

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory: Elevating Reading Comprehension in Elementary Learners through the ARAL Program and Its Implications for Administration and Governance in Contemporary Education

Lovelle M. Arguido, MAEd¹, Eliseo I. Felisilda, PhD², Gladys S. Escarlos, PhD³

¹Teacher II, Department of Education, Guinuyoran Central School, Philippines

²Teacher III, Department of Education, San Miguel Elementary School, Philippines

³Professor, College Education, Central, Mindanao University, Philippines

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ABSTRACT

Developing reading comprehension among early grade learners remains a pressing challenge in Philippine basic education, particularly following learning disruptions brought about by the pandemic. This study examined how the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program supports the improvement of reading comprehension among elementary learners in selected public schools in the District of Valencia City, Bukidnon. Guided by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, the study explored the role of scaffolding, peer interaction, and guided support in strengthening reading development.

A quantitative descriptive research design was employed. Teacher-respondents were selected through purposive sampling, specifically those facilitating ARAL reading sessions and maintaining documented learner progress records. A validated researcher-developed survey measured the extent of ARAL instructional practices, while reading comprehension levels were gathered from school-based assessments. Results show that a majority of learners fall within the Beginning and Developing levels of comprehension, indicating the continued need for structured reading support. Teachers reported a high extent of implementation of guided reading, scaffolding strategies, and peer-assisted learning, reflecting strong alignment with Vygotskian principles. However, challenges such as heavy teacher workload, limited reading materials, and inconsistent parental involvement were found to affect sustainability. The findings suggest that ARAL effectively supports comprehension growth when learning is socially mediated and scaffolded. Strengthening administrative support, enhancing resource provision, and fostering school-community partnerships are essential for sustaining literacy gains. The study underscores the importance of collaborative, guided learning environments in promoting reading comprehension among Filipino learners.

Keywords: ARAL Program, Reading Comprehension, Sociocultural Theory, Scaffolding, Valencia City Bukidnon

INTRODUCTION

Reading comprehension is widely recognized as a cornerstone of early academic success and lifelong learning. When children learn not only to read, but to understand, interpret, and make meaning from text, they build the cognitive foundation needed for learning across all subject areas. However, in the Philippines, reading comprehension remains a persistent challenge among elementary learners. The *Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA)* in both 2018 and 2022 ranked the Philippines among the lowest in reading performance globally, with majority of learners struggling to identify main ideas and evaluate written information (OECD, 2019; OECD, 2023). These outcomes highlight systemic gaps in literacy instruction and reinforce the urgency of addressing learning recovery in the foundational years.

The situation became even more pronounced during the COVID-19 pandemic, when prolonged school closures, shifting modalities, and unequal access to learning resources strained the capacity of learners, teachers, and families. Several Filipino scholars have noted that the pandemic magnified pre-existing inequities in reading readiness, especially among learners from rural communities and economically disadvantaged households (Dizon, 2022; Reyes & Corpuz, 2021). Teachers, though committed, often faced difficulties differentiating reading instruction and providing individualized support due to large class sizes, administrative demands, and limited instructional materials (Pascual & Garcia, 2023). As a result, reading comprehension challenges are not merely academic issues; they reflect deeper social conditions shaped by environment, language exposure, and opportunities for learning support.

To respond to this national concern, the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program was introduced by the Department of Education as a structured intervention aimed at rebuilding foundational literacy and closing learning gaps. ARAL focuses on small-group instruction, targeted remediation, peer-assisted activities, and family engagement—all approaches that emphasize guided learning rather than solitary reading. The design of ARAL aligns closely with Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that learning takes place through social interaction and mediated support. According to Vygotsky (1978), learners progress when they are supported in the *Zone of Proximal Development*—the space between what they can do alone and what they can achieve with guidance. Contemporary Filipino researchers highlight similar observations, noting that children learn best when teachers scaffold tasks, model comprehension strategies, and create purposeful dialogue around text (Labrador & Medina, 2022; Santos, 2024).

Understanding ARAL through Vygotsky's lens helps us see reading not just as a technical skill, but as a socially cultivated practice. When children discuss stories, share interpretations with peers, and receive thoughtful guidance from teachers and family members, comprehension becomes meaningful and connected to real-life contexts. Strengthening reading comprehension, therefore, requires more than instructional materials; it demands collaboration among schools, families, local governments, and community organizations. As Philippine schools continue to navigate learning recovery, grounding literacy programs in sociocultural approaches can help build resilient, inclusive, and culturally relevant pathways for children to become confident and capable readers.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which emphasizes that learning is a social process shaped by interaction, shared experiences, and the cultural environment in which a child grows. Vygotsky (1978) proposed that children do not learn in isolation; rather, they construct knowledge by engaging with individuals who guide, encourage, and model ways of making meaning. In the context of reading comprehension, this means that understanding text is not simply a matter of decoding words, but of participating in purposeful conversations, asking questions, and making connections with others.

