

Cultivating Early Literacy: Impact on Grade One Academic Achievement

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Abstract. Teaching pupils to read requires patience, creativity, and a deep understanding of their learning styles. By fostering a supportive and engaging environment, educators can instill a lifelong love for reading in young learners. This study aimed to assess the Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills with their academic performance. It was conducted among the Grade 1 pupils of Zamboanguita District 2, Division of Negros Oriental, for the school year 2021–2022. The study utilized the descriptive-correlational research design and employed a standardized questionnaire provided by the Division Office. The statistical tools used are percentage, mean, mean percentage score, Pearson product-moment coefficient of correlation, and t-test for independent data. The study revealed that the Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills in listening comprehension, letter-sound identification, initial sound discrimination, and familiar word reading are just around the borderline of passing. It was also revealed that their academic performance based on their grades is satisfactory. Moreover, pupils' foundational literacy skills are determinants of their' academic performance.

Keywords: Reading; Grade 1 pupils; Academic performance; Foundational literacy skill; Descriptive correlational.

1.0 Introduction

According to future teachers, motivating pupils to read and understand what they are reading on varying levels is one of the most relevant tasks of the schools. Gao et al. (2018) said that it is best to address the reading challenges at the early stage to decrease tendencies of developmental delays which can affect pupils' performance over the long term. Indeed, it is of utmost importance that schools and teachers work together to promote students' reading abilities including comprehension, and to expose them to use a variety of reading strategies deliberately and appropriately, thereby giving them better conditions to meet the demands of the society (Aldibs & Khalil, 2022). Sadly, however, difficulty in reading is a major concern among primary school teachers in Ghana since the majority of their pupils do not know how to read (Oduro et al., 2021). In addition, the study by Gilmore (2022) indicates that children who do not know how to read at the end of Grade 3 usually struggle and remain behind their classmates as they progress in school.

Based on the 2020 report by Education EF (EF), an international education company, the Philippines ranked at the 27th spot in the English Proficiency Index, indicating a 7-spot drop. This proves that the country has been experiencing a declining rank over the past years: in 2016 at the 13th place, in 2017 at the 15th place, in 2018 at the 14th place, and in 2019 at the 20th place. Moreover, it was also disclosed that most Filipino students are struggling to handle questions that require higher cognitive skills, including both situational and contextual questions (ABS-CBN News). According to the Department of Education (DepEd), in Bicol, more than 70,000 elementary pupils are non-readers in both English and Filipino, citing primary findings from research in 2019. Most of the "non-readers" came from Grades 1 and 2. These pre-test results were gathered by administering the Philippine Informal

Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) between July and August 2019 (Jaucian, 2020). Moreover, poor reading performance among the pupils in Grade 1 is one of the common problems of the teachers in the public schools of Valencia District and even in other districts in the Division of Negros Oriental (Saberón, 2020). The findings are proof that the Filipino students ranking last in reading comprehension out of 79 countries in the 2018 Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) is not a coincidence (Roperó, 2019).

In this regard, the researcher saw the importance of looking into the reading level of pupils in Grade 1 because this area has been less explored in literature. Moreover, other studies focused mostly on students' reading and listening comprehension wherein the respondents are already in College, High School, and Intermediate Elementary. To address the problems faced by Filipino learners, the researcher being an elementary teacher would like to contribute to the solutions of problems related to emergent readers.

Thus, the researcher decided to assess the Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills, where the foundation in reading is vital because they will have difficulty studying at a higher level if they miss this chance. Exploring this aspect would shed light for the school administrators to provide programs and projects that will enhance pupils' foundational literacy skills. Consequently, implementing these projects will result in improved reading performance among pupils at the earliest time possible. As such, it will be a basis for an action plan to improve the academic performance of the Grade 1 pupils.

This study was designed to assess the Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills and their academic performance. Specifically, the study sought to answer the following questions:

- a. What is the level of the Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills in terms of the following: Listening comprehension; Letter-sound identification; Initial sound discrimination; and Familiar word reading?
- b. What is the academic performance of the pupils based on their grades?
- c. Is there a significant relationship between the foundational literacy skills of the pupils and their academic performance?

2.0 Methodology

2.1 Research Design

The descriptive-correlational research design by Creswell was used. It is descriptive since it assesses pupils' foundational literacy skills. It is correlational since their relationship was identified.

