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Navigating Phonics, Fluency, and Comprehension Instruction: Elementary Teachers' Experiences in English 4 in Public Elementary Schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela – Binarsang Elementary School

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Abstract

Reading proficiency is fundamental to learners' academic success, yet many Filipino elementary learners continue to face challenges in phonics, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. This qualitative phenomenological study explored the lived experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing literacy instruction in public elementary schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela, with Binarsang Elementary School as the research site. Specifically, the study examined teachers' instructional practices, challenges, coping strategies, and recommendations for improving literacy instruction. Ten Grade 4 English teachers were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis and were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The findings revealed six themes: (1) explicit phonics instruction as the foundation of reading, (2) guided and repeated reading to improve fluency, (3) interactive strategies for comprehension, (4) differentiated instruction for diverse learners, (5) teacher creativity in addressing instructional challenges, and (6) collaboration with parents and stakeholders to sustain literacy development. The study highlights the critical role of teachers' pedagogical expertise, adaptability, and reflective practice in strengthening reading instruction. The findings provide valuable implications for teacher professional development, curriculum enhancement, and school-based literacy programs in Philippine public elementary schools.

Keywords: *phonics instruction, reading fluency, reading comprehension, literacy instruction, English 4, qualitative study, elementary teachers*



1. Introduction

Reading is a foundational skill that enables learners to succeed across all areas of learning. In Grade 4, learners transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," making effective instruction in phonics, fluency, and comprehension essential. At this stage, teachers are expected to help learners decode words accurately, read fluently, and construct meaning from increasingly complex texts.

Despite national literacy initiatives, many Filipino learners continue to experience reading difficulties, as reflected in international and national assessments. These challenges underscore the importance of strengthening classroom literacy instruction and supporting teachers in implementing evidence-based reading strategies.

Elementary teachers play a vital role in developing learners' literacy skills. They employ explicit phonics instruction, guided reading, comprehension strategies, formative assessment, and differentiated instruction to address the diverse needs of learners. However, they also encounter challenges such as varying reading abilities, limited instructional resources, insufficient parental support, and time constraints, requiring them to adapt their teaching practices creatively and effectively.

Although previous studies have examined reading achievement and literacy interventions, fewer have explored teachers' lived experiences in teaching phonics, fluency, and comprehension in authentic classroom settings. Understanding these experiences can provide valuable insights into effective instructional practices and inform professional development, curriculum improvement, and literacy policy.

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in public elementary schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela, focusing on Binarsang Elementary School. Specifically, it examined how teachers implement phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction, the challenges they encounter, the strategies they employ, and the implications of their experiences for improving literacy instruction in Philippine public elementary schools.

2. Review of Literature

Reading is a fundamental language skill that supports learners' academic achievement and lifelong learning. In elementary education, literacy instruction focuses on developing learners' abilities in phonics, reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. These components are interrelated and collectively contribute to reading proficiency. Research has consistently shown that learners who receive explicit and systematic reading instruction demonstrate better literacy outcomes than those who rely solely on incidental learning. Consequently, teachers play a crucial role in providing meaningful learning experiences that enable learners to become independent and strategic readers.

Phonics instruction remains one of the most effective approaches for developing early reading skills. It enables learners to understand the relationship between letters and sounds, allowing them to decode unfamiliar words accurately. According to the National Reading Panel (2000), systematic phonics instruction significantly improves children's word recognition, spelling, and reading achievement. More recent studies continue to support explicit phonics instruction, emphasizing that learners benefit from direct teaching of letter-sound correspondences combined with opportunities to apply these skills in authentic reading contexts. Teachers who integrate phonics with reading and writing activities help learners develop automatic word recognition while fostering confidence in reading.

Reading fluency serves as the bridge between word recognition and comprehension. Fluent readers read accurately, quickly, and with appropriate expression, allowing them to focus on understanding the meaning of the text rather than decoding individual words. Rasinski (2018) explained that repeated reading, guided oral reading, reader's theater, and teacher modeling are effective strategies for improving learners' fluency. When learners develop fluency, they allocate more cognitive resources to comprehension, resulting in improved academic performance across subject areas. Teachers therefore play an important role in providing regular opportunities for oral reading practice accompanied by constructive feedback.

