PERCEIVED READING GAPS ASSESSMENT-SURVEY OF THE LOWER PRIMARY EDUCATION LEARNNERS AMIDST THE COVID- 19 PANDEMIC

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Abstract

Learning to read is multipart and big predictor for the learner's academic success. It is a skill that a child has to work on constantly, so it's not surprising that many children develop a "reading gaps". During COVID-19 pandemic, reports states that reading skills among young students stalled that prompted to conduct this study. This study ascertained the literacy gaps of the lower primary education pupils of Labangon Elementary School, Cebu City as perceived by the selected teachers based on EGRA subtasks: letter identification, phonetic awareness, familiar word reading, nonword reading, oral reading fluency, listening comprehension; and reading comprehension. Descriptive- survey method was used and employing adapted instrument. Respondents were chosen purposively. Findings of the study have revealed that majority of the teacher respondents disagree that the pupils have literacy competency on nonword reading, reading comprehension, oral reading fluency; listening comprehension. While some respondents agree that pupils have competency on letter identification, phonetic awareness; familiar word reading. Based on the findings, this study concludes that literacy gaps of the pupils as perceived by the respondents are largely dwell on higher level of reading skills and therefore marked the lower level literacy skills of the pupils. The used of the developmental reading material as output of the study is highly recommended.

Keywords: Perceived Reading gaps using EGRA subtasks, descriptive survey, Labangon Elementary School, Cebu City, Philippines.

Introduction:

Learning to reading is multipart, it involves complex skills and several cognitive processes. Reading is a skill or talent needed by individuals to attain success in their academic work [1]. A big predictor of academic success of the learners [2]. Reading to a tremendous and sizeable extent determines the success in the academic endeavour, reading provides access into every subject in school programme or curriculum, and perhaps that is why Hall and Barnes (2017) stated that reading is an important and a tremendous tool for study, for creating awareness, for future employment and recreation [1]. The pupils' success will be defined by their ability to read fluently and skillfully [2]. Moreover, an essential skill in reading is learning to comprehend a text focal idea [1]. To achieve reading comprehension, a reader must possess some essential critical intellectual and rational equipment to comprehend [1]. But despite universal acceptance of reading's vital importance, the reading gap in our classroom remains [2]. Likewise, research has long established that proficient reading helps students succeed in other subject areas, especially as academic content becomes more challenging [2].

The problem of reading is more seriously felt in the Philippines where reading is taught in a foreign language which is also the medium of instruction [3]. In the Philippines, there has been a continual enrichment of the reading skills of struggling readers through the initiatives of remedial reading teachers [4]. It was cited in the findings of the Swanson Committee that reading is one of the subjects in which much of the weaknesses of the Filipino students are found [3]. Students with weak foundational skills are more likely to struggle and become disinterested as content becomes more complex [5]. Seemingly, Program for International Student Assessment or PISA of 2018 data show that 15-year-old students in Grades 9 and 10 who repeated a grade at least once at the elementary level scored at least 52 points less in reading than non-repeaters, while those who repeated a grade at least once in the junior high school level scored at least 71 points less in reading than non-repeaters [6]. Furthermore, a study of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) revealed that 34% of the second-grade students could not read even a single word and 48% of the children could not understand a single question in their mother tongue, especially in the Sidama region, 69.2% of the children could not identify even single sounds or letters in words [7]. This illustrates and concludes that reading fundamentals must not have been learned in the early grades [6].

Apparently, to make every learner a proficient in reader, schools across the Philippines are tasked to help learners develop their reading skills, in support of the implementation of the K-12

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Basic Education Program as mandated by the Department of Education; however, the national assessment results have revealed that there are still many early grade learners struggling to meet the learning standards in early language, literacy, and numeracy [8]. To answer this steadfast problem on literacy gaps, the Department of Education also seeks to develop more reading experts from the ranks of teachers through scholarships, long-term trainings, locally available or abroad, to help strengthen the reading programs; but educational reforms and literacy projects cannot be in the hands of DepEd alone [9]. Parental involvement in their child's literacy practices is a more powerful force than other family background variables, such as social class, family size and level of parental education (Flouri & Buchanan, 2004), while reading enjoyment is more important for children's educational success than their family's socio-economic status (OECD, 2002) [10]. According to Waterford.org., to help children succeed through access to lifelong education, the participation of parents in the educational process means that teachers and parents share the responsibility to teach students and work together to achieve educational goals [11]. Trust and mutual understanding between parent and teacher is a real secret of child's happy learning; likewise, support and cooperativeness from parents towards teacher helps a lot to connect, understand and work towards child [12].

