

Teaching Reading Strategies and Challenges in the New Normal: Context of a School District in Northern Luzon

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Abstract

The strategies in teaching reading and challenges encountered by teachers are influenced by a number of interrelated factors. Using a combination of quantitative and qualitative approaches through the descriptive and comparative methods, this study determined the level of utilization of teaching reading strategies by teachers in pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. It also examined whether there exists a significant difference in the level of utilization when responses are grouped according to grade level and school classification. Moreover, the study brought out the challenges encountered by the elementary teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic. Findings showed that the level of utilization of teaching reading strategies along pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading is moderate. Further, there are no significant differences in the level of utilization of the teaching reading strategies when grouped according to grade level. and school classification. The challenges encountered included limitation of assistance and teaching time, transportation of teachers for their home visitation, pupils' lack of interest, lack of assistors/guidance from the family, and lack of supplementary reading materials at home. From these, it could be concluded that the teaching of reading is greatly affected by the pupils' circumstances.

Keywords: pre-reading, post-reading, while-reading, reading program, reading materials

1. Introduction

Cultivating proficient reading skills is a paramount responsibility for teachers, especially in the foundational academic years ranging from Grade 1 to Grade 3. The manner in which pupils are instructed during these formative stages significantly shapes their future academic performances. Establishing a solid foundation in reading not only equips learners with essential language comprehension abilities but also lays the groundwork for success in various subjects across the curriculum. Recognizing the pivotal role of early education in shaping a child's cognitive development, teachers undertake the crucial task of imparting effective reading strategies that serve as the cornerstone for continued learning and academic achievement throughout a learner's educational journey.

According to Umali (2016), reading stands as a fundamental pillar of basic education and serves as the bedrock for lifelong learning. Positioned at the core of educational development, reading is indispensable in facilitating the unraveling of unfamiliar concepts, thereby propelling learners towards new discoveries and knowledge acquisition. The significance of reading extends beyond mere literacy; it acts as a gateway to a myriad of disciplines, enabling individuals to glean insights and information that transcend the boundaries of specific subjects. As learners engage with written texts, they not only enhance their comprehension skills but also cultivate a versatile intellectual toolkit that proves invaluable in diverse academic pursuits and future endeavors. Umali's assertion underscores the pivotal role of reading in shaping well-rounded and intellectually adept

individuals, emphasizing its enduring impact on the journey of continual learning and personal development.

One of the early authorities in reading was Edward William Dolch, where the Dolch Sight Word Test originated from. In his book called *Problems in Reading*, he related challenges in reading which must be considered in dealing with grade school pupils. Some of these are the idea that children memorize the chart or guess what the letters are even without actual reading, many pupils are farsighted on entering grade one, children usually do not like to look at a book for any length of time, and the most common difficulty is a tendency for the children's eye, instead of pointing straight ahead, to point outward at a slight angle (Press, 2018).

To help pupils in the elementary level as they embark on their reading development, several teaching reading strategies had been advanced, such as previewing text, guessing meaning, using prior knowledge, cognitive and meta-cognitive teaching reading strategies, using visual representatives, consulting relevant sources, phonics instruction, vocabulary building, comprehension strategies, fluency practice, and visualization techniques. Phonics instruction is fundamental, focusing on decoding skills and letter-sound relationships, while phonemic awareness activities enhance students' ability to manipulate individual sounds. Vocabulary building includes word maps and context clues exploration. Comprehension strategies such as predicting, questioning, and summarizing foster a deeper understanding of texts. Fluency practice through read-aloud and repeated reading promotes smooth, expressive reading. Visualization techniques encourage students to create mental images while reading, aiding comprehension.

In the locale of the study, the need to study teaching reading strategies becomes particularly evident when considering the researcher's observations and scenarios where distinct challenges often hinder effective literacy instruction. As observed in the locale, limited resources, including outdated or insufficient teaching materials, can impede the implementation of research-backed reading strategies. Moreover, the shortage of trained educators may result in a lack of expertise in employing diverse instructional techniques. The unique socio-economic factors prevalent in rural communities can also contribute to a dearth of literacy-rich environments outside the classroom, further emphasizing the need for robust instructional strategies. Additionally, observations reveal that pupils in the schools in the district of Santa Fe face linguistic diversity, making it essential to tailor reading strategies to accommodate varied language backgrounds.

The researcher also observed the prevalence of language barriers among learners from linguistically diverse backgrounds necessitated the need to conduct a study on teaching learning strategies. In classrooms where students speak various languages at home, crafting strategies that accommodate language differences becomes imperative for fostering effective reading instruction (Seráfica *et al.*, 2023). Additionally, the impact of socio-economic disparities is evident, as learners from economically disadvantaged backgrounds may lack access to enriching reading materials and experiences, requiring tailored strategies to bridge these gaps.

Based on these circumstances, the researcher assessed the utilization of teaching reading strategies used in teaching from Grade 1 to 3 during the COVID-19 pandemic particularly in three stages: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. Furthermore, the study endeavored to determine the challenges encountered by teachers with regard to reading in the English subject in the implementation of self-learning modules for school years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022.

