

KAES-GURO: A Mentoring Program in Improving Students' Reading Proficiency

Princess Jane Pandi-Ruedas and Julieta T. Canda

Abstract

This study aimed to improve the reading proficiency of Grade 8 mentees. Specifically, the study focused on 1) the profile of 34 mentees in terms of their reading proficiency level in the five skills taught namely: phonetic analysis and vocabulary building for word recognition, noting details, predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions for comprehension; 2) the profile of 41 mentors in terms of their English 10 grade and reading proficiency level on the same skills tested for the mentees; 3) a mentoring program that could be implemented in improving reading; 4) modules to be used in the implementation of the mentoring program; and 5) how effective was the peer mentoring reading program according to both participants. Mentoring sessions were conducted in three cycles for each domain following the principles of an action research - planning, acting, observing and reflecting stages. There were 41 mentors and 34 mentees involved in the study. Focused Group Discussion (FGD) was conducted to probe the efficiency of the KAES-GURO mentoring program. To compare the increase of pre-test and post-test results, percentages were used as statistical measures. It can be gleaned from the findings that the mentoring program improved the mentees' reading proficiency; thus, effective. It is then recommended to implement the KAES-GURO mentoring program as an intervention program in the school; encourage teachers to apply the concepts of action research in answering classroom-based problems and difficulties, fitted for their type of learners; and that the ideology of the mentoring program to be replicated in other subject areas.

Key Words: Reading Intervention, Peer Mentoring, Action Research

Introduction

Reading is a constant life skill used at school and throughout life. It is a basic macro skill. Without the capacity to read well, a lot of opportunities for individual's accomplishment and job fulfilment may be lost and seems impossible (Anderson, Hiebert, Scott, & Wilkinson, 1985) – from understanding the instructions in a medicine bottle, filling out applications, and reading road or warning signs (Davis, 2016). With its importance, a lot of evidences still support problems with literacy in many aspects of the world. The United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund's (UNICEF), report January 2018 shows that the number of literate youths declined from 170 million to 115 million. In addition, it has been found that literacy is lowest in least developed countries ("Literacy", 2018) since education is not seen as a priority and only perceived as limitation to development. One true example of this claim is in Niger where there is only 36.6% of youth's literacy rate (Roser & Espina, 2015).

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Moreover, in the Philippines, a UNESCO mid-decade assessment report of Southeast Asian education systems (2008), found out that the Philippines had fallen drastically in terms of participation and achievement rates in basic education. Statistics show that the youth literacy rate in the country is still high by regional criteria; however, the 1.5 percent drop in 1990 and 2003 compared, where 96.6 percent is downed to 95.1 percent evidently show a declining literacy rate in the country (Macha, Mackie, Magaziner, 2018). Moreover, from 2013 to 2015, data shows a drop of 3.775 in the youth literacy from ages 15 to 24.

To bridge the growing problem, a number of intervention strategies have been suggested to remedy it, one of which is peer mentoring program (Gensemner, 2000). Mentoring is a means of passing on values and instilling students' hope in the future. As children need positive role models and interpersonal connections to help shape their identity development, the concept of mentoring helps achieve these. With these notions and claims, it is equally important to present the concepts gathered by the researcher that could be associated to reading, and intervention programs using action research.

Reading. From time-to-time people have wondered why reading is important since we take for granted its fundamental role functioning in today's society. According to Davis (2016), reading is essential, since spoken and written words, are one of the building blocks of life. Kose (2006) stated that when dealing with reading, people encounter two layers of reality: one that they can see and one that they cannot see. He further specified that the purpose of reading is to make the underlying meaning, visible and clear. Research has made known that the degree of awareness a child has in the underlying phonological structure of words, is a contributory factor to the success of a learner. Another factor is reading comprehension which was defined by Kintsch (2014), as the process of generating meaning from text being read.

Intervention Program. In the study of Cho (2010), he stated that improving reading in schools could be augmented through intervention programs (Cho, 2010). Reading intervention programs and their approaches have long been proven to be of help to students who find reading difficult. According to the National Educational Services (NEPS), evidences show that well-targeted and well carried interventions can be effective for students from varied range of backgrounds and abilities (Aton, 2014). In addition, Brooks (2009) revealed that when it comes to managing failing grades, distinct interventions are essential since it has been observed that the usual class instruction is not enough.