 The COVID-19 outbreak has posed the teachers to encounter numerous challenges, and nevertheless, they dealt with these difficulties by employing their own coping techniques [13]. In the Philippines, UNICEF reported that less than 15 percent of schoolchildren in the Philippines, or about three in every 20, can read simple texts in large part due to the longest schools closure of more than 70 weeks as of the middle of February caused by the COVID-19 pandemic [14]. Additionally, there is a reason to assume that the COVID-19 pandemic had a differential effect on students and affected many areas of education, resulting in a need for empirical research how students' learning was affected during this time [15]. Furthermore, findings of a study likewise showed that teachers are greatly challenged in terms of learning quality transfer, module distribution and retrieval, students' difficulties in following instruction, power disruption, internet connection, and health risks posed by the pandemic [13]. Consequently, these dilemmas prompted to conduct the study.

Problem Statement

This study sought to know the literacy gaps of the lower primary education pupils as perceived by the selected teachers of Labangon Elementary School, Cebu City, Philippines, during the COVID-19 pandemic using the identified and adapted EGRA subtasks in terms of:

1. Letter identification,
2. Phonetic awareness,
3. Familiar word reading
4. Non-word reading,
5. Oral reading fluency,
6. Listening comprehension; and
7. Reading comprehension

Literature Review

A foundation in reading and writing has been the basis of our educational system since its inception and discovering new ways to increase student interest in those basic components of learning is something that every teacher struggles with at one time or another [37]. One of the most important goals for today's educators should be to train individuals with good literacy who can comprehend and question what they read, because there is a close relationship between literacy and academic achievement (Grove & Hauptfleisch, 1982; Moreillan, 2007) [38]. This literacy skills help children develop empathy and self-confidence [7]. The pupils' success will be defined by their ability to read fluently and skillfully [2]. Conversely, poor readers having reading difficulties as a result of a lack of skills such as perceiving the unity of meaning, using strategies and connecting prior knowledge to new information; hence, they experience reading difficulties (Bonds & Bonds, 1992; Jitendra, Hoppes & Xin, 2000; Moddy, Kennedy & Brady, 1997) [38]. A study also revealed that majority of the students cannot read unseen text with understandable pronunciation and stress and there were some students who were repeater and also some were promoted to grade 3 with learning deficiencies [44]. The main causes of these learning deficiencies were inappropriate teaching techniques, problem in using teaching materials, student's passive participation, memorization tendency, inappropriate assessment, teacher's incompetence, and lack of family support [44].

To adequately address the fundamental problem that too many children are leaving elementary school with reading skills inadequate for the next higher level of instruction, there must be

changes the way on how reading be taught [39]. Teachers must emphasize all kinds of reading, especially critical reading which is not just reading on the lines but it deals with reading between and beyond the lines [40]. Although, educators have long understood the importance of literacy, teaching children to read is very complex [41]. Far too many children have trouble reading and writing [41]. The NICHD-led National Reading Panel, formed by Congress in the late 1990s, reviewed decades of research about reading and reading instruction to determine the most effective teaching methods. The panel found that specific instruction in the major parts of reading (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension) is the best approach to teaching most children to read [42]. There are multiple ways to teach and learn reading [42]. One of which, is to ensure that classroom instruction in kindergarten through Grade 3 is skillfully delivered with a balanced emphasis on word-level and reading comprehension skills, and secondly, must have procedures in place to accurately identify children who fall [39].

Effective reading interventions are essential in closing the literacy gap [43]. Hence, students need opportunities to develop their reading skills [44]. Developing the student's competencies in reading requires exposing students to gradually challenging reading materials [44]. Since the pandemic struck, forcibly changing the way school works in most areas; consequently, have found out causes of the need for reading intervention [45]. Andrew Kay, CEO of the World Literacy Foundation, stated that over "770 million people in the globe can't read or write a single word and a further two billion people struggle to read a sentence" (World Literacy Foundation, 2020), and with the existing literacy gaps as large as this, the pandemic only caused a downward spiral to the lives of children and their futures [46].

