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CHALLENGES OF CLOSE READING APPROACH ON THE COMPREHENSION LEVEL OF JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOL: A PURVIEW OF INQUIRY

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to discover the challenges encountered by the teachers of a close reading approach on the comprehension level of junior high school students in selected public schools in Sulop Davao del Sur. The researcher was concerned when students showed poor performance on both written and verbal assessments. For example, students could not answer reader response questions with accuracy when assigned a reading with comprehension questions. They had difficulty recalling what they read and performing critical analyses when assigned written work. Their performance on both informal and formal assessments illustrated they did not have a deep understanding of the text (Allen, 2020; Blum, 2021). The participants of this study are the ten (10) English teachers in selected public schools in Davao region during this academic year 2023-2024. These English teachers were chosen as participants since they have lived experiences in teaching reading to junior high school students for a couple of years. As a result, analysis of the data revealed three main themes with four sub-themes each, to wit; "lack of vocabulary development" with sub-themes, use comprehension technique, insufficient reading materials, students become more active and relationship of teachers and students. The second theme immersed was "use multiple strategies" with sub-themes, give clear instructions, use basic guide in reading, motivate students to read and be compassionate in teaching reading. Lastly, the last theme immersed was "use reading comprehension in context with sub-themes, more classroom activities, use small group discussion, importance of teachers training and use standard lesson plan.

KEYWORDS: *Challenges, comprehension, close reading, approach, junior high school*

INTRODUCTION

In most high school content area classrooms, the teachers' main learning objective for their students is for them to acquire knowledge of a particular content. It is uncommon that junior high school teachers also plan targeted reading instruction in addition to subject area goals. Reading instructional support in the content classroom usually consists of students being shown how to use graphic organizers and reading guides. Unfortunately, content teachers often assume that students enter their classroom prepared with the foundational reading skills to work and study in the content areas. However, this is usually not the rule, but the exception. Many students are unable to read productively, and such reading is critical to developing knowledge in the content areas.

Despite the complexity of reading acquisition in general, literacy experts believe that complexity of the texts involved in each content area contributes to the students' inability to understand subject matter materials. Secondary students have difficulty reading content subject matter due to the specialized texts that are used in content curricula (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2018). These texts are mainly informational textbooks and/or documents relating to specific subject matter, which includes domain-specific vocabulary (Short, et al. 2024).

Students with little experience reading for information are at a disadvantage when they encounter a content text and cannot understand it. They need specific reading strategies that support more productive reading of content-specific texts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2018). Reading for information, specifically acquisition of content knowledge, requires the student to know how to implement correct comprehension strategies for each required reading.

Consequently, in some areas of the United States of America content reading is not an easy task for students if they do not know how to self-monitor by applying comprehension strategies while reading. Progress is hindered due to a lack of reading competence caused by limited comprehension. Harvey and Daniels (2019) emphasized that reading comprehension should be viewed as a readers' ability to advance their thinking processes while reading. Older readers who struggle while reading often have difficulty monitoring their thinking process and must be taught strategies that foster deeper comprehension of a text.

For this reason, they need instruction not only on multiple reading strategies, but also how to employ them independently while engaging with a text. A key aspect of self-monitoring as one reads is the awareness to stop reading when comprehension has broken-down (Beers, 2019). A student must be able to identify when they no longer understand what they are reading and respond to this problem with a reading strategy that repairs their comprehension. This is especially important when students are reading in the content areas and have less experience

with content area of texts. Almasi and Hart (2018) stated that it is critical that older students self-monitor while reading so they can make meaning of instruction in content subjects. Without the ability to read with understanding, secondary students do not academically progress. This creates a difficult instructional environment for the teacher and a less productive academic experience for the students.

In Quezon City, Philippines, one of the researchers considered reading as a complex process that involves "sensation, perception, comprehension, application and integration". It is the process of making and getting meaning from printed words and symbols. Reading as a whole, is a means of communication and of information and ideas. Aracelo (1994) as cited by Panerio (2018) reported that "85% of the things that people do involve reading". Individuals read street signs, advertisements, menus in restaurants and recipes from cook books, dosage of medicine and others. Moreover, reading is the foundation of academic success and life learning. One article from Philippine Star (2020) states that: "The undeniable fact remains that majority of Filipino students do not possess the ability and motivation to read. Due to the fast-evolving world and changing technology, it cannot be denied that sometimes reading is taken for granted".