2.2 Research Participants

The study was conducted in the different Public Elementary Schools in Zamboanguita District 2. One hundred ninety (190) pupils from the aforementioned seven elementary schools were the respondents of the study. The participants were selected using the systematic sampling technique.

2.3 Research Instrument

A standardized questionnaire that was crafted and quality-assured by the Department of Education to gather the data needed for the study was employed. Documentary analysis using the School Form 5 (Report on Promotion and Learning Progress and Achievement) was utilized for the pupils' academic performance. Part I shows the disclosure statement, where the teachers are giving consent to the researcher to gather data/information provided that confidentiality of data will be observed. It also contains the purpose of the conduct of the study. Part II consists of the pupils' profiles. Part III is the EGRA tool used to gather the data on the pupils' foundational literacy skills.

2.4 Data Gathering Procedure

Beginning the data-gathering procedure included complying with all of the panel members' corrections and recommendations. Then, a letter request was sent to the Schools Division of Negros Oriental to conduct the study upon the dean's endorsement of the graduate school of Foundation University. After which, permission was likewise sought from the school principals or school heads and the teacher-adviser of the pupils. Furthermore, the assistance of the Grade 1 teachers to facilitate the administration of the test was asked. The administration was done orally and individually by the Grade 1 teachers to determine the foundational literacy skills. The accomplished questionnaires were retrieved after all pupils were assessed. The results were scored and tabulated using MS Excel and were analyzed and interpreted.

2.5 Ethical Considerations

When the study was conducted, the guidelines of Foundation University's Ethics Committee were followed. Upon the committee's approval, permission from the Schools Division Superintendent to conduct the study through writing was asked. Help was also sought from the school heads in the conduct of the study. Confidentiality of the result was also assured by keeping their identity as individual participants.

2.6 Data Analysis

The tools used by the researcher in analyzing the data were the following:

Percent. This was utilized to demonstrate how a part is related to a whole. It was used in presenting the academic performance of the Grade 1 pupils.

Mean. This was used to get the level of academic performance of the pupils and their foundational literacy skills.

Pearson Product Moment Coefficient of Correlation. This was used to determine the relationship between the foundational literacy skills of pupils and their academic performance. This was utilized since both variables are measured in ratio scale.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Foundational Literacy Skills of Grade 1 Pupils in terms of Listening Comprehension

Table 1. Foundational literacy skills of grade 1 pupils in terms of listening comprehension (n=190)

Scores	Number of Pupils		%	Mean	MPS	Overall Level
	Failing	Passing				
1	9		4.74			
2		18	9.47			
3		39	20.53	3.98	79.60%	Passing
4		21	11.05			Level
5		103	54.21			
TOTAL	9	181				
OVERALL PERCENTAGE	4.74%	75.26%	100%			

Table 1 shows the foundational literacy skills of Grade 1 pupils in terms of listening comprehension. Based on the results, of the 190 pupils, 9 or 4.74% fall on the failing level with a score of 1. On the other hand, 181, or 75.26% fall on the passing level wherein 18 pupils got 2; 39 pupils got 3; 21 pupils got 4; and the majority comprising 103 pupils got a perfect score of 5. Summing up, pupils' listening comprehension falls on the passing level as reflected in the mean score of 3.98 or a mean percentage score (MPS) of 79.60%. Though it is categorized on the passing level, it still needs improvement as a significant number are still on the borderline of passing.

As cited in the study of Mealings (2023), primary school learners must have sufficient listening comprehension abilities to succeed in the future. Children must be able to listen to and understand what their teachers and classmates are saying to succeed in school. Similarly, Nisa, Izzah, and Hadi (2022) stressed that listening comprehension involves different processes that are essential in understanding. These include speech recognition, identifying the meaning of words, and learning the sentence structure. It increases the compatibility of learners' linguistic comprehension. In other words, to lead us in understanding the pure meaning of the information, we need to listen.

3.2 Foundational Literacy Skills of Grade 1 Pupils in terms of Letter-Sound Identification

Table 2 shows the foundational literacy skills of Grade 1 pupils in terms of letter-sound identification. The results reveal that of the 190 pupils, 69 or 36.32% are on the failing level wherein 3 pupils got below 10; 8 obtained a score within the range of 10–19; 14 acquired a score within the score bracket of 20–29; 17 earned a score within the scale of 30–39; and 27 gained a score within the scope of 40–49. On the other hand, 121, or 63.68% fall on the passing level wherein 53 got 50–59; 25 obtained within the range of 60–69; 23 gained within the scope of 70–79; 15 earned within the bracket 80–89; and 5 acquired within the bracket of 90–100. On average, the pupils have a mean score of 52.92 or a mean percentage score of 52.92% which still needs improvement as it is just a little bit more of the passing level.

