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Perceived Reading Skills of Grade 1 Learners

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Abstract:

This study investigated the reading skills of 172 Grade 1 learners in a large school in Western Visayas, Central Philippines, to inform the design of an appropriate intervention plan. The research assessed learners' reading proficiency in four domains: decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. It explored the influence of socio-demographic factors, including sex, parental educational attainment, number of siblings, and family income. Findings indicated that the overall reading level of the respondents was at the "Emergent" stage, with decoding as the strongest skill and fluency as the weakest. Notably, learners from lower socio-economic backgrounds outperformed their peers, suggesting that other factors, such as home literacy practices or community support, may positively influence reading development. Statistical analysis revealed a significant difference in decoding skills based on parental educational attainment, but no significant differences were found across other domains. The study concludes with recommendations for targeted literacy interventions, strengthened fluency instruction, and increased parental engagement, emphasizing the importance of context-aware, inclusive, and evidence-based approaches to early literacy education.

Keywords: Early grades, literacy intervention, reading skills, socio-demographic factors,

Introduction:

Nature of the Problem

Literacy is universally recognized as a cornerstone of human achievement and progress, profoundly influencing self-esteem, mental development, and the capacity to lead a meaningful life. The ability to read and write is a vital indicator of an individual's intellectual potential and a powerful driver of academic success and socio-economic advancement for society (Kern, 2020). Consistent with this understanding, the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines has championed various initiatives under the K to 12 Basic Education Program to cultivate a nation of proficient readers and responsible citizens. Central to this effort is the Hamon: Bawat Bata Bumabasa (3B's Initiative), which, through the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP), sets the primary goal of ensuring every learner achieves reading proficiency at their respective grade level (DepEd Memo No. 173, s. 2019).

Significant challenges persist despite these systematic and well-intentioned efforts, particularly among early-grade learners. Recent oral reading assessments from the 2024-2025 school year have brought many non-readers across different districts to light, highlighting critical gaps in foundational reading skills, particularly in Key Stage 1. This data underscores the urgent need for targeted and appropriate interventions. While standardized tests have been the traditional method for assessing reading performance, they often fail to capture the full spectrum of a student's abilities. Teachers, who observe learners daily in the classroom, possess a unique and valuable perspective on their students' decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills. These firsthand observations can provide a more holistic and reliable basis for effective intervention planning.

This research, therefore, sought to fill this gap by investigating the perceived reading skills of Grade 1 learners as reported by their teachers. The study not only aimed to understand the characteristics and reading difficulties encountered by these young learners but also to draw upon the expertise of educators and their understanding of these issues. By analyzing the teachers' perceptions, the study provides a more nuanced picture of learners' performance, which can serve as a foundation for developing a data-driven, evidence-based intervention plan. The ultimate goal is to enhance reading literacy and improve academic outcomes for early-grade learners by equipping teachers with improved strategies tailored to address individual needs and support holistic cognitive development. The findings will provide crucial insights into how to build a stronger foundation for lifelong learning.

Objectives

This study aimed to determine the perceived reading skills of Grade 1 learners from one large school in a district within a medium-sized division in Negros Occidental. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions: 1) the perceived reading skills level of Grade 1 learners according to decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension skills; 2) the perceived reading skills level of Grade 1 learners when grouped according to sex, parents' highest educational attainment, number of siblings, and average family monthly income; and 3) the significant difference in the reading skills level of Grade 1 learners when grouped according to the aforementioned variables.