Action Research. According to Burns (2010), research is only effective when it is crafted with personal significance; thus, action research is more meaningful and authentic when it is conducted personally by a teacher-researcher in his/her own space. Action research aids teachers "pick up threads suggested in academic circles, and weave them in their own classroom" (Mills, 2011). Moreover, Burns (2010) further explained that action research provides teachers the framework to build their personal classroom developments by giving teachers a room for opportunities to identify the changes they need to do in their teaching practices.

In context, Philsaga High School Foundation, Incorporated (PHSFI), under the Division of Agusan del Sur has its shared challenges when it comes to reading difficulties of the students. For the past years, it has been observed that there is an alarming number of non-readers present in almost all year levels, despite the conducted intervention programs. With this, the school decided to make a reading test as part of the enrolment process for the incoming Grade 7 students which started last academic year 2017-2018 by testing the skills namely: word recognition and comprehension. The reading test results revealed that 38 out of 241 enrollees were struggling both in the two named skills.

Hence, to further augment the challenge, the researcher, as the Reading Coordinator of the school, used peer mentoring program where struggling readers were mentored by the Grade 11-General Academic Strand (GAS) students who were profiled accordingly. Mentoring was one of the Grade 11 students' requirements in their subject Reading and Writing Skills. On the other hand, readers were grouped in one section. However, to prove the problem, a validated Reading Test was given to them to further assess their reading levels. Since the G-11 students stand as mentors to the G-1 mentees, the reading program was called Kaes-Guro which stands for 'kaeskwela ko, guro ko'. At the onset of the mentoring program, four (4) of the mentees moved to another school due to transfer of residence, thus, making them 34.

The never-ending problem in reading of the school prompted the researcher to conduct action research which aims to improve the students' reading proficiency level through a peer mentoring reading program. It focused on 1) the reading proficiency level in the five skills taught to the 34 mentees; and 2) the efficacy of the peer mentoring reading program. Proven successful, this would help the researcher envision a considerable answer to one of the most common problems faced by the teachers in the reading classrooms.

Methodology

Research Design

According to Leo Van Lier (1994), action research is "traditionally depicted as a spiral consisting of cycles of several steps - goal setting, planning, acting, observing and reflecting.", as shown in Figure 2.

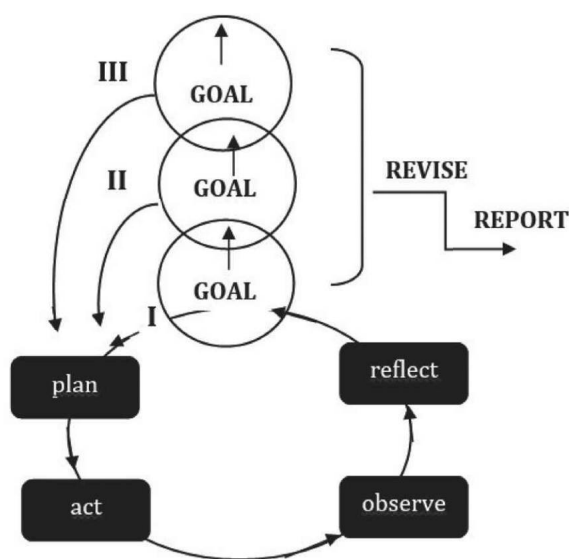


Figure 2. The different parts of action research depicting the cycles of several steps.

The first stage begins with a series of goals set by the researcher. The second stage was the planning on some kind of actions based on the defined goal. The third stage was the acting which carried out the planned actions to meet the desirable end. The fourth stage was the observation which was to observe the process preferably with a partner. And the last stage was the reflection where the researcher would validate the effectiveness of the mentoring program through the validated post-test results, and the over-all evaluation of the program through a FGD with the mentors and mentees.

Sampling Procedure and Participants

As to how the mentees were initially selected, the school conducted an informal reading test on the academic year 2017-2018 as part of the enrolment process for incoming Grade 7 students and it was found out that 38 of them really could not read. To faithfully assist the following students, a validated Reading Test was given and the results revealed that all 34 prospect non-readers were under the frustration reading level. The mentee-participants were down to 34 since four (4) of them transferred residence. The mentor-participants were also selected. The researcher, as the Reading and Writing Skills (RWS) teacher of Grade 11-Rizal, informed the SHS students to have mentoring as one of their activities for the course.

