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RESEARCH ARTICLE

PEDAGOGICAL PRACTICES AND EARLY LITERACY DEVELOPMENT AMONG GRADE 2 LEARNERS: A QUALITATIVE CASE STUDY IN CABECERIA 25 ELEMENTARY SCHOOL, PHILIPPINES

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Abstract

This qualitative case study examines how pedagogical practices shape early literacy development among Grade 2 learners in Cabeceria 25 Elementary School, Philippines. Grounded in emergent literacy, social constructivism, and balanced literacy perspectives, the study explores how classroom instruction, teacher–learner interactions, and contextual conditions influence learners' reading and writing growth. Data were generated through in-depth semi-structured interviews with teachers and learners, classroom observations, and document analysis of lesson plans and reading records, and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis. Five themes emerged: (1) Structured–Explicit Foundations for Decoding and Comprehension, (2) Meaningful and Contextualized Literacy Engagements, (3) Dialogic and Interactive Reading Practices, (4) Home–School Synergy in Literacy Development, and (5) Structural Constraints and Instructional Trade-offs. Findings indicate that a balanced approach combining explicit instruction with interactive, contextualized, and supportive practices enhances learners' literacy outcomes. However, time, class size, and resource limitations constrain consistency. The study underscores the need for sustained teacher support, resource provision, and family engagement to strengthen early literacy.

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INTRODUCTION

Early literacy development is a cornerstone of lifelong learning, shaping learners' capacity to access, process, and create meaning from texts. In the primary grades, especially Grade 2, learners transition from learning to read toward reading to learn—an inflection point that determines subsequent academic trajectories. Contemporary educational discourse emphasizes not only what is taught but how it is taught: the pedagogical practices that mediate learners' engagement with print, language, and meaning-making. Understanding learners' lived classroom experiences is therefore essential to evaluate how instruction supports or constrains literacy growth.

Effective literacy pedagogy integrates multiple dimensions: explicit teaching of foundational skills (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency), opportunities for rich language use, and authentic reading and writing experiences. From a social constructivist lens, learning is mediated through interaction and dialogue, where meaning is co-constructed in socially situated contexts (Vygotsky, 1978). Complementing this, balanced literacy approaches advocate the integration of systematic skills instruction with meaningful literacy experiences, including shared reading, guided reading, and independent practice. These perspectives suggest that literacy development is optimized when learners are actively engaged, supported through scaffolding, and exposed to texts that connect with their lived realities.

In the Philippine context, reforms such as the MATATAG curriculum foreground foundational skills and early grade literacy as urgent priorities. Despite these efforts, persistent challenges—such as large class sizes, limited materials, and varied learner readiness—continue to affect classroom practice. While quantitative studies document reading levels, fewer studies illuminate how pedagogical practices are experienced by learners and how these experiences translate into literacy development. This study addresses this gap by examining the pedagogical practices in Cabeceria 25 Elementary School and their influence on Grade 2 learners' early literacy.

Research Questions

1. What pedagogical practices characterize early literacy instruction in Grade 2 at Cabeceria 25 Elementary School?
2. How do learners experience these practices in relation to reading and writing development?
3. What factors facilitate or hinder early literacy growth?

Theoretical Framework

This study draws on Emergent Literacy Theory, Constructivist Learning Theory, and Balanced Literacy. Emergent literacy posits that reading and writing develop from early, meaningful interactions with language and print (Teale & Sulzby, 1986). Constructivism, associated with Lev Vygotsky, emphasizes learning through interaction and scaffolding (Vygotsky, 1978). Balanced literacy integrates explicit skills instruction with authentic literacy experiences to support comprehensive development (Pressley, 2006).

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative case study design was employed to capture the complexity of early literacy instruction within its natural classroom context. Cabeceria 25 Elementary School represents a typical public school setting with diverse learners and resource constraints. Participants were purposively selected and included two Grade 2 teachers and twelve learners with varying reading levels.

Data were collected through (a) in-depth semi-structured interviews (teachers and learners), (b) classroom observations focusing on reading and writing instruction, and (c) document analysis of lesson plans, reading logs, and assessment records. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis—familiarization, coding, categorization, and theme development. Trustworthiness was ensured through triangulation, member checking, and audit trails.