2. Literature Review

Rehman *et al.* (2020) advocated teaching reading strategies in three stages, namely: pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading. Each of these stages has its own reading strategies that would help learners in developing their reading skills. In the pre-reading strategy, teachers impart to their pupils a particular undertaking to find out what they should anticipate and learn from their reading activities. Pupils at this stage will be able to understand the initial knowledge and concept depicted in the reading material. This stage is vital as it will assist the pupils to improve and kindle their prior information.

On the other hand, while-reading strategies are the conscious processes where pupils must be aware of the reading undertakings and check whether they have comprehended a text or any reading material (Brevik *et al.*, 2018). Teachers are advised to employ various while-reading strategies but should be able to determine what and when it is appropriate to use one of the other (Maslawati *et al.*, 2015).

Finally, in post-reading strategies, teachers are advised to help students wrap up what they learned and do something with these like relating with other language skills such as writing, listening, and speaking (Rehman, *et al.*, 2020). This will make pupils realize the learning objectives and would be able to analyze and interpret relative knowledge from the reading material that they have utilized.

In the Philippines, reading practice has been elevated through the Department of Education Order No. 45, series of 2002, otherwise known as Reading Literacy Program in the Elementary Schools. Among others, this DepEd Order states that school must ascertain that every child is a successful reader at the end of Grade III, ensure that no pupil will be promoted to the next higher grade unless he/she manifests mastery of the basic literacy skills in

a particular grade level, see to it that all possible means of assistance and encouragement shall be extended to enable the child to read, and develop a School-Based Reading Program to improve reading comprehension.

In the school district of Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya, it has been observed that teachers have various strategies in teaching reading to the learners but are hampered due to the problems brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. In the school year 2020–2021 and 2021–2022 when the pupils went through self-learning modules, the teachers were hard up in employing their strategies in teaching reading to the pupils since they only do home visitations at limited period. They could only visit one pupil at most twice in a month; thus, the pupils were on their own and were hard up especially if they do not have support from their family members.

In the remote places, teachers visited only the pupils once in a month and their sessions were limited since they had to cater to other subjects as well. Some strategies in reading that were employed include giving, previewing the text material, giving of context clues, or unlocking difficult words. Other teachers performed repetition and requested the parents or siblings to follow up the schedule of the pupils to read, so they were able to remind them not to forget reading even at least 30 minutes during their schedule in reading.

The two school years of using self-learning modules led to various challenges in learning and teaching so the teachers had no choice but to do teach once or just depend on the responses of the pupils in the assessments that were included in the SLMs. Hence, they were not certain if the pupils really learned the needed skills in reading. The pupils, most of the time, were left alone or did not even have time to read since there were cases that they were not at home when they were visited.

In November of 2022, when DepEd went through full face-to-face, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for Grades 1 to 3 based on the records of elementary schools in Santa Fe district showed that only a quarter (20–25) in a class were at the *mastery* level while most were at the level described as *moving towards mastery* and also about 20–30% were at the *low mastery* and *very low mastery* levels. These results were particularly seen in the invented word reading, oral passage reading, and reading comprehension parts of the EGRA.

Similarly, in the Phil-IRI group screening test (GST), only about 20% were at the independent level while most were either at the frustration to instructional and instructional to independent levels. Lastly the functional literacy assessment tool (FLAT) Pre-Assessment Results in the school year 2020–2021 recorded most elementary schools in Santa Fe, Nueva Vizcaya having a poor comprehension in all grade levels.

In addition to these studies, the COVID-19 pandemic being faced by all learners in the country and in the world greatly magnified the problem since schooling had to shift from face-to-face interaction to distance learning. The health threats posed by the pandemic, a sudden shift to distance learning, and additional responsibilities of learners together with their parents and guardians at home have yielded a stressful and demanding context for educators' workload (Kraft, *et al.*, 2020; Maslang *et al.*, 2021). It was identified by Levine (2020) and Tabangcura *et al.* (2023) that equity is more challenging brought by closure of the pandemic where teachers try serving learners through modules, online or through phone calls and other platforms.

While the government and health officials tried to flatten the epidemiological curve of the deadly virus, the Department of Education (DepEd) worked hard to transition the modality of teaching from conventional *face-to-face* learning, or the traditional *brick-and-mortar schools* to so-called *blended learning*. According to Magsambol (2020), as the government limited face-to-face interaction and prohibited mass gatherings, DepEd's blended learning approach was implemented with students learning from online, television, radio, and printed materials.

Department of Education Order No. 31, s. 2020 provided for a guide for teachers in using the SLMs which emphasizes learning label of each part. The introduction or learning objectives part relates with *What I need to know?*; the pretest — *What I know?*; lesson proper — *What's in?*, *What's new?*, *What is it?* and *What's more?*; generalization — *What I have learned?*; application — *What I can do?*. These are followed by assessment and additional activities. Consequently, the daily learning logs (DLLs) and daily learning plans (DLPs) were now replaced by the weekly home learning plan (WHLP) where teachers need to accomplish relative to the provided SLMs. Reading is one of the five sub-strands of the Language Arts and Multiliteracies Curriculum (LAMC) under the K-12 educational framework. The distribution of the LAMC domains is funneled into four groups, these are: Kindergarten to Grade 3; Grade 4 to 6; Grade 7 to 10; and Grade 11 to 12.

