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The Impact of Differentiated Instruction Strategies on the Reading Skills of Grades I-III Learners

Asnifah Khalic *

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

* Correspondence: agk36892@imcc.edu.ph

ABSTRACT
This qualitative study examines the implementation of differentiated instruction in reading among early grade learners, along with the challenges faced during its application. Based on in-depth interviews with classroom teachers and focus group discussions with learners, the findings suggest that differentiated instruction enhances reading fluency, expands vocabulary, and improves comprehension by addressing diverse learning needs through flexible grouping, varied teaching strategies, and continuous assessment. Teachers noted increased learner motivation, improved confidence, and the ability to respond more effectively to individual differences. However, barriers such as limited instructional time, inadequate teaching materials, lack of professional training, difficulty in managing multi-level classrooms, and minimal institutional support were also identified. These challenges point to systemic limitations that hinder the consistent integration of differentiated instruction in early reading education. The study underscores the need for sustained teacher capacity-building, instructional resource allocation, and administrative support to institutionalize differentiated reading practices in primary schools.

KEYWORDS: differentiated instruction, early reading, learner diversity, reading development

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1. Introduction

Reading proficiency forms the foundation of academic success across subjects and grade levels. However, national assessments such as the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) reveal consistently poor performance, particularly in rural public schools. At Aloon Primary School in the Pantao Ragat District, the 2023–2024 Phil-IRI results for Grades I–III showed that 48.37% of learners were classified as frustrated readers, 26.86% as instructional readers, and only 24.77% as independent readers. These figures reflect significant challenges in foundational literacy, which hinder learners from progressing effectively through the curriculum and developing higher-

order thinking skills (Ocampo, 2019). The urgent need for targeted, evidence-based instruction is evident, especially in the early years of schooling where learners transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn."

One instructional approach gaining attention is differentiated instruction—a strategy designed to meet diverse learner needs through tailored teaching methods, flexible grouping, and ongoing assessment. Differentiated instruction draws from Robert Glaser's concept of Individually Prescribed Instruction and has since evolved into a widely accepted framework in inclusive education. Research indicates that this approach supports improvements in reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary, especially when aligned with tools like the Phil-IRI (Berninger et al., 2021; Ocampo, 2019). Despite its promise, the implementation of differentiated instruction presents several challenges. Teachers often face difficulties in managing multi-level classrooms, lack access to appropriate materials, and receive limited training on how to adapt instruction based on assessment data (Llego, 2018). Additionally, interventions such as reading clinics and word analysis have shown limited effectiveness in early grades when not developmentally appropriate.

Although differentiated instruction is recognized for its potential to improve literacy outcomes, most studies have focused on upper elementary levels or urban school settings. There is limited empirical research on how differentiated strategies are applied and experienced in rural, under-resourced schools in the Philippines, particularly among Grades I–III learners. This gap in the literature makes it difficult to understand how teachers in these settings adapt instruction to address the unique needs of early grade readers. Without context-specific insights, efforts to improve reading instruction may fall short of addressing the persistent literacy gap among the country's most vulnerable learners.

This study investigates the role of differentiated instruction in improving reading performance among early grade learners at Aloon Primary School in the Pantao Ragat District, Division of Lanao del Norte. Specifically, this research seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do the Grades I–III teachers employ differentiated instruction strategies in reading classes?
- What is the impact of differentiated instruction strategies on the reading skills of Grades I–III learners?

2. Methodology

This study employed a qualitative explanatory case study design to examine how differentiated instruction influences the reading performance of early grade learners at Aloon Primary School in the Pantao Ragat District, Division of Lanao del Norte. The explanatory case study approach was selected to explore the experiences, practices, and challenges encountered by teachers and learners as they engaged with differentiated reading strategies in real classroom settings. This design allowed for an in-depth, contextualized understanding of how differentiated instruction is

implemented in a rural public school where learners struggle with reading fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension (Alipio et al., 2025; Torres et al., 2021).

The research was conducted at Aloon Primary School, a public elementary school supervised by the Department of Education and situated in a geographically isolated rural area. The school offers instruction from Kindergarten to Grade 6 and caters to learners from diverse socio-economic backgrounds. Despite existing reading interventions, Phil-IRI results from School Year 2023–2024 revealed that a significant percentage of learners in Grades I–III remained at the frustration and instructional levels. These results underscored the need for instructional reforms tailored to learners' individual reading needs. The school's location and performance provided a relevant context for exploring the implementation and impact of differentiated instruction strategies. The researcher, having established rapport with school personnel through previous academic engagements, was granted access and trust throughout the data collection process.