RESULTS

Theme 1: Structured—Explicit Foundations for Decoding and Comprehension

Classroom instruction consistently emphasized the explicit teaching of foundational literacy skills, particularly phonics, syllabication, word recognition, and guided comprehension strategies, as essential building blocks for early reading development. Teachers carefully structured their lessons to ensure that learners were systematically introduced to sound-symbol relationships, blending techniques, and word formation processes. Modeling played a central role, with teachers demonstrating how to decode unfamiliar words, break them into

syllables, and derive meaning from context. Repetition and drills were also frequently used to reinforce these skills, allowing learners to practice repeatedly until they achieved a level of familiarity and accuracy. This structured and step-by-step approach ensured that learners developed a solid foundation in reading mechanics, which is critical at the early stages of literacy acquisition.

Furthermore, teachers provided scaffolding through guided practice, offering immediate feedback and support as learners attempted to apply newly learned skills. This support was particularly beneficial for struggling readers, who often required additional guidance to build confidence and competence. The use of predictable routines such as daily reading exercises, guided decoding activities, and comprehension questioning created a stable learning environment where learners knew what to expect and could focus on skill development without unnecessary confusion. As a result, learners gradually developed confidence in their ability to read, moving from hesitant decoding to more fluent and accurate reading. Overall, the emphasis on explicit instruction and structured routines contributed to a supportive and effective learning environment that facilitated the gradual development of both decoding skills and basic comprehension.

Responses:

“Tinuruan kami ng pagbasa ng pantig, kaya mas kaya ko nang magbasa ng salita.”

(We were taught syllables, so I can now read words better.)

“Kapag binabasa ng teacher at inuulit namin, mas natututo ako.”

(When the teacher reads and we repeat, I learn more.)

“May tulong kapag tinatanong kami kung ano ang ibig sabihin.”

(It helps when we are asked what the meaning is.)

The findings suggest that explicit instruction plays a crucial role in strengthening the foundational skills necessary for reading fluency and comprehension, particularly among early grade learners. Through systematic phonics instruction, modeling, and guided practice, learners are provided with clear and structured pathways for decoding words and understanding texts. This approach minimizes confusion and reduces cognitive load, allowing beginning readers to focus on mastering essential skills such as sound–symbol relationships and word recognition. As noted by Ehri (2005), repeated and structured exposure to phonics supports the development of automaticity, enabling learners to read more fluently and allocate greater cognitive resources to comprehension rather than decoding.

From a constructivist perspective, these practices are most effective when combined with purposeful scaffolding that supports learners within their developmental range. Consistent with the theory of Lev Vygotsky, teacher guidance helps learners perform tasks they cannot yet accomplish independently, gradually building their competence and confidence (Vygotsky, 1978). Structured routines such as guided reading, repeated practice, and step-by-step instruction provide stability and clarity, which are particularly beneficial in early grades. However, the findings also emphasize that these routines should not be limited to mechanical skill development; they must be complemented by opportunities for meaning-making, interaction, and application. In this way, explicit instruction serves as a foundation that, when integrated with engaging and meaningful learning experiences, supports both the technical and conceptual dimensions of literacy development.

Theme 2: Meaningful and Contextualized Literacy Engagements

Teachers consistently connected texts and literacy tasks to learners’ daily lives such as family routines, community events, and familiar experiences thereby making reading and writing more meaningful and accessible. Rather than presenting texts in isolation, teachers selected stories and designed activities that reflected the learners’ cultural and social contexts, allowing them to see relevance in what they were learning. Writing prompts were often based on personal experiences, while classroom discussions encouraged learners to relate story events to their own lives. This approach enabled learners to engage more deeply with the content, as they could easily visualize situations and connect emotionally and cognitively with the material being presented.

