IMCC Journal of Science 2024, 4, 96-103
https://myjournal.imcc.edu.ph/

Challenges of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Teachers in Improving Learners' Reading Literacy Skills

Norma Quiñones *

Graduate School, Iligan Medical Center College, Iligan City, Philippines

* Correspondence: norma.quinones@deped.gov.ph

ABSTRACT
This qualitative study explores the challenges encountered by teachers in the Alternative Learning System (ALS) in enhancing learners' reading literacy, along with the strategies they employ to address these difficulties. The ALS serves out-of-school youth and adult learners, many of whom face socio-economic hardships, limited educational backgrounds, and diverse learning needs. Through interviews with ALS teachers, the study identified five core challenges: cultural and language barriers, emotional and social difficulties, learner diversity, limited foundational reading skills, and resource and schedule constraints. Despite these complexities, teachers adopted three primary coping strategies: differentiation and grouping, remediation and reinforcement, and tailored instructional methods. The findings highlight the necessity of culturally responsive materials, individualized instruction, and emotional support to effectively address the reading literacy gap. This study calls for strengthened institutional backing, resource provision, and professional development tailored to the ALS context to empower learners in achieving reading success.

KEYWORDS: Alternative Learning System, differentiated instruction, reading literacy, teacher strategies

ARTICLE INFO: Received: 11 November 2024; Revised: 07 December 2024; Accepted: 15 December 2024; Published Online: 27 December 2024; Volume: 04; Issue: 05; Type: Original Article

1. Introduction

Reading literacy is a foundational skill necessary for academic achievement and lifelong learning. Within the Department of Education's Alternative Learning System (ALS), improving reading and numeracy among learners presents unique challenges due to the non-formal, community-based nature of its programs. As mandated by the Basic Education Act (Republic Act 9155), the ALS offers three core components: the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Program, the Basic Literacy Program (BLP), and the Education Skills Training (EST). The A&E aims to certify learners at the elementary

and secondary levels, while the BLP focuses on eradicating illiteracy among out-of-school youth and adult learners through basic literacy and numeracy instruction (Chavez, 2021).

Despite its inclusive intent, ALS teachers face persistent barriers in fostering literacy skills among learners who often come from marginalized backgrounds. Poor reading proficiency is strongly associated with increased risks of academic failure, dropout, low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression (Martins, 2021). These struggles are compounded by a lack of early reading foundations and inadequate support systems at home. To effectively teach reading, educators must not only understand the nature of reading difficulties but also implement responsive strategies that cater to learners' diverse needs.

Educational theorists stress the significance of foundational skills, appropriate instructional methods, and learner motivation in achieving academic success (Gedik, 2022). According to Bloom's Taxonomy, as cited by Hashim and Ahmed (2021), reading comprehension is linked to higher-order thinking skills, highlighting the importance of instructional depth. Furthermore, Bandura's (2021) social learning theory underscores the critical influence of environmental and cognitive factors on learners' reading performance. ALS teachers are tasked with designing interventions that address both cognitive and emotional needs, often with limited training and resources.

This study draws upon the researcher's twelve years of experience in ALS to explore the complex realities of literacy instruction in this alternative educational setting. While reading scientists have spent decades studying how to support struggling readers, few investigations center on ALS contexts in the Philippines. By identifying both challenges and coping mechanisms, this research seeks to contribute context-specific insights that can inform instructional practices and policy development.

This study investigates the challenges faced by ALS teachers in improving learners' reading literacy. Specifically, it seeks to answer the following questions:

- What are the challenges of ALS teachers in improving learners' reading literacy skills?
- How do ALS teachers cope with these challenges?

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative narrative inquiry design to explore the experiences of ALS teachers in teaching basic literacy and numeracy skills. Narrative inquiry was chosen to capture the detailed and chronological accounts of teachers' perspectives, emphasizing the meaning and essence of their experiences without imposing preconceived theories (Deakin, 2025). This approach allowed for an in-depth understanding of the challenges faced and the coping strategies employed by ALS educators (Alipio & Torres, 2023; Alipio et al., 2025; Torres et al., 2021).

