
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Enhancing Early Literacy: Strategies For Improving Oral Reading Skills in Grade One Pupils

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| ABSTRACT

This study examined the relationship between language skills specifically receptive and expressive language and the oral reading ability of Grade 1 learners. Using a quantitative correlational research design, the study aimed to determine how language proficiency influences learners' oral reading performance in Sinugbuanong Binisaya, the mother tongue used for instruction. Data were gathered from 30 Grade 1 pupils, along with input from their teachers and parents, using a Language Skills Assessment Questionnaire and an oral reading test. Statistical analysis revealed a strong positive and significant relationship between receptive language and oral reading ability and between expressive language and oral reading ability. The findings indicate that learners with higher receptive and expressive language skills demonstrate greater fluency and comprehension in oral reading. These results align with previous research underscoring the critical role of oral language development in reading acquisition. The study highlights the importance of integrating listening, speaking, and reading activities into early literacy instruction and proposes the development of a Reading Skills Enhancement Plan that incorporates mother tongue-based, culturally relevant strategies to improve early literacy outcomes.

| KEYWORDS

Receptive language, Expressive language, Oral reading ability, Reading fluency, Early literacy, Language development, Sinugbuanong Binisaya

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

Reading is one of the most fundamental skills that learners must acquire in the early years of schooling. Oral reading in particular plays a vital role in helping children bridge the gap between recognizing words and understanding their meaning. It allows learners to connect written symbols with sounds, and later on, develop fluency and comprehension. However, learning to read is not an automatic process, and many children face challenges in decoding words, recognizing sounds, and making meaning from print (Ehri et al., 2001; Frost, 2012). Effective reading instruction is therefore essential to ensure that pupils become proficient readers.

Debates have long existed on whether reading instruction should focus more on phonics or meaning-based approaches. The phonics method emphasizes systematic instruction on letter-sound relationships, while meaning-focused instruction prioritizes word recognition and comprehension (Bus & van Ijzendoorn, 1999; Clay, 2001). Both perspectives highlight that oral reading skills serve as a strong predictor of future literacy development. When learners fail to master these skills early, they risk lagging behind in later academic tasks.

Recent assessments highlight the urgency of strengthening literacy instruction in the Philippines. Results from the 2019

Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that Filipino students performed significantly lower in reading comprehension compared to international counterparts. The Department of Education further noted that pupils who struggled in the early grades often carried these weaknesses throughout higher levels of learning. Factors contributing to these challenges include limited reading materials, lack of parental support, exposure to gadgets and social media, absenteeism, and disruptions in schooling brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. These conditions slowed the development of reading fluency and comprehension among young learners.

In the context of Sinugbuanong Binisaya, pupils also face difficulties in fluency, spelling, and vocabulary due to the scarcity of instructional resources and limited teacher training in mother tongue instruction. Learners are exposed to technology and media that use English, further affecting their oral reading development in the local language. These realities highlight the need for relevant strategies and interventions to strengthen reading acquisition among Grade One pupils, tailored to children's natural interests and abilities (Danniels, 2018).

While existing research has explored general reading development and the effectiveness of various instructional methods, there remains a notable gap in understanding the specific relationship between learners' language skills particularly receptive and expressive language and their oral reading ability within the context of Sinugbuanong Binisaya. Most prior studies have focused on English or Filipino language proficiency, overlooking how learners' native linguistic competence influences reading fluency, comprehension, and word recognition in the mother tongue. Additionally, there is limited empirical evidence on how deficiencies in receptive (listening and understanding) and expressive (speaking and word use) language skills directly impact oral reading performance among early-grade learners. Addressing this gap is crucial for designing effective, language-based interventions that holistically develop pupils' oral reading abilities and overall literacy proficiency in their first language. Identifying the pupils' strengths and weaknesses in these areas, the study aims to design a Reading Skills Enhancement Plan that integrates mother tongue-based instruction, culturally relevant materials, and engaging learning activities suited to the local context. Ultimately, this research intends to bridge the gap between language development and reading fluency, providing practical insights and interventions that can guide teachers, school administrators, and curriculum developers in improving early literacy instruction not only in Kayam Elementary School but also in other Binisaya-speaking communities.

