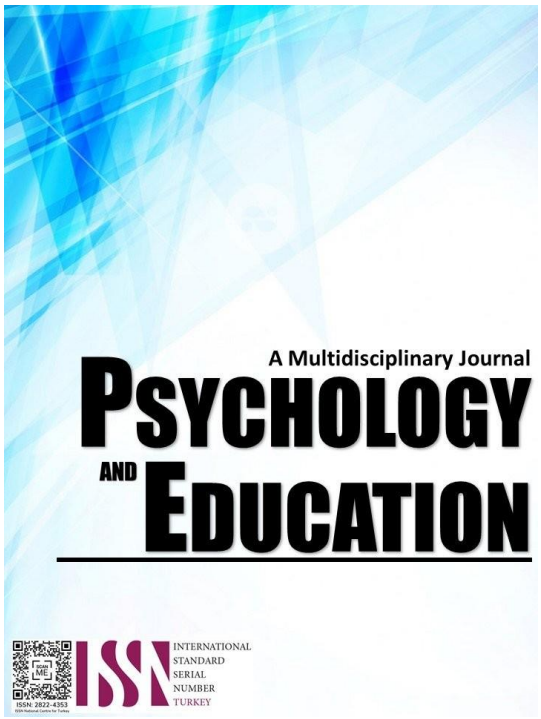
READING SKILL EXPERIENCES AMONG PRIMARY LEARNERS STALLED DURING THE PANDEMIC: A QUALITATIVE INQUIRY



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Research Article

Reading Skill Experiences Among Primary Learners Stalled During the Pandemic: A Qualitative Inquiry

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Abstract

The ability to read is an indispensable skill for a learner to acquire. For it allows a person to learn, develop and succeed in life. It is helpful because it boosts communication skills, cognition, and focus. Since the pandemic, people are more exposed to visual and audio feeds and reading has become less substantial. Hence, this study was conducted in order to assess learner's reading ability coming from Valencia Elementary School. Considering that the learners have been under a program of modular learning, this study sought to find out if the said educational program significantly helped and improved their literacy. This study used Heideggerian phenomenology as the research design. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) popularized by Moustakas modified by Vann Kaam was used to analyze the lived experiences of the participants. Moreover, the participants in this study were chosen using a purposive sampling method. The participants were requested to go into further detail about their experiences in modular learning. This study is anchored on Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences which is a theory outlining the various methods that students learn and pick up knowledge. To gather information, a semi-structured interviewing guide was utilized. The result presented three (3) key themes specifically: (1) Reliance on Teacher's Presence; (2) Vocabulary Challenge; and (3) Literacy Obstacle. To deal with these problems, educators should offer the right level of scaffolding at the right time, indulge learners in multisensory activities, and teach students to be more independent in the classroom. It is expedient to help educators understand better the non-readers and low performing students.

Keywords: *reading skill experiences, challenges, modular learning*

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has also had a severe impact on education. Learners have faced enormous challenges and difficulties towards the learning process. As for primary learners, reading fluency has been the great dilemma for educators (Emia et al., 2022). Indeed, the corona virus disease has exacerbated this learning crisis and learners have fallen behind in their learning. Thus, educators need to tackle the learning crisis head on in order to help every learner gain basic reading skills as well as unlock their potential. The aftermath of this disease has modified the education system of several countries (Reimer et al., 2021). Learners have to adapt with the modular and online learning process (Bahinting et al., 2022; Olleras et al., 2022). Most of the schools conducted distance learning in the remaining months of the year 2019 as well as at the beginning of the year 2021. Teachers had a great responsibility and played a big role in adjusting their pedagogical strategies to ensure the continuation of learning (Abusejo et al., 2022; Ando et al., 2022; Riconalla et al., 2022:). Nevertheless, there is uncertainty whether this learning method successfully attains the goal of education (Abudi, (2021).

Measuring students' learning is crucial when learners return to school. A number of learners faced great challenges in developing the basic skills (Segarino et al., 2022). Conforming to the university-based research (Perez et al., 2022) organization Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), they derived reading fluency of second and third graders less than 30% with the usual standard (D'Souza, 2021). Based on the results of this study, an early intervention is necessary to address the problem of students' poor performance as a result of the pandemic (Cariaga et al., 2022; Ugbamen et al., 2022). The same is true if ineffective readers are not addressed; this could compromise student performance during the teaching and learning process (Raspin et al., 2019). Contrarily, early identification of this issue and academic treatments would significantly boost learners' academic proficiency (Hall & Burns, 2018; Lyytinen, 2008).