Table 2. Foundational literacy skills of grade 1 pupils in terms of letter-sound identification (n = 190)

Scores	Number of Pupils		%	Mean	MPS	Overall Level
	Failing	Passing				
Below 10	3		1.58			
10-19	8		4.21			
20-29	14		7.37			
30-39	17		8.95			
40-49	27		44.21	52.92	52.92%	Passing Level
50-59		53	27.90			
60-69		25	13.16			
70-79		23	12.10			
80-89		15	7.89			
90-100		5	2.63			
TOTAL	69	121				
OVERALL PERCENTAGE	36.32%	63.68%	100%			

The result of the current study, though in general pupils fall on the passing level, is quite alarming as a significant number comprising 69 or a third of the total number of pupils are failing in terms of letter-sound identification. According to the study of Vetsch-Larson (2023), a prerequisite for students to successfully become fluent and comprehend texts is having a mastery of the alphabetic principle and phonological awareness. Hence, it should be noted that students who have mastered phonemic awareness have a strong foundation to become fluent readers. Moreover, Henriksen et al. (2023) argued that acquiring of phoneme awareness and letter-sound knowledge is crucial in early literacy learning, which are proven to be excellent indicators of later reading and spelling proficiencies. When learning to read, children should develop and retain letter-sound knowledge, which is the understanding of the relationship between the phonemes of spoken words and the graphemes of written words.

3.3 Foundational Literacy Skills of Grade 1 Pupils in Terms of Initial Sound Discrimination

Table 3. Foundational literacy skills of grade 1 pupils in terms of initial sound discrimination (n=190)

Scores	Number of Pupils		%	Mean	MPS	Overall Level
	Failing	Passing				
1	3		1.58			
2	2		1.05			
3	5		2.63			
4		7	3.68			
5		3	1.58	7.91	79.1%	Passing Level
6		25	13.16			
7		32	16.84			
8		23	12.11			
9		20	10.53			
10		70	36.84			
TOTAL	10	180				
OVERALL PERCENTAGE	5.26%	94.74%	100%			

Table 3 presents the foundational literacy skills of Grade 1 pupils in terms of initial sound discrimination. As seen from the table, of the 190 pupils, 10 or 5.26% of pupils fall on the failing level wherein 3 pupils got 1; 2 pupils earned 2; and 5 pupils garnered 3. On the other side, 180 or 94.74% fall on the passing level in which 7 pupils achieved 4; 3 pupils obtained 5; 25 pupils got 6; 32 pupils acquired 7; 23 pupils earned 8; 20 pupils had 9; and 70 pupils scored 10. The mean score as a whole is 7.91 and the mean percentage score is 79.1%. This implies that more than 75% of the pupils were able to reach the 75% mastery level.

In the study of Vetsch-Larson (2023), in reading instruction, phonemic awareness has been a priority, and it is currently an important part most of classrooms. Teachers have been made aware of the essence of phonological awareness and language proficiency, and how these could affect the students' reading development. Moreover, Fritsch, Silva, and Sanchez (2021) emphasized that direct instruction in phonemes enables students to accurately comprehend sound and lay the groundwork for the development of their reading abilities. Phonemic awareness has been described as a necessary skill for the child to learn to read and write. It is necessary to have the ability to identify and isolate the phonemes to represent them as letters.

In addition, Li et al. (2023) acknowledged that phoneme discrimination is the ability to detect subtle similarities and differences between phonemes. Phoneme discrimination is a strong predictor of reading development, and poor phoneme discrimination may predict reading disabilities. Classroom instruction should include repeated exposure to differentiating phonemes with known high-frequency words and minimal pairs to develop a strong foundation for discerning phonetic features.

