

READING PROFICIENCY LEVEL AND SYNTACTICAL SKILLS AMONG JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS TALIBON II DISTRICT, BOHOL

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ABSTRACT

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Keywords— reading proficiency, syntactical skills, quantitative-correlational research design, Pearson Chi-Square tests, Spearman Rank Correlation

This study examines the reading proficiency levels and syntactical skills of Grade 9 pupils in Bohol's Talibon II District. A correlational research design was used, with a quantitative technique, to collect data from 295 students through structured questionnaires targeted at testing their abilities in word recognition, reading comprehension, word order, and sentence combination. Pearson Chi-square tests and Spearman Rank Correlation were used to assess the correlations between reading proficiency and syntactical abilities. The

statistics show that while students performed adequately in word order, their skill in sentence combination was much lower. The study found no significant relationship between reading competency and syntactical skills, refuting the widely held idea that reading proficiency predicts syntactical ability.

A significant correlation was discovered between word identification and



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reading comprehension, emphasizing the critical importance of vocabulary knowledge in boosting overall reading comprehension. The study shows that targeted therapies are required to improve both syntactical abilities and reading competency in children. Educators and school administrators are encouraged to implement particular training programs aimed at developing these key skills. By adhering to these principles, instructors can help students improve their academic performance and reading skills.

INTRODUCTION

Globally, the persistent issue of low literacy among adolescents and adults has profound implications for individuals' lives and societies (Durda, 2020). The Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey (FLEMMS, 2008) reveals a staggering 20.1 million Filipinos aged 10–64 grappling with reading comprehension. Shockingly, the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) ranks Filipino high school students at the bottom in reading, math, and science out of 79 countries (Manlapig, 2020). This urgent situation demands our immediate attention and concerted efforts.

Reading is an essential part of the educational process since it develops comprehension and analytical skills. This activity requires decoding symbols to interpret phrases, which is critical for knowledge acquisition. According to Iqbal, Noor, Muhabat, and Kazemian (2015), reading proficiency includes skills such as word recognition, vocabulary, syntactical awareness, and higher-level discourse abilities, all of which contribute to understanding.

Syntactical skills, which refer to the ability to structure words and phrases to express meaning, are essential for reading comprehension. Syntax, as defined by Dawson and Phelan (2016), is the structure of language that allows cohesive sentences to be formed. Scott (2008) adds that syntax aids comprehension by establishing grammatical frames. According to the Bottom-Up and Top-Down Theory (Gonzales, 2017), readers decode symbols by using their preconceptions, expectations, and assumptions to make sense of the text. Additionally, Bartlett's (1932) schema theory asserts that comprehension is an interactive process that integrates readers' prior knowledge with textual content. Chomsky's Universal Grammar backs up these claims, stating that natural syntactical norms aid readers in understanding sentence patterns (Nordquist, 2018).

The fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) calls for increased literacy and numeracy, which aligns with the requirement for educational initiatives that promote reading skills (Grotlüschen et al., 2020). This study, by confirming the link between syntactic skills and reading comprehension, has the potential to profoundly impact current teaching practices. Hudson (2010) stresses reading fluency as a predictor of understanding, suggesting

that it leads to enhanced comprehension, particularly at the primary school levels. Recent research confirms the link between syntactic skills and reading comprehension (Tong & McBride, 2017). Cain (2007) further demonstrates that while syntactic awareness aids understanding, its impact varies with the developmental stage.

Related Literature. Low literacy among adolescents and adults worldwide remains a severe problem in all countries, even in economically developed countries. The effects of low reading proficiency levels can be harmful to both the individuals concerned and their communities. While large-scale international assessments do assess reading proficiency, the data they give is undifferentiated. The scholars and policymakers' concern is to understand better the nature of reading difficulties (Durda, 2020).

Reading is an integral part of every educational process since all subjects taught at all levels involve reading. *Reading* is a cognitive activity. It is an activity in which the reader takes part in a conversation with the author through the text written (Nyarko, Kugbey, Kofi, Cole & Adentwi, (2018).

