media based on students' cognitive levels. Engaging students in reading can lead to significant gains across various grades and ethnic categories (Macaruso, Wilkes, & Prescott, 2020).

Despite these advances, no research has focused on the local context of Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte. This study aims to address this gap, with the goal of improving reading comprehension skills and enhancing academic performance. School officials and teachers are encouraged to support this research project.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this phenomenological research is to explore the experiences of elementary teachers in aiding their students' reading comprehension. This study investigates the reading strategies used and the insights derived from these strategies at Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas, Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte.

Research Questions

1. What are the experiences of elementary teachers in teaching reading comprehension?

2. What strategies do they apply to improve students' reading comprehension?

3. What insights can be derived from the strategies they applied?

Significance of the Study

Department of Education (DepEd): The findings can inform school regulations and new programs, providing strategic ideas to support teachers in meeting learners' needs and ensuring quality education.

School Heads: This study can help in setting effective monitoring and evaluation mechanisms to enhance the use of reading comprehension strategies and improve student outcomes.

Teachers: The study offers insights into improving skills and creativity, aiding in achieving the goal of enhancing reading comprehension and building students' knowledge.

Future Researchers: This study serves as a baseline for further qualitative research on factors affecting reading comprehension and student academic performance.

Definition of Terms

Reading Comprehension: The process of making meaning from text, involving the understanding of written words, content, and the construction of meaning (Healy, 2002; Woolley, 2011).

Reading Skills: The ability to read, comprehend, interpret, and decode written language and texts, crucial for assimilating and responding to written communications.

Review of Significant Literature

Definition of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension involves understanding and interpreting written text. It is a creative and constructive activity characterized by purpose, selectivity, anticipation, and comprehension (Smith). It includes the reader, the text, and the reading activity, encompassing capacities, knowledge, and experiences (Catherine, 2002; Kustaryo, 1988). Effective comprehension requires understanding vocabulary, relationships among words and concepts, organizing ideas, recognizing the author's purpose, making judgments, and evaluating (Kustaryo, 1988).

Importance of Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is essential for academic and personal success. It is the foundation for understanding academic content and performing assignments. Mastering reading skills before third grade is critical for long-term academic success (Cunningham & Stanovich, 1997; Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007). Engaging in reading activities allows students to understand, analyze, and apply information (Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, & Snowling, 2013; Wong, 2011).

Reading comprehension also plays a significant role in daily life, enabling individuals to understand utility bills, housing contracts, job applications, and more (Hoeh, 2015; Marshall, n.d.). It is crucial for maintaining employment and engaging in various activities safely and effectively.

Models of Reading Comprehension

Three models facilitate the comprehension process:

1. Interactive Model: Emphasizes the interaction between the text and the reader's prior knowledge and between different reading strategies (Ahmadi, Ismail, & Abdullah, 2013; Brunning, Shraw, & Ronning, 1999).

2. Bottom-Up Model: Focuses on decoding text from letters to words, sentences, and overall meaning (Goodman, 1967).

3. Top-Down Model: Involves using prior knowledge and context to understand the text.

Theoretical Lens

This research is based on the Simple View of Reading (SVR) by Hoover & Gough (1990), which posits that reading comprehension results from efficient decoding and general oral language comprehension. The SVR model states that comprehension is the product of decoding and language comprehension: reading comprehension = decoding x language comprehension.

Conceptual Framework

The study explores the experiences, strategies, and insights of elementary teachers in improving reading comprehension at Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte.

2. METHOD

This section details the methods and processes employed in conducting this study. It includes the philosophical assumptions of the study, research design, research participants, role of the researcher, ethical considerations, data collection, data analysis, and trustworthiness evaluated through credibility, confirmability, dependability, and transferability.

Philosophical Assumptions of the Study

Philosophical assumptions provide the framework for collecting, analyzing, and interpreting data in a specific field of study, establishing the foundation for conclusions and decisions. Qualitative researchers emphasize understanding and articulating the beliefs and theories informing their research. In this study, I explore teachers' roles in improving students' reading comprehension to enhance their knowledge. This research aligns with the constructivist paradigm, relying on participants' views to create a theory or pattern of meanings through qualitative data collection and analysis (Creswell, 2013).

