

Multilingual Exposure and Its Influence on the Reading Comprehension Skills of Grade 6 Learners

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ABSTRACT

This study employed a quantitative design, specifically the non-experimental correlational approach to investigate the influence of multilingual exposure on the reading comprehension of Grade 6 learners in one of the elementary schools of Lanao del Norte, Mindanao, Philippines. A standardized Multilingual Exposure Questionnaire and the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) were utilized as primary instruments for data collection. The study employed a total population sampling, wherein all Grade 6 learners were included as participants. Findings revealed that learners exhibited a high level of multilingual exposure, indicating frequent interaction with more than one language in their daily environment at school, at

home, and in the community. However, despite this high exposure, their reading comprehension levels were found to be low. Statistical analysis further showed that the computed correlation ($r = 0.112$, $p = 0.278$) between multilingual exposure and reading comprehension was weak and non-significant. This suggests that while pupils are immersed in a multilingual setting, such exposure does not necessarily translate into improved comprehension skills in English. Instead, other variables, like the quality of teaching, the availability of reading materials, students' socioeconomic backgrounds, and the types of reading activities, might be even more important in building literacy skills. These findings highlight the importance of looking beyond just language exposure when tackling reading difficulties. It's suggested that the school and stakeholders enhance literacy instruction with clear teaching methods, offer reading materials that are both accessible and suitable for different levels, and promote parental involvement in helping pupils develop their reading comprehension, making multilingualism a valuable asset instead of a hurdle in their learning journey.

Keywords: *multilingualism, multilingual exposure, reading comprehension, Phil-IRI*

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in reading is the cornerstone of academic success and a critical part of learning across all content areas. However, in many multilingual settings, learners encounter a highly complex linguistic environment that they interact with on a daily basis. Imagine a sixth grader reading English textbooks, chatting with friends in Filipino, and speaking a mother tongue at home, all on the same day. This linguistic reality influences the way learners construct meaning from texts, and it has implications for the role of input in second language readers' comprehension abilities. Although there is a growing number of multilingual classrooms, the relationship between multilingualism and comprehension is timely and pertinent.

Multilingual education has been internationally acknowledged as a factor that could potentially improve cognitive flexibility or metalinguistic awareness, which are crucial to reading comprehension attainment (Bialystok, 2018). Yet challenges remain, particularly in settings where learners are required to read and learn material through a second or third language. The recently released Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2018 results showed that in fact, many multilingual students can barely understand difficult texts, especially when not taught in their dominant language (Jacob, 2019; OECD, 2019). At the national level, the Philippines still struggles with the same difficulties. According to the 2018 PISA report, Filipino students were placed in the lowest of reading literacy attainment with 83% of its 15-year-olds unable to reach the minimum proficiency level (Department of Education, 2019). Locally, some schools adhering to the policy of Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) sought to develop reading outcomes; however, varying levels of language exposure among learners result to discrepancies in reading comprehension (Tadlas, 2022).

Multilingual exposure refers to the amount and variety of contact with more than one language that takes place in an individual's environment, including interactions at home, school, and in the community (De Houwer, 2015). It affects cognitive and linguistic progress, especially with regard to vocabulary learning, inferencing, and reading comprehension. In contrast, reading comprehension is regarded as the ability to construct meaning incorporating linguistic, cognitive, and metacognitive processes (Snow, 2002). Prior research indicates that multilingual experience can have a positive, negative or null effect on reading depending on factors such as the learner's language dominance, proficiency level, and the pedagogical support they receive (Cummins, 2001; Leung, 2019). For example, balanced bilinguals may have better comprehension because of cross-language transfer and greater cognitive control (Bialystok & Barac, 2012).

Regardless of the increasing research on multilingualism and literacy, there is not much knowledge gained as to how multilingual exposure specifically affects the reading comprehension of elementary learners in the Philippine setting. The majority of the studies available in the literature are directed toward high school or university students, which is a research gap in elementary education. Therefore, with specific reference to linguistic experience and literacy performance in this study investigates the relationship between multilingual exposure and reading comprehension of Grade 6 learners as a contribution to local evidence about how language experience influences various aspects of literacy performance.

This investigation is important for several reasons. First, it adds to the theoretical discourse regarding the relationship between multilingualism and literacy development in early and mid-elementary school learners. Second, teachers and curriculum developers could use its results to consider how reading comprehension can be facilitated with students' linguistic backgrounds. Third, the results could have implications for efforts by the Department of Education to reform language and literacy instruction via MTB-MLE. Last, the study might serve as a reference point for further investigations into additional language and cognitive factors that also contribute reading outcomes in multilingual contexts.