Moreover, this contextualization allowed learners to anchor new vocabulary, concepts, and ideas in their prior knowledge, facilitating better comprehension and retention. When unfamiliar words or ideas were introduced, teachers linked them to familiar experiences or local examples, making them easier to understand and remember. As a result, learners were not only able to decode and recognize words but also grasp their meanings within a meaningful context. This practice supported the gradual expansion of vocabulary and conceptual understanding, as learners continuously built upon what they already knew. Overall, contextualized pedagogy transformed literacy instruction into a more engaging and learner-centered process, where knowledge was constructed through meaningful connections rather than memorization alone.

Responses:

"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag ang kwento ay tungkol sa bahay o pamilya."

(I understand better when the story is about home or family.)

"Mas gusto ko ang activity kapag tungkol sa totoong buhay."

(I like activities more when they are about real life.)

"Naalala ko ang kwento kasi parang nangyayari sa amin."

(I remember the story because it feels like it happens to us.)

The findings indicate that contextualization plays a critical role in enhancing both comprehension and retention by enabling learners to connect new information with their existing knowledge and lived experiences. When lessons and reading materials are grounded in familiar contexts such as family, community, or everyday situations learners are better able to construct meaning, as they can relate abstract concepts to concrete realities. This aligns with the work of Bransford et al. (2000), which emphasizes that learning becomes more effective when new knowledge is anchored in prior understanding. Through this process, learners are able to organize, interpret, and recall information more efficiently, resulting in deeper and more sustained comprehension.

In addition, contextualized learning increases learner motivation by making reading and writing activities more relevant and purposeful. When learners recognize the connection between what they are learning and their real-life experiences, they are more likely to engage actively and invest effort in the task. This is consistent with experiential learning principles, particularly the theory of David Kolb, which highlights that meaningful learning occurs through the integration of experience, reflection, and application (Kolb, 1984). Furthermore, the use of culturally and locally relevant texts allows learners to see themselves reflected in the learning materials, fostering a sense of identity and belonging in the learning process. Such relevance not only enhances understanding but also promotes inclusivity and engagement, suggesting that contextualized pedagogy is a powerful approach in supporting effective and meaningful literacy development.

Theme 3: Dialogic and Interactive Reading Practices

Observed classrooms consistently featured dialogic and interactive reading practices, including shared reading, guided questioning, and structured discussions that transformed reading into a collaborative meaning-making process. Teachers did not limit instruction to silent or individual reading; instead, they actively engaged learners through purposeful questioning that prompted prediction, inference, and explanation. Before reading, learners were asked to anticipate what the text might be about based on titles or pictures. During reading, teachers paused to ask comprehension and inferential questions, encouraging learners to think critically about characters, events, and meanings. After reading, learners were guided to explain their understanding, share insights, and connect the text to their own experiences. This process allowed learners to move beyond decoding and engage deeply with the content.

To sustain active participation, teachers utilized interactive strategies such as turn-taking, think-pair-share, and choral responses. These approaches ensured that all learners, including those who were less confident, had opportunities to participate and express their ideas. Turn-taking created a structured environment for sharing responses, while think-pair-share allowed learners to first process ideas individually, then discuss with a peer, and finally share with the class. Choral responses, on the other hand, promoted collective participation and reinforced fluency and comprehension. Through these practices, reading became a socially engaging activity where learners collaboratively constructed meaning, developed confidence in expressing their thoughts, and strengthened both their comprehension and communication skills.

Responses:

"Mas naiintindihan ko kapag tinatanong kami habang nagbabasa."

(I understand better when we are asked questions while reading.)

"Gusto ko kapag nag-uusap kami tungkol sa kwento."

(I like it when we talk about the story.)

"Mas natututo ako kapag nakikinig sa sagot ng kaklase."

(I learn more when I listen to my classmates' answers.)

The findings highlight that interactive reading practices play a vital role in fostering higher-order thinking skills and enhancing learners' ability to monitor their own comprehension. When learners are actively engaged in dialogue during reading activities through questioning, predicting, and discussing they are encouraged to think beyond surface-level understanding and engage in deeper meaning-making processes. This active involvement allows learners to analyze texts, make connections, and evaluate ideas, which are essential

components of critical literacy. Moreover, interactive reading supports comprehension monitoring, as learners become more aware of their understanding and are able to identify and address gaps in meaning through discussion and clarification.

