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IMPROVING READING COMPREHENSION SKILLS IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE THROUGH PEER-ASSISTED LEARNING STRATEGY: A QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT
This research study investigated the effectiveness of the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) as an intervention program designed to enhance reading comprehension skills among Grade 5 students. The primary objectives included improving reading comprehension abilities and fostering basic comprehension through engaging reading activities. Employing a quasi-experimental research design, data was collected to assess the impact of PALS on the targeted student cohort. The findings of the study revealed that PALS was indeed effective in enhancing the reading comprehension skills of Grade 5 students. The noticeable improvement in performance between pre-test and post-test assessments underscored the program's efficacy in promoting reading readiness skills. This positive outcome can be attributed to the innovative strategies employed within the PALS framework. The results also suggest a promising trend towards addressing reading proficiency issues among Grade 5 students in Magugpo Pilot Central Elementary School. Based on these encouraging findings, it is strongly recommended to continue and further develop the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy as it has the potential to significantly contribute to ongoing efforts aimed at improving reading comprehension skills in this age group. This study provides valuable insights into the design and optimization of reading intervention programs for young learners, thereby supporting their academic achievement and overall educational success.

KEYWORDS: ***reading, PALS, reading level, reading comprehension, teaching strategy, quasi-experimental research design***

INTRODUCTION
Reading proficiency is a fundamental skill that impacts a child's academic success across all subjects. Becoming proficient in reading in the early elementary school grades is also a good indicator of future academic performance and general success in life (Mulcahy et al., 2019). However, students struggling with reading comprehension has been an enduring challenge. This issue is particularly concerning because reading is the foundation to all other areas of learning. When students struggle to comprehend what they read, it affects their performance across all subjects, leading to broader academic challenges.

In a global perspective, 16% of children and adolescents worldwide do not meet the minimum proficiency levels in reading. About 387 million of the 617 million total are children. As a result, by the time they are old enough to finish elementary school, more than half of all children—56% of them—will not be proficient readers (UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2017). Results from SEA-PLM 2019 highlighted also a large proportion of low-performing children in Lao PDR and the Philippines could only "identify relationships between words and their meanings" in the official language of instruction by Grade 5, despite these basic reading skills being targeted in the Grade 1 curriculum (UNICEF, 2021).

Moreover, in the Philippines, the issue of students' reading proficiency is not a recent concern. Studies indicate that the reading challenges faced by Filipino students appear to persist over time (Alayon, 2014). According to the 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), 15-year-old Filipino children were still falling behind international students in math, reading, and science. These findings underscore the need for continued efforts to enhance educational strategies that can effectively improve the literacy of Filipino students.

Consequently, in the aftermath of the pandemic, there has been a concerning rise in the number of students experiencing challenges with reading in Magugpo Pilot Central Elementary School. Based on the PHIL-IRI assessment, a significant proportion of frustrated readers, particularly at the Grade 5 level has been documented. Specifically, 2.69% are categorized as non-readers, while 25.83% are classified as frustration level readers. Following this, the researcher implemented the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) as an intervention program at the above-mentioned school.

This study explores the effectiveness of PALS in enhancing students' reading performance, comparing its efficacy with traditional methods such as the read-aloud strategy. It evaluate how well PALS improves reading skills and offers insights into its comparative benefits. The research aims to provide a clearer understanding of which approach might be more effective in helping students develop better reading abilities over time. Thus, this study sought to identify the advantages that PALS may have over traditional methods, aiming to inform educators' decisions on effective reading instruction strategies to apply in their own classroom settings.

OBJECTIVES
This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of the Peer-Assisted Learning Strategy (PALS) in improving the reading comprehension skills of students in English language. More specifically, this study aimed:

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1. To describe the competence level of Grade 5 students in reading comprehension before using peer-assisted learning strategy.
2. To describe the competence level of Grade 5 students in reading comprehension after using peer-assisted learning strategy.
3. To find if there is a significant difference in pre-test and post-test scores of the control group (taught in the traditional method).
4. To assess the significant difference in pre-test and post-test scores of the experimental group (taught using peer-assisted learning strategy).
5. To determine the significant difference in the post-test scores of the control and experimental groups.

METHODS

This research study used quantitative quasi-experimental method in collecting data. The research design was a two-group quasi-experimental pretest-posttest design, where both groups received pretests at the beginning and posttests at the end of each period under consideration.

Purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling method, was used to select participants for this study. The research participants were 20 pairs of students in experimental group and 20 students in control group in the same grade level from Magugpo Pilot Central Elementary School.

The instrument used to gather data for the pre-test and post-test was a 20-item comprehension questionnaire adapted from the 2018 Philippine Informal Reading Inventory Manual. The researcher also designed a 30-minute tutoring program, followed by a course pack employing the peer-assisted learning strategy, scheduled across a 12-day intervention period. This initiative targeted the enhancement of reading comprehension and was carried out during lunchtime. The pre-test and post-test instruments had already passed DepEd's quality assurance and were also validated by experts before being used in the study.