Close reading approach also plays a vital role in ones' success in school. It is one of the most important skills an individual learner must need to master. It is a prerequisite of all learning areas. It serves as a gateway for every learner to learn the different subjects because when a learner has a difficulty in reading, he/she may encounter also difficulties in all subject areas. Researches have shown that there are many reasons in the difference in the achievement level of the students. Luz (2020) stresses that many Filipino learners do not have the reading habit required in learning. As she noted, "the problem of non-reading lies at the heart of why the Philippines is so uncompetitive in the world economy and why so many of our people continue to live in poverty or barely escape it". In Davao del Sur division, the department of education has started its reading administration to elementary and junior high schools to assess the level of reading ability of the learners and determine their reading profile. It has a great hope that these learners who have reading difficulties can still be relieved of their reading problems by means of a suitable reading environment, teaching program and family support.

The indispensable issue to be addressed here is the form the environment, program and support that should be undertaken. The reading environments must be designed to eliminate the reading difficulties of students to make them feel relaxed and willing to express themselves. In addition to this, students' learning must be supplemented with materials in consonance to their interests and abilities coupled with support from the teacher and students' family members. The research proves the "effectiveness of informing students about the difficulties they experience and strategy-based programs conducted with the cooperation of the teacher and family.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In his analysis of the reading brain, Wolf (2019) stated that the human brain was not designed to read. Unlike speaking and vision, reading is not built into human DNA. The innate qualities of language and vision do not extend to reading (Olsen & Gayan, 2021). Though children can speak words, they have very little meaning without association (Jensen, 2018). In fact, when humans began reading symbols, a product of the earliest forms of writing, the brain was restructured to accommodate this new behavior. Furthermore, if the early human brain successfully adapted and reorganized itself to the process of reading, then improving reading ability is also conditioned into the miraculous workings of the human brain. The brain is capable of reading, but questions of how children learn to read and the best conditions for learning to read is fuel for research.

For decades, theoretical understanding concerning how children learn best have provided frameworks for learning. These learning theories have influenced educational practices in all discipline areas. One theory that acknowledges a child's importance in the learning process, aptly named a child-centered approach, gained momentum and continues to influence current instructional practices. Tracey and Morrow (2019) stated the key part of a child-centered model in an educational setting is the view that learning is motivated by a child's sense of wonder. They further explain that it was learning theorists like Rousseau, Pestalozzi, and Frobel that conceptualized play and natural curiosity as the source of learning opportunities for children. Dewey, another educational reformer, focused his attention on how learning proceeds with instruction to achieve mastery.

Gillis (2024) promoted a problem-based approach to learning. He claimed that for learning to take place, a child needs to confront a problem within the context of the child's real-world experiences, ones that can be solved through trial and error, much like those of a scientist's work. He believed that contextual settings provide the best curriculum for true learning. He elaborated, "They [problems] give the pupils something to do, not something to learn: and the doing is of such a nature as to demand thinking, or the intentional noting of connections; natural learning naturally happens". His concern encompassed how to approach subject matter instruction in any curriculum design.

Instead, children need direct language that is devoid of complicated words that direct them to the discovery of correct conclusions. From her perspective, Montessori contended that learning happens when students are given explicit modeling by the teacher illustrating the exact answers, which gives the child opportunity to learn without confusion. Furthermore, if the student does not understand it, it is a futile effort to continuing in his or her confusion. The teacher and child move on to another lesson; otherwise, its continuance would impede natural learning. Tracey and Morrow (2019) mentioned that opposition to the Montessori method was that children were being taught from the intellectualism of adults rather than from their own experiences with materials.

More in line with idea of approximation, working through a process of trial and error when learning new information, Piaget was interested in the difference between the thinking processes of adults and children (McLeod, 2019). They asserted that children learn through association between a new object and its placement in their current schemata, which occurs during four stages of maturation. Jarrett (2019) added that Piaget stressed that a child's reality is composed of their generalizations of the world that form their schemata, which develop into more complex thinking as the child grows.