The Philippines, in response to the need for the teaching and learning process during the early months of the pandemic, implemented DepEd Order No. 012 s. 2020 "*Adoption of the Basic Education Learning Continuity Plan for School Year 2020-2021 in Light of the Covid-19 Public Health Emergency.*" This covers interventions that grapple with the challenges brought by the pandemic [47]. Furthermore, a new study from the UN Cultural Agency reveals that "more than 100 million more children than expected are falling behind the minimum proficiency level in reading due to COVID-related school closures" (United Nations, 2021) [46]. Accordingly, as per Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), school activities hampered by COVID-19 have resulted in 30 percent decrease in the oral reading fluency of learners, this implies that low performing schools are falling even further behind [48]. With the emergence of new normal in every aspect known, its effect on education is evident [47].

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At the onset of the COVID pandemic in the Philippines, educational institutions were directed to cease in-person classes to help stop the spread of the virus [48]. Learners of today are forced to adapt despite unpreparedness for distance learning [47]. The world's never-ending struggle to achieve higher literacy rates has been an uphill battle for centuries, and the pandemic became its biggest enemy [46]. Due to pandemic, learning motivation is consistently deteriorating; skills development has been superficially delivered and, most unfortunate, reading abilities of our learners are at risk of continuous decline [48]. Likewise, teachers are put in situations where they must continue doing daily duties amidst the complexities that the pandemic brings [47].

According to the Vice President of the Philippines at the same time the Department of Education Secretary, Sara Duterte, "The recent global health crisis has shown some of our weakest areas of our country's education system and has worsened education inequality [49]. The younger, vulnerable, and disadvantaged children are among most affected," [49]. Consequently, school closures due to the COVID-19 pandemic have affected the ability of children to read and comprehend [49]. Basically, the pandemic did not make it easy for students and teachers alike [47. Teachers are even more encouraged to come up with ways to address such a pressing matter due to pandemic [47]. As means of apprehending the literacy problem, there is now a roll-out of seminars in every region of the country that tackles the learning recovery plan focusing on the basic skills of learners—literacy, numeracy, and science [47]. In order to support the efficacy of instruction and reading skills, the appropriate evaluation methodologies have been reinforced to evaluate the actual status of students' reading proficiency [50].

The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) was developed to assess the main skills that are known to predict reading success within the early grades of primary school (first through third grades) [51]. EGRA is an orally-administered test to determine basic reading skills, such as letter-sound identification, word and non-word decoding, and reading comprehension. It has provided educators with a quick and easy-to-interpret feedback on the literacy levels of students in primary schools [52]. Furthermore, EGRA provides a common language to discuss children's literacy abilities and does not measure literacy behaviours, background knowledge or attitudes about reading [53].

In the context of this emerging focus on measuring basic literacy skills, EGRA was developed to provide a battery of assessments of basic reading skills for developing countries to monitor the status of early reading in primary schools [54]. EGRA measures a specific set of critical early grade reading skills, not necessarily all-important literacy skills that is based on the key

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components such as alphabetic principle, phonetic awareness, vocabulary, fluency; comprehension [55] Like all assessments, EGRA has limited functions; hence, the subtasks included in EGRA can be adapted for teachers to inform their instruction [53]. This reading assessment methodology has been adapted for use in more than 60 countries, in 100 languages, as of March 2014 [54].

Apparently, the early grade reading assessment (EGRA) was created to provide a reliable and valid measure of skills that contribute to reading acquisition [53]. According to a particular study, findings indicate that the EGRA has acceptable psychometric properties and an internal structure that is based on the two main factors of "decoding and comprehension" and "oral comprehension" [56]. Additionally, research on the development of reading skills has advanced the understanding of the reading process (August and Shanahan, 2006, Hoover and Gough, 1990, NICHD, 2000) and served as the underpinning of EGRA's conceptual framework [53]. On the other hand, the results of the assessment, as presented by RTI International's senior education advisor Joseph De Stefano during the workshop, suggests that there are gaps in productive teaching methods, which may be associated with achievement, for instance in letter-sound identification—a skill that should be automatic to readers—10-25% of the surveyed children could not identify a single letter sound correctly and the reason for this was instead of saying the sound, the children were saying the letter name. In reading fluency, while the average scores are increasing from Grade 1 to Grade 2, many children still cannot read a single one- or two-syllable word correctly, even after two years of schooling. Likewise, comprehension scores are also weak, and, depending on the language, between 8% and 38% of the students cannot read a single word of a short story [52]. It was also disclosed in a study that assessment data of early grade literacy in low-income countries reveal that many students are not mastering the basic skills of reading (Gove & Cvelich, 2011) [54]. In fact, teaching young children to read is not only the foundation of improving educational outcomes, but also has important implications for future learning [54]. Henceforth, at the teacher's level, a positive finding is that having specific training in reading, and in-service training, are both associated positively with children's reading skills [57]. Moreover, teachers also play a vital role in recognizing the importance of reading and preparing all students no matter what their proficiency for literacy learning because it is the day to day work of educators that ensures the majority of children will learn to read [58].

