

From Pandemic to the New Normal: Learning Loss Among Pandemic Learners in Reading and Literacy

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ABSTRACT

This descriptive qualitative study explores the lived experiences of learning loss in reading and literacy among fifteen Grade 10 Alternative and Relevant Learning or ARAL students at Bukidnon National School of Home Industries, a public secondary school in Bukidnon, Philippines. The study was conducted during the transition from pandemic-era modular and online learning to face-to-face instruction in the new normal. Using purposive sampling, data were collected through a semi-structured Google Forms questionnaire and analyzed using the six-phase thematic analysis developed by Braun and Clarke (2006).

Four salient themes emerged. Instructional isolation and technical skill decline were the most prominent, affecting vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation due to the lack of real-time teacher feedback. Cognitive erosion and reduced reading stamina were also observed, as modular learning encouraged surface-level processing and weakened higher-order reading skills. Technology functioned as both a distraction and a support, diverting attention while also providing tools that aided literacy development. Finally, learners demonstrated resilience through multimodal and collaborative recovery strategies such as peer reading, viewing subtitled media, and parental support.

The findings highlight that literacy is a social and cognitive process vulnerable to isolation. Recovery efforts should prioritize face-to-face instructional support, sustained engagement in extended reading, balanced use of digital tools, and peer-assisted learning programs aligned with the Department of Education ARAL framework.

Keywords: learning loss, reading literacy, ARAL students, pandemic education, thematic analysis

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic dramatically altered how students in the Philippines learned, shifting many public-school learners from face-to-face classes to modular, online, and blended modalities. This change was especially difficult for Grade 10 Alternative and Relevant Learning (ARAL) student who were already struggling or at risk of falling further behind academically. After the shift, many reported that reading and literacy became harder: comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation declined because they had less face-to-face interaction with teachers, more distractions at home, and fewer opportunities to practice reading and ask questions. Before the pandemic, many could easily summarize stories and follow instructions, but during and after, they found these tasks more difficult, often struggling to focus on long texts or remember what they had read.

This study is important because it focuses specifically on the lived experiences of Grade 10 ARAL students, trying to understand how the pandemic affected their reading and literacy skills in concrete ways. National data show that even before COVID-19, many Filipino children struggled with reading, and the long school closures made this problem worse. However, most of these reports come from test scores and surveys, not from students' personal stories. By analyzing open-ended responses from 15 ARAL learners, this study can show which reading tasks like summarizing stories, understanding instructions, or decoding difficult words students now find hardest,

and which factors (online learning, home distractions, limited teacher guidance, or use of digital tools) helped or harmed their progress.

The findings can help schools and teachers design more targeted interventions, such as increasing reading practice, strengthening face-to-face discussions, blending modules with interactive activities, and using simple apps or dictionary tools. They can also guide parents and guardians in supporting reading at home and creating a calmer study environment. Overall, the study aims to connect the national picture of learning loss with the real, everyday experiences of ARAL learners, so that reading and literacy support can be more relevant, practical, and effective in the post-pandemic classroom.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study utilized a qualitative descriptive research design to explore the experiences of Grade 10 ARAL students regarding their reading and literacy development during and after the pandemic. This design is suitable for describing participants' perspectives, feelings, and challenges in a detailed and meaningful way (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Rather than measuring statistical relationships between variables, the study focused on understanding *how* and *why* certain aspects of reading such as comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation became more challenging for students in a public-school setting. The qualitative approach allowed the researcher to analyze patterns of meaning across participants' responses and translate these into clear themes that reflect the realities of ARAL learners in the post-pandemic classroom.

Locale of the Study

This study was conducted at a public secondary school in Bukidnon National School of Home Industries, where Grade 10 ARAL students are enrolled. The school follows the Department of Education's Alternative and Relevant Learning (ARAL) program, which supports learners who experienced learning gaps during the pandemic. The institution serves students from diverse socio-economic backgrounds, many of whom shifted to modular and online learning modalities when schools were closed. The setting provided a rich context for examining how the pandemic affected reading and literacy skills, especially for learners who struggled with comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation after the long period of school disruption. The study focused specifically on Grade 10 ARAL students, exploring their experiences, challenges, and the strategies that helped them cope with reading difficulties in the current school year.

Participants of the Study

The participants of this study were 15 Grade 10 ARAL students enrolled at the selected public school during the school year 2025–2026. These students were purposively selected based on the following criteria: (1) identification as ARAL program enrollees; (2) prior exposure to modular and/or online learning during the pandemic; and (3) willingness to share their experiences regarding reading and literacy. The selection used purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to ensure that participants have direct and relevant experiences related to the study's focus (Cohen et al., 2020). The researcher-maintained confidentiality by using participant codes (P1–P15) instead of real names. The relatively small but strategically chosen sample allowed for in-depth exploration of their reading experiences and provided rich data for thematic analysis.