Phenomenology, an interpretive research approach, seeks to uncover meaning and describe lived experiences. This approach allows for a deep, reflective interpretation of learners' and teachers' experiences. Phenomenology studies the structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view (Smith, 2003). Neubauer (2019) describes phenomenology as focusing on individuals' lived experiences within the world. Creswell (2013) notes that in-person, semi-structured interviews lasting less than one hour are most effective. Patton (2002) defines phenomenology as inquiry asking, "What is the structure and essence of the experience of this phenomenon for these people?" This study examines the importance of reading comprehension for elementary pupils.

Different philosophical assumptions are used in qualitative research. In this study, the following philosophical assumptions are described:

Ontology: Ontology relates to the nature of reality. Creswell (2012) states that reality is subjective and multiple, as shown through participants' perspectives. Multiple realities exist, including the researcher, participants, and audience interpreting the study. This research depends on the voices and interpretations of the participants, expressed through quotes and themes. The actual experiences of elementary school teachers illuminate the importance of reading comprehension for pupils.

Epistemology: Epistemology refers to the theory of knowledge, including its methods, validity, and scope. Creswell (2012) states that epistemological assumptions involve the researcher reducing the distance between themselves and what is being analyzed, suggesting collaboration and time spent in the field. Davidson (2000) and Jones (2011) identify phenomenology with thematic analysis as suitable for this type of study. I established close interaction with colleagues to gain direct information relevant to the inquiry. Having long-standing relationships with participants, I could easily understand their experiences in our school.

Axiology: Axiology involves the study of values, including their nature and classification. Creswell (2012) asserts that the role of values in axiological assumptions is crucial. Researchers openly discuss values shaping the narrative and include their understanding in interpreting participants' data. I highly valued my participants' information as the basis for discovering teachers' experiences and strategies in teaching reading comprehension.

Rhetoric: This assumption emphasizes writing in a literary, informal style using personal voice and qualitative terms. Creswell (2012) and Lincoln and Guba claim that the investigator uses specific language and personal narrative in the study. I wrote informally, using personal voice and qualitative terms such as credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

Qualitative Assumptions

This qualitative research employs a phenomenological research design. According to Husserl (1970), phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain, starting from a perspective free from hypotheses or preconceptions. Phenomenology begins with a condition or experience and investigates its effects and perceptions through participants' narration. Willis (2007) emphasizes understanding participants' views of themselves and their world.

This research explores teachers' experiences in aiding students' reading comprehension at Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas, Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte. Phenomenology allows for examining the phenomena through participants' subjective perspectives.

Research Design

This study uses a qualitative research design with a phenomenological approach. Interviews were conducted with individuals knowledgeable about the event, situation, or experience. Participants were interviewed and observed applying various strategies to enhance students' comprehension. Through this process, the researcher constructed universal meanings and gained a profound understanding of the phenomenon.

Rudduck and Flutter (2000) differentiate between roles assumed by participants in research: as sources of data, active participants, and co-researchers. Fielding (2001) extends this to include participants as researchers if they initiate research and lead dialogue. In this study, teachers are the sources of data.

Phenomenology attempts to extract pure, untainted data, sometimes using bracketing to document personal experiences and remove researcher bias. In-depth interviews captured teachers' day-to-day experiences.

Research Participants

Eight elementary school teachers from Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas, Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte, participated in this phenomenological study. Participants underwent in-depth interviews (IDI). Creswell (2014) suggests that 8 to 14 participants are sufficient for qualitative inquiry, while Morse (1994) recommends at least six. Lichtman (2010) adds that a small number of individuals is ideal for in-depth qualitative research.

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, following criteria: (1) permanent teachers in public elementary school at Maguintalunan Integrated School, (2) advisors of grade 2 pupils, and (3) both male and female teachers. The number of participants was deemed sufficient to generate themes and information.

Ethical Considerations

The study explores elementary school teachers' experiences in applying strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. Given the nature of qualitative studies, ethical considerations include ensuring participants' safety and confidentiality. The Belmont Report (1979) principles—respect for persons, beneficence, and justice—guided ethical considerations.

Participants' consent was obtained, and the interview was conducted in a comfortable setting. Privacy was respected, and participants received a token of appreciation. The research followed the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act 10173), ensuring the confidentiality and proper handling of data.

