

# Beginning Reading Skills of Primary Learners

Iris S. Duque<sup>1</sup> and Ana Cristina G. Fortes<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1,2</sup>Sorsogon State University, Philippines

Email: <sup>1</sup>[ayrhiz.13@gmail.com](mailto:ayrhiz.13@gmail.com) and <sup>2</sup>[anacristinafortes05@gmail.com](mailto:anacristinafortes05@gmail.com)

**Abstract**— This study determined the beginning reading skills along phonological and phonemic awareness of primary learners in one elementary schools in the Philippines. Using the quantitative method, the researcher modified Kilpatrick’s Phonological Awareness Test (PAST). The data gathered were analyzed and interpreted using frequency, percentage and rank of scores. The data revealed that the primary learners have varying phonological and phonemic awareness skills. More than half of the learners exhibited deficiencies in their PA skills. Also, the rate of their working memories or the automaticity in accomplishing each task is low. Findings have shown that the most automatic subtest is the syllable blending which is also the easiest task to them. However, the least automatic, and the most difficult skill is the onset-rime deletion that includes items with consonant blends. These variations may be accounted to the different phonological and phonemic experiences they had during the 2-year distance learning. Generally, they are not aware that words are made up of smaller units of sounds, and that sounds can form different syllables and words. This means that these learners must be given reading instructional strategies that will improve their phonological and phonemic awareness skills. It was recommended that trainings and workshops with regards to proper teaching of beginning reading skills be given to teachers and reading volunteers. Schools may also implement reading intervention programs to address reading deficiencies of learners, and with this, school administrators may give additional support to the teachers, especially in providing appropriate instructional materials.

**Keywords**— reading skills, primary learners, elementary schools, teaching.

## INTRODUCTION

The ability to read is an essential skill. It is a vital part of learning that determines achievement in an individual’s education and success in their career. One of the essential elements of reading that formed the basis of the present study is the reading skill which involves the knowledge and skill to understand and recognize phonemes or speech sounds. The understanding of phonemes is largely referred to in reading studies as phonological awareness. It is the ability to recognize and manipulate the sound properties of spoken words, such as syllables, initial sounds, rhyming parts, and phonemes (Kilpatrick, 2016). Phonological awareness is an umbrella term having skills “under the umbrella” moving from easier (word and syllable) to more complex (onset-rime and phoneme). Knowledge of the developmental levels of phonological awareness is important in measuring and tracking the reading proficiency of learners. Failure to acquire this understanding, often leads to persistent deficits in word recognition later in the learning years.

In the Philippines, reports had been made manifesting reading performance problems among Filipino learners. One of the threatening was the report made by the Department of Education (DepEd) in 2019 that more than 70,000 elementary students in Bicol cannot read in

both English and Filipino. Worst, there may have been an increase in the figures because of the pandemic which forced schools to shut down and adopt a variety of Distance Learning Methods. Less than 15% of schoolchildren in the Philippines, or about 3 in every 20, can read simple texts in large part due to the longest school closure of more than 70 weeks as of the middle of February caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) said in a report. Similarly, in the results of the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) conducted in 2022 to determine the reading profiles of grades 1-3 learners, the district where the participating school in this study belonged to, was among the districts with the lowest results.

The effect of the pandemic on the education system in the Philippines, being one of the countries to have the longest school closure, has been severe. Children had a variety of learning experiences, most especially in terms of reading abilities.

In the acquisition process of the components of learning to read, namely: phonemic awareness; phonics; vocabulary; fluency; and comprehension, the basic fundamental skill which is phonemic awareness must be taught first before the other components in order to be a proficient reader. However, not all parents or guardians

who served as teachers at home during the distance learning are aware of this.

These proved the importance of face-to-face interactions in developing the ability to read. Teachers, most especially, may help the students to develop the proper skills in reading, as well as of locating, evaluating, organizing, and retaining what is read. These academic skills can be cultivated by students only when teachers are enriched with the proper academic setting and equipped with a planned curriculum (Jose and Raja, 2011).

Another important predictor of learning to read is automaticity. Automaticity in word recognition has been hypothesized to be important in reading development (LaBerge & Samuels, 1974; Perfetti, 1985). Automaticity determines the extent to which they master the skill. This means to say that higher automaticity with a skill implies mastery, while lower automaticity indicates lower mastery of the skill. If the learners manifest mastery, therefore they have better or more advanced reading skills.

In the present study, though the respondents are primary learners, the focus of assessment to be done will only cover Phonological and Phonemic Awareness Skills, as well as automaticity with these tasks. In kindergarten, children develop print concepts, phonological and phonemic awareness, and knowledge of letter names and sounds, all of which contribute to the development of fluent reading. These skills are a necessary foundation to reach the ultimate goal of reading: comprehension (Hogan, 2020).

However, these learners/respondents haven't experienced formal schooling which is vital in developing beginning reading skills. This means that they had different experiences in developing foundational skills in reading at home. Effective teaching of these skills cannot be attained through spoon feeding alone, but through the use of strategies and motivation to develop the interest to read.