Research Instruments

The data collection process was carried out systematically to ensure ethical and accurate procedures. First, the researcher obtained permission from the school administration. Once approval was granted, the Grade 10 ARAL teacher assisted in identifying and inviting eligible participants from the ARAL class. Before answering the survey, each participant was given a brief explanation of the study's purpose, procedures, and their rights, including voluntary participation and confidentiality. Written informed consent was obtained from parents or guardians, and assent forms were signed by the students.

The data were gathered using an online self-administered survey through Google Forms. The researcher created a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions and shared the Google Form link with the participants. Students were instructed to answer the questions honestly and in their own words, and all responses were automatically saved in the Google Forms system. The gathered written responses served as the primary material for the analysis of reading and literacy experiences among Grade 10 ARAL students.

Data Analysis

The gathered data were analyzed using thematic analysis, a qualitative method that identifies, organizes, and interprets recurring patterns across participants’ responses (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The first step was immersion in the data, where the researcher read and re-read the written responses collected through Google Forms to become thoroughly familiar with the content. Afterward, initial codes were generated based on key phrases and ideas related to reading comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, pronunciation, and support systems (e.g., home distractions, modular learning, teachers, apps, parents).

These codes were then grouped into broader themes that reflected common experiences, such as “decline in comprehension and vocabulary,” “difficulty summarizing stories and understanding instructions,” “home distractions and limited face-to-face guidance,” and “reading regularly, using apps, and receiving teacher or home support.” The themes were reviewed and refined to ensure they accurately represented the participants’ narratives and were supported by direct examples from their responses. Finally, the findings were interpreted in relation to existing literature on post-pandemic reading skills and Philippine education, linking students’ experiences to broader research on reading loss and recovery. This structured approach enabled the study to provide a clear, coherent picture of how the pandemic affected the reading and literacy development of Grade 10 ARAL students using data collected through Google Forms.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Coding from the Responses	Final Themes	Frequency (% of Responses)
Instructional isolation	Instructional Isolation and the Decline of Technical Skills	70%
Decline in vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation		
Lack of real-time teacher feedback and modeling		
Difficulty decoding new or complex words		
Reading alone without guidance at home		
Struggle to focus on long passages	Cognitive Erosion and the Loss of Reading Stamina	50%
Tasks like summarizing stories now harder		
Habit of answering only short items during pandemic		
Reduced deep analysis of texts		
Easier fatigue when reading		
Distractions from social media and games	The Technological Duality: Distraction vs. Utility	40%
Using online resources to look up meanings		
Relying on digital texts and materials for learning		
Technology as both barrier and bridge to literacy		

Use of apps like Duolingo and Grammarly	Multimodal and Collaborative Recovery Strategies	35%
Watching movies with subtitles to improve vocabulary		
Reading practice with parents and peers		
Teacher guidance and classroom discussions		
Combining digital tools with human support		

Instructional Isolation and the Decline of Technical Skills

One of the strongest themes to emerge from the participants' experiences was instructional isolation and the decline of technical skills. Grade 10 ARAL students repeatedly described how the shift to modular and online learning severed real-time teacher feedback and face-to-face discussions, leading to sharp declines in vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation. Participant 3 shared, "My parents were busy grinding to support the family during the pandemic, so I was left reading by myself with no one to teach me how to correctly pronounce complex words," while Participant 7 noted struggling "to decode new terminology or master the nuances of spoken language" without verbal modeling. These responses reveal that technical literacy is a social-cognitive process reliant on consistent expert scaffolding when that was removed, foundational skills eroded rapidly, making even basic tasks like clarifying text meanings far more effortful.

This theme dominated the coded responses, appearing in over 70% of participant narratives as the most cited challenge (see Table 1 from prior thematic categorization). Arranged from most to least frequent, issues like lack of teacher guidance, solitary home reading, and word decoding difficulties underscored a profound "feedback gap" that outstripped other barriers. Through thematic analysis, instructional isolation stood out across interviews, reflecting how pandemic modalities disrupted the interactive loops essential for literacy growth. The implications are stark: without intervention, this isolation perpetuates skill attrition, compromising comprehension in the new normal. Studies like Kuhfeld et al. (2020) confirm that school closures broke these feedback loops, stunting academic progress, while Hammerstein et al. (2021) link such disruptions to broad literacy declines mirroring ARAL students' realities in Philippine public schools.

Cognitive Erosion and the Loss of Reading Stamina

A second prominent theme was cognitive erosion and the loss of reading stamina, where students who once handled summarization and instructions effortlessly now battled focus on long texts. Participant 11 explained, "Before the pandemic, summarizing stories was a snap, but now I find it difficult to focus and understand long passages," attributing it to online classes' emphasis on short answers that conditioned surface-level processing. Participant 5 echoed, "I lost practice in analyzing longer texts because I got used to fragmented digital tasks," highlighting fatigue during sustained reading.

This theme surfaced in about 50% of responses, secondary to isolation but still critical, with sub-elements like reduced deep analysis and easier distraction ranking high. It illustrates a shift from intuitive mastery to effortful engagement, as modular learning weakened cognitive endurance. This aligns with Bandura's social-cognitive framework, where disrupted routines erode self-regulated focus, and research by Dong et al. (2020) shows how digital fragmentation during lockdowns hindered deep processing offering context for findings on ARAL learners' post-pandemic struggles. While challenging, this theme points to rebuildable stamina through targeted practices.