Reading comprehension represents the ultimate goal of literacy instruction. It involves constructing meaning from texts by integrating prior knowledge, vocabulary, inferencing skills, and critical thinking. Duke and Cartwright (2021) emphasized that comprehension develops when teachers explicitly teach learners how to predict, question, summarize, visualize, and monitor their understanding while reading. Effective comprehension instruction encourages learners to become active participants in the reading process rather than passive recipients of information. Classroom discussions, collaborative learning, and authentic questioning further strengthen learners' comprehension and analytical thinking.

Current literacy research also highlights the importance of differentiated instruction in addressing diverse learner needs. Elementary classrooms often consist of learners with varying reading abilities, language backgrounds, and learning preferences. Tomlinson (2017) argued that differentiated instruction allows teachers to modify instructional content, learning processes, and assessment according to learners' readiness levels and interests. Flexible grouping, scaffolded activities, and individualized interventions enable struggling readers to receive targeted support while allowing advanced learners to continue developing higher-order literacy skills.

Within the Philippine context, the Department of Education has intensified efforts to improve literacy through programs such as the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP), the National Reading Program, Catch-Up Fridays, and the MATATAG Curriculum. These initiatives recognize reading as a foundational competency that requires systematic instruction, continuous assessment, and timely intervention. Teachers are encouraged to

employ contextualized instructional materials, differentiated strategies, and learner-centered approaches that respond to the needs of diverse classrooms. However, studies conducted in Philippine public schools continue to report challenges related to inadequate instructional resources, large class sizes, varying learner abilities, and limited parental support, all of which influence the effectiveness of literacy instruction.

Despite extensive research on reading achievement and intervention programs, relatively few qualitative studies have examined teachers' lived experiences in simultaneously teaching phonics, fluency, and comprehension in authentic classroom settings. Most existing studies emphasize learner outcomes rather than the instructional processes, professional decision-making, and contextual realities experienced by teachers. Exploring teachers' perspectives provides valuable insights into how literacy instruction is implemented, adapted, and sustained despite existing challenges. Understanding these experiences can inform teacher education, curriculum development, school leadership, and educational policy aimed at strengthening literacy instruction in Philippine public elementary schools.

Overall, the literature suggests that effective literacy instruction requires the integration of explicit phonics instruction, fluency development, comprehension strategies, differentiated teaching, formative assessment, and collaborative partnerships among teachers, families, and school leaders. These interconnected practices support learners' reading development while enabling teachers to respond to the diverse literacy needs present in elementary classrooms. However, further qualitative inquiry is needed to understand how teachers navigate these instructional responsibilities in real classroom contexts. This study addresses this gap by exploring the lived experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction in public elementary schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela.

Objectives of the Study

This study aimed to explore the lived experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction in public elementary schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela, with Binarsang Elementary School as the focal research site.

Specifically, the study sought to:

1. Describe the instructional practices employed by Grade 4 English teachers in teaching phonics, reading fluency, and reading comprehension.
2. Explore the experiences of teachers in delivering literacy instruction to diverse learners.
3. Identify the challenges encountered by teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction.

4. Examine the strategies teachers use to address instructional challenges and improve learners' reading skills.
5. Generate insights and recommendations that may strengthen literacy instruction and support literacy development in public elementary schools.

Methodology

This study employed a qualitative phenomenological research design to explore the lived experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction. Phenomenology was deemed appropriate because it seeks to understand and describe participants' shared experiences and the meanings they attach to a particular phenomenon. The study was conducted at Binarsang Elementary School in the Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela. The participants consisted of ten (10) Grade 4 English teachers selected through purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria required participants to have at least three years of teaching experience, currently teach English 4, and be directly involved in reading instruction. Their teaching experiences provided rich and relevant information regarding literacy instruction in the elementary classroom.

Data were collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans, reading intervention materials, and instructional resources. The interviews focused on teachers' instructional practices, classroom experiences, challenges encountered, coping strategies, and recommendations for improving literacy instruction. Classroom observations and document analysis were conducted to triangulate and validate the interview data. The collected data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) Reflexive Thematic Analysis. The analysis involved familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the final report. This systematic process enabled the identification of recurring patterns and meaningful themes that reflected the participants' experiences.