Literature Review

Multilingualism

Multilingual exposure refers to a person's daily exposure and interaction to more than one language in the environment. According to Bialystok (2018), multilingualism enhances metalinguistic awareness, cognitive control, and language flexibility. On the other hand, exposure isn't necessarily balanced proficiency in both languages; some learners may be fluent speakers of one language but struggle to read even simple texts in another. Cummins (2000) highlighted the Interdependence Hypothesis which suggests that first language literacy skills can transfer to the second language under conditions of sufficient exposure and instruction. This suggests that a strong foundation in the mother tongue can help with reading comprehension in other languages.

Reading Comprehension

Reading comprehension is defined as the process of understanding a text through word recognition, vocabulary knowledge and prior knowledge (Perfetti & Stafura, 2014). The Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) states that reading comprehension is the result of decoding and linguistic comprehension. Thus, if word recognition skills are poor, then it inhibits comprehension regardless of the degree of exposure to the language.

The alignment of orthographic system and language of instruction affects reading comprehension in multilingual settings. Tamis-LeMonda et al. (2019) have shown that social and environmental factors, such as family language practices, play a key role in early literacy development. Learners with exposure to print-rich and linguistically-enhancing environments have more developed word knowledge.

Studies conducted in multilingual regions show mixed findings. Bialystok (2018) found cognitive gains for bilinguals in problem solving and executive control, but Verhoeven (2007) suggested multilingual exposure might not necessarily be beneficial with regard to reading without specific instruction in decoding and comprehension.

In the case of the Philippines, Nolasco (2013) claimed that literacy support is provided by the MTB-MLE program when instruction in first language is linked systematically to Filipino and English literacy. But challenges remain in materials availability, teacher training and a shift to higher-grade reading expectations

METHODS

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative correlational research design to determine the relationship between multilingual exposure and the reading comprehension. The correlational approach was used since it allowed the researcher to examine the extent to which two variables, multilingual exposure and reading comprehension were statistically related without manipulating the variables involved (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). The study focused on identifying whether the degree of exposure to multiple languages has a significant effect on pupils' reading comprehension performance.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in a public elementary school in Salvador, Lanao del Norte during the School Year 2025–2026. Strategically located in the heart of the municipality, the school offers basic education and remains committed to upholding the mission and vision of the Department of Education in producing quality learners.

Participants and Sampling Technique

The study employed total population sampling, wherein all 137 Grade 6 learners were included as participants. The inclusion criteria required that participants (a) were officially enrolled as Grade 6 pupils, (b) had completed at least two years of MTB-MLE instruction, (c) who used 3 languages whether at home, in school and at the community and (c) provided informed consent along with parental or guardian permission. Participation in the study was voluntary, and respondents were assured of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses.

Research Instrument

Two standardized instruments were utilized for data collection in this study: the Multilingual Exposure Questionnaire (MEQ) and the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI). The Multilingual Exposure Questionnaire (MEQ) measured the degree of pupils' exposure to multiple languages across three domains: home, school, and community. The questionnaire was adapted from existing multilingualism and language exposure scales (De Houwer, 2015) and modified to fit the Philippine context.

It consisted of Likert-scale items assessing how frequently and in what contexts pupils used or heard each language. The Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), developed and validated by the Department of Education, served as the tool for assessing pupils' reading comprehension levels. The Phil-IRI includes passages in Filipino and English, followed by comprehension questions designed to measure literal, inferential, and critical understanding of texts. Scores were classified according to DepEd's standard reading level categories: independent, instructional, and frustration levels.

Data Gathering

Data were collected through surveys administered to the participants through survey questionnaire and Phil_IRI Test. Prior to the administration of the instruments, the study's aim was explained, and informed consents were secured.

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics through the Jamovi. Descriptive statistics such as mean, standard deviation, and frequency distribution were computed to summarize the levels of multilingual exposure and reading comprehension among pupils. Inferential statistics, specifically Pearson's Product-Moment Correlation Coefficient (r), were used to determine the relationship between multilingual exposure and reading comprehension. The significance level was set at 0.05. Additional analyses, such as linear regression, were conducted to assess the predictive effect of multilingual exposure on reading comprehension performance.

Ethical Consideration

This study followed all ethical standards for research involving human participants. Before data collection began, approval was obtained from the elementary school. The researcher also complied with the requirements of the ethics committee to ensure participant protection and full ethical compliance. Participation was voluntary, and informed consent was secured from all respondents. To protect the privacy of all participants, all information gathered was kept strictly confidential, and responses were anonymized. Throughout the research process, the researcher observed the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice. This compliance ensured that the participants were treated fairly, that risks were minimized, and that the potential benefits were maximized.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Level of Multilingual Exposure

This subsection presents the results of the Multilingual Exposure Questionnaire administered to the respondents. The questionnaire sought to determine the level of pupils' exposure to Maranao, Bisaya, Filipino, and English in three major domains: home, school, and community.

