

Utilizing Reading Strategies: Its Implications for the Effective Teaching of Reading

¹Floresa Occeña Albia, ²Ramir Philip Jones V. Sonsona

¹Department of Special Education, University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Philippines

²Department of Teaching Languages and Special Education, University of Science and Technology of Southern Philippines, Philippines

Abstract: This study ascertained the common reading problems that negatively impact reading of students with learning difficulties and investigated the reading strategies that special education teachers utilize to improve reading skills of their students. A survey questionnaire was used to determine the common reading problems encountered by the teachers in their reading classes and what reading strategies was employed in order to address such difficulties. Significant results of the study included the top three problems that adversely influence reading of students with learning difficulties include - issues with background knowledge, issues with vocabulary and trouble with fluency. Accordingly, the commonly used reading strategies by Special Education teachers were graphic organizer, questioning and peer-assisted strategy. Albeit, various strategies have been demonstrated as effective intervention for improving students' reading, teachers should not depend on one single strategy in teaching their students. Results revealed that although teachers use several reading comprehension strategies that have been approved as effective by research, they modify some of these strategies based on the students' needs and abilities.

Keywords: Learning difficulty, reading strategies, teaching reading, Special Education teacher, Philippines.

I. INTRODUCTION

Teaching students in special education classrooms is, indeed, a complex task with accompanied varying needs and challenges especially when it comes to reading. Alhamdan (2019) noted that students with learning difficulty often struggle more compared to general learners as they are learning to read. In fact, they struggle with reading more than with any other academic area. Because reading is a complex skill, especially for students with learning difficulties, it is important to choose a reading curriculum or strategies that match what research has shown are most effective for helping these students learn to understand what they read.

Not only is reading a valuable skill for learning in school, but in order to successfully interact in everyday life, individuals need reading skills to read and understand labels, directions, job application forms, and newspapers (Chatman, 2015). More so, individuals need reading skills to be able to have and maintain a job and successfully engage in different daily activities and live self-sufficiently (Hoeh, 2015).

It is especially significant to help students with reading difficulties overcome the reading problems that may hinder them from literacy success before they reach the higher grade. This is because, in lower level elementary grades, students are focused on learning to read, while students beyond third grade are reading to learn (Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007; Clarke, Truelove, Hulme, Snowling, 2013). Failing to solve reading difficulties during students' early grades drastically increases the chance that the reading difficulties will follow them into their adult years (Ford & Opitz, 2008; Samuelsson, Lundberg, & Herkner, 2004). Sloat, Beswick, & Willms (2007) stated that the majority of students who do not master the skills of reading to learn by the end of third grade will never learn to read well, have more difficulties with the grade level curriculum, need ongoing intensive assistance, and perform less than their classmates in reading achievement and curricular knowledge. Thus, the critical role that reading plays in students learning beyond third grade emphasizes the importance of recognizing struggling readers in their early grades and providing them with the most suitable reading strategies (Antoniou & Souvignier, 2007; Sloat, Beswick, & Willms, 2007). Research strongly supports both the vital role of early identification in the prevention of reading difficulties and the urgent need to teach children to read during the first few years of school so that they can "read to learn" in grade 3 and beyond" (Sloat, Beswick, and Willms, 2007).

Improving all students' reading skills in order to narrow the reading attainment gap is one of the essential goals of the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) and Every Student Succeed Act (ESSA). Closing the gap can be done through requiring and encouraging schools to integrate high standards, high quality instruction,

and teaching with research-based material and assessments (International Literacy Association 2016; Richburg-Burgess, 2012).

Several reading strategies have been administrated as effective tools for improving students' understanding of written materials (Almutairi, 2018). These strategies include, but not limited to graphic organizers (DiCecco & Gleason, 2002), collaborative strategic reading (Vaughn et al., 2011), peer-assisted learning strategy (Rafdal et al., 2011), story-mapping (Zahoor & Janjua, 2013), and self-questioning (Rouse, Alber-Morgan, Cullen, & Sawyer, 2014).