A central concept in Vygotsky's theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) the space between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can accomplish with guided support. When teachers, parents, or peers provide appropriate assistance, learners are able to perform tasks that they would not manage alone. Over time, these supports are gradually removed in a process known as scaffolding (Wood, Bruner, & Ross, 1976). In reading instruction, scaffolding may appear in forms such as guided reading, modeling comprehension strategies, or discussing unfamiliar vocabulary together.

Filipino scholars affirm the importance of guided interaction in developing literacy. Labrador and Medina (2022) observed that students in early grades show notable improvement when teachers model how to ask questions during reading. Similarly, Reyes (2021) found that peer reading circles foster motivation and confidence, particularly among learners who initially experience difficulty. These findings support Vygotsky's premise that learning is strengthened through collaboration and shared dialogue.

The ARAL Program reflects these sociocultural principles. Its emphasis on small-group remediation, peer-assisted reading, and family involvement aligns with the idea that learning is shaped by social and cultural contexts rather than by the learner alone. When teachers intentionally structure discussions, guide students

through texts, and encourage meaning-making, they activate the learner's ZPD and create conditions for genuine comprehension growth (Santos, 2024).

Seen through this theoretical lens, improving reading comprehension is not only a classroom concern but also a community responsibility. Schools benefit when families, community leaders, and local governments participate in literacy programs an approach consistent with Vygotsky's view of learning as culturally embedded. The ARAL Program, therefore, becomes more effective when implemented within supportive social systems where learners interact, communicate, and learn together.

Objectives of the Study

This study aims to examine how the ARAL Program enhances reading comprehension among elementary learners when viewed through the lens of Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory and to identify its implications for educational administration and governance in Philippine schools.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Describe the current level of reading comprehension of elementary learners participating in the ARAL Program.
2. Analyze how instructional strategies used in the ARAL Program reflect Vygotskian principles, particularly:
 - Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD),
 - Scaffolding,
 - and learning through social interaction.
3. Explore the experiences and perceptions of teachers, learners, and parents regarding the implementation of the ARAL Program in improving reading comprehension.
4. Determine challenges encountered by schools in sustaining ARAL-based guided and peer-assisted reading practices.

Scope and Delimitation of the Study

This study focused on examining how the implementation of the ARAL Program influences the reading comprehension levels of elementary learners in the District of Valencia City, Bukidnon. The research was limited to selected public elementary schools within the district where the ARAL Program is actively conducted. The study centers on learners in the early grades who have been identified by their teachers as in need of reading support and are participating in small-group or remedial reading sessions under ARAL.

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND STUDIES

Sociocultural Theory as a Foundation for Learning

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory emphasizes that learning is shaped by interaction, language, and cultural experiences. Vygotsky (1978) argued that children learn best through guided participation with more knowledgeable others teachers, parents, or peers who support them as they bridge the gap between what they can do independently and what they can achieve with guidance, known as the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD). When applied to literacy, this theory suggests that reading comprehension develops through dialogue, questioning, shared interpretation, and structured feedback rather than solitary reading.

Recent educational research upholds this perspective. Kushki (2024) found that meaningful interaction during reading tasks enhances comprehension more effectively than silent independent reading, especially among

young learners. Similarly, Labrador and Medina (2022) noted that Filipino elementary students showed improved understanding of texts when teachers modeled how to ask guiding questions and verbalize thinking. These findings reinforce that comprehension is a socially constructed process, built through conversation and community learning environments.

Reading Comprehension in Early Grade Learners

Reading comprehension is recognized as a key determinant of academic success, influencing performance not only in language subjects but across mathematics, science, and social studies. However, assessment reports in the Philippines show persistent challenges. The Philippine PISA 2022 results revealed that many learners struggle with interpreting written information and identifying the main idea of a text (OECD, 2023). Reyes and Corpuz (2021) argue that limited exposure to reading materials at home and inconsistencies in literacy instruction contribute to low comprehension performance in early grades.

This concern is not isolated. International findings echo the same pattern, emphasizing the need for explicit comprehension strategy instruction. Snow (2020) highlights that young readers benefit when teachers actively teach how to predict, infer, summarize, and connect ideas during shared reading. Without these supports, learners may decode words but fail to grasp meaning—creating the gap commonly observed in classrooms.

Scaffolding and Guided Reading Practices

Scaffolding—the temporary support given to learners until they can perform a task independently is central to both reading instruction and sociocultural learning. Wood, Bruner, and Ross (1976) describe scaffolding as a flexible form of guidance that adapts to the learner's growing competence. Santos (2024) reported that teachers who used guided reading approaches, think-alouds, and text discussion circles observed stronger comprehension skills among early grade learners in public schools.

