



Research Article

Functional Literacy Challenges among Grade 7 Learners: An Exploratory Study

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ABSTRACT

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This study examined the literacy performance, challenges, contributing factors, and coping strategies of Grade 7 learners identified through PHIL-IRI as having low literacy levels. The study used a qualitative descriptive design. Data came from FLAT results, learner interviews, and teacher and head teacher input. The researchers used thematic analysis, frequency tables, and codes-to-themes matrices to analyze the data. Findings showed that not all 15 learners were functionally literate. Of these, 13.33% were at the letter level. Another 26.67% were at the word level, and 60.00% were at the paragraph level. Learners struggled with reading comprehension, written expression, following instructions, confidence during literacy tasks, and using literacy skills in daily life. These challenges stemmed from limited literacy resources, poor home and classroom environments, inconsistent parental guidance, English language barriers, classroom limitations, and socio-economic demands. To cope, learners sought help from peers, teachers, and family. They practiced independently, adjusted their study routines to accommodate household responsibilities, used available resources and programs, and sometimes avoided tasks to manage anxiety. The study recommends sustained, differentiated, and learner-centered literacy interventions. It also calls for stronger remedial and ARAL programs, greater access to reading materials, and the inclusion of learners in the design of effective literacy support initiatives.

Keywords: coping strategies, differentiated instruction, Functional literacy, Grade 7 learners, literacy challenges, PHIL-IRI, remedial reading programs

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Introduction

Functional literacy is essential to achieving equitable education and promoting national development. It refers to an individual's ability not only to read and write but also to understand, interpret, and apply information effectively in real-life situations (PSA, 2025a; EDCOM 2, 2025). In the Philippines, national assessments such as the Functional Literacy, Education and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS) and the Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT) have been used to examine not only basic literacy skills but also individuals' ability to apply these skills in practical contexts (Department of Education, 2016; DepEd Agusan del Sur Division, 2022). Although 93.1% of Filipinos aged 10 to 64 were reported to be able to read and write, only 70.8% demonstrated functional literacy, revealing a substantial gap between basic literacy and the ability to apply literacy skills in everyday situations. This disparity underscores the need to strengthen learners' reading comprehension, vocabulary, critical thinking, and ability to use literacy skills meaningfully beyond the classroom.

The seriousness of the literacy problem is further reflected in international assessments. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and other global benchmarks have consistently shown that the Philippines continues to face significant challenges in reading proficiency. In PISA 2018, approximately 80% of Filipino 15-year-old students performed below the minimum proficiency level in reading (OECD, 2019). These findings suggest that the problem extends beyond the ability to decode words or read simple texts and includes difficulties in understanding, interpreting, evaluating, and applying information to real-world situations. Such challenges may consequently affect learners' academic performance, critical thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving abilities (UNESCO, 2023). The continuing low performance of Filipino learners in reading therefore highlights the urgency of strengthening literacy interventions that address both foundational and functional dimensions of reading.

At the national and local levels, the Department of Education has implemented various assessment mechanisms and literacy programs to monitor and improve learners' reading performance. One of these is the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), which assesses learners' reading abilities through oral and silent reading activities and classifies them according to reading levels, including independent, instructional, and frustrated readers (DepEd, 2025a; Mendoza, 2025). Despite the implementation of these assessment and intervention programs, literacy challenges remain evident in Region X and Misamis Occidental. The functional literacy rate in Region X was reported at 70.0%, while Misamis Occidental recorded a slightly lower rate of 68.4% (DepEd, 2025a). These figures indicate that a considerable proportion of learners continue to experience difficulties in developing and applying literacy skills effectively.

The local situation becomes more evident in the Phil-IRI results of Misamis Occidental for School Year 2024–2025. As presented in Figure 1, among the 5,025 Grade 7 learners assessed during the pretest, 1,638 were classified as independent readers, 1,833 as instructional readers, and 1,360 as frustrated readers. The considerable number of frustrated readers is particularly concerning because Grade 7 marks the transition of learners into secondary education, where they are expected to comprehend increasingly complex texts and use reading as a primary means of acquiring knowledge across different learning areas. The presence of a large number of struggling readers at this stage may therefore hinder their ability to meet the academic demands of secondary education.