In general, the performance standard of the reading component from Grade 1 to 3 are: activate prior knowledge conceptually related to text and establish a purpose for reading; be self-aware as they discuss and analyze text to create new meanings and modify old knowledge; respond to literary text through the appreciation of literary devices and an understanding of story grammar; locate information from expository texts and use this information for discussion or written production; demonstrate a love for reading stories and confidence in performing literacy-related activities/task; demonstrate critical understanding and interpretation of visual media;

and organize, process and use information effectively.

It is also integrated in the guiding principles of LAMC that: all languages are interrelated and interdependent; language acquisition and learning is an active process that begins at birth and continues throughout life; learning requires meaning; learners learn about language and how to use it effectively through their engagement with and study of texts; and successful language learning involves viewing, listening, speaking, reading, and writing activities. Lastly, it was postulated in the K to 12 curriculum of English the need for the application of six (6) language teaching principles which are spiral progression, interaction, integration, learner centeredness, contextualization, and construction.

From these guiding principles provided in the LAMC under K-12 framework, reading strategies are of paramount considerations. Barron (2017) posited that reading strategies are the readers' mental procedures to accomplish a reading task. Furthermore, these are considered as series of undertakings which readers perform in order to make sense in their reading performances. Brevik *et al.* (2018) also related that reading strategies are procedures and processes used by pupils to advance in their reading abilities.

3. Research Methodology

The mixed research design involving the integration of both quantitative and qualitative research methods within a single study or research program was utilized in this study. Mixed design specifically refers to the systematic combination of elements from both experimental (quantitative) and non-experimental (qualitative) research designs. This approach allows researchers to leverage the strengths of both methods, providing a more comprehensive understanding of a research problem. For the quantitative approach, the respondents can just check on their utilization of the provided reading strategies in pre-reading, while reading and post-reading stages. This will ascertain that the researchers could get what they want to gather from the respondents and at the same time will give the respondents more convenience in responding. Meanwhile, the qualitative part will provide more insights particularly in the challenges that the teachers experienced and observed in the new normal and they could triangulate their responses in the quantitative part.

The research methods for the quantitative part were descriptive and comparative. The descriptive part presents the level of utilization of the reading strategies in three reading stages and the comparative reflects the comparison of the level of utilization in three reading stages when grouped according to profile. The research method for the qualitative part is simple descriptive type. In this study, it showed the challenges in dealing with teaching reading strategies amid the pandemic. The methods employed for data collection included survey questionnaires and document scanning. The scanned documents comprised the Santa Fe school district's annual reports on reading, focusing specifically on the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) for Grades 1 to 3, the Phil-IRI group screening test (GST), and the functional literacy assessment tool (FLAT) Pre-Assessment Results for the school year 2021-2022.

4. Findings and Discussions

4.1 Level of Utilization of Teachers on the Teaching Reading Strategies Along the Stages of Pre-Reading, While Reading and Post Reading

In this study, the perception of the teachers on the level of utilization of the teaching reading strategies in teaching reading to Grades 1, 2 and 3 pupils were presented in three stages, these are pre-reading, while-reading, and post reading. Harvey (2012) and Souhila (2014) provided the definition of teaching reading strategies as conscious, flexible techniques which teachers can use to help readers improve their reading performance through rewarding their comprehension on specific reading tasks and contexts. Tables 1 to 3 show the results. Data were gathered through a survey questionnaire and mean ratings were computed to show the level of utilization of teachers on provided reading strategies.

Table 1. Level of Utilization of Teaching Reading Strategies in Pre-reading

Pre-reading Teaching Reading Strategies	Mean	Qualitative Description
Previewing text	2.70	Sometimes
Guessing meaning	2.42	Rarely
Using prior knowledge	3.00	Sometimes
Skimming	2.85	Sometimes
Scanning	2.61	Sometimes
Making predictions	3.58	Very Often
Asking assistance from parents/siblings	2.70	Sometimes

The level of utilization of teaching reading strategies in pre-reading among the surveyed group of 33 participants reveals a range of engagement frequencies. Notably, the highest ratings are: using prior knowledge (Mean=3.00) also described as *sometimes* and making predictions (Mean=3.58) described as *very often*. In terms of using prior knowledge, this is very common strategy in teaching reading to pupils as this is being used by teachers to jumpstart the reading process (Usman *et al.*, 2019). Rehman, *et al.* (2020) also highlighted this as very important for teachers to observe in the pre-reading stage. This is where the teachers could get references in planning for their strategies for their next undertakings as they go to actual reading with their pupils.

In the context of the locale of the study, this even become more useful since the pupils were on a distance learning and using the self-learning modules (SLMs) without the direct supervision of their teachers. The usual getting-to-know each other and identifying the prior knowledge of pupils that teachers do at the beginning of classes were not done. Teacher Reina, one of the teachers in a school with medium classification, claimed that “some of the learners cannot understand what they are reading”. So first, she had to know what the pupils have learned so far before embarking to actual practice in reading.