The "HAMON: BAWAT BATA BUMABASA" initiative (DepEd, 2019) aims to completely prepare students for the essential reading skill. Inability to read would prevent students from receiving a quality education. Many educational institutions around the world share the same goal, which is to produce readers who are proficient. Such a specific action could not satisfy the demand in accordance with the results of the national assessment of student learning. Many students still fall short of the educational requirements for literacy, numeracy, and early language. For learners, reading comprehension has been a barrier to

success in a variety of subject areas. Because of this, it is challenging to demonstrate their knowledge and understanding across several topics. To resolve this issue, reading comprehension needs to be strengthened (Barnett et al., 2007).

Research Questions

The research objective of this is to give emphasis on the lived experiences of the grade 6 learners in Valencia Elementary School. Furthermore, the research digs into the specifics by responding to the following queries:

1. How was your experience in learning during the pandemic? Was it easy or hard? Why?
2. Did you read the modules by yourself? If not, who helped you?
3. Were you able to understand the lesson in the learning modules? If not, why?
4. Did you find some difficult words in the modules before? What did you do to help you understand them?
5. Did you spend time reading other materials aside from your modules during the pandemic? If yes, what are those?

Literature Review

There are various skills which a learner must acquire and one of them is reading. It serves as a basic building block for learning, regardless of the school subjects. Understanding and interpreting the text are necessary in learning to read. Different linguistics have various definitions of reading.

According to Sutari (2000), it is an action of acquiring meaning from symbols or characters on printed materials. It is interpreted as the process of understanding semantic meaning along with the symbol that represents it. It is a varied process involving word recognition, comprehension of text, fluency, and motivation. Reading is not only looking at written symbols and letters but decoding symbols to arrive at meaning.

When learners have strong reading comprehension skills, they are able to apply their reading in meaningful ways. Westwood (2001) contends that in order to comprehend literature, readers must use prior knowledge to reflect, organize, filter, and interpret on the data they acquire from the material. Unfortunately, a number of learners find reading text difficult. It can be inferred that comprehension involves combining reading with thinking and reasoning. Therefore, understanding the text requires critical thinking skills to be able to accurately understand the written material. Furthermore, Kuswidyastutik (2013) said, "The level of understanding of a problem can be measured by whether someone answers a question about it, and the difficulty is measured by the mistakes made in answering the questions. The researcher believes that the common challenges experienced by learners in understanding the text are questions related to the key ideas, locating references, comprehending the structure, and an assumption that may be derived from the texts. The researcher illustrates potential reading comprehension challenges for learners. These are the following:

Identifying key concepts (skimming)

A sentence that expresses the author's position on the subject is the major theme. The meaning of a particular paragraph or the argument being made regarding the issue is conveyed by the primary concept. According to Vener, defining the key idea is crucial because it is a part of the paragraphs' overall notion. She also stated that the main idea should appear in many locations throughout a paragraph. Typically, the first sentence usually contains the main idea, however it can also be in the second or third sentences. As a result, it could be more difficult to determine the essential theme. It could be challenging for the learners to recognize and identify the passage's key topic.

Finding out details (scanning)

According to Brown (2001), "scanning involves fast looking for specific details within a paragraph." In addition, Kahayanto (2005), the viewer's eyes should be allowed to wander freely across the text when scanning in order to find whatever it is they are looking for, whether it be a particular word, the name of a town, a certain dish, or some other specific information. He believes it is difficult for students to scan properly because they need to be aware of the types of information they need and have a firm conviction about where to look in the text to find that information. In order to locate specific bits of information like names, dates, words or phrases, and references in the text, a learner could find it challenging to separate crucial information from unnecessary text content.

Recognizing textual structure

Hess defines text structure as the hierarchical arrangements made within paragraphs or longer texts that are acceptable for the purpose and genre.

Additional examples of the author's text structures are shown in the following:

1. Sequence (process): The text is written in order of events or chronological order.
2. Descriptive: The text provides a detailed description of the topic of the text.
3. Chronological Order: This pattern reveals the entire course of events. It frequently appears in narrative works.
4. Proposition-support: This textual format starts by expressing a perspective on a subject,and then it provides evidence for that position by using statistics or examples.
5. Compare-contrast: This pattern describes how many events or concepts are similar (compare) or different. (contrast).
6. Problem-solution: This pattern tackles an issue and provides a complete explanation. The essay then presents possible fixes for the issue.
7. Cause-effect: The text shares information about an event and what caused it to occur.

