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## Navigating Reading Challenges: Phenomenological Study of Teachers Supporting Struggling Readers in Philippine Context

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### ABSTRACT

Struggling readers are a persistent concern in Philippine elementary education, yet research has largely examined student reading outcomes rather than the professional, emotional, and instructional experiences of the teachers who support these learners in resource-constrained, multilingual classrooms. This study investigated the lived experiences of elementary English teachers in identifying and supporting struggling readers, and how they adapt their pedagogy and negotiate contextual barriers. Transcendental phenomenological design was employed. Fifteen proficient public elementary English teachers in Baguio City, Philippines, were selected through criterion purposive sampling and interviewed using semi-structured, face-to-face interviews. Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis, and trustworthiness was supported through member checking. Four themes emerged: (a) diagnostic triage through standardized literacy assessments, (b) pedagogical flexibility and differentiated scaffolded instruction, (c) ecosystemic collaboration via remedial and peer networks, and (d) socio-contextual barriers, including parental illiteracy and resource constraints. The findings suggest that Vygotskian scaffolding must be extended to account for ecological and linguistic barriers in post-colonial multilingual classrooms, because its effectiveness is bounded by the educational and socioeconomic capital of the home. Implications for teacher professional development, curriculum localization, language-in-education policy, and parental partnership are discussed.

17

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Reading literacy is the foundation of academic achievement, cognitive development, and equitable civic participation (Kim et al., 2020; Lampi et al., 2025). Within core

language curricula, reading proficiency enables learners to decode complex information, construct meaning, and engage critically with texts (Sangers et al., 2025). However, foundational reading difficulties, including decoding deficits, dysfluency, limited vocabulary, and impaired comprehension, remain a persistent global challenge (Karageorgos et al., 2023; Tribujeña et al., 2025). Learners who do not master these competencies early in their schooling are more likely to experience diminished self-efficacy, academic alienation, and widening achievement gaps (Sutherland et al., 2024).

In the Philippines, the problem has reached critical proportions. The Second Congressional Commission on Education (EDCOM II) reported that approximately 4.5 million elementary students in Grades 1 to 3 fall short of basic literacy benchmarks (Abejuela et al., 2023; Bernando et al., 2021). Data from the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) further indicate that one in every three Filipino elementary learners is classified as a low-emerging reader (Pocan et al., 2022). These systemic vulnerabilities call for evidence-based pedagogical interventions that fit classroom realities.

Although education reform policies frequently mandate standardized literacy programs, teachers remain the primary agents of instructional change (Harris & Jones, 2019; Jenkins, 2020). Reading development is a multidimensional construct shaped by cognitive, linguistic, motivational, and sociocultural variables, which requires educators to deploy responsive and flexible pedagogies (Zhu et al., 2025; Yapao-Alcantara & Ducot, 2025). This study is anchored in Vygotsky's Social Development Theory, which emphasizes social interaction, mediated scaffolding, and the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in literacy acquisition (Smagorinsky, 2018; Xi & Lantolf, 2021). The principles of Reciprocal Teaching additionally inform how collaborative dialogue and self-regulation support reading comprehension among vulnerable learners (Juhkam et al., 2023; Kavani & Amjadiparvar, 2018; Satriani et al., 2022).

Despite an extensive literature on student reading outcomes, knowledge about the subjective realities of educators remains limited. Existing scholarship focuses largely on the quantitative efficacy of specific reading programs and pays less attention to the lived experiences, professional dilemmas, and emotional labor of teachers who work directly with struggling readers in authentic classrooms (Assiri & Siddiqui, 2020; Fabillaran, 2024; Serry et al., 2022; Shin & Kim, 2025). Research is also scarce on how teachers manage compounding stressors, such as severe resource limitations, heavy administrative workloads, diverse learner readiness, and multilingual classroom ecologies, particularly in urban upland settings such as Baguio City, where ethnolinguistic diversity creates distinctive instructional demands (Talidong & Toquero, 2020).

