Reading skills and perceived challenges among high school learners in Carranglan, Nueva Ecija: A basis for developing gender-based instructional materials

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the reading levels and perceived reading difficulties of junior and senior high school students in Carranglan, Nueva Ecija, to support the development of instructional materials tailored to varied learning needs. A total of 593 students from Grades 7 to 12 were assessed using the Phil-IRI Group Screening Test and categorized as Independent, Instructional, Frustration, or Non-Reader. Teachers also identified reading challenges through a Likert-scale survey. Findings showed a general improvement in reading proficiency across grade levels, with most Grade 12 students classified as independent readers. However, many students in the intermediate grades remained at the instructional level, indicating a need for additional support. Common difficulties included limited vocabulary, decoding issues, and weak comprehension, compounded by socio-emotional factors such as low confidence and peer-related concerns. In response, the study proposes a set of Filipino literary texts—including tula, haiku, tanaga, sanaysay, talumpati, and maikling kwento—featuring gender-sensitive themes to enhance engagement, inclusivity, and comprehension. The findings emphasize the importance of differentiated instruction, innovative teaching strategies, and targeted interventions to promote literacy and ensure equitable academic success for all learners.

1. Introduction

Reading is one of the most essential skills a learner can develop, serving as a cornerstone for academic success and lifelong learning. In the Philippines, where education plays a critical role in shaping the nation's future, developing reading skills among elementary learners has been identified as a key area for improvement. Reading proficiency, which encompasses decoding text and understanding the meaning, is foundational for accessing information, engaging with diverse knowledge, and fostering critical thinking (Bernardo et al., 2021).

Proficiency in reading is pivotal for academic achievement across all subject areas. Learners who can read effectively are better equipped to understand and engage with their coursework, which leads to higher academic performance (Idulog et al., 2023). Reading is not only about decoding text but also involves deriving meaning from what is read (Ogunbodede and Sawyerr-George, 2023).

Without strong reading skills, learners may face significant challenges in comprehending and engaging with essential concepts across subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies. This can severely limit their overall academic growth and development. Proficient reading skills are essential for academic success, enabling learners to understand, analyze, and apply knowledge and skills across these domains. Struggling readers may face increasing difficulty in keeping up with coursework, leading to frustration, disengagement, and potential setbacks in their educational journey.

In the Philippines, improving reading skills among elementary learners remains a consistent goal of the Department of Education (DepEd). The Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013, or Republic Act No. 10533, emphasizes the importance of foundational skills such as reading to ensure learners' preparedness for higher educational levels. Despite these efforts, many Filipino students still perform below the expected proficiency levels in reading. The 2022 Program for International Student

Assessment (PISA) results showed that the Philippines ranked lowest out of 79 countries in reading comprehension in 2018 and improved slightly to 76th out of 81 countries in 2022.

Various factors influence learners' reading proficiency levels, including socioeconomic status, educational resources, home literacy environments, and instructional methods. Learners from low-income families often have limited access to reading materials and literacy-rich environments, which negatively affects their reading development (Mirasol and Topacio, 2021).

As frontline educators, teachers provide valuable insights into the challenges that learners face in developing reading skills. Their perceptions can help identify specific difficulties and guide the development of appropriate interventions. Teachers often report phonological processing, decoding, and comprehension difficulties as common challenges among struggling readers (Sin and Siahpoosh, 2020). These issues are often compounded by limited vocabulary, lack of motivation, and inadequate instructional materials.

Schools with limited resources often face significant challenges in providing adequate reading programs and support for their students. This can further exacerbate the difficulties that learners, particularly those from disadvantaged backgrounds, experience in developing essential reading skills. Without access to well-resourced reading interventions, such as specialized instruction, quality reading materials, and dedicated support staff, these students may lag behind their peers in acquiring foundational literacy abilities needed for academic success. This resource gap creates a cycle, resulting in disengagement and long-term academic setbacks. Hence, a comprehensive approach is essential to address the reading challenges among elementary learners in the Philippines.