The research was conducted in South 1 and South 2 Districts of the Division of Iligan City, located in Northern Mindanao, Philippines. Iligan City, bounded by the provinces of Misamis Oriental, Bukidnon, Lanao del Sur, and Lanao del Norte, covers

approximately 81,337 square kilometers and comprises 44 barangays characterized by a Type C climate with evenly distributed rainfall (Clemen et al., 2023). The city is administratively divided into thirteen elementary school districts, providing the geographical and institutional context for this study (see Figure 2).

Participants consisted of six purposively selected ALS teachers, with three from Dona Juana Actub Lluch Memorial School in South 1 District and three from Iligan City Central School in the City Central District. Selection criteria required participants to have a minimum of five years' experience teaching literacy and numeracy within the ALS, ensuring their ability to provide rich insights based on sustained engagement.

Data were gathered through semi-structured interviews conducted face-to-face, following approval and permission from relevant authorities. Interviews were audio-recorded using mobile devices, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English for consistency and clarity. Some participants opted to provide written responses to supplement verbal data.

Thematic analysis, as outlined by Braun and Clarke (2024), was employed to analyze the data. This involved six steps: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes by combining related codes, reviewing and refining themes, determining the significance of each theme, and reporting findings. The analysis process was conducted in collaboration with research experts from the Iligan Medical Center College Center for Research, Development, and Publication to ensure rigor and validity.

3. Results

Challenges of ALS Teachers in Improving Learners' Reading Literacy Skills

Five key themes emerged in response to the first research question on the challenges faced by ALS teachers in enhancing learners' reading literacy: (1) low foundational reading skills, (2) learner diversity, (3) resource and schedule constraints, (4) cultural and language barriers, and (5) emotional and social challenges.

Low Foundational Reading Skills. Participants reported that many ALS learners lack essential reading skills such as letter recognition and phonemic awareness. Additionally, some learners can decode words without understanding their meaning, which hampers effective engagement with texts. One teacher shared:

> *"Comprehension is a major issue. Some learners can read words aloud but do not understand what they are reading. This makes it hard for them to answer even basic questions about the text. Many of my students, especially the younger ones, require additional support to bridge this gap." (T1)*

Learner Diversity. Teachers emphasized the wide range of educational backgrounds, ages, and socio-economic contexts of ALS learners, which complicates instruction. Learners include young students to older adults, some of whom have been

out of school for years and come from marginalized communities. One participant explained:

> *"The ALS learners have different life situations. Some work during the day, while others have family responsibilities. One learner who was 35 years old had to drop out of school early and struggled to recall basic literacy skills upon returning." (T3)*

Resource and Schedule Constraints. Inconsistent schedules and limited teaching resources were identified as major obstacles. Teachers noted that meeting learners only once a week hinders skill retention, and the scarcity of materials limits lesson customization. One participant stated:

> *"Consistency is key when teaching foundational reading skills, but our current setup does not allow for that. A learner who showed improvement during one session lost progress by the next because we only meet weekly." (T2)*

Cultural and Language Barriers. Teachers reported challenges related to learners' diverse cultural backgrounds and mother tongues. Instructional materials often do not reflect learners' experiences, and language differences affect comprehension. One stated:

> *"Creating culturally relevant materials is challenging. Many of my students come from indigenous communities and do not connect with standard textbooks, so I write simple stories based on their experiences." (T1)*

Emotional and Social Challenges. Learners' low confidence, socio-economic hardships, and negative attitudes toward learning, particularly among older students, also impede literacy development. One participant explained:

> *"Confidence is a big issue for many learners. I had a high school student who was too embarrassed to participate because of poor reading skills. It took months of encouragement before they engaged more actively." (T3)*

Coping Strategies Employed by ALS Teachers

In response to the second research question on how ALS teachers cope with these challenges, three themes emerged: (1) tailored instructional methods, (2) remediation and reinforcement, and (3) grouping and differentiation.

