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Improving Reading Achievement Through the ARAL Learning Recovery Program: A Multilevel Study Using Phil-IRI

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Abstract

Many learners reach the end of junior high school still reading at the frustration level, just before the Senior High School curriculum demands independent, research-based reading. The Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program is the Philippines' national learning recovery intervention, yet independent evidence of its effect at the secondary level remains limited. To determine the effectiveness of the ARAL Program in improving the reading achievement of Grade 10 frustration-level readers at Pinamungajan National High School, Cebu Province, School Year 2025–2026, as measured by the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI). A quantitative, single-group pretest–posttest design was used. All 86 Grade 10 learners classified at the frustration level in both Word Reading and Reading Comprehension were enumerated, together with six ARAL tutors. Data came from the Phil-IRI (before and after the program), a learner profile questionnaire, and a researcher-made tutor questionnaire on perceived reading challenges. Data were analyzed using frequency, percentage, weighted mean, standard deviation, and the exact McNemar test. Most learners were aged 15–16 (90.7%), male (75.6%), and had parents or guardians with a high school education (74.4%); 82.6% attended eight or fewer ARAL sessions. Tutors rated learner-, home-, school-, and teacher-related factors as very serious concerns (overall $M = 3.46$). After the program, 52 learners (60.5%) advanced from the frustration to the instructional level in Word Reading and 11 (12.8%) did so in Reading Comprehension; no learner declined and none reached the independent level. Both changes were statistically significant (exact McNemar $p < .001$ and $p = .001$, respectively). The ARAL Program was associated with significant gains in reading achievement, with markedly larger gains in decoding than in comprehension. Closing the comprehension gap likely requires explicit comprehension instruction, more consistent attendance, and stronger home, school, and tutor support. A Reading Achievement Enhancement Plan is proposed on this basis.

Keywords: *ARAL Program; reading achievement; Phil-IRI; frustration level; reading intervention; pretest–posttest design; Cebu, Philippines*

Introduction

Reading is a foundational skill for academic success, cognitive development, and lifelong learning. Globally, the share of children in low- and middle-income countries unable to read and understand a simple text by age 10, known as learning poverty, rose from 57% to an estimated 70% between 2019 and 2022 (World Bank et al., 2022). In the Philippines, the 2024 Functional Literacy, Education, and Mass Media Survey reported a basic literacy rate of 93.1% but a functional literacy rate of only 70.8% among Filipinos aged 10 to 64 (Philippine Statistics Authority [PSA], 2025). Learners often master decoding without progressing to full comprehension, and unresolved gaps tend to compound as texts become more complex, surfacing as lower grades, disengagement, and dropout risk. Recent reporting of PSA data indicates that nearly 18.9 million Filipinos who completed secondary education between 2019 and 2024 may be functionally illiterate (Tribune.net.ph, 2025). Diagnostic assessment and structured intervention are central to addressing these gaps. The Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) classifies learners at the independent, instructional, or frustration level, guiding differentiated instruction (Department of Education [DepEd], 2018; Velasco et al., 2022). Phil-IRI-based studies have used these classifications to document persistent below-grade-level reading and to ground intervention programs (Misanes & Pascual, 2023), and sustained, scaffolded, and targeted interventions have been shown to improve fluency and comprehension (Delos Santos & Javier, 2024; Santos & Reyes, 2023).

The ARAL Program, institutionalized through Republic Act No. 12028 (Republic of the Philippines, 2024) and implemented under DepEd Order No. 18, s. 2025 (DepEd, 2025), is the national learning intervention for learners below minimum proficiency in reading, mathematics, and science. Early implementation reports are encouraging; for example, one DepEd progress report noted that the number of identified struggling readers at a pilot site fell from 575 to 233 by midyear (Sun.Star Manila, 2025). However, most available evidence is administrative or journalistic. Independent research that evaluates ARAL at the secondary level using a formal pretest–posttest design with the Phil-IRI, and that pairs reading data with implementers' reports of challenges, is scarce, particularly in Cebu Province. Grade 10 is a strategic point for such an evaluation. Under the MATATAG Curriculum, it is the last year of Key Stage 3 and the final checkpoint before learners enter Senior High School (DepEd, 2024), where coursework such as Practical Research assumes that students can read critically, synthesize multiple sources, and construct evidence-based arguments. A Grade 10 learner still reading at the frustration level therefore faces those demands without the comprehension foundation they require.

