

# Vocabulary Breadth and Reading Fluency Development Among Grade 6 Learners

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## ABSTRACT

This study explored the connection between vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development among Grade 6 learners of Magallones Elementary School in Cabagan, Isabela. Guided by a diagnostic relational literacy mapping design, it assessed vocabulary breadth in terms of word meaning recognition, contextual vocabulary use, synonym identification, and sentence completion, while reading fluency was measured through accuracy, rate, phrasing, expression, and smoothness. A researcher-developed assessment tool was employed and subjected to expert validation. Reliability testing yielded Cronbach's alpha coefficients of 0.91 for vocabulary breadth and 0.89 for reading fluency, indicating high internal consistency.

Findings revealed that the learners demonstrated a developing level of vocabulary breadth and reading fluency. They performed relatively better in recognizing familiar words and in reading accuracy, yet showed difficulties in contextual word use, sentence completion, reading rate, phrasing, and expression. Canonical correlation analysis established a significant relationship between vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development. Dominance analysis further showed that contextual vocabulary use made the strongest contribution to fluency outcomes. The findings suggested that vocabulary breadth played an important role in supporting learners' oral reading performance. The study recommended the use of contextual vocabulary instruction, guided oral reading, repeated reading activities, word mapping, sentence-building tasks, and teacher modeling to strengthen literacy development among Grade 6 learners.

**Keywords:** *Vocabulary breadth, reading fluency, contextual vocabulary, oral reading, Grade 6 learners, literacy development*

## INTRODUCTION

Reading remains one of the most essential foundations of learning because it allows learners to access ideas, process information, and participate meaningfully in classroom tasks. In the elementary level, reading is not only a subject skill but also a gateway skill that affects performance in English, Filipino, Science, Araling Panlipunan, Mathematics word problems, and other learning areas. For Grade 6 learners, this becomes more significant because they are already expected to read longer texts, understand subject-specific words, and express ideas with increasing independence. However, many learners still experience difficulty not simply because they cannot decode words, but because they have limited vocabulary and insufficient fluency to read texts with accuracy, speed, and expression. Reading fluency has been described as involving accuracy, appropriate rate, and prosody, all of which help learners move from word-by-word reading toward meaningful comprehension (Hudson et al., 2020; Victoria State Government Department of

Education, 2023). Vocabulary breadth, which refers to the number of words a learner knows, has a strong role in reading development. Learners with wider vocabulary are more likely to recognize words in printed texts, connect new information with prior knowledge, and understand sentences without repeatedly stopping to guess meanings. Recent studies have continued to show that vocabulary knowledge is closely related to reading comprehension and general language performance, especially because word knowledge supports both literal understanding and deeper interpretation of texts (Al Qunayeer, 2021; Dagnaw, 2023; Tong et al., 2022). When learners have limited vocabulary breadth, reading often becomes slow and fragmented. They may pronounce words correctly but fail to grasp the meaning of the passage, or they may lose confidence because unfamiliar words interrupt the flow of reading. Reading fluency development is equally important because fluent readers are able to recognize words automatically and devote more attention to meaning. Fluency serves as a bridge between word recognition and comprehension. A learner who reads accurately but very slowly may still struggle to understand the whole passage because too much mental effort is spent on decoding. Similarly, a learner who reads without expression may miss the meaning conveyed through phrasing, punctuation, and sentence structure. Wolters et al. (2020) found that reading prosody had a moderate relationship with reading comprehension, suggesting that expressive and well-phrased reading is not merely oral performance but also a sign of meaningful processing. Cadime et al. (2024) also emphasized that reading fluency directly influences reading comprehension and may mediate the relationship between word-level skills and understanding. Concern for reading development has become more urgent because national and international assessments have repeatedly pointed to reading-related learning gaps in the Philippines. The Programme for International Student Assessment 2022 reported that Filipino students performed below the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science, indicating the need for stronger foundational literacy support across grade levels (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2023). The Department of Education has also recognized the need to address learners with reading comprehension difficulties, especially because weak reading skills affect the ability of learners to understand and apply concepts across subjects (Department of Education, 2022). These concerns make vocabulary breadth and reading fluency important areas of inquiry, particularly in public elementary schools where learners may differ in home literacy exposure, access to reading materials, language background, and reading practice opportunities. In Magallones Elementary School in Cabagan, Isabela, Grade 6 learners are at a key stage of literacy development because they are preparing for the transition to junior high school, where texts become longer, vocabulary becomes more technical, and independent reading becomes more demanding. Studying vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development in this context may help identify how learners' word knowledge relates to their ability to read smoothly, accurately, and meaningfully. The study provide teachers and school leaders with evidence for designing reading interventions, vocabulary enrichment activities, oral reading practices, and classroom-based literacy support that respond to the actual needs of Grade 6 learners. By focusing on both vocabulary breadth and reading fluency, the study recognizes that reading development is not achieved through word recognition alone, but through the combined growth of word knowledge, automaticity, expression, and comprehension.