According to Barber (2010), several signal words are connected to various text structures. The signal words connect ideas, highlight connections, and denote changes from one notion to the next. The following phrase denotes text structure:

a. problem/solution: because, since, this lead to
b. cause and effect: because, consequently, this is why, so
c. chronological order: first, next, last, before, after, dates, years
d. descriptive: for example, such as, for instance, specifically

Learners may have difficulties in determining how a passage is organized or structured. Learners must use the signals to guide them as they search for information in order to understand how sentences are put together to produce paragraphs.

Most of the learners find the word or expression in text difficult to grasp. One of the common reasons is that a learner's inability to comprehend a phrase or term in the text is due to unfamiliarity. There are numerous words that a written text contains which are not known to the learners. Apparently, vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. If the learner has limited vocabulary, it can hinder understanding the text. Learners may have trouble understanding the content if it has a lot of new words, even if they are allowed to consult the dictionary. In a nutshell, vocabulary is important because it's the basis of all languages and the unfamiliar words must be taught before conducting reading.

The causes of pupils having trouble understanding literature are numerous and varied. These variables can be found in the learner's environment, in the learner's background, and in various teaching methods (Westwood,2001). The learner's history is something that has its roots in the learner. This became related to how the learner felt about reading, including their drive along with excitement to read as well as their past knowledge.

One of the key elements in raising kids' reading achievement is their level of interest. According to De Bortoli (2010), "enjoyment and interest in a subject influence not only quality, perseverance, and intensity in particular learning scenarios but can also influence participation in educational settings generally and boost their drive." Hence, interest in reading is vital so that the learner would make an effort to comprehend the text.

Having motivation to read is a great help to enhance learners' performance understanding of one's reading comprehension. As Brown notes, motivation encompasses elements like the need for discovery, activity, stimulation, new information, and ego enhancement. (Brown, 2004) It can be said that motivation and interest are closely related to learner effort. According to Ilmu (2012), "if learners are more motivated, they will learn more with greater interest." Hence, motivation and interest have a powerful impact on learners' performance.

According to Mellon (2003), "students typically enter the class with prior information acquired in or out of the classroom. It affects how people understand and filter what they learn. Learners can easily grasp the idea of what they read when they connect the knowledge they already knew into the new accumulated knowledge. On the contrary, if a learner doesn't have extensive knowledge with regard to vocabulary, then it has a great possibility that the learner would find difficulties along the way.

Despite the difficulties brought on by the pandemic, teachers are essential members of the learning community. (Cabello et al., 2022) Teachers are one of the school environment aspects that can significantly improve kids' academic performance. The teacher's responsibility is to communicate her knowledge to the students. A teacher is crucial to the learning process, especially when it comes to teaching reading because they also determine whether or not their pupils are proficient readers.

Wang (2013) stated that despite teachers' extensive subject-matter knowledge, they frequently rely on a single teaching strategy to convey this knowledge. Teaching strategy is fundamental in classroom instruction. Teachers would be aimlessly projecting information that is unbeneficial to the learners if the teacher doesn't make use of different essential strategies.

A classroom environment that is conducive for learning is necessary in education. Sokhbirin (2002) asserts that "someone who lives in a culture where reading and education are valued will find it easier to develop reading skills that can be applied practically outside of the classroom". A positive learning environment also has an impact on learners' performance. Same goes with learning to speak the English language. If the learner is well exposed to such an environment, then there is a great possibility that the learner can speak well. It doesn't take a day to learn the skill but with great practice it will be achievable. Achievement is influenced by the learner's environment, which includes their home and school. Regular parental involvement in their children's schooling is prevalent. Parents must uphold the duty of ensuring that their kids acquire the fundamentals, especially reading. On the other hand, school can also be a great factor why learners couldn't do well. The lack of resources can lead to slow progress of the learner. Books and other educational materials must be provided in order to increase learner's achievement. Therefore, teachers should evaluate which triggers a learner's progress in their learning, especially reading.

Based on the literature review, there are different factors that afflict the reading ability of a learner. Variations in children's reading behavior during the epidemic may hasten already-present social disparities in children's cognitive abilities. Keeping in mind the aforementioned details, this study would aid educators in better understanding low-performing and non-reader learners. For the sake of children whose school year has been impacted by the pandemic, it is crucial to step in as soon as possible.