Current State of Knowledge

These studies reveal a complex and evolving understanding of early literacy development, emphasizing the interplay between foundational skills and broader linguistic and environmental factors. Research by Silverman et al. (2020) highlighted a critical point: while interventions may improve language comprehension, they often have no significant impact on standardized reading comprehension scores without a strong foundation in decoding. This suggests that "sounding out" words remains a crucial prerequisite for proper reading comprehension. This finding is further supported by a longitudinal study by Coloma et al. (2020), which demonstrated that decoding is a primary predictor of reading success in the early years of reading (Grade 2). However, linguistic factors like vocabulary and syntax become more influential as students advance to higher grades. This body of research underscores that a clear, focused direction in decoding is essential not only for young learners but also for older elementary students, as shown by Philippakos et al. (2024), whose work confirmed that targeted instruction in multisyllabic decoding significantly improves word recognition and overall reading ability.

In the local context, similar challenges and findings have been observed. The Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines is actively addressing these issues through initiatives like the Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP), which aims to ensure that every learner reads at grade level. Despite these efforts, a recent oral reading verification for the 2024-2025 school year has exposed many non-readers in early grades, indicating a persistent gap in reading skills. This aligns with findings from a local study by Fabillaran (2024), who found that students showed instructional-level performance in oral reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension. This research further emphasized combining oral fluency practice, vocabulary enrichment, and comprehension strategies to address these core literacy deficiencies.

The role of technology and different media in literacy is also a growing area of study. A 2025 National Literacy Trust (NLT) report indicated a rising preference among children for audiobooks over traditional print. While audiobooks can aid in story understanding and creativity, experts caution against their substitution for printed materials, as they bypass the necessary "decoding" skills. The NLT advocates for a balanced approach integrating various reading forms to promote holistic literacy. Furthermore, research by Lin et al. (2023) confirmed that digital reading greatly influences vocabulary acquisition, suggesting its potential as a flexible and accessible tool in vocabulary instruction.

Beyond direct reading skills, the impact of environmental and social factors is also well-documented. Toseeb and Bryant (2020) presented a compelling argument that parental involvement in literacy, rather than just the parents' level of formal education, is a more significant predictor of a child's early reading success. Their study found that regular parent-child literacy interactions, such as joint reading and storytelling, demonstrably improve decoding and comprehension skills. This suggests that the home environment and parental engagement are critical components of a comprehensive approach to literacy development.

Consequently, understanding how educators perceive and apply these principles in the classroom is crucial for designing practical and effective interventions. These collective findings highlight a consensus in the literature: effective literacy instruction must be multifaceted, addressing core skills like decoding and vocabulary, leveraging technology, and fostering supportive, language-rich environments both in school and at home.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is anchored in Marie Clay's Emergent Literacy Theory, which provides a foundational understanding of how children develop reading and writing skills. This theory posits that literacy development is a continuous process that begins at birth and is nurtured through a child's everyday interactions with language and print, long before formal schooling. Clay (1991) emphasized that children are active learners who construct knowledge and apply strategies to accomplish tasks. She viewed teaching as a mutual relationship between the child and the educator, where a teacher's guidance and "scaffolding" positively influence the child's learning. According to Clay (1998), since each child's literacy development is unique, educators must provide clear instructional

approaches that help them find and use strategies to support their learning. Clay's work highlights the importance of a literacy-rich environment filled with books, stories, and engaged adults to build a strong foundation. Her theory shifts the focus from what children cannot do to what they can, using those strengths as a starting point for growth. This perspective informs the present study's approach to investigating the reading skills of Grade 1 learners and developing an appropriate intervention plan based on their observed strengths and weaknesses.

Methodology:

This section presents the study's methodology, including the research design, respondents, instruments, procedures for establishing validity and reliability, and the statistical treatments performed. It details how the investigation was conducted to ensure the data collected was accurate and reliable.

Research Design

This study utilized a descriptive research design to identify the perceived reading skills of Grade 1 learners in decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. This design was chosen as it allows for the systematic observation and documentation of existing characteristics without manipulating any variables (Siedlecki, 2020). Using this approach, the study aimed to establish a baseline understanding of learners' reading proficiency and determine if there were significant differences in their skills when grouped by various demographic factors. The findings will serve as a basis for a targeted reading intervention plan.