Role of the Researcher

As the researcher, I attempted to access participants' thoughts and feelings, conducting interviews in comfortable locations. Efforts were made to avoid bias and maintain objectivity. As a teacher at the study site, I brought privileged information about the research context, playing the roles of interviewer, observer, and interpreter.

Data Collection

Data collection began with teacher interviews, following these steps:

1. Site and Participants: Eight elementary school teachers from Maguintalunan Integrated School were selected.

2. Permission: Approval was obtained from relevant offices, including the Dean of Rizal Memorial College, Office of the Schools Division Superintendent, and the school principal.

3. Orientation: Participants were oriented about the study's purpose and their roles. In-depth interviews were conducted using validated interview guides and recording devices.

4. Interview: The procedure included introductory phases, open-ended questions, and follow-up questions to encourage elaboration. The interview was summarized and reviewed for accuracy.

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved examining and thoughtfully analyzing the collected data. Creswell (2013) and Merriam and Tisdell (2015) suggest that qualitative research focuses on understanding individuals' experiences. The researcher organized and categorized data under explanatory themes.

Using thematic analysis, I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase method:

1. Familiarization: Reading the data and noting initial ideas.

2. Initial Coding: Identifying basic segments of data.

3. Searching for Themes: Sorting codes into potential themes.

4. Reviewing Themes: Refining themes at different levels.

5. Defining and Naming Themes: Ensuring themes accurately represent the data.

6. Writing the Report: Embedding data extracts within an analytical narrative.

Trustworthiness of the Study

Trustworthiness in qualitative research includes credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985):

Credibility: Ensuring the truth of research outcomes. I conducted in-depth interviews to capture participants' genuine experiences, ensuring consistency with their actual experiences.

Transferability:The degree to which findings can be applied in other contexts. I provided a detailed narrative and used purposive sampling to enhance transferability.

Dependability: The stability of results over time. Participants assessed the results and suggestions, ensuring they were supported by data.

Confirmability: Ensuring results are based on participants' data, not researcher bias. This was achieved through transcribing, member checking, and triangulation.

By adhering to these criteria, the study ensured the accuracy and reliability of its findings, contributing to a deeper understanding of teachers' experiences in improving students' reading comprehension.

3. RESULTS

This section explores the views of teachers on their students' learning curve in reading, highlighting their experiences, coping mechanisms, and insights as reading facilitators. The study aims to understand the challenges educators face in teaching reading comprehension and the strategies they employ to maintain their enthusiasm and effectiveness in helping students improve their reading levels.

Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Teaching Their Students to Comprehend

After analyzing the participants' responses regarding their instructional competence as reading facilitators, three major themes emerged: lack of vocabulary, reading motivation, and slow reading fluency.

Students' Lack of Vocabulary

Vocabulary plays an essential role in reading comprehension, enabling students to understand the texts they read. Many participants indicated that students with poor reading comprehension often struggle with unfamiliar words, making it difficult for them to grasp the meaning of the text.

As IDI-02 expressed:

"Most of my students have difficulty understanding what they read, especially if they encounter a word for the first time. That is why I usually ask them about certain words if I feel like it might be new to them."

IDI-03 added:

"My students who are poor in reading comprehension are also those who lack vocabulary. It is quite difficult to teach them, but I find ways since it is my responsibility to help them with this problem."

The data shows that teachers face difficulties in teaching comprehension due to students' limited vocabulary. Without sufficient knowledge of word meanings, students struggle to comprehend texts, resulting in confusion.

Research supports this finding. Sedita (2005) noted that students with limited word knowledge often fail to comprehend texts. Thornbury (2002) emphasized that even with good grammar, without a rich vocabulary, communication can be hindered. Vocabulary knowledge is crucial for reading comprehension as it allows students to efficiently access and process textual information (Ali & Mohd. Ayub, 2012; Bee Eng & Abdullah, 2003).

Reading Motivation

Motivation significantly impacts learning, including the reading process. Participants highlighted that a lack of motivation is a fundamental problem in their classrooms.

IDI-01 mentioned:

"Getting the attention of my Grade 2 pupils is really challenging. They also lack motivation to read since most of them prefer to play or talk to their seatmates."

IDI-06 affirmed:

"I often encounter students who say 'I don't know that' or look around avoiding eye contact when asked to read. Some just murmur words or play with their fingers."

