Lived Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment

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HOW TO CITE:

Ronalyn C. Flores, Leo D. Rayon, Jr. (2026). Lived Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment. International Journal of Special Education, 41(15s), 1198-1216

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ABSTRACT:

Reading difficulties continue to hinder the academic performance and participation of many learners, particularly those who struggle with foundational literacy skills. While peer-assisted reading interventions have been widely used to improve reading outcomes, limited studies have examined the lived experiences of struggling readers and the pedagogical insights derived from such interventions. This study explored the lived experiences of grade 7 struggling readers in a peer-assisted reading (PAR) program and identified the pedagogical insights drawn from their experiences in a public secondary school in Santo Tomas, Davao del Norte. Anchored on an interpretivist worldview, the study employed a qualitative phenomenological design. Ten (10) grade 7 students identified as struggling readers through the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) were purposively selected as participants. Data were collected through semi-structured in-depth interviews and analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) phenomenological method. The findings revealed three themes describing the participants' lived experiences: Initial Anxiety and Literacy Difficulties in Peer-Assisted Reading, Positive Emotional, Social, and Learning Experiences in Peer-Assisted Reading, and Enhanced Reading Confidence, Skills, and Motivation Through Peer-Assisted Reading. The participants initially experienced reading as an anxiety-provoking activity characterized by fear, uncertainty, and literacy difficulties. Through sustained peer support, guided practice, and collaborative learning, they gradually developed confidence, improved reading skills, and stronger motivation to read. Four pedagogical insights also emerged: Interactive and Enjoyable Activities Promote Active Participation in Reading, Repetition and Continuous Guidance Strengthen Reading Mastery, Flexible Scheduling and Sufficient Learning Time Enhance Reading Engagement and Understanding, and Developmentally Appropriate Reading Materials Facilitate Learning Improvement. These findings underscore the importance of peer-assisted reading environments that integrate emotional support, collaboration, scaffolded instruction, and

learner-centered practices to promote meaningful literacy development among struggling readers.

Keywords: peer-assisted reading, struggling readers, lived experiences, pedagogical insights, phenomenology

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental skill that underpins learners' academic success and lifelong learning. It enables individuals to acquire knowledge, develop critical thinking skills, communicate effectively, and participate meaningfully in society (Veril & Siat, 2025). As a foundational literacy skill, reading serves as a gateway to learning across all subject areas and contributes significantly to personal, social, and economic development (Tarjiah et al., 2023). Consequently, literacy development remains a global educational priority and is central to achieving quality education for all. Despite continuous efforts to improve literacy outcomes, many learners continue to experience difficulties in reading comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development. Struggling readers often encounter barriers that limit their ability to understand texts, express ideas, and participate actively in classroom learning (Almazan & Almeda, 2026). These challenges affect not only academic performance but also learners' confidence, engagement, and motivation to read. In the Philippine context, these persistent difficulties remain evident among high school learners (Apiles, 2025; Idulog et al., 2023; Reapor, 2026) Globally, literacy development continues to be a major educational concern despite ongoing reforms. Large-scale assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reveal that many learners still perform below expected reading proficiency levels. Similarly, a global learning crisis has been identified in which a significant number of children and adolescents are unable to read and comprehend simple texts (Bacus et al., 2025; Huettig & Ferreira, 2022). These findings underscore the continuing need for effective and sustainable interventions that address reading difficulties and support literacy development among struggling learners. In response to these challenges, researchers and educators have implemented various reading interventions aimed at improving literacy outcomes. Research has consistently shown that structured reading interventions and peer-assisted learning strategies are effective in enhancing learners' reading performance. Studies in the Philippine context confirm that peer-assisted learning strategies significantly improve reading comprehension and overall reading achievement among junior high school learners (Crebillo & Gilbas, 2025; Deloy et al., 2025; Penepona, 2025). Likewise, structured literacy intervention programs contribute to measurable improvements in reading comprehension among secondary learners. Furthermore, Filipino teachers commonly employ intervention practices such as remedial reading, guided reading, and peer tutoring to address learners' reading difficulties (Bendo et al., 2026; Hacutina, 2025; Lagdaan & Sevilla, 2025). Moreover, classroom-based intervention studies demonstrate that structured reading programs improve reading accuracy, fluency, and comprehension skills among struggling readers. These interventions become more effective when learning is scaffolded through peer interaction, allowing learners to receive immediate feedback, encouragement, and guided support during reading activities (Nombrado & Rayon, 2026). Similarly, peer-assisted and collaborative reading approaches strengthen comprehension by facilitating shared meaning-making, discussion, and guided questioning among learners. Research also shows that fluency-oriented instruction and structured reading practice significantly improve reading speed, accuracy, and comprehension among struggling readers (Rasinski et al., 2009; Scammacca et al., 2013) Despite the demonstrated effectiveness of these interventions, reading difficulties among Filipino learners remain persistent. Studies reveal that