Also, numerous classroom-based reading assessments have been used by teachers to measure the students' reading understanding of academic material as well as measure the efficiency of a particular instructional method or teaching strategy.

II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design, Setting and Participants

In this study, qualitative approach was utilized. According to Creswell (2013), when a researcher seeks deep understanding of a particular problem or issue, a qualitative method is the most appropriate methods of inquiry. To identify and deeply understand the common reading problems that prevent students with learning difficulties from comprehending the text well while reading and the reading strategies that experienced special education teachers utilize to improve the students' comprehension level.

This study took place in the selected schools of Cagayan de Oro City offering Special Education classes. Teachers who have been handling learning difficulties voluntary took part in the conduct of this study.

Name of School	Number of Special Education Teacher/s
Agusan Elementary School	1
Bonbon Elementary School	1
Bugo Central School	4
City Central School	16
Cugman Elementary School	3
Pedro Oloy Roa Elementary School	2
Puerto Elementary School	3
TOTAL	30

Data Gathering Procedure

The procedure used for data collection was the self-made interview questionnaire. The interview was administered to the target respondents after securing permission of the concerned individuals and authorities. The researcher submitted a letter of permission to the school heads. Upon approval of the letters with the availed corresponding schedules from those concerned, the collection of data started.

Creswell (2013) argues that “the qualitative researchers should collect data themselves through examining documents, observing behavior, and interviewing participants”. Therefore, the researcher is the instrument who collects data, interview participants, and observe participants' action.

Statistical Treatment

This is a descriptive-qualitative research, thus, in analyzing the data, the questions asked the respondents will be grouped. All the responses will be tabulated according to the specific questions and will be reflected and written in verbatim form.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study is to identify the common reading problems that negatively impact reading comprehension of students with learning difficulties and investigate the reading strategies that special education teachers utilize to improve reading skills of their students.

Research Question 1:

What are the common problems encountered by Special Education teachers in reading classes?

Table 1. Reading Problems encountered by SpEd teachers in reading classes

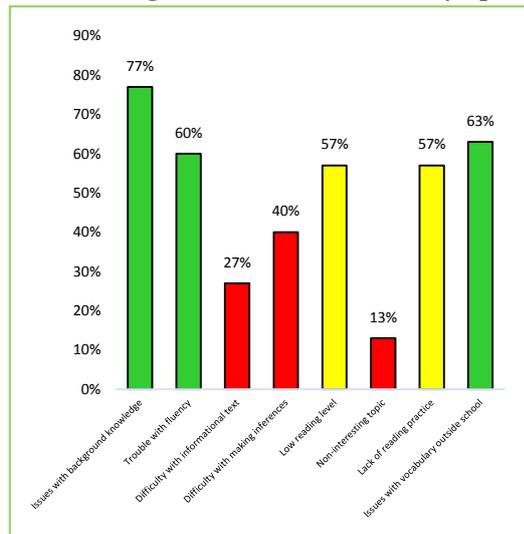


Table 1 above shows the common problems encountered by Special Education teachers in their reading classes. According to the teachers' responses, top three problems that negatively impact reading of students with learning difficulties includes issues with background knowledge (77%), followed by issues with vocabulary (63%) and lastly, trouble with fluency (60%). Further discussion of the common problems that shared by most teachers is provided in the following section.

The first problem is the issue with background knowledge. According to the result, having background knowledge is a significant factor that facilitates students' understanding of a text through linking the information to their previous experiences. In contrast, students who do not have enough background knowledge and life experience have nothing to connect the new information with, which makes the new information hard to be understood (Almutairi, 2018). What was found in this study regarding the importance of background knowledge generally aligns with the study of Blanc and Tapiero (2001). They pointed out that having more background knowledge about the topic of reading plays a significant role in helping readers to construct meaning from a text. Readers who had more background knowledge were able to make more accurate connection between the new textual information and their previous experience when compare to readers with less background knowledge.