Methodology

This study used the descriptive survey design that aimed to ascertain and elucidate the present phenomena of the literacy gaps of the early grade pupils as perceived by the teachers handling the lower primary education. The utilization of the descriptive survey design helped and facilitated the researcher in knowing and getting systematic information of the present status of the literacy gaps of the learners. This study demarcated its scope based of EGRA subtasks and the empirical observations of the respondents based on the observed phenomena of the literacy gaps of the learners. Respondents were chosen purposively. They are the teachers that are currently assigned to teach in the lower primary education of the Labangon, Elementary School, Cebu City.

The instrument of the study was an adapted instrument; thus, modification was made to match and wired with the problem statement of the study.

Results and Discussion

This portion presents the results and discussion of the research problems. The results of the study are graphically presented as a form of an overview of the findings. Below the graphical presentation, the discussion of the results is conveyed.

Graphical and table presentation are made to reveal the results of the assessment of the literacy gaps of the lower primary education learners as perceived by the respondents. The assessment centers on the identified Early Grade Reading Assessment or EGRA subtasks as to phonetic awareness, familiar word reading, non-word reading, oral reading fluency, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension.

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Graphical Presentation Of The Literacy Gaps Assessment Amidst The COVID-19

Pandemic As Perceived By The Teacher Respondents Based On The Identified and Adapted
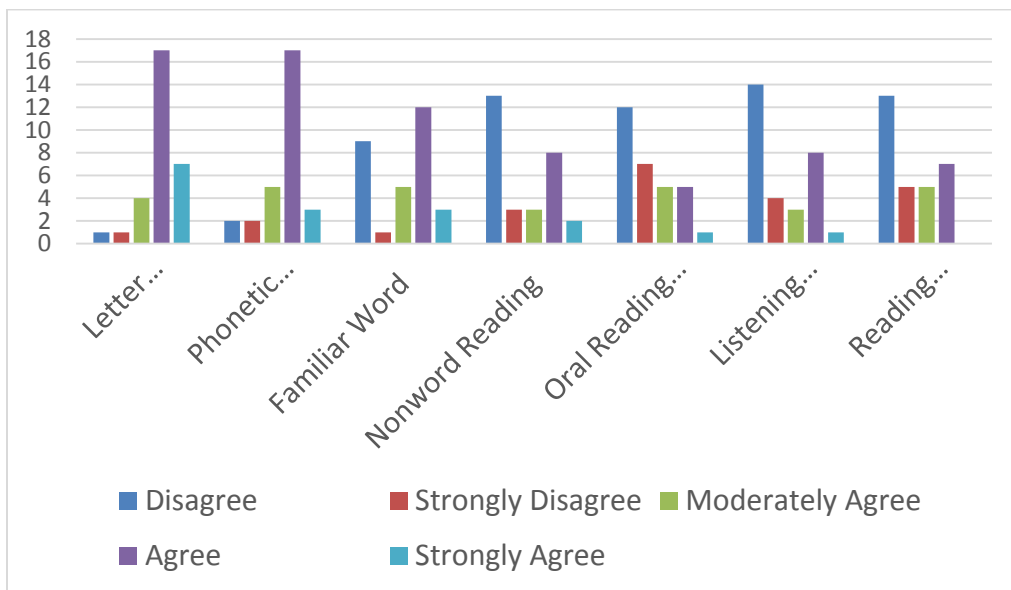
EGRA Subtasks

n-30

Table Presentation Of The Literacy Gaps Assessment Amidst The COVID-19

Pandemic as Perceived By the Teacher Respondents Based On The

Identified and Adapted EGRA Subtasks

n-30

Category	Letter Iden-tifica tion	P (%)	Phon-e-tic Awarenes s	P (%)	Fami liar Word	P (%)	Non-wor d Rea ding	P (%)	Oral Readi ng Fluen cy	P (%)	Listen ing Compre-hensio n	P (%)	Readin g Compr e-hensio n	P (%)
	f		f		f		f		f		f		f	
Disagr ee	1	3.3	2	6.6	9	30	13	43.3	12	40	14	46.7	13	43.3
Strongl y Disagr ee	1	3.3	3	10	1	3.3	2	6.7	7	23.3	4	13.3	5	16.7
Moder	4	13.3	5	16.7	12	40	3	10	5	16.7	3	10%	7	23.3