In addition to socio-economic factors, research indicates that gender significantly influences reading performance. Studies have shown that female learners generally outperform their male counterparts in reading assessments (Idulog et al., 2023). This disparity in reading proficiency is linked to cognitive and social factors, such as differences in language processing abilities and reading preferences. Boys often prefer non-fiction texts and action-driven narratives, while girls tend to favor fiction and character-focused stories (Mustadi and Amri, 2020).

As reading proficiency challenges and performance differences by gender have increased, there is also an increasing need to receive fitting instructional materials that address the diversity of the needs of the students. Materials sensitive to gender can help mitigate the effects of such differences by being congruent with boys' and girls' interests and strengths and breaking stereotypes in increasing engagement. Some content is designed to appeal to other preferences due to gender, while others emphasize creating inclusive materials that transcend traditional gender boundaries. It is research-driven to the point where an appropriate representation is required, ensuring just and unbiased delivery of outcomes in educational resources (Badshah et al., 2021). The way to ensure equitable education outcomes for the students is by developing friendly learning environments that are inclusive and potentially reduce gender-related biases.

Research shows that gender-sensitive reading materials can motivate learners and improve their reading performance (Hochweber and Vieluf, 2018). Such materials may include various genres and topics that appeal to both male and female learners, ensuring all students feel represented and included. For instance, incorporating non-fiction texts that align with boys' preferences for factual and action-oriented content, alongside fiction and narrative texts that appeal to girls, can help create a more balanced and engaging reading curriculum.

Moreover, gender-based instructional materials can challenge traditional gender roles and promote equality in the classroom. By presenting diverse characters and storylines that reflect various experiences and perspectives, these materials encourage learners to think critically about gender and social norms. This approach enhances reading comprehension while fostering a more inclusive and equitable learning environment. However, studies indicate that gender bias persists in educational materials, with a disproportionate emphasis on male-centric content and language (Alharbi, 2022). Similarly, gender biases have been identified in teacher education texts, with limited attention given to gender issues and a lack of specific strategies to address them (Herdina and Ningrum, 2023).

Reading proficiency encompasses various dimensions, including decoding abilities, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary. These components clearly indicate how well students can read and understand Filipino texts. This study is crucial as it categorizes learners into distinct reading ability levels—from independent readers who can comprehend texts with minimal assistance to nonreaders who struggle significantly with basic reading tasks. By evaluating students' reading proficiency and exploring perceived challenges, the study aims to identify key areas for improvement and propose gender-based instructional materials that effectively address the diverse needs of learners. The findings will contribute to the development of more targeted and effective educational resources, ultimately supporting the enhancement of students' reading skills in the community.

This study aims to describe the reading skills and perceived challenges in reading among high school learners in Carranglan, Nueva Ecija. Specifically, to:

1. Describe the level of reading skills among learners
2. Describe the challenges in reading among learners as perceived by teachers
3. Propose gender-based instructional materials to improve the reading skills among learners

2. Literature review

High school learners' reading skills are foundational to their academic success, yet many struggle with comprehension and engagement due to socioeconomic, motivational, and instructional factors. This literature review explores the current levels of reading skills among high school students, the challenges teachers perceive in addressing reading difficulties, and the potential of gender-sensitive instructional materials to enhance reading proficiency and motivation.

2.1. Level of reading skills among high school learners

Reading proficiency is a crucial determinant of academic success, yet many high school learners, particularly from low-income and non-English-speaking backgrounds, struggle with both basic and advanced literacy skills (Caraig and Quimbo, 2022). Early intervention is pivotal, as the absence of foundational support leads to persistent comprehension difficulties, especially in content-heavy subjects like science and history. However, literacy interventions in resource-limited settings show only moderate success, emphasizing the limitations of one-size-fits-all approaches (Kim et al., 2020). Additionally, cognitive factors such as phonological awareness and attention span significantly influence reading ability, making later remediation efforts increasingly challenging (Singh et al., 2023).

