

## Research Article

# Exploring para teacher's strategies in developing pupil's phonemic awareness in New Normal

Glory Mei Sabandal Cerna

Department of Education, Philippine Normal University and Guihulngan National High School-Poblacion, Guihulngan City, Philippines, 6214

\*Corresponding Author: [cerna.glorymei@lisqpu.pnu.edu.ph](mailto:cerna.glorymei@lisqpu.pnu.edu.ph) | Phone Number: +639675210865

### ABSTRACT

This study examines the applied strategies of para teacher in developing the English language phonemic awareness of a first grader in the context of modular distance learning delivery modality. To develop such awareness, students should be able to master the tasks such as (1) phoneme isolation, (2) phoneme identity (3) phoneme deletion, (4) phoneme segmentation, (5) phoneme categorization, and (6) phoneme blending. This study concentrates on how the para teacher addresses all the six components of phonemic awareness and explores whether there are any additional elements that should be considered with English learners' phonemic awareness development. In this case study, data were collected through semi-structured interviews, field notes from modular instruction observation, and phonemic awareness assessment results. The results from this case study imply that systematic teaching strategies are essential to consider with English learners' phonemic awareness development. The findings of this study also disclosed that both para teacher and learner's motivation is an essential component in teaching and learning phonemic awareness.

**Keywords:** Case Study; Para Teacher; Phonemic Awareness; Reading Strategies; Teaching Reading

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Phonemic awareness is the knowledge that spoken language words may be broken down into individual phonemes, which are the smallest units of speech. Since it involves understanding the alphabetic principle, it can be considered as the predictor of reading success. However, in the context of the new normal, especially in the modular distance learning delivery modality, the concern on how phonemic awareness is acquired by the pupils with a member of the family or a stakeholder who serves as a para teacher arises. Just like any other pandemic, natural disaster, and calamity, the onset of COVID-19 was unforeseen. This led to the closure of schools around the globe. The Global Campaign for Education recognizes such a decision, but it stresses the placement of contingency plans to safeguard the learners' right to education even during a crisis (Philani, 2020). Subsequently, the popularity of distance or remote learning has emerged on the surface of the global educational system.

While distance learning has portrayed challenges in each grade level curriculum inclusion, some researchers and even teachers assert the problematic situation of early reading instruction (Schwartz, 2020). Researchers added that there is no adequate information determining the kind of learning delivery modality that works best for instruction in early reading. Every weekday in New York City, it is notable that supplemental learning instruction (delivered by NYC educators) was conducted through a local public broadcasting network that launches a one-hour series of Let's Learn NYC! The lessons, intended for learners ages 3-8, work on phonics and phonemic awareness, being the foundational skills in reading (Schwartz, 2020).

Similarly, in the Philippine context, the Department of Education (DepEd) has utilized alternative learning delivery modalities to guarantee that learning continues even though learners are not in school. One of those learning delivery modalities implemented by DepEd is modular distance learning that encompasses individualized instruction through printed or digital (can be accessed on a computer, smartphone, and the like) self-learning modules distributed to the learners' parents (Llego, 2020). These have also been supplemented with remote-based instructions such as radio and television, online distance learning, or blended learning (Hernando-Malipot, 2021). Moreover, to upskill teachers in the new normal, a webinar series that includes the introduction of teaching strategies to develop learners' pre-reading skills have been in place. These pre-reading skills include phonemic awareness that is defined as an understanding of the phonemes considered as the smallest units of sound represented by the letters of the alphabet comprising the speech stream (International Reading Association, nd). An understanding of the phonemes or alphabetic principle is required for beginning reading (Ochs, 2001). Hence, to develop such awareness, the following tasks were identified (National Reading Panel, 2000):

- a) Phoneme isolation. This requires the recognition of separate sounds in words.
- b) Phoneme identity. This requires recognition of the common sound in a series of words.

- c) Phoneme categorization. This requires recognition of the word with the different sounds in a series of three or more words.
- d) Phoneme blending. This requires listening to a series of individually spoken sounds and combining them to form an identifiable word.
- e) Phoneme segmentation. This requires splitting a word into its sounds by counting the sounds or by pronouncing and positioning a marker for each sound.
- f) Phoneme deletion. It requires recognition of what word remains when a specified sound is removed.