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ately Agree														
Agree	17	56.7	17	56.7	5	17	10	33.3	5	16.7	8	26.7	5	16.7
Strongly Agree	7	23.3	3	10	3	10	2	6.7	1	3.3	1	3.3		

Letter identification.

As shown in the data found in table on literacy gaps assessment amidst the COVID-19 pandemic based on the assessment of the respondents in terms of letter identification as one of the subtasks of EGRA, it reveals that 17 or 56.7 % of the 30 respondents *agree* that learners can identify or name the letters which means that students have high- level of competency in letter identification. While, seven (7) or 23.3% of the respondents were *strongly agree* which means that learners have highest level of competency in letter identification. It is also revealed that four (4) or 13.3% of the respondents have conveyed that they were *moderately agree* of the skill being assessed which means that pupils have average level of competency. On the other hand, one (1) or 3.3% of the respondents *disagree* and *strongly disagree* which means that that pupils have lower and lowest level of competency in letter identification, however they are few learners that need to be nurtured. This only implies that most of the learners as perceived have the letter identification ability but still gap is observed. According to Piasta and Wagner, alphabet knowledge is a hallmark of early literacy and facilitating its development has become a primary objective of pre-school instruction and intervention. However, little agreement exists about how to promote the development of alphabet knowledge effectively. Children's knowledge of letter names and sounds is the best predictor of their later reading and spelling abilities [16]. Moreover, results revealed from the Exploratory Factor Analysis (EFA) four underlying dimensions occur from the gaps in reading achievement of kindergarten pupils such as letter & sound identification, reading programs, instructional materials and strategies to close the gaps [17]. Additionally, preschool and kindergarten students with poor knowledge of letter names and sounds are more likely to struggle with learning to read and be classified as having reading disabilities [16].

Phonetic awareness

One of the EGRA subtasks that is being assessed in the study is the gap on phonetic awareness of the learners as viewed by the respondents. As shown in table, 17 or 56.7% of the 30 respondents

agree the acquisition of the skill, which means that the learners have the high-level competence in phonetic awareness. It is also shown in the table that five (5) or 16.7% of the respondents moderately *agree* the ability of the pupils in phonetic awareness, which denotes that learners have average level of competence in phonetic awareness.

Explicitly manifested in the table that three (3) or 10% of the respondents are *strongly agree* that skill in phonetic awareness is attained, which means that learners have highest level of competency in phonetic awareness in terms of identifying the onset and rime. Conversely, two (2) or 6.6% of the respondents *disagree* and other two (2) or 6.6% *strongly disagree* the actualization of the skill in phonetic awareness, which indicate that learners have low and lowest level of competency in phonetic awareness in terms of identifying onset and rime sounds. Basically, the data on phonetic awareness implies that although majority have agreed the attainment of the skill as perceived by the respondents, but there is still concern on the gap of phonetic awareness based on the perceived assessment. Phonological awareness is critical for learning to read any alphabetic writing system. Studies have found that phonemic awareness was more predictive of reading development than students' IQ" (O'Connor, 2013, p. 28) [18]. The skill in phonological awareness is typically mastered by second grade of the learners, however, due to the pandemic and different platforms of learning over the past two years, students are now lacking these basic reading skills. [19]. Gaps in phonics knowledge are super common and these gaps can create big problems for students, however, everyone can take steps to prevent gaps and to address them when they show up [20].

Familiar word reading

It is showed in the table the EGRA subtask in terms of familiar word reading. As manifested, 12 or 40% of the respondents were *moderately agree* that students can read a list of words drawn from a corpus of frequent words presented randomly. This only means that learners have the average level of reading competency in familiar word reading. Likewise, nine (9) or 30% of the respondents *disagree* that students have skill on familiar word, which means that students have low level of competency in familiar word reading as perceived. Alternatively, five (5) or 17% of the respondents *agree* that the skill on familiar word reading is manifested by the students, which suggests that students have high level of competency for familiar word reading. It is also overtly shown that 3 or 10% of the respondents *strongly agree* that the students have evident skill on familiar word reading. This means that students have highest level of competency in familiar word reading.