many junior high school students continue to experience comprehension gaps, limited vocabulary development, and low reading engagement (Domingo, 2025; Idulog et al., 2023; Reapor, 2026). These challenges are often associated with low motivation and weak reading habits, which further hinder literacy development. Motivation and engagement are therefore recognized as critical factors in reading development (Klauda & Guthrie, 2014; McBreen & Savage, 2020). Learners who are actively engaged in reading tasks tend to demonstrate better comprehension and academic performance. However, struggling readers frequently experience decreased motivation as a result of repeated academic difficulties, creating a cycle of disengagement and poor performance. Beyond cognitive and academic outcomes, recent studies emphasize the importance of understanding learners' lived experiences in addressing reading difficulties (Nombrado & Rayon, 2026; Ubaldo, 2023). Qualitative research reveals that struggling readers often encounter emotional challenges such as anxiety, low confidence, fear of making mistakes, and apprehension about reading in front of peers. These findings suggest that reading difficulties are not solely academic concerns but are also deeply socio-emotional experiences shaped by learners' interactions, perceptions, and classroom environments. Despite the growing body of literature on reading interventions and peer-assisted learning, a significant gap remains in understanding the lived experiences of struggling readers within peer-assisted reading environments (Breadmore et al., 2026; Fuchs et al., 1997). Existing studies largely focus on quantitative outcomes such as reading comprehension scores, fluency gains, vocabulary development, and intervention effectiveness. While these studies provide valuable evidence regarding the success of intervention programs, they offer limited insight into how struggling readers personally experience peer support, navigate reading challenges, develop confidence, and construct meaning from their participation in peer-assisted reading activities. The limited attention given to learners' perspectives creates an incomplete understanding of how peer-assisted reading interventions influence struggling readers beyond measurable academic outcomes (Astrero & Eugenio, 2025; McMaster et al., 2005). Although previous studies have established the effectiveness of peer tutoring and collaborative learning strategies, little is known about how learners perceive these interventions, how they experience social interactions within peer-assisted settings, and how such experiences contribute to their motivation, engagement, and reading development. Exploring these lived experiences is essential for developing more responsive, learner-centered, and contextually relevant literacy interventions. At the policy level, the Philippine Department of Education has implemented various initiatives to address literacy gaps and improve reading achievement (Briones, 2026; Gatcho et al., 2024; Manuel et al., 2025). These include the Every Child a Reader Program, the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI), and the National Reading Program Framework. More recently, the Department institutionalized the Academic Recovery and Accessible Learning (ARAL) Program through DepEd Order No. 018, Series of 2025, which aims to address learning losses in foundational skills, particularly reading (Briones, 2026; Silagan et al., 2025). Anchored on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, the ARAL Program emphasizes scaffolded instruction and peer-assisted tutoring as key strategies for learning recovery. At the local level, similar concerns are evident in a public secondary school in Davao del Norte. Phil-IRI results indicate consistent improvement among grade 7 learners following reading interventions (Bendo et al., 2026). In School Year 2023–2024, the number of struggling readers decreased from twelve (12) to four (4), while in School Year 2024–2025, the number declined from nineteen (19) to five (5). These outcomes suggest that structured reading interventions have contributed to measurable improvements in reading performance. This progress is largely attributed to the sustained implementation of the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program, a school-based intervention that has been implemented for seven years. The PAR

program utilizes peer tutoring, guided reading sessions, and continuous monitoring to address learners' reading difficulties (Astrero & Eugenio, 2025; Fuchs et al., 1997; Navarro, 2026). Notably, the program was implemented before the institutionalization of the ARAL Program and has served as the school's primary reading remediation strategy. With the implementation of DepEd Order No. 018, s. 2025, peer-assisted tutoring became a formally recognized national strategy for literacy recovery. In this context, the PAR program aligns with ARAL and serves as its localized implementation within the school. While ARAL provides the national framework, PAR operationalizes its principles through structured peer-assisted reading activities specifically designed to support grade 7 struggling readers. Against this backdrop, this study explored the lived experiences of grade 7 struggling readers participating in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. Specifically, it aimed to understand how learners experience peer-assisted reading activities, perceive peer support, navigate reading difficulties, and develop confidence and motivation within the intervention environment.

Ultimately, this study aimed to contribute to the enhancement of peer-assisted reading interventions by providing a deeper understanding of the socio-emotional, cognitive, and relational dimensions of learners' experiences. By foregrounding the voices of struggling readers, the study could offer insights that would inform the development of more responsive literacy programs, strengthen the implementation of ARAL-aligned interventions, and support the creation of learner-centered reading practices that promote both literacy achievement and positive reading experiences.

Research Questions

This study aims to answer the following questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of struggling readers in a peer-assisted reading environment?
2. What pedagogical insights can be drawn from the experiences of struggling readers in a peer-assisted reading environment?