Participants in this study included three Grades I–III teachers and three learners, each representing one grade level. Teachers were purposively selected based on their years of experience and their prior engagement with reading-related professional development. The Grade I teacher had 6 years of experience, the Grade II teacher had 5 years, and the Grade III teacher had 28 years. All three had attended recent seminars such as the teachers' capacity building on the strategies in teaching initiation of beginning reading, the district training on strengthening pedagogical skill in teaching reading in the mother tongue and bridging process, and the division echo training on project care for NorMin readers. Learners were likewise purposively selected using Phil-IRI results to represent various reading levels: one classified as frustrated, one as instructional, and one as independent. Following the recommendations of Polkinghorne (1989) and Creswell (2013), the sample size was intentionally small to facilitate rich, focused data collection and analysis.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews developed by the researcher and reviewed for content validity by three education specialists. Interview protocols for teachers focused on instructional planning, strategy implementation, observed learner outcomes, and encountered challenges. Learner interviews were adapted to their developmental levels and explored their engagement, motivation, and perceptions of reading activities. All interviews were conducted in a private space within the school and were scheduled in collaboration with the principal to ensure minimal disruption to regular classes. When necessary, questions and responses were translated into Filipino, Binisaya, or the local dialect to enhance participant comprehension and comfort. With informed consent, interviews were audio-recorded and supplemented by field notes to capture non-verbal cues.

Ethical clearance was secured from the Iligan Medical Center College Research Ethics Review Committee, with endorsements from the Dean of the Graduate School. Approvals were also granted by the Schools Division Superintendent of Lanao del Norte and the Principal of Aloon Primary School. Since the study involved minors, informed assent was obtained from learners, and informed consent was secured from their

parents or guardians. The study's purpose, procedures, and confidentiality protocols were explained to both parents and participants. Participation was voluntary, and all information was treated with strict confidentiality and anonymity in reporting.

Interview data were transcribed verbatim and, when applicable, translated into English. Thematic analysis was conducted using Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase framework. The process began with familiarization through repeated readings of the transcripts, followed by initial coding to identify significant statements and recurring patterns. Codes were then sorted into broader themes relevant to the study's objectives, such as "strategy differentiation," "learner engagement," "instructional barriers," and "perceived impact." Themes were reviewed and refined in relation to the research questions. Peer debriefing was conducted to enhance credibility and reliability of findings. This approach provided a systematic yet flexible means of interpreting the effectiveness and challenges of differentiated instruction in the context of early grade reading instruction in a rural school.

3. Results

Experiences of Teachers and Learners on Differentiated Instruction in Reading

Four key themes emerged in response to the first research question on how Grades I–III teachers employ differentiated instruction strategies in reading classes: (1) flexible grouping based on skill levels, (2) varied instructional methods for different learning needs, (3) use of multiple assessment tools to track progress, and (4) observations and informal assessments for individualized support.

Flexible Grouping Based on Skill Levels. Participants emphasized the importance of organizing learners into groups according to their current reading levels to ensure that each child receives targeted instruction. This strategy allowed teachers to deliver lessons tailored to the specific needs of each group. One teacher stated:

> *"With my grade 1 class, I focus on foundational skills. I use a lot of visual aids, songs, and games to teach letter sounds and sight words. I use small group work and try to make the groups based on what skills the learners need to work on." (T1)*

Varied Instructional Methods for Different Learning Needs. Teachers employed multiple strategies to address the diverse learning styles present in their classrooms. Visual, auditory, and kinesthetic activities were used to reinforce reading concepts. A teacher described:

> *"In reading, I use a variety of strategies. For struggling readers, I might use explicit phonics instruction and repeated readings. For advanced readers, I provide opportunities for book clubs and creative writing." (T2)*

Use of Multiple Assessment Tools to Track Progress. Participants reported using a variety of assessment tools such as running records, comprehension quizzes, and learner portfolios to monitor reading growth. One teacher shared:

> *"I use formative and summative assessments, plus learner self-assessments. I also communicate regularly with parents." (T3)*

Observations and Informal Assessments for Individualized Support. Participants highlighted the value of observation in customizing instruction. Teachers relied on informal methods like listening to students read aloud and watching their participation. A teacher stated:

> *"I watch how they participate in class and listen to them read aloud. I also use simple assessments like matching letters to sounds." (T2)*

Impact of Differentiated Instruction on Reading Skills of Early Grade Learners

Four key themes emerged in response to the second research question on the impact of differentiated instruction on reading skills: (1) boosts self-efficacy and willingness to participate, (2) reduces frustration and makes learning more enjoyable, (3) enhances fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary growth, and (4) helps struggling learners catch up while challenging advanced readers.