Grabe and Stoller (2002) emphasized that reading motivation is crucial for learners to comprehend texts effectively. Motivated readers find reading enjoyable and are more likely to engage deeply with texts, leading to better comprehension.

Educators need to build students' reading motivation to help them comprehend texts. Effective strategies include creating engaging and relatable reading activities, providing choices in reading materials, and fostering a supportive classroom environment (Hairul, Ahmadi, & Pourhosein, 2012; Ferlazzo, 2021).

Slow Reading Fluency

Fluency, defined as the ability to read with speed, accuracy, and proper expression, is crucial for comprehension. Participants noted that many students struggle with reading fluency, especially after the pandemic.

IDI-04 stated:

"Most of my pupils are not fluent readers or are slow readers, especially after the pandemic. So, I applied repeated reading and explained unfamiliar words to them."

IDI-05 shared:

"As a teacher, you have to find interventions for students who have difficulty reading. I conduct pre-reading interventions to identify those with reading problems and remedial classes for slow readers."

Teachers must be resourceful in using different strategies to improve reading fluency. Repeated reading and remedial classes are effective interventions. Fluency issues often stem from difficulties with word recognition and automaticity, which can impede comprehension (Perfetti, 1985; Moats & Tolman, 2019).

Research shows that repeated reading, multicomponent interventions, and assisted reading with audiobooks can improve reading fluency and comprehension for students with learning disabilities (Steven E. A., Walker M. A., & Vaughn S., 2017; Lee, J & Yoon S.Y., 2017).

Figure 3: Experiences of Elementary Teachers in Teaching Their Students to Comprehend

Strategic Application to Students' Improvement in Reading Comprehension

Participants shared various strategies they use to enhance reading comprehension among students. Three major themes emerged: visualization strategy, questioning strategy, and making-connection strategy.

Visualization Strategy

Visualization helps students understand texts by creating mental images. Many participants found this strategy effective, especially for younger students.

IDI-08 shared:

"Teaching lower-grade students is challenging and fun. I help them visualize stories and the words used in the texts we read."

IDI-06 supported this:

"Visualization greatly enhances my students' reading comprehension. Primary students' imaginations are more vivid than those in higher grades."

Visualization makes reading more engaging and helps students understand and retain information. According to Harvey and Goudvis (2000), visualization involves drawing mental images of what is being read, which helps students focus and comprehend the text better.

Questioning Strategy

Questioning helps teachers assess students' comprehension and encourages active engagement with the text.

IDI-05 expressed:

"In primary school, reading stories is common. To check comprehension, I follow up with various questions."

IDI-07 affirmed:

"Questioning after reading helps students prepare and improves their comprehension. It allows me to know what to correct."

Questions direct and focus students' reading comprehension, helping them process information and engage with the text (Tankersley, 2003). Smith (1980) emphasized that questioning enhances understanding, making it a vital part of reading instruction.

Making-Connection Strategy

Making connections between the text and students' experiences helps them relate to and understand the text better.

IDI-01 stressed:

"After reading a story, I ask my students if they can relate to or have experienced something similar."

IDI-04 shared:

"I ask students if they have experienced similar situations as those in the story, explaining that stories can reflect real-life events."

Making connections enhances comprehension by linking new information to prior knowledge (Correia & Bleicher, 2008). There are three types of connections: text-to-self, text-to-text, and text-to-world (Morrison & Wlodarczyk, 2009). This strategy helps students relate personally to the text, improving understanding and retention.

Figure 4: Strategic Application to Students' Improvement in Reading Comprehension

Teachers' Insights on the Application of Strategies

From the data, two main themes emerged regarding teachers' insights from the strategies they apply: the development of learners' critical thinking skills and the enhancement of students' concentration.

Development of Learners' Critical Thinking Skills

Reading comprehension fosters critical thinking. Many respondents noted that students who comprehend well can think critically.

IDI-03 emphasized:

"Some students provide their own answers based on their understanding of the passage, showing critical thinking."

IDI-07 stressed:

"After reading, I let my class share their insights. Their different ideas indicate they understand the situation discussed."