In the Philippine government, the Department of Education annually assesses the word recognition, reading comprehension, and reading proficiency level of every learner through the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI). It is an informal reading test consisting of graded passages given to determine the individual student's performance in oral reading, silent reading, and listening comprehension. The tests consist of three (3) parts: oral reading, silent reading, and listening comprehension. Phil-IRI provides greater insight into every learner's reading level. In this way, teachers will be able to identify their level, so proper and appropriate instruction will be customized and provided addressing the needs of the students. There are three levels of reading proficiency; frustration, instructional, and independent, depending on their scores from word recognition and reading comprehension.

Word decoding and identifying is the ability to correctly decipher a particular word out of a group of letters (Key Literacy Component: Decoding, n.d.). It is the ability to apply knowledge of the relationship between letters and sounds, which includes knowing letter patterns to pronounce the written words correctly.

Language is nothing without grammar. People require grammar to communicate their ideas effectively. Basic axioms such as verb tenses, articles, and adjectives in proper order, how questions are phrased, and more comprise the grammar of the language.

The word grammar originated from the Greek word "craft of letters". It is defined as the systematic study and description of a language, and a set of rules and examples dealing with the syntax and word structures of a language (Nordquist, 2020).

Dawson & Phelan (2016) stated that within the broader grammar construct, syntax means how to organize words and phrases to form more significant phrases and sentences. Scott (2008) refers to syntax as a vehicle of

meaning-containing theories that advocates the direct role of syntactical skills in reading comprehension.

Syntactical skill is recognizing and using grammatical structures in a language (Chik, Ho, Yeung, Chan, Chung, Luan, Lo, & Laun 2011). Syntactical skills, if mentioned, directly refer to two related constructs: syntactic knowledge and syntactic awareness Brimo, et.al (2015). Although syntactical skills refer to syntactic knowledge and awareness, which are both important, the focus of this current study is to identify the relationship between syntactic awareness and the reading proficiency level of the respondents.

Moreover, this leads to language understanding (Shen, 2018). Similarly, Guo (2008) expounds that syntactic awareness refers to understanding grammatical structures in a sentence. In the same way, it also points out the ability to reflect on the syntactic structure of language.

Word- order. Shah & Mello (2016) mentioned in their study that syntax errors are related to the word order and the constituents in a sentence. A sentence with incorrect word order is said to possess structural errors that would lead to misunderstanding the meaning it conveys.

Word order refers to the word structure and arrangement in a phrase and sentence. In English Subject, +Verb + Object is the standard word order. To determine the correct sequence of words, learners need to understand the subject, verb, and object (s). In communicating in English, the sequence of words is vital because it impacts the meaning of what is trying to convey. For example, the sentences “The chicken crossed the road” and “The road crossed the chicken” differ because the subject and object are inverted. The same would be true if the sentence becomes “Crossed the road the chicken.” With this, the importance of word order is paramount (TOEFL Test, 2015).

Sentence Combination. Sentence combining has become the subject of several pieces of research during the last 55 years. There were 85 studies conducted proving that it is an effective method for helping students produce more syntactically complex sentences. Sentence combining teaches students how to rewrite simple short sentences into more varied styles, lengths, and syntactic structures. For example: “The ball was red. The ball was big. The ball bounced when I dropped it.” could become “The big red ball bounced when I dropped it.” by combining the sentence into one (Saddler, 2017).

Related Studies. Being able to comprehend the meaning of the text is the ultimate aim of reading, not the process. Different skills contribute to successful reading comprehension. These include word reading ability, vocabulary knowledge, syntactical skills, memory, and discourse-level skills such as making inferences, knowledge about text structure, and metacognitive skills.

In the study Hudson (2010), he stated that reading fluency is a vital factor in reading proficiency. Furthermore, he mentioned that reading a text fluently is critical for comprehension. In his study, he found that there is a correlative relationship between text reading fluency and comprehension. Reading rate

and accuracy are essential facilitators of reading comprehension in average and disabled readers. He stated in his findings that individual differences in reading rate and accuracy in grade 3 were the most crucial factor in accounting comprehension performance and facilitating the quick and accurate reading of a text.