Literature Review

Language development, particularly in terms of receptive and expressive skills, plays a crucial role in shaping children's reading fluency and comprehension. Studies have consistently shown that these two domains of language ability serve as strong predictors of oral reading success. For instance, Park and Lee (2024) found that receptive vocabulary and expressive sentence production significantly correlated with reading fluency among elementary learners, with linguistic variables explaining more than half of the variance in reading performance. Similarly, Wise et al. (2007) revealed that while receptive vocabulary supports pre-reading skills, expressive language directly facilitates word identification and fluency, emphasizing the interconnectedness of these language domains in literacy development. In the Philippine context, Diaz et al. (2022) highlighted that although expressive language skills are emphasized in the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, receptive skills remain underdeveloped, potentially contributing to later struggles in reading fluency and comprehension. Longitudinal research by Killingly et al. (2024) further demonstrated a reciprocal relationship between expressive and receptive vocabulary and word recognition, confirming that as children's oral language proficiency grows, so does their reading ability. Complementing these findings, Canuto et al. (2024) showed that structured, fluency-based interventions such as repeated reading and Big Book activities effectively improved Filipino learners' oral reading fluency and accuracy, illustrating how balanced instruction that integrates both language development and fluency practice can enhance overall literacy outcomes.

Methodology

This study utilized a quantitative correlational research design to examine the relationship between the language skills (receptive and expressive) and the oral reading ability of Grade 1 learners at Kayam Elementary School in Carcar City, Cebu. The correlational design was chosen to determine the extent to which language proficiency influences oral reading performance without manipulating any variables. The study followed an input-process-output continuum model, where the input involved assessing the learners' language skills, the process included analyzing their oral reading abilities, and the output aimed to identify the relationship between the two and propose strategies to enhance reading fluency. The respondents of the study included 30 Grade 1 learners and their teachers and parents, who provided relevant data regarding the children's language development and reading behavior. Data were collected using a Language Skills Assessment Questionnaire, which measured the learners' receptive and expressive language competencies, and an oral reading test to evaluate their reading fluency and accuracy. To ensure objectivity and accuracy, the data were statistically analyzed using the Pearson Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (Pearson r) to determine the strength and direction of the relationship between language skills and oral reading ability. The results of this analysis were used to draw insights that could inform reading interventions and instructional strategies for improving early literacy among Grade 1 pupils.

Results

Table 1. Level of language skills of the learners in terms of receptive language

Indicators	WM	SD
Points to a family member when asked to do so.	4.33	0.80
Points to five body parts on himself when asked to do so.	4.27	0.83
Points to five named pictured objects when asked to do so	4.17	0.75
Follows one-step instructions that include simple prepositions (e.g. in, on, under, etc.)	3.97	0.89
Follows two-step instructions that include simple prepositions.	4.07	0.83
Aggregate Weighted Mean	4.16	
Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.82

The data in Table 1 reveal that the Grade 1 learners at Kayam Elementary School demonstrate a high level of receptive language skills, as indicated by an aggregate weighted mean of 4.16 and a standard deviation of 0.82. This suggests that most learners consistently understand and respond appropriately to verbal instructions and cues. The highest-rated indicator, "*Points to a family member when asked to do so*" (WM = 4.33), shows that learners effectively comprehend simple and familiar commands, reflecting strong understanding of contextual and relational language. Similarly, tasks involving identifying body parts (WM = 4.27) and pictured objects (WM = 4.17) indicate that learners can associate words with visual representations, a crucial skill for early reading development. However, slightly lower means for following one-step (WM = 3.97) and two-step (WM = 4.07) instructions involving prepositions suggest that learners may need additional support in processing multi-step verbal directions and spatial concepts. The relatively small standard deviation implies consistent performance across learners. These findings imply that while receptive language is generally well-developed, teachers should continue integrating listening comprehension and direction-following activities such as interactive games and storytelling to further enhance learners' ability to process more complex verbal information, which is foundational for improving reading comprehension and fluency in later stages of literacy development.