This study therefore aimed to describe and interpret the lived experiences of elementary English language teachers who support struggling readers in a multilingual Philippine context. It was guided by two research questions:

1. RQ1. What are the lived experiences of elementary English language teachers in identifying and supporting struggling readers?

2. RQ2. How do teachers adapt their pedagogical strategies and negotiate contextual barriers to improve reading outcomes among struggling learners?

The study contributes to Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which promotes inclusive and equitable quality education. By situating teachers' pedagogical adaptations within Republic Act No. 10533 (Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013) and the Philippine Professional Standards for Teachers (PPST), the findings offer insights for strengthening teacher pedagogical competence, refining institutional reading policies such as the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) program, and fostering home-school literacy partnerships.

## 2. METHOD

This study used a qualitative transcendental phenomenological design (Køster & Fernandez, 2023). Phenomenology is well suited to exploring, describing, and interpreting the structures of lived experience surrounding a specific phenomenon, here the pedagogical realities of teachers supporting struggling readers. Through epoche (bracketing of preconceptions), the researchers sought to identify the essential, invariant structures of participants' professional experiences without imposing external theoretical bias. The study was conducted in a public elementary school in the Cordillera Administrative Region (Baguio City, Philippines). The school was purposefully selected because it implements localized reading recovery frameworks designed to mitigate literacy deficits in Grades 1 through 6.

Using criterion purposive sampling (Nyimbili & Nyimbili, 2024), the study recruited 15 licensed public elementary English language teachers. Inclusion criteria required participants to (a) hold a permanent position categorized as Proficient Teacher under the PPST; (b) have at least three years of classroom experience teaching elementary English; and (c) actively handle learners identified as struggling readers since national reading diagnostics.

Data was collected through in-depth, semi-structured, face-to-face interviews, a method that allows participants to describe their experiences in their own words (Alshenqeeti, 2014). Interviews took place in professional settings, such as school conference rooms. The interview protocol was developed from the literature on literacy instruction and teacher cognition. Sample questions included: "Can you walk me through your daily experience when encountering a student who struggles significantly with reading decoding and comprehension?" and "What specific pedagogical adjustments do you employ when standard curriculum materials fail to engage struggling learners?" Interviews lasted 45 to 60 minutes, were audio-recorded with explicit permission, and were transcribed verbatim. To support trustworthiness (credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability), member checking was conducted by returning transcripts to participants to verify accuracy and nuance.

Transcripts were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's six-phase thematic analysis (Ahmed et al., 2025). The analysis moved from inductive, data-driven coding toward a latent thematic synthesis through the following phases:

- Familiarization with the data: repeated reading of, and engagement with, the interview transcripts.
- Generating initial codes: systematic identification of features relevant to teacher practices, challenges, and emotional responses across the dataset.
- Searching for themes: collating codes into potential overarching thematic clusters.
- Reviewing themes: checking themes against coded extracts and the full dataset to produce a reliable thematic map.
- Defining and naming themes: refining the essence of each theme and assigning clear, descriptive names.
- Producing the report: selecting vivid, compelling verbatim extracts to construct an analytic narrative.

20

### 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

#### Results

The analysis yielded four themes that capture the experiences, pedagogical strategies, and systemic challenges of elementary English teachers who support struggling readers. Table 1 summarizes the themes and their relationships, and the sections that present each theme with illustrative participant extracts.