METHODS

Research Design

This study was anchored on the interpretivist worldview, which posits that reality is socially constructed and understood through individuals' subjective experiences and meanings (Creswell, 2013). Interpretivism emphasizes understanding human experiences from the perspectives of those who live them, recognizing that individuals construct meaning through their interactions with their social and cultural environments (Negou et al., 2023). Consistent with this philosophical stance, the study adopted a qualitative phenomenological approach to explore the lived experiences of grade 7 struggling readers who participated in a peer-assisted reading (PAR) environment. Phenomenology seeks to describe and interpret the essence of a shared experience by examining how individuals perceive and make meaning of a particular phenomenon (Denzin & Lincoln, 2012; Oluka, 2025; Twycross, 2004; Webb & Welsh, 2019). This approach enabled the study to gain a deeper understanding of the cognitive, social, emotional, and motivational dimensions of learners' experiences as they navigated reading challenges, peer support, confidence development, and engagement in the PAR program. To gather rich and detailed accounts of participants' lived experiences, the study employed semi-structured in-depth interviews (IDIs) as the primary data collection method. Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to openly describe their experiences while giving the researchers the flexibility to ask probing and follow-up questions that elicited deeper insights into emerging themes and meanings. This method was particularly appropriate for phenomenological inquiry because it facilitated the collection of detailed narratives about participants' perceptions, feelings, challenges, and reflections regarding their participation in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program, thereby providing a comprehensive understanding of

how they interpreted and made sense of their experiences.

Research Locale

The study was conducted at La Libertad National High School in Santo Tomas, Davao del Norte, Philippines. The school was purposively selected because it implements the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program, a school-based reading intervention designed to support struggling readers through structured peer-assisted learning activities. The program provided an appropriate setting for exploring the lived experiences of grade 7 struggling readers as they developed reading fluency, word recognition, and comprehension through guided peer interactions. As the school has consistently implemented literacy intervention programs, it offered a rich context for understanding participants' experiences and generating insights that may help improve peer-assisted reading initiatives and similar literacy programs in other educational settings.

Research Participants

Participants were selected through purposive sampling, a non-probability sampling technique commonly used in qualitative research to identify individuals who possess firsthand knowledge and direct experience of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The study involved ten (10) grade 7 students enrolled at La Libertad National High School who were identified as struggling readers based on the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) and were active participants in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. The inclusion criteria required participants to (1) be officially identified as struggling readers through the school's Phil-IRI assessment, (2) be enrolled in grade 7 at the time of the study, (3) have actively participated in the PAR Program for at least one academic quarter, (4) be willing to share their experiences, and (5) provide informed assent with parental or guardian consent. Students who did not meet these criteria or who chose not to participate were excluded from the study. The sample size was considered appropriate for a phenomenological study, as it allowed the researchers to obtain rich, in-depth accounts of participants' lived experiences while achieving data saturation (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1: Profile of the Research Participants of the Study

School	Participant	Gender	Interview Code
La Libertad National High School	Participant 01	Male	P1
	Participant 02	Male	P2
	Participant 03	Male	P3
	Participant 04	Male	P4
	Participant 05	Male	P5
	Participant 06	Female	P6
	Participant 07	Female	P7
	Participant 08	Female	P8
	Participant 09	Female	P9
	Participant 10	Female	P10

Table 1 presents the profile of the research participants and the interview coding system used in the study. The participants consisted of ten (10) purposively selected grade 7 struggling readers from La Libertad National High School, Santo Tomas, Davao del Norte, including five (5) males and five (5) females who participated in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. To ensure confidentiality and protect participants' identities, each participant was assigned a pseudonymous identifier and an interview code (P1–P10), which were used throughout the data collection, transcription, analysis, and presentation of the findings in accordance with ethical research standards.

Data Gathering Procedure

The data gathering process followed a systematic and ethically guided procedure to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Before data collection, the researchers secured the necessary approvals from the concerned institutional and school authorities. A semi-structured In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide was then developed, validated by experts in qualitative research and language education, refined based on their recommendations, and pilot-tested with students who shared characteristics similar to those of the actual participants. Ethical clearance was subsequently obtained from the Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC). Informed consent from parents or legal guardians and informed assent from the student participants were secured after explaining the study's purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and participants' rights. Following the completion of all ethical and administrative requirements, the researchers conducted individual semi-structured interviews in a safe and comfortable environment within the school. With the participants' permission, the interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and translated into English when necessary while preserving the intended meanings of the responses. The transcripts were validated by a qualitative research expert and verified through member checking, allowing participants to review and confirm the accuracy of their responses before data analysis. Finally, all research data, including audio recordings, transcripts, consent forms, and related documents, were securely stored using password-protected digital files and locked storage. Pseudonyms and interview codes were used throughout the study to protect participants' identities and maintain confidentiality in accordance with established ethical standards.

Research Instrument

The primary research instrument was a researcher-developed semi-structured In-Depth Interview (IDI) guide designed to gather rich descriptions of the participants' lived experiences in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. The interview guide was aligned with the study's research questions and included five (5) probing questions for each main question to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and reflections. Its semi-structured format allowed the researchers to ask follow-up questions for clarification and deeper understanding while maintaining alignment with the study objectives. To establish content validity, the interview guide was evaluated by two experts in qualitative research and language education, who assessed its clarity, relevance, appropriateness, and alignment with the research objectives. Their recommendations were incorporated into the final version of the instrument.