However, in Guihulngan City Division where the sole learning delivery is modular, those teaching reading strategies introduced are not applicable by the teachers under such modality since their traditional responsibility which is 'to teach' has shifted into monitoring role of the learners' progress, and thus, the main responsible of delivering instruction and should make use of such reading strategies are the para teachers (members of the family or any stakeholders of the community who substitute the role of the professional teachers in the traditional modality).

The scenario above has led to the conduct of this study since the researcher would like to explore the para teacher's applied teaching strategies for the learner's acquisition of phonemic awareness. To describe and interpret the phonemic awareness development of the grade 1 learner under the para teacher's instruction, a case study design is used by the researcher. Specifically, this study was guided by the following research questions:

- a) What are the reading strategies applied by the para teacher in developing the grade 1 learner's phonemic awareness?
- b) What are the difficulties encountered by the para teacher in giving instructions to the learner?
- c) What is the status of the learner's phonemic awareness development?
- d) What are other factors to be considered in developing a learner's phonemic awareness?

## 2. RESEARCH METHOD

This study utilized qualitative design, specifically, the case study method in which data gathering can be conducted through different techniques (personal interviews, observations, and analysis of different sources like artifacts, official documents, and the like) (McLeod, 2019). Occasionally, a case study may also collect quantitative data (McCombes, 2020). Hence, the case study design was best suited for this study's research questions. Since case study design is grounded in real-life settings, its results can be considered rich and full account of a phenomenon. Therefore, the use of case study design in this study permitted the researcher to be in the right position to describe the reading strategies applied by the para teacher, alias Mrs. Gina in developing the phonemic awareness of his or her grade 1 learner, alias Ryan by conducting in-depth interviews with the para-teacher and learner, observing them in different occasions while doing the modular instruction (Fontana & Frey, 2008) and identifying the phonemic awareness development of the learner through an assessment tool.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 Phonemic Awareness Strategies

Many students arrive in preschool or kindergarten knowing what they need to know. Through language play or exposure, children learn letters and sounds. However, for those who require assistance, explicit, systematic training in phonemic awareness will be required to teach these concepts and skills (Phillips & Torgesen, 2006). Thus, appropriate, and systematic phonemic awareness teaching strategies are needed.

Based on the interviews, and modular instruction observations, which were supported by the results of the phonemic awareness assessment, it was disclosed that the sole phonemic awareness teaching strategy Mrs. Gina applied was phoneme isolation in which reading a word was taught by sounding out its first phoneme. "When there is a reading activity in the module, I teach him reading by sounding out the first letter of the word. For example, /a/ /a/ --apple or /m/--ma," Mrs. Gina responded when asked about the phonemic awareness strategies she applied. "There was a word in the module which was "papa" (dad), I sounded out /p/ then I directly read to him, "papa". I just directly read it without sounding out individually the four phonemes," she added. This was evident during the modular instruction observations made by the researcher. It was observed in the series of three observations that Mrs. Gina modelled just the first sound of a word, then read it, and let Ryan follow what she was saying. However, the strategy just focused only on the identification of the first sound of the word; it deviated from the notion that a learner can isolate phonemes if one is able to figure out whether a certain sound appears at the beginning, middle, or end (Southwell, nd).

Further, as the interviews and observation progressed, another strategy was disclosed. "I teach him the Abakada alphabet first," Mrs. Gina answered when asked about the phonemic awareness teaching strategies she applied. Abakada, an alphabet that represents the sounds in the Tagalog language, was created in the 1930s by renowned academic Lope K. Santos. There are 20 letters in total (five vowels and fifteen consonants): a, ba, ka, da, e, ga, ha, i, la, ma, na, ng, o, pa, ra, sa, ta, u, wa, ya (Tagalog Lang, nd). Her answer was verified with the results obtained by Ryan during the phonemic awareness assessment. There were nine instances when Ryan sounded out phonemes based on the abakada alphabet instead of just one phoneme. For example, when he was asked to tell the first sound of the words, "mama" (mom) and "papa" (dad), Ryan answered /m-a/ and /p-a/ respectively.