To ensure the trustworthiness of the findings, the study adopted Lincoln and Guba's (1985) criteria of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, and data triangulation. Thick descriptions of the research context were provided to support transferability, while an audit trail documented the research procedures to ensure dependability. Confirmability was achieved through reflective journaling and maintaining an objective interpretation of the data. Ethical principles were strictly observed throughout the study. Approval was obtained from the appropriate educational authorities and the school head prior to data collection. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, their voluntary participation, and their right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Written informed consent was secured from all participants, and confidentiality and anonymity were maintained through the use of

pseudonyms. All collected data were used solely for research purposes and were stored securely to protect participants' privacy.

5. Findings and Discussion

Analysis of the interview data generated four major themes that describe the experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction.

Theme 1. Strengthening Reading Foundations through Explicit Phonics Instruction

Teachers emphasized that explicit phonics instruction helped learners recognize letter-sound relationships and decode unfamiliar words more accurately. Daily phonics drills, word-building activities, and guided practice were commonly used to improve learners' decoding skills.

One participant shared, *"I begin every reading lesson with phonics activities because many pupils still struggle to read unfamiliar words."* Another teacher stated, *"Repeated practice helps my pupils become more confident readers."*

These findings suggest that systematic phonics instruction remains essential even at the Grade 4 level, particularly for struggling readers. This supports the findings of Ehri (2020), who emphasized that explicit phonics instruction improves word recognition and overall reading achievement.

Theme 2. Improving Reading Fluency through Guided Reading

Participants described guided reading, repeated oral reading, and teacher modeling as effective strategies for improving learners' reading fluency. They observed that regular reading practice enhanced learners' accuracy, speed, and confidence.

As one participant explained, *"When pupils read aloud every day, they become faster and more expressive."* Another noted, *"Guided reading allows me to correct mistakes immediately and encourage hesitant readers."*

These experiences indicate that fluency develops through continuous guided practice and constructive feedback. The findings are consistent with Rasinski (2018), who highlighted repeated reading as an effective strategy for building reading fluency.

Theme 3. Promoting Reading Comprehension through Interactive Learning

Teachers reported using questioning, storytelling, graphic organizers, and group discussions to help learners understand texts and think critically. These strategies encouraged active participation and deeper comprehension.

One participant shared, *"I ask questions before, during, and after reading so learners can connect ideas."* Another remarked, *"Group discussions help pupils explain the story using their own words."*

The findings demonstrate that comprehension improves when learners actively engage with texts rather than simply reading aloud. This supports Duke and Cartwright (2021), who argued that interactive comprehension instruction strengthens learners' understanding and critical thinking.

Theme 4. Overcoming Instructional Challenges through Creativity and Collaboration

Teachers identified varying reading abilities, limited instructional materials, and insufficient parental support as major challenges. Despite these difficulties, they developed localized reading materials, differentiated instruction, and collaborated with parents and colleagues to support struggling readers.

One teacher stated, *"I prepare my own reading materials because available resources are not enough."* Another shared, *"Working with parents helps reinforce reading practice at home."*

These findings illustrate teachers' resilience and adaptability in addressing literacy challenges. Similar findings were reported by Tomlinson (2017), who emphasized differentiated instruction, and by DepEd literacy initiatives, which recognize teacher collaboration and parental involvement as key factors in improving reading outcomes.

6. Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of Grade 4 English teachers in implementing phonics, fluency, and comprehension instruction in public elementary schools of Reina Mercedes District, Schools Division of Isabela. The findings revealed that teachers play a vital role in developing learners' reading skills through explicit phonics instruction, guided reading, interactive comprehension strategies, and differentiated instruction. Despite challenges such as diverse learner abilities, limited instructional resources, and varying levels of parental support, teachers demonstrated resilience, creativity, and commitment in providing meaningful literacy instruction. Their experiences underscore the importance of continuous professional development, collaborative partnerships, and adequate instructional support in improving learners' reading proficiency. Overall, effective literacy instruction depends not only on the curriculum but also on teachers' pedagogical competence and their ability to respond to learners' diverse needs.

7. Implications

The findings of this study have important implications for educational practice and policy. School administrators should strengthen school-based literacy programs by providing

adequate instructional materials and regular professional development on evidence-based reading instruction. The Department of Education may use the findings to enhance literacy initiatives and support teachers through mentoring and instructional coaching. Teacher education institutions should continue preparing future teachers with strong competencies in phonics, fluency, comprehension, and differentiated instruction. Furthermore, strengthening partnerships among schools, parents, and communities can reinforce learners' reading development beyond the classroom. Future studies may examine literacy instruction in other grade levels or districts to broaden understanding of effective reading practices in diverse educational contexts.

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