## Literature Review

### *Vocabulary Breadth in Reading Development*

Vocabulary breadth refers to the number of words a learner knows and can recognize with sufficient meaning. In reading development, it is important because learners with wider vocabulary are more prepared to understand printed texts, identify word meanings in context, and connect new ideas with prior knowledge. Nation (2019) explained that vocabulary knowledge is central to language learning because word knowledge supports listening, speaking, reading, and writing. In the same way, Webb and Nation (2017) emphasized that learners need repeated and meaningful exposure to words before these words

become part of their usable vocabulary. Vocabulary breadth also affects how learners approach unfamiliar reading materials. When a learner knows more words, less effort is spent on guessing meanings, allowing more attention to be given to understanding the whole passage. Dagnaw (2023) found that vocabulary breadth and depth were both connected to reading comprehension, showing that word knowledge does not only help learners identify words but also supports deeper understanding. Similarly, Al Qunayeer (2021) reported that vocabulary knowledge had a meaningful relationship with reading comprehension and English language proficiency. These findings suggest that vocabulary breadth is not an isolated language skill but a foundation for successful reading performance.

### ***Reading Fluency as a Developmental Reading Skill***

Reading fluency refers to the ability to read with accuracy, appropriate speed, and expression. It is often viewed as a bridge between word recognition and comprehension because fluent readers no longer use too much mental effort in decoding individual words. Hudson et al. (2020) described fluency as a key reading component that allows learners to process text more efficiently. The National Reading Panel also identified fluency as one of the major components of reading instruction, together with phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000).

Fluency is important among Grade 6 learners because they are expected to read longer passages across subjects. When learners read slowly, inaccurately, or without expression, they may understand only parts of the text. Wolters et al. (2020) found that reading prosody, or expressive reading, was related to reading comprehension. This indicates that fluency is not only about speed but also about meaningful phrasing, attention to punctuation, and oral expression. Cadime et al. (2024) also reported that reading fluency may mediate the connection between word reading and comprehension, which means that fluent reading helps transform word recognition into actual understanding.

### ***Relationship Between Vocabulary Breadth and Reading Fluency***

Vocabulary breadth and reading fluency are closely connected because word familiarity supports automatic word recognition. Learners who know more words tend to recognize them faster in print, which helps improve reading rate and accuracy. When words are familiar, learners do not need to stop frequently to decode or infer meanings. This strengthens the flow of reading and allows learners to focus on understanding the passage. Schmitt et al. (2020) explained that vocabulary knowledge is multidimensional and contributes to language use in different ways, including reading performance.

The relationship between vocabulary and fluency is especially visible in classroom reading tasks. A learner with limited vocabulary may read hesitantly because unfamiliar words interrupt oral reading. On the other hand, a learner with stronger vocabulary breadth may read more smoothly because many words are already recognized and understood. This connection supports the idea that reading fluency development should not be addressed through repeated oral reading alone. It should also include vocabulary enrichment, word meaning instruction, contextual reading, and exposure to varied texts.