The post-test results presented in Figure 2 further provide an important basis for examining the effectiveness of existing reading interventions. The reported results indicated 1,638 independent readers, 1,833 instructional readers, and 1,360 frustrated readers. The similarity between the reported pretest and post-test figures suggests that substantial improvement may not have been achieved among the learners identified as struggling readers. This finding raises concerns regarding the adequacy, sustainability, and responsiveness of existing interventions in addressing the specific literacy needs of secondary learners. While schools continue to implement remediation activities, the persistence of frustrated readers indicates that interventions may need to move beyond short-term remediation and consider the broader academic, personal, family, and contextual factors affecting learners' reading development.

The comparison of results across Grade 7 to Grade 10, as presented in Figure 3, further demonstrates the persistence of reading difficulties among secondary learners. Grade 7 recorded the highest number of frustrated readers at 1,360, followed by Grade 8 with 815, Grade 9 with 779, and Grade 10 with 632. Although the number of frustrated readers generally decreased across grade levels, the figures indicate that reading difficulties remain

present throughout secondary education. The particularly high number among Grade 7 learners suggests that the transition from elementary to secondary education may be a critical period for identifying and addressing literacy difficulties. Without timely and appropriate intervention, learners may continue to experience difficulties in understanding learning materials, following written instructions, expressing ideas, and independently accessing information.

Further evidence of the continuing literacy concern can be seen in the Grade 7–12 Reading Assessment of Calamba National Comprehensive High School for School Year 2025–2026. As shown in Figure 4, the assessment involved 1,023 learners and identified 80 as frustrated readers (Department of Education, 2025). Although this represents a smaller proportion of the assessed population, the existence of frustrated readers at the secondary level remains significant because reading proficiency is fundamental to learning across all subject areas. Learners who experience persistent reading difficulties may struggle not only in language-related subjects but also in subjects requiring the interpretation of written instructions, problem situations, informational texts, and other academic materials. These findings reinforce the need to examine the underlying factors that contribute to persistent literacy difficulties among secondary learners.

In response to the continuing literacy challenge, the Department of Education has implemented several programs and interventions, including Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD) initiatives and national reading programs intended to establish and strengthen foundational literacy skills (DepEd, 2025a). Programs such as Early Language, Literacy, and Numeracy (ELLNA) and ARAL have likewise been implemented to provide targeted support to learners experiencing difficulties in reading and other foundational competencies (Mendoza, 2025). However, despite these initiatives, literacy challenges persist, particularly among learners in marginalized and resource-constrained communities. Teachers may encounter heavy workloads, limited instructional resources, and insufficient opportunities for professional development, which may affect their capacity to provide sustained, differentiated, and individualized literacy support (EDCOM 2, 2025). Furthermore, existing reading assessment tools may not fully capture the complex literacy needs of adolescent learners. Since the Phil-IRI was primarily developed as an assessment mechanism for younger learners, concerns regarding its appropriateness for measuring the more complex reading behaviors and literacy demands of secondary students warrant further examination (PSA, 2025a).

These circumstances reveal that the literacy problem among secondary learners cannot be understood solely through assessment scores. Behind the numerical results are learners who may experience difficulties in understanding texts, acquiring vocabulary, expressing ideas, completing academic tasks, and applying reading skills in everyday situations. Their literacy development may also be influenced by their home environment, learning experiences, access to reading materials, motivation, teacher support, and strategies for coping with reading difficulties. Similarly, teachers play an important role in identifying struggling readers, selecting appropriate interventions, and creating learning environments that support literacy development. Understanding these experiences and contextual factors is therefore essential to developing interventions that are responsive to the actual needs of secondary learners.

