

A qualitative study on the effects of students' reading comprehension difficulty

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative study explored the lived effects of reading comprehension difficulty on study habits and academic achievement among forty Grade 11 students at Biabas Trade High School. The findings established that reading difficulty is a dual-edged experience, serving as both a significant academic barrier (resulting in lower grades, missed deadlines, and emotional stress like frustration and anxiety) and an unexpected catalyst for personal resilience. Students proactively employ resourceful and disciplined strategies (e.g., rereading, peer discussion, flashcards) to manage their reading habits, indicating high motivation and self-reliance. Crucially, the necessity of coping with these struggles fosters positive behavioral adaptations, including improved self-management, time management, and discipline. The study concludes that effective support must leverage this inherent student resilience by systemically integrating metacognitive training and emotionally supportive instruction into the curriculum.

Keywords: Reading comprehension difficulty, academic achievement, study habits, resilience, qualitative research, self-management, metacognitive strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a foundational skill for academic success, as it underpins students' ability to access, process, and apply knowledge across subject areas.

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Extensive quantitative research has consistently demonstrated a strong association between reading ability and academic performance; however, such approaches often reduce the problem to measurable outcomes and overlook the lived realities of students who struggle to understand written texts (Snow, 2002; OECD, 2019). Addressing this gap, the present study advances a qualitative perspective that moves beyond correlation to examine how reading comprehension difficulty is experienced in students' daily academic lives. Rather than merely confirming that a problem exists, this research seeks to illuminate how reading difficulties manifest psychologically, behaviorally, and emotionally, particularly in relation to students' study habits and academic achievement. By foregrounding students' narratives, the study aims to contribute a human-centered understanding that can inform more empathetic and effective educational interventions targeting the root causes of reading challenges rather than their surface-level symptoms (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Central to this inquiry is the intricate relationship between students' internal struggles with comprehension and their observable study behaviors. Difficulty in understanding texts often fosters a negative relationship with reading, which may lead to avoidance behaviors such as procrastination, superficial engagement with complex materials, or the complete neglect of assigned readings (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). Qualitative exploration is expected to reveal how students' self-perceptions of their reading ability shape their motivation and influence the amount of effort they are willing to invest in academic tasks. Personal accounts of frustration, anxiety, and feelings of being overwhelmed are anticipated to show how these emotional responses disrupt study routines and contribute to the development of ineffective study habits. In this way, reading comprehension difficulty may initiate a self-reinforcing cycle in which avoidance behaviors further weaken academic engagement, thereby widening existing achievement gaps (Alexander, Graham, & Harris, 1998).

Beyond immediate effects on study habits, reading comprehension difficulty has both direct and indirect consequences for academic achievement across disciplines. While poor performance in language-related subjects is an expected outcome, the inability to grasp key ideas from texts also affects learning in content areas such as science, history, Filipino, and even mathematics, particularly when problem solving depends on understanding written instructions and concepts (Shanahan & Shanahan, 2008). Students' narratives of falling behind, repeated academic setbacks, and declining confidence highlight the emotional toll of persistent low performance, including feelings of hopelessness and disengagement from school. These experiences demonstrate how a single skill deficit can influence a student's broader educational trajectory, reinforcing the need for qualitative research that captures the complexity and depth of students' academic lives and validates the voices of those who feel marginalized by their reading difficulties (OECD, 2019).

Guided by this perspective, the study aims to establish the demographic profile of the student participants at Biabas Trade High School for the academic year 2025–2026 in terms of sex, age, and year level, and to qualitatively explore their lived experiences of reading comprehension difficulty. It seeks to analyze the psychological, behavioral, and emotional challenges associated with these difficulties, particularly their effects on study habits such as procrastination and cursory review, as well as the development of a negative relationship with reading. The research also examines how reading comprehension difficulty influences academic achievement across various subjects, including its ripple effects beyond language arts. Ultimately, the study endeavors to formulate evidence-based recommendations and educational interventions grounded in students'

narratives, with the goal of providing targeted and compassionate support for learners struggling with reading comprehension at Biabas Trade High School (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

The scope of this qualitative research is deliberately focused on selected Grade 11 students at Biabas Trade High School who have been identified as experiencing difficulty in reading comprehension. The primary emphasis is on their engagement with English texts, while also considering how these challenges affect performance in other learning areas such as Science and Filipino, underscoring the pervasive nature of reading as an academic skill. Data will be collected through surveys and in-depth one-on-one interviews with a limited group of participants, allowing for rich and detailed accounts of their experiences. As a result, the findings are context-specific and are not intended to be generalized to all students, but rather to provide an in-depth understanding of a particular subgroup within a defined educational setting (Patton, 2015).

