

Functional literacy among intermediate learners: Basis for an enhancement program

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ABSTRACT

This study determined the level of functional literacy of intermediate pupils, as a basis for a functional literacy program. There were 45 intermediate pupils who were chosen from selected elementary schools. Three (3) fables were used as a tool in determining the level of functional literacy of the learners. The learners were required to read each fable and answer questions pertaining to the dimensions of comprehension, drawing inference and applying lessons learned in real life situations. The result revealed that the learners are proficient in their functional literacy skills. However, there were learners who obtained developing performance along the three dimensions, therefore a functional literacy program was proposed. It also showed that the older learners and who are in the higher grades were more proficient than those in the lower grades and younger ones. The researcher suggests that the few pupils who are on the beginning and instructional level must be given extra reading lessons to improve their functional literacy, children must be provided with extra reading materials at home and school, parents are encouraged to collaborate closely with the teachers on the reading needs of the learners to have a basis in guiding their children, the proposed enhancement program for school year, 2026-2027 must be implemented, and researchers may replicate this study in other districts or schools divisions.

Keywords: Functional literacy, comprehension, inference, application.

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INTRODUCTION

As learners engage with 21st century education, literacy extends beyond the mechanical ability to decode written text and encompasses a broader set of competencies that enable meaningful participation in society. The Department of Education (2025) emphasizes that a learner is considered functionally literate only when he demonstrates the capacity to comprehend written information, perform basic mathematical operations, and apply these skills effectively in solving everyday problems. Functional literacy, therefore, represents a level of reading and thinking proficiency that allows individuals to contribute meaningfully to their environment. It is conceptualized as a composite of three essential dimensions, namely comprehension, inference, and application, which collectively reflect a learner's ability not

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only to understand texts but also to derive meaning and utilize insights in real life contexts. Despite global efforts to improve literacy outcomes, recent evidence highlights a persistent comprehension gap among intermediate learners, wherein many are capable of decoding words but struggle to infer deeper meanings or translate lessons into practical situations (Elston et al., 2022).

The transition from Grade 4 to Grade 6 marks a crucial developmental stage in which learners move from learning to read toward reading to learn. According to Duke et al. (2021), this shift necessitates the development of higher order thinking skills, particularly inference and application, which go beyond literal comprehension. This need has become even more urgent in the post pandemic context, where learning disruptions have intensified what the World Bank (2024) describes as learning poverty, leaving many students unable to connect academic content with functional life skills. From a global perspective, UNESCO (2023) frames functional literacy as the socially situated use of reading, emphasizing that learners who are unable to apply lessons to their behavior have not yet achieved true functional literacy. This perspective underscores the importance of assessing not only what learners understand, but also how they interpret and apply knowledge within real world contexts.

In this regard, the present study evaluates functional literacy through the dimensions of comprehension, inference, and application in order to identify specific areas where learning breakdowns occur. Comprehension refers to the learner's ability to grasp the literal meaning of a text, including the identification of characters, settings, and sequences of events as explicitly presented. Inference involves the capacity to read between the lines and interpret implicit meanings or underlying morals based on textual clues and character actions. Application, on the other hand, pertains to the learner's ability to relate these inferred lessons to real life situations and social behaviors, as demonstrated through responses that propose solutions to contemporary problems grounded in the moral of the text. Through this multidimensional framework, the study seeks to generate a precise understanding of learners' functional literacy skills.

The development of reading comprehension remains fundamental to lifelong learning, as it enables individuals to acquire knowledge from written materials and integrate new information with prior understanding. Reading begins with early exposure to visual and textual representations and evolves into a critical skill that supports continuous learning and knowledge transmission across generations (Torres, 2019). However, national data indicate a disparity between basic and functional literacy levels. While approximately 90% of intermediate learners demonstrate basic literacy, only a limited proportion can successfully complete functional comprehension tasks that require higher level skills such as summarizing and interpreting texts accurately (DepEd, 2025). This gap highlights the need for more targeted interventions that address not only decoding skills but also deeper comprehension processes.

International assessments further reveal the extent of the challenge faced by Filipino learners. Results from the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2018 and 2022 show that the Philippines ranked among the lowest in reading comprehension and critical thinking. These findings signal a critical concern within the education system and emphasize the urgency of addressing deficiencies in learners' reading abilities. Supporting this concern, Idulog et al. (2023), citing Minciano (2007), identified two primary issues in reading comprehension among Filipino learners, namely the inability to identify main ideas and difficulty in understanding textual details. These challenges indicate the necessity of strengthening various levels of comprehension, including literal, interpretative, critical, and applied understanding, to ensure deeper engagement with texts and more effective use of reading in practical contexts.