In this context, the present study focuses on the continuing literacy difficulties experienced by Grade 7 learners in Misamis Occidental. It seeks to explore the methods, systems, and contextual factors that contribute to learners' reading difficulties, particularly in relation to reading comprehension and vocabulary development. It also examines the challenges learners encounter when applying literacy skills in their daily lives, the influence of home and school environments on their literacy development, the ways learners cope with their reading difficulties, and teachers' perceptions and responses to these challenges. Using a descriptive qualitative research design, the study aims to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences of learners and educators and to identify contextual factors that may not be adequately reflected in quantitative assessment results. Ultimately, the study seeks to generate evidence-based and context-responsive insights that can inform the development of more appropriate, sustainable, and learner-centered literacy interventions for Grade 7 learners in Misamis Occidental and contribute to broader efforts to improve functional literacy in secondary education.

Methods

The study employed a mixed-methods exploratory sequential design to examine the instructional, systemic, and contextual factors affecting the functional literacy of Grade 7 learners in a public secondary school in Calamba

District, Division of Misamis Occidental. The study was conducted at Calamba National Comprehensive High School and involved the 15 lowest-performing Grade 7 learners based on their PHIL-IRI results, together with two English teachers and the English department head, who were purposively selected for their direct involvement in literacy instruction. Data were gathered using an adapted Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT), a validated semi-structured interview guide, focused group discussions, and classroom and task-based observations. The FLAT was used to determine learners' functional literacy levels across six progressive areas, while qualitative data explored learners' experiences, challenges, coping strategies, instructional practices, and contextual factors influencing literacy development. Quantitative data were analyzed using frequency and percentage distributions, while qualitative data were examined through thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's (2006) framework, with triangulation used to enhance the credibility of the findings. Ethical standards were observed throughout the study, including informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, secure data storage, and institutional ethics approval.

Results and Discussions

Functional Literacy Level of Grade 7 Learners

The findings revealed that all 15 Grade 7 learners assessed using the FLAT were classified as not functionally literate. Although 60% reached the paragraph level, none progressed to the comprehension or local-material levels required to demonstrate functional literacy. This finding indicates that basic reading ability does not necessarily translate into the capacity to comprehend, interpret, and apply information in meaningful situations. Functional literacy requires learners to use literacy skills for academic, social, and everyday purposes, rather than merely recognize or decode written words (Palma, 2024).

The result further suggests that reading fluency and functional literacy represent different dimensions of literacy development. Learners may successfully read connected text while continuing to experience difficulty identifying main ideas, interpreting questions, understanding unfamiliar vocabulary, and applying information. This finding supports the argument that literacy interventions should move beyond decoding and fluency toward explicit instruction in comprehension, vocabulary, interpretation, and application (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2021; Palma, 2024).

Challenges in Demonstrating Functional Literacy

The learners experienced several interconnected challenges, including reading comprehension difficulties, writing and language expression problems, difficulty following written instructions, low confidence and anxiety, and limited application of literacy skills in daily life. These findings indicate that functional literacy difficulties are not caused by reading ability alone but are influenced by cognitive, linguistic, emotional, instructional, and environmental conditions (Palma, 2024).

Reading Comprehension Difficulties

Reading comprehension emerged as one of the most significant difficulties among the learners. They struggled to understand written texts, identify main ideas and supporting details, interpret questions, and understand unfamiliar English vocabulary. These difficulties suggest that some learners could decode words but were unable to construct meaning from the texts they encountered. According to Sweller (2020), learners may experience difficulty when reading requires them to process several sources of information simultaneously, particularly when unfamiliar vocabulary increases the demands placed on working memory.

Low Confidence and Anxiety in Literacy Tasks

The findings also showed that some learners experienced nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and embarrassment when asked to read aloud or participate in literacy activities. These emotional barriers sometimes resulted in silence, avoidance, or dependence on classmates. Al Otaibi (2021) noted that high levels of anxiety may encourage learners to disengage from literacy activities, thereby reducing opportunities for practice and skill development. This suggests that literacy interventions should establish supportive learning environments where learners can practice reading without fear of embarrassment or failure (Palma, 2024).