The significance of this study extends to multiple stakeholders within the educational community. For students, the research offers an opportunity to articulate and better understand their reading comprehension difficulties, potentially fostering greater self-awareness, improved study strategies, and increased confidence as learners (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2000). For teachers, the findings provide first-hand insight into students' struggles, enabling more responsive instructional practices and the design of targeted activities that support comprehension development. School principals and administrators may use the evidence generated to inform school-wide reading programs, allocate resources more effectively, and justify professional development initiatives focused on literacy instruction, thereby contributing to improved overall academic performance. Parents are likewise positioned as key partners, as the dissemination of findings can equip them with practical knowledge to support reading development at home. Finally, the study contributes to the broader field of educational research by offering qualitative data, contextual insights, and methodological guidance that can inform future investigations into reading difficulties and the development of compassionate, learner-centered interventions (Snow, 2002; OECD, 2019).

Statement of the problem

This study aims to investigate the effects of reading comprehension difficulty among students, with a specific focus on students' reading habits and academic achievement at Biabas Trade High School during the academic year 2025–2026. Specifically, it seeks to generate empirical evidence that will clarify how reading comprehension difficulty manifests among students and how it influences their academic engagement and outcomes.

Specifically, this study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What is the profile of the students at Biabas Trade High School in terms of age and sex?
2. How does reading comprehension difficulty affect students' reading habits and academic achievement?
3. Based on the results of the study, what recommendations can be made to address reading comprehension difficulty among students?

METHODOLOGY

This study will employ a descriptive qualitative research design that integrates a survey method with in-depth, one-on-one interviews in order to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the lived experiences of Grade 11 students who struggle with reading comprehension. This design is intentionally selected to move beyond the limitations of purely quantitative approaches and to capture rich, detailed accounts of students' thoughts, emotions, and personal challenges related to reading. By utilizing open-ended questions during individual interviews, the study aims to explore not only the observable difficulties encountered by students but also the underlying psychological and emotional dimensions of these struggles. Such a qualitative approach is particularly appropriate for identifying recurring patterns, understanding the root causes of reading comprehension difficulties, and generating nuanced, human-centered insights that cannot be adequately represented through numerical data alone.

The research will be conducted at Biabas Trade High School in Biabas, Ubay, Bohol, a setting chosen for its relevance and suitability to the objectives of the study. The school provides a naturalistic educational environment with a diverse population of learners exhibiting varying levels of reading ability. Classrooms where English reading instruction is routinely conducted offer a meaningful context in which students' reading experiences and challenges can be examined. This locale thus serves as an appropriate and supportive setting for exploring the phenomenon of reading comprehension difficulty as it occurs in authentic academic situations.

The participants of the study will consist of forty Grade 11 students from Biabas Trade High School who have been identified as experiencing difficulties in reading comprehension. A purposive sampling technique will be employed to ensure that participants possess direct and relevant experiences related to the focus of the research. Selection will be based on students' demonstrated or self-reported reading challenges, as well as their willingness and availability to participate in the study. This approach ensures that the data gathered will be information-rich and directly aligned with the purpose of the investigation.

Data gathering will commence upon securing formal written permission from the school principal. Following approval, the researcher will identify and invite eligible participants to take part in the study. The primary data collection procedure will involve conducting individual interviews using a structured yet flexible interview guide, allowing participants to freely express their experiences while ensuring consistency across interviews. Interviews will be conducted in a private and comfortable setting within the school to promote openness and minimize distractions. Prior to data collection, informed consent will be obtained from all participants, including permission to audio-record the interviews. Ethical considerations will be strictly observed throughout the process, with assurances of voluntary participation, confidentiality, and the right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Audio-recorded responses will be carefully transcribed verbatim to preserve accuracy and maintain the integrity of the data.