Moreover, the scenarios above were quite alarming as the results implied that Mrs. Gina needed systematic training in teaching phonemic awareness. Because of assertions about their efficacy in boosting children's capacity to learn to read, phonemic awareness training programs have sparked a lot of interest among principals, teachers, parents, and even

publishers (National Reading Panel, 2000). A growing body of research suggests that early, systematic, specific phonemic awareness teaching can help early readers improve their reading skills (McGee & Ukrainetz, 2009). As indicated in correlational studies, phonemic awareness and letter knowledge have been found as the top two school-entry predictors about how well students will learn to read over the first two years of instruction. Such findings entail that phonemic awareness training plays an essential role in the advancement of reading skills. Children who gain phonemic awareness of the English language at a young age using appropriate strategies can reduce reading and spelling problems, according to research (Coyne, Kame'enui, Simmons, and Harn, 2004).

### 3.2 Phonemic Awareness Teaching Difficulties

The findings of this study unraveled the difficulties encountered by Mrs. Gina in teaching phonemic awareness to Ryan. "At first, I had difficulty teaching him the /f/ sound because he pronounced it as /ep/, but later, he was able to successfully pronounce it." This had been confirmed when the researchers observed during the modular instructions that Ryan for an instance, uttered /p-a-d-e-r/ instead of /f-a-th-e-r/. It further revealed that Ryan was also having difficulty in sounding out the voiced and unvoiced /th/ as well as replacing /v/ with /b/. These difficulties encountered by Mrs. Gina had something to do with Ryan's unfamiliarity with the English language. Children's brains are wired to identify phonemes in their native language, which may conflict with phonemes in English (Antunez, 2002). In addition, second language articulation is a cognitive skill that some people have a natural aptitude, interest, and drive than others, but which anyone can learn to some degree if given the right conditions. The biggest issue with pronunciation that foreign language learners have is the necessity to shift a conceptual pattern that they learned as a child for their first language (Abbas Pourhossein Gilakjani & Mohammad Reza Ahmadi, 2011). While human articulatory organs are similar, there are some significant variances in the phonetic system amongst languages around the world. The second language's sound system is generally affected by the second language's sound system. It is always a challenge to produce sounds that don't exist in the target language in one's mother tongue (Ahmed, 2020).

Moreover, during the series of modular instruction observations, the researchers noticed that Mrs. Gina relied heavily on the activities found in the learning modules and that the accomplishment of some tasks was done by her. For an instance, a supposed phonemic instruction on the activity of adding a phoneme to another phoneme to form a syllable was completed by Mrs. Gina, herself. Specifically, in the activity when Ryan was asked to fill the missing phoneme of the word "t\_sa" to form into "tasa" (mug), Mrs. Gina just dictated the answer. This instance had been corroborated by her response in an interview, "Parents cannot devote much time to their children's education when it is modular. Some students tend to delegate their responsibilities for answering questions and completing assignments to their parents, while the latter are off playing and not participating in the modular instruction. Some parents are having trouble deciphering the English phrases used in the modules as well." The findings stated above supported the results of a study that many youngsters view this time of pandemic as a break from school, and as a result, they want none of a typical school routine. Instead, they prefer to sleep and get up whenever they want and spend the rest of their day playing (Shelina Bhamani, Areeba Zainab Makhdoom, Vardah Bharuchi, Nasreen Ali, Sidra Kaleem, & Dawood Ahmed, 2020).

The difficulties encountered by Mrs. Gina were normally part of the critical function of parents in their children's acquisition of phonemic awareness. Teachers are frequently faced with the task of choosing appropriate activities to encourage students to notice and learn how to use phonemes, or to become phonemically aware (Evinger, 2000). Parents may assist their children to improve vocabulary, develop an interest in a range of topics, and developing the background knowledge needed to become great readers during the preschool and first school years. When parents allow their children to play with language at home, they improve the likelihood that their kids will acquire the phonemic awareness that they will need in school. Furthermore, doing phonemic awareness tasks at home helps children develop favorable attitudes toward reading, allows parents to engage in their kid's early learning, and develops the parent-child link (Breux, 2003).