Not surprisingly, the teaching strategy that got the lowest rating is on *guessing meaning* (Mean=2.42) described as *rarely*. Based on the aforementioned condition, the teachers only have once or twice a month of home visitation. Hence, whenever they had chances, they were more inclined to utilize what they know as more practical and effective given their observations and experiences. This strategy on *guessing meaning* might not have been dealt with most often because the learners were not provided with the primary tools or proper foundations. How could they guess if there were no opportunities for them to learn the basics? What will they guess and where could they get these?

In pre-reading activities, the learners may also use their own materials as preparation when they read the actual text. These could be other materials that are not prescribed but what they have at home. However, as observed in the schools of the locale of study and affirmed by their teachers, there were very few of their learners who have their own materials at home and so the continuity of learning as opined in the K-12 framework and the DepEd Order No.18 s. 2020, *Policy Guidelines for the Provision of Learning Resources in the Implementation of the Basic Education Continuity Plan*), was not realized pertinent to reading aspect of the English language.

A deeper analysis of the findings suggests a nuanced understanding of the utilization of teaching reading strategies in pre-reading activities among the surveyed group. The analysis reveals that the highest-rated strategies, particularly using prior knowledge and making predictions, play crucial roles in the distance learning context, where direct teacher-pupil interactions are limited. Using prior knowledge emerges as a common and valuable strategy, acting as a foundation for teachers to plan effective teaching reading strategies.

Table 2. Level of Utilization of Teaching Reading Strategies in While-reading

While-reading Teaching Reading Strategies	Mean	Qualitative Description
Analyzing and highlighting	2.33	Rarely
Taking notes on the behavior of pupils	2.82	Sometimes
Generating questions	2.73	Sometimes
Identifying main ideas	2.88	Sometimes
Drawing inference	2.45	Rarely
Using flashcards	4.00	Very Often
Reading through repetition	3.61	Very Often
Use of fuller approach	3.36	Sometimes
Defining words	3.15	Sometimes
Use of offline technology-based software	3.12	Sometimes

Table 2 shows that the *using of flashcards* (Mean=4.00) and *reading through repetition* (Mean=3.61) got the highest ratings and were described as *very often*. This could mean that these were the common teaching reading strategies utilized by the teachers during the pandemic. The using of flashcards is very practical, simple and had the lowest cost because they just need to bring with them what they have in their school, or they could easily create with new materials or from recycled ones.

The reading through repetition likewise was very useful and practical for the teachers. Here, the teachers themselves become the visual aid and at the same time the instructional material. Without anything at hand but

only the stature of being a teacher, they could be able to teach their pupils. They read a word, or a line and the learners will follow or repeat what the teachers have read. This could be done once or depending on the mastery and comprehension levels of the learners. As attested by Teacher Jane, a teacher in one of the big schools, she claimed that “many pupils can’t read, can’t pronounce some words and don’t grasp the main idea of the topic; thus, there is a need for one-by-one teaching and through listen and repeat process, they could be able to master what they are reading”.

Notwithstanding, it is relevant to take note the three strategies written by the three respondents, and these were presented back to the other teachers, and they rated as well. These are: use of fuller approach (mean=3.36); defining words (3.15); and use of offline technology-based software (mean=3.12) all described as sometimes. Though these are at the moderate level, these must be highlighted as these came from the teachers themselves. According to them, these are the teaching reading strategies that they could use given the conditions during the pandemic.

The fuller approach is the use of phonemic awareness to identify and manipulate phonemes in order to teach the pupils with corresponding sounds and spelling patterns (Dontre, 2020). This was claimed by Teacher Aida, teacher in a medium school, with this statement, “I used fuller approach in teaching reading. It is easy to learn by the learners and I can do it myself without any material or technology only my effort in pronouncing and spelling of words”.

In terms of defining words, it became part of the routine whenever students had hard times in reading because of some words that they do not understand, or it is their first time to encounter. The teachers have to define the words first and most often use a language that the pupils could easily understand. It was observed in the locale and as experienced by the researcher herself as a primary teacher that the pupils lack vocabulary and so they are limited with the words that they could pronounce and understand well. They then depend to the explanation to be provided by teachers or any member of the household who could help them. These members of the household, however, were not always present to help the pupils.

Lastly, the use of offline technology-based software such as power point, videos and slideshows of picture using the teachers’ laptop or mobile phones were commonly used during the pandemic. As part of the preparations of teachers, when they do home visitations, they always bring with them their laptops and mobile phones and use these to enhance their teaching of the different subjects. Since there was also lack of reading materials to supplement the SLMs provided to the learners, they greatly depend on what the teachers will bring and read with them. The teachers confirmed that the use of power point, photo viewer or other offline applications such as spinning wheel and guessing words and picture identification are very beneficial. These provide scaffolding for pupils to become more interested in reading and for their easy comprehension of the material that they are assigned to read.