2.2. Challenges in reading among learners as perceived by teachers

Teachers identify vocabulary deficits, weak comprehension, and disengagement as primary obstacles to literacy development (Adao et al., 2023). A key concern is students' inability to decode and interpret complex texts, often exacerbated by poor fluency and lack of motivation. Digital distractions and limited exposure to meaningful reading experiences further diminish engagement (Gilson et al., 2018).

Additionally, structural issues like large class sizes and insufficient resources hinder the effectiveness of differentiated instruction. Many students perceive reading as a compulsory academic task rather than a valuable skill, reinforcing a cycle of frustration and avoidance (Olifant et al., 2019). Addressing these issues requires a shift from passive instruction to interactive, student-centered approaches that promote reading as a meaningful and enjoyable activity.

2.3. Gender-based instructional materials to improve reading skills among learners

Research underscores gender-based differences in reading preferences—girls tend to favor fiction and relational narratives, while boys gravitate toward nonfiction, technology, and adventure (Jabbar and Warraich, 2023). While tailoring reading materials to gender preferences may enhance engagement, this approach risks reinforcing stereotypes and overlooking intersectional factors such as socioeconomic status and family influence (Scholes, 2019). A more effective strategy involves diversifying text selections to accommodate varied cognitive and interest levels, integrating multimedia resources for immersive learning experiences. Additionally, creating inclusive, interactive environments fosters critical thinking and vocabulary development, ensuring reading instruction benefits all learners without reinforcing rigid gender norms (Singh et al., 2023).

3. Research methodology

Several studies have examined the impact of reading fluency on academic achievement, emphasizing the importance of early interventions in developing literacy skills. Building on this, the study focuses on investigating reading fluency, specifically among high school learners in Carranglan, Nueva Ecija. The study aims to assess students' reading proficiency levels and explore the challenges they face, as perceived by their teachers. This design provided measurable and objective insights into reading abilities and challenges through structured tools and statistical analysis.

The questionnaire was validated through a rigorous procedure to ensure its reliability and relevance. Initially, a panel of experts in education, language studies, and research methodology evaluated the questionnaire for content validity, assessing the clarity, appropriateness, and alignment of each item with the study's objectives. The experts provided feedback, leading to necessary revisions for improved coherence and readability. Then, the revised questionnaire underwent a pilot testing phase involving a small group of high school students and teachers to identify ambiguities and ensure comprehensibility. Statistical measures, such as Cronbach's Alpha, were employed to determine internal consistency and reliability, ensuring that the instrument yielded stable and accurate responses. The pilot testing for the study was conducted at Nueva Ecija University of Science and Technology, outside the target population. The reliability analysis of the instrument yielded a Cronbach's alpha of 0.835 for Perceived Challenges in Reading Among Learners and $\alpha=0.890$ for the Perceived Importance of Gender-Based Reading Materials in Improving Reading Skills, resulting in an overall reliability of $\alpha=0.863$. These values indicate a high level of internal consistency, confirming that the instrument is reliable. Finally, adjustments were made based on pilot testing results before the questionnaire was administered to the full sample, ensuring that it effectively captured reading skills and perceived challenges among learners.

Moreover, the study sample included 593 high school students from grades 7 to 12 and 6 Filipino subject teachers. The teachers, familiar with the reading practices in their classrooms, provided valuable insights into the challenges faced by the students. Students' reading skills were assessed, focusing on Filipino reading proficiency, with four proficiency levels: Independent, Instructional, Frustrated, and Nonreader. The results from the Phil-IRI Group Screening Test, provided by the school, were used for the analysis. Additionally, teachers' perceptions of reading challenges and the need for gender-sensitive instructional materials were gathered through a 4-point Likert scale survey, which measured the severity of challenges across four categories:

- Strongly Agree (4)
- Agree (3)
- Disagree (2)
- Strongly Disagree (1)

The survey covered challenges such as student motivation, access to instructional materials, socio-economic factors, and classroom engagement.

The quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, with a frequency distribution summarizing students' reading proficiency levels. Teachers' responses to the Likert scale survey were analyzed using measures such as the mean to quantify perceived challenges. This analysis highlighted key areas where students struggle with

reading and provided an overview of the challenges identified by their teachers. Confidentiality was strictly maintained by anonymizing and securely storing all data to protect participants' privacy. The research adhered to ethical standards, ensuring voluntary participation without coercion or bias and reporting findings honestly and accurately. Sensitivity to participants' diverse needs was prioritized, with measures in place to address any discomfort or distress. These ethical practices ensured that the research was conducted with the highest standards of respect and professionalism.

4. Results and discussion

Having established research design and data collection methods, the following section presents the results of the study, followed by a discussion of their implications for reading fluency and intervention strategies.

4.1. Reading proficiency assessment of junior and senior high school students in Filipino

Table 1 presents the reading proficiency levels of junior and senior high school students in Filipino, categorized as Independent, Instructional, Frustration, and Non-Reader. It highlights the distribution of students across these categories, offering insights into their reading skills and comprehension abilities at various grade levels.

Table 1: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 7 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	43	78	121	93.08%
Instructional	7	0	7	5.38%
Frustration	1	0	1	0.77%
Non-reader	1	0	1	0.77%
Total	52	78	130	100%

The results show that most Grade 7 students fall into the independent reading category, making up 93.08% of the entire population (121 out of 130 students). Such a high percentage registers the fluency with which students read and understand texts without assistance as a strong sign that foundational literacy skills have been firmly set in this grade level. On the other hand, the smallest percentage of students falls under the frustration and non-reader categories, each making up only 0.77% of the population; this means 1 student each in the frustration and non-reader categories. These findings indicate that only a few students have trouble reading or failing to read.

It is noteworthy that findings imply that, on average, Grade 7 demonstrates a strong reading culture and teaches effectively to promote highly independent reading proficiency. A small percentage in lower proficiency categories directs attention toward intervention programs and targets 'No one is left behind' in developing reading skills.

Research emphasizes the importance of early literacy development for fostering reading fluency

and comprehension. According to a study by Caraig and Quimbo (2022), establishing strong foundational skills in early grades is critical for student success in later years. The findings from this study align with those of previous research, which suggests that high levels of independent reading proficiency in Grade 7 indicate effective instruction in early education. Moreover, the small number of students in the frustration and non-reader categories supports claims that targeted interventions are necessary for struggling readers to ensure no student is left behind in literacy development (Tomas et al., 2021).

As shown in Table 2, instructional-level readers constitute the most significant fraction at 46.74 percent (43 out of 92 students for Grade 8). This might mean that nearly half of the students still need support to read accurately and comprehend appropriately, a stage where they are undergoing a transition in reading skills.

In contrast, no students were recorded as non-readers, and only 7.61% fell into the frustration category. In other words, while some struggle to read, none can read, encouraging outcome.

Table 2: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 8 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	18	24	42	45.65%
Instructional	23	20	43	46.74%
Frustration	7	0	7	7.61%
Non-reader	0	0	0	0%
Total	48	44	92	100%

These outcomes indicate a wide range of reading abilities in Grade 8. In that sense, this group requires differentiated instructions to meet the diverse demands. The high number of instructional readers further suggests the need for targeted support in moving students towards more independent reading. A study by Andrianatos (2019) emphasized that instructional reading levels indicate a transitional phase in student development, where targeted interventions are critical for enhancing reading fluency. This phase represents a transitional period where students move from one level of proficiency to the next, requiring targeted interventions to ensure steady progress. Similarly,

differentiated instruction tailored to varying reading levels can significantly improve comprehension and retention in middle school students (Caraig and Quimbo, 2022). This approach is particularly beneficial in middle school, where students exhibit a wide range of reading proficiencies. Table 3 shows that the most significant percentage of the Grade 9 students, 80% (100 out of 125), fell under independent readers. Thus, the reading skill and comprehension strength at this level were strong. This means, to a great extent, these students got adequate support from the curriculum and methods of instruction in fostering literacy growth.

