

## Addressing Reading Comprehension Difficulties in Printed Modular Distance Learning: A Case Study

Junilyn A. Tingson<sup>a</sup>✉ and Judequi M. Aquino<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>JHS Faculty, DepEd, Mandaue City Division, Cebu, Philippines

<sup>b</sup>Statistician II, Eversley Child Sanitarium and General Hospital, Cebu, Philippines

✉ **Corresponding Author:** Judequi M. Aquino, **E-mail:** [judequiaquino@gmail.com](mailto:judequiaquino@gmail.com)

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### ABSTRACT

This study aimed to explore how the teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students in Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) amid the prohibition of the traditional face-to-face session during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study used the semi-structured interview to gather in-depth data from the four Junior High School English teachers who are handling the students in the PMDL. Consequent to the pandemic, the researcher gave interview guide sheets and used audio recorders to document the responses accurately. This study utilized thematic analysis. The study showed that teachers managed to ascertain or find out students' reading comprehension difficulties through assessment scores or task outputs then verified through the background of the students from their previous English teachers. Moreover, teachers guide the students who adopt PMDL in improving their reading comprehension skills by keeping open communication and close collaboration with the parents or guardians and providing reinforcement activities.

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### 1. Introduction

Reading comprehension is the ability to decode and understand the meaning of written words (Arnold, 2020; Yusmalinda & Astuti, 2020). Alarmingly, PISA results (Philstar.com, 2019) showed that the Philippines ranked lowest in reading comprehension which means that Filipino students have reading comprehension difficulties. Reading comprehension skill is challenging for many students worldwide and has been attributed to various factors such as having low or poor inference making skills, vocabulary, low motivation, grammatical boundaries (Elbro & Buch-Iversen, 2013; Anastasiou & Griva, 2009), and poor critical thinking skills (Mohseni, Seifoori & Ahangari, 2020). To date, there have been various studies conducted in exploring ways and varied strategies to improve students' reading comprehension. However, with our current situation in the "New Normal" in Education where modular distance learning is employed, the suggested means of improving students' comprehension skills and the commendable methods and strategies undertaken by the teachers such as Directed Reading Activity (Audina, et al., 2020) or applying an approach of Inquiry-based learning (Rahmasari, 2020) are being challenged because face-to-face sessions are prohibited in carrying out Distance education during the COVID-19 pandemic. So, it is important to know how teachers address students' reading comprehension difficulties in Printed Modular Distance Learning in the "new normal." This present study aims to investigate how the teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students in Printed Modular Distance Learning by collecting detailed and in-depth information from the teachers.

Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process of simultaneously integrating complex skills of extracting and constructing meaning (Kirby, 2003; McLaughlin, 2012; Muawanah, 2014) through interaction and involvement between the reader and the text (Anastasiou & Griva, 2009) and the act of reading the text (Kirby, 2003; Rahmasari, 2020). Reading is more than seeing words clearly, more than correctly pronouncing written words, and more than understanding the meaning of isolated words (Yusmalinda & Astuti, 2020). Reading is not only looking at words in the text and pronouncing them but knowing all the components of a text. In short, the object of all reading is the interpretation of the meaning expressed in the written text.

Reading comprehension skill is indeed challenging for many students worldwide and for Filipino students as well as shown in the PISA results (Philstar.com, 2019). Aside from the factors mentioned above, other factors affecting the problems in reading comprehension are the difficulty of the material, the environment, and the students' technique of reading (Hardiante, Umamah & Ismiatun, 2020). Moreover, teaching strategies in reading comprehension are important in the learning process and could affect the students reading comprehension. Brown (2004) has noted that teaching strategies can make teaching reading easier to implement a variety of teaching methods and techniques. Therefore, successful teachers who teach an understanding of reading know that by using different methods, reading can be taught.

As stipulated in DepEd Order No. 007, s. 2020 entitled "School Calendar and Activities for School Year 2020-2021," schools and Community Learning Centers (CLCs) are allowed to decide on the specific DLDM which may be deemed appropriate in their context. As provided in DepEd Order No. 007, s. 2020, under the guidance of ROs and SDOs, schools and Community Learning Centers (CLCs) entitled 'School Calendar and Activities for School Year 2020-2021' are allowed to decide on the particular Distance Learning Delivery Modalities (DLDM) that may be considered suitable in their context. More than 8.8 million parents chose modular learning for the upcoming school year as their chosen distance learning modality, according to DepEd, with just 3.3 million opting for online learning (Mateo, 2020).