Table 3. Level of Utilization of Teaching Reading Strategies in Post-reading

Post-reading Teaching Reading Strategies	Mean	Qualitative Description
Using visual representatives	3.36	Sometimes
Confirming/Disconfirming	3.00	Sometimes
Consulting relevant source	3.00	Sometimes
Paraphrasing	3.00	Sometimes
Generating questions	3.91	Very Often
Appreciating the reading material	3.00	Sometimes
Asking pupils what they have learned	3.00	Sometimes

Next to the highest rating is the use of visual representatives. This teaching reading strategy is also very helpful to students to break the mode of students reading from texts. Based on the observations and experiences of the researcher herself, the pupils were more visuals, and they could be more interested and excited in reading when they see visuals or pictures that represent what they are reading.

On the other hand, the lowest ratings could mean that they do not usually use these strategies as these are not practical and could not get the interest of the learners given the situations that they were into during the pandemic. They did not usually ask the learners to confirm or disconfirm, consult relevant source, paraphrase, ask to appreciate the reading material, and ask pupils what they have learned. Although these teaching reading strategies are also helpful in post-reading, these were not utilized because the teachers were focused on what

they could easily access to.

Another possible reason was that, since they were limited with time, the teachers might not even have the opportunity to have post-reading activities. In their home visitation, they allot about an hour for each pupil, and this was divided to all their subjects. Most of the time, they could not employ all the teaching reading strategies but only what is accessible and practical at the time they had their chances to teach reading to their pupils.

4.2 Comparison in the Level of Utilization of the Respondents of the Teaching Reading Strategies When Grouped According to Grade Level and School Classification

The inquiry revolves around understanding whether distinct patterns emerge in the application of reading strategies based on the academic grade of the respondents and the type of school they attend. For instance, it could be observed that students in higher academic grades and urban schools tend to employ more advanced metacognitive reading strategies, such as summarization and critical analysis, possibly due to a more enriched educational environment. On the other hand, students in lower grades and rural schools might exhibit a reliance on foundational strategies like decoding and basic comprehension, highlighting potential disparities in educational resources and teaching methodologies. The results are presented in Tables 4 and 5.

Table 4. Level of Utilization of the Teaching Reading Strategies when grouped according to Grade Level

Mean Ratings	Grade Level	N	Mean	Qualitative Description	F	p-value	Decision
Pre-reading	1	10	3.18	Sometimes	1.168	.325	Accept Ho
	2	11	3.21	Sometimes			
	3	12	3.26	Sometimes			
While-reading	1	10	3.11	Sometimes	1.178	.335	Accept Ho
	2	11	3.14	Sometimes			
	3	12	3.19	Sometimes			
Post-reading	1	10	3.15	Sometimes	.394	.667	Accept Ho
	2	11	3.21	Sometimes			
	3	12	3.26	Sometimes			

Statistical analysis using ANOVA in Table 4 reveals that the F and p- values are: Pre-reading ($F=.736$; $p\text{-value}=.487$); While-reading ($F=.736$; $p\text{-value}=.497$); and Post-reading ($F=.736$; $p\text{-value}=.770$). All these values indicate that the null hypothesis is accepted which relates that there are no significant differences on the level of utilization of the teaching reading strategies when grouped according to grade level. This implies that the Grade 1, 2, and 3 teachers do not differ in perceptions regarding the teaching reading strategies that they used. This means further that, regardless of grade-level the teaching reading strategies used are the same.

In the normal situation, it is well recognized that teaching reading from Grades 1, 2 and 3 are being done differently because of the differences of every learner pertinent to their grade level. Based on the K-12 Curriculum Guide for English, the learning process that supports this is the principle of spiral progression. The skills, structure, and type of texts to be taught to learners are revised and revisited at increasing level of difficulty and complexity. In this way, the pupils advance from the foundational level to higher levels of reading skills and knowledge.

The K-12 Curriculum Guide for English also specifies varying content standards for Grades 1, 2 and 3. For instance, in phonological awareness, the content standard is for Grade 1 pupils to *demonstrate understanding of sounds and their meanings for appropriate use of words*. Meanwhile, Grade 2 pupils must *demonstrate understanding of the letter-sound relationship between Mother Tongue and English for effective transfer of learning*. And for Grade 3 pupils, they must *demonstrates understanding of familiar sight and irregularly spelled words for automatic recognition*. With these varying content standards, teaching reading strategies of teachers also must be varied.

Notwithstanding, the findings of the foregoing study showed that regardless of the grade level, their teaching reading strategies are the same. This could be explained by the limitations they had during the pandemic. The content standards were at the minimum level and the regular assessments being done before the beginning of classes were not performed. The interim guidelines as stipulated in DepEd Order No. 31, series of 2020 for language learning area provides for 40% Written Works and 60% Performance Tasks. Quarterly examinations were not given for School Year 2020-2021 and the weight of these were distributed to the weights of Written

Works and Performance Tasks.

While there were no empirical studies in the locale that would triangulate this result. The researcher herself and some of the respondents affirm on the lack of undifferentiated teaching reading strategies because either they are focused with the most common teaching reading strategies, or they were not able to have time to employ several of these because of the prevailing conditions that time. Aside from the experiences of the researcher and the revelation of the teacher-respondents, another affirmation was the results of reading assessments conducted in November of 2022 such as the EGRA, Phil-IRI and FLAT.