In response to these challenges, the Department of Education implemented the Every Child a Reader Program through DepEd Order No. 45, s. 2022, which aims to ensure that all

learners achieve reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3. As learners progress to higher grade levels, they are expected to demonstrate increased competency in reading, particularly in responding to literary, inferential, and evaluative questions outlined in the Most Essential Learning Competencies. Teachers often utilize literary forms such as fables to develop these skills, as such texts provide opportunities for learners to engage in comprehension, inferential thinking, and moral reasoning that contribute to the development of critical thinking abilities.

Anchored in these educational imperatives, this study examines the functional literacy of intermediate learners through the use of fables as instructional material. It focuses on assessing learners' abilities in comprehension, inference, and application, particularly in relation to their capacity to understand narratives, derive implicit meanings, and apply lessons to real life situations. The findings of the study are intended to serve as an empirical foundation for the development of a targeted Functional Literacy Program, ensuring that learners do not merely acquire reading skills but evolve into critical thinkers capable of applying knowledge and wisdom in their everyday lives.

Statement of the Problem

This study determined the level of functional literacy among intermediate pupils as a basis for a Functional Literacy Program. Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the level of functional literacy of the learners in terms of comprehension, inference, and application?
2. Is there a significant difference in the level of functional literacy of the learners in terms of comprehension, inference, and application when grouped according to profile variables?
3. What Functional Literacy Program may be proposed to improve the functional literacy of the learners?

METHODOLOGY

This study employed the descriptive qualitative research design to determine the level of functional literacy among intermediate learners and to provide a basis for the development of an intervention program. The descriptive aspect focused on identifying the current level of functional literacy in terms of comprehension, inference, and application, while the qualitative aspect guided the formulation of a Functional Literacy Program intended to address the specific literacy gaps identified through the assessment process.

The participants of the study consisted of 45 intermediate pupils from two elementary schools in Western Tabuk District II, Tabuk City Division, namely Gawidan Elementary School and Gaogao Elementary School. The respondents were selected through quota sampling, wherein 15 learners from each grade level participated in the study. This sampling approach ensured representation across the intermediate grade levels and allowed for a balanced assessment of functional literacy among the learners.

The research instrument utilized in the study comprised three fables specifically tailored for intermediate learners in Grades 4 to 6, namely The Ant and the Grasshopper, The Crow and the Pitcher, and The Bundle of Sticks. Each story contained four questions, with one question designed to measure comprehension, one for inference, and two for application. The comprehension domain focused on identifying the plot, characters, and sequence of events, which corresponds to basic information processing. The inference domain assessed the

learners' ability to determine the moral of the story even when it was not explicitly stated, reflecting critical thinking and the ability to read beyond the text. The application domain required learners to explain how the lesson of the fable applies to a modern school problem, thereby measuring practical social and functional utility.

A rubric was used to score the results of the functional literacy test across the three domains. For comprehension at the literal level, a score of 4 or Advanced indicated that the learner identified all key details, characters, and plot points with 100% accuracy, a score of 3 or Proficient indicated identification of most key details with minor omissions, a score of 2 or Developing reflected identification of only the main character or setting with failure to capture what happened, and a score of 1 or Beginning indicated inability to identify the basic plot or characters of the fable. For inference at the interpretive level, a score of 4 or Advanced represented correct identification of the hidden moral or motive with a clear explanation of character actions, a score of 3 or Proficient indicated correct identification of the moral with difficulty explaining the reasoning, a score of 2 or Developing reflected a vague guess about the moral that was only slightly related to the text, and a score of 1 or Beginning indicated inability to identify a moral or provision of an incorrect interpretation. For application at the functional level, a score of 4 or Advanced indicated the proposal of a highly realistic and logical real life solution directly based on the lesson of the fable, a score of 3 or Proficient represented a relevant real life solution with limited detail in execution, a score of 2 or Developing indicated mention of a real life situation with a weak or forced connection to the fable, and a score of 1 or Beginning reflected inability to relate the story to any real life situation or personal behavior.

Ethical considerations were strictly observed throughout the conduct of the study. The researcher secured permission from the school heads and obtained consent from the parents of the learners through a Parental Consent Form that allowed their children to participate in the study. Confidentiality of the data was ensured by excluding the names of the learners in the final report, thereby protecting their identity and privacy.

The data gathering procedure was personally administered by the researcher, who handled the class and established rapport with the learners to encourage active participation in the reading and evaluation activities. The pupils were required to read each fable both orally and silently and were given 20 minutes for each reading session before taking the corresponding test. After completing the first fable, the same procedure was applied to the second and third fables, ensuring consistency in administration and time allocation across all assessment tasks.

For data analysis, specific scoring ranges with corresponding descriptive interpretations were utilized for each dimension of functional literacy. A score range of 10 to 12 was described as Advanced, 7 to 9 as Proficient, 4 to 6 as Developing, and 0 to 3 as Beginning. For the overall functional literacy of the learners, a score range of 28 to 36 was categorized as Advanced, 19 to 27 as Proficient, 10 to 18 as Developing, and 0 to 9 as Beginning. These scoring ranges provided a structured basis for interpreting the learners' performance across the three domains.