Table 1 presents the level of pupils' multilingual exposure at home. As shown, Maranao and Bisaya received high mean scores, indicating that these are the dominant languages used in daily family interactions. Filipino and English, while occasionally used for media and academic tasks, registered moderate levels of exposure.

Table 1. *Multilingual Exposure at Home*

| Language | Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|----------|---------------|--------------------|
| Maranao | 3.80 | High |
| Bisaya | 3.65 | High |
| Filipino | 2.90 | Moderate |
| English | 2.85 | Moderate |

| Language | Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Overall Mean | 3.30 | High |

Legend: hahaha

The data indicate that pupils experience a high level of multilingual exposure at home, particularly through the use of Maranao and Bisaya. This suggests that pupils' linguistic development is deeply influenced by their immediate family environment, where native and regional languages are dominant.

Table 2 shows the level of multilingual exposure at school. The results reveal that pupils use all four languages frequently. Filipino and English are widely used during classroom instruction, while Maranao and Bisaya are often used among peers in informal communication.

Table 2. *Multilingual Exposure at School*

| Language | Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Maranao | 3.50 | High |
| Bisaya | 3.70 | High |
| Filipino | 3.80 | High |
| English | 3.75 | High |
| Overall Mean | 3.69 | High |

Legend: hahaha

The findings indicate that pupils show a high degree of multilingual exposure at school, utilizing Maranao, Bisaya, Filipino, and English in both academic and social interactions. This highlights the school's role as a linguistically rich environment that fosters effective communication across languages.

Table 3 presents the pupils' level of multilingual exposure in the community. Maranao and Bisaya remain highly used in public settings, while Filipino and English are moderately used in formal or media-related contexts.

Table 3. *Multilingual Exposure in the Community*

| Language | Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|--------------|---------------|--------------------|
| Maranao | 3.85 | High |
| Bisaya | 3.70 | High |
| Filipino | 3.10 | Moderate |
| English | 2.90 | Moderate |
| Overall Mean | 3.39 | High |

Legend: hahaha

The results show that pupils continue to experience high multilingual exposure in the community, particularly through Maranao and Bisaya, which are used in social, religious, and transactional activities. Filipino and English remain accessible but less frequently used in local communication.

Table 4 summarizes the overall multilingual exposure of pupils across the three domains. The overall average weighted mean of 3.46, verbally interpreted as High, reveals that Grade 4 pupils are frequently exposed to more than one language in their daily environment.

Table 4. *Multilingual Exposure in the Community*

| Domain | Over-all Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|-----------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Home | 3.30 | High |
| School | 3.69 | High |
| Community | 3.39 | High |

| Domain | Over-all Weighted Mean | Descriptive Rating |
|-----------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Overall Average | 3.46 | High |

Legend: hahaha

Overall, the findings indicate that pupils exhibit a high level of multilingual exposure across all domains, home, school, and community. The data affirm that the learners' linguistic environment provides multiple opportunities for interaction in Maranao, Bisaya, Filipino, and English, contributing to the development of their multilingual competence.

The results of the Multilingual Exposure Questionnaire reveal that the learners operate in a richly multilingual context. Their consistent use of Maranao and Bisaya at home and community settings reflects strong cultural and linguistic roots. Meanwhile, their exposure to Filipino and English at school underscores the influence of formal education and national language policy.

This high level of multilingual interaction suggests that learners naturally navigate among languages, supporting findings from sociolinguistic research that frequent exposure enhances cognitive flexibility, literacy, and communicative competence.

Level of Reading Comprehension

This subsection presents the reading ability level of Grade 6 learners at Salvador Central Elementary School in terms of both word recognition and reading comprehension, based on Phil-IRI assessment results. Phil-IRI, or the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory, is a nationally implemented tool by the Department of Education for assessing students' reading proficiency. The results help identifies students' reading levels: independent, instructional, or frustration.

Table 5 presents the reading ability of learners, which was categorized into three levels of reading comprehension: Independent, Instructional, and Frustration. The classification was based on their ability to recognize and understand words during a reading task.

Table 5. *Level of Reading Comprehension*

| Level of Reading Comprehension | Frequency | Percentage |
|--------------------------------|-----------|------------|
| Independent | 38 | 27.73 |
| Instructional | 62 | 45.25 |
| Frustration | 37 | 27.00 |
| Total | 137 | 100.00 |

Table 5 presents the level of reading comprehension among Grade 4 pupils. The data reveal that 62 pupils (45.25%) are at the instructional level, 38 pupils (27.73%) are at the independent level, and 37 pupils (27.00%) fall under the frustration level.