The study is anchored on three complementary theories that together describe a developmental sequence from struggling to independent reading: Anderson's Schema Theory (activation and restructuring of prior knowledge), Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (scaffolding within the Zone of Proximal Development), and Skinner's Behaviorist Theory (consolidation through practice, reinforcement, and feedback). This sequence parallels the frustration, instructional, and independent levels of the Phil-IRI. Its legal bases are

DepEd Order No. 14, s. 2018, which established the revised Phil-IRI (DepEd, 2018), DepEd Order No. 18, s. 2025, and Republic Act No. 12028. This study therefore determined the effectiveness of the ARAL Program in improving the reading achievement of Grade 10 learners at Pinamungajan National High School, School Year 2025–2026, as a basis for a reading enhancement plan. Specifically, it sought to (a) describe the learners' profile (age, sex, number of ARAL sessions attended, parents' or guardians' educational attainment and occupation, and number of siblings); (b) determine the issues and challenges affecting reading achievement, as perceived by ARAL tutors; (c) determine learners' reading levels before and after the program; (d) test whether reading achievement differed significantly before and after the program; and (e) formulate a reading enhancement plan. The null hypothesis, tested at $\alpha = .05$, was that there is no significant difference in Grade 10 learners' Phil-IRI reading achievement before and after the ARAL Program.

Methods

Research Design

The study used a quantitative, single-group pretest–posttest design with a descriptive-comparative approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Fraenkel et al., 2023). Learners' Phil-IRI reading levels were described at each time point and compared before and after the ARAL Program. The study followed an input–process–output framework: inputs were the learner profile, perceived challenges, and baseline reading levels; the process comprised consent procedures, instrument administration, the ARAL intervention, and statistical analysis; and the output was a proposed Reading Achievement Enhancement Plan.

Setting

The study was conducted at Pinamungajan National High School, a public Mega School in Pandacan, Pinamungajan, Cebu Province, during School Year 2025–2026. The school serves approximately 3,997 learners and employs 141 teachers. It was chosen because it enrolls a large and varied learner population, actively implements ARAL as part of its regular programs (so the intervention examined was authentic rather than introduced for research), and operates at the secondary level, where unresolved reading difficulties become more consequential.

Participants

Of the 609 Grade 10 learners enrolled, Phil-IRI screening identified 86 who were at the frustration level in both Word Reading and Reading Comprehension. These 86 learners met all selection criteria (Grade 10 enrollment, active ARAL participation, and frustration-level classification) and were included through total enumeration. They were distributed across all ten Grade 10 sections, with between 3 and 13 learners per section. Six ARAL tutors directly facilitating reading intervention sessions for these learners (five

English, one Filipino) also participated, selected purposively for their firsthand experience of implementation. Participation required parental or guardian consent and learner assent for the learners, and personal consent for the tutors.

Instruments

Three instruments were used. The **Learner Profile Questionnaire** (researcher-made) gathered age, sex, number of ARAL sessions attended, parents' or guardians' highest educational attainment and occupation, and number of siblings, with parental assistance where needed and code numbers in place of names. The **Phil-IRI** is the standardized DepEd reading assessment (DepEd, 2018). It classifies Word Reading and Reading Comprehension separately as independent, instructional, or frustration level, and was administered following official DepEd protocols without modification. The pretest was administered by the class advisers during the first week of classes at the beginning of the school year. The advisers then passed the test papers to the English Department, whose teachers checked the learners' answers and computed their scores. Learners with the lowest scores were identified and listed as ARAL tutees, after which the ARAL tutors were assigned to the different classes. After the 12 ARAL sessions were completed, the ARAL tutors administered the posttest to the tutees.