Table 3: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 9 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	41	59	100	80%
Instructional	16	5	21	16.8%
Frustration	4	0	4	3.2%
Non-reader	0	0	0	0%
Total	61	64	125	100%

In contrast, the lowest percentage of students falls into the frustration and non-reader categories, with only 3.2% (4 students) struggling to read and no one being unable to. This represents a continued decline in the percentage of students having difficulty with reading as they progress through grades. Overall, the implication is that the students in Grade 9 demonstrate a high level of literacy competency in dealing with more complex texts. However, the students in the frustration category clearly show the need for further monitoring and individualized support.

Instructional strategies and curricular support play vital roles in fostering literacy development. Studies by Doty (2021) emphasized the importance

of structured interventions to support struggling readers, highlighting that even minor gaps in reading ability at higher grades can impede overall academic performance. Moreover, effective teaching methods tailored to diverse literacy levels, such as differentiated instruction, help maintain consistent growth, ensuring students in frustration categories receive necessary interventions (Yacob and Mohamad, 2024). Table 4 presents the reading proficiency assessment of Grade 10 students in Filipino. The highest percentage in the instructional category is shown by Grade 10 at 57.02% (65 out of 114), indicating that most students at this stage are not yet fully independent and still require some support to read successfully.

Table 4: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 10 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	13	35	48	42.11%
Instructional	48	17	65	57.02%
Frustration	1	0	1	0.88%
Non-reader	0	0	0	0%
Total	62	52	114	100%

The highest percent in the instructional category is shown by grade 10 at 57.02% (65 of 114), indicating that at this stage, most students are not yet fully independent but still need some support to read successfully. This suggests a plateauing of reading independence at this level.

Only 0.88% (1 student) on the frustration list existed, and non-readers were not found. As the earlier grades demonstrated, very few students had marked difficulties with reading at this level.

This evidence suggests that despite the ability of many students to still read with assistance, efforts

have to be made to help them become independent readers in preparation for the demands of senior high school and beyond.

The gradual shift from dependent to independent reading as students progress through educational stages (Saro et al., 2024). This progression ensures that students can navigate academic materials with confidence and efficiency. Effective interventions at this critical juncture are necessary to foster the independence required for higher academic success (Sibanda and Iwu, 2023). Without effective instructional strategies, such as scaffolding,

differentiated instruction, and explicit reading comprehension techniques, students may struggle to develop the independence needed for higher academic success.

As seen in Table 5, of the 68 students, 45, or 66.18%, are independent readers in Grade 11, the most significant proportion of them. This means that most of them have developed the skills for understanding and interpreting texts independently, which is required in other senior high school academic tasks. Notably, none of the students fall within the categories of frustration or non-reader, and only 33.82 percent (23) fall within the instructional level. This implies that although a proportion of students still require some instructional support, most students are doing fine.

The results indicated continued improvement in reading proficiency as the students progress through grades, reflecting the efficacy of interventions and teaching strategies that prepare students for academic success in their final years of high school.

The importance of early interventions and teaching strategies in improving reading proficiency among students. Studies suggest that independent reading skills are crucial for academic success, as they support students in processing complex texts. Furthermore, the gradual improvement in reading as students advance through grades reflects the impact of targeted instructional strategies and the effectiveness of scaffolded learning environments in building students' confidence and ability to understand texts (van de Pol et al., 2019). Such findings are echoed in the literature, highlighting the role of educators in nurturing students' reading skills through tailored instructional support. Based on Table 6, grade 12 shows outstanding results, with 100% of students falling into the independent reader category. Such an outstanding result indicates that every student has gained the necessary skills to become an independent reader and an independent comprehended vital skill for post-secondary education or workforce readiness.

Table 5: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 11 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	33	12	45	66.18%
Instructional	19	4	23	33.82%
Frustration	0	0	0	0%
Non-reader	0	0	0	0%
Total	52	16	68	100%

Table 6: Reading proficiency assessment of grade 12 students in Filipino

	Male	Female	Total	Percent
Independent	40	24	64	100%
Instructional	0	0	0	0%
Frustration	0	0	0	0%
Non-reader	0	0	0	0%
Total	40	24	64	100%

No students are in either the instructional frustration or nonreader categories, which indicates an absolute absence of reading problems at this level. This outcome suggests the culmination of a reading program that is well-structured and effective throughout the way throughout school. It supports the argument about literacy initiatives being sustained, but highlights the need to maintain such support structures in earlier grades.