Data Analysis

The data gathered from the semi-structured in-depth interviews were analyzed using Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysis. This method was selected because it provides a rigorous and systematic approach to describing, interpreting, and understanding the essence of participants' lived experiences. Through this analytical process, the researchers were able to identify meaningful patterns, derive themes, and develop a comprehensive understanding of the experiences of struggling readers in a peer-assisted reading (PAR) environment.

Trustworthiness of the Study

To ensure the rigor and quality of the study, trustworthiness was established using the framework proposed by Lincoln and Guba

(1985), which consists of credibility, dependability, transferability, and confirmability. These criteria served as the basis for evaluating the trustworthiness of the findings and ensuring that the lived experiences of struggling readers were accurately represented and systematically interpreted. Consistent with the recommendations of by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and Creswell and Poth (2018), various strategies were employed throughout the research process to enhance the credibility, consistency, applicability, and neutrality of the study.

Ethical Considerations

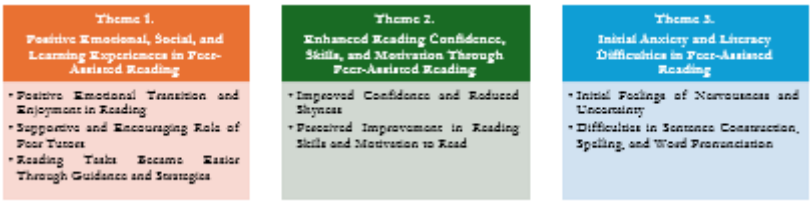
The study adhered to established ethical principles throughout the conduct of the research to safeguard the rights, welfare, and dignity of the participants. Prior to data collection, the researchers secured the necessary permissions from the concerned authorities, including the the Schools Division Office of Davao del Norte, and the administration of La Libertad National High School. Furthermore, the study underwent ethical review and was granted ethical clearance by the Institutional Ethics Review Committee (IERC) under Control No. 2026-010-INT-RCF before the commencement of any research activities.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Lived Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment

This section presents the findings on the lived experiences of struggling readers who participated in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. Using Colaizzi's (1978) method of analysis, significant statements were analyzed to develop themes that captured the essence of the participants' experiences. The findings provide insights into how the participants perceived peer support, addressed reading challenges, and developed confidence and engagement through the program. Figure 1 illustrates the lived experiences of struggling readers in a peer-assisted reading environment.

Figure 1: Lived Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment



Theme 1: Positive Emotional, Social, and Learning Experiences in Peer-Assisted Reading

Analysis of the participants' narratives revealed the theme Positive Emotional, Social, and Learning Experiences in Peer-Assisted Reading, which reflected the transformation of struggling readers as they participated in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program. Initially, participants associated reading with fear, frustration, embarrassment, and uncertainty because of their reading difficulties. However, regular participation in the program gradually changed these perceptions, allowing them to experience reading as more enjoyable, meaningful, and achievable. The findings indicate that peer-assisted reading provided not only academic support but also emotional encouragement that fostered greater confidence and willingness to participate in reading activities. The participants consistently described their peer tutors as patient, helpful, and encouraging, creating a supportive learning environment where they felt accepted and comfortable asking questions or making mistakes. Such positive peer relationships reduced anxiety and self-consciousness, enabling learners to participate more actively in reading tasks. With continuous guidance in pronunciation, word recognition, comprehension, and reading strategies, participants perceived reading activities as easier and more manageable. These experiences

contributed to improved confidence, reduced shyness, and increased motivation to read. Overall, the findings demonstrate that peer-assisted reading addressed not only the academic challenges of struggling readers but also their emotional and social needs. Participants gradually shifted from viewing reading as an individual struggle to seeing it as a collaborative learning experience characterized by encouragement, companionship, and shared success. As learners experienced repeated support and successful reading experiences, they developed stronger confidence in their abilities and more positive attitudes toward reading. The findings support the growing body of evidence that peer-assisted learning creates supportive environments that reduce reading anxiety, foster emotional safety, and increase learner engagement (Breadmore et al., 2026; Lee, 2014). Likewise, structured peer tutoring enhances reading comprehension, motivation, active participation, and positive attitudes toward reading by providing collaborative learning opportunities and timely feedback (Atamosa & Dioso, 2024). The participants' experiences in this study closely reflect these documented benefits of peer-assisted learning. The findings may also be understood through the lens of Sociocultural Theory, particularly the concept of the Zone of Proximal Development, in which peer tutors functioned as more capable peers who provided guidance and feedback that enabled struggling readers to accomplish reading tasks beyond their independent abilities (Haider & Yasmin, 2015; Machimana & Genis, 2025; Nombrado & Rayon, 2026). Similarly, the concept of scaffolding explains how temporary instructional support helped participants gradually become more competent and independent readers as their confidence and reading skills improved (Ibrahim et al., 2023; Rodgers et al., 2016; Salem, 2016) Furthermore, the findings are consistent with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through observation, modeling, and the development of self-efficacy (Venegas, 2018). By observing their peer tutors' reading behaviors and receiving continuous encouragement, participants developed greater confidence in their own reading abilities and became more willing to engage in reading activities (Nolan, 2017). Overall, the findings suggest that peer-assisted reading is not merely a literacy intervention but a meaningful learning experience that promotes emotional well-being, social connectedness, and academic engagement among struggling readers.