Numerous researches have investigated the relationship between syntactical awareness and reading proficiency. According to Srisang et al. (2021), word recognition and syntactical understanding have a considerable influence on comprehension. Brimo, Apel, and Fountain (2015) suggest that syntactic awareness, which begins in early education, is crucial to reading comprehension because it allows readers to monitor sentence meaning. Tong and McBride (2017) emphasize that syntactic skills training promotes reading comprehension growth, particularly for students with reading difficulties.

Al-Damiree and Bataineh (2016) found that lexical knowledge and syntactical skills improve reading comprehension. Hashemi and Mahmoudi (2016) affirm that vocabulary knowledge is vital for English-as-a-foreign-language (EFL) learners since it allows them to synthesize sentences and apply syntactical rules. According to Cabardo's (2015) research, Filipino pupils, particularly men, do poorly in silent and oral reading, with the majority struggling with comprehension.

This study looks at the association between reading proficiency and syntactical skills among Grade 9 students in Talibon II District, Talibon, Bohol (SY 2021-2022). The goal is to assess respondents' reading proficiency using Phil-IRI scores, with a focus on word recognition, the ability to identify and understand words, and comprehension, the ability to understand the meaning of the text. This study investigates the association between reading proficiency and syntactical awareness in order to offer a focused reading intervention to assist children in developing critical literacy skills for academic achievement.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study was conducted in seven high schools, namely Calituban High School, Cataban Integrated School, Mahanay High School, Mayor Catalino Y. Casoyla Memorial High School, Ponciana E. Leoligao High School, San Jose National High School, and Zosimo A. Gulle Memorial National High School. The study involved Grade 9 students who were randomly selected for the 2021-2022 school year, excluding transferees and those who completed the Group Screening Test. The upgraded Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) Oral Verification Test was used to assess reading proficiency. To evaluate syntactical skills, the study used adapted instruments, including Bowey's (1986) Syntactic Awareness Task-Word Order questionnaire and the Sentence Combination Test from TOALD-4, which was also used in Guo's study. The reliability of the syntactical abilities' questionnaire was pilot-tested and yielded a Cronbach Alpha score of 0.82.

The level of word recognition and reading comprehension of the students was computed using the following formulas below:

$$\text{Word Recognition} = \frac{\text{No. of word recognized}}{\text{No. of words in the passage}} \times 100\%$$

$$\text{Reading Comprehension} = \frac{\text{No. of word recognized}}{\text{No. of words in the passage}} \times 100\%$$

Level	Word Recognition (WR)	Reading Comprehension
Independent	97-100%	80-100%
Instructional	90-96%	59-79%
Frustration	89% and below	58% and below

The Phil-IRI- Oral Verification Test used a set of criteria that identified the reading levels of the students. These criteria which include the percentage of word recognition accuracy and the percentage of correct answers to comprehension were adapted from the set of criteria proposed by Johnson, Kres, and Pikulski, (1987) as cited by (Lagarto, 2021).

The syntactic skills of the respondents were computed using the following parameters.

Symbol	Description	Word Order	Sentence Combination
O	Outstanding	90-100%	90-100%
VS	Very Satisfactory	85-89%	85-89%
S	Satisfactory	80-84%	80-84%
FS	Fairly Satisfactory	75-79%	75-79%
P	Poor	74% and below	74% and below

After getting approval, the researcher asked school principals to distribute the assent and consent forms, as well as questionnaires, to Grade 9 English teachers. Teachers initially gave the forms, followed by the questionnaire, which was available either in print for pupils with restricted internet access or as a Google Form for those with steady connections. The researcher also requested Phil-IRI findings from Grade 9 counselors and English teachers.