Theoretical Underpinning

The theory of Multiple intelligences is put forth by Howard Gardner. In accordance with the theory of multiple intelligences, learners can learn in various ways. While some students learn better while moving, others comprehend the content better if they can touch and move the material. This approach is relevant for learners who want to increase their reading fluency and comprehension. Simply by listening to the teacher's conversation, some students' reading comprehension will increase. As they take part in theatrical events, some students' reading levels will rise, while others will develop fluency due to a greater understanding of the subject. According to Lev Vygotsky's theory, pupils learn by integrating their previous knowledge with new knowledge. To help students see the connections between what they already know and what they are learning, teachers ought to do so. Both reading comprehension and fluency can benefit from this. When teachers give students a chance to learn about a subject then they give them reading fluency passages and comprehension questions after studying it and making connections with the new material students should have a higher fluency and comprehension rate.

Numerous factors that affect learners' reading performance have been uncovered by prior studies. These variables can be found in the learner's environment, in the learner's background, and in various teaching methods (Westwood, 2001). Reading instruction requires both comprehension and interpretation of the text. One of the typical explanations for why a learner cannot understand a phrase or term in the text is due to unfamiliarity. It is also known that a major factor in improving students' performance in reading is having a strong motivation (De Bortoli, 2010). Ilmu (2012) asserts that "more motivated learners will study more and do so with greater interest." Moreover, the performance of the learner is also influenced by the learning environment (Sokhbirin, 2002). Regular parental involvement in their children's education is important. Parents have a responsibility to make sure their children learn the fundamentals, specifically reading. Lastly, school or the teacher can also be a major reason why students can't perform well. The learner's progress may be slowed down by a lack of resources and teachers are one element of the educational setting that can greatly enhance students' academic achievement (Cabello et al., 2022). To improve student achievement, a teacher's skills must be sharpened and other teaching aids must be made available.

An idea put forth by Howard Gardner called "multiple intelligences" which is differentiating cognitive abilities into distinct modalities is linked to how readers understand the text. Strong linguistic intelligence allows a learner to understand new words rapidly and retain them. Learning is applied in meaningful ways when students have great reading comprehension skills. Westwood (2001) contends that readers must ponder, arrange, filter, and analyze the information they learn from the text in order to fully understand literature.

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Methodology

Research Design

This study used qualitative inquiry as a research design. Qualitative inquiry is a broad approach that qualitative researchers adopt as a means to examine social circumstances. It relies on the direct experiences of primary learners of Valencia Elementary School. It aims to identify the reading skills of primary learners stalled during the pandemic in the said school.

Sampling Technique

A purposive sampling technique was applied in choosing the participants of this study. It is a non-probability sampling method where researchers rely on their decision in choosing the best subjects to participate. The qualifications of choosing the participants are the following; (a) the subject should be a primary learner (b) the subject should be a learner stalled during the pandemic, and (c) the subject is currently enrolled in the school year 2019 to present.

Data Collection

An intent letter was given to the school head of the primary school. Following approval, the researcher informed the teachers during questionnaire distribution and described its contents. The specifics of the study were explained to the participants by the researcher. The participant's participation in the study was voluntary, and they are free to leave at any time without facing any repercussions. Then, the questionnaires were distributed to the graders. The gathered data were recorded.

Research Rigor

The researcher handles rigor utilizing pertinent criteria and effective tactics for the qualitative design in order to develop the study's rigor. Additionally, Guba and Lincoln (1985) claim that in qualitative inquiry, integrity can take the place of reliability and validity. In order to ensure the authenticity and credibility of the data bracketing was executed by the researchers (Cabello, 2022). Bracketing would be essential for more authentic results (Alase, 2017). Responses of the participants' potential responses were predicted in advance (Cabello et l., 2022) Hence, this would guarantee the accuracy and the reliability.

Ethical Consideration

The researcher guaranteed ethical consideration in conducting the study. Confidentiality of the data never forced the participants to answer questions which they must keep private. The researchers assured the confidentiality of their responses in order to gain the trust of the participants.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed with the use of content analysis. This would help organize and elicit meaning from the data accumulated. In this study, the content analysis was done in accordance to the following steps: preparation, organization, and reporting. The first step was to identify the data collection and sampling as well as selecting the unit. The second step was to collect the data categorized, interpreted and checked. Lastly, the third step was systematic and logical abstractions.