Study Respondents

The respondents for this study were 120 Grade 1 learners from a large school in a specific district of Western Visayas, Central Philippines. The researcher used a stratified random sampling technique and the Cochran formula to determine the sample size from the total population of 172 Grade 1 students, ensuring a representative sample.

Instruments

The primary instrument for this study was a researcher-made questionnaire, specifically adapted into the Hiligaynon language, to effectively assess the reading skills of Grade 1 learners in the local context. The questionnaire was structured into three distinct parts to gather comprehensive data. The first part was a letter of consent, which clearly outlined the study's purpose and ensured the voluntary participation and confidentiality of the respondents' information. The second section was a personal profile, which collected key demographic data from the learners' parents, including sex, highest parental educational attainment, number of siblings, and average family monthly income. The final and main component was a reading competency-based survey comprising 40 multiple-choice items. These items were meticulously categorized into four core areas of reading proficiency: decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. This comprehensive, three-part approach was designed to measure the learners' specific reading skills and correlate those findings with their socio-demographic backgrounds.

Data Gathering Procedure

After ensuring the validity and reliability of the research instrument, the data gathering process was conducted systematically. Initially, the researcher secured the School Division Superintendent's permission to conduct the study within the designated school. Upon approval, a subsequent letter was sent to the Public Schools District Supervisor for authorization. Following these official approvals, a letter of consent was distributed to the parents of the Grade 1 learners, along with a survey sheet to gather the necessary demographic information for the study's profile section. Once the 120 respondents were identified through stratified random sampling, the researcher administered the questionnaires with the assistance of the learners' teachers. All completed forms were collected immediately. The data will be encoded using Microsoft Excel and processed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) with the guidance of the school's statistician for analysis and interpretation.

Data Analysis and Statistical Treatment

Objective No. 1 used a descriptive analytical scheme and the mean to determine the perceived reading skills level of Grade 1 learners in four areas: decoding, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension.

Objective No. 2 also employed a descriptive analytical scheme and the mean to assess these learners' perceived reading skills level when grouped according to pre-identified socio-demographic variables, such as sex, parental educational attainment, number of siblings, and family income.

Objective No. 3 used a comparative analytical scheme and the Mann-Whitney U test to determine if there was a statistically significant difference in the reading skills level of Grade 1 learners when grouped and compared according to the aforementioned variables.

Ethical Consideration

This study was conducted with strict adherence to ethical research principles to protect the rights and privacy of all participants. Informed consent was a primary consideration, and it was thoroughly discussed with and secured from the target respondents before they participated in the survey. They were given a clear understanding of the study's purpose and procedures. Participants were assured that their privacy and anonymity would be respected throughout the research process, and all identifying information and study results would be treated with the utmost confidentiality. To further uphold this commitment, the researcher adhered to all provisions of the Data Privacy Act 2012. After the data was gathered, it was appropriately handled and discarded. In disseminating and publishing the study's findings for academic purposes, great care was taken to ensure that no details that could reveal the identity or school affiliation of the participants were disclosed.

Results and Discussion:

This section presents, analyzes, and interprets the data gathered to achieve the study's objectives. All findings follow specific, appropriate procedures to provide a precise solution to each research problem.

Table 1
Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension Skills

Area	Mean	Interpretation
A. Decoding	45.33	Emergent
B. Vocabulary	45.25	Emergent
C. Fluency	31.00	Emergent
D. Comprehension Skills	40.75	Emergent

Table 1 presents a descriptive analysis of the reading skills of Grade 1 learners, revealing that all four areas are at the "emergent" level. Decoding skills, with a mean score of 45.33, showed the highest proficiency, indicating that learners are beginning to develop their ability to recognize and read words. Vocabulary followed closely with a mean of 45.25, suggesting learners are starting to build a bank of words but still require more exposure. Comprehension skills, with a mean of 40.75, were also categorized as "emergent," indicating that learners need more practice with activities that encourage deeper thinking and discussion. The lowest mean score was in fluency (31.00), which points to significant difficulty in reading smoothly, accurately, and with appropriate speed. This is a critical issue as limited fluency can hinder a learner's ability to focus on comprehension. This finding is supported by Rasinski et al. (2003), who state that fluency is a vital "bridge" between word recognition and reading comprehension. Their research confirms that students with limited fluency often struggle with comprehension tasks despite having basic decoding skills.