Theme 2: Enhanced Reading Confidence, Skills, and Motivation Through Peer-Assisted Reading

Analysis of the participants' narratives revealed the theme Enhanced Reading Confidence, Skills, and Motivation Through Peer-Assisted Reading, highlighting how participation in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program contributed to learners' academic and personal development. Participants described noticeable improvements in their reading fluency, word recognition, and comprehension, which gradually increased their confidence and willingness to participate in reading activities. As they experienced success in completing reading tasks, they became more motivated to read and more optimistic about their ability to improve. A key feature of these experiences was the consistent support provided by peer tutors. Participants shared that their tutors patiently guided them through difficult words, clarified unfamiliar concepts, and provided immediate feedback and encouragement. This individualized assistance reduced their hesitation and fear of making mistakes, making reading activities more manageable and less intimidating. The supportive learning environment also allowed learners to practice reading more frequently and recognize their own progress over time. The findings further indicate that improvements in reading skills, confidence, and motivation reinforced one another. As learners became more competent readers, they were more willing to participate in classroom reading activities, which created additional opportunities for practice and success (Nombrado & Rayon, 2026). These repeated positive experiences strengthened their confidence and sustained their motivation, transforming reading from a challenging task into a meaningful learning experience.

The participants' experiences reinforce existing evidence that peer-assisted learning promotes literacy development by increasing learner engagement, providing timely feedback, and creating opportunities for collaborative learning (Longfellow et al., 2008). Beyond improving reading performance, supportive peer interactions encouraged learners to develop more positive attitudes toward reading and greater confidence in their own abilities, demonstrating the broader educational value of peer-assisted reading (Breadmore et al., 2026; Lee, 2014; Navarro, 2026).

These findings may be explained through Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding, which emphasize that learning develops through guided social interaction. Within the PAR program, peer tutors acted as more capable peers who provided the temporary support needed for struggling readers to accomplish tasks that they could not yet perform independently (Machimana & Genis, 2025; Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Wu & Ko, 2024). As learners acquired new reading skills and strategies, they gradually became more confident and increasingly capable of reading with less assistance.

The findings also align with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of observation, modeling, and self-efficacy in learning. By observing effective reading behaviors, receiving encouragement, and experiencing repeated success, participants developed stronger beliefs in their own capabilities as readers (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006; Shehzad et al., 2020). Collectively, these experiences demonstrate that peer-assisted reading not only improves literacy skills but also nurtures learners' confidence, motivation, and positive self-perceptions, enabling them to become more engaged and resilient readers (Astrero & Eugenio, 2025; Escobido et al., 2025).

Theme 3: Initial Anxiety and Literacy Difficulties in Peer-Assisted Reading

The findings showed that participants entered the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program with significant emotional and literacy-related challenges, giving rise to the theme Initial Anxiety and Literacy Difficulties in Peer-Assisted Reading. Most learners described reading as an intimidating activity that triggered nervousness, fear of making mistakes, and uncertainty about their abilities. These emotions were accompanied by difficulties in pronunciation, word recognition, spelling, sentence construction, and comprehension, making reading both academically and emotionally demanding. Rather than existing independently, participants' emotional responses and literacy difficulties reinforced one another.

Their struggles with reading often heightened feelings of embarrassment and self-doubt, while anxiety reduced their confidence to participate in reading activities. This interaction created a cycle in which fear of failure discouraged active engagement, making it more difficult for learners to develop their reading skills during the initial stages of the program. Although the early experiences were challenging, the participants' narratives revealed a gradual shift as they continued participating in peer-assisted reading sessions.

With regular guidance, constructive feedback, and encouragement from their peer tutors, learners became more comfortable expressing themselves and attempting reading tasks. The supportive environment helped lessen their fear of being judged and enabled them to view mistakes as part of the learning process rather than as signs of failure.

The experiences of the participants affirm the growing understanding that literacy difficulties extend beyond deficits in reading skills and are closely linked to learners' emotional well-being (Pollock, 2019; Ross et al., 2025). Supportive peer-assisted learning environments can reduce anxiety, strengthen learners' sense of belonging, and encourage greater participation by providing immediate assistance and positive reinforcement (Fuchs et al., 2000; Fuchs et al., 1999).

These conditions allow struggling readers to engage more confidently in literacy activities despite their initial challenges. From a theoretical perspective, the findings may be interpreted

through Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding.