The Tutor Questionnaire on Perceived Issues and Challenges (researcher-made) comprised 20 items in four sections: learner-related (6 items), home-related (5), school-related (5), and teacher-related (4) factors. Items were rated on a four-point scale (4 = always/very serious concern, 3 = often/serious concern, 2 = sometimes/moderately serious concern, 1 = never/not a concern). Mean scores were interpreted as follows: 3.25–4.00, very serious concern; 2.50–3.24, serious concern; 1.75–2.49, moderately serious concern; and 1.00–1.74, not a concern. Both questionnaires were developed in consultation with teachers involved in ARAL, and the learner questionnaire used simple, age-appropriate language. The tutor questionnaire was thoroughly checked by the dissertation adviser and the statistician before it was administered to the ARAL tutors.

Procedure

Permission was secured from the school authorities, the district supervisor, and the schools division superintendent before data collection. Consent and assent forms explaining the purpose, voluntariness, confidentiality, and data privacy provisions were distributed to parents or guardians, learners, and tutors. The Phil-IRI pretest established learners' baseline reading levels. The ARAL Program was then implemented among the identified frustration-level readers once a week from January to March 2026, for a total of 12 sessions. Each session lasted one hour, from 3:30 to 4:30 PM. After the intervention, the Phil-IRI posttest was administered, learners' attendance in ARAL sessions was recorded through the profile questionnaire, and the tutor questionnaire was completed. Data were then organized, tabulated, and analyzed.

Ethical Considerations

The study followed DepEd research ethics protocols. Because the learners were minors, written parental or guardian consent and learner assent were obtained, and learners were told they could decline or withdraw at any time without any effect on their academic standing. Tutors gave personal informed consent. Participants were identified by codes only; data were stored in locked cabinets and password-protected files accessible only to the researcher, and results are reported in aggregate. Activities were non-intrusive, age-appropriate, and scheduled to avoid disrupting regular classes, with teachers coordinating to monitor learner comfort.

Data Analysis

Frequencies and percentages summarized the learner profile and reading levels. Weighted means and standard deviations summarized tutors' ratings (Hair et al., 2020). Because Phil-IRI classifications are paired, categorical data from the same learners at two time points, the exact McNemar test was used to determine whether shifts between categories exceeded chance (Smith & Ruxton, 2020); this test was preferred over the paired-samples *t* test because the outcome was categorical rather than continuous. Word Reading and Reading Comprehension were tested separately at $\alpha = .05$.

Results

Learner Profile

Table 1 presents the profile of the 86 learners. Most (90.7%) were aged 15–16, the expected age for Grade 10, and three-quarters (75.6%) were male. Attendance in ARAL was limited for many: 39.5% attended only five sessions and 27.9% attended eight, and 71 learners (82.6%) attended eight or fewer sessions; only 9.3% attended 12. Most parents or guardians had reached only the high school level (74.4%), 22.1% had reached college, and 3.5% had reached elementary level. The most common occupations were private employee (59.3%) and Overseas Filipino Worker (23.3%). Nearly two-thirds of learners (65.1%) had three or more siblings.

Table 1
Profile of the Learner-Respondents (N = 86)

Characteristic	f	%
Age		
13–14 years	8	9.3
15–16 years	78	90.7
Sex		
Male	65	75.6
Female	21	24.4
ARAL sessions attended		
5	34	39.5

Characteristic	f	%
6	2	2.3
7	11	12.8
8	24	27.9
9	3	3.5
10	4	4.7
12	8	9.3
Parents'/guardians' educational attainment		
Elementary level	3	3.5
High school level	64	74.4
College level	19	22.1
Parents'/guardians' occupation		
Private employee	51	59.3
Overseas Filipino Worker (OFW)	20	23.3
Farmer/fisherman	12	14.0
Self-employed	3	3.5
Number of siblings		
1–2	30	34.9
3–4	38	44.2
5 or more	18	20.9

Note. Percentages may not sum to exactly 100.0 because of rounding.