Table 2
Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension according to Sex

Categories	Male		Female	
	Mean	Interpretation	Mean	Interpretation
A. Decoding	44.75	Emergent	45.90	Emergent
B. Vocabulary	45.25	Emergent	45.25	Emergent
C. Fluency	31.53	Emergent	30.49	Emergent
D. Comprehension Skills	42.71	Emergent	38.85	Emergent

Table 2 presents the reading skill levels of Grade 1 learners disaggregated by sex, revealing similarities and notable differences. In decoding and vocabulary, both male and female learners showed "emergent" skills with minimal differences in their mean scores. Females had a slight edge in decoding (45.90 vs. 44.75), while both sexes had an identical mean vocabulary score of 45.25. A more significant disparity appeared in fluency and comprehension, where male learners consistently outperformed females. In fluency, males (31.53) surpassed females (30.49), and in comprehension, males scored notably higher (42.71) than females (38.85), though both sexes remained within the "emergent" level for all skills. This highlights the importance of using diverse and gender-responsive teaching methods to ensure both boys and girls receive the support they need to become

proficient in all aspects of reading.

Table 3
Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension according to Parents' Highest Educational Attainment

Categories	**Lower**		**Higher**	
	Mean	**Interpretation**	**Mean**	**Interpretation**
A. Decoding	47.26	Emergent	40.83	Emergent
B. Vocabulary	45.95	Emergent	43.61	Emergent
C. Fluency	31.07	Emergent	30.83	Emergent
D. Comprehension Skills	41.55	Emergent	38.89	Emergent

Table 3 shows the reading skill levels of Grade 1 learners when grouped by their parents' highest educational attainment, categorized as "Lower" and "Higher." Surprisingly, learners whose parents had lower educational attainment consistently scored higher across all reading domains. In decoding, the "Lower" group scored 47.26, while the "Higher" group scored 40.83. This trend continued in vocabulary (45.95 vs. 43.61) and comprehension (41.55 vs. 38.89), with both groups remaining at the "emergent" level. Fluency scores were very close, with 31.07 for the "Lower" group and 30.83 for the "Higher" group. These findings challenge the conventional assumption that higher parental education correlates with better academic performance. A possible explanation is that parents with lower educational backgrounds may be more actively involved in their children's foundational learning, compensating for their limited formal education with hands-on engagement and a strong desire to ensure their children's future success. They might spend more time on simple, daily-life-based learning activities, while more educated parents may be busier with work or rely more on the school system. This trend is supported by the study of Toseeb and Bryant (2020), which found that parental involvement, rather than formal education level, is a more significant predictor of early literacy success.

Table 4
Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension according to the Number of Siblings

Categories	**Few**		**Many**	
	Mean	**Interpretation**	**Mean**	**Interpretation**
A. Decoding	44.25	Emergent	45.88	Emergent
B. Vocabulary	44.50	Emergent	45.63	Emergent
C. Fluency	29.50	Emergent	31.75	Emergent
D. Comprehension Skills	41.00	Emergent	40.63	Emergent