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However, one (1) or 6.6% of the respondents was *strongly disagree* the attainment of the skill, which means that students have lowest ability in familiar word reading as perceived. Generally, the data on familiar word reading generate the implication that students have opposing competence of the skill although competency is explicit to some students but some students need to be nurtured with the skill based on the perceived assessment of some respondents. Readers read familiar words by accessing them in memory, called sight word reading. With practice, all words come to be read automatically by sight, which is the most efficient, unobtrusive way to read words in text [21]. The study of Murray ultimately concludes that the ability to read words (word recognition) and understand those words (language comprehension) lead to skillful reading comprehension [22]. Furthermore, a word is familiar to a learner when he or she is able to decode it (sound out the word). [23]. Familiar word recognition is a reading readiness skill that marks the final alphabetic phase; hence, reading acquisition is successful when a learner is able to automatically recognize many words [23].

Nonword reading

Nonword reading is one of the EGRA subtasks that is being underscored as part of literacy skills. Table 1, shows that 13 or 43.3% of the respondents *disagree* that students can read nonword in terms of numbers, punctuations, or symbols. This means that students have low level competency in nonword reading as perceived. Conversely, 10 or 33.3% of the respondents *agree* that students have the skills that in nonword reading, which signifies that students have high level of literacy competency in nonword reading. Three (3) or 10% of the respondents *moderately agree* of the acquisition of the literacy skill as assessed, which imparts that students have average level of competency. In contrast, two (2) or 6.7% of the respondents *strongly disagree* that students have the literacy competence in nonword reading, which indicates that students have, lowest level of competency in nonword reading as conceived. Conversely, two (2) or 6.7% of the respondents *strongly agree* that student have the nonword reading ability, which conveys that students have highest level of literacy competency in nonword reading. This implies that the perception of the respondents in nonword reading ability of the students varies that have manifested the conflicting perceptions which imparts that there are certainly underlying gaps as observed.

The ability to read nonwords—to 'sound out'—is widely regarded as very important for learning to read and learning to read nonwords ('sounding out') is at least partly isolable from other aspects of learning to read [24].   Most poor readers performed within the range of the reading-

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age controls on the phonological tasks and in nonword naming [25]. A study also showed that third and fifth -grade poor readers to be significantly more impaired than word identification level match first graders on all measures on nonword reading. This finding provides a strong evidence for a deficit in nonword reading skills that is not explained by verbal intelligence [26].

Oral reading fluency

 Oral reading fluency is one of the subtasks of EGRA being assessed through perception based of the respondents. As shown in table 1, 40% or 12 of respondents *disagree* that students can read the narrative or short information with accuracy, with little effort, and at sufficient rate/speed. This means that students have low competency level in oral reading fluency. It is also manifested in the table that 23.3% or 7 of the respondents *strongly disagree* that students have oral reading fluency skills, which means that students have lowest level of competency. Conversely, 16.7% or 5 of the respondents *moderately agree* that students have acquired the assessed competency which denotes that students have average level of competency. It is also showed that 16.7% or 5 of the respondents *agree* that students have competency for oral reading fluency, which means that students have high level of competency as remarked. One (1) or 3.3% of the respondents *strongly agree* that students have the skills in oral reading fluency, which indicates that students have highest level of competency. Generally, the data for oral reading fluency imply the major gaps as observed based on the trends of responses.

In the field of education, especially elementary education, fluency is a critical factor in literacy success [27]. Oral reading fluency (ORF) deficits are a hallmark of reading difficulties [28]. The impact of fluency struggles extends beyond word-level difficulties to include deficits in reading comprehension [28]. Many researchers, including Breznitz, Armstrong, Knupp, Lesgold, and Pinnell, have found that fluency is highly correlated with reading comprehension—that is, when a student reads fluently, that student is likely to comprehend what he or she is reading [29]. Hence, teaching children to read fluently and comprehend a text is one of the main goals of early childhood education, because of the primary aims of reading which are to achieve one's goals, develop one's knowledge and potential, and participate in society (OECD, 2013) [30]. Unfortunately, disfluent readers are more likely to attribute their poor reading to poor ability, and are less likely to exhibit the task persistence that leads to improved academic results [31].