Results showed that the EGRA for Grades 1 to 3 in Santa Fe district had most of the pupils at the level described as *moving towards mastery* and about 20-30% were at the *low mastery* and *very low mastery* levels. Likewise, in the Phil-IRI group screening test (GST), another reading assessment showed that only about 20% were at the independent level while most were either at the frustration to instructional and instructional to independent levels. Finally, the FLAT Pre-Assessment Results revealed that most elementary schools in Sta. Fe district had a poor reading comprehension.

All in all, these findings raise crucial questions about pedagogical uniformity and the impact of pandemic-related limitations on instructional practices. In a conventional educational setting, the K-12 Curriculum Guide for English underscores the importance of differentiated teaching strategies based on grade levels, emphasizing the principle of spiral progression to cater to the varying needs and complexities of learners as they advance through foundational to higher levels of reading skills. However, the study findings reveal a paradox wherein, despite the recognized diversity in content standards for Grades 1, 2, and 3, teachers were reported using the same teaching reading strategies.

Table 5. Level of Utilization of the Teaching Reading Strategies when grouped according to School Classification

Teaching Reading Strategies	School Classification	N	Mean	Qualitative Description	F	p-value	Decision
Pre-reading	Small	10	3.08	Sometimes	.736	.487	Accept Ho
	Medium	11	3.11	Sometimes			
	Big	12	3.16	Sometimes			
While- reading	Small	10	3.21	Sometimes	.746	.497	Accept Ho
	Medium	11	3.24	Sometimes			
	Big	12	3.10	Sometimes			
Post-reading	Small	10	3.10	Sometimes	.264	.770	Accept Ho
	Medium	11	3.11	Sometimes			
	Big	12	3.15	Sometimes			

In similar vein, data in Table 5 could be supported by the general findings from the reports submitted by all the elementary schools in the division of Nueva Vizcaya. As presented in the background of the program for the achievement of reading targets in the Division of Nueva Vizcaya. There was no school, big, or small, that was spared from the ill effects of COVID-19 pandemic. All went through distance learning with the use of SLMs and the teachers were tasked to go on home visitation to the various far-flung places.

With the reports collated by the office of the Division of Nueva Vizcaya, they came up with a general reading program where all the schools could base on, and they have to craft also their own depending on their context. There is no strict procedure for small, medium, or big schools but they emphasize more on the 6 elements of reading namely: oral language, phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary and understanding. The primary objective of this reading program is to equip learners with reading skills to make them proficient and independent readers in their grade levels, capacitate and assist teachers to become effective reading teachers, produce varied reading intervention materials that will be utilized in teaching reading across reading levels of learners, and nurture a culture of reading in schools and communities.

4.3 Challenges Encountered by the Respondents in Using the Different Teaching Reading Strategies

For the presentation of the challenges encountered by the respondents in using the different teaching reading strategies along the three reading stages and in dealing with the reading subject amid the COVID-19 pandemic, their narratives were analyzed and grouped according to categories. Hereafter, the results are presented in table 6 using thematic approach.

Table 6. Thematic Categories of Respondents' Narratives on the Challenges Encountered Using Various Teaching Reading Strategies

Thematic Category	Specific Challenge
1) Limited Assistance and Teaching Time	Accomplishment of as many subjects as possible, meeting for only one or two hours, pupils were not at home, pupils were doing performance tasks in another subject
2) Home Visitation Problems	No official service or transportation, use of own vehicle (motor bike or tricycle), long distance walking to far flung areas, and unfavorable roads (crossing rivers and uncemented road)
3) Pupils' lack of interest and ability to read	Lack of vocabulary, attitude of pupils towards reading, cannot paraphrase or summarize, poor language facility, and short span of interest in reading
4) Lack of assistors/guidance from the family	Parents were not at home, no guidance from parents or any adult, pupils were left at home alone, and/or pupils were with their parents in the fields/farms
5) Lack of supplementary reading materials at home	Lack or no reading materials, lack of gadgets, no or limited access to internet

Data in Table 6 show that the surveyed 35 teachers encountered various challenges while teaching reading with their pupils during the COVID-19 pandemic. Generally, their responses were categorized into 1) Limited assistance and teaching time; 2) Home visitation problems; 3) Pupils' lack of interest and ability to read; 4) Lack of assistors/guidance from the family; and 5) Lack of supplementary reading materials at home. The categories were interpreted individually based on the frequency of responses provided. The verbatim were also included to project the responses of the respondents and to support the themes in the thematic categories presented in Table 6.

1) Limited assistance and teaching time. Foremost of the challenges that the teachers have encountered was the limitation of assistance and teaching time. The specific challenges here are: accomplishment of as many subjects as possible, meeting for only one or two hours, pupils were not at home, and pupils were doing performance tasks in another subject.

These were also discussed in previous sections of this study. For the teaching of reading, teachers were allotted only about 15 minutes per child twice or once a month. Hence, they really had less time in assisting and teaching their learners.