The Technological Duality: Distraction vs. Utility

Technology emerged as a double-edged sword, with gadgets fueling distractions like social media and games while also enabling recovery via online resources. Participant 9 admitted, "My reading skills suffered because I used gadgets more for entertainment than reading during lockdown," yet Participant 12 countered, "I used online resources and digital materials to discover new words and comprehend the text when teachers weren't available."

Cited in roughly 40% of narratives, this duality ranked mid-tier, balancing negative screen-time barriers against positive utility like dictionary apps. Students' reflections reveal agency in renegotiating tech's role, from hindrance to bridge. This paradox echoes Reimers (2021), who advocates leveraging pandemic lessons for resilient digital integration, and supports data showing ARAL students' adaptive potential amid home-based learning gaps.

Multimodal and Collaborative Recovery Strategies

Finally, students demonstrated resilience through multimodal and collaborative recovery strategies, blending apps like Duolingo and Grammarly with human support. Participant 14 described “using specialized apps, watching English movies with subtitles, and consulting online dictionaries to build vocabulary,” while Participant 10 valued “teacher guidance, home practice with parents, and reading with friends.”

This theme, in 35% of responses, emphasized proactive blending of digital tools and social interaction as key to addressing losses. It highlights inner drive and the need for modernized instruction, aligning with external calls for interactive recovery (e.g., DepEd's learning plans). Schools can build on this by embedding such strategies, turning student ingenuity into systemic strength.

SUMMARY, CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Summary

The qualitative data reveals that the transition to pandemic-era learning fundamentally altered students' reading and literacy experiences, shifting them from intuitive mastery to a more effortful and challenged process. A primary finding is the loss of foundational technical skills, specifically vocabulary, fluency, and pronunciation, driven by instructional isolation. Participants noted that without immediate teacher guidance and face-to-face discussions, they struggled to pick a new word or learn how to speak fluently. For example, one student shared that because their parents were "busy grinding," they were left reading alone with no one to teach them correct pronunciation. This lack of interaction made it harder to clarify meanings, suggesting that literacy is a social-cognitive process that suffered during isolation.

Additionally, the study identifies a significant cognitive erosion characterized by a loss of reading stamina. Tasks that were previously considered a prompt, such as summarizing stories and following instructions, have become difficult post-pandemic. Participants reported that they now lose focus and struggle to understand long passages. A critical insight provided by students is that the format of online learning specifically the reliance on short answers conditioned them for conciseness. This fragmented digital curriculum inadvertently weakened the mental endurance required for deep comprehension and the analysis of longer texts.

The role of technology during this period was found to be a double-edged sword. On the negative side, increased screen time and home distractions made it harder to concentrate, as gadgets were often used more for entertainment than reading. Conversely, when used as a deliberate learning tool, technology facilitated growth. Participants successfully utilized online resources, dictionary apps, and specialized software like Duolingo and Grammarly to discover new words and comprehend the text more when physical instructors were unavailable.

Conclusion

Based on the findings, it is concluded that the pandemic created a significant feedback gap in literacy development. The absence of real-time teacher modeling and classroom discussion led to a decline in technical fluency and vocabulary acquisition. Literacy is not merely an individual skill but one that relies heavily on social scaffolding; when that scaffolding was removed, students' proficiency in complex tasks like summarization and deep analysis regressed.

Also, the shift toward digital, modular learning has resulted in cognitive conditioning toward surface level processing. The short answer culture of online education has reduced students' capacity for sustained attention, leading to a noticeable struggle with long-form reading post-pandemic. However, the data also highlights a powerful inner resilience. Students have demonstrated a proactive mindset by independently adopting

multimodal recovery strategies, blending digital innovation with traditional human support to bridge their academic gaps. Ultimately, student interest and engagement are the primary drivers of successful literacy recovery in the current educational landscape.

Recommendations

Based on the conclusions, the following recommendations are offered to enhance post-pandemic literacy outcomes: For Educators, Teachers should adopt a "modernized approach" by integrating interactive apps and digital materials directly into the curriculum to meet students' new digital habits. There is a critical need to restore deep reading practices by gradually reintroducing long-form texts and complex analytical tasks to rebuild reading stamina. For School Institutions, Schools should facilitate more face-to-face discussions and peer-learning opportunities to re-establish the feedback loops lost during the pandemic. Providing structured support for "reading with friends" and collaborative literacy projects can enhance student engagement and motivation. For Parents, Parents are encouraged to provide regular reading practice at home and engage in "reciting" activities with their children. Even simple actions like providing diverse reading materials and asking about the "deeper meanings of stories" can provide the necessary scaffolding for fluency and comprehension. For Students, Students should continue to leverage technology as a purposeful learning tool rather than solely for entertainment. Using multimedia resources, such as watching movies with subtitles and practicing "reading aloud," can serve as effective self-regulated strategies for improving vocabulary and communication skills.

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