Once the surveys were completed, the data was gathered, tabulated, and examined quantitatively. SOP 1, which assesses respondents' reading skills in word recognition and comprehension, utilizes Standard Deviation. Standard Deviation was also used to assess respondents' syntactical abilities in word order and sentence structure. Pearson Chi-Square Tests were used to examine the relationship between reading competency, syntactical skills, and word

recognition and comprehension. The association between word order and sentence combination was analyzed using the Spearman Rank Correlation. Finally, the Kruskal-Wallis H Test assessed the variation in syntactical skills across various levels of reading competency.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

According to the respondents' reading proficiency results, the majority are at the frustration level, with difficulties in reading comprehension (48.81%) and word recognition (44.41%) being the most common areas. Only 16.61% of respondents attained the Independent level of reading proficiency. These startling statistics underscore the critical need for immediate and focused reading instruction to raise student literacy and academic performance.

The respondents' average syntactical skills score was Satisfactory (19.36) for sentence combinations and Very Satisfactory (20.78) for word order. These statistics reassure us that our pupils are doing well in these domains. However, it's important to note that this also means there is significant potential for improvement, especially in the construction of grammatically correct phrases.

Even though most responders had good syntactical abilities, there is still a lot of room for development. Just 18.98% of respondents were rated as having poor word order, while 59.66% were rated as having excellent word order. 39.32% of sentence combinations were rated as Outstanding, but a noteworthy 27.12% were rated as Poor. This research underscores the need for persistent work and focused assistance to further improve students' syntactical awareness and language competency.

The Pearson Chi-square test revealed that the p-value is 0.000. Thus, based on the statistical result the null hypothesis was accepted. It was further stated that word recognition significantly affects the reading comprehension of the respondents.

The result of the study is similar to the study of Srisang, et.al (2021) which stated that accurate word decoding and recognition are essential to comprehend a text. Several studies focused the most attention on word decoding or word reading. Brimo, et. al (2015) believed that language skills, especially syntax, contribute to reading comprehension. In their study, they emphasized that syntactic knowledge and syntactic awareness drives syntactical skills. Although some researchers believed that syntactic awareness does not contribute to early elementary-age students' reading comprehension (Bowey & Patel, 1988; Cain, 2007), they proved that the contribution of syntactic awareness and reading comprehension depends on their age and grade level. They also found out in their study that syntactic awareness contributes to the reading comprehension of the readers.

In addition, it was revealed through the Chi-square Test that there is a significant relationship between word recognition and reading comprehension. This suggests that word recognition plays an important role in reading

comprehension. The result is similar to the result of the study of Srisang, et.al (2021) study which stated that accurate word decoding and recognition are essential to comprehend a text. Moreover, several studies have focused the most attention on word decoding or word reading. Brimo, et.al (2015) believed that language skills, especially syntax, contribute to reading comprehension. In their study, they emphasized that syntactic knowledge and syntactic awareness drives syntactic skills.

Table 1. *Correlation Between Reading Proficiency Level and Syntactical Skills*
n=295

LEVEL OF SYNTACTICAL SKILLS							TOTAL
READ ING PROFI CIENCY LEVEL		POOR	FAIRLY SATIS FACTORY	SATIS FACT ORY	VERY SATIS FACTORY	OUTS TAN DING	
	FRUST RATION	36	4	10	11	70	131
	INSTRUC TIONAL	29	12	6	16	52	115
	INDEP ENDENT	9	5	5	8	22	49
TOTAL		74	21	21	35	144	295

Two cells (13.3%) have an expected count of less than 5. The minimum expected count is 3.49.

p-value = 0.173

Result: Insignificant

Decision: Failed to reject Ho

The Pearson Chi-square test revealed that the p-value is 0.173. Thus, based on the statistical result, the null hypothesis was accepted. The results stated that the reading proficiency level did not significantly affect the syntactic skills of the respondents. The findings of this study are consistent with those of some researchers who hypothesized that early primary kids' reading comprehension is unaffected by syntactic awareness. Bowey (1988), and Cain (2007) proved that the contribution of syntactic awareness and reading comprehension depends on their age and grade level. In his research, Brimo (2015) cited Demont and Gombert's (1996) finding that syntactic awareness was crucial for

reading comprehension as early as kindergarten. Likewise, Tong et.al (2017) showed that training in syntactic skills appeared to promote growth in reading comprehension. In their study, they emphasized that syntactic awareness and reading comprehension have bidirectional relationships. They found that children’s syntactic understanding was associated with reading comprehension with the contribution of nonverbal reasoning ability, vocabulary knowledge, phonological skills, and morphological skills. Al-Damiree et al. (2016) also emphasized that reading comprehension may signal a positive relationship between vocabulary knowledge and syntactic awareness. They discovered that increasing pupils’ syntactic and vocabulary awareness improved reading comprehension.

