

Phonemic Awareness Strategy and Reading Proficiency Level of Grade 2 Learners in Davao City

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Abstract

Throughout education, the instruction of reading to learners has consistently held great significance. Over time, educators have employed various methods and resources in facilitating reading proficiency among countless children. Numerous studies have also looked into the efficiency of identifying the effectiveness of phonemic awareness as a reading strategy for Grade 2 learners in one of the schools of the Division of Davao City, Region XI, Philippines, during the expanded face-to-face classes. The sample consisted of thirty (30) public school elementary learners. The researchers collected the data through a researcher-made reading assessment tool and administered it with the proper observance of ethical protocols. Generally, phonemic awareness greatly influences the reading proficiency level of Grade 2 learners. Moreover, the study concluded to implement explicit reading programs targeting various issues to improve learners' reading proficiency. Provide professional development opportunities for teachers to enhance their phonological awareness teaching skills. Localize and contextualize reading materials for real-life connections. Involve parents and the community in supporting students' reading skills. Monitor progress and implement reward systems. Allocate budgets for reading programs and procure necessary materials. Finally, this study can be a starting point for future investigation of phonemic awareness as a strategy and reading proficiency level of learners.

Keywords: Phonemic Awareness; Reading Proficiency Level; Public Elementary School Learners

1. Introduction

Recognizing specific sounds (phonemes) in spoken language and being able to modify them are known as phonemic awareness. This ability is crucial for learning to read and write. It can be developed with practice and specific teaching. Learners' ability to read well depends on their development of phonemic awareness. Though many students need help with phonemic awareness, this can make decoding and understanding written text difficult. Even though phonemic awareness is crucial, more research on efficient teaching methods must be done.

Phonemic awareness strategies have been widely studied and recognized as effective methods for improving reading proficiency in learners worldwide. A meta-analysis by Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2011) found that phonemic awareness interventions positively affected reading outcomes in learners across languages and ages. Numerous studies have also examined the efficiency of specific phonemic awareness strategies in different cultural and linguistic contexts. For example, a study by Ng and Siegel (2007) investigated the effectiveness of phonemic awareness training in Cantonese-speaking Chinese learners in Hong Kong. The study found that the phonemic awareness training significantly improved learners' phonological awareness and reading skills, with the most remarkable improvements seen in phoneme segmentation and word reading.

Furthermore, according to the Philippine Department of Education (DepEd), reading is a fundamental skill crucial for academic and life success. However, many Filipino learners need help with reading proficiency, with the National Achievement Test (NAT) results showing that only around half of Grade 6 learners meet the proficiency level in English. Phonemic awareness has been identified as a critical skill for developing reading proficiency in the Philippines. Several studies have investigated the effectiveness of phonemic awareness strategies in improving reading proficiency among Filipino learners. One study by Tan (2018) investigated the effects of phonemic awareness training on the reading skills of Grade 2 learners. The study found that phonemic awareness training significantly improved learners' reading skills, with the most significant improvements in phonological awareness, word reading, and reading comprehension.

A study by Duyanen (2019) investigated the effectiveness of a phonemic awareness and phonics-based reading intervention program for Grade 1 learners in a rural school in the Philippines. The study found that the intervention program

significantly improved learners' phonemic awareness skills, word reading accuracy, and reading comprehension. These studies suggest that phonemic awareness strategies can effectively improve reading proficiency among Filipino learners.

All learners have experienced learning gaps or regression during the extended period of remote learning. Conducting phonemic awareness strategies can help identify and address students' phonological skills deficits, allowing for targeted interventions and support. The pandemic has disproportionately affected students from disadvantaged backgrounds. Conducting phonemic awareness strategies can mitigate the impact of the gap in learning and provide equitable opportunities for all students to develop essential literacy skills. Moreover, learners nowadays have skipped two years of in-person classes, leading them to need reading help. This study will investigate if phonemic awareness strategies are still effective during these years.

2. Review of Related Literature

Teaching children to read has always been an essential part of education. There have been many different techniques and tools that educators have used in the past that have helped many children learn to read. Learning more about brain development and considering the age at which students are expected to achieve specific reading skills, it is essential to remember that learning to read is sequential and needs to be developmentally appropriate for the learner.