The second problem is issue with vocabulary. Knowledge of vocabulary plays a critical role in facilitating readers' understanding of a text (Malatesha Joshi, 2005; Martin-Chang & Gould, 2008). Qian (2002) said that "Having a larger vocabulary gives the learner a larger database from which to guess the meaning of the unknown words or behavior of newly learned words, having deeper vocabulary knowledge will very likely improve the results of the guessing work". According to the results, the limited amount of academic vocabulary depressingly influences comprehension of some graders with learning difficulties. The lack of academic vocabulary as a problem that prevents some learners with learning difficulty from comprehending a text is generally consistent with those found in the literature (Clemens & Simmons, 2014; Jitendra, Edwards, Sacks, & Jacobson, 2004). Also, Gersten, Fuchs, Williams, and Baker (2001) noted that students with learning difficulties face problems to accurately understand many of the vocabulary and terminology that have been employed in academic texts.

The last problem is the issue with reading fluency. Issues with fluency was found as another problem that impacts the students' reading ability. Based on the results of this study, the issues with fluency are organized into two parts: fast reading and slow reading (lack of fluency), which both impact students' reading comprehension. All teachers pointed out that the lack of fluency (slow decoding) is a problem that prevents some of their learners with learning difficulties from comprehending a text well. According to the results, when students with learning problems are reading in a very slow and choppy way, they are using most of their working memory and energy trying to decode words in a text. As a result, they start losing the meaning of sentences. Not only slow reading, but also, super-fast reading negatively impacts understanding of reading. Fast readers miss the meaning of what they are reading because they just thinking about finishing what they are reading. While reading so fast students are missing punctuation marks and pausing as needed while reading, which all are a very important to be considered while reading to understand a text. What is found regarding lack of fluency is broadly in line with those found in the literature (Graham & Bellert, 2005; Chard, Vaughn, &

Tyler, 2002; Perfetti (1985), Therrien, Gormley, & Kubina, 2006; Wolf and Katzir-Cohen, 2001). Also, Chard, Vaughn, and Tyler (2002) concluded that students with learning difficulties often experience difficulty with reading fluency, which directly influence their reading comprehension. According to the present study, teachers offer help to their students to improve their reading fluency through implementation of rereading strategies. Rereading strategy helps students through providing them with a good model of reading, so they can recognize where to pause and using the intonation. It allows students for more rereading practices.

Research Question 2:

What reading strategies do special education teachers employ in handling students with learning difficulties?

Table 2: Reading Strategies employed by SpEd teachers

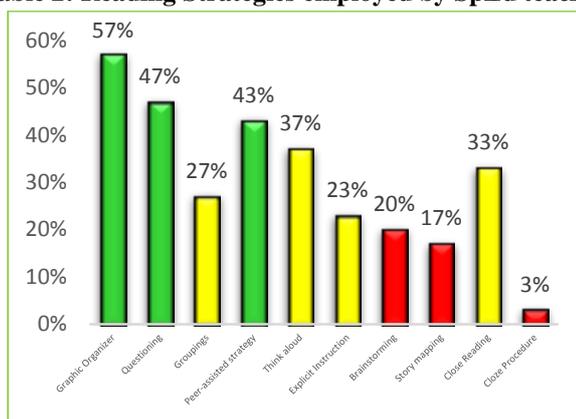


Table 2 presents the different reading strategies used by Special Education teachers. Most of these strategies are broadly aligned with the strategies that are highlighted by the National Reading Panel (2000) as an effective strategies for improving students’ reading. These strategies involve monitoring comprehension, using graphic organizers, answering questions, generating questions, recognizing story structure, and summarizing (National Reading Panel, 2000). According to the result, top three most commonly used reading strategies were graphic organizer, questioning and peer-assisted strategy consequently.