Learning occurred through meaningful interaction with peer tutors who provided guidance, explanations, and encouragement appropriate to the learners' needs (Machimana & Genis, 2025; Tinggie et al., 2023). As this support was gradually internalized, participants became better equipped to manage reading tasks independently while developing greater confidence in their abilities.

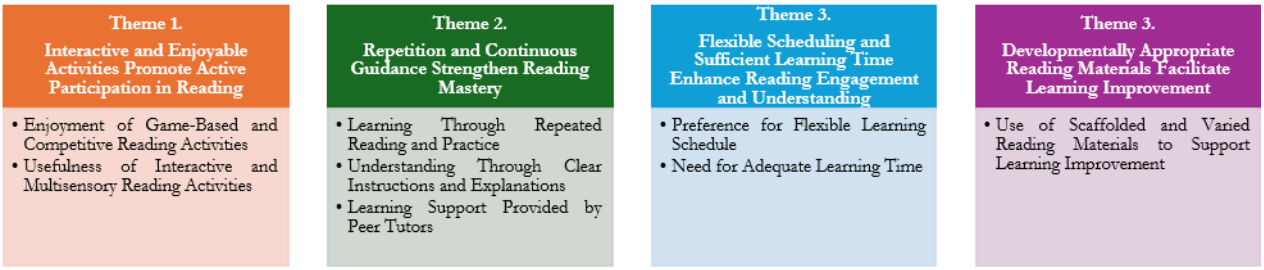
The participants' experiences also reflect the principles of Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes learning through observation, modeling, and successful performance. Watching peer tutors demonstrate effective reading behaviors and receiving continuous encouragement helped participants build self-efficacy and persist despite their initial difficulties (Shehzad et al., 2020).

Overall, the findings illustrate that the PAR program provided a supportive environment where learners gradually overcame anxiety and literacy challenges, enabling them to participate more actively and develop a more positive perception of themselves as readers.

Pedagogical Insights Drawn from Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment

The experiences of struggling readers in the peer-assisted reading (PAR) program provided valuable pedagogical insights into the instructional practices and learning conditions that supported their reading development. The participants emphasized the importance of supportive learning environments, clear instructional guidance, repeated reading practice, and positive peer interactions in improving their confidence, motivation, and reading skills. These findings suggest that effective reading instruction should address both the academic and socio-emotional needs of struggling readers through learner-centered and collaborative approaches. Figure 2 presents the pedagogical insights derived from the participants' experiences, including the core ideas and emerging themes that can inform the design and implementation of effective literacy interventions.

Figure 2: Pedagogical Insights Drawn from the Experiences of Struggling Readers in a Peer-Assisted Reading Environment



Theme 1: Interactive and Enjoyable Activities Promote Active Participation in Reading

One of the key pedagogical insights that emerged from the participants' experiences was the importance of making reading activities interactive and enjoyable to encourage active participation, leading to the theme Interactive and Enjoyable Activities Promote Active Participation in Reading. Rather than responding positively to traditional reading tasks alone, learners became more engaged when instruction incorporated games, friendly competition, movement, flashcards, and other interactive activities. These approaches transformed reading from a difficult and intimidating task into an enjoyable learning experience that encouraged learners to participate with greater interest and enthusiasm. The participants explained that

interactive activities allowed them to become active contributors to the learning process instead of passive recipients of instruction. Activities that involved collaboration, guessing games, and action-based tasks sustained their attention, reduced their fear of making mistakes, and encouraged them to interact with their peers. These experiences suggest that creating enjoyable learning opportunities can lessen learners' anxiety while increasing their willingness to participate in reading activities. The findings indicate that learner engagement is influenced not only by the content of reading instruction but also by how learning experiences are designed and delivered (Wang, 2023). When reading activities are meaningful, collaborative, and responsive to learners' interests, students become more motivated to participate and persist despite difficulties. Interactive and multisensory approaches also help learners understand reading concepts more effectively by allowing them to learn through different forms of participation (Romero, 2020; Wulandari & Pujaningsih, 2025). These experiences reinforce the growing evidence that learner-centered and interactive instructional approaches promote reading engagement, motivation, and participation (Ahmad et al., 2024). Collaborative learning, peer-assisted activities, and multisensory instruction create supportive learning environments where learners are encouraged to take an active role in developing their literacy skills while building positive attitudes toward reading (Durroh et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, these findings can be understood through Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding, which emphasize that learning develops through meaningful social interaction and guided support. Interactive reading activities enabled learners to collaborate with peers and receive timely assistance from their tutors, allowing them to accomplish reading tasks that would have been difficult to complete independently while gradually developing greater competence (Flores et al., 2024; Palincsar et al., 1987; Rayon, 2017). The findings also reflect the principles of Social Learning Theory, which highlights the role of observation, modeling, and reinforcement in learning. Through participation in games, collaborative activities, and guided reading tasks, learners observed effective reading behaviors and received positive feedback that strengthened their confidence and motivation (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014; Nombrado & Rayon, 2026; Webber et al., 2023). Overall, the findings suggest that interactive and enjoyable reading activities are effective instructional strategies that foster active participation, meaningful engagement, and positive literacy experiences among struggling readers.