Early literacy interventions play a critical role in fostering long-term reading success. Studies by Preskitt et al. (2020) emphasized the importance of structured, sustained reading programs that begin in early childhood and continue through secondary education. These initiatives, when maintained, ensure that students develop the skills necessary to become independent readers, essential for academic achievement and career readiness. Conversely, failure to implement such programs in earlier grades can lead to literacy challenges that may hinder future educational progress (Snow and Matthews, 2016).

4.2. Perceived challenges in reading among learners

Table 7 presents various challenges faced by students in reading development. Each statement highlights specific difficulties that impact students' ability to read, comprehend, stay engaged, and overcome social or emotional barriers. Table 7 shows the range of challenges students identified with reading, measured through their weighted means. The highest mean from Table 7 is 3.50, indicating that these factors are the most significant barriers students face. These include issues like comprehension, limited vocabulary, and aspects of reading skills, wherein students face serious challenges. Inadequate instructional strategies suggest that pedagogical approaches may be lacking in certain areas, thereby calling for more specific or heterogeneous instructional strategies in reading. Simultaneously, interpersonal relationships, particularly bullying, are examples of the social-emotional component affecting reading self-confidence and participation.

On the other hand, the lowest mean score is for socio-economic factors, with a mean of 2.50. While still an important challenge, there is a possibility that the students encounter fewer direct socio-economic barriers than other challenging factors against reading development, or that teachers consider socio-economic barriers to be less potent in the classroom. It might result from attempts to reduce the degree of socio-economic disadvantage through

factors such as reading materials available at the school or community-based reading programs.

Table 7: Perceived challenges in reading among learners

Statement	Weighted mean
1. Decoding difficulties: Students in my class struggle with decoding words, which hinders their ability to read fluently and accurately.	3.17
2. Comprehension issues: Many of my students are able to read words but struggle to understand the meaning of the texts they read.	3.50
3. Limited vocabulary: A limited vocabulary prevents some students from understanding the main ideas and making inferences when reading.	3.50
4. Motivation and engagement: I observe that a lack of motivation and engagement in reading tasks significantly affects students' reading progress.	3.17
5. Socio-economic factors: Socio-economic challenges, such as limited access to books and reading materials, affect the reading development of some students.	2.50
6. Attention and focus issues: Attention difficulties often prevent my students from staying focused on reading tasks and comprehending the material.	3.17
7. Emotional and psychological barriers: Emotional issues, like anxiety or low self-esteem, contribute to some students' reluctance to engage in reading activities.	3.17
8. Inadequate instructional strategies: I believe that the current instructional strategies in place are not always effective in addressing the diverse reading needs of my students.	3.50
9. Peer relationships and bullying: Social issues, such as bullying or exclusion from peers, negatively impact the reading confidence and participation of some students.	3.50
10. Lack of parental involvement: A lack of parental involvement and support at home hampers the reading development of many students in my classroom.	3.17
Total	3.23

Generally, the grand mean of 3.23 gives an overall measure of the struggles encountered and describes the challenges learners in reading face as moderate to high. Thus, the mean score becomes a measure for integrating the wide range of challenges, showing that although no particular problem is considerably lighter than the others, many factors simultaneously affect the learners' reading abilities.

Table 7 shows that the reading challenges are multifaceted and complex and involve cognitive, instructional, social, and emotional dimensions. The high means clustering of issues such as comprehension and peer relationships brings out the complex interplay between the academic and social domains, making holistic interventions emphasizing skill-based and socio-emotional barriers to reading success important.