With the changes embraced for the new normal in education, these students have preferred the PMDL modality in which SLMs are claimed by their parents every Friday, and answer sheets are submitted the following Friday upon claiming the next set of SLMs. The teacher-learner interaction takes place on the feedback of the answer sheets/output submitted every Friday or once a week.

It is worth noting that one study in Pakistan (Malik, 2012) revealed that students taught by a modular approach get a significant mean score in a general comprehension-based teacher evaluation than students taught by a conventional or traditional classroom approach. However, it was also revealed that the Modular approach that was used in the experimental study made use of a module instead of a textbook but still in a face-to-face session. The modular approach employed in the study is not similar to the Modular Distance Learning now in the "new normal" in education.

While it may be true that with DepEd's #Sulong Edukalidad, different measures are taken to support continuity of learning, it does not eradicate the fact that there are a number of students in the Junior High School who have reading comprehension difficulties. Furthermore, students are still in the process of adapting to the changes in the modality of learning and as revealed in the recent study (Hebebc, Bertiz, & Alan, 2020), most of the students' problems are related to the lesson process, such as adaptation to a new learning environment, speed of lectures, and incomprehension or having difficulty understanding the lessons. So, it is important to know how teachers address students' reading comprehension difficulties in Printed Modular Distance Learning where there is no face-to-face session as what was usually done in the remedial reading sessions way back then.

The study aimed to explore how the teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students in Printed Modular Distance Learning amid the prohibition of the traditional face-to-face session during the COVID-19 pandemic.

## **2. Purpose of the Study**

This study explored how teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students who adopt Printed Modular Distance Learning (PMDL) by collecting detailed and in-depth information.

## **3. Methodology**

### **3.1. Research Design**

This is a qualitative research based on the case study. This approach (Baxter & Jack, 2008) enables the researcher to answer "how" and "why" type questions while taking into consideration how a phenomenon is influenced by the context within which it is situated. This study investigated how the teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students in Printed Modular Distance Learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **3.2. Research Participants**

Purposive sampling is employed in this research. This is a more acceptable sampling procedure (Ishak & Bakar, 2014), as it involves selecting participants for a special situation or a specific purpose in mind and gaining a deeper understanding of the particular case (Neuman, 2009 as cited by Ishak & Bakar, 2014). The target participants for the study are only those Junior High School English teachers of Jagobiao National High School who are handling students who preferred the Printed Modular Distance Learning. Four Junior High School English teachers are tapped by the researcher as participants and agreed to participate in the study.

### **3.3. Data Gathering**

This basic qualitative case study utilized semi-structured interviews which allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information with the liberty to explore the sequence and the way of asking the set questions. Semi-structured interviews, or focused interviews (Dane, 2010 as cited by Baskarada, 2014), can be more flexible and allows the researcher to better understand the perspective of the interviewees (Daymon & Holloway, 2002, as cited by Baskarada, 2014). All four participants were briefed about the study and written consents were solicited for their participation. Interview guide sheets were given, and audio recorders were used to document the responses accurately.

### **3.4. Data Analysis**

In this study, thematic analysis was used as it offers a versatile and valuable research method that helps researchers to define and organize relevant themes and subthemes that can be used as units of analysis. (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Mortensen, 2019). Braun and Clarke (2006) provide a six-phase guide (as cited by Maguire & Delahunt, 2017) which is a very useful framework for conducting this kind of analysis. The steps, however, are not necessarily linear and the researcher may move forward and back between them, perhaps many times, especially if the researcher is dealing with a lot of complex data. The steps are as follows: (1) Be familiar with the data; (2) Generate initial codes; (3) Search for themes; (4) Review themes; (5) Define and name themes; (6) Present and discuss results. The iterative process was done in order to generate useful and more qualitative data instead of following rigid linear steps. Interview questions were revised due to new information and going back to previous respondents to clarify responses was also done.