Theme 2: Repetition and Continuous Guidance Strengthen Reading Mastery

The findings indicate that reading mastery is achieved through sustained practice rather than through a single learning experience, giving rise to the theme Repetition and Continuous Guidance Strengthen Reading Mastery. Participants consistently shared that repeated reading allowed them to become more familiar with difficult words, improve pronunciation, strengthen comprehension, and gain confidence in reading. Instead of perceiving repetition as repetitive or tedious, they viewed it as an essential part of their learning process that helped them gradually improve their reading abilities. Another important insight was the value of continuous guidance throughout the learning process. Participants explained that peer tutors provided clear explanations, corrected mistakes, answered questions, and offered encouragement whenever they encountered difficulties. This consistent support enabled learners to better understand reading tasks and reduced their uncertainty, making them more willing to continue practicing despite their challenges. The participants' accounts further suggest that meaningful learning occurred through the combination of repeated practice and timely instructional support. Frequent opportunities to revisit reading tasks reinforced previously learned skills (Lo et al., 2011), while immediate feedback helped learners refine their performance and correct errors before they became persistent difficulties (Gorp et al., 2016). Together, these experiences enabled learners to make steady progress and develop greater confidence in their reading abilities. The

pedagogical implication of these findings is that struggling readers benefit from instructional approaches that emphasize gradual learning rather than immediate mastery. Effective reading instruction should provide learners with sufficient time to practice, revisit challenging texts, and receive individualized guidance (Nombrado & Rayon, 2026; Paris, 2005; Primeaux, 2000). Such an approach allows learners to build understanding progressively while maintaining motivation and engagement throughout the learning process. These findings may be interpreted through Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding, which view learning as a socially supported process. Within the PAR program, peer tutors acted as more capable peers who provided temporary guidance, explanations, and feedback that enabled learners to accomplish reading tasks beyond their independent abilities (Palincsar & Klenk, 1992; Thurston et al., 2019). As learners gained competence through repeated experiences, they gradually relied less on assistance and became more independent readers. The findings also align with Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes the role of observation, reinforcement, and successful experiences in developing self-efficacy. By repeatedly observing effective reading strategies, practicing them with guidance, and receiving positive reinforcement, participants developed stronger confidence and persistence in reading (Schunk & Zimmerman, 2006; Shehzad et al., 2020). Overall, the findings demonstrate that repetition and continuous guidance create meaningful opportunities for struggling readers to develop reading mastery, confidence, and long-term engagement in literacy learning.

Theme 3: Flexible Scheduling and Sufficient Learning Time Enhance Reading Engagement and Understanding

The participants identified time as an important factor that influenced how well they engaged in reading activities, leading to the theme Flexible Scheduling and Sufficient Learning Time Enhance Reading Engagement and Understanding. They shared that reading sessions were more productive when conducted at times when they felt mentally prepared, attentive, and less fatigued. They also emphasized that having adequate time to complete reading tasks allowed them to concentrate better and understand texts more effectively. Many participants expressed that rushed reading activities made it difficult to process information, ask questions, and apply reading strategies. In contrast, flexible schedules and longer learning sessions gave them opportunities to read at a comfortable pace, clarify unfamiliar words, and receive guidance from their peer tutors. These conditions reduced pressure and enabled learners to participate more confidently throughout the reading sessions. Rather than viewing instructional time as simply a schedule to follow, the participants regarded it as an essential resource that supported meaningful learning. Adequate learning time encouraged deeper comprehension, sustained participation, and continuous practice, while flexible scheduling accommodated learners' readiness and individual learning needs. These experiences suggest that struggling readers benefit when reading interventions prioritize quality of learning over the speed of task completion. The findings highlight an important pedagogical implication for reading instruction. Literacy interventions should provide sufficient time for guided practice, reflection, and interaction so that learners can fully engage with reading activities (Guthrie et al., 2013; Nahdi et al., 2024; Taylor et al., 2003). Allowing learners to progress at a pace appropriate to their abilities creates a more supportive environment where understanding, confidence, and motivation can develop naturally (Wahyuni et al., 2025). From a theoretical perspective, the findings are consistent with Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding. Meaningful learning occurred when participants were given enough time to interact with their peer tutors, receive explanations, ask questions, and gradually accomplish reading tasks that initially exceeded their independent abilities (Daw, 2020; Rayon, 2017). Adequate time enhanced the effectiveness of the instructional support provided throughout the learning process (Fuchs et al., 1997; Palincsar et al., 1987; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2008). The

findings also reflect the principles of Social Learning Theory, which emphasizes that observation, practice, feedback, and successful experiences strengthen learners' self-efficacy. Flexible scheduling and sufficient learning time created opportunities for participants to observe effective reading strategies, practice them repeatedly, and receive reinforcement without unnecessary pressure (Schunk, 1990; Shehzad et al., 2020). Overall, the findings suggest that thoughtful scheduling and adequate instructional time are essential components of effective reading interventions, enabling struggling readers to participate more actively, understand texts more deeply, and achieve more meaningful learning outcomes.