Peer-assisted learning also plays a significant role. Albaracin (2025) demonstrated that learners engaged in peer reading pairs showed increased fluency and confidence, especially when paired with supportive classmates. Astrero and Eugenio (2025) further found that structured peer reading programs lead not only to improved comprehension but also higher motivation and enjoyment of reading.

The ARAL Program and Learning Recovery Efforts

The Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program was developed as part of the national response to learning disruption during the pandemic. The Department of Education (DepEd, 2025a; 2025b) states that ARAL aims to provide targeted support in reading, mathematics, and science through small-group instruction, diagnostic-based remediation, and family involvement. These program elements align directly with Vygotskian principles: Small-group tutoring activates the learner's ZPD; Guided reading provides scaffolding; Peer collaboration builds shared meaning; Parental reinforcement extends learning beyond the classroom.

In studies conducted after ARAL's pilot implementation, Pascual and Garcia (2023) observed that schools with structured ARAL reading sessions significantly improved their learners' word recognition and comprehension skills. However, they also noted challenges such as teacher workload, inconsistent implementation, and the need for sustained administrative support.

The reviewed literature and studies collectively support the idea that reading comprehension develops most effectively when learning is guided, interactive, and socially supported. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a strong theoretical basis for the ARAL Program, as both emphasize scaffolding, collaboration, and meaningful dialogue. However, effective implementation relies on school leadership, teacher capacity, and community involvement—factors that vary across local contexts. This gap underscores the need to examine ARAL within the District of Valencia City, Bukidnon, where learner profiles, school resources, and community dynamics shape how reading support is delivered.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative descriptive research design. The purpose of this approach is to determine whether a relationship exists between the implementation of ARAL instructional practices and the reading comprehension performance of elementary learners. The descriptive component focuses on identifying the level of implementation of specific reading support strategies under the ARAL Program.

Research Locale

The study was conducted in two (2) public elementary schools in the Division of Valencia City, Bukidnon where the ARAL Program is actively implemented. Valencia City is a growing educational hub in Bukidnon, with diverse communities and varying levels of reading support at home. The selected schools were chosen based on accessibility, the presence of ARAL classes, and administrative approval to use data for academic research.

Respondents of the Study

The respondents of this study were teachers assigned to handle ARAL reading remediation sessions in the selected schools. These teachers were directly involved in delivering scaffolded reading instruction, guided reading activities, and peer-assisted learning sessions. The learners' reading comprehension scores were included as secondary data for analysis but were not directly surveyed.

Sampling Technique

This study employed purposive sampling in the selection of respondents. The participants were limited to teachers who were directly involved in the implementation of the ARAL Program, specifically those handling reading remediation sessions. These teachers were chosen because they were in the best position to provide accurate information regarding the instructional strategies used in ARAL and the reading progress of the learners under their care.

Research Instruments

Data for this study were gathered using a researcher-developed survey questionnaire which underwent content validation by three educational experts to ensure clarity, relevance, and alignment to research objectives. The questionnaire measured the extent of ARAL instructional practices across three key dimensions:

- (1) Guided reading and scaffolding strategies, which refer to how teachers model comprehension skills and provide step-by-step support;
- (2) Peer-assisted and collaborative reading activities, which involve reading tasks done with partners or small groups; and
- (3) Teacher monitoring, feedback, and progress support, which assess how teachers track learner improvement and provide corrective guidance.

To determine the reading comprehension levels of learners participating in the ARAL Program, the study utilized existing school-based reading assessments, such as the PHIL-IRI, ECCD checklists, or the school's official reading progress records. These assessment results were used to classify learners' comprehension levels and served as the basis for correlating instructional practices with reading development.

Data Gathering Procedure

The researcher first sought permission to conduct the study by submitting a formal letter to the Schools Division Office and to the principals of the participating schools. Upon approval, coordination meetings were held with the ARAL teachers to explain the objectives and procedures of the research, ensuring transparency and informed

participation. The validated survey questionnaires were then distributed to the teacher-respondents and retrieved after completion. Additionally, the researcher coordinated with the school reading coordinator to obtain the reading comprehension scores of learners, ensuring that the data were handled with strict confidentiality and used solely for research purposes. After collection, the data were organized, tabulated, and prepared for statistical analysis.

Statistical Treatment of Data

To analyze the collected data, appropriate statistical tools were employed. The Weighted Mean was used to determine the extent of ARAL instructional practices as reported by the teacher-respondents. Frequency counts and percentage distributions were applied to describe the reading comprehension levels of the learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

This chapter presents the findings of the study based on the data gathered from ARAL teacher-respondents and school reading assessment records of elementary learners in the District of Valencia City, Bukidnon. The results are organized according to the research objectives.