Table 4 presents a descriptive analysis of the reading skills of Grade 1 learners when grouped by the number of siblings they have, categorized as "few" or "many." The results reveal a surprising trend: learners with many siblings consistently outperformed those with fewer siblings in decoding (45.88 vs. 44.25), vocabulary (45.63 vs. 44.50), and fluency (31.75 vs. 29.50). This suggests that a larger number of siblings may create a more language-rich and interactive environment at home, providing more opportunities for peer learning and informal literacy practice. Older siblings might serve as reading models or provide direct assistance, which can be particularly beneficial for foundational skills like decoding and fluency. However, the trend reverses slightly in comprehension, where learners with fewer siblings scored marginally higher (41.00 vs. 40.63). This could be due to parents receiving more focused, one-on-one attention during reading time, allowing for deeper discussions and a more thorough understanding of the text. All scores remain within the "emergent" level, but the findings highlight sibling interaction's significant and often overlooked role in early literacy development.

Table 5
Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding, Vocabulary, Fluency, and Comprehension according to an Average Family's Monthly Income

Categories	**Lower**		**Higher**	
	Mean	**Interpretation**	**Mean**	**Interpretation**
A. Decoding	47.61	Emergent	42.04	Emergent
B. Vocabulary	46.62	Emergent	43.27	Emergent
C. Fluency	31.83	Emergent	29.80	Emergent
D. Comprehension Skills	41.55	Emergent	39.59	Emergent

Table 5 presents the reading skills of Grade 1 learners when grouped by average family monthly income, categorized as "Lower" and "Higher." The results reveal a surprising trend: learners from lower-income families

consistently outperformed those from higher-income families across all reading domains. The lower-income group achieved higher mean scores in decoding (47.61 vs. 42.04), vocabulary (46.62 vs. 43.27), fluency (31.83 vs. 29.80), and comprehension (41.55 vs. 39.59). All scores, however, remain within the "emergent" level. This trend challenges the assumption that higher income leads to better academic outcomes. It suggests that factors such as greater parental involvement in foundational learning or a more language-rich home environment may be more influential than economic status alone.

Table 6
Comparative Analysis in the Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Decoding when grouped and compared according to the aforementioned Variables

Variable	Category	N	Mean Rank	t-test	p-value	*Sig. level*	Interpretation
Sex	Male	59	44.75	-0.395	0.694	0.05	Not Significant
	Female	61	45.90				
Parents' Highest Educational Attainment	Lower	84	47.26	1.948	0.043		Significant
	Higher	36	40.83				
Number of Siblings	Few	40	44.25	-0.524	0.602		Not Significant
	Many	80	45.88				
Average Family Monthly Income	Lower	71	47.61	1.895	0.060		Not Significant
	Higher	49	42.04				

Table 6 presents the comparative analysis of Grade 1 learners' decoding skills when grouped by various demographic variables. The results show a significant difference in decoding skills based on parents' highest educational attainment (p=0.043, which is less than the significance level of 0.05). This leads to rejecting the null hypothesis and suggesting that parental education contributes to a child's decoding ability. Conversely, the analysis found no significant difference in decoding skills when learners were grouped by sex (p=0.694), number of siblings (p=0.602), or average family monthly income (p=0.060). Since these p-values are all greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is accepted, indicating that these specific factors do not directly affect a learner's ability to decode words.

Table 7
Comparative Analysis in the Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Vocabulary when grouped and compared according to the aforementioned Variables

Variable	Category	N	Mean Rank	t-test	p-value	*Sig. level*	Interpretation
Sex	Male	59	45.25	0.003	0.998	0.05	Not Significant
	Female	61	45.25				
Parents' Highest Educational Attainment	Lower	84	45.95	0.646	0.520		Not Significant
	Higher	36	43.61				
Number of Siblings	Few	40	44.50	-0.319	0.750		Not Significant
	Many	80	45.63				
Average Family Monthly Income	Lower	71	46.62	0.995	0.322		Not Significant
	Higher	49	43.27				

Table 7 compares Grade 1 learners' vocabulary skills when grouped by several demographic variables. The results indicate no significant difference in vocabulary scores across all groups. Specifically, the analysis reveals p-values greater than the 0.05 significance level for sex (p=0.998), parents' highest educational attainment (p=0.520), number of siblings (p=0.750), and average family monthly income (p=0.322). This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis for all four variables. The findings imply that, within this sample, these specific demographic factors do not significantly affect a learner's vocabulary acquisition. This suggests that the vocabulary skills of the learners are relatively consistent regardless of their background, possibly due to the equalizing effect of shared classroom instruction and literacy activities provided in the school environment.