**Table 1.** Thematic Structure of Teachers' Experiences in Supporting Struggling Readers

| Theme                                                                      | Focus                                                                                                  | Key elements                                                                                                           |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1. Diagnostic triage through standardized literacy assessments             | Baseline identification of learners' reading levels and specific deficits (decoding vs. comprehension) | Phil-IRI, FLAT, and CRLA; classification of learners as non-readers, frustration-level, or instructional-level readers |
| 2. Pedagogical flexibility and differentiated scaffolded instruction       | Adapting materials and methods to diverse proficiency, attention, and linguistic backgrounds           | Tailored and simplified texts, multimedia and picture-based activities, vernacular translation                         |
| 3. Ecosystemic collaboration via remedial and peer networks                | Extending instructional time and support beyond regular class hours                                    | ARAL program, after-class remediation, DEAR sessions, peer buddy systems                                               |
| 4. Socio-contextual barriers: parental illiteracy and resource constraints | Structural and familial limits on the effectiveness of school-based support                            | Parental illiteracy, time poverty, limited resources; teacher-parent communication as partial remedy                   |

*Note. Themes are presented in the order in which teachers described their practice, from diagnosis (Theme 1) through classroom adaptation (Theme 2) and wider support networks (Theme 3), to the barriers that constrain these efforts (Theme 4).*

#### Theme 1: Diagnostic Triage Through Standardized Literacy Assessments

Before beginning instructional interventions, participants emphasized the indispensable role of diagnostic assessment mandated by the Department of Education. Assessments served as an empirical compass for classifying learners, pinpointing specific reading deficits (decoding versus comprehension), and establishing baseline

metrics. Standardized tools such as <sup>12</sup>the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), the Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT), and the CRLA were routinely used.

*"The first part of our strategies is to conduct an assessment first... The students are then categorized according to their reading level. From there, we determine whether they are non-readers, frustration level, or instructional level readers before designing interventions."* (T9)

These findings reveal that standardized diagnostic assessments serve as the primary epistemological and methodological foundation for elementary teachers' literacy remediation practices. The systematic deployment of standardized tools—such as <sup>14</sup>the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), the Functional Literacy Assessment Tool (FLAT), and the CRLA—reflects a structured diagnostic triage process through which educators transform raw performance data into categorical profiles ranging from non-readers and frustration-level readers to instructional-level readers prior to designing targeted pedagogical interventions. As articulated by Participant T9 (*"The first part of our strategies is to conduct an assessment first... The students are then categorized according to their reading level..."*), this practice demonstrates that addressing reading difficulties is grounded not in subjective intuition, but in an empirical compass that isolates specific skill deficits between decoding and reading comprehension. Theoretically, this categorical mapping functions as a vital prerequisite for applying precise scaffolding within Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), while illustrating how institutional policy mandates from the Department of Education (DepEd) are internalised by frontline educators as an initial navigational mechanism to manage classroom literacy complexities.

## Theme 2: Pedagogical Flexibility and Differentiated Scaffolded Instruction

Classrooms characterized by wide disparities in reading proficiency, attention span, and linguistic background required teachers to adopt flexible, differentiated instructional designs. Participants reported tailoring reading materials, simplifying syntax, and integrating multimedia tools to sustain engagement. Differentiation also brought professional challenges, including a heavier workload, large class sizes, and the need to translate English texts into local vernaculars to accommodate the ethnolinguistic diversity of Baguio City.

*"Some of them can really read [but] then if we ask them questions about the story, they cannot answer, especially those that require higher-order thinking skills... some of them also cannot retain information easily. So, we adjust the literary lessons for them, align it to their level, lessen assessment items, and sit with them to translate concepts into the vernacular."* (T8)

*"They appreciate it more when the reading material is technologically enhanced. I used a Facebook post of a story entitled 'The Escape.' I read it aloud for proper pronunciation and vocabulary explanation. Afterward, when answering comprehension questions, they were actively engaged and asking questions."* (T7)

*"Instead of using long text passages that bore them, I used pictures for sequencing events in Powerpoint. It provides variety, and somehow, their interest is sparked."* (T10)