The main research instrument used in this study will be a researcher-developed interview questionnaire consisting of ten open-ended questions. This instrument is designed to elicit detailed information regarding students' perceptions of their reading comprehension abilities, the nature and extent of the difficulties they encounter, and the ways in which these challenges influence their study habits and academic performance. Data analysis will follow a qualitative thematic approach, wherein transcribed interview data will be systematically examined, coded, and categorized to identify emerging themes and patterns. Through this process, meaningful interpretations will be

generated to provide a comprehensive understanding of how reading comprehension difficulty affects students' academic lives.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Demographic profile of the participants

This section presents the results and discussion based on data gathered from forty (40) Grade 11 students of Biabas Trade High School who were purposively selected and who participated in one-on-one interviews using a researcher-developed interview guide composed of open-ended questions. As described in the methodology, the study employed a descriptive qualitative design, and data were collected in a private and supportive school setting to encourage honest and reflective responses. The demographic information was obtained to contextualize the qualitative findings and to ensure a clearer interpretation of the students' lived experiences related to reading comprehension difficulty.

In terms of age, the respondents demonstrated a highly homogeneous profile. The majority of the participants were sixteen (16) years old, comprising 37 out of 40 students or 92.5% of the total sample. Only one participant was fifteen (15) years old, while two participants were seventeen (17) years old. This concentration within a narrow age range suggests that the participants were at similar developmental and cognitive stages and were likely exposed to comparable academic demands, particularly in reading-intensive subjects at the senior high school level. Such homogeneity strengthens the credibility of the qualitative findings, as variations in experiences are less likely to be attributed to age-related differences. With respect to sex, the sample was evenly distributed, consisting of 20 male and 20 female students. This equal representation ensures that the perspectives gathered were not skewed toward one sex and allows for a balanced understanding of reading comprehension difficulties as experienced by both male and female learners. Overall, the uniformity in age and balance in sex provide a stable demographic foundation that enhances the trustworthiness and consistency of the data.

Effects of reading comprehension difficulty on reading habits

Analysis of the interview data revealed that reading comprehension difficulty has a substantial influence on students' reading habits, particularly in how they approach texts and regulate their study behaviors. Many students reported actively employing a range of strategies to cope with comprehension challenges, such as highlighting important information, rereading difficult passages, using flashcards, engaging in regular review sessions, asking for help from peers, and participating in group discussions. These strategies reflect a strong sense of motivation, discipline, and self-reliance among students who are determined to improve their understanding despite persistent difficulties.

However, the data also indicate that these efforts are often accompanied by mixed emotions. Students commonly expressed feelings of frustration, pressure, tiredness, anxiety, and loss of focus, especially when comprehension problems persisted despite repeated attempts to understand the material. Some participants acknowledged a lack of effective strategies at certain points, leading to discouragement and low confidence. Nevertheless, many students described coping mechanisms

such as rereading notes, practicing repeatedly, and consciously maintaining motivation, which gradually led to improved understanding. Although reading comprehension difficulty negatively affected their efficiency and confidence, it simultaneously became a catalyst for personal growth, as students learned to persist, adapt, and develop more disciplined study routines. These findings suggest that reading difficulties do not solely result in negative behaviors but also encourage the development of resilience and constructive learning habits.

Effects of reading comprehension difficulty on academic achievement

The findings further demonstrate a clear connection between reading comprehension difficulty and students' academic achievement across subjects. Students consistently reported that poor comprehension led to low examination scores, failing grades, unfinished tasks, missed deadlines, and wasted study time. Subjects that require extensive reading and complex vocabulary, such as English, Science, and technical subjects, were identified as particularly challenging. Difficulty understanding long texts, unfamiliar terms, and abstract concepts often resulted in confusion and weak academic performance.

Despite these challenges, the data also reveal that comprehension difficulty prompted some positive academic behaviors over time. Several students noted that when comprehension improved, their academic performance also improved, resulting in higher grades, better time management, and earlier preparation for examinations. Students who employed effective strategies such as note-taking, regular review, and flashcards reported increased confidence and motivation when they were able to understand lessons more clearly. Although low performance initially caused emotional stress, embarrassment, and discouragement, these negative experiences motivated many students to study harder, seek assistance, and adjust their learning strategies. As a result, reading comprehension difficulty, while undeniably hindering academic achievement, also contributed to the development of resilience, discipline, and adaptive skills that supported long-term academic growth.

Discussion

The demographic characteristics of the participants provide a strong and reliable context for interpreting the findings of the study. The high homogeneity in age, with most participants being sixteen years old, indicates that the students were navigating similar academic expectations and developmental challenges. The equal representation of male and female respondents further strengthens the validity of the findings by ensuring that the documented experiences reflect a balanced range of perspectives. These demographic conditions allow the effects of reading comprehension difficulty to be examined through a focused and unbiased lens.