Boosts Self-Efficacy and Willingness to Participate. Teachers observed that students became more confident and actively engaged when tasks matched their abilities. One teacher noted:

> *"Differentiated instruction fosters a sense of belonging and empowers students. It builds confidence and reduces frustration, leading to greater engagement." (T1)*

Reduces Frustration and Makes Learning More Enjoyable. Participants described how tailoring tasks to learners' levels minimized stress and improved classroom enjoyment. One learner said:

> *"I learn better because I don't get stuck." (L1)*

Enhances Fluency, Comprehension, and Vocabulary Growth. Teachers reported improved reading performance, particularly in fluency and comprehension. One learner agreed:

> *"Reading! I can read more words now." (L2)*

Helps Struggling Learners Catch Up While Challenging Advanced Readers. Participants shared that differentiated instruction served learners across all proficiency levels. One teacher said:

> *"Students who were behind are starting to catch up. Those who were ahead now read more complex books." (T2)*

4. Discussion

This study revealed that differentiated instruction plays a significant role in enhancing reading performance among Grades I–III learners. Eight key themes emerged: flexible grouping by skill level, varied instructional methods, use of multiple assessment tools, observations and informal assessments, increased self-efficacy, reduced frustration, improved fluency and comprehension, and support for both struggling and advanced readers. These findings align with existing literature emphasizing how learner-centered strategies support literacy growth. Doyle (2023) emphasized the importance of grouping learners based on skill levels to ensure instructional alignment. Similarly, Uchkunovich and Akmalovna (2022) highlighted how multimodal instruction promotes engagement and addresses diverse learning preferences. The integration of multiple assessments, as noted by Spaho et al. (2025), provided actionable data for tailoring reading instruction to student needs.

Teacher use of observation and informal assessments allowed for real-time instructional adjustments, creating a responsive learning environment. This approach facilitated a more individualized teaching process, echoing differentiated practices that prioritize learner progress over uniformity. Alfayez (2022) found that instruction aligned to ability levels enhanced self-confidence and participation, while Urfali Dadandi and Dadandi (2022) underscored that matching task difficulty to learner readiness reduced stress and increased enjoyment. Improvements in fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary acquisition further demonstrate the academic value of differentiated instruction. These findings resonate with Strogilos et al. (2021), who concluded that differentiated instruction helps narrow achievement gaps while challenging more advanced learners appropriately.

These outcomes are consistent with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes learning through social interaction and scaffolding, and Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction Framework (2001), which advocates for responsive pedagogy tailored to student readiness, interests, and learning profiles. However, implementation challenges emerged, including teacher workload, time constraints, and the need for ongoing professional development. While flexible grouping and assessment-driven instruction proved effective, their sustainability depended on manageable class sizes and sufficient resources. These challenges reflect broader systemic issues in instructional reform. Similar concerns were raised by Queiroga et al. (2024), who argued for institutional support in delivering equitable reading instruction.

These findings suggest the need for structured support in teacher training, curriculum flexibility, and classroom resourcing. Although focused on a specific grade band, the study contributes valuable insight into the operationalization of differentiated instruction in early literacy. Future studies may consider expanding the scope across

grade levels or subject areas, integrating technology for personalized learning, and employing longitudinal methods to track long-term reading gains. Investigating the influence of external factors—such as socioeconomic status or parental involvement—would also help contextualize instructional outcomes. Through sustained research and practice, differentiated instruction may continue to advance equity and excellence in foundational literacy education.

5. Conclusion

This study concluded that differentiated instruction significantly improves reading fluency, comprehension, and learner confidence among Grades I–III learners. Teachers and students recognized the effectiveness of flexible grouping, varied strategies, and individualized support in addressing diverse learning needs. However, challenges such as limited resources, time constraints, and teacher workload affected consistent implementation. Strengthening teacher training, providing instructional support, and adopting flexible classroom structures can enhance the effectiveness of differentiated reading instruction in early grade classrooms.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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