The findings under Theme 2 demonstrate that teachers' pedagogical flexibility and differentiated instruction represent a responsive instructional adaptation to the pronounced disparities in reading proficiency, attention spans, and ethnolinguistic backgrounds among elementary learners in Baguio City. The narrative from Participant T8 ("*...we adjust the literary lessons for them, align it to their level, lessen assessment items, and sit with them to translate concepts into the vernacular*") highlights that differentiation extends beyond mere syntactic simplification or workload adjustment, encompassing crucial translanguaging practices that bridge the gap between mechanical decoding and higher-order thinking skills. Furthermore, the integration of digital and visual media—as illustrated by Participant T7 ("*Facebook post of a story entitled 'The Escape'...*") and Participant T10 ("*pictures for sequencing events in Powerpoint*")—evidence how multimodal technology enhances active student engagement and sparks learning interest among students with limited attention spans. Theoretically, these empirical insights expand Vygotsky's Socio-Cultural Scaffolding framework, illustrating how educators function as adaptive mediators who dynamically align pedagogical support, linguistic scaffolding, and digital artifacts to navigate structural constraints within densely populated, multilingual classrooms.

### Theme 3: Ecosystemic Collaboration via Remedial and Peer Networks

Recognizing that regular contact hours were insufficient to close severe literacy gaps, teachers established structured remedial interventions, notably through school programs such as the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) initiative, alongside peer-assisted learning arrangements.

*"After regular class hours, I dedicate 30 minutes to remediation using flashcards for phonemic awareness—pronouncing sounds from A to Z, progressing to Consonant-Vowel-Consonant (CVC) patterns, and finally word reading."* (T4)

*"We integrate reading aloud and 15-minute DEAR (Drop Everything and Read) sessions after lunch. We also paired them with reading buddies."* (T7)

*"It's peer teaching, really. When instruction comes directly from the teacher, struggling readers often become shy and anxious. But when paired with friendly peers, they feel safe and comfortable participating."* (T9)

The findings under Theme 3 illustrate that mitigating severe literacy deficits requires expanding instructional time beyond standard classroom hours through ecosystemic collaboration and peer-assisted networks. Structured remedial initiatives—such as the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) framework, systematic phonemic awareness drills ("*pronouncing sounds from A to Z, progressing to CVC patterns*", T4), and routine reading routines ("*15-minute DEAR sessions after lunch*", T7)—demonstrate a methodical scaffolding strategy designed to build foundational literacy skills. Crucially, the implementation of "reading buddies" and peer-assisted learning mechanisms addresses the socio-emotional barriers associated with reading remediation. As Participant T9 highlighted ("*When instruction comes directly from the teacher, struggling readers often become shy and anxious. But when paired with friendly peers, they feel safe and comfortable participating*"), peer tutoring serves as an affective buffer that lowers students' affective filter and alleviates anxiety.

Theoretically, these empirical insights reinforce <sup>23</sup> Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory and Vygotsky's Social Constructivism, underscoring that effective reading development relies not only on teacher-directed instruction, but also on a supportive, low-anxiety socio-relational environment that fosters psychological safety and active participation among struggling readers.

#### **Theme 4: Socio-Contextual Barriers: Parental Illiteracy and Resource Constraints**

Although these support systems were vital, teachers faced severe structural and familial obstacles. Participants noted that socioeconomic pressures often left parents unavailable or ill-equipped to support home reading routines, and that in some cases parents themselves experienced functional illiteracy.

*"Maybe the parents themselves are 'no-read, no-write' because of their own educational background... They simply do not have the time or literacy capacity to follow up on lessons at home." (T2)*

*"Parents in public school's struggle with economic survival; consequently, they can barely spare time to monitor homework. This is a profound systemic challenge for public school educators compared to private settings." (T11)*

*Despite these barriers, proactive teacher communication, such as digital text messaging, occasionally bridged the gap by eliciting home support when parents were directly guided on how to engage their children.*

*"When a student refused to participate, I texted the mother. The next day, the child came back saying, 'Teacher, I took a picture of the activity to show my mom so she could help me.' Direct communication helps." (T9)*