Listening comprehension

Data in table 1, reveals the results of the perceived assessment of the respondents of the identified subtasks of EGRA for literacy skills. Explicitly, the table shows that 46.7% or 14 of

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the respondents *disagree* that students can respond to the questions after listening the passage/short story/directions. This indicates that students have low level of competency. On the hand, 26.7% or 8 of the respondents *agree* that students have competency in listening comprehension which means that students have high level of competency. Four (4) or 13.3% of the respondents *strongly disagree* that students have lowest level of competency in listening comprehension. Likewise, table 1 discloses that 10% or three (3) of the respondents *moderately agree* that students have listening comprehension skills, which imparts students have average level of competency. It is also revealed in the table that 3.3% or one (1) of the respondents answered *strongly agree* that students have the competency, which denotes that students have highest level of competency.

In totality, the data for the assessment of the listening comprehension of the students as perceived imply that there is a higher emphasis on the gaps in listening comprehension, although varied responses are manifested. Based on research, listening skill is critical for language learning [32]. Students have critical difficulties in listening comprehension because universities and schools pay more attention to writing, reading, and vocabulary [33].   Studies also show that there are problems involving this important skill as well [32]. To address this critical problem in listening comprehension, Goh (2000) said that it is very important to teach listening strategies to students and before doing this, teachers should increase learners' knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and phonology [33].

Reading comprehension

Early Grade Reading Assessment aims to assess foundational literacy skills of children in the early grades. This EGRA assessment has its identified subtasks that were highlighted in this study, one of which is the reading comprehension. Data in table 1 show that 43.3% or 13 of the respondents *disagree* that students can answer the questions after reading the reading text material, which means that students have low level of competency in reading comprehension. It is also shown that 23.3% or seven (7) of the respondents *moderately agree* that students have the competency, which denotes that students have an average level of competency. Likewise, 16.7% or five (5) of the respondents *agree* that students have the skills, which conveys that students have high level of competency. Conversely 16.7% or five (5) of the respondents *strongly disagree* the acquisition of the competency, which imparts that students have lowest level of competency in reading comprehension as observed.

Ultimately, the data in reading comprehension have manifested contrasting inputs of responses that largely highlighted the disagreement of the attainment of the competency that imply the existence of the gaps, although varied responses are manifested. A research also shows that reading comprehension is one of the most complex cognitive activities in which humans engage, making it difficult to teach, measure, and research [34]. Moreover, reading comprehension is comprised of complicated factors; mainly comprising of cognitive, linguistic and socio-cultural variables, due to which the development of an effective reading strategy is difficult for language instructors (Alenizi, 2019; Ismail & Tawalbeh, 2015 [35]. As commonly known, comprehension is considered as the essence of reading as it accounts for the process that supports effective extraction of meaning from a written passage [35]. According to Duke, Ward; Pearson (2021), comprehension instruction should begin early, teaching word-reading and bridging skills (including graph phonological semantic cognitive flexibility, morphological awareness, and reading fluency) supports reading comprehension development, reading comprehension is not automatic even when fluency is strong, teaching text structures and features fosters reading comprehension development, comprehension processes vary by what and why we are reading, comprehension strategy instruction improves comprehension, vocabulary and knowledge building support reading comprehension development, supporting engagement with text (volume reading, discussion and analysis of text, and writing) fosters comprehension development, and instructional practices that kindle reading motivation improve comprehension [36]. Hence, the practice of effective reading comprehension techniques is essential to enhance the extent of comprehension among students and thus, language instructors are required to implement adequate reading strategies to improve comprehension and facilitate critical thinking in understanding complex texts [35].

Findings

Based on the data collected and analyzed, the study arrives at the salient findings:
Perceived reading gaps assessment of the respondents of the lower primary education learners during the COVID-19 pandemic using the identified EGRA subtasks reveals that literacy gaps in letter identification, phonetic awareness, and familiar word reading are generally found out that are not manifested as perceived by the respondents that made them agree that the students have the skills. Although varied responses are also evident. On the other hand, it was also found out that nonword reading, oral reading fluency, listening comprehension, and reading comprehension

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as perceived have largely manifested and confined the gaps that made the respondents disagree the acquisition of the assessed literary competencies, though varied responses are also afforded.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, this study concludes that literacy gaps of the pupils as perceived by the teacher respondents are largely dwell on higher level of reading skills and therefore marked the lower level literacy skills of the pupils.

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