Perceived Issues and Challenges

Table 2 shows that tutors rated all four dimensions as very serious concerns (overall M = 3.46, SD = 0.65). Learner-related factors were rated highest (M = 3.67), followed by home-related (M = 3.43), school-related (M = 3.40), and teacher-related factors (M = 3.25). Within the learner dimension, difficulty decoding words, limited vocabulary, low comprehension, and low motivation each had a mean of 3.83, and frequent absence from reading interventions had a mean of 3.50. At home, parents' limited time to supervise reading was the top concern (M = 3.83). In school, large class size and the absence of a structured remedial reading program before ARAL were rated highest (both M = 3.67). Among tutors' own concerns, teaching load and paperwork, and the difficulty of teaching learners at varied reading levels, received unanimous maximum ratings (M = 4.00, SD = 0.00), whereas insufficient intervention materials was the lowest-rated item (M = 2.17, moderately serious).

Table 2
Tutors' Perceived Issues and Challenges Related to Reading Achievement (n = 6)

Dimension / Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
Learner-related factors			

Dimension / Indicator	M	SD	Interpretation
Difficulty decoding or sounding out unfamiliar words	3.83	0.41	Very serious
Limited vocabulary affecting word recognition	3.83	0.41	Very serious
Low comprehension of what is read	3.83	0.41	Very serious
Lack of interest or motivation to read	3.83	0.41	Very serious
Short attention span during reading activities	3.17	0.41	Serious
Frequent absence from reading interventions	3.50	0.55	Very serious
Subtotal	**3.67**	**0.48**	**Very serious**
Home-related factors			
Lack of reading materials at home	3.50	0.55	Very serious
Parents have limited time to supervise reading	3.83	0.41	Very serious
Home language differs from medium of instruction	3.50	0.55	Very serious
Financial constraints limit access to reading resources	3.17	0.75	Serious
Parents' limited educational background	3.17	0.75	Serious
Subtotal	**3.43**	**0.63**	**Very serious**
School-related factors			
Class size too large for individualized instruction	3.67	0.52	Very serious
Limited access to level-appropriate materials in school	2.83	0.75	Serious
Insufficient intervention time	3.50	0.55	Very serious
No structured remedial reading program prior to ARAL	3.67	0.52	Very serious
Limited assessment tools for monitoring progress	3.33	0.52	Very serious
Subtotal	**3.40**	**0.62**	**Very serious**
Teacher-related factors			
Limited reading-specific training/seminars	2.83	0.41	Serious
Teaching load and paperwork limit individualized remediation	4.00	0.00	Very serious
Difficulty addressing varied reading levels in one class	4.00	0.00	Very serious
Insufficient intervention materials aligned to learners' levels	2.17	0.41	Moderately serious
Subtotal	**3.25**	**0.85**	**Very serious**
Overall	**3.46**	**0.65**	**Very serious**

Note. Scale: 3.25–4.00 = very serious concern; 2.50–3.24 = serious concern; 1.75–2.49 = moderately serious concern; 1.00–1.74 = not a concern. The overall mean is computed across all 20 items.

Reading Levels Before and After the ARAL Program

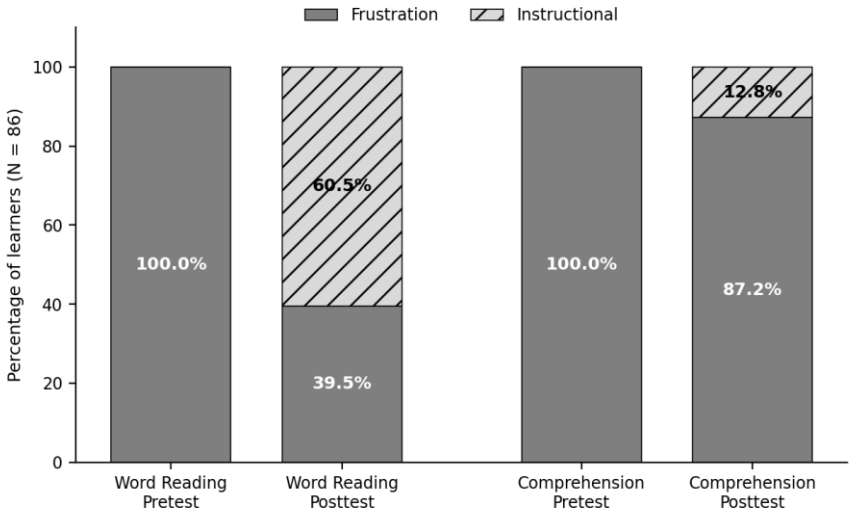
Before the program, all 86 learners (100%) were at the frustration level in both Word Reading and Reading Comprehension (Table 3, Figure 1). After the program, 52 learners (60.5%) reached the instructional level in Word Reading while 34 (39.5%) remained at the frustration level. In Reading Comprehension, 11 learners (12.8%) reached the

instructional level while 75 (87.2%) remained at the frustration level. No learner reached the independent level in either component.