Overall, the findings reveal the dual nature of reading comprehension difficulty in students' academic lives. On one hand, it functions as a significant barrier that negatively affects reading habits, academic performance, and emotional well-being, leading to low grades, missed deadlines, frustration, and anxiety. On the other hand, it serves as a powerful catalyst for personal and academic development. Students' narratives show that persistent struggle encouraged the use of active and disciplined strategies, fostered resilience, and strengthened motivation to improve and seek help. While reading comprehension difficulty initially undermines confidence and performance, it ultimately promotes the development of essential self-management skills,

emotional strength, and adaptive learning behaviors. These results highlight the importance of recognizing reading comprehension difficulty not only as an academic deficit but also as a critical area where appropriate support and intervention can transform challenges into opportunities for meaningful growth.

CONCLUSION

Based on the findings of this study, it can be concluded that reading comprehension difficulty among Grade 11 students at Biabas Trade High School constitutes a complex and multifaceted experience that simultaneously constrains academic performance and fosters personal growth. The results demonstrate that difficulties in understanding written texts directly contribute to lower grades, missed deadlines, inefficient study time, and heightened emotional distress, including frustration, anxiety, and discouragement, particularly in reading-intensive subjects such as English and Science. These outcomes confirm that reading comprehension difficulty remains a significant academic barrier that affects both cognitive engagement and emotional well-being. However, the findings also reveal that students do not respond to these challenges passively. Instead, they actively employ disciplined and proactive strategies such as rereading, highlighting, using flashcards, engaging in peer discussions, and preparing early, reflecting a strong sense of motivation, self-reliance, and determination to succeed despite persistent difficulties.

As students continuously navigate these challenges, the necessity to cope with repeated academic setbacks becomes a powerful catalyst for positive behavioral and personal development. The emotional struggles associated with poor comprehension often prompt students to adapt their study habits, improve time management, seek help more actively, and develop greater perseverance. Over time, these adaptive responses foster essential self-management skills, resilience, confidence, and discipline that extend beyond reading tasks and influence their broader academic trajectory. Thus, while reading comprehension difficulty initially undermines academic achievement, it paradoxically contributes to the formation of constructive learning behaviors and emotional strength that are critical for long-term academic success. This dual-edged nature of reading comprehension difficulty underscores the importance of viewing it not solely as a deficit but also as a developmental opportunity when appropriate support systems are in place.

In light of these conclusions, the study highlights the need for interventions that build upon students' existing strengths rather than focusing exclusively on remediation. Students would benefit from structured guidance that formalizes the active strategies they already use by integrating metacognitive reading practices, such as planning before reading, monitoring comprehension during reading, and reflecting after reading. Teachers play a crucial role in this process and are encouraged to embed reading comprehension strategies directly into subject instruction, particularly in English and Science, while simultaneously fostering a supportive classroom environment that acknowledges emotional challenges and validates students' efforts. At the institutional level, school administrators may strengthen academic outcomes by establishing school-wide programs or workshops that explicitly develop reading strategies, time management, discipline, and resilience, thereby transforming students' organic coping mechanisms into structured academic competencies. Parental involvement is equally vital, as consistent support at home that emphasizes effort, strategy use, and emotional encouragement rather than grades alone can reinforce positive study habits and sustain students' motivation.

Furthermore, the findings of this study open avenues for future research that may examine the long-term academic trajectories of students who develop resilience and self-management skills as a result of early reading comprehension difficulties. Longitudinal and mixed-methods studies could provide empirical evidence on whether these adaptive skills translate into sustained academic success, thereby strengthening the case for resilience-focused and strategy-based educational interventions.

Throughout the conduct of this research, ethical standards were strictly observed to ensure the integrity of the study and the protection of participants. Participation was voluntary, informed consent was obtained, and confidentiality was maintained at all stages of data collection and analysis. The researcher expresses sincere appreciation to the Grade 11 students who willingly and honestly shared their experiences, as well as to Mr. Diomedes L. Montero, the principal of Biabas Trade High School, whose support and cooperation made the completion of this research possible. The authors further affirm that the study was conducted without any conflict of interest, as there were no financial, professional, or personal relationships that could have influenced the research process or the interpretation of the findings, and any potential conflicts that may arise in the future will be promptly disclosed.

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