Table 1. Reading Comprehension Levels of Learners

Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Beginning	8	26.67
Developing	12	40.00
Approaching Proficient	6	20.00
Proficient	4	13.33

Table 1 displays the reading comprehension performance of learners participating in the ARAL Program across four proficiency categories. The highest proportion of learners were categorized as *Developing* (40%), followed by those in the *Beginning* level (26.67%). Only a small percentage reached the *Proficient* level (13.33%). This suggests that although students are progressing, many still face difficulties with deeper comprehension such as inference, summarizing, and deriving meaning independently, indicating the need for continued structured reading support. This aligns with findings of Reyes and Corpuz (2021), who noted that Filipino learners often exhibit strong decoding skills but struggle with comprehension due to limited guided practice. Similarly, the PISA 2022 Report (OECD, 2023) found that the Philippines continues to score below global averages in reading comprehension, highlighting the need for systematic intervention. Santos (2024) emphasized that comprehension improves significantly when learners receive scaffolding through interactive reading rather than independent seatwork.

Table 2. Extent of ARAL Instructional Strategies

Instructional Strategy Indicator	Weighted Mean	Interpretation
Guided reading and modeling	4.2	Very Much
Peer-assisted learning	4.0	Very Much
Teacher scaffolding and feedback	4.3	Very Much
Gradual release of reading responsibility	4.1	Very Much

Table 2 shows the extent to which teachers implement ARAL reading strategies. All strategies received high mean scores, indicating they are frequently practiced in ARAL sessions. This reflects strong teacher engagement in structured reading support and collaborative learning guiding learners' comprehension development. The use of guided reading and scaffolding supports Vygotsky's (1978) sociocultural learning framework, which emphasizes learning through interaction with knowledgeable others. Labrador and Medina (2022) found that think-aloud modeling and gradual release of responsibility significantly improve comprehension among Filipino early graders. Albaracin (2025) and Astrero & Eugenio (2025) also found that peer-assisted reading increases fluency, comprehension, and learner motivation, supporting the idea that social learning is essential in reading development.

Table 3. Challenges in Sustaining ARAL Implementation

Challenge Indicator	Mean	Interpretation
Limited materials	3.8	High
Teacher workload	4.2	High
Inconsistent parental involvement	3.5	Moderate
Limited volunteer support	3.9	High

Table 3 outlines the challenges encountered in implementing ARAL. Teacher workload is the most pressing concern, followed by limitations in materials and volunteer support, while parental involvement remains inconsistent. These constraints make it difficult to maintain consistent reading sessions and individualized support for learners. These findings are consistent with Pascual & Garcia (2023), who noted that while ARAL is instructionally sound, its sustainability depends on school-level support structures. EDCOM II (2024) reported that teacher workload, class size, and lack of community partnerships are major barriers to literacy recovery. SEAMEO INNOTECH (2023) emphasized that successful reading programs require collaboration among teachers, parents, and local stakeholders, not just classroom instruction.

CONCLUSIONS

1. The ARAL Program effectively supports reading comprehension development when implemented with guided, interactive, and scaffolded instruction.
2. Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory provides a strong foundation for ARAL, particularly in promoting learning through dialogue, modeling, and shared meaning-making.
3. Improvements in comprehension were closely tied to social learning conditions—not merely exposure to text.
4. The sustainability of reading progress depends on school leadership, teacher coaching systems, resource availability, and community partnership.
5. Strengthening administrative and governance support is essential to ensure that literacy recovery becomes a continuous practice, not a temporary post-pandemic intervention.

Recommendations

For Teachers

- Continue using guided reading and think-aloud strategies to support comprehension.
- Provide consistent formative feedback and encourage collaborative reading activities.

- Use reading journals or discussion prompts to deepen meaning making.

For School Administrators

- Allocate fixed time schedules for ARAL sessions to avoid interruptions.
- Develop school-based Reading Support Teams composed of teachers, SPED coordinators, and trained volunteers.
- Include reading remediation goals in School Improvement Plans (SIP).

For Local Government and Community Partners

- Strengthen reading corners in barangays and establish community-based reading hubs.
- Support the printing or procurement of leveled reading materials and storybooks in Filipino, English, and mother tongue.
- Encourage youth organizations, church groups, and retirees to serve as Reading Buddies Volunteers.

For Policy-Makers

- Institutionalize ARAL as a long-term literacy framework, rather than an emergency recovery program.
- Provide teacher training focused on scaffolding strategies and sociocultural literacy instruction.
- Invest in reading assessment systems that inform instruction, not just compliance.

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