Table 3
Phil-IRI Reading Levels Before and After the ARAL Program (N = 86)

Component	Time	Frustration f (%)	Instructional f (%)	Independent f (%)
Word Reading	Before	86 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
	After	34 (39.5)	52 (60.5)	0 (0.0)
Reading Comprehension	Before	86 (100.0)	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)
	After	75 (87.2)	11 (12.8)	0 (0.0)

Figure 1
Distribution of Learners by Phil-IRI Reading Level Before and After the ARAL Program



Note. No learner reached the independent level at either time point.

Significance of the Change in Reading Achievement

As shown in Table 4, 52 learners (60.5%) improved from the frustration to the instructional level in Word Reading and 11 (12.8%) did so in Reading Comprehension. No learner moved to a lower level in either component. The exact McNemar test indicated significant improvement in Word Reading ($p < .001$) and in Reading Comprehension ($p = .001$); the null hypothesis was therefore rejected for both components.

Table 4
Exact McNemar Test of Change in Phil-IRI Reading Level From Before to After the ARAL Program (N = 86)

Component	No change f (%)	Improved f (%)	Declined f (%)	N	Exact p	Decision
Word Reading	34 (39.5)	52 (60.5)	0 (0.0)	86	< .001	Reject H_0
Reading Comprehension	75 (87.2)	11 (12.8)	0 (0.0)	86	.001	Reject H_0

Note. No change = frustration to frustration; improved = frustration to instructional; declined = instructional to frustration. Significant at $p < .05$.

Discussion

Principal Findings

Every learner began at the frustration level in both components, and after the ARAL Program a significant number moved up: roughly six in ten in Word Reading and about one in eight in Reading Comprehension, with no declines. The program was therefore associated with real and statistically reliable improvement, but the improvement was far larger in decoding than in comprehension, and no learner reached the independent level.

Why Decoding Outpaced Comprehension

The differential gain is consistent with prior ARAL and intervention research. In a 60-hour ARAL intervention for struggling Grade 4 learners in Palawan, word recognition and decoding responded more readily to targeted, repeated practice, whereas comprehension generally required more sustained and intensive support (Buahe, 2026). In a randomized controlled trial, gains in decoding and vocabulary mediated later, sustained improvements in comprehension, meaning that comprehension growth builds on, and lags behind, word-level gains (Downing et al., 2026). A systematic review likewise found that interventions targeting foundational skills alone did not significantly improve comprehension, whereas multicomponent interventions combining decoding with explicit comprehension strategies improved both (Donegan & Wanzek, 2021). The pattern here is thus better read as a well-documented feature of reading intervention than as a failure of the program. It also fits the study's theoretical sequence: structured practice, reinforcement, and feedback can consolidate decoding relatively quickly, while comprehension depends on schema building and scaffolded interaction with text, which take longer.

Tutors' ratings point to structural reasons why the comprehension component may have received less depth. Insufficient intervention time, large classes, and the difficulty of teaching mixed reading levels were all rated as very serious concerns, and tutors unanimously cited workload and paperwork as limits on individualized remediation. These constraints would be expected to restrict the explicit, text-based comprehension instruction that decoding gains alone cannot replace.

Attendance and Dosage

More than four in five learners (82.6%) attended eight or fewer ARAL sessions, and tutors rated frequent absence from interventions as a very serious concern (M = 3.50). Earlier work reports that learners with better attendance receive more teacher-guided practice and immediate correction of reading errors, and show stronger reading performance (Goza, 2023). Reduced exposure may therefore have limited gains, particularly in comprehension. This study, however, did not test the association between the number of sessions attended and reading outcomes, so this remains a hypothesis for future research.