Table 8
Comparative Analysis in the Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Fluency when grouped and compared according to the aforementioned Variables

Variable	Category	N	Mean Rank	t-test	p-value	*Sig. level*	Interpretation

Sex	Male	59	31.53	0.303	0.763	0.05	Not Significant
	Female	61	30.49				
Parents' Highest Educational Attainment	Lower	84	31.07	0.064	0.949		Not Significant
	Higher	36	30.83				
Number of Siblings	Few	40	29.50	-0.622	0.535		Not Significant
	Many	80	31.75				
Average Family Monthly Income	Lower	71	31.83	0.587	0.559		Not Significant
	Higher	49	29.80				

Table 8 compares Grade 1 learners' fluency skills when grouped by several demographic variables. The results consistently show no significant difference in fluency scores across all groups. The p-values of 0.763 for sex, 0.949 for parental educational attainment, 0.535 for the number of siblings, and 0.559 for average family monthly income are well above the 0.05 significance level. This leads to the acceptance of the null hypothesis. The findings suggest that these demographic factors do not statistically affect a learner's reading fluency. Instead, the results imply that fluency development is likely more influenced by consistent and effective classroom instruction, such as guided reading and repeated reading, than socio-economic or family background alone.

Table 9
Comparative Analysis in the Reading Skills Level of Grade 1 Learners in Comprehension Skills when grouped and compared according to the aforementioned Variables

Variable	Category	N	Mean Rank	t-test	p-value	*Sig. level*	Interpretation
Sex	Male	59	42.71	1.087	0.279	0.05	Not Significant
	Female	61	38.85				
Parents' Highest Educational Attainment	Lower	84	41.55	0.685	0.495		Not Significant
	Higher	36	38.89				
Number of Siblings	Few	40	41.00	0.099	0.921		Not Significant
	Many	80	40.63				
Average Family Monthly Income	Lower	71	41.55	0.540	0.590		Not Significant
	Higher	49	39.59				

Table 9 compares Grade 1 learners' comprehension skills when grouped by several demographic variables. The results consistently indicate no significant difference in comprehension scores across all groups, as all p-values exceeded the 0.05 significance threshold. Specifically, the p-values for sex (p=0.279), parents' highest educational attainment (p=0.495), number of siblings (p=0.921), and average family monthly income (p=0.590) all lead to the acceptance of the null hypothesis. These findings suggest that these specific demographic factors do not significantly affect learners' ability to comprehend what they read. This implies that instructional approaches and interventions within the classroom, such as effective teaching techniques like questioning methods and story retelling, have a greater impact on early comprehension development than a learner's home-related background variables.

Conclusions:

The study concluded that Grade 1 learners' overall reading skills were at the "emergent" stage, with decoding as the strongest area and fluency as the weakest, underscoring the need for targeted fluency interventions alongside continued support for decoding and vocabulary. Interestingly, learners from families with lower parental education, lower income, and more siblings outperformed their peers, suggesting that home literacy practices and parental involvement play a stronger role than socio-economic status in early reading success. No significant differences were found in vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension across sex, family income, and number of siblings, though decoding skills varied significantly with parents' educational attainment, highlighting its impact on foundational skills. In response, the study recommends implementing learner-profile–based literacy programs, prioritizing fluency-focused strategies in teacher training, supporting resilient learners from disadvantaged backgrounds, promoting parental literacy and involvement, conducting continuous monitoring and research on early literacy, and ensuring individualized support for learners through small-group and peer-assisted instruction.

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