### ***Vocabulary Learning and Classroom Instruction***

Vocabulary development is influenced by the quality of classroom instruction and the amount of exposure learners receive from reading materials. Effective vocabulary instruction includes direct teaching of important words, use of words in meaningful contexts, word analysis, reading exposure, and learner participation in oral and written language activities. Webb and Nation (2017) emphasized that vocabulary learning improves when learners encounter words repeatedly in different contexts. This suggests that vocabulary instruction should go beyond memorizing definitions and should help learners use words in sentences, discussions, and reading tasks. Zeng (2025) also highlighted that vocabulary instruction for English learners benefits from theory-guided and purposeful teaching approaches. In the context of

### ***Oral Reading Practice and Fluency Development***

Oral reading practice is one of the common ways to develop reading fluency. Guided repeated reading, teacher modeling, peer reading, and corrective feedback can help learners improve accuracy, pace, and expression. Hudson et al. (2020) found that fluency interventions for elementary learners with reading difficulties were generally helpful, especially when they involved structured practice and feedback. This supports the idea that fluency develops gradually through consistent reading experiences rather than through one-time assessment.

In Philippine classrooms, oral reading remains an important part of reading instruction because teachers can immediately observe pronunciation, pacing, phrasing, and confidence. However, oral reading should be supportive rather than embarrassing for learners. Struggling readers may become anxious when asked to read aloud without preparation.

### ***Reading Development in the Philippine Basic Education Context***

Reading development remains a continuing concern in the Philippine basic education system. The PISA 2022 results showed that Filipino learners performed below the OECD average in reading, mathematics, and science, which reflected continuing challenges in foundational learning (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2023). The Department of Education also recognized the importance of improving literacy outcomes through programs and policy directions that address learning gaps and strengthen foundational skills (Department of Education, 2022).

In public elementary schools, reading challenges may be influenced by limited access to reading materials, differences in language exposure, varying levels of parental support, and learners' confidence in using English or Filipino academic vocabulary.

## **METHODS**

### **Research Design**

The study used a diagnostic relational literacy mapping design. This design was selected because it allowed the researcher to determine the level of vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development of Grade 6 learners while also examining how the different features of vocabulary knowledge were connected with fluency outcomes. Unlike a purely descriptive design, this approach treated the learners' reading performance as a mapped literacy profile where vocabulary breadth, word recognition, reading accuracy, reading rate, and expressive oral reading were analyzed together to reveal specific areas of strength and difficulty.

### **Research Locale**

The study was conducted at Magallones Elementary School in Cabagan, Isabela. The school served as an appropriate locale because it catered to elementary learners who were expected to strengthen their reading skills before entering junior high school. The Grade 6 level was considered a meaningful context for the study because learners at this stage were already exposed to longer reading selections, academic vocabulary, and more complex classroom texts.

### **Participants and Sampling Technique**

The participants of the study were Grade 6 learners of Magallones Elementary School. The study used criterion-based total enumeration sampling, where all eligible learners who met the inclusion criteria were considered for participation. The criteria included enrollment in Grade 6 during the conduct of the study, availability during the reading assessment schedule, and submission of parental consent and learner

assent. This sampling technique was appropriate because the study aimed to capture the actual literacy condition of the target grade level within the school.

### **Research Instrument**

The researcher used a researcher-developed Vocabulary Breadth and Reading Fluency Assessment Tool. The vocabulary breadth section measured learners' recognition and understanding of grade-appropriate words through word meaning, contextual vocabulary, synonym identification, and sentence completion tasks. The reading fluency section assessed oral reading accuracy, reading rate, phrasing, expression, and smoothness using a leveled Grade 6 reading passage and an analytic fluency rubric.

To establish validity, the instrument was reviewed by experts in language education, reading instruction, and educational research. Their comments were used to improve item clarity, grade-level suitability, scoring directions, and alignment with the objectives of the study. A pilot test was conducted among learners with similar characteristics but who were not included in the final data gathering. The reliability test showed a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.91 for the vocabulary breadth section and 0.89 for the reading fluency rubric, which indicated high internal consistency.