With the approval of the Division of Tagum City, this research was conducted in Magugpo Pilot Central Elementary School SPED Center in the province of Davao del Norte. The researcher also adhered to ethical principles and guidelines, safeguarding the rights, dignity, and well-being of all participants by obtaining assent forms from participants, ensuring voluntary participation, confidentiality, and withdrawal at any time.

The researcher administered the pre-test, consisting of a 20-item comprehension question to both the experimental and control groups. Standardized administration procedures were ensured to maintain consistency and reliability of data. Based on the results, the initial step in implementing PALS involved pairing frustration readers with independent readers. To form these pairs, teachers ranked all learners in the experimental group based on their reading abilities, with the highest-performing student at the top and the lowest-performing at the bottom. The list was then divided in half to pair the highest-performing student with the lowest-performing one. The researcher then employed the peer-assisted learning strategy, followed by the administration of the post-test, consisting of the same instrument.

After administering the instrument, the researcher collected and recorded participants' responses to the pre-test and post-test outcomes and subjected them to statistical analysis. The use of frequency distribution was employed for the listing of the scores of the respondents. The use of comparison coefficients was used to test the significant difference between the pre-test and post-test mean scores. Other than that, to facilitate obtaining results, the researcher used JASP software to determine and compare the t-test results between the pre-test and post-test of the experimental and control groups in the study.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Table 1
Mean Comparison of Pre-test Scores of Control and Experimental Group

Pre-test	No. of Students	Mean	Class Proficiency	Competency level
Group A (Control)	20	9.4	47%	Frustration
Group B (Experimental)	20	9.5	47.5%	Frustration

Table 1 shows the mean comparison of pre-test scores of control and experimental group. The mean score for the Control Group is 9.4, while the mean score for the Experimental Group is 9.5. The mean difference is 0.1, showing that there is significant difference.

However, the data presented shows that the mean scores for both groups on a pre-test are relatively similar, both groups are under frustration level in reading comprehension with the Experimental Group having a slightly higher mean score. It means both groups are comparable. To interpret the competency level of students, it is calculated as the mean score divided by the HPS (Highest Possible Score) multiplied by 100%. For the Control Group, the class proficiency is 47, while for Experimental Group, it is 47.5.

This implies that these grade 5 learners were having difficulty and find it challenging to understand the text that has been assigned to them. Alarmingly, as Claessen et al. (2020) noted, reading difficulties exist globally, and the Philippines is no exception. Moreover, an article from the Philippine Star (2010) states that undeniable fact that the majority of Filipino students lack the ability and motivation to read. Due to the rapidly evolving world and changing technology, it is evident that reading is sometimes taken for granted.

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Table 2
Mean Comparison of Post-test Scores of Control and Experimental Group

Posttest	No. of Students	Mean	Class Proficiency	Competency level
Group A (Control)	20	10.5	52.5%	Frustration
Group B (Experimental)	20	16.7	83.5%	Frustration

Table 2 shows the posttest results for both groups in terms of mean score and class proficiency. The mean of Control Group is 10.5, while the mean of Experimental Group is 16.7. The class proficiency for each group was calculated using the formula: Class proficiency = (mean/HPS) X 100%, where HPS is the highest possible score, which in this case is 20. For the Control Group, the class proficiency is 52.5%, while the Experimental Group, the class proficiency is 83.5%.

In terms of mean score and class proficiency, the Experimental Group outperformed the Control Group in the posttest by a large margin. The outcome shows that after receiving instruction using the peer-assisted learning strategy, the experimental group's mean paced differently from the control group. These findings demonstrate that PALS is an effective short-term intervention for struggling readers.

A crucial aspect of successful remediation depends on the student's effort and attitude, influencing the speed of their learning significantly. Students who are motivated generally make faster progress than those with a less positive attitude towards learning (Legera & Conca, 2010). Thus, PALS is regarded as an effective instructional strategy that encourages active student engagement. Also, working with peers have shown desirable behaviour on participation, motivation and improved social skills interaction by making friends during the implementation of the strategy (Okilwa & Shelby, 2010).

Table 3
Pretest and Posttest of the Control Group

	Mean	t-value	p-value	Remarks
Pretest	9.4	-3.153	0.005	significant
Posttest	10.5			

Table 3 shows the comparison of the achievements of the students in control group. The control group's pretest mean score was 9.4, and the posttest mean score was 10.5. The t-value, which measures the difference between the pretest and posttest means relative to the variability in the data, was -3.153. The negative t-value indicates that the posttest mean was slightly higher than the pretest mean. The p-value, which represents the probability of obtaining a t-value as extreme as or more extreme than the observed t-value if there were truly no difference between the pretest and posttest means, was 0.005. This p-value is below the conventional threshold of 0.05, indicating that the decision was significant.

It proves there was a significant difference between the achievements of the students when using traditional read-aloud strategy in developing reading comprehension in the control group as reflected on their pretest and posttest mean scores.