The following were some of the responses of the teachers surveyed (R refers to respondent; no corrections were made; thus, errors in spelling and grammar were retained to ascertain authenticity of the responses given):

The problem we had was the lack of teacher-learner connection and the limited time we had for our pupils. (R2)

We only visit them once or twice a month. (R3)

Whenever we meet our pupils, we are only given one or two hours. (R7)

Sometimes, pupils were not at home, so we have limited time in teaching them. (R20)

Some of our pupils were busier in other subjects. (R30)

These statements prove that the respondents really faced challenges in terms of limited assistance and teaching time which resulted to a more superficial understanding due to lack of more personal and first-hand interaction with the pupils. In further analysis, the limitation of assistance and teaching time challenged that hall mark of being a teacher in the primary level — especially from Grades 1, 2 and 3. Whether distance or in-person learning, it is well established that in the early years of reading development of pupils, a full support and guidance must be ensured by teachers.

According to Rachael (2022), reading is an essential aspect of the literacy development that must be honed at the early stage of children's schooling. Moreover, if children were not given strong foundation of the basics of reading in their early years, then there is a probability that they may be hard up reading in the later stages.

2) Home visitation problems. This theme is also one among the challenges faced by the teachers in teaching reading during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specific challenges to this include no official service or transportation, use of own vehicle (motor bike or tricycle), long distance walking to far flung areas, and unfavorable roads (crossing rivers and uncemented and muddy road). Some of the verbatim responses were the following:

Our school does not provide transportation for our home visitation, we use our own. (R14)

We are forced to walk a long distance going from one house to another for our home visitation. (R16)

Sometimes we really have to use our own motor bike or tricycle because the house of our pupils is in remote areas. (R18)

We do not have transportation budget, so we use our own money for our fare whenever we go for home visitation. (R21)

Home visitation entails giving motivation which according to some studies are part of the challenges experienced by teachers in teaching reading. Regarding reading motivation, Lu (2022) pointed out that motivating students to engage with reading can be challenging due to various factors such as competing interests, external distractions, and perceived lack of relevance in provided materials. Overcoming this challenge requires educators to employ strategies like selecting engaging texts, incorporating student choice, and creating a positive reading environment.

3) *Pupils' lack of interest and ability to read.* Another challenge was on the lack of interest on the part of the pupils. This lack of interest could be perceived generally in two ways. One is the natural tendency of children to get disinterested into things that are not attractive to them. Another is that they have no interest because nobody else within his/her surrounding do those things like in reading, nobody is around to show that reading is fun and interesting. Some of the responses were the following:

Some pupils are not interested in reading. (R1)

During the pandemic, the pupils were challenged to read their SLMs. They leave activities that needs to be done thru writing such as essay, reflections and explanations because they have difficulties in understanding the text or reading exercises. (R3)

Some of the learners cannot understand what they are reading because they lack interest in these materials. (R4)

Improvement of the reading ability of pupils that was partially neglected during the past two years of modular/distance learning. (R6)

Many pupils can't read, doesn't grasp the main idea of the topic. (R9)

Pupils have different reasons why they lack interest in reading. According to Oxford Learning (2019), some causes of disinterested in reading are: lack of support, attention disorder, different in learning styles, and learning disabilities. In this case, after diagnostic assessments, proper intervention must be applied. In the case of the district of Santa Fe, there must be a proper interpreting of pupils' performances in all the reading assessments being conducted to come up with strategic intervention for their improvement. Some suggestions related by the teachers include exploring other different materials other than the materials of the school, motivate and reward success activities, working on active listening and phonics skills, listen and repeat activities, and reading aloud.

Pupils' lack of interest and ability to read was also claimed by Novianti *et al.* (2021) who stated that sometimes the challenges rest on the learners and not on the teachers. While the teachers do everything that they could, they could not force the learners to follow what they want or what they perceive as ideal. Meanwhile, Lavana and Nor (2020) emphasized the importance of differentiated instruction to accommodate various learning styles. Recognizing the diversity within classrooms and delivering meaningful learning experiences tailored to individual needs is crucial for effectively addressing multifaceted challenges associated with reading instruction.

4) *Lack of assistors/guidance from the family.* The lack of assistors/ guidance from the family is very important in the development of reading capabilities of children. The specific challenges under this theme are: parents were not at home, no guidance from parents or any adult, pupils were left at home alone, and/or pupils were with their parents in the fields/farms. As mentioned in the social constructivism theory, they really need guidance to start with. Very few children could start alone in the early years, most learn through modeling or with someone who could shape the reading styles and interest within them. Below are some examples of the responses of the teachers:

The pupils were not able to express their own ideas since it is a self-learning material especially when there is no guidance from their parents/guidance. (R5)

Pupils were not able to express their own ideas, and they can't understand what they are reading because it is a self-learning modules and some pupils have no guidance from parents/guardian. (R13)

My students lack guidance from their parents or any relative. (R15)

There is no assistance from adults, so they end up not reading. (R20)

There is a need for guidance coming from their support system. (R25)

This lack of assistance from teachers, parents and other members of the family is another well recognized scenario for children to learn reading. Without these, they would experience difficulties when reading on their own. One explanation on this was related to the study of Rachael (2022) and the discussions in Sections 1 and 2 of this study regarding, scaffolding, prior knowledge, and environment. According to Rachael (2022), these three aspects can be used by teachers in the pre-, while- and post-reading stages. First, they need to use scaffolding technique, consider learners' prior knowledge and the environment where the child will be reading. If all these will be observed, there is a better expectation that teaching reading can be effective and efficient especially for learners in Grades 1, 2, and 3.