The findings under Theme 4 reveal that reading remediation in public elementary schools is deeply constrained by macro-structural socio-contextual barriers, specifically the convergence of intergenerational parental illiteracy and severe economic hardship. As highlighted by Participant T2 ("*...the parents themselves are 'no-read, no-write'... They simply do not have the time or literacy capacity to follow up on lessons at home*") and Participant T11 ("*Parents in public school's struggle with economic survival; consequently, they can barely spare time to monitor homework*"), the efficacy of school-based interventions is fundamentally bounded by home environments marked by time poverty and a lack of parental educational capital. Nevertheless, the narrative from Participant T9 demonstrates that proactive digital communication ("*When a student refused to participate, I texted the mother...*") can partially bridge this home-school divide by establishing low-barrier touchpoints that mobilize parental involvement despite structural constraints. Theoretically, these empirical insights align with Bourdieu's Cultural Capital Theory and Ecological Systems Theory, underscoring that student reading outcomes cannot be decoupled from the socio-economic conditions of the household, and that empowering struggling readers necessitates developing low-threshold communication channels that activate home support systems without overburdening economically vulnerable families.

## Discussion

### Diagnostic Triage

The reliance on Phil-IRI, FLAT, and CRLA indicates that teachers treat assessment as the starting point of instructional decision-making rather than as an end-of-term checkpoint. This practice is consistent with [Gu \(2021\)](#) and [Li and Gu \(2026\)](#), who argue that formative and diagnostic assessment in primary literacy functions as a dynamic tool that drives pedagogical modification. By grounding instructional design in empirical data, teachers bridge the gap between curriculum expectations and actual learner competencies.

### Pedagogical flexibility

Teachers' tailoring of materials, use of multimedia and picture-based tasks, and vernacular translation align with evidence that tiered instruction and digital multimodal scaffolding improve vocabulary acquisition and reading attitudes ([White & Vibulphol, 2020](#); [Yu & Liu, 2022](#); [Zou & Teng, 2023](#)). Translating complex English texts into regional languages also operationalizes Vygotskian scaffolding: the learner's existing linguistic repertoire serves as a cognitive bridge before the learner moves toward mastery of the target language ([Lee & Kim, 2024](#)). That several participants nonetheless described such adjustments as added workload shows that this flexibility is sustained largely by individual teacher effort.

### Remedial and peer networks

The use of flashcard-based phonemic awareness remediation and the progression from letter sounds to CVC patterns to word reading reflects the emphasis of the National Reading Panel on explicit, systematic phonics instruction, and the importance of phonological decoding in learning to read words ([Ehri, 2022](#)). Peer buddy systems illustrate Vygotsky's principle that cognitive development is inherently social and is mediated through collaborative dialogue with more knowledgeable peers ([Homayouni, 2022](#)). Participants' accounts that struggling readers felt safer when paired with peers also suggest that peer interaction reduces anxiety and creates an affective climate that encourages risk-taking in language learning ([Guo et al., 2025](#)).

### Socio-contextual barriers

Parental involvement is widely recognized as <sup>37</sup> a critical pillar of literacy development ([Penderi et al., 2023](#)), and the difficulties participants described echo evidence on the consequences of limited parental involvement in the foundation phase ([Motshusi et al., 2024](#)). The finding that direct, guided teacher–parent communication could elicit home support ([Yapao-Alcantara & Ducot, 2025](#)) suggests that even low-cost communication can partially offset these constraints.

### Theoretical Contribution

Taken together, the four themes extend the application of Vygotskian scaffolding in two ways. First, scaffolding in multilingual classrooms is linguistic as well as

instructional: teachers use the vernacular as a mediating resource, which positions learners' home languages as assets in English reading development rather than as obstacles. Second, scaffolding does not stop at the classroom door. Its efficacy is bounded by the socioeconomic and educational capital of the wider home ecosystem, so that in resource-constrained settings teachers must frequently compensate for familial educational deficits through intense emotional labor and extended instructional hours. Theories of scaffolding in post-colonial multilingual contexts therefore need to account for ecological and linguistic barriers, not only for the teacher–learner dyad.