Phonemic Awareness Strategy is crucial and holds significant importance in learners' development in reading. Developing learners' reading skills depends critically and significantly on their use of the phonemic awareness strategy (Kuhl, 2004). Likewise, Shankweiler and Crain (1986) argue that "explicit conscious awareness of phonemic structures depends on metalinguistic abilities that do not come free with the acquisition of language." Consistent with this claim is the observation that many 4- and 5-year-old children with typical language comprehension and speaking skills cannot perform such simple metalinguistic operations as counting the number of phonemes in spoken words or identifying words that do not rhyme with other words.

According to Holm & Dodd (1996), studies of instructional experience about phonological awareness across cultures have linked phonemic instruction to phonological awareness. Adult readers who have never been exposed to a phonemic coding system tend to perform poorly in phonological awareness tasks aimed at the level of phonemes, regardless of reading skill. Since students may utilize letter-sound patterns to pronounce the word even if it is foreign to them, letter-sound knowledge aids pupils in learning new words and decoding written language. These skills are notoriously tricky for weak readers. Furthermore, Mann et al. (2023) said Phonological awareness, often known as the capacity to distinguish and modify speech sounds, is now widely acknowledged as one of the crucial elements in the growth of early solid reading abilities. Excellent early reading skills.

It is essential to know that "68% of schoolchildren do not possess the skills necessary to reach minimal levels of reading proficiency" (Berg & Stegeman, 2003). It is crucial to assess phonological awareness skills to determine students that may have difficulties so that they do not become failures. This researcher focused on making changes in small group reading instruction to better instruct students at all reading levels using phonemic awareness interventions to become more successful, fluent readers. Moreover, the study emphasizes that students exposed to the Phonemic Awareness Strategy exhibited significant improvements in their pre-test scores, showcasing a high level of phonemic awareness. The strategy's implementation focused on students who used the Phonemic Awareness Strategy showed significant advancements (Dehaene et al., 2010).

Another study by Landerl and Wimmer (2008) investigated the effectiveness of phonemic awareness training in German-speaking learners. The study found that the phonemic awareness training significantly improved learners' phonemic awareness and reading skills, with tremendous improvements seen in phoneme deletion and word reading fluency. In addition, phonemic awareness strategies effectively improve reading proficiency among learners who experience particular learning challenges, such as dyslexia. A study by Snowling et al. (2010) investigated the effectiveness of phonemic awareness training in English-speaking children with dyslexia. The study found that phonemic awareness training significantly improved learners' phonological skills, reading accuracy, and reading comprehension. These studies suggest that phonemic awareness strategies can effectively improve reading proficiency among learners worldwide across different languages and cultural contexts.

Research confirms what Stanovich (1986) indicated: the learning and knowledge gap between poor readers and good readers grows over time because poor readers read less – and learn less – and good readers read more – and more complex text – each year. However, the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction can rely on factors like the learners' age, variety, and developmental stage, the instructional methods used, the duration and intensity of the intervention, and the overall instructional context. It is essential to consider these aspects and evaluate the quality and implementation of phonemic awareness instruction to determine its effectiveness in a specific setting.

It is significant to remember that these results specifically refer to the initial stages of implementation. The approach might produce more advantageous outcomes with continued instruction, refinement, and modification (Suggate, 2016). However, the research indicates that during the initial implementation phase, the Phonemic Awareness Strategy has yet to consistently demonstrate effectiveness in improving students' phonemic awareness skills. The effectiveness of the Phonemic Awareness Strategy in raising students' phonemic awareness levels has yet to be consistently shown (Suggate, 2016). However, phonemic awareness does not necessarily develop with age; roughly one-third of pupils need varied support to encourage its growth (Adams, 1990). Research has also been done on when to start teaching or engaging in phonemic awareness activities. According to Byrne, Fielding-Barnsley, and Ashley (2000), the acquisition of phonemic awareness is crucial for learning to read, but so is the speed at which it happens. A long-term study discovered that students who struggled to read in grade five were slow to pick up phonemic awareness, even though they finally developed acceptable levels of it. There may be a window when phonological processes can lead in developing early reading.