Table *Analysis*

Horizons	*Textural Language*	*Themes*
"Bati, mingaw kaayo kay wala sa eskwelahan. Nindot gyud tong naay maestra ug mga klasmeyt kay sadya. Lisud kaayo kay walay modiscuss ug mopasabot." (P3#1) (It wasn't fun, not being in school is boring. It's really nice to have a teacher and classmates because it's very difficult that there's no one to discuss and explain (the lesson).	Uninspiring and Challenging	Reliance on Teacher's Presence
''Lisud kaayo kay module man, walay maestra nga magtudlo.''(P4#1) (''It is very difficult because it is modular, there is no teacher to teach.")	Self- Struggle	
"Learning during Pandemic was a little bit easy because the modules have guides and if I don't understand something, I will just search it on google	Lack of understanding	

or you-tube but I would prefer face to face learning."(P1#1)	Internet Dependence	
"Yes, I have encountered many difficult words to understand in the modules and what I did is just search on google, you-tube or other valuable resources and dictionaries to have the answer."(P1#4)	Resourceful and motivated	Vocabulary Challenge
"Yes, daghan kaayo. Lisud kaayo ug mga words. Usahay kay mohulam mi og cellphone sa song uncle nya magpasignal mi para maka research kay walay signal sa amoa."(P4#4) (Yes, I encountered a lot of difficult words. Sometimes, we borrow cellphone from my uncle, then we search for signal for us to be able to research because there is no signal in our house.)	Limited Vocabularies	

"Yes I have understood some of the lessons on the modules but sometimes there are a lot of difficult words in the lessons that I can't understand."(P6#3)	Neighbor Dependence	Literacy Obstacle
"Wala, kay dili ko kabasa sa uban nga naa sa module. Gitabangan ko sa akong ante og basa ug answer." (P4#2)(No, because I can't read (the other words) what's in the module. My aunt helped me in reading and answering my modules.")	Relative Dependence Neighbor Dependence	
"Wala, kay si ante ra akong gipaanser sa module" (No, my aunt only answered the modules."(P4#3)		
"Halos lisud manto tanan. Wala ra gyud koy gibuhat bahala wala ko kasabot atong mga lisud nga words. Kay og mangutana kong lola dili pud kabalong mobasa, unya kay usahay busy pud akong silingan ug answer sa iyang module."(P3#4)(Almost everything is	Inability of Guardian to assist	

Result and Discussion

Following data analysis, the researchers identified three emergent core themes: Theme 1: Reliance on Teacher's Presence, Theme 2: The Vocabulary Challenge, Theme 3: Literacy Obstacle. The aforementioned core themes showcased the reading skill experiences of primary learners in modular learning modality. (Please see Table 1. Data Analysis)

Reliance on Teacher's Presence

The pandemic has created many challenges for learners and parents as they transitioned into home-based learning or modular learning. The learners got difficulties in answering their modules in the absence of discussion and explanation coming from their teacher. They found difficulties in answering modules in which the educational background of the family is important for the progress of a learner (Calica, 2020).

Participant 3 mentioned that,
"Bati, mingaw kaayo kay wala sa eskwelahan. Nindot gyud tong naay maestra ug mga klasmeyt kay sadya. Lisud kaayo kay walay modiscuss ug mopasabot."(It wasn't fun, not being in school is boring. It's really nice to have a teacher and classmates because it's very difficult that there's no one to discuss and explain (the lesson).

Due to a lack of comprehension, the learners were distracted and bored while attempting to answer the modules. They want to be in school rather than at home since a teacher will discuss and explain the lesson in school.

Participant 4 mentioned that,
‘‘Lisud kaayo kay module man, walay maestra nga magtudlo.’’ (‘‘It is very difficult because it is modular, there is no teacher to teach.")

Due to a lack of information, the learners struggled to answer the modules and needed the teacher's assistance.

The Vocabulary Challenge

According to Mellon (2003), "students typically enter the class with prior information acquired in or out of the classroom. It affects how people understand and filter what they learn. Learners can easily grasp the idea of what they read when they connect the knowledge they already knew into the new accumulated knowledge. On the contrary, if a learner doesn't have extensive knowledge with regard to vocabulary, then it has a great possibility that the learner would find difficulties along the way. Students need direct instruction in reading as well as assistance from parents and teachers in the creation of pre-, during-, and post-reading techniques. Woolley (2011) contends that the process of deriving meaning from a book is the act of reading comprehension. During the reading process, students require representation of the text to understand but in the time of pandemic, they encountered many difficult words due to limited prior knowledge, the absence of the teacher and as well as limited gadgets.