S/N	Indicators	WM	SD
1	Uses five to 20 recognizable words	3.93	0.83
2	Uses pronouns (e.g. I, me, <i>ako</i> , <i>akin</i>)	4.13	0.82
3	Uses two- to three-word verb-noun combinations (e.g., <i>hingi gatas</i>)	3.97	0.76
4	Names objects in pictures	4.17	0.83
5	Speaks in grammatically correct two- to three word/sentences	3.67	0.80
6	Asks "what" questions	4.10	0.76
7	Gives account of recent experiences (with prompting) in order of occurrence using past tense	4.27	0.74
	Aggregate Weighted Mean	4.03	
	Aggregate Standard Deviation		0.79

The data in Table 2 reveal that the Grade 1 learners possess a very good level of expressive language skills, as indicated by an aggregate weighted mean of 4.03 and an aggregate standard deviation of 0.79. This shows that most learners can effectively express their thoughts, use appropriate vocabulary, and communicate meaningfully. The highest-rated indicator, "Gives account of recent experiences (with prompting) in order of occurrence using past tense" (WM = 4.27), which earned an excellent description, suggests that many learners are beginning to develop narrative skills and temporal sequencing key elements in storytelling and reading comprehension. Other strong areas include the ability to name objects in pictures (WM = 4.17) and use pronouns appropriately (WM = 4.13), reflecting their growing vocabulary and understanding of grammatical conventions. Meanwhile, the lowest indicator, "Speaks in grammatically correct two- to three-word sentences" (WM = 3.67), indicates that some learners still require additional support in constructing complete and grammatically accurate sentences. The moderate variation in scores suggests that while overall expressive ability is strong, individual differences remain. These results imply that learners are developing a solid foundation for verbal communication, which is essential for literacy and reading fluency. Therefore, teachers should continue to provide structured oral language activities, such as guided storytelling, role-playing, and sentence-building exercises, to strengthen learners' expressive skills and prepare them for more complex reading and comprehension tasks.

Table 3. Level of oral reading ability of the learners

Level	Numerical Range	f	%
Independent	27-30	2	6.67
Instructional	17-26	14	46.67
Struggling	11-16	9	30.00
Non-reader	0-10	5	16.67
Total		30	100.00
Mean			17.17
St. Dev.			5.82

The results in Table 3 show the level of oral reading ability of the Grade 1 learners at Kayam Elementary School. The data reveal that the majority of the pupils fall under the Instructional level (46.67%), indicating that nearly half of the learners can read with some guidance and support from the teacher. Meanwhile, 30% of the learners are categorized as Struggling readers, showing limited decoding and fluency skills, while 16.67% are identified as Non-readers, suggesting difficulty in recognizing basic words and sounds. Only 6.67% of the learners reached the independent level, demonstrating strong reading fluency and comprehension with minimal assistance. The mean score of 17.17 and standard deviation of 5.82 indicate that most learners perform around the lower end of the instructional range, but with noticeable variation in reading ability across the class. These findings imply that while a number of learners are beginning to develop foundational reading skills, many still require targeted interventions to strengthen word recognition, decoding, and fluency. The relatively low percentage of independent readers underscores the need for systematic phonics instruction, guided oral reading practices, and individualized reading support to help struggling and non-readers progress. Furthermore, since the majority are still at the instructional level, teachers should implement scaffolded reading activities such as paired reading, echo reading, and repeated reading to gradually build fluency and confidence, ensuring that all learners can transition toward independent reading proficiency.