Both children and adults who have been taught to use a phonemic coding system in learning to read perform relatively well in these phonological awareness tasks. Research has consistently shown that phonemic awareness positively correlates with reading achievement and predicts early reading skills (Huang & Hanley, 1995). Furthermore, Kirby and Bowers (2012) emphasize that "morphology works" as it helps increase vocabulary knowledge and understanding and predicts reading development and achievement. Syllable awareness appears to develop naturally (Treiman & Zukowski, 1991), so most children across cultures will master syllable awareness by 5 or 6 years of age. Morphological approaches to reading make a distinct contribution to reading success by grade 4, and the impact increases as students get older and words get longer and more complex (Nagy et al., 2006).

In this context, the necessity of assessment sprung from the prime factor of need theory. The assessment of the reading proficiency levels of the pupils delves mainly into the internal structure of one's persons and the degree of organization in one's thoughts (Peterson & Taylor, 2012). Accordingly, schools teach children to do these things rightly. However, several variables affect the degree of learning and how much it should be modified learned. Ultimately, the effect causes several learning differences in the children and creates vast problems in the school system (Bryce, 2011). Learning is defined as a process inferred from relatively stable changes in behavior that result through practice or interaction with and adaptation to the environment (Bustos & Espiritu, 1996; Sevilla et al., 1997). Thus, an individual may learn something when interactions of several cognitive, psychomotor, and affective variables enable one to perform specific tasks differently from the usual performance. In this regard, comprehension and understanding become essential tools for learning (Cromley, 2009).

3. Statement of the Problem

This study determined the effectiveness of phonemic awareness strategy in improving the reading proficiency level of grade 2 learners. Specifically, this study answered the following questions:

1. What is the pre-test result before the conduct of phonemic awareness strategy to Grade 2 learners?
2. What is the post-test result after the conduct of the phonemic awareness strategy for Grade 2 learners?
3. Is there a significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of Grade 2 learners?

3.1 Hypothesis

Ho1. There is no significant difference between the pre-test and post-test results of Grade 2 learners.

4. Research Design and Methodology

4.1 Population Respondents

The study's 30 respondents were public elementary school learners of one of the Division of Davao City schools, Region XI. A convenient sampling method is utilized to select 30 learners from a specific educational setting who meet the predefined inclusion criteria. This sample size allows for statistical analysis and provides a representative subset of the target population. The learner-respondents were assured of the utmost confidentiality of their responses.

4.2 Data Gathering Procedure

Data collection for this study started by carefully crafting a reading-assessment tool. The study incorporated pre-and post-assessments to measure the learners' reading proficiency levels. Before implementing the phonemic awareness strategies, a pre-test is administered to establish a baseline measurement of the participants' reading skills. Subsequently, the learners

receive targeted instruction on phonemic awareness strategies for a designated duration. The learner-respondents were assured of the utmost confidentiality of their responses. After retrieving all the responses, the researcher began encoding them in the Microsoft excel office application. The encoded data was then transferred to IBM SPSS 25 for statistical analysis.

4.3 Data Gathering Instrument

The researchers utilized a research-made reading assessment. The researchers established psychometric measures. It was checked for reliability using Cronbach's alpha. Items with Cronbach alpha values of 0.70 and above were described as reliable. It showed that all items in Phonemic Awareness Reading Assessment Tool (0.81>0.70 reliability index) passed the required standard, thus considered reliable. The data were gathered and analyzed employing mean and standard deviation analysis and Paired Sample t-Test. These statistical measures allow for a quantitative assessment of the effectiveness of the phonemic awareness strategies on the learners' reading skills.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1 Pre-test Result

Presented in Table 1 is the level of the reading proficiency of grade 2 public elementary school learners in one of the schools in the Division of Davao City, Region XI, before the conduct of the strategy.

Table 1. Pre-Test Result

Test	Mean	SD	Descriptive Level
Pre-test	11.60	1.070	Moderately Manifested

It reveals that the overall mean value is 11.60 (SD=1.070), described as "moderately manifested." A standard deviation of 1.070 indicates a moderate level of dispersion in the dataset. The data points around the mean are spread out to some extent. However, the magnitude of the standard deviation suggests that the variability is relatively high. This means that learners possess a reasonable level of reading skills, but they may still face some challenges and limitations. It implies that learners at this level can comprehend and analyze texts at a satisfactory level. However, they may require some support or guidance to grasp complex or advanced reading materials fully.