Limited Application of Functional Literacy in Daily Life

The learners' difficulties extended beyond classroom activities. Some struggled to read shopping lists, labels,

text messages, and written instructions at home. These findings demonstrate that functional literacy involves the transfer of reading and comprehension skills from academic contexts to authentic daily situations. Learners who cannot independently interpret practical texts may become dependent on family members or peers for assistance, limiting their autonomy and participation in everyday activities (Palma, 2024).

Coping Strategies of Grade 7 Learners

Despite their difficulties, learners demonstrated several coping strategies, particularly help-seeking, repeated reading and practice, use of available learning resources, participation in remedial programs, and seeking assistance from teachers, classmates, parents, and siblings. These strategies demonstrate learners' resilience and willingness to overcome literacy barriers. However, some learners also relied on avoidance, such as remaining silent or allowing others to answer, particularly when they felt anxious or overwhelmed. Structured scaffolding, guided practice, and supportive feedback may help transform these less adaptive responses into more productive learning behaviors (Al Otaibi, 2021; Palma, 2024).

Implications for Literacy Intervention

The findings suggest that literacy interventions should address both the skills and contexts influencing functional literacy. Teachers should provide explicit instruction in comprehension and vocabulary while incorporating authentic materials such as labels, schedules, messages, forms, instructions, and other practical texts. Linguistically responsive strategies may also help learners bridge their familiar languages with English academic texts (Bernardo, 2022; Cummins, 2021). Furthermore, programs such as ARAL and remedial reading should be strengthened through regular monitoring, differentiated instruction, appropriate learning materials, and sustained teacher support (Palma, 2024).

Conclusions

The study concluded that instructional, environmental, and contextual factors influenced functional literacy among Grade 7 learners. Key challenges included limited resources at home and school, non-conducive study environments, time constraints, inconsistent parental guidance, irregular reading and writing habits, language environment, difficulty with English, classroom and instructional factors, and socio-economic challenges. Anxiety and low confidence further inhibited participation and comprehension. Despite these obstacles, learners showed resilience. They sought help from peers and teachers, practice independently, engage with resources, and manage their time as best as they can.

Functional literacy improved when instructional strategies are student-centered, contextually relevant, and practically grounded. Personalized support, including one-on-one or small-group reading sessions, engaging low-stress activities, and materials linked to everyday experiences, enhances comprehension, confidence, and participation. Sustained programs such as ARAL and remedial reading, combined with teacher support, manageable class sizes, ongoing professional development, and collaboration with parents, are critical for reinforcing literacy skills. Overall, functional literacy flourished in environments where instruction, resources, family involvement, and consistent reading and writing habits worked together to address learners' needs.

Recommendations

To further improve the functional literacy of Grade 7 learners, a collaborative and sustained approach involving learners, teachers, parents, school and community stakeholders, DepEd, policymakers, and future researchers is recommended. Learners should develop daily reading and writing habits by engaging in 15–20 minutes of functional literacy activities, such as reading instructions, recipes, labels, or writing short notes, while maintaining simple reading logs to monitor progress and build confidence. Teachers should strengthen ARAL and remedial reading through diagnostic assessment, differentiated instruction, small-group or individualized remediation, and the use of authentic, real-life literacy materials, while incorporating low-pressure activities such as journaling, storytelling, and reading games to enhance engagement. Parents and guardians should provide consistent, supportive, and non-pressuring literacy assistance at home through shared reading and practical writing activities. Community stakeholders, including barangay officials, school partners, and local organizations, should help provide accessible reading materials, establish community reading spaces, and organize regular storytelling and reading activities. DepEd should strengthen existing literacy programs by providing adequate instructional resources, intervention tools, teacher professional development, and systematic monitoring and evaluation, particularly in disadvantaged and geographically isolated schools. Policymakers

should ensure sufficient funding for literacy programs, teacher training, manageable class sizes, and the integration of authentic literacy tasks into the curriculum, with emphasis on improving existing programs rather than continuously introducing new initiatives. Finally, future researchers should investigate the effectiveness of functional literacy interventions across diverse and marginalized contexts using qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods approaches to generate evidence that can inform instructional practices, program improvement, and education policy.

Conflict of Interests

The author declares that they have no conflicts of interest

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