Thus, Piaget's thinking aligns more with Dewey's trial and error rather than Montessori's argument for a formal presentation of information designed to avoid learner confusion. Piaget's view that mental processes occur in learning is the main foundational thought for cognitivism, a learning theory that began in the 1960s. Theorists believed that the learner is capable of logical thoughts. The brain is usually compared to a computer that processes information, only with humans it is their use of higher-order thinking skills connected to memory and schemata (Cognitivism, 2019). The concept of metacognitive awareness specifies that learners are aware of their thinking processes while learning (Frey, et al. 2019).

Moving away from how individuals learn through cognitive processes, Vygotsky's (1978) socio-cultural theory as cited in Butin (2020) promotes collaboration between learners. Children need to interact with their peers who are at different stages in cognitive abilities. His zone of proximal development theory concludes that children learn best when they are challenged just above their cognitive ability level, so teachers and fellow students can scaffold their understanding, which then provides a more effective route to mastery (Roskos & Newman, 2021).

Constructivists and cognitivists, Vygotsky and Piaget respectively, shared the same belief that children are active learners who construct knowledge by using prior understandings to build new knowledge (Constructivism, 2019). In theoretical contrast, the learning theory of behaviorism, despite its conjoining with the constructivist concept of experience influencing learning, is positioned differently regarding how knowledge is acquired (Behaviorism, 2019).

Tracey and Morrow (2019) identified behaviorism as the foundational learning theory that informs the reading pedagogy dominantly used in most classrooms. Reading is conceptualized as an entity that is the sum of all its parts. Thus, reading instruction is fractioned into mini-lessons: "The complex task of reading is broken down into its many component elements, and the emphasis of reading instruction becomes mastery of these components. A key feature of how behaviorism influences reading instruction is found in the operant conditioning work of B.F Skinner. During instruction, readers are given positive reinforcement for accurate answers. If they are incorrect, they are asked to continue working until they arrive at the correct one.

For example, in the pedagogical approach called reading readiness, the teacher uses direct instruction of pre-reading skills believed to be the precursors to reading acquisition. An effect of using a skills-based approach to reading is that instruction of subskills becomes layered with subskills to learn subskills. Then reading theorists began determining which skills were more necessary for learning (Hiebert & Raphael, 1996, as cited in Tracey & Morrow (2019), and teachers choose what specific skills best support children while learning to read and expertly assess their progress.

The argument that emergent readers need skills-based instruction versus a meaning-making approach has been debated for years (Frey, et al. 2019) as the call for federal involvement to improve reading instruction became more urgent. The No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation was became into law in order to motivate all the parents and learners to continue learning in school. This mandate included the framework for reading instruction designed by The National Reading Panel (NRP). Their research recommendation for a successful reading program included the following components: phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary instruction, and comprehension (National Reading Panel, 2020). Though research support for skills-based reading instruction became more prevalent, many were concerned with extraneous factors that influence the overall process of transforming a non-reader into a reader.

Goodman (2020) published an article stating that everyone is a reader. She felt reading is easily learned, excluding physical or mental impairment, when readers feel it has a purpose in their lives. Nonetheless, she explains while working with students and teachers through the years, she often heard them self-identify as poor readers.

For supporting evidence, they cited lack of interest in the text, reading past unknown vocabulary, reading aloud without fluency, or needing to reread as examples of their inability to read well. Though Goodman believed these to be common reading behaviors depending on contextual situations, she proposed that the students' and teachers' perceptions of what good readers do was inaccurate because they focused on specific aspects of early reading instruction like decoding or reading every word rather than concentrating on making meaning while reading. The argument becomes an issue of whether reading is a natural behavior best performed by readers in natural settings (Goodman, 2020; Smith, 2024) as opposed to reading instruction being a set of skills that can be systematically taught and learned.