Table 2. *Correlation Between Word Order and Sentence Combination*

			Score On Word Order
Spearman's Rho	Score On Word Order	Correlation Coefficient	1.000
		Sig. (2-tailed)	
		n	295
	Score On Sentence Combination	Correlation Coefficient	.723**
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000
		n	295

Table 1 presents the correlation between the word order and sentence combination of the respondents. This shows the relationship between the ability of the respondents to arrange words, phrases, and clauses and their skill to combine two or more sentences into one without changing the thought.

The result of the statistical test revealed that the p-value is 0.000. Thus, based on the statistical result the null hypothesis was rejected. It was further stated that the ability to recognize word order significantly affects the skill in sentence combination of the respondents.

Moreover, from the tabulation, it was found that there is a significant relationship between word order and sentence combination. This implies that the ability to put words in their proper order contributes to a meaningful combination of sentences. The study by Tausch (2012) entitled “A syntax-based reading intervention for English as second-language learners” stated that ESL students have more difficulty learning to speak and read the second language before understanding it than their English-speaking peers. The latter already master the different sentence types. Even when the learners know the vocabulary, word order can hinder fluent reading and comprehension. According to Tausch, syntactic awareness highly correlates with comprehension.

CONCLUSIONS

The majority of Grade 9 pupils in the Talibon II district struggle with reading, especially with comprehension, according to the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory criteria. They typically perform at the instructional level when it comes to word recognition, which suggests that they need to improve their vocabulary and comprehension. To address this, educators can implement strategies such as regular vocabulary-building exercises and comprehension-focused reading materials.

Students' syntactical skills showed potential for development in creating grammatically sound sentences, as they performed at a Very Satisfactory level in word order but only at a Satisfactory level in sentence combination. This implies that they need to improve their capacity to organize sentences, clauses, and phrases without altering their original meaning. Educators can help students in this area by providing exercises that focus on maintaining sentence structure while rearranging words or phrases.

Overall, reading competence and syntactical abilities did not significantly correlate, according to the study, indicating that reading competency was not a predictor of syntactical skill level. The significance of these subskills in improving reading and syntactical competence was highlighted by the considerable association found between word recognition and reading comprehension, as well as between word order and sentence combination.

In conclusion, the data suggests a clear path for improvement. By focusing on enhancing students' syntactical arrangement and word recognition skills, we can make significant strides in increasing their reading comprehension and sentence construction skills. This highlights the actionable steps that educators can take to support their students' learning journey.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the study's findings and conclusions, the researcher recommends the following actions:

1. To present the study's findings to school administrators, teachers, and parents, informing decisions that aim to improve students' reading proficiency and syntactical skills;
2. To create and implement targeted programs for enhancing students' word recognition and reading comprehension skills, with support from school administrators and teachers;
3. To introduce additional activities and interventions to further improve students' abilities in sentence construction and grammatical accuracy despite satisfactory syntactical skill levels;
4. To incorporate updated and effective reading strategies, such as integrating technology into reading exercises or using word walls, for English teachers to support students' learning;

5. To provide students with skill-building exercises like sentence anagrams, wordplay, or Scrabble that help practice organizing words, phrases, and clauses meaningfully;
6. To encourage students to engage with English media—songs, novels, news articles, magazines, and other reading materials—to expand vocabulary and enhance comprehension skills;
7. To identify and address any barriers to reading and syntactical abilities, allowing teachers to tailor strategies that foster greater interest in reading;
8. To conduct a parallel study with a more extensive or more diverse sample, focusing on other variables such as contextual clues, sentence anagrams, and riddles that support vocabulary development; and,
9. To implement the proposed reading intervention program to ensure continued improvement in students' reading skills.

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