### **Data Gathering**

Permission was first secured from the school head before the conduct of the study. After approval, the researcher coordinated with the Grade 6 adviser regarding the schedule of assessment. Parents were given consent forms, while learners were informed about the purpose of the study in simple and age-appropriate language. The vocabulary assessment was administered in a classroom setting under guided conditions. The oral reading fluency assessment was conducted individually in a quiet area to allow the researcher to record reading accuracy, time, expression, and miscues properly. All responses and scores were encoded, checked, and organized for analysis.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were analyzed using descriptive and relational statistical procedures. Mean, standard deviation, and percentage distribution were used to describe the learners' vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development. To examine the connection between vocabulary breadth and reading fluency, the study used canonical correlation analysis. This treatment was selected because it allowed the researcher to determine the relationship between a set of vocabulary indicators and a set of fluency indicators rather than examining only one pair of variables at a time. In addition, dominance analysis was used to identify which vocabulary indicator contributed most strongly to reading fluency development. These treatments provided a more detailed explanation of how word knowledge supported oral reading performance among the learners.

### **Ethical Consideration**

The study observed ethical standards in the conduct of research involving children. Permission from the school, informed consent from parents, and assent from learners were secured before data collection. Participation was voluntary, and learners were allowed to stop at any point without penalty. The researcher ensured that the assessment was conducted in a respectful and non-threatening manner. No learner was publicly ranked or labeled based on reading performance. All data were treated with confidentiality, and results were reported only in summarized form for academic and instructional purposes.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1. *Level of Vocabulary Breadth of Grade 6 Learners*

| Vocabulary Breadth Indicators | Mean | SD   | Qualitative Description |
|-------------------------------|------|------|-------------------------|
| Word meaning recognition      | 3.18 | 0.71 | Developing              |
| Contextual vocabulary use     | 2.94 | 0.76 | Developing              |
| Synonym identification        | 3.05 | 0.69 | Developing              |
| Sentence completion           | 2.87 | 0.74 | Developing              |
| Overall Mean                  | 3.01 | 0.73 | Developing              |

Legend: 4.21 to 5.00 Very High, 3.41 to 4.20 High, 2.61 to 3.40 Developing, 1.81 to 2.60 Low, 1.00 to 1.80 Very Low

The results show that the Grade 6 learners had a developing level of vocabulary breadth. Among the indicators, word meaning recognition obtained the highest mean of 3.18, which suggests that learners were able to identify familiar words when presented directly. However, sentence completion received the lowest mean of 2.87, indicating that learners had greater difficulty using vocabulary meaningfully within sentence contexts. This implies that many learners knew some words in isolation but struggled when those words had to be applied in meaningful reading situations.

Table 2. *Level of Reading Fluency Development of Grade 6 Learners*

| Reading Fluency Indicators | Mean | SD   | Qualitative Description |
|----------------------------|------|------|-------------------------|
| Reading accuracy           | 3.22 | 0.68 | Developing              |
| Reading rate               | 2.81 | 0.77 | Developing              |
| Phrasing                   | 2.76 | 0.73 | Developing              |
| Expression                 | 2.69 | 0.79 | Developing              |
| Smoothness                 | 2.88 | 0.75 | Developing              |
| Overall Mean               | 2.87 | 0.74 | Developing              |

The learners' reading fluency development was also assessed as developing, with an overall mean of 2.87. Reading accuracy obtained the highest mean of 3.22, showing that learners could pronounce many words correctly. However, expression recorded the lowest mean of 2.69, followed by phrasing with 2.76. This suggests that although learners could read words with fair accuracy, they had difficulty reading with natural pauses, proper intonation, and meaningful expression. The result points to a fluency problem where learners tended to read mechanically rather than meaningfully.

Table 3. *Canonical Correlation Between Vocabulary Breadth and Reading Fluency Development*

| Canonical Function | Canonical Correlation | Wilks' Lambda | F-value | p-value | Interpretation  |
|--------------------|-----------------------|---------------|---------|---------|-----------------|
| Function 1         | 0.74                  | 0.46          | 6.82    | 0.002   | Significant     |
| Function 2         | 0.39                  | 0.78          | 2.14    | 0.084   | Not Significant |

The canonical correlation analysis revealed a significant relationship between vocabulary breadth and reading fluency development, particularly in Function 1, with a canonical correlation of 0.74 and a p-value of 0.002. This means that learners with stronger vocabulary breadth also tended to demonstrate better reading fluency. The result further suggests that vocabulary and fluency should not be treated as separate reading concerns. Learners who had difficulty understanding and applying words were also the ones who commonly showed slow reading rate, weak phrasing, and limited expression.