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Research Questions

To have a proper direction of this study, the close reading approach was considered as a hybrid set of steps developed by several theorists in the field of literacy. In step one, students engaged in multiple readings of a short text. In step two, students identified and defined unknown vocabulary words in the text. During step three, the students continued self-monitoring their comprehension by chunking the text into smaller increments of specific foci regardless of the pre-established paragraphs or stanzas. This study examined these issues through the following research questions:

1. What are the challenges encountered by the English teachers in terms of close reading approach on the comprehension skills of junior high school students?
2. How do English teachers cope with the challenges encountered in teaching close reading approach on the comprehension level of junior high school students?
3. What educational insights can be drawn to improve the comprehension level of the junior high school students in terms of close reading approach?

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

Specific details of the research procedures will be described, so future researchers can generalize the results from this study to other situations. Extensive and careful descriptions of the time, place, context, and culture of the study will be thoroughly discussed in order to develop transferability, which is the qualitative parallel to external validity in postpositivist research. This section will: discuss the interview approach; explain the role of the researcher; and lastly, describe the sampling method and ethical considerations.

Research Participants

In a qualitative research study, it is a common practice to have a small yet appropriate group of participants. However, in this study, the researcher will apply a criterion sampling, in which participants meet predefined criteria. The most prominent criterion is the participant's experience with the phenomenon under study which is the lived experiences of grade 10 English teachers using close reading approach to improve comprehension skills of junior high school students. These participants are well experienced in teaching English to junior high school students most especially in reading comprehension subject.

Particularly, these teachers are English teachers in the junior high school program who taught for more than five (5) years in their profession as teachers and experienced in both face-to-face and distance learning so that they can really point out comparison and contrast in those modes. The researcher looks for participants who have shared an experience but vary in characteristics and in their individual experiences.

The participants of this study will be the ten (10) English teachers in selected public schools in Davao region during this academic year 2023-2024. These English teachers were chosen as participants since they have lived experiences in teaching reading to junior high school students for a couple of years.

Participant 1 is a licensed professional teacher in one of the public schools in Davao region. She is an experienced teacher for almost 14 years and she taught English subjects to grade 10 students. Currently, she is pursuing her Master’s Degree in Educational Management (thesis writing).

Participant 2 is a male teacher in one of the public schools in Davao region. He is a licensed professional teacher. He experienced teaching English among junior high school learners for a couple of years. He is currently enrolled in his Master’s Degree in Educational Management.

Participant 3 is considered as a mother of all learners in their school. She taught for almost fifteen years handling English under special education program. Some of her students are deaf, mute and blind. She obtained her Master’s Degree in Guidance and Counselling three years ago.

Participant 4 is a female licensed teacher who taught English subjects to junior high school for almost 6 years. She is currently pursuing her Master of Arts in Teaching English.

Participant 5 is a male licensed teacher from public school teaching English for almost ten years in the junior high school program. Currently, he is pursuing his Master’s Degree in Teaching English.

Participant 6 is a licensed professional teacher. She obtained her Master’s Degree in Teaching English two-years ago. Currently, she is handling English subjects in the junior high school program in one of the private schools in Davao region.

Participant 7 is a male licensed teacher from private school in Davao City. He is currently teaching English subjects to junior high school students including reading. He is currently pursuing his MA in Teaching English at the Rizal Memorial Colleges, Inc. Davao City.

Participant 8 is a male teacher in one of the public schools in Davao region. He is a licensed professional teacher. He experienced teaching for almost six years and he taught English among junior high school learners. He is currently enrolled in his Master's Degree in Educational Management.

Participant 9 is a licensed professional teacher in a public school in Davao region. She is an experienced teacher for almost 5 years and she taught English-reading to junior high school. Currently, she is pursuing her Master's Degree in Teaching English.

Participant 10 is a licensed professional teacher. She obtained her Master's Degree in Teaching English two-years ago. Currently, she is handling English subjects in the junior high school program in one of the public schools in Davao region.

Research Instruments

Creswell (2019) proposes researchers to conduct interviews in order to learn the things they cannot directly observe. Qualitative interviewing is not used to get answers to questions, but to understand the experiences of the participants and the meaning they make of that experience. Generally, qualitative studies use unstructured, open-ended interviews, because they allow for the most flexibility and responsiveness to emerging issues for both the participants and interviewer; however, the use of semi-structured interviews is not uncommon and used when the researcher seeks to obtain specific more focused information.