### **3.5. Ethical Considerations**

The researcher gathered the informed participants and assured them of the strict confidentiality, following the ethical principles during the study period to investigate how the teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students in Printed Modular Distance Learning amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Furthermore, the researcher asked for the participant's consent to have an audio recording of the interview session.

### **3.6. Rigors of the Study**

Triangulation of data sources, data types, or researchers is a primary strategy that can be used and would support the principle in case study research that the phenomena be viewed and explored from multiple perspectives (Baxter & Jack, 2008). Auxiliary informants were purposively identified to triangulate the statements made by the key informants. As data were collected and analyzed, the researcher also integrated a process of member checking (Krefting, 1991), where the researchers' interpretations of the data were shared with the participants, and the participants had the opportunity to discuss and clarify the interpretation and contribute new or additional perspectives on the issue under study.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Several themes emerged from the responses of the participants. These are reflective of the experience of the participants. Discussed below are the following observations:

### **4.1 Encountering Difficulties**

#### **4.1.1 Assessment scores or task outputs**

With Printed Modular Distance Learning, conducting the ORV (Oral Reading Verification) Test was not made possible. Teachers rely on the students' assessment scores or outputs from the given tasks in order to find out their students' reading comprehension difficulties.

*"For this pandemic, I can only assess the students' reading comprehension difficulties through their scores from the modules provided since there is no face-to-face reading test to be administered like the ORV and the Phil-IRI." (P1)*

*"...For me, through assessment I would be able to ascertain my students' reading comprehension difficulties..." (P3)*

Teachers find out students' reading comprehension difficulties not only from the assessment scores from the SLMs (Self-Learning Modules) but also from task outputs as they allow students to share their thoughts and interpretations.

*"...First is their outputs, but of course we cannot really hide the fact that we don't know if eee if they're the ones who made it, or their parents or their their their guidance, their what you call it...guardians rather. Guidance naman.. ok, so first is the outputs..." (P4)*

*"In my part, I am creating authentic learning experiences such as having them write something, letting them share their experiences, giving them instructions to be followed, asking open-minded questions. So, in that way,*

*learners can share their thoughts. Through that activities, I can find out who are those learners having reading comprehension difficulties." (P2)*

The teachers do not depend only on the modules given but provide other tasks or activities in order to ascertain their students' reading comprehension difficulties. An accurate assessment is necessary for teachers to give appropriate remediation and assistance to students (Nation & Snowling, 2011).

#### **4.1.2 Students' background**

Having no personal contact with the students, aside from looking into the students' scores and outputs, teachers ask about the background of the students from their previous English teachers and communicate with their parents or guardians at the same time.

*"Um... In this given situation that we are in right now, it's a bit challenging umm...to ummm point out or find out ummm...students' difficulties with regards to reading comprehension, but. Ummm..I ask their previous English teachers...especially those I think who have ummm difficulties." (P3)*

*"...As uh, I have said earlier and the second the prerequisites kno.. prerequisite knowledge. So I ask the former teachers. The former English teachers about their performance last year. So I think that is ahh, the greater ahhh way to access their comprehension skills and the second of course, the family background..." (P4)*

Knowing the background of our students is an important way in order to come up with an appropriate way to address learning gaps or in this case, reading comprehension difficulties. Paris and Stahl (2005), emphasized the importance of knowing and being sure of the type of curricular experiences of the different students in order to address their needs in optimal conditions.

#### **4.2 Initiating Improvements**

##### **4.2.1 Open communication and collaboration with the parents or guardians**

Guiding the students in improving their reading comprehension skills through Printed Modular Distance Learning is very challenging for teachers. Under the so-called "new normal", parents or guardians play an important role in the progress of the students. Communication and collaboration between parents and teachers are necessary for students' progress in reading comprehension. Teachers share with the students through their parents some simple and helpful reading strategies to help them improve.