3.4 Foundational Literacy Skills of Grade 1 Pupils in Terms of Familiar Word Reading

Table 4. Foundational literacy skills of grade 1 pupils in terms of familiar word reading (n=190)

Scores	Number of Pupils		%	Mean	MPS	Overall Level
	Failing	Passing				
Below 5	9		4.74			
5-9	7		3.68			
10-14	13		6.84			
15-19	18		9.47			
20-24	32		16.84	25.33	50.66%	Passing Level
25-29		49	25.79			
30-34		23	12.11			
35-39		20	10.53			
40-44		8	4.21			
45-50		11	5.79			
TOTAL	79	111				
OVERALL PERCENTAGE	41.58%	58.42%	100%			

Table 4 presents the foundational literacy skills of Grade 1 pupils in terms of familiar word reading. Based on the results, of the 190 pupils, 79 or 41.58% fall on the failing level in which 9 pupils got below 5; 7 pupils gained a score within the range of 5-9; 13 pupils earned a score within a bracket of 10-14; 18 pupils had a score within the scope of 15-19; and 32 pupils obtained a score within the range of 20-24. There are 111 or 58.42% pupils in the passing level wherein 49 pupils got a score within the range of 25-29; 23 pupils garnered a score within the scope of 30-34; 20 pupils achieved a score within the bracket of 35-39; 8 pupils acquired a score within the scale of 40-44; and 11 pupils gained a score within the span of 45-50. As a whole, 25.33 is the mean score, and the mean percentage score is 50.66%. The result implies that the foundational literacy skill of the pupils in terms of familiar word reading is just around the borderline of passing.

According to the study of Sangthong and Jiamsanguanwong (2021), familiar words refer to words that most people have seen or encountered and heard through reading or listening. According to the previous study, the subjects took a longer time to read non-familiar words than familiar words. Furthermore, recent research shows the value of good vocabulary knowledge: to have better outcomes in education, individuals must have an improved vocabulary to accomplish better on reading comprehension tests (Hulme & Rodd, 2021).

3.5 Summary Table of Grade 1 Pupils' Foundational Literacy Skills

Table 5. Summary table of grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills (n=190)

Table 3: Summary table of grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills (n = 176)							
Foundational Literacy Skills	$\bar{x}$	MPS	Number of Pupils				Overall Level
			Failing Level		Passing Level		
			F	%	f	%	
Listening Comprehension	3.98	79.60	9	4.74	181	95.26	Passing
Letter-Sound Identification	52.92	52.92	69	36.32	121	63.88	Passing
Initial Sound Discrimination	7.91	79.10	10	5.26	180	94.74	Passing
Familiar Word Reading	25.33	50.66	79	41.58	111	58.42	Passing

Table 5 reveals the summary table of Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills. It can be seen from the table that the pupils fall on the passing level in listening comprehension, letter-sound identification, initial sound discrimination, and familiar word reading. The mean score of listening comprehension (3.98), letter-sound identification (52.92), initial sound discrimination (7.91), and familiar word reading (25.33) shows that it is just

around the borderline of passing; therefore, it needs further advancement because the majority were not able to reach the 75% mastery level. This finding is in accordance with the findings of the study of Modesto and Ferreira (as cited in Librea et al., 2023) which stated that decoding deficit, poor vocabulary, lack of attention, poor language processing skills, lack of knowledge foundation, poor memory, and others are some of the many factors that influence students' ability to read.

Meanwhile, Oluoch-Suleh and Ombara (2023) acknowledged that the ability to read at a basic level is essential for success in other curriculum-related subjects. The ultimate purpose of teaching language in many schools across the world is to help students acquire literacy skills, which are essential for communication and have a significant impact on the mastery of other academic subjects. Different curricula and approaches are used to achieve this goal. Thus, students must have a solid foundation in language understanding, expression, writing, comprehension, and spelling.

3.6 Pupils' Performance Profile Based on Grades

Table 6. Pupils performance profile based on grades (n = 190)

Performance	Descriptive Rating	Frequency	Percentage
90-100	Outstanding	7	3.69
85-89	Very Satisfactory	37	19.47
80-84	Satisfactory	94	49.47
75-79	Fairly Satisfactory	49	25.79
Below 75	Did Not Meet Expectations	3	1.58
TOTAL		190	100.00

Mean Grade: 81.805

Table 6 reveals the pupils' performance profile based on grades. Data reveal that the academic performance of the pupils is satisfactory having an average grade of 81.805. Based on the table shown, there are 44 pupils, or 23.16% who got the best academic performance, while the remaining 146 pupils, or 76.84% need to improve their performance to achieve a very satisfactory or even outstanding academic performance. This implies that pupils need to enhance their foundational literacy skills to improve their performance.