To ensure that these students could really be able to mentor the selected mentees, their English 10 grades and reading proficiency level were considered. Their grades revealed that they were all proficient and advanced. On the other hand, their reading proficiency level were also obtained by taking the same test with the mentees; thus, revealed that all of them fall on the Independent Level. Aside from that, the researcher, as their teacher and facilitator, also made a month-long preparation, equipping the mentors with necessary skills to help them deal with the mentees. Furthermore, there were 34 mentees and 41 mentors included in the KAES – GURO mentoring program.

Data Collection

The following are used to collect data for the study: the questionnaire with pre-test and post test items, participants' observation notes, FGD, and evaluation sheets.

Questionnaire with pre-test/post-test items. In gathering the data, a pre-test was constructed based on the least learned skills revealed from the reading test. The pre-test was validated by the three (3) experts in reading. The pre-test was a 35-item test that focused on the different reading skills specifically on using phonetics, vocabulary building, noting details, predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions. On the other hand, the same test was used during the post-test; however, the items from the pre-test were re-arranged.

Focused group discussion (FGD). A focused group discussion was conducted every after each completed reading skill (using phonetics, vocabulary building, noting details, predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions). The success of the study depended on the increase of their scores from pre-test to post-test; hence, they were interviewed by the researcher as to the difficulties, advantages, disadvantages, efficacy and recommendations they could provide every after each cycle of the study that would aim to improve the KAES – GURO Mentoring Program.

Evaluation sheets. After the validated post-test was conducted, evaluation sheets were given to mentor-participants which consisted the difficulties, advantages, disadvantages, efficacy and recommendations they could give for the mentoring program. This wrapped up the comments from both participants in creating a better version of the reading program.

In getting the reading proficiency level of the students, the equivalent verbal description of the percentage scores of the participants' reading proficiency is determined using the scale and the descriptive rating established by Burns and Roe (2007) in the book *Informal Teaching Reading in Today's Reading Inventory*, presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Reference Scale of the Reading Level established by Burns & Roe

Percentage score	Verbal description
60 - 100%	Independent
41 - 59%	Instructional
0 - 40%	Frustration

Results and Discussions

This section presents the results of the peer mentoring program undertaken by the participants. Furthermore, this gives answers to specific problems in Chapter 1.

A. The Reading Proficiency Level of The Mentee-Participants in Terms of Word Recognition and Comprehension

Table 2 Profile of Mentee Participants in terms of Word Recognition (Validated Pre Test)

Reading proficiency level		Phonetic analysis (10 items)		Vocabulary building (10 items)	
Level	Score Equivalence	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Frustration	0 – 4	28	82%	32	94%
Instructional	5	6	18%	2	6%
Independent	6 – 10	0	0%	0%	0%
Total		34	100%	34	100%

Since most of the mentees fall on the frustration reading level, this means that these mentees have difficulty in reading and still need thorough guidance from the teachers or mentors in word recognition. Out of the 32 mentees or 94% under the frustration reading level in vocabulary building, two (2) of them even got zero (0) which means that they really need extra help on this area. As to the difficulty of the two skills, it could be observed that there are more mentees who fall on the frustration reading level in vocabulary building. This means that vocabulary building is more difficult than phonetic analysis. This connection could also be explained since a student could not be able to recognize the meaning of the word in the vocabulary building if he/she could not read the sounds a letter could create in the phonetic analysis (Kose, 2006).

Mentees who belong to the frustration reading level in all the sub skills of comprehension means that they still have difficulty in reading and therefore need the thorough guidance of teachers or mentors. More so, the mentee participants profile revealed that although some of them fall on the Instructional Level on a specific sub skill, all of them are still considered ‘recipients’ of the program since they failed on one or the other sub – skills needed for them to become holistically independent readers. This result may be true to Kintsch (1998) study that comprehension is getting the whole gist of the text being read rather than just acquiring the denotation of the individual words in sentences – which is evident as students of today come to interpret the meaning of sentences in a word-by-word basis.