Statistical treatments were applied to analyze the collected data. Frequency count and percentage were used to describe the profile of the respondents in terms of age, sex, and grade level. Analysis of Variance and t test were employed to compare the level of functional literacy of the learners according to their demographic profile, while the Post hoc test was utilized to determine significant differences among the sub variables. These analytical procedures ensured an objective and systematic interpretation of the data, thereby supporting the validity of the study's findings and conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Results and Discussion of this study are based on data gathered from 45 intermediate learners using a quantitative descriptive research design with equal distribution across Grade 4, Grade 5, and Grade 6 levels. The sampling approach ensured balanced representation, while the primary data collection instrument assessed functional literacy across three dimensions: comprehension, drawing inference, and application. Statistical analyses included frequency counts, percentages, mean computation, t-test, and one-way ANOVA with post hoc comparisons to determine differences across demographic variables. The discussion that follows is grounded entirely in the data obtained and is interpreted in direct relation to the objectives of the study, ensuring that all findings are explained within the context of functional literacy development among learners.

The demographic profile reveals that out of 45 respondents, 28 or 62% were female and 17 or 38% were male, indicating that the group was dominated by female learners. In terms of age, 9 learners or 20% were 9 years old, 12 or 27% were 10 years old, 14 or 31% were 11 years old, and 10 or 22% were 12 years old, showing that most respondents were 11 years old followed by 12 years old. The grade level distribution was equal, with 15 learners or 33% each from Grades 4, 5, and 6, resulting in a total of 45 or 100.00%. This balanced grouping allowed for meaningful comparison across grade levels. The predominance of female learners aligns with findings from the Philippine Institute for Development Studies, which reported that boys lag behind girls in human capital development, particularly in basic education where 3 out of 4 boys are from the poorest households, contributing to widening gender gaps. The age distribution also falls within the expected range for Grades 4 to 6 as stipulated in DepEd Order No. 32, s. 2024 and DepEd Order No. 17, s. 2025, which emphasize progression within the K-12 curriculum designed to ensure mastery of competencies and preparation for higher education, employment, and lifelong learning.

The level of functional literacy across the three dimensions indicates that learners are generally performing at a proficient level, with mean scores of 7.44 for comprehension, 7.51 for drawing inference, and 8.62 for application. In comprehension, 5 learners or 11.11% scored within 10–12, 28 or 62.22% within 7–9, 11 or 24.44% within 4–6, and 1 or 2.22% within 0–3. This distribution shows that while the majority fall within the proficient range, a considerable portion of learners remains at the developing level, with one learner classified under beginning. This pattern highlights persistent comprehension challenges, consistent with DepEd (2025) reports indicating that approximately 22% of learners struggle to accurately understand written text. The need for targeted interventions is further supported by Elston et al. (2022), who emphasized that strategies such as summarizing and identifying text structures enhance comprehension and learner confidence.

In the dimension of drawing inference, 13 learners or 28.89% scored within 10–12, 15 or 33.33% within 7–9, 14 or 31.11% within 4–6, and 3 or 6.67% within 0–3. These results show that 17 learners fall within developing and beginning levels, accounting for 37.78% of the group, indicating notable difficulty in inferential thinking. This finding aligns with Hall et al. (2019), who identified inference-making as a critical predictor of long-term reading success. The use of fables as assessment material is particularly appropriate, as noted by Pelletier and Beatty (2015), since these texts require learners to extract implicit meanings and life lessons. The data suggest that learners are still developing the ability to bridge coherence gaps, such as identifying motives and emotional states of characters, which are essential skills in higher-order reading comprehension.

In terms of application, the highest mean of 8.62 was recorded, with 18 learners or 40.00% scoring within 10–12, 14 or 31.11% within 7–9, 13 or 28.89% within 4–6, and none or 0.00% within 0–3. This indicates that learners demonstrate relatively stronger ability to apply literacy and numeracy skills in real-life contexts. However, the presence of 13 learners at the developing level suggests that not all learners have fully mastered the ability to translate textual understanding into practical application. Smith and Roberts (2022) emphasize that learners in Grades 4 to 6 must transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn,” which involves applying knowledge across contexts. The findings suggest that while learners can process ideas independently, there remains a need to strengthen their capacity to extract and apply deeper meanings from texts.

Overall functional literacy results show that 0 learners or 0.00% fall under the beginning level, 10 or 22.22% under developing, 25 or 55.56% under proficient, and 10 or 22.22% under advanced, with a mean score of 23.58 classified as proficient. These results indicate that the majority of learners have moved beyond basic decoding and can effectively comprehend, infer, and apply knowledge. However, the presence of 10 learners at the developing level highlights a critical gap that requires intervention to ensure all learners achieve at least proficiency by the end of Grade 6. This contrasts with the findings of Altivo (2023), where learners were at instructional level in literal comprehension and frustration level in inferential and analytical skills, indicating weaker literacy outcomes. The variation observed in this study suggests that functional literacy improves with age and grade level, likely due to increased exposure, experience, and cognitive development.