This interpretation is supported by Nystrand (1997), who emphasizes that dialogic instruction promotes meaningful engagement by allowing learners to negotiate meaning, clarify misconceptions, and expand their vocabulary through interaction. Such practices align with the principles of social constructivism, particularly the work of Lev Vygotsky, which posits that knowledge is co-constructed through social interaction and collaborative learning (Vygotsky, 1978). Through dialogic exchanges, learners are exposed to diverse perspectives and language use, which enriches their understanding and supports language development. Furthermore, these practices contribute to the development of oral language skills such as speaking, listening, and vocabulary use which are widely recognized as strong predictors of reading success in the early grades. As such, interactive and dialogic reading approaches not only improve comprehension but also lay a solid foundation for overall literacy development.

Theme 4: Home–School Synergy in Literacy Development

Learners' literacy growth was strongly influenced by the level and quality of support they received at home, particularly in terms of reading assistance, availability of print materials, and consistent parental encouragement. Learners who had access to books, story materials, or even simple printed texts at home were more likely to engage in regular reading practice, which reinforced skills learned in school. Additionally, those who were guided by parents or caregivers through shared reading, listening to oral reading, or assisting with comprehension demonstrated greater confidence and fluency. These forms of support provided learners with extended opportunities to practice decoding, build vocabulary, and develop comprehension skills beyond classroom instruction, contributing to more sustained literacy development.

However, teachers reported noticeable variations in the level of parental involvement among learners, which created differences in literacy progress. Some learners benefited from active parental engagement, while others had limited or no support due to factors such as parents' work schedules, limited literacy skills, or lack of available materials at home. As a result, learners without adequate home support often relied solely on classroom instruction, which constrained their opportunities for practice and slowed their progress. This disparity highlights the critical role of the home environment in shaping literacy outcomes and underscores the need for schools to implement strategies that support and engage parents, ensuring that all learners have equitable opportunities to develop their reading skills.

Responses:

"Tinutulungan ako ng nanay ko magbasa sa bahay."

(My mother helps me read at home.)

"Minsan wala akong kasama magbasa kaya nahihirapan ako."

(Sometimes I have no one to read with, so I struggle.)

"Mas gumagaling ako kapag may nagpa-practice sa akin."

(I improve when someone practices with me.)

The findings underscore that home literacy environments play a crucial role in shaping early reading outcomes, as learning does not occur solely within the classroom but is continuously reinforced in the home setting. When parents or caregivers are actively involved in their children's reading development by guiding practice, providing feedback, and encouraging consistent reading habits learners gain more opportunities to develop fluency, comprehension, and confidence. This aligns with the work of Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002), who emphasize that parental involvement contributes significantly to literacy acquisition by extending learning beyond formal instruction. Learners who are exposed to supportive home literacy practices, such as shared reading and guided practice, tend to demonstrate stronger reading skills compared to those with limited support.

Furthermore, the findings suggest that strengthening home–school partnerships is a strategic approach to enhancing early literacy development, particularly for struggling readers. Structured initiatives such as reading logs, parent orientations, and take-home reading materials create a collaborative framework where teachers and families work together to support learners' progress. These practices not only reinforce skills learned in the classroom but also foster a culture of reading within the home environment. Additionally, such partnerships can help bridge disparities among learners by providing consistent support regardless of varying home conditions. By actively engaging parents as partners in education, schools can amplify instructional gains, promote learner motivation, and create a more holistic and sustained approach to literacy development.

Theme 5: Structural Constraints and Instructional Trade-offs

Teachers and learners identified several structural constraints that significantly influenced the delivery and effectiveness of early literacy instruction, particularly limited instructional time, large class sizes, and insufficient teaching and learning materials. These constraints created a challenging classroom environment where teachers were often required to make difficult instructional decisions. With limited time allocated for literacy instruction, teachers prioritized covering required competencies and lesson objectives, sometimes at the expense of deeper comprehension and mastery. As a result, lessons tended to focus more on completing tasks and meeting curriculum demands rather than allowing sufficient time for guided reading, individualized feedback, and reflective learning processes. This time pressure also reduced opportunities for repeated practice, which is essential for developing foundational literacy skills such as decoding, fluency, and comprehension.