Multidimensional Challenges and Learner Context

The uniformly high ratings across learner, home, school, and teacher dimensions indicate that frustration-level reading is a multidimensional problem. Learner-related weaknesses in decoding, vocabulary, comprehension, and motivation were rated highest, which corroborates local findings that lexical and linguistic complexity and low prior knowledge and motivation hinder Grade 10 learners' comprehension at the same school (Liugan & Lacostales, 2026). Home-related concerns, especially limited parental time and scarce reading materials, align with Philippine evidence on weak home literacy environments (Librea et al., 2023), and the substantial share of learners with an OFW parent (23.3%) is notable given findings that remittances can improve access to materials without replacing daily reading supervision (Dialde, 2023). School-related concerns, including the absence of a structured remedial program before ARAL, agree with reports that insufficient time and materials constrain reading instruction (Apiles, 2024), and tutors' workload concerns are consistent with evidence that teachers' procedural readiness to teach reading lags their content and motivational readiness (Estrella, 2022).

The learner profile suggests that these difficulties are not primarily developmental: 90.7% of learners were age-appropriate for Grade 10, and age is typically associated with reading performance through developmental differences (Balansag, 2025). The concentration of parents' or guardians' education at the high school level and the large share of families with three or more children may reflect reduced access to reading resources and individual parental attention (Dizon et al., 2023; Melencion, 2023). The predominance of male learners fits a common pattern among struggling readers, although prior evidence on sex differences in reading proficiency is inconclusive (Balansag, 2025). As the profile variables were only described and not tested against outcomes, these explanations remain suggestive.

Implications and the Proposed Reading Achievement Enhancement Plan

The findings support sustaining ARAL while adding a deliberate comprehension component. The Reading Achievement Enhancement Plan proposed from this study has three thrusts: (a) a sustained, multicomponent intervention that pairs continued

decoding and vocabulary work with explicit comprehension instruction (predicting, questioning, summarizing, and inferencing, using leveled passages matched to learners' instructional levels); (b) capacity building for ARAL tutors through reading-specific training and reduced non-instructional paperwork during intervention periods; and (c) a home–school partnership through take-home reading kits, parent orientation, and reading logs. These are complemented by smaller instructional groupings, more dedicated intervention time, attendance monitoring, and quarterly Phil-IRI progress monitoring integrated into the School Improvement Plan.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the single-group pretest–posttest design has no comparison group, so improvement cannot be attributed to ARAL alone; maturation, regular classroom instruction, and testing effects cannot be ruled out. Second, Phil-IRI levels are ordinal categories, so the analysis could detect movement only across level boundaries and not smaller gains within a level, which may understate progress among learners who remained at the frustration level. Third, perceived challenges were reported by only six tutors, five of whom taught English, so the findings may weigh more heavily on English than Filipino reading intervention and do not include learners' own perspectives. Fourth, the study was conducted in a single school, and the number of sessions attended varied widely among learners without being modeled in the analysis.

Recommendations for Practice and Research

School administrators may reduce effective group size during reading intervention, protect tutors' time from administrative demands, and sustain the remedial program beyond the current ARAL cycle. ARAL coordinators and tutors may strengthen attendance monitoring and integrate explicit comprehension strategies alongside decoding instruction. Parents and guardians may set aside regular time for supervising reading practice at home and encourage attendance. DepEd may consider extending the duration or intensity of the comprehension components of ARAL and expanding reading-specific training for tutors. Future studies should examine the relationship between sessions attended and reading outcomes, use comparison groups, and follow learners longitudinally to establish how long it takes to close the comprehension gap.

Conclusion

The ARAL Program was associated with significant improvement in the reading achievement of Grade 10 frustration-level readers at Pinamungajan National High School: 60.5% advanced to the instructional level in Word Reading and 12.8% in Reading Comprehension, with no learner declining. Decoding gains are a necessary but not yet sufficient foundation for full reading recovery. Because challenges were rated as very serious across learner, home, school, and teacher dimensions, closing the comprehension gap will require explicit, sustained comprehension instruction, more consistent attendance, and coordinated support at home, in school, and for tutors. The

proposed Reading Achievement Enhancement Plan offers a practical framework for achieving this.

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