In the study of Ladson-Billings (2021) and Maslang (2023), members of the family and the cultural group where the learners belong greatly affect their reading habits, especially in the early years. It was emphasized in the study of Ladson-Billings that culturally responsive teaching as a means to address and bridge literacy gaps. Tailoring instructional approaches to incorporate students' cultural contexts not only enhances engagement but also fosters a more inclusive and effective learning environment.

5) *Lack of supplementary reading materials at home.* Lack of supplementary reading materials at home was also one of the challenges not only for teachers but for the pupils especially as well. The specific challenges under this theme are: lack or no reading materials, lack of gadgets, no or limited access to internet. The statements below support the presentation of this challenge:

There are no different reading materials at home that can arouse the pupils' interest. (R11)

Reading materials should be localized and contextualized. (R12)

There must be localize reading materials and the use of models and other instructional materials to arouse learners' interests. (R17)

They lack other reading materials that could help them enhance their reading skills. (R19)

The pupils only depend on the modules that the school provide. They do not have other materials at home to supplement their reading practice. (R23)

This finding on the lack of other materials at home to supplement the reading resources in school finds greater implications in the discussion regarding the very low performance of the Philippines in PISA 2018 where we were at the bottom. As reported by Manlapig (2020), the PISA result states that per student in the country is 90 percent lower than the global average and the ability of each student to learn and comprehend the materials presented is further hampered by the absence of viable teaching materials (Maslang, 2021).

Frederick S. Perez, former president of the Reading Association of the Philippines (RAP), as cited by Manlapig (2020) said that "it isn't just a question of being able to read, it could also be related to the process of contextualization as well as the materials needed to be used."

In this case, the study puts forward the idea of having more materials for the learners especially those that they could easily refer or understand considering their locale, situations, and other pertinent things. There must be more materials written in the mother tongue and with graphics that learners could easily grasp. The schools in Santa Fe have already started with the localization and contextualization process but there is still lot of things to be done now that we are back to school.

5. Conclusions

Based on the significant findings in this study, it could be concluded that the level of utilization of teaching reading strategies by teachers greatly depend on the circumstances that they are into. These circumstances influence the way they manage their time and effort in teaching reading to their pupils. Most of the time, the conditions of the pupils have an impact on the way teachers employ their teaching strategies. Teachers are known to be creative and resourceful, but these have limitations, and they succumbed to other equally demanding factors like the children's lack of interest in reading, lack of family support system and lack of reading materials at home to supplement the materials being utilized by the teachers. Meanwhile, Grade level and school classification do not always define the level of utilization of the teaching reading strategies, particularly during the pandemic where everybody was covered by the national protocol on the various type of community and individual quarantine. The other factors that may also affect the utilization of teaching reading strategies of teachers are the conditions of pupils such as family conditions, personal wiliness to read, rewards and the like. Finally, challenges are drivers of public service, excellence, and innovations. When teachers are challenged, the more that they find ways to realize their vocation as teachers and reach out to those who are really in need of their services. From these challenges are the realization of remedial activities in reading that could be implemented to generally improve the pupils' reading skills and comprehension and at the same time to fill the gap that the two-year COVID-19 pandemic had caused unprecedentedly.

6. Recommendations

From all the conclusions, it is highly recommended that teachers could always be flexible and ready to adjust their strategies in teaching reading to their pupils given some unique conditions like that of COVID-19 pandemic. The utilization of one, two or combination of several techniques in pre-reading, while-reading and post-reading must be carefully considered. There are many factors that affect the utilization of teaching reading strategies, for future studies then, the analyses of family support system, learning disabilities and children's disinterestedness in reading could be performed. For deeper and better understanding future studies may make use of qualitative approach through phenomenological or grounded theory. The challenges could be thoroughly examined and need to be part of the information and dissemination campaign to reach out more audience as possible. A forum or conference to discuss how these challenges maybe resolved could also be initiated so that these will be given appropriate solutions and actions before these will perpetrate more complications to the children's growth and development in reading. Likewise, building upon the findings of this study, future researchers may consider investigating the nuanced factors influencing the adaptability and effectiveness of these strategies in diverse educational contexts. This could involve exploring the impact of socio-economic disparities on the implementation of teaching reading strategies, the role of cultural and linguistic diversity in shaping instructional approaches, and the integration of inclusive practices to cater to pupils with diverse learning needs. Understanding how contextual factors intersect with teaching strategies can inform the development of more tailored and equitable approaches to reading instruction, fostering inclusive and effective practices in diverse educational settings.

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