Participant 1 mentioned that,
"The learning during Pandemic was a little bit easy because the modules have guides and if I don't understand something, I will just search it on google or you-tube but I would prefer face to face learning.

Some learners find some lessons in the modules easy due to the guides and answer keys given in the modules but still they wish to have face to face classes for better understanding.

Participant 1 mentioned that,
"Yes, I have encountered many difficult words to understand in the modules and what I did is just search on google, you-tube or other valuable resources and dictionaries to have the answer."

The process of learning would be made simpler with the aid of technology and internet access. The other resources also are helpful if it was available to different learners at home. However not all learners have gadgets, and other valuable resources at home.

Participant 4 mentioned that,
"Yes, daghan kaayo. Lisud kaayo ug mga words. Usahay kay mohulam mi og cellphone sa akong uncle nya magpasignal mi para maka research kay walay signal sa amoa." (Yes, I encountered a lot of difficult words. Sometimes, we borrow my uncle's phone, then we search for a signal for us to be able to research because there is no signal in our house.)

The availability of learning aid matters most in learning during the pandemic. The resourceful and motivated learners would find learning better. Internet connectivity was really needed for learners in searching the answers of the difficult lessons or words in the module.

Participant 6 mentioned that,
"Yes I have understood some of the lessons on the modules but sometimes there are a lot of difficult words in the lessons that I can't understand."

Most of the learners find the word or expression in text difficult to grasp. One of the common reasons is that a learner's inability to comprehend a phrase or term in the text is due to unfamiliarity. There are numerous words that a written text contains which are not known to the learners. Apparently, vocabulary plays an important role in language learning. If the learner has limited vocabulary, it can hinder understanding the text.

Literacy Obstacle

Learners encountered many challenges in modular learning modality. Many difficult words to read or even to understand but despite the difficulties brought on by the pandemic, teachers are essential members of the learning community (Cabello et al., 2022). Teachers are one of the school environment aspects that can significantly improve kids' academic performance. The teacher's responsibility is to communicate her knowledge to the students. A teacher is crucial to the learning process, especially when it comes to teaching reading because they also determine whether or not their pupils are proficient readers but when the pandemic strikes, pupils with difficulties in reading really need the help of the teacher.

Participant 4 mentioned that,
"Wala, kay dili ko kabasa sa uban nga naa sa module. Gitabangan ko sa akong ante og basa ug answer." (No, because I can't read (the other words) what's in the module. My aunt helped me in reading and answering my modules.")

Most of the learners find the words or expressions difficult to read due to lack of reading practices. Having motivation to read is a great help to enhance learners' performance understanding of one's reading comprehension.

Participant 4 mentioned that,
"Wala, kay si ante ra akong gipaanser sa module" (No, my aunt only answered the modules."

The child basically relies on his aunt's response since he doesn't know any better.In this case, there's no learning being developed in the child.

Participant 3 mentioned that,
"Halos lisud manto tanan. Wala ra gyud koy gibuhat bahala wala ko kasabot atong mga lisud nga words. Kay og mangutana kong lola dili pud kabalong mobasa, unya kay usahay busy pud akong silingan ug answer sa iyang module."(Almost everything is difficult. I didn't really do anything because my grandmother doesn't know how to read and my neighbor who is in high school is also busy answering his modules."

In this modular learning modality, the learning outcomes of the learner are significantly influenced by the parents or guardians. The inability of guardians or parents to help the child has greatly affected the learning outcomes of a child since it was modular.

Participant 4 mentioned that,
"Wala ko nagbasa sa balay kay walay makatudlo nako og pabasa. Dayon si ante busy manpud, dili gani namo mahuman ug answer ang module usahay." (No, because no one can teach me how to read. My aunt is also busy, we can't even finish and answer the module sometimes."

The ability of a child to read is affected when there is a

lack of follow up at home. Since it was modular, certain modules would be left undone or incomplete since other things must be done first.

Conclusion

Therefore, the pandemic that we encountered for two years affected the reading performance of Grade 6 pupils that caused a learning gap due to the modular learning modality. This study finds out that learners learned more in the presence of teachers. Lack of parental support and as well as the educational capacity of the parents to guide their child is one of the greatest factors for the reading delay. Furthermore, this study recommends that educators should offer the right level of scaffolding at the right time, indulge learners in multisensory activities and teach students to be more independent in the classroom. This study suggests more investigations and research in finding out the solutions addressing the increasing numbers of non-readers.

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