Semi-structured interviews combine the flexibility of unstructured, open-ended interviews with directionality and an agenda to produce focused, qualitative, textual data (Tovani, 2021). This study collected data using semi-structured interviews in order to explore how English teachers in both public schools describe the challenges they encountered in teaching English using close reading approach to Grade 10 junior high school students.

In order to ensure that the same information was collected from all the participants, an interview guide was used. The interview guide included open-ended questions and topics to help structure the interview, but when needed, the interviewer also explored, probed, and asked additional questions to clarify and expand on a particular topic. The interview guide helped make interviewing across a number of different participants more systematic and comprehensive by defining in advance the issues to be explored. The open-ended questions were framed in a way, so the participants could represent their views and perspectives in their own words and terms, in addition to taking the questions in any direction that they chose (Brown & Kappes, 2022).

Since qualitative research studies subjects in their natural setting, all interviews except one, took place in a face-to-face set up at a time convenient for the participants. All interview sessions were tape recorded for purposes of transcription. When needed, the researcher used follow-up interviews after transcription to clarify meaning or explore areas in more depth.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis begins with the process of organizing, reducing, and describing the collected data (Cresswell, 2019). Unlike quantitative analysis there are no prescribed formulas for qualitative analysis. Marshall and Rossman (2006) remind researchers that qualitative analysis does not proceed in a linear fashion and it is not neat. However, good practice and procedures enhance the credibility of qualitative research. In the last section, the data analysis procedures will be explained and the steps taken to ensure the results from this study are credible, transferable, dependable, and authentic will be thoroughly described.

To guide the data analysis, the researcher used the seven phases of data analysis described by Marshall and Rossman (2019) as a means to reduce data, create manageable pieces, allow for interpretation, and find meaning in the words of the participants. The seven phases included: organizing the data; immersion in the data; generating categories and themes; coding the data; offering interpretations through analytic memos; and (f) searching for alternative understandings.

Data analysis first begins with organizing the data. Organization of the data involved keeping information provided by each participant separate and in sequence with the order of the interviews. This is very important so that teachers who experienced close reading approach in teaching English to grade 10 students may share their insights, dispositions and reflections thoroughly. The process of organizing the data allowed it to remain manageable, easily accessible, and readily available. The digital audio files from the interviews were carefully transcribed into written form. A logbook was established to create organization for the data collected from each individual participant.

Next, the researcher became familiar with the data through extensive reading of the interviews to gain an understanding of the content. This involved reading through the interviews at least three times. Following Cresswell (2019) recommendations for qualitative analysis, the researcher created a sheet of notes for each participant. The summary sheets were a quick way to refer back to the original data as the data analysis continued.

After the initial readings, I read data through completely with one typology in mind. Typologies as classification systems made up of categories that divide some aspect of the world into parts. These typologies are generated from the theory, common sense, or research objectives. For this study, I used the typologies or themes from the literature

review as the constructs through which to view the data. After reading through the data with each construct or typology in mind, the researcher coded the data into five categories from the literature by taking excerpts of text from the data and identifying it within a particular category.

After everything was coded, the researcher read through the data again while writing analytic memos on his thoughts and insights and began the process of offering interpretations. During this stage the researcher began to interpret the data to find significance and meaning in the teachers' instructional experiences through pulling salient themes, reoccurring ideas, and patterns of belief that resonated collectively throughout the interviews.

The offering of interpretations began following the emergence of themes in the data. Marshall and Rossman (2019) believe this part of the data analysis brings meanings to the themes and categories and allows the researcher to develop links between the interviews. The researcher began to interpret the data to find significance and meaning in the teachers' instructional experiences.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

It can be concluded that close reading approach has a good benefit to support the reading comprehension and learning process. Students can understand the contents of the reading text easily. Besides, it can increase students' reading interest, especially reading stories or fairy tales. Text prediction has an important role in close reading activities strategy because at this stage students are required to think critically. This strategy can help teachers in improving students' reading comprehension skills in teaching the English language. Based on the data of the research, the close reading strategy has several benefits, including: can improve students' reading comprehension ability; can increase students' interest in reading; make the class more exciting, and less boring.