These findings align with existing literature that highlights the multifaceted nature of reading difficulties. According to Spencer and Wagner (2018), comprehension issues and limited vocabulary are among the most prevalent barriers to reading proficiency, as students struggle to extract meaning from texts despite their ability to decode words. Similarly, Gulay and Pontillas (2024) emphasized that motivation and engagement significantly impact students' reading performance, with disengaged readers showing lower comprehension levels and reduced academic success. Additionally, Gotlieb et al. (2022) discussed the role of social dynamics in literacy development, noting that negative peer relationships, including bullying, contribute to reading anxiety and reduced self-efficacy in struggling readers. These studies support the current findings, underscoring the need for holistic reading interventions that address not only cognitive and instructional factors but also socio-emotional aspects that influence students' reading confidence and overall literacy development.

4.3. Perceived importance of gender-based reading materials in improving the level of reading skills among learners

Table 8 highlights the perceived importance of gender-based materials on learners' engagement and reading skills.

Table 8: Perceived importance of gender-based reading materials in improving the level of reading materials among learners

Statement	Weighted mean
1. Gender-specific reading materials can increase learners' engagement: I believe that providing reading materials that reflect gender-specific interests can significantly increase students' engagement in reading activities.	2.50
2. Gender-based content helps in addressing reading challenges: I feel that gender-based reading materials help address the reading challenges of both boys and girls by catering to their distinct interests and preferences.	2.83
3. Diverse gender representations encourage reading participation: Including diverse gender roles and representations in reading materials encourages more active participation in reading among learners.	3.50
4. Boys benefit from reading materials tailored to their interests: Reading materials specifically designed for boys' interests, such as adventure or science fiction, are more effective in improving their reading skills.	2.33
5. Girls benefit from gender-specific reading resources: I believe that girls' reading abilities improve when exposed to reading materials that align with their interests, such as stories about relationships or personal growth.	2.33
6. Gender-based materials make reading more relatable: When reading materials reflect learners' gender identities and experiences, they find reading more relatable and engaging.	2.83
7. Reading materials with gender inclusivity promote better comprehension: I believe that gender-inclusive reading materials, featuring both male and female protagonists, promote better comprehension and reading success.	2.83
8. Gender-tailored content boosts reading confidence: Providing gender-specific reading content boosts learners' confidence, making them feel more connected to the material and improving their reading levels.	2.83
9. Boys and girls respond differently to reading material based on content: I observe that boys and girls have different responses to reading materials, with gender-based content potentially enhancing their reading performance.	2.83
10. Incorporating gender-based reading materials should be a priority: I think that selecting reading materials based on the gender interests of learners should be a priority in improving overall reading levels.	3.33
Total	2.82

The highest mean score is 3.50, which indicates the role of diverse gender representations in reading materials to encourage participation. The finding suggests that when learners see diverse gender roles and identities in what they read, they are more likely to be engaged. This would mean that diversity in representation is effectively better than strictly gender-segmented content because it appeals to a more diversified range of interests and may also encourage inclusiveness. This point highlights how content should reflect societal diversity to bridge the engagement gap in learning by making reading materials relatable to every learner.

However, the lowest mean scores, both at 2.33, refer to statements that boys and girls benefit from reading materials made for their interest-laden requirements. Low scores imply less agreement that content regarding strict gender increases reading skills. This can mean that even the most traditional approach of classifying content according to different gender interests may not be appropriate or relevant in targeting today's learners. This may mean that readers benefit more from material that portrays a range of interests and encourages them to seek their way beyond the stereotypical gender norms while reading.

The weighted mean scores for different statements about the relevance of gender-based reading materials in enhancing reading engagement, comprehension, and learners' confidence. The grand mean of 2.82 implies that, on average, the respondents moderately agreed with the presumed benefits of gender-specific reading materials. This explains a general consensus that although materials based on gender may have some strengths, other aspects of engagement and effectiveness in reading could balance this scale.

Furthermore, on average, the respondents agree that gender-specific material improves reading for learners. However, that average score also suggests that there is a nuanced stand which, although it does not raise gender-based material, is to be seen singularly as a solution to improve the reading interest of the learner. Instead, evidence points to content that is inclusive of diverse content, moving beyond traditional constructions of gender and promoting appeal to a broad constituency of learners with the potential to address a more comprehensive range of reading challenges.