Table 4. Test of relationship between the language skills and the oral reading ability of the learners

Variables	r-value	Strength of Correlation	p - value	Decision	Remarks
Receptive Language and Oral Reading Ability	0.848*	Strong Positive	0.000	Reject Ho	Significant
Expressive Language and Oral Reading Ability	0.888*	Strong Positive	0.000	Reject Ho	Significant

*significant at $p < 0.05$ (two-tailed)

The results presented in Table 4 indicate a strong positive and statistically significant relationship between the learners' language skills and their oral reading ability. Specifically, the receptive language shows a correlation coefficient of $r = 0.848$ ($p = 0.000$), while expressive language yields an even stronger correlation of $r = 0.888$ ($p = 0.000$). Both values are significant at $p < 0.05$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. These findings imply that learners with higher levels of receptive and expressive language skills tend to perform better in oral reading tasks. The strong correlation suggests that the ability to understand spoken language (receptive skills) and to communicate effectively using appropriate words and sentences (expressive skills) are essential predictors of reading fluency and comprehension. The implications of these findings are highly relevant for early literacy instruction. Since both receptive and expressive language significantly influence oral reading ability, teachers should design learning experiences that integrate listening, speaking, and reading activities. Strategies such as interactive storytelling, shared reading, vocabulary-building games, and oral retelling exercises can help reinforce the connection between spoken and written language. Moreover, these results emphasize the importance of early intervention in developing language skills to prevent reading difficulties later on. By nurturing both receptive and expressive language competence in the early grades, educators can effectively enhance learners' oral reading fluency, comprehension, and overall literacy development.

Discussion

The results showing a strong positive correlation between both receptive and expressive language skills and oral reading ability ($r = 0.848$ and $r = 0.888$, respectively) support the extensive body of research emphasizing the crucial role of oral language

development in early reading acquisition. Studies have consistently demonstrated that learners with well-developed receptive and expressive language skills exhibit stronger decoding, fluency, and comprehension abilities. For instance, Wise et al. (2007) found that both receptive and expressive vocabulary independently predicted pre-reading and word identification skills, underscoring that language competence is foundational to early literacy growth (Wise et al., 2007). Similarly, Roth, Speece, and Cooper (2002) identified that semantic and expressive abilities in kindergarten were strong predictors of later reading comprehension, while phonological awareness predicted word reading indicating that different language domains contribute uniquely to various aspects of reading development (Roth et al., 2002). This aligns with the current study's findings, suggesting that children who understand and use language effectively are more capable of decoding text, constructing meaning, and reading fluently.

Furthermore, recent longitudinal research has reinforced that the relationship between vocabulary and reading is reciprocal, meaning that language proficiency supports reading development, and reading practice, in turn, strengthens language skills. Killingly et al. (2024) found that receptive and expressive vocabulary were mutually reinforcing with word recognition across Grades 1 to 5, indicating a continuous interaction between oral and reading development (Killingly et al., 2024). In addition, Park and Lee (2024) reported that expressive language skills particularly sentence production and vocabulary use were strong predictors of reading fluency in elementary learners (Park & Lee, 2024). These findings validate that both understanding spoken language (receptive) and producing meaningful speech (expressive) are integral to achieving reading proficiency. For teachers, these results imply the importance of integrating oral language activities such as storytelling, questioning, and guided discussions into reading instruction. Strengthening both receptive and expressive language skills at an early stage can thus lay a solid foundation for improved oral reading fluency and comprehension among young learners.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the study, it can be concluded that, the study on Grade 1 pupils at Kayam Elementary School showed a strong correlation between the learners' language skills and their oral reading ability. The majority of students demonstrated very good proficiency in both receptive and expressive language, which positively influenced their reading performance. However, a notable portion of pupils were categorized as struggling readers, indicating a gap that requires attention. The findings emphasize that improving both language comprehension and expression is essential for enhancing early literacy skills. Thus, targeted strategies focusing on strengthening language skills could significantly improve the oral reading abilities of students, ensuring better academic outcomes.

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