The predominance of the instructional level suggests that most pupils are developing readers who can recognize words with reasonable accuracy but still require teacher assistance and contextual support. This indicates a transitional stage toward reading fluency and automaticity. According to Durkin (2019), pupils in the middle grades often shift from decoding individual words to reading more fluently with comprehension, which aligns with the observed results.

The 27.73% of pupils who reached the independent level demonstrate strong mastery of word recognition skills, enabling them to read fluently and comprehend texts without assistance. Pikulski and Chard (2005) emphasized that independent readers can recognize words automatically, which allows them to focus their cognitive resources on constructing meaning rather than decoding. This finding suggests that a portion of the pupils have achieved the expected reading proficiency for their grade level.

However, the 27.00% of pupils at the frustration level remain a concern. Learners at this stage often struggle to identify words and comprehend reading materials even with support. Harris and Hodges (2018) pointed out that readers at the frustration level possess limited sight vocabulary and phonics knowledge,

which impedes reading fluency and comprehension. Similarly, Snow, Burns, and Griffin (1998) argued that insufficient exposure to print and lack of systematic reading instruction contribute to low reading performance among struggling readers.

The distribution of pupils across the three levels highlights the diversity in reading ability within the Grade 4 cohort. This variation may stem from differences in home literacy environments, teacher scaffolding, and classroom resources. The finding supports Cunningham and Stanovich's (2001) assertion that frequent reading exposure and guided practice contribute significantly to automatic word recognition and overall reading growth.

Overall, the results underscore the need for targeted reading interventions to help pupils move from frustration and instructional levels toward independent reading proficiency. Approaches such as phonics-based instruction, guided oral reading, and vocabulary enrichment have been proven effective in improving word recognition and fluency (Rasinski, 2012). Strengthening these instructional practices can promote reading independence and comprehension, thereby improving overall literacy achievement among Grade 4 pupils.

Relationship Between Multilingual Exposure and Reading Comprehension Performance

This subsection presents the relationship between multilingual exposure and reading comprehension performance of the respondents.

Table 6. *Relationship Between Multilingual Exposure and Reading Comprehension Performance*

| Variables Correlated | r-value | p-value | Interpretation |
|---|---------|---------|-----------------------|
| Multilingual Exposure and Reading Comprehension | 0.112 | 0.278 | Weak, Not Significant |

Table 6 presents the correlation between multilingual exposure and reading comprehension performance among the Grade 4 pupils. The computed correlation coefficient of $r = 0.112$ with a p-value of 0.278 indicates a weak and statistically non-significant relationship between the two variables. This means that while pupils are highly exposed to multiple languages (Maranao, Bisaya, Filipino, and English), such exposure does not significantly affect their reading comprehension levels.

This finding suggests that multilingual exposure alone does not ensure better comprehension outcomes. Pupils may frequently use different languages across contexts—home, school, and community—but this does not automatically translate into enhanced reading skills, especially when literacy instruction is not equally developed in all languages. According to Cummins' (1979) Threshold Hypothesis, the cognitive advantages of bilingualism or multilingualism emerge only when a learner achieves adequate proficiency in each language. Without this proficiency, language exposure may not significantly influence reading comprehension performance.

The weak correlation may also be explained by language separation across domains. Pupils often use Maranao or Bisaya in their homes and communities, while Filipino and English are used primarily in school. This compartmentalized language use limits cross-linguistic transfer of reading-related skills. Koda (2007) supports this view, emphasizing that positive transfer occurs only when learners possess sufficient literacy experience and metalinguistic awareness in both their first and second languages.

Similarly, Bernardo (2005) observed that Filipino multilingual learners benefit from exposure to several languages only when reading instruction is explicit and systematic in both the first and second language. Without structured reinforcement and vocabulary alignment, multilingualism alone may not enhance comprehension. Therefore, instructional design should integrate translanguaging strategies, where teachers allow the use of pupils' first languages alongside English or Filipino during reading activities to foster understanding.

Despite the weak correlation, multilingual exposure remains a valuable foundation for language learning. What is crucial is how this exposure is strategically utilized within the classroom. Literacy

programs that recognize and build upon pupils' home languages can help bridge comprehension gaps, making reading instruction more inclusive and effective.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that multilingual exposure is a rich linguistic resource but not a direct determinant of reading success. When supported by systematic instruction and inclusive pedagogy, pupils' diverse language backgrounds can become powerful assets for literacy development. Schools, teachers, and parents must therefore work collaboratively to create an environment where multilingualism and literacy learning reinforce each other, leading to more equitable and effective reading outcomes for all learners.

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