Moreover, large class sizes posed significant challenges in providing individualized support and differentiated instruction. Teachers found it difficult to attend to the diverse needs of learners, particularly those who required additional guidance or remediation. In such contexts, struggling readers often received less focused attention, while advanced learners had limited opportunities for enrichment. The lack of adequate instructional materials, including books, visual aids, and activity resources, further compounded these challenges. Without sufficient materials, teachers were constrained in implementing hands-on, interactive, and small-group activities that are critical for effective early literacy development. Consequently, instructional practices often shifted toward more teacher-centered approaches, such as whole-class instruction and lecture-based teaching, which limited learner engagement and active participation. These trade-offs highlight how structural constraints not only affect the quality of instruction but also shape the overall learning experience, underscoring the need for systemic support to create more equitable and effective literacy learning environments.

Responses:

"Kulang ang oras para matutukan ang bawat bata."

(Time is not enough to focus on each learner.)

"Marami kami kaya hindi lahat nabibigyan ng chance magbasa."

(There are many of us, so not everyone gets a chance to read.)

"Kulang ang books kaya naghahati-hati kami."

(Books are limited, so we share.)

Structural constraints shape instructional choices and can dilute the effectiveness of otherwise sound pedagogies. Large classes and limited resources reduce opportunities for differentiation and guided reading key elements of early literacy instruction. International evidence similarly notes that resource availability and time allocation are critical determinants of learning quality (OECD, 2019). Addressing these constraints is essential to sustain effective literacy practices.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Early literacy development among Grade 2 learners in Cabeceria 25 Elementary School is significantly strengthened through the balanced integration of explicit instruction, contextualized learning, and interactive pedagogy. The findings reveal that learners demonstrate greater progress when foundational decoding skills are systematically taught through structured and guided instruction, and are immediately reinforced through meaningful, dialogic, and collaborative learning experiences. This combination allows learners not only to master the technical aspects of reading but also to engage in deeper comprehension and meaning-making processes. When literacy instruction is both structured and engaging, learners develop confidence, fluency, and a more positive disposition toward reading. However, the study also highlights persistent disparities in learners' literacy development due to varying levels of home support and the presence of structural constraints such as limited instructional time, large class sizes, and insufficient learning materials. These factors affect the consistency, depth, and sustainability of effective pedagogical practices.

Sustained improvement in early literacy outcomes therefore requires a holistic approach that extends beyond classroom instruction. While effective teaching practices are essential, they must be supported by enabling conditions that create a conducive learning environment. The provision of adequate instructional materials, the maintenance of manageable class sizes, and the strengthening of home-school partnerships are critical components in supporting learners' literacy development. Engaging parents and caregivers as active partners in the learning process can provide additional reinforcement and practice opportunities for learners outside the classroom. Furthermore, aligning pedagogical approaches with learners' lived experiences ensures

that learning remains relevant, meaningful, and inclusive. Overall, the findings emphasize that improving early literacy outcomes requires not only pedagogical effectiveness but also systemic support and collaborative efforts among educators, families, and educational stakeholders.

To strengthen early literacy development among Grade 2 learners, it is essential to intensify professional development on balanced and differentiated literacy instruction, equipping teachers with the knowledge and skills to integrate explicit teaching with meaningful, learner-centered strategies. Providing adequate and leveled reading materials is equally important to support both guided and independent reading, ensuring that learners engage with texts appropriate to their reading levels. Schools should also institutionalize dialogic reading and small-group instruction within daily schedules to promote active participation, comprehension, and individualized support. Strengthening home-school literacy programs such as reading logs, parent workshops, and take-home reading kits can further extend learning beyond the classroom and foster consistent reading habits. Additionally, addressing structural constraints through improved resource allocation and supportive educational policies is necessary to sustain effective instructional practices. Finally, conducting further research using mixed-methods approaches is recommended to establish stronger links between pedagogical practices and measurable reading gains, thereby informing evidence-based interventions for literacy development.

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