Hence, this study determined the beginning reading skills of primary learners specifically identifying the performance on the phonological awareness and phonemic awareness test. Likewise, the study also determined the learner's automaticity in reading in the identified skills. Finally, the researcher proposed a teaching reading strategy to enhance their reading skills.

## METHODOLOGY

### *Research Design*

The present study determined the beginning reading skills along phonological and phonemic awareness skills of primary learners in one elementary schools in the Philippines, s.y. 2022-2023.

It employed a quantitative method of research in identifying the beginning reading skills of the learners. The main instrument that was used is a modified phonological awareness test. The data gathered were tallied, tabulated and analyzed by the use of appropriate statistical tools and measures such as, frequency count, percentage, and rank.

### *The Sample*

The key respondents to this study were the eighty-six (86) primary learners in one elementary school in the Philippines, school year 2022-2023.

Purposive sampling was utilized in choosing the participating school. Of the fourteen elementary schools in the district, the researcher decided to conduct the study in her school assignment because it is one of the schools that have not conducted intensive limited face to face during the current school year since the purpose of the study is to identify the beginning reading skills of learners who have not undergone formal schooling.

The researcher included complete enumeration of the enrollees in the school since the number of respondents is reasonable enough to gather the necessary data needed for the purpose of this study.

The 86 respondents came from three sections in which one of the advisory class is handled by the researcher.

### *The Instrument*

The main instrument that was used to address the research questions is a Phonological Awareness Test derived from Phonological Awareness Screening Test (PAST) of David A. Kilpatrick. It is a diagnostic test that is used to identify students' abilities on the different components of phonological awareness.

The test was carefully modified to suit the intended respondents of the said study. The researcher changed the words that were included in the items and based them from Dolch word list level 2. This is a list of frequently used English words (also known as sight words), compiled by Edward William Dolch, a major proponent

of the “whole-word” method of beginning reading instruction. Additionally, instead of giving each learner multiple sets of tests, the researcher utilized only 1 in order to avoid consuming too much time. The contextualized instrument was reviewed by 2 reading teachers and 1 graduate school faculty who were experts in the field of language teaching. The test is composed of three parts. Part I is for the basic syllable levels. Part II is onset-rime levels, and the third part is for phoneme level, which is the most complex component of PA according to the Phonological Awareness Continuum. Each part is composed of three levels which include PA manipulation activities namely deletion, blending, and substitution. Additionally, PA automaticity was also measured and included through a timed manner of administration. Students were given five seconds to respond to each item. If the child was able to respond within two seconds, the item will be considered automatic.

### Data Gathering Procedures

The researcher oriented the involved teacher’s/ test administrators on how to conduct the test, specially on proper pronunciation of sounds and words, scoring, and providing feedback. The test was given orally and in a timed manner. Informal conversations with the respondents were as well conducted before starting the test. This was done to provide helpful insights as to how and why the results of the study came to be. The respondents and test administrators were given a month for them to finish the test. After the 1-month time frame, retrieval of the test results started. The collected data was organized, tabulated, and consolidated. After which, it was analyzed and finally interpreted. All data collected was kept private and confidential as per research ethics also.

### Data Analysis Procedures

The data gathered was treated using the appropriate descriptive statistical treatment. The test in the study required marking. As each pupil responded orally to the given test item, the teacher marked every item with the necessary data that was gathered. Scores were awarded in each task.

The present study used frequency, percentage, and rank to address the various objectives.

In addressing SOP 1 which determined the beginning reading skills of learners, frequency and percentage of correct scores out of the total number of respondents were analyzed. This enabled the researcher to identify what particular skills under phonological and phonemic awareness have they encountered difficulties and which tasks have they accomplished the easiest. In the 2nd SOP which determined automaticity in reading in the identified skills, frequency and percentage of automatic scores out of the correct ones were analyzed. This abled the researcher determine which among the correct responses were automatically answered. Additionally, percentages of each subtest under phonological and phonemic awareness were ranked accordingly to identify which skills have the most and the least automaticity. In addressing the 3rd and last SOP which determined the appropriate teaching reading strategies to be utilized to the grade 2 learners, results of the 1st and 2nd SOP’s were analyzed. It enabled the researcher identify the status of their reading proficiencies and thereby tell what kind of reading instruction do the learners need.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Based from the gathered data, the following findings are revealed:

*Table 1: Beginning Reading Skills of Primary Learners*

Subtest (Skills)	% of Correct Identified Items
<b>PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS</b>	
Basic Syllable Deletion	39.53%
Basic Syllable Blending	50.47%
Basic Syllable Substitution	16.28%
<b>PHONEMIC AWARENESS</b>	
Onset-Rime Deletion	6.98%
Onset-Rime Blending	22.79%
Onset-Rime Substitution	10.70%
Phoneme Deletion	7.21%
Phoneme Blending	11.6%
Phoneme Substitution	12.79%

As seen in table 1, among the three tasks under phonological awareness, syllable substitution was found to be the most difficult, while the easiest task was syllable blending. This is due to the fact that substitution tasks require multiple manipulation skills before it can be accomplished. They should have the knowledge that by blending syllables, new words may be formed, in order to successfully complete substituting tasks. It was evident that they are not aware that by replacing syllables in words, new words may be formed.