Tailored Instructional Methods. Teachers adapt their instruction to meet individual learner needs, using techniques such as sight words, phonics, and the MARUNGKO approach to systematically build literacy skills. One noted:

> *"For learners who struggle with reading, especially those from Dangpanan, I use sight words, sound lessons, and letter identification. The Marungko Approach, which uses the modern Filipino alphabet, has helped improve their reading significantly." (T1)*

Remediation and Reinforcement. Teachers conduct initial assessments to determine learner levels and provide remedial instruction for those who lag behind. Repetition and reinforcement help consolidate skills. One shared:

> *"I assess every student at the beginning to determine their level and provide remedial sessions for those still struggling. For learners who do not progress, I work closely to help them catch up." (T2)*

Grouping and Differentiation. Learners are grouped based on reading proficiency, allowing teachers to deliver targeted activities and encourage repeated practice to build skills progressively. One noted:

> *"I group my students according to their BLP, Elementary, and Junior High School levels. This helps me assign appropriate reading activities that focus on letter and sound recognition." (T1)*

4. Discussion

This study revealed that ALS teachers face critical challenges in developing learners' reading literacy. Five key themes emerged: low foundational reading skills, learner diversity, limited resources and time, cultural and language barriers, and emotional and social difficulties. These findings affirm the role of ALS teachers as both instructional facilitators and adaptive responders to the varied realities of out-of-school youth and adult learners.

Low foundational reading skills significantly hinder comprehension. Magliano (2023) emphasized that deficits in phonics, decoding, and meaning-making restrict students' ability to process and retain information. Teacher-participants reported that many learners struggled with basic recognition of letters and sounds, often unable to connect spoken language with print. Some could read words aloud but failed to understand their meaning, which limited higher-level learning.

Learner diversity further complicated instruction. Pura (2023) and Yin and Chai (2020) highlighted that ALS classrooms include students of varying ages, educational levels, and life circumstances. Participants confirmed these realities, noting that some learners returned to school after decades, while others balanced work, family, and school. This diversity required teachers to constantly adjust lessons, use concrete materials, and differentiate instruction to meet the wide range of abilities and experiences.

Resource and schedule constraints were equally pressing. Francisco and Buri (2024) asserted that insufficient instructional time and limited teaching tools directly

impact learning outcomes. ALS sessions, often held only once a week, disrupted continuity and reinforcement. Teachers observed that learners frequently forgot lessons between sessions, slowing progress and requiring repeated remediation. The lack of individualized materials also made it difficult to respond to learners' unique needs.

Cultural and language differences posed further barriers. Luzano (2023) stressed the need to connect content with students' real-life experiences. Participants echoed this, describing how standard learning materials often failed to resonate with learners from indigenous or rural communities. Translating texts into the vernacular, adapting stories based on students' lives, and respecting diverse cultural backgrounds were critical for fostering engagement and comprehension.

Emotional and social challenges added another layer of difficulty. Mendoza (2023) found that many ALS learners experience low self-esteem, anxiety, and social stigma. Teacher-participants shared stories of students who were embarrassed to read aloud or felt they were too old to learn. Encouraging these learners required not only academic strategies but also emotional support and consistent motivation, roles often filled by ALS teachers themselves.

To cope with these challenges, participants employed a range of adaptive teaching strategies. Differentiated instruction—emphasized by Tomlinson (2000)—allowed teachers to tailor content based on learners' literacy levels. Many used the Marungko approach and sight-word methods to build skills from the ground up. Grouping strategies, as supported by Gehrer and Nusser (2021), helped teachers provide focused attention by clustering learners into BLP, elementary, or secondary levels.

Remediation and reinforcement were also central practices. Spain et al. (2022) and Salindab (2022) supported these methods in alternative education settings. Teachers used initial assessments to identify learners' levels and offered extra sessions or reviews for those who struggled. Some even asked learners to repeat modules if they had not mastered core skills.

These findings suggest the need for systemic support in ALS implementation. Curriculum planners must prioritize basic reading skills and equip teachers with differentiated tools and culturally relevant materials. Schedules must allow for regular, sustained learning sessions, while emotional and psychological support for learners should be integrated into the teaching framework. Although this study is limited to a small group within Iligan City, it provides valuable insights into the realities of literacy instruction in alternative education. Future research may expand to explore the impact of technology, long-term outcomes of differentiated instruction, and the role of community partnerships in supporting lifelong learning among ALS learners.