### 3.3 Ryan's Phonemic Awareness Status

A critical component is assessing phonemic awareness. It has two purposes: to identify kids who may be or are at danger of learning basic reading abilities, as well as to assess their progress (Evinger, 2000). Data-driven instruction that employs assessment to evaluate students' phonological awareness levels, including phonemic awareness, is the key to success (Inverizzi, 2003). The phonemic awareness assessment conducted to Ryan yielded reflective results of the strategies utilized by Mrs. Gina. The said assessment was composed of six phonemic awareness tasks: phoneme segmentation, identity, isolation, deletion, categorization, and blending as identified by the National Reading Panel (2000). Each task consisted of four items and three consecutive days were allotted to finish the said assessment. It was to ensure the sustainability of Ryan's attention span.

Phoneme isolation. This task necessitates the recognition of individual sounds within words. In this activity, Ryan was asked to tell the first sound of each of the words such as 1) "dula" (game; to play), 2) "friend", 3) "mama" (mom), 4) "papa" (dad). In the first item, Ryan was silent at first, but as the researcher repeatedly sounded out the word, the learner was able to get the correct answer, /d/. For number two, he was able to get it right. However, the last two items were answered wrongly with the respective responses: /ma/ and /pa/. Phoneme identity. This task requires the identification of a common sound in a string of words. Ryan's job in this activity was to tell the sound that was common in the different words: 1) "papa" (dad), "puto" (steamed rice cake), "piso" (peso); 2) "kaon" (to eat), "kila" (eyebrow), "kuto" (head louse); 3) "yoyo", "yawe" (key), "yuta" (soil; land); 4) "school", "sulat" (letter/correspondence; to write), "sukli" (change received from money transaction). In numbers two and three, Ryan was able to get the correct answers, while he got wrong for items one and four.

Phoneme categorization. This task requires the recognition of a word with several sounds in a sequence of three or more words. In this activity, Ryan was asked to identify the word that did not belong to each series of words: 1) “pan” (bread), “payong” (umbrella), “sudlay” (comb); 2) “kape” (coffee), “kuto” (head louse), “pan” (bread); 3) “lapis” (pencil), “laso” (ribbon), “bino” (wine); 4) “haplas” (liniment), “bulad” (dried fish), “hunasan” (low tide). In numbers two and three, Ryan was able to get the correct answers, while he got wrong for items one and four.

Phoneme blending. This task necessitates listening to a series of individual spoken sounds and combining them to form a recognizable word is required for this. Ryan’s job in this activity was to tell the word formed when certain phonemes were blended: 1). /p/ /a/ /n/ (bread); 2). /u/ /n/ /a/ (first); 3) /d/ /u/ /h/ /a/ (two); 4) /l/ /a/ /m/ /i/ (yummy). In all the items, Ryan got wrong answers: /pa/, /u/, /du/, and /la/ respectively.

Phoneme segmentation. This requires splitting a word into its sounds by counting the sounds or by pronouncing and positioning a marker for each sound. In this task, Ryan was asked to determine the number of phonemes present in the words: 1) “school”; 2). “dula” (game; to play); 3) “kape” (coffee); 4) “kaon” (to eat). Incorrect answers were identified for numbers one and two. Though Ryan was able to get the right answers for items three and four, he failed to answer when requested to tell the exact phonemes present in the words.

Phoneme deletion. This task necessitates recognizing what word remains when a specified sound is removed. In this activity, Ryan’s job was to tell the word left when the initial phoneme was removed in the following words: 1) “school”; 2). “kape” (coffee); 3) “lami” (yummy); 4) “star”. The results disclosed that he got the right answers for one and four, while wrong for items two and three.

The findings above were reflective of Mrs. Gina’s applied phonemic awareness strategies-the utilization of phoneme isolation and Abakada alphabet in delivering instruction. In the assessment given, it was evident that Ryan had never shown mastery in any of the undertaken tasks. Even on phoneme isolation, Ryan failed to get the perfect score since he made use of the Abakada alphabet in sounding out the phonemes. For example, Ryan sounded out /m/ as /ma/, and /p/ as /pa/. The results further implied Ryan’s lack of systematic instruction received. Therefore, it still boiled down to the fact that para teachers needed explicit training as they are the ones who will play the roles of the professional teachers when modular distance learning delivery modality becomes the sole option in continuing education amidst unseen crises. Children’s reading of letters and words is influenced by phonemic awareness education (Piper, 2010). As a result, for students to gain higher reading performance, they must learn and grasp phonemic awareness; as cited by (Evinger, 2000), when pupils have not gotten appropriate direct training in phonemic awareness, which eludes around 25% of middle-class first graders and much more of those who come from less literacy-rich homes, a bigger problem arises.