The finding is supported by the statement of Holm & Dodd (1996). Studies of instructional experience about phonological awareness across cultures have linked phonemic instruction to phonological awareness. Adult readers who have never been exposed to a phonemic coding system tend to perform poorly in phonological awareness tasks aimed at the level of phonemes, regardless of reading skill. Since students may utilize letter-sound patterns to pronounce the word even if it is foreign to them, letter-sound knowledge aids pupils in learning new words and decoding written language. These skills are notoriously tricky for weak readers.

Furthermore, Mann et al. (2023) said Phonological awareness, often known as the capacity to distinguish and modify speech sounds, is now widely acknowledged as among the most crucial aspects of developing excellent early reading skills. Moreover, letter sounds' very stable syllable structure can make letter-to-phoneme mapping more prominent. This may explain why letter sounds are primarily employed as a teaching tool when children are initially taught to read and spell. It is essential to know that "68% of schoolchildren do not possess the skills necessary to reach minimal levels of reading proficiency" (Berg & Stegeman, 2003, p. 48). As Berg and Stegeman (2003) later mention, it is crucial to assess phonological awareness skills to determine students that may have difficulties so that they do not become failures. This researcher focused on making changes in small group reading instruction to better instruct students at all reading levels using phonemic awareness interventions to become more successful, fluent readers.

5.2 Post-Test Result

Presented in Table 2 is the level of the reading level of public elementary school learners in the Division of Davao City after the conduct of the intervention and strategy.

Table 2. Post-Test Result

Test	Mean	SD	Descriptive Level
Post-test	18.23	1.736	Very Highly Manifested

It reveals that the overall mean value is 18.23 (SD=1.736), described as "very highly manifested." A standard deviation result of 1.736 indicates a relatively higher level of dispersion in the dataset than a minor standard deviation. This larger standard deviation signifies a broader range of values and less clustering around the mean, indicating a more diverse dataset. This means that the increase in scores after the intervention of the phonemic awareness strategy impacted the learners reading proficiency level. This implies that learners possess exceptional skills in comprehending and analyzing various texts using phonemic awareness strategy. They can effortlessly understand complex ideas, make connections, and extract nuanced information from a wide range of materials. Thus, learners with a very high reading proficiency will likely excel academically across multiple subjects, as they can effectively engage with challenging literature, science, social studies, and other disciplines.

The findings support what Dehaene et al. (2010) study emphasizes that students exposed to the Phonemic Awareness Strategy exhibited significant improvements in their pre-test scores, showcasing a high level of phonemic awareness. The strategy's implementation focused on students who used the Phonemic Awareness Strategy showed significant advancements. Huang & Hanley (1995) claimed that children and adults who have been taught to use a phonemic coding system to learn to read perform relatively well in these phonological awareness tasks. Research has consistently shown that phonemic awareness positively correlates with reading achievement and predicts early reading skills. Furthermore, Kirby and Bowers (2012) emphasize that "morphology works" as it helps increase vocabulary knowledge and understanding and predicts reading development and achievement. Syllable awareness appears to develop naturally (Treiman & Zukowski, 1991), so most children across cultures will master syllable awareness by 5 or 6 years of age. Morphological approaches to reading make a distinct contribution to reading success by grade 4, and the impact increases as students get older and words get longer and more complex (Nagy et al., 2006).

Numerous studies and educational practices support the effectiveness of phonemic awareness instruction in improving reading outcomes, particularly in the early stages of reading instruction. Phonemic awareness interventions and activities have been found to enhance phonological processing skills, decoding abilities, word recognition, and reading comprehension.

5.3 Significant Difference of Pre-test and Post-Test Results

A paired-sample t-test was conducted to compare learners' reading proficiency levels before and after the Phonemic Awareness Strategy. The findings revealed that there was a statistically significant difference in the pre-test scores (M =11.60, SD = 1.070) to post-test (M=18.23, SD=1.736), $t(29) = -21.226, p < .005$ (two-tailed). The mean increase in the test scores was 6.633, with a 95% confidence level interval ranging from -7.21 to -5.99. This requires the rejection of the null hypothesis.