This finding is somewhat related to the study of Gao et al. (2018) that the academic achievement of students throughout their educational careers is influenced enormously by the development of sufficient reading skills at an early age. Moreover, the investment of cognitive capacities and the contextual stimulation provided by, for instance, educational environments, result in academic success. It is believed that these serve as the foundation for the growth of academic achievement (Peng & Kievit, 2020).

3.7 Test on Significant Relationship Between Pupils' Foundational Literacy Skills and their Academic Performance

Table 7. Test on significant relationship between pupils' foundational literacy skills and their academic performance (n=190)

Variables	R	Decision Rule	Remarks
Foundational Literacy Skills & Performance			
Listening Comprehension	0.500762	Reject H_0	Significant
Letter Sound Identification	0.568018	Reject H_0	Significant
Initial Sound Discrimination	0.648571	Reject H_0	Significant
Familiar Word Reading	0.352638	Reject H_0	Significant
OVERALL	0.553798	Reject H_0	Significant

r significant level at 0.05, 188 df = 0.1946

Table 7 reveals the test on the significant relationship between the pupils' foundational literacy skills and their academic performance. Data show that pupils' foundational literacy skills can account for the relationship of their academic performance as manifested in the r values of listening comprehension (0.500762), letter-sound

identification (0.568018), initial sound discrimination (0.648571), and familiar word reading (0.352638), values of which are greater compared to its tabular value of 0.1946 at 0.05 level of significance with 188 degrees of freedom.

Pupils' foundational literacy skills are significantly related to their academic performance as signified by the obtained overall r value of 0.553798 at 0.05 level of significance with 188 degrees of freedom. Hence, the null hypothesis is rejected. Pupils' foundational literacy skills are determinants of pupils' academic performance. This finding is in accordance with the study of Oluoch-Suleh and Ombara (2023) which concluded that the ability to read at a basic level is essential for success in other curriculum-related subjects. Thus, students must have a solid foundation in language understanding, expression, writing, comprehension, and spelling which are essential for communication and have a significant impact on the mastery of other academic subjects. In the same vein, Oduro et al., (2021) discovered that learners who perform well academically are skillful in reading as compared to those with less skill. Furthermore, Spiegel et al., (2021) emphasized that the academic achievement of pupils throughout their educational careers is influenced enormously by the development of sufficient reading skills at an early age.

4.0 Conclusion

This research has confirmed the importance of Grade 1 pupils' foundational literacy skills to be developed at an early age. Likewise, the data gathered in this research highlight also the critical roles of teachers. The result of this study which shows that the pupil-respondents are only at the "passing level" on their foundational literacy skills, namely: listening comprehension, letter-sound identification, initial sound discrimination, and familiar word reading, is not at all surprising considering that the nationwide profile of pupils in their pre-test results administered by DepEd in 2019 from Grades 1 to 2 pupils using the Phil-IRI showed many non-readers (Jaucian, 2020). The level of these pupil-respondents on their foundational literacy skills is also validated by their performance profile based on their grades. Hence, it is safe to conclude that the foundational literacy skills of early graders dictate their success in their academic performance. Furthermore, since teachers play a huge role in cultivating early literacy skills, interventions and educational program focusing on foundational literacy skills at early age are vital.

Based on the findings and conclusions drawn, the following are hereby recommended:

- a. School administrators should take the lead in designing Learning Action Cell (LAC) sessions prioritizing on teaching the foundational literacy skills using technology.
- b. Teachers should design activities to motivate learners to highly engage them in the development of their foundational literacy skills.
- c. Home learning facilitators should collaborate with teachers on possible materials to be used in letting learner appreciate the value of reading.
- d. Future researchers should venture on longitudinal studies to investigate the long-term effects of specific literacy interventions on Grade 1 pupils' academic achievement beyond their immediate grade 1 year. They should also do comparative studies to assess the impact of traditional teaching methods versus innovative approaches, such as phonics-based instruction or multisensory learning techniques.

5.0 Contributions of Authors

This study was authored by a single individual and underwent thorough review and approval by her method specialist before completion.

6.0 Funding

This study did not receive any financial support from any organization.

7.0 Conflict of Interests

The author affirms the absence of any conflicts of interest related to the study.

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