Under phonemic awareness skills, the task on onset-rime deletion got the lowest and was considered to be the most difficult, while the easiest was on onset-rime blending.

The difficulties occurred in onset-rime with the presence of consonant blends. This may be due to their different experiences of phonological awareness acquisition and

learning to read at home during the 2-year distance learning, as PA skills should be taught in progression.

Another is that, the interchanging of positions of syllables or phonemes to be manipulated got them easily confused. This means that they do not have the proper phonological manipulating skills needed for them to read well.

The results show that the Grade 2 learners have varying phonological and phonemic awareness skills. Almost half of them can manipulate syllables in words, but not onsets-rimes, and phonemes. The findings strongly suggest that manipulating smaller units of sounds requires more advanced working memory skills and mastery of each of the lower levels of phonological awareness. This means that all their skills under phonological and phonemic awareness need instructional supervision.

**Table 2: Automaticity in the Identified Skills**

Most automatic to least automatic subtest		
Subtest (Skills)	Percentage (%)	Rank
<b>PHONOLOGICAL AWARENESS</b>		
Syllable Deletion	53	3
Syllable Blending	54.4	2
Syllable Substitution	65.7	1
<b>PHONEMIC AWARENESS</b>		
Onset-Rime Deletion	36.7	6
Onset-Rime Blending	60.2	2
Onset-Rime Substitution	47.8	4
Phoneme Deletion	48.4	3
Phoneme Blending	41.7	5
Phoneme Substitution	65.5	1

It is evident in Table 2 that in terms of automaticity, along phonological awareness, syllable substitution appeared to be the most automatic. This was followed by syllable blending, and the least was syllable deletion.

Along phonemic awareness, the subtest that was the most automatic was phoneme substitution, while the least was onset-rime deletion.

Generally, the over-all automaticity level of their phonemic awareness skills is low since most of the subtests didn't reach even half of respondents with automatic scores. This implies that their working memories took too much time to process. This is because there is only a small amount of information that is readily accessible in their minds.

Automaticity in this test occurs when they have stored vocabulary of words (those that they hear) that made them easily identify the answer. This may depend on how vast the words there are in their storage that occurred from their past experiences.

In the informal conversations conducted to the respondents, it was found that those learners who got both correct and automatic answers had supervised reading sessions with their guardians during the 2-year distance learning modality, and at the same time had access to internet and gadgets. This is believed to be a factor in expanding vocabulary of words.

With these findings, the teaching reading strategies that should be given to these learners are those that will

develop their phonological and phonemic awareness skills.

Those learners who failed in almost all the phonological awareness skills will be given Rhyme Generation Instructional Strategy. The primary purpose for implementing this activity is to encourage students to develop critical phonemic awareness skills such as manipulation of the basic syllable and onset and rime. The strategy may be modified for older students by using word families.

On the other hand, for learners whose difficulties fall only on phonemic awareness skills, the teacher may utilize Sound Sorts Activity. The primary purpose for implementing this is to facilitate readers' ability to perceive that speech is made up of a series of sounds.

Another is the Picture Card Snap Strategy. It provides emergent and early readers with scaffolded practice in identifying and categorizing sounds. It provides emergent and early readers with specific, repeated practice in matching initial, medial, or final sounds to pictures.

It was also observed by the test administrator that learners respond to questions in varying ways. This means that they use multi-intelligences to learn a skill. To address this, the teacher may apply Multisensory Mapping which uses all modalities (auditory, visual, kinesthetic-tactile) to facilitate retention and processing of sounds. As students play and manipulate sounds through the senses, they begin to grasp the alphabetic principle.

### CONCLUSION

The primary learners are not aware that words are made up of smaller units of sounds, and that sounds can form different syllables and words; The variations in their beginning reading skills may be accounted to the different phonological and phonemic experiences they had during the 2-year distance learning; The 2-year distance learning hindered automaticity in mental processes of the learners not only in their PA skills but understanding directions as well. They had difficulties in processing new knowledge because they lack background knowledge in deciphering new inputs.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Trainings and workshops with regards to proper teaching of beginning reading skills may be given to

teachers, reading volunteers, and parents. This can unify the correct way of teaching reading especially beginning reading skills, including proper pronunciation of letter sounds, which are very much crucial to the success of the learners' future reading skills.; The Department of Education should give priority to the reading skills of the learners. They should include more learning competencies that would develop these skills; Kindergarten teachers may start and give focus to teaching phonological awareness; Schools may implement reading intervention programs to address reading deficiencies of learners. These intervention programs must be suited to the needs and the reading levels of the learners, not according to the grade levels they are in. This must also be facilitated by teachers/reading volunteers who are capable enough, especially those who will handle beginning reading skills.; School administrators may give additional support to the teachers, especially in providing appropriate instructional materials to be used in the reading intervention programs.

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