Effective reading strategies turn students into critical readers who apply higher-order thinking skills (Kim, 2020). Modern cognitivists link reading comprehension with critical thinking, prior knowledge, inference-making, and metacognitive skills (Limbach & Waugh, 2010; Zabit, 2010).

Enhancement of Students' Concentration

Improving concentration is essential for comprehension. Teachers employ various strategies to maintain students' focus.

IDI-02 shared:

"I call out students' names to catch their attention during lectures, reminding them to focus on the lesson."

IDI-08 added:

"I create engaging activities to keep students interested and focused, moving beyond traditional teaching methods."

Reading sharpens the brain, improving concentration and comprehension (Brown, 2004; Nuttal, 2005). Concentration is crucial for academic success, and reading helps develop this skill (Hoeh, 2015; Marshall, n.d.).

Figure 5: Teachers' Insights on the Application of Strategies

In conclusion, the findings highlight the challenges teachers face in improving students' reading comprehension and the effective strategies they employ. Vocabulary knowledge, reading motivation, and fluency are critical areas of focus. Visualization, questioning, and making connections are effective strategies that enhance comprehension. Developing critical thinking skills and improving concentration are essential outcomes of these strategies, contributing to overall academic success.

4. CONCLUSION

This section presents the summary of the study, drawing implications for educational practice and suggesting future directions. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore the importance of reading comprehension for elementary students at Maguintalunan Integrated School, Brgy. New Visayas Sto. Tomas, Division of Davao del Norte. By examining teachers' insights on improving reading skills, the study identified effective techniques, approaches, and strategies used to enhance students' reading comprehension.

Summary of Findings

The study employed a qualitative phenomenological method with thematic analysis. Interview questions, adhering to Creswell's (2012) principles, facilitated a genuine understanding of teachers' experiences and insights. The key findings are summarized as follows:

Challenges in Improving Reading Comprehension: Teachers identified three major challenges: students' lack of vocabulary, low reading motivation, and slow reading fluency.

Strategies to Improve Reading Comprehension : Effective strategies included visualization, questioning, and making connections.

Insights from Applied Strategies: The application of these strategies led to the development of students' critical thinking skills and enhanced their concentration.

Implications

The study's findings have several implications for educational policies and practices aimed at enhancing reading comprehension.

1. Revisiting Educational Policies and Programs: The DepEd authority should reconsider existing policies, programs, and mechanisms to ensure the effective implementation of methods that improve reading skills. There is a need for policies that support the delegation of tasks, allowing teachers to focus more on improving students' reading skills.
2. Effective Delegation of Tasks: Proper delegation can help teachers concentrate on their primary role of enhancing students' reading skills while allowing other teachers to develop their skills in performing ancillary functions. This balanced approach can improve overall school efficiency.
3. Curriculum Integration and Relevance: Educators should emphasize the relevance of reading courses within the larger educational program. Understanding why certain courses are essential can motivate students to engage more deeply with the content, thereby improving their reading comprehension.
4. Strategic Methods for Reading Comprehension: Designing strategic methods for enhancing reading comprehension is crucial. These methods should provide students with feedback on their performance, enabling them to evaluate and improve their comprehension levels.
5. Building Strong Teacher-Student Rapport: The various activities designed to improve reading skills also help build strong rapport between teachers and students. This relationship is beneficial for both parties, as it fosters a supportive learning environment and guides students towards future success.

Future Directions of the Study

Based on the results and discussions, the study suggests several future directions:

1. Organizing Diverse Learning Activities: Teachers should organize a variety of activities to stimulate students' interest in reading. Engaging and diverse activities can help develop students' reading skills and maintain their motivation to learn.
2. Fostering Student Motivation: Understanding and motivating students is crucial for improving their learning outcomes. Teachers should employ strategies that address students' individual needs and preferences to create a more conducive learning environment.
3. Utilizing Mixed Methods: While this study used a qualitative phenomenological approach, future research should consider a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative methods. This approach can provide more comprehensive and reliable findings, offering deeper insights into the complexities of teaching and improving reading comprehension.

In conclusion, this study highlights the importance of addressing vocabulary, motivation, and fluency to enhance reading comprehension. The identified strategies and insights provide valuable guidance for educators and policymakers. Future research should continue to explore effective methods and approaches, contributing to the development of robust educational practices that support students' reading and overall academic success.

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