However, the conventional method was found to be less effective, likely due to its teacher-centered nature. This finding implies that continued reliance on teacher-centered instructional strategies cannot ensure student achievement. While it allows educators to compare student performances, it limits students' potential, making this method less interactive, and less engaging. Effective instructional approaches, as described by Zemelman et al. (2012), are student-centered, cognitive, and participatory.

Table 4
Pretest and Posttest of Experimental Group

	Mean	t-value	p-value	Remarks
Pretest	9.5	-17.382	0.001	significant
Posttest	16.7			

Table 4 shows the comparison of the achievements of the students in experimental group. The experimental group's pretest mean score was 9.5, while the posttest mean score was 16.7. The t-value of -17.382 suggests a large difference between the pretest and posttest scores. This value indicates that the posttest scores were significantly higher than the pretest scores. As a result, the p-value is 0.001 less than 0.05, indicating that the difference between the pretest and posttest scores is statistically significant.

It prves that there was a significant difference between the achievements of the students in the experimental group as reflected on their pretest and posttest mean scores when intervened through peer-assisted learning strategy. Even though students did not make to leap from frustration to instructional level, the mean difference highlights improvements far from their status quo. With the 12- session intervention, students already show significant advancement.

In both cases, control and experimental, the results showed positive student achievements using either the traditional read-aloud or the interactive read-aloud strategies to develop reading literacy. While students can be taught using various strategies, teachers predominantly use conventional methods, which are

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not well-suited for 21st-century learners. Therefore, educators need to explore different approaches that foster better learning engagement.

According to Isaac (2018), children's reading skills can be significantly enhanced through read-aloud sessions. However, empirical research indicates that the effectiveness of read-aloud sessions largely depends on the teachers' approach. On the otherhand, PALS stands out from typical teacher-led reading instruction because it gives immediate feedback, rewards students, and lets them spend more time reading. Researchers believe PALS works well because it lets students listen, read aloud, and correct mistakes. It's different from regular lessons because students get quick feedback from peers. While teachers try to help one-on-one, it might not be enough for struggling readers who need more interaction (Saenz et al., 2006).

Table 5
Posttest of Control and Experimental Group

Post-test	Mean	t-value	p-value	Remarks
Control	10.5	-9.612	0.001	Significant
Experimental	16.7			

Table 5 shows the results of independent t-test of the posttest of control group and experimental group. The mean control group's posttest mean score was 10.5 and the experimental group's posttest mean score was 16.7, p-value is 0.001 which is less than .05, indicating that it is statistically significant.

To determine if there is a significant difference between the two groups, a t-test was conducted. The t-value obtained is -9.612 and the p-value is 0.001. The p-value less than the commonly used threshold for statistical significance of 0.05, indicating that the difference between the two groups is statistically significant.

The experimental group utilizing the use of peer-assisted learning strategy as intervention fared better academically. The aspects relating to students that have an impact on students' participation in literacy includes standards, teamwork, reading, and writing proficiency and decisions. More students read when they anticipate being interested successful, collaborate with their peers, and capable readers have the potential to make options to develop their reading abilities. Peer-assisted Learning Strategy, then, is an efficient method for student to communicate with other students. Considering other people's perspectives inspires learners to read and discuss with their peers (Tompkins, 2006). When using Peer-assisted Learning Strategy, beyond the more conventional question-response-evaluation discourse practices controlled by the teacher, peer-tutoring, with a particular focus on using specific questioning techniques employs cognitive strategies such as summarization, question generation, and activating prior knowledge can improve reading comprehension skills among primary school students (Muller et al., 2016).

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the study, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The competency level of both the control and experimental groups at the beginning of the experiment were equivalent.
2. The competency level of the students in the experimental group after the experiment was significantly higher than the control group.
3. Also, the control group which relies on the discussion or the traditional method, shows a very small yet significant progress.
4. Consequently, the result it showed that the ability of students' reading comprehension through peer-assisted learning strategy improved significantly. Therefore, the interference of using peer-assisted learning strategy as intervention in developing reading comprehension skills was effective. Achievements of the students in both the control and experimental groups in developing reading literacy improved using the traditional read-aloud and the use of peer-assisted learning strategy, as interventions, respectively.
5. Overall, the data suggests that both approaches were effective in teaching reading, but peer-assisted learning strategy resulted higher mean than the other. Peer-assisted Learning Strategy was more effective than traditional method.

RECOMMENDATION

Based on the conclusions derived from the results of the study, the following recommendations are hereby presented:

1. Considering the students' struggles with reading and learning, this could be form as the basis for strategy-based program aimed at improving reading comprehension ability.
2. There is a need for English language teachers to explore reading strategies to be engaging and not monopolized by the teacher. This could be done through peer-assisted learning strategy so that students can collaborate with other learners, and develop confidence as well.
3. It is recommended that the peer-assisted learning strategy be implemented over a longer duration to thoroughly assess its long-term effectiveness on reading comprehension.
4. Just as other activities, the work of teachers depends on the school community. By sharing the administrator's resources to developing rich literacy experiences to students, the School Administrators should encourage, support, and strictly implement reading program.

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