Table 3 Profile of Mentee Participants in terms of Comprehension (Validated Pre-Test)

Reading Proficiency Level		Noting Details (5)		Predicting Outcomes (5)		Drawing Conclusions (5)	
Level	Score Equivalence	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Frustration	0 – 2	27	79%	30	88%	33	97%
Instructional	3	7	21%	4	12%	1	3%
Independent	4 – 5	0	0%	0	0%	0	0%
Total		34	100%	34	100%	34	100%

B. Efficacy Of The Peer Mentoring Reading Program

The improvement of the reading proficiency of the mentee participants can be manifested through the increase of the proficiency level marked by their scores in post-test as compared to the pre-test.

Table 4 Mentee Participants' Score Equivalence in Validated Pre-Test and Post-Test

Reading Proficiency Level		Pre – Test		Post – Test	
Level	Score Equivalence	Frequency	Percentage	Frequency	Percentage
Frustration	0 – 14	33	97.06%	0	0%
Instructional	15 – 20	1	2.94%	0	0%
Independent	21 – 35	0	0%	34	100%
Total		34	100%	34	100%

The findings showed that after undertaking the mentoring program, the mentees were able to improve the five focused reading skills: using phonetic analysis, vocabulary building, noting details, predicting outcomes and drawing conclusions. This happened after the cyclical steps conducted with three cycles in each domain. This result would be a support to Mercer's (2003) claim that in each classroom, students are learning on numerous levels and at diverse paces. Just like what is presented in this study, it took the researcher three cycles for each domain since mentees have varied pacing in learning.

Conclusion

As this study aims to improve the reading proficiency of the grade 8 mentees, the success of the mentees to actually improve their performance in reading helps them unlock the door to lifelong learning, as reading is necessary for learning (George, 2019). In each classroom, students are learning in diverse levels and paces. With the study, teachers may want to use mentoring program as an intervention to assist their learners with reading difficulties in the classroom improve while still fostering the needs of the independent learners in the class.

The findings showed that the reading proficiency of Grade 8 mentees on the onset of the study belongs to the frustration and instructional levels; thus, need the thorough guidance from teachers. After undertaking the mentoring program, the mentees were able to improve the five (5) focused reading skills. This happened

after the cyclical steps conducted with three cycles in each domain. On the other hand, mentors' profile was also considered as to their English 10 grades and their reading proficiency level. It was found that all mentors had grades equivalent to Proficient and Advanced. All of them even fall on the Independent Level of the reading proficiency with five mistakes as the lowest score and perfect score (35) as the highest which proved that all mentors were indeed capable of mentoring the Grade 8 mentees. Thus, a mentoring program called Kaes-Guro was used which stands for *Kaeskwele Ko, Guro Ko*. This ran through a module titled *Reading Enrichment with Ate & Kuya* (REAK) which gave both participants a mixture of simple to complex exercises that would enhance students' ability in the skills being developed. The Kaes-Guro mentoring program was found to be effective according to the improvement on the test results of the mentees from pre-test to post-test. It was further backed-up by the observation notes, FGD and evaluation sheets given to both participants.

Furthermore, the researcher would like to conclude that hence, action research could be very useful in the classroom setting. The three cycles conducted proved that students in the classroom have varied needs and levels that could not be met using one strategy or in an hour of class discussion. Thus, to improve reading, cyclical steps should be done to ensure that all of them could be given the extra leap they need in order to be helped.

Recommendations

With the success of the mentoring program in improving students reading proficiency, notable limitations were noted. One was the supervision issues during the implementation of the program. Since there were 41 mentors and 34 mentees every session, there was really a great number of students to be supervised by the researcher – from getting the attendance of mentors a course requirement, conduct of parallel sessions, giving of snacks to mentees, and to restoration during every session. With the great number of participants, sometimes it would tend to become noisy for a classroom built for 60 students. Thus, the researcher recommends future researchers conduct the mentoring sessions in separate classrooms with a specific number of students per classroom, with five (5) to seven (7) pairs of mentor-mentees.

Second, although the KAES-GURO mentoring program had been effective to these set of Grade 8 mentees, the findings may not be true when given to other set of students. A lot of factors may also arise during the implementation that is not similar to what the researcher did in this study. Thus, future researchers should really be flexible enough to meet and fix the issues for every session raised by both participants. In doing so, the researcher would like to agree to Van Lier (1994) statements that, “as anyone doing action research will soon find out, reality is a whole lot messier than that, and in practice the various stages will blend in with one another, or perhaps gradually advance all together like strands in a rope we are twining. Thus, the important thing to remember is that all the ingredients must occur in a balanced and carefully monitored way.”

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