Table 3. Change in Results Score after Phonemic Awareness Strategy

	Mean	Std. Dev	Mean	Std. Deviation	Std. Error Mean	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference		t	df	Sig (2-tailed)
						Lower	Upper			
Pre-test	11.60	1.070								
Post-test	18.23	1.736	-6.633	1.712	.313	-7.212	-5.994	-21.226	29	.000

The results imply that the implementation of the phonemic awareness strategy had a significant impact on the learners' reading proficiency. It suggests that incorporating phonemic awareness activities and instruction effectively enhanced their decoding skills, word recognition abilities, and overall reading comprehension. Likewise, the statistically significant improvement in the mean reading proficiency score provides evidence for the effectiveness of the phonemic awareness strategy in improving the learners' reading abilities.

The finding negates the study of Weiner (1994), who asserted that aspiring readers need more than to learn phonemic awareness skills to improve their reading. Cunningham (1986) and Wittrock (1986) emphasize that it is critical to teach children how to think about their reading using metacognition or thinking about one's thinking and train them regarding when and why to use various segmentation and blending strategies to decode new words. Hayward et al. (2017), learners tend to exhibit several errors in phonological awareness, such as adding letters at the beginning, middle, and end of the word, omitting phonemes, repeating phonemes, reversing the order of phonemes, as well as substituting a letter or phonemes in a word.

Considering that there is an interdependent relationship between decoding ability and comprehension, it would be expected that teachers would report these difficulties at the reading comprehension level since children who have difficulty reading words also have difficulty understanding written texts (Ribeiro et al., 2016). In this context, the necessity of assessment sprung from the prime factor of need theory. The assessment of the reading proficiency levels of the pupils delves mainly into the internal structure of one's persons and the degree of organization in one's thoughts (Peterson & Taylor, 2012). Bryce (2011) asserts that schools instruct kids to conduct themselves appropriately. However, the amount that is taught and the amount that should be learned depends on various things. Ultimately, the impact results in various learning disabilities in the kids and poses severe issues for the entire educational system.

6. Conclusions

Based on the analyses made on the available data, these were the conclusions:

- Teachers must equip their learners by explicitly introducing phonemic awareness into the classroom. The ability of a learner to master reading and achieve academic success depends on their phonological awareness.
- Research has shown that teaching learners phonemic awareness has a significant positive impact on their reading skills. The result revealed that the selected grade 2 learners who actively participated in this study exhibited a very highly manifested result of reading level.
- Reading proficiency levels are increased when learners are specifically taught to identify and manipulate phonemes because they can decode and comprehend words better. It is evident in the result of this study that the phonemic awareness strategy is effective in the reading proficiency level of learners.
- Pre-tests and post-tests are helpful instruments for evaluating the effectiveness of treatments or educational opportunities. They offer a before-and-after measurement so that teachers can evaluate the efficacy of their efforts and decide wisely about upcoming interventions. The findings allow teachers to pinpoint problem areas, change their strategy, and raise the reading competency of students.
- The evidence is compelling that phonemic awareness strategy can help learners' reading abilities. This tool lets teachers keep track of learners' advancement over time. Thus, the instrument's efficiency depends on its correct use, ongoing professional development for teachers, and a comprehensive strategy for reading instruction that smoothly incorporates evaluation into the learning process.

7. Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, the following were recommended:

- It is highly recommended that school officials from the school to the higher levels of the educational system should explicitly conduct reading programs to address different issues regarding learners' proficiency in reading. Develop a reading intervention program using a phonemic awareness strategy to enhance learners' reading skills.
- The DepEd Officials should continue to provide teachers with professional development and career opportunities to enhance their skills in teaching phonological awareness to learners. Provide opportunities to reading teachers for professional development by sending them to training, seminars, workshops, and symposia.
- The School Administrators may find this study to help the school increase their reading proficiency. They should plan for programs and closely monitor the teachers' intervention or strategies to improve learners' reading skills. The school should also allocate a budget to programs, events, and activities directly related to reading activities and include procuring the materials and books needed for reading remediation activities.
- Phonemic awareness is a tactic that teachers can use to improve their students' reading skills because it helps them learn to recognize and control the different sounds in spoken words. This is essential for the growth of their powerful reading abilities. With consistent practice and targeted interventions, learners can develop a strong foundation that sets them on the path to becoming proficient readers.
- Parents may be encouraged to tutor their children, especially in reading. Ensure their participation in the school and community uplifts the learners' reading proficiency.
- Future researchers may utilize this survey as a starting point for a qualitative investigation of phonemic awareness as a strategy and reading proficiency level of learners.

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