Regardless of the different forms that graphic organizers may take (Venn Diagram, T chart, and Spider map), they are found to be an effective strategy that can be used in different stages of reading (during and after reading) for improving students’ reading (Almutairi, 2018). That finding is broadly in line with those of researchers such as Sam and Rajan, (2013). Also, Chang et al. (2002) pointed out that “among the numerous reading strategies, graphic strategies are one of the few approaches that can be applied at the preview stage before reading, during the reading process itself, and at the stage after reading”. Also, Kim, Vaughn, Wanzek and Wei (2004) concluded that although improving reading is a very difficult task, it could be done through using graphic organizers.

Questioning is another strategy that helps to improve reading of students with learning difficulties. According to this study, questioning as a strategy takes two forms based on students’ ability: (a) teachers frequently stop and question the students while they are reading and (b) students are questioning themselves about the text while they are reading. These two forms of questioning are broadly consistent with what was found in the literature (Rouse, Alber-Morgan, Cullen, & Sawyer, 2014; Swanson & De La Paz,1998; Taylor, Alber, & Walker, 2002). In addition, questioning as a strategy improves students’ reading skills through encouraging them to think while reading, stay focused on reading task, thinking about the best answers, and go back to the text and reread it if they miss some information. It also improves students’ understanding of main ideas and details of the text by encouraging them to ask, “what if” questions and connecting the text to their background knowledge.

Peer-assisted reading strategy is another reading strategy that was frequently mentioned as effective by the special education teachers in this study. Similarly, Peer-assisted learning strategy has been demonstrated as an effective instructional method by the U.S. Department of Education’s Program Effectiveness Panel (McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2006; McMaster, Fuchs, & Fuchs, 2007). According to the results, the peer-assisted reading strategy increases reading skills of students with learning difficulties through allowing them to work with and listen to a peer, increasing their motivation to learn, predicting, and learning from each other’s personal connection to the text. It also facilitates students’ comprehension through allowing them a cooperative learning experience in which they coordinate and discuss information that has been in the book and share with one another. It also helps improving students’ confidence to share and confirm what they learn from the text with others.

Overall, although various strategies have been demonstrated as effective intervention for improving students’ reading, educators should not rely on one single strategy while teaching their students. That is because

one specific strategy might be beneficial for one particular student, but not for another due to the unique problems that each student has (Almutairi, 2018). Also, educators should be aware of that even utilizing evidence-based strategies may negatively influence students' reading if it is employed in an inappropriate or very modified form (Kim, Linan, Thompson, & Misquitta, 2012; Watson, Gable, Gear, & Hughes, 2012).

IV. CONCLUSION & FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this study was to identify the common reading problems that negatively impact reading comprehension of students with learning difficulties and investigate the reading strategies that special education teachers utilize to improve reading comprehension levels of their students.

Based on the analyses conveyed, the top three problems that negatively impact reading of students with learning difficulties includes issues with background knowledge, followed by issues with vocabulary and trouble with fluency. Accordingly, teachers start to observe the manifestation of these reading problems before their students reach third grade, usually between in kindergarten and second grade. Teachers usually start to notice these problems when their students fail to learn the pre reading skills, such as having trouble with recognizing alphabets, letter-sounds, sight words, and decoding. Even though, teachers start to notice reading problems with their students who have learning difficulties before they reach third grade, the gap grows so much bigger by third grade. After third grade, students are expected to be independent readers who can read for learning. That is what justifies teachers trying to help their students before they reach upper elementary level through using different reading strategies.

Moreover, most commonly used reading strategies by teachers were graphic organizer, questioning and peer-assisted strategy. According to the results, although teachers may resort to some reading comprehension strategies that have been approved as effective by research; consequently, they modify some of these strategies based on the students' needs and abilities. For instance, one strategy might originally require students to write down their ideas on worksheets or other instructional means. However, students might be weak at writing, so teachers allow their students to verbally express their ideas and write these ideas down for them. Also, teachers do modify some strategies by breaking them into smaller pieces and modify strategies for students who have low reading level, which prevent them from comprehending a text well.

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