*"I address the students' reading comprehension difficulties through their parents and I believe that open communication between the teacher and the parent will greatly help the student in improving their reading comprehension skills. For me, the parents can call me for their concerns and queries." (P1)*

*"I can tap the parents to assist their children at home with the reading difficulty since face-to-face is not allowed at the moment. As a teacher in language, I think that is the least that I can do for now since our actions are limited for this pandemic." (P1)*

*"I find it hard to guide them but I really find ways to cater their needs at a new normal situation by giving them numerous resources or reading materials on their level, allowing learners to record their voices while reading and listen back to it and collaborating to the parents by providing them opportunities for repeated reading. Reading in the same text over and over while fluency builds. As a teacher, I keep coordinating face-to-face to the parents every once a week for the progress or as the case needed through phone or cell numbers I provided." (P2)*

*"Yes, ummm...Reading comprehension tests are really challenging, so with ummm Printed modular distance learning. In my case, through their parents, I guide my students with their difficulties in reading comprehension by sharing to them simple and doable reading strategies such as brainstorming, outlining using graphic organizers because I think these strategies would Ummm really help them Ummm cope up their difficulties with regards to reading comprehension." (P3)*

*"Because, as I have said, we don't have anyways, or means for them to grasp or hold them to monitor and even teach them. But I always believe that the information or the the help of teachers and and parents is one great way to address their needs and for us to monitor their comprehension skills. I think the parents have the bigger responsibility and go together with the teachers to improve. And unsa to monitor? (Umm...) To monitor their comprehension skills in that way, at least. (uhm..OK, so in guiding them you communicate with parents.) I communicate with parents, and then parents to their sons or to their children." (P4)*

While it may be true that not all parents can follow the learning process at home, still, it does not eradicate the fact that parents' support provides a positive impact on students' improvement. Parents' participation in the intervention program provides a significantly positive impact on the improvement of the students' performance (Reglin, Cameron & Losike-Sedimo 2012).

#### 4.2.2 Provision of reinforcement activities or tasks

Along with communicating and collaborating with the parents or guardians, teachers also provide reinforcement activities that will help the students improve their reading comprehension skills. The activities are still coursed through their parents or guardians.

*" I provided them printed reading materials with questions to be answered and be submitted every week with guided directions and explanations and how they go through about it. And of course, in collaboration with the parents and Guardians who will be guiding them at home." (P2)*

*" To address, I think for me to treat or to like... ahmm, at least. to a little bit develop their comprehension skills I think I believe in Stephens Krashen Stephen Krashen's second language acquisition, with the utilization of task management...you are going to give them the task that is ahh, which they can relate to. Like for example, you have to include in the printed modular the things that interest them, like for example to tap social media platforms because in that way they have they can re late and it tickles their interest. (Ahhh..) It tickles their interest and in that way they can write more, they can have more idea and it can, it can lead them to a better comprehension skills because they already have the prior knowledge..." (P4)*

It is noted that teachers assist students virtually through video calls if it is possible and when it is deemed necessary. In some cases, parents communicate the need for the teacher to virtually connect or communicate with the student to help with understanding the text or instruction better.

*" On my end, I encourage my students to be very open to me about their concerns on reading comprehension. I'm very realistic on this. I assist them virtually sometimes ummm... If it's really hard for them to understand a story or an article, and I also provide reinforcement activities to them about the topic, like a...write... like writing a summary of the story." (P3)*

In the absence of face-to-face sessions or classes during the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers address the reading comprehension difficulties of students under the Printed Modular Distance Learning basically through their parents or guardians. Teachers keep open communication and closely collaborate with the parents or guardians since they are the ones who guide the students at home. Teachers and parents openly communicate with each other about the students' performance, their children's reading comprehension difficulties, and the reinforcement activities or other ways of addressing these difficulties aside from activities provided in the SLMs.

#### 5. Conclusion

Addressing students' reading comprehension difficulties in PMDL is difficult for teachers. Having no personal contact with the students, they examine the students' scores from the SLMs and their outputs to determine the students' reading comprehension difficulties. Furthermore, teachers inquire about the students' backgrounds from their previous English teachers. This study concludes that open communication and collaboration between teachers and parents are critical considerations in addressing the reading comprehension difficulties of students in PMDL in the "new normal." These findings are reflections of the experiences of the select Junior High public-school teachers. It is recommended that further research be undertaken on pedagogies for strengthening reading comprehension skills in students who chose PMDL.

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