Implications

The traditional bottom-up approach to reading influenced by behaviorist psychologist E.J. Gibson, which claimed that learning was based upon "habit formation, brought about by the repeated association of a stimulus with a response" and language learning was characterized as a "response system that humans acquire through automatic conditioning processes," where "some patterns of language are reinforced (rewarded) and others are not," and "only those patterns reinforced by the community of language users will persist". Behaviorism became the basis of the audio-lingual method, which sought to form second language "habits" through drilling, repetition, and error correction.

Thus, the importance of vocabulary development and comprehension techniques was found relevance to the theory of E.J. Gibson because a robust vocabulary improves all areas of communication such as; listening, speaking, reading and writing. Vocabulary is critical to a child's success for these reasons: vocabulary growth is directly related to school achievement, the size of a child's vocabulary in kindergarten predicts the ability to learn to read, vocabulary helps children to think and learn about the world and expanding a child's knowledge of words provides unlimited access to new information.

On the other hand, Richard Gregory draws a paradigm shift that occurred in the cognitive sciences. Behaviorism became somewhat discredited as the new cognitive theory represented the mind's innate capacity for learning, which gave new explanatory power to how humans acquired their first language; this also had a tremendous impact on the field of ESL/EFL as psycholinguists explained: "how such internal representations of the foreign language development within the learner's mind.

Another statement from John Flavell emphasized "thinking about thinking" and was introduced as a concept, who is typically seen as a founding scholar of the field. Flavell said that metacognition is the knowledge you have of your cognitive processes (your thinking). You can control your thinking processes through various strategies, such as organizing, monitoring, and adapting. Additionally, you can reflect upon the tasks or processes you undertake and select and utilize the appropriate strategies necessary in your intercultural interactions.

Lastly, the close reading teaching activity learning strategy lays the foundation for John Dewey's educational philosophy, which states that students will experience meaningful learning if they are able to demonstrate the steps of scientific inquiry. The advantage of close reading teaching activity the learning model is based on intrinsic motivation in accordance with constructivism about learning, where students should experience learning while teachers are only mediators and facilitators.

Thus, students will automatically be more motivated to learn. With high motivation, students will be more interested in solving problems contained in the worksheets and textbooks so that the information obtained will be more organized in the cognitive structure of students. The Close Reading model emphasizes the process of full student involvement to be able to find the material being studied and relate it to real-life situations so as to encourage students to be able to apply it in their lives. From this concept, there are several things that can be observed.

First, the Close Reading model emphasizes the direct experience process. The learning process does not expect students to only receive lessons, but the process of finding and finding the subject matter themselves. Second, close reading model encourages students to be able to apply it in life, meaning that the model not only expects students to understand the material they are learning but how the subject matter can color their behavior in everyday life. day.

The subject matter in the close reading is not to be piled up in the brain and then forgotten, but as a provision for them to influence real life.

Future Directions

This research study shares the lived experiences of junior high school teachers in teaching reading using close reading activities among Grade 10 learners who value reading comprehension, modification of reading strategies and imposition of powerful motivation. Just as it informs of the many challenges teachers faced, it exposes numerous areas for further study. The overarching topic of educational disruption could be explored in relation to student achievement, teacher mental health, or teachers leaving the profession.

Within in the context of the difficulty in reading among learners and its impact on education, possible directions for research include student attendance, engagement, mental health, and coping strategies. To hone it on student academic progress, the study of the inequities which seemed to be exacerbated during teaching reading and learning using close reading and the impact of those on the achievement gap in education across the nation could be explored.

Also, worthy of study is how the reading format was beneficial to students as they did not have to manage the complexities of attending school with their peers every day, were allowed to work at their own pace, and possibly received one-to-one interaction and assistance from their teachers. Additionally, I would recommend studies to examine the impact of reading on parents' perceptions of teachers' roles and responsibilities. Other possibilities might involve the notion of reading student cues while video conferencing, and how adaptations teachers made during reading sessions and learning directly impacted their future practice in either a face-to-face or a distance environment.

The extreme disruption of poverty among learners opened the floodgates with regards to educational topics worthy of pursuit. My study situates itself in the literature with regards to teachers' experiences in teaching JHS learners. Its findings led to several recommendations and possibilities for additional research.

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