### Practical and Policy Implications

At the systemic level, educational policy and administrative frameworks must evolve to accommodate the complex realities of early-grade reading remediation in multilingual contexts. The Department of Education should institutionalize flexible language-in-education policies that officially validate strategic vernacular translation as a legitimate instructional scaffold during remediation. Simultaneously, school administrators and policymakers must increase targeted funding and streamline bureaucratic reporting requirements for remedial initiatives such as the ARAL program. Mitigating administrative overload is critical to preserving teachers' capacity, reducing emotional burnout, and ensuring the long-term sustainability of structured literacy interventions in public elementary schools.

At the institutional and instructional levels, sustainable progress requires strengthening community synergies and advancing teacher capabilities. Schools should establish low-barrier adult literacy and family-engagement workshops that equip parents with actionable home-tutoring strategies, thereby bridging the home–school literacy divide in socioeconomically marginalized communities. Concurrently, teacher training institutions and school leaders must prioritize continuous professional development focused on advanced differentiated instruction, multimodal digital literacy tools, and trauma-informed pedagogical practices. Anchored in foundational frameworks regarding the specialized knowledge essential for effective reading instruction (Trezek & Zepp, 2025), these professional development programs will empower educators to address both the cognitive and socio-emotional dimensions of reading difficulties effectively.

### Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Several limitations should be considered. The study drew on 15 teachers from a single public elementary school in one city, which limits the transferability of the findings to other regions and school types. The data relies on teachers' self-reports and does not include the perspectives of learners, parents, or school administrators, nor observation of classroom practice. Future studies should therefore employ mixed-methods or longitudinal designs with larger, multi-regional samples, and incorporate the direct perspectives of parents and school administrators, to evaluate the long-term efficacy of literacy intervention frameworks in the Philippines.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that reading development among elementary struggling readers is a complex, multidimensional phenomenon shaped by diagnostic precision, pedagogical flexibility, peer collaboration, and robust family-school partnerships. Elementary English teachers function as adaptive mediators who strategically navigate severe resource constraints, multilingual classroom dynamics, and systemic socioeconomic barriers. Although structured remedial initiatives such as the ARAL program and differentiated instruction produce measurable empirical gains, remedial efficacy in public elementary schools remains inherently constrained by home environments characterized by intergenerational parental illiteracy and time poverty. Transcendental phenomenological analysis reveals that successful reading interventions critically depend on teachers' continuous pedagogical improvisation and substantial emotional labor, underscoring that sustained improvements in student literacy cannot be decoupled from comprehensive support for educators and families.

To operationalize these findings, this study offers critical recommendations for policy, practice, and future research. Pragmatically, educational policymakers and school leaders should implement community-embedded intervention frameworks that provide accessible, low-barrier family literacy programs while systematically embedding mental health support and reducing administrative burdens for remedial educators. Furthermore, resource allocation must prioritize the development and distribution of culturally responsive, multilingual leveled reading materials. Methodologically, future research should adopt longitudinal or mixed-methods designs to evaluate the long-term efficacy and scalability of home-school partnership models across diverse socioeconomic strata. By addressing these structural and pedagogical dimensions, stakeholders can transition reading remediation from isolated classroom efforts into a sustainable, ecosystem-wide support framework.

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## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## <sup>16</sup> DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The authors state that the data supporting the findings of this study will be made available by the corresponding author, D.L.D.S, upon reasonable request.

## AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

D.L.D. Songyoen led the conceptualization, methodology design, research supervision, and manuscript editing. J.C. Gutierrez, N.J.S. Raguindin, K.A.B. Respicio, A.R. Sampaga, B.D.A. Sibucan, C.M. Simpliciano, M.R.M. Simpliciano, H.C. Tan, A.L. Tique, and R.H.B. Villacarlos contributed equally to data collection, field interviews, qualitative thematic analysis, and initial draft preparation. <sup>13</sup> All authors critically reviewed, revised, and approved the final manuscript prior to submission.

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