### 3.4 Ryan’s Phonemic Awareness Status Motivation Matters in the Second Language Phonemic Awareness Development

Generally, motivation refers to a person’s intrinsic aims and desires, which could be referred to as passion (Karaoglu, 2008). While many studies investigated how motivation affects second language learning, it is important to note that its interference with learner’s phonemic awareness has not been specifically focused on (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2020). This interference caused by motivation was evident in the case of Mrs. Gina and Ryan.

In the bigger picture of Mrs. Gina’s context as the breadwinner and a para teacher at the same time, it was apparent that most of her time was allotted to earning a living while spending enough time on Ryan’s modular instruction was almost impossible. This implied that her motivation towards earning a living was higher compared to her drive towards being a para teacher. There was an instance when Mrs. Gina had to finish cooking some goodies to sell, while Ryan was left alone accomplishing some modular tasks. During that time, Ryan had to approach Mrs. Gina from time to time to ask for instructions; when she felt annoyed and exhausted of explaining and giving repetitive instructions, she opted to tell Ryan to stop answering the modules and set them aside for some other time. This scenario somewhat loosened up Ryan’s motivation to learn. From that day on, the researchers observed that Ryan no longer initiated to answer his modules, but rather waited for Mrs. Gina’s signal to start.

In terms of phonemic awareness instruction, Mrs. Gina believed that the teachers are of the authority to deliver such. She even said, “Face-to-face classes are nothing like modular learning delivery. It’s because when students are present in the classroom, teachers can concentrate on teaching them. Parents cannot devote their whole attention to their children’s learning demands when they are only at home.” This statement signified a deeper implication that Mrs. Gina was less motivated to teach as she held onto her notion that her role was not to take on the responsibilities of professional teachers but to provide her children with their needs outside formal education. Moreover, a great number of studies have indicated that parents extend insufficient help to their children in distance learning (Bubb, S.; Jones, M.A., 2020) since they do not fully comprehend the concepts and principles of teaching and learning; the worst thing is that they do not have knowledge on specific subjects and feel out-of-the-way, and thus demotivated.

Consequently, as Mrs. Gina displayed no motivation to teach, Ryan was influenced – he also lost some motivation to acquire phonemic awareness. When Ryan was asked if he liked studying sounds, he answered, “No. I love playing more than studying. Grandma will be the one to answer my modules anyway.” This statement further indicated how the para teacher’s amount of passion or motivation in teaching affected how the learner saw the need to acquire phonemic awareness. Thus, it is proposed that the language learning process can be facilitated by the teachers by motivating their learners (Gardner, 2001).

## 4. CONCLUSION

The affective aspects that affect learners' phonemic awareness development are often unnoticed, especially in the modular distance learning delivery context. This study that delves into the para teacher's applied strategies and difficulties in developing learner's phonemic awareness (PA), offers a body of information that indicates how the former addressed the PA tasks such as (1) phoneme isolation, (2) phoneme identity (3) phoneme deletion, (4) phoneme segmentation, (5) phoneme categorization, and (6) phoneme blending (National Reading Panel, 2000). More importantly, this research reveals the inclusion of motivation as an essential component in the teaching and learning of phonemic awareness. Based on the findings of this study, it is significant that in times of crisis, learning continuity plans especially for kindergarten up to Grade 1 must be designed according to the profile of the para teachers and learners. Lastly, it is also recommended that future studies should consider motivation as one of the variables to focus on when investigating factors affecting phonemic awareness development among learners.

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## AUTHOR'S CONTRIBUTIONS

The main author considered the design and analysis, collected the data, performed the analysis, and wrote the paper. The co-author deliberated with the design of the research, collected the data, and performed the coding and thematic analysis.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicting interests of any kind in the submission of this research paper.

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