The analysis of significant differences in functional literacy according to profile variables reveals that for sex, female learners had a mean of 23.60 while male learners had a mean of 23.50, with a *t*-value of -0.103 and a *p*-value of 0.919. Since the *p*-value is greater than 0.05, the null hypothesis is not rejected, indicating no significant difference between male and female learners. This suggests that functional literacy levels are comparable across sexes, despite broader trends in educational disparities.

In contrast, significant differences were found across age groups, with mean scores of 18.30 for age 9, 24.20 for age 10, 24.50 for age 11, and 27.20 for age 12. The computed *F*-value of 9.27 with a *p*-value of <.001 indicates statistical significance at $\alpha = 0.05$, leading to the rejection of the null hypothesis. Post hoc analysis further reveals that significant differences exist between ages 9 and 12 at $p < .001$, between ages 9 and 10 at $p < .01$, and between ages 9 and 11 at $p < .05$. These results confirm that older learners demonstrate higher levels of functional literacy, reflecting developmental progression in cognitive and reading skills.

Similarly, significant differences were observed across grade levels, with mean scores of 18.70 for Grade 4, 26.10 for Grade 5, and 25.90 for Grade 6. The *F*-value of 19.8 with a *p*-value of <.001 indicates a statistically significant difference at $\alpha = 0.05$, resulting in the rejection of the null hypothesis. Post hoc comparisons show significant differences between Grade 4 and Grade 5 and between Grade 4 and Grade 6 at $p < .001$, while no significant difference was found between Grades 5 and 6 with a mean difference of 0.200 and *p*-value of 0.992. These findings indicate that functional literacy significantly improves as learners progress from Grade 4 to higher grade levels, but the improvement stabilizes between Grades 5 and 6, suggesting a plateau in development at the upper intermediate level.

The proposed functional literacy program for School Year 2026–2027 is designed to address the identified gaps, particularly among learners at the developing level. With a time allotment of 30–45 minutes on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays, and using Aesop’s Fables as reading materials, the program targets comprehension, inference, and application through strategies such as teacher modeling, guided practice, and situational analysis. Assessment tasks including story mapping, retelling, inference generation, and real-life application posters are aligned with the dimensions of functional literacy. The use of varied instructional strategies

responds to learner diversity and is supported by Kuhn (2022) and Turner (2010), who emphasized that targeted instructional practices improve reading fluency and comprehension.

In synthesis, the findings demonstrate that while learners generally exhibit a proficient level of functional literacy with a mean of 23.58, significant variations exist across age and grade level, with older and higher-grade learners showing better performance. No significant difference was observed based on sex, indicating equitable literacy outcomes across genders within the sample. The presence of learners at the developing level underscores the need for targeted interventions, which the proposed program seeks to address. These results contribute to the understanding of functional literacy development in intermediate learners and highlight the importance of differentiated instruction and sustained literacy support, thereby providing a strong empirical foundation for subsequent program implementation and evaluation.

CONCLUSION

The findings of the study reveal that the intermediate learners generally demonstrate proficiency in comprehension, drawing inferences, and the application of learned concepts, indicating that a majority have attained a functional level of literacy consistent with expected academic standards. However, the results also highlight that a portion of the learners remain at the instructional level, while a smaller group is still classified at the beginning level, suggesting gaps in functional literacy that require targeted intervention. These disparities underscore the need for sustained and differentiated instructional support to ensure that all learners progress toward becoming independent readers. The proposed program is therefore positioned as a strategic response to these identified needs, with the objective of strengthening learners' reading competencies and promoting autonomy in reading.

In light of these findings, it is imperative that learners who fall within the beginning and instructional levels be provided with additional and focused reading instruction to enhance their functional literacy skills. This support should be complemented by the provision of adequate and varied reading materials both at home and in school to enrich learners' exposure to texts and reinforce skill development. Furthermore, active collaboration between parents and teachers is essential in addressing learners' reading needs, as such partnership enables consistent guidance and reinforcement of reading practices across learning environments. The implementation of the proposed enhancement program for the school year 2026-2027 is therefore strongly recommended to systematically address the identified gaps and support continuous literacy development. Moreover, future researchers are encouraged to replicate this study in other districts or school divisions to validate the findings and contribute to a broader understanding of functional literacy development among learners. Collectively, these conclusions and recommendations emphasize the importance of a collaborative, resource supported, and program driven approach to improving literacy outcomes and ensuring that all learners achieve the goal of independent reading.

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