These findings align with previous research indicating that diverse and inclusive reading materials enhance student engagement and comprehension. Moreover, Chang and Rawian (2025) emphasized that incorporating diverse gender roles and representations in reading materials fosters higher reading motivation and enjoyment, particularly among students who might otherwise disengage from traditional, gender-segregated content. Similarly, Hu et al. (2024) found that gender-neutral and inclusive reading materials contribute to improved reading habits and literacy outcomes, as they encourage students to explore a wider range of texts beyond stereotypical preferences. Additionally, Stewart et al. (2021) highlighted that rigid gender-based reading assignments may inadvertently reinforce traditional gender norms, limiting students' exposure to diverse perspectives. These studies support the current findings that, while gender representation in reading materials is crucial, a broader and more inclusive approach—rather than strictly gender-segmented content—may be more effective in fostering reading engagement and comprehension among learners.

5. Proposed gender-based instructional material

The reading materials were designed to heighten students' reading ability through the collection of Filipino literary pieces with gender themes. The compilation was diverse in forms, including the following: Tula, haiku at tanaga, sanaysay, talumpati, and maikling kwento-shaped to express various themes of reflections and experiences on gender matters. By combining these genres, the materials will reach various readers' interests and levels, hence promoting participation and better understanding. For instance, tula and haiku will be concerned with emotions and insights in poetic forms, while tanaga will explore traditional Filipino verse with modern themes of equality and inclusion. Sanaysay and talumpati offer platforms for persuasive and reflective thought on gender issues, while maikling kwento puts all of these themes into very narrative stories that students can directly connect with.

The materials will cover voices across the gender spectrum, ensuring that male, female, and non-binary visions are given a strong voice. Every piece will inherently carry themes such as power, equity, relationships, and identity, thus making it relevant and relatable to students. These literary pieces seek to develop literacy skills among students, as well as empathy, critical thinking, and cultural awareness. In aligning the content with students' realities and incorporating the richness of Filipino literature, these proposed materials will become a tremendous tool for creating inclusiveness and understanding while achieving academic goals.

6. Conclusions

The study results clearly showed a progressive development in the students' reading ability from Grade 7 to Grade 12, with a majority being independent readers by Grade 12. This progressive pattern, therefore, speaks of the effectiveness of the instructional strategies and literacy programs that have contributed to increased growth in reading skills over time. Despite these successes, many intermediate-grade students can be classified as instructional, indicating the need to sustain intervention to move them toward independent readers. In addition, this small but persistent proportion of the frustration category emphasizes the necessity of remedial interventions that provide

opportunities to redress or prevent such disparities in student literacy outcomes.

To address the observed challenges and enhance reading proficiency, schools will implement differentiated instructional strategies suited to the varied needs of learners, particularly at instructional and frustration levels. Additionally, reading materials that are engaging and inclusive, like gender-based Filipino literary pieces, can help fill in the gaps and improve student engagement and comprehension. Therefore, professional development programs for teachers should emphasize innovative adaptive support methods for the divergent range of reading abilities and needs. Lastly, monitoring and assessment mechanisms should be strengthened to track individual progress and ensure timely interventions so that no single child stays behind.

Compliance with ethical standards

Ethical considerations

This research upheld ethical standards by ensuring the confidentiality and anonymity of all student participants throughout the data collection and reporting processes. Before the administration of the Phil-IRI Group Screening Test and the perception survey, informed consent was obtained from both students and their guardians, with full disclosure of the study's objectives, procedures, and voluntary nature. The study also respected the students' right to withdraw from participation at any time without penalty. Teachers who participated in identifying reading challenges were assured that their responses would remain confidential and be used solely for academic purposes. Furthermore, the development of gender-based instructional materials was carried out with sensitivity and inclusiveness in mind, ensuring that no group was marginalized and that all content promoted respect, equality, and cultural relevance.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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