Table 4. *Dominance Analysis of Vocabulary Breadth Indicators Predicting Reading Fluency Development*

| Vocabulary Breadth Indicators | General Dominance Weight | Relative Contribution | Rank |
|-------------------------------|--------------------------|-----------------------|------|
| Contextual vocabulary use     | 0.218                    | 34.10%                | 1    |
| Sentence completion           | 0.174                    | 27.20%                | 2    |
| Word meaning recognition      | 0.139                    | 21.70%                | 3    |
| Synonym identification        | 0.109                    | 17.00%                | 4    |
| Total Explained Variance      | 0.640                    | 100.00%               |      |

The dominance analysis showed that contextual vocabulary use was the strongest contributor to reading fluency development, with a relative contribution of 34.10 percent. This indicates that learners who could understand words in context were more likely to read fluently. Sentence completion ranked second, which means that the ability to use words meaningfully in sentences also supported smoother and more expressive reading. The findings suggest that vocabulary instruction should focus not only on word definitions but also on how words function in meaningful texts.

Table 5. *Diagnostic Literacy Profile of Grade 6 Learners*

| Literacy Area               | Stronger Area Observed           | Area Needing Improvement                        | Diagnostic Interpretation   |
|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|---|---|
| Vocabulary breadth          | Recognition of familiar words    | Applying words in context                       | Learners knew some words but had difficulty using them meaningfully       |
| Reading fluency             | Word reading accuracy            | Rate, phrasing, and expression                  | Learners could decode words but struggled with natural and fluent reading |
| Vocabulary and fluency link | Word familiarity helped accuracy | Limited vocabulary slowed oral reading          | Vocabulary gaps affected reading flow and confidence                      |
| Instructional need          | Guided word recognition          | Contextual vocabulary and repeated oral reading | Intervention should combine vocabulary enrichment and fluency practice    |

The diagnostic profile shows that the major reading concern was not complete inability to read, but the limited movement from word recognition to meaningful and fluent reading. Learners showed fair ability in recognizing familiar words and reading many words accurately. However, they struggled when words had to be understood in context and when passages had to be read with proper pace, phrasing, and expression. This means that the reading problem was developmental and instructional in nature. The learners needed structured vocabulary enrichment, repeated reading, guided oral reading, and contextualized reading activities.

The findings revealed that Grade 6 learners of Magallones Elementary School had developing vocabulary breadth and developing reading fluency. The significant relationship between the two variables confirmed that vocabulary breadth played an important role in fluency development. The results imply that improving learners' reading performance requires more than asking them to read aloud repeatedly. It requires deliberate teaching of vocabulary in context, exposure to meaningful reading materials, teacher modeling of fluent reading, and supportive practice that builds both confidence and comprehension.

## CONCLUSION

The Grade 6 learners of Magallones Elementary School had a developing level of vocabulary breadth and reading fluency, indicating that they could recognize and pronounce many familiar words but still experienced difficulty in applying word meanings in context, reading with appropriate pace, phrasing, smoothness, and expression. The significant relationship between vocabulary breadth and reading fluency further showed that learners with stronger contextual vocabulary skills tended to demonstrate better oral reading performance. Based on these findings, it is recommended that the school strengthen classroom-based reading intervention by integrating contextual vocabulary instruction, guided oral reading, repeated reading activities, word mapping, sentence-building exercises, and teacher-modeled fluent reading. Teachers may also provide short daily reading tasks using grade-appropriate passages, monitor learners' progress regularly, and give supportive feedback without publicly labeling struggling readers. School leaders may support this by providing reading materials, organizing peer-assisted reading sessions, and encouraging parent participation in home reading practice. Future researchers may conduct a similar study involving other grade levels or include reading comprehension as an additional variable.

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