Theme 4: Developmentally Appropriate Reading Materials Facilitate Learning Improvement

The participants consistently emphasized that the quality of reading materials influenced how easily they understood and engaged with reading activities, leading to the theme Developmentally Appropriate Reading Materials Facilitate Learning Improvement. They explained that story-based texts, simplified vocabulary, and visually supported materials made reading less intimidating and easier to understand. When texts matched their reading abilities, they were able to focus on comprehension rather than becoming overwhelmed by unfamiliar words and complex passages. An important insight that emerged from the participants' experiences was that accessible reading materials encouraged them to participate more actively in literacy activities. Appropriately selected texts reduced frustration, increased interest, and allowed learners to experience success during reading sessions. These positive experiences strengthened their confidence and motivated them to continue reading despite previous difficulties. he findings further suggest that instructional materials serve as more than sources of content; they are essential tools that shape learners' reading experiences. Materials that are aligned with learners' developmental levels, interests, and literacy needs create opportunities for meaningful participation and gradual improvement (Muammar et al., 2023). By presenting information in manageable and engaging ways, developmentally appropriate resources help struggling readers build comprehension and sustain their engagement throughout the learning process (Kim et al., 2016). These findings reinforce the growing understanding that effective literacy instruction depends not only on sound teaching strategies but also on the careful selection and adaptation of instructional materials (Block et al., 2009; Duke et al., 2021). Reading interventions are more effective when learners are provided with texts that are understandable, relevant, and supported by visual or contextual cues, enabling them to experience continuous progress and positive learning outcomes (Calam et al., 2022; Panerio et al., 2025). The findings can be explained through Sociocultural Theory and the concept of scaffolding, which view learning as a process supported by appropriate instructional tools and guided interaction. Developmentally appropriate reading materials functioned as scaffolds that enabled learners to engage with texts that were challenging yet achievable with assistance (Morales, 2016; Nombrado & Rayon, 2026; Pol et al., 2010). Together with the support of peer tutors, these materials gradually helped learners strengthen their reading competence and independence.

The findings also align with Social Learning Theory by demonstrating that visual supports, structured texts, and modeled reading activities enhanced learners' understanding through observation, interpretation, and guided practice. As participants successfully interacted with accessible reading materials, they developed greater confidence, motivation, and willingness to participate in reading activities (Morales, 2016). Overall, the findings highlight that selecting developmentally appropriate reading materials is a fundamental component of effective reading instruction, as it promotes comprehension, engagement, and sustained literacy development among struggling readers.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Reading among grade 7 struggling readers is an emotional, social, and developmental experience

that extends beyond the acquisition of literacy skills. The participants entered the peer-assisted reading environment with feelings of anxiety, uncertainty, and low confidence arising from their reading difficulties. Through sustained peer interaction, guided support, and repeated engagement in reading activities, they gradually developed confidence, improved reading skills, and stronger motivation to read. The peer-assisted reading environment enabled learners to move from fear and hesitation toward active participation, greater self-confidence, and a more positive perception of themselves as readers. Effective reading instruction for struggling readers is strengthened by interactive and enjoyable learning experiences, continuous guidance, repeated practice, flexible learning conditions, and developmentally appropriate reading materials. Active participation increases when reading activities are engaging and collaborative, while reading mastery develops through sustained practice, clear explanations, corrective feedback, and peer support. Flexible scheduling and sufficient learning time promote deeper engagement and understanding, whereas appropriately leveled and scaffolded reading materials make learning more accessible and meaningful. These instructional conditions support not only reading improvement but also the development of confidence, motivation, engagement, and positive learning experiences among struggling readers. The findings imply that students who experience reading difficulties benefit significantly from learning environments that are emotionally supportive, socially interactive, and developmentally responsive. The participants' experiences demonstrate that reading difficulties are not solely academic concerns but are closely associated with feelings of anxiety, fear of failure, low confidence, and hesitation to participate. Consequently, literacy interventions should address both the cognitive and affective dimensions of reading development. Peer-assisted reading programs provide learners with opportunities to engage in reading within a supportive environment where mistakes are viewed as part of the learning process and where encouragement, guidance, and positive interactions contribute to increased confidence and motivation. Such experiences may help struggling readers develop a more positive reading identity and strengthen their willingness to participate in literacy activities both inside and outside the classroom.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The researchers extends their appreciation for those who served as reviewers and external validators of the study.

AI USE DISCLOSURE

The authors of this manuscript declare that no generative artificial intelligence (AI) or AI-assisted technologies were used to generate content, ideas, frameworks, or theories during the writing process. AI was utilized solely to enhance readability and refine language, under strict human oversight and control. After using AI technologies, the author carefully reviewed and edited the manuscript to ensure its accuracy and coherence. The authors understand the potential of AI to generate content that may sound authoritative but could be incorrect, incomplete, or biased. Therefore, the manuscript was thoroughly revised through human judgment.

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