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that ALS teachers face significant challenges in improving learners' reading literacy skills, particularly due to low foundational reading abilities, diverse learner backgrounds, limited resources and time, cultural and language barriers, and emotional struggles among students. Despite these difficulties, teachers employ adaptive strategies such as differentiated instruction, remediation, and grouping to support their learners. These efforts highlight the vital role of ALS educators in

addressing the complex needs of non-traditional learners and emphasize the importance of sustained support for literacy development in alternative education settings.

Acknowledgment

Gratitude is directed to the two peer reviewers for the valuable comments and suggestions that greatly improved this paper.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

Author Contributions: The author confirms sole responsibility for the following: study conception and design, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. The author has approved the final version of this manuscript.

References

1. Alipio, M. M., Pregoner, J. D. M., & Lantajo, G. M. A. (2025). Lived experiences of radiographers assigned to veterinary clinics in the Philippines: A qualitative study. Journal of Medical Imaging and Radiation Sciences, 56(4), 101901.
2. Alipio, M., & Torres, R. (2023). Transition to limited face-to-face classes during the COVID-19 pandemic: Challenges met and lessons learned towards implementing continuous quality improvement. IMCC Journal of Science, 3(1), 15-29.
3. Bandura, A. (2021). Social learning theory and classroom behavior. Education and Psychology Review, 33(2), 187–200.
4. Bloom, B. S., as cited in Hashim, N., & Ahmed, F. (2021). Bloom's Taxonomy and its relevance in reading comprehension. International Journal of Educational Research, 105, 102549.
5. Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2024). Thematic analysis: A practical guide. SAGE Publications.
6. Chavez, A. L. (2021). Literacy programs in the Philippine Alternative Learning System: A review. Journal of Adult Education and Development, 45(2), 121–138.
7. Clemen, I. G., Pundirogong, J., Jabbar, J., & Alipio, M. (2023). Acceptance and Attitude of Muslim Pregnant Women on Transvaginal Ultrasound Scan. IMCC Journal of Science, 3(1), 57-65.
8. Deakin, R. (2025). Understanding teacher narratives in non-formal education settings. Journal of Qualitative Inquiry in Education, 39(1), 56–74.
9. Francisco, J., & Buri, C. (2024). Instructional time and learning quality in Philippine alternative education. Philippine Journal of Educational Studies, 18(1), 45–60.
10. Gehrer, K., & Nusser, L. (2021). Differentiation in literacy instruction: Practices and challenges. International Review of Education, 67(4), 487–505.
11. Gedik, N. (2022). Understanding student motivation and foundational literacy: A pedagogical perspective. Journal of Contemporary Education, 12(3), 233–247.

12. Hashim, N., & Ahmed, F. (2021). Bloom's Taxonomy and its relevance in reading comprehension. International Journal of Educational Research, 105, 102549.
13. Luzano, R. A. (2023). Contextualizing content in ALS literacy instruction: A cultural approach. Philippine Journal of Alternative Education, 8(1), 32–47.
14. Magliano, J. P. (2023). The cognitive foundations of reading comprehension. Journal of Learning Sciences, 32(2), 145–168.
15. Martins, A. C. (2021). Poor literacy and emotional well-being among adolescents. International Journal of Education and Psychology, 14(1), 33–51.
16. Mendoza, R. A. (2023). Social-emotional challenges of ALS learners in the Philippines. Asia-Pacific Journal of Alternative Education, 7(1), 88–103.
17. Pura, A. (2023). Teaching reading in diverse ALS classrooms: A phenomenological study. Philippine Journal of Literacy and Development, 9(2), 59–75.
18. Salindab, C. (2022). DepEd remedial programs for ALS learners. Education Quarterly Review, 12(3), 112–124.
19. Spain, R., Rowe, A., Smith, B., & Goldberg, D. (2022). Reinforcement learning and remediation in education. Journal of Educational Innovation, 28(4), 221–235.
20. Tomlinson, C. A. (2000). Differentiation of instruction in the elementary grades. ERIC Digest.
21. Torres, R., Alipio, M., & Sudaria, R. E. (2021). Organizational, teacher, and administrative determinants of quality improvement implementation during COVID-19 pandemic: Insights from a higher education institution in Iligan City, Philippines. IMCC Journal of Science, 1(Special), 1-14.
22. Yin, H., & Chai, C. S. (2020). Addressing learner diversity in non-traditional classrooms. Journal of Teaching and Learning, 16(2), 101–117.