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## EARLY LITERACY INSTRUCTIONAL PRACTICES AND THEIR RELATIONSHIP TO STUDENTS' READING COMPETENCIES: A QUANTITATIVE INVESTIGATION IN COTABATO PROVINCE

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### 2. ABSTRACT

This quantitative study examined the extent of early literacy instructional practices and the level of students' reading competencies, and determined the significant relationship and influence of instructional practices on reading outcomes among 300 Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers from selected DepEd Central Elementary Schools in Tulunan, Mlang, and Matalam, Cotabato during School Year 2025–2026. Using a descriptive-correlational research design, data were gathered through a validated self-developed questionnaire with Cronbach's Alpha of 0.843. Early literacy instructional practices were assessed across six dimensions: explicit instruction (M=4.58, Highly Practiced), scaffolding (M=4.54, Highly Practiced), reading aloud (M=4.51, Highly Practiced), direct teaching (M=4.44, Highly Practiced), modelling (M=4.49, Highly Practiced), and guided reading (M=4.58, Highly Practiced). Students' reading competencies were rated across four dimensions: fluency (M=4.22, Independent), knowledge of the text (M=4.38, Independent), critical thinking (M=4.26, Independent), and vocabulary skills (M=4.32, Independent). Spearman rho correlations confirmed highly significant positive relationships between all six instructional practice dimensions and all four reading competency dimensions ( $p < .01$ ). Multiple regression analyses revealed that reading aloud significantly predicted fluency ( $t=2.381$ ,  $p=.018$ ); direct teaching significantly predicted knowledge of the text ( $t=2.358$ ,  $p=.019$ ); explicit instruction, reading aloud, and modelling significantly predicted critical thinking ( $p < .01$ ); and explicit instruction, reading aloud, and modelling significantly predicted vocabulary skills ( $p < .01$ ). Findings affirm that

early literacy instructional practices are significant predictors of student reading competencies in early grade classrooms.

**3. KEYWORDS:** *Early literacy, instructional practices, reading competencies, Spearman rho, multiple regression, guided reading, explicit instruction, Cotabato.*

#### 4. INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational academic skill that underpins learning across all subject areas and shapes students' long-term educational trajectories. In the Philippine context, persistent literacy deficits remain a critical challenge: the 2019 PISA results placed Filipino learners 69th out of 79 surveyed nations in reading comprehension, with only 3.6% performing at the highest proficiency level (OECD, 2019). The National Center for Education Statistics (2019) similarly reported that approximately 32% of American fourth graders perform below the basic reading level, underscoring the global dimension of the early literacy crisis.

Early literacy instructional practices — including explicit instruction, scaffolding, reading aloud, direct teaching, modelling, and guided reading — have been consistently identified as powerful predictors of students' reading outcomes. Archer and Hughes (2019) established that explicit instruction minimizes ambiguity and provides clarity in learning expectations, while Cunningham and Zibulsky (2020) demonstrated that guided reading aloud significantly improves comprehension by modeling fluent reading and providing contextual support.

Despite growing evidence of the relationship between instructional practices and reading outcomes, Philippine-specific quantitative investigations examining this relationship at the early grade level — particularly in rural Mindanao contexts — remain limited. This study addressed this gap by quantitatively assessing the extent of teachers' early literacy instructional practices, measuring students' reading competencies across four dimensions, and determining the significant correlations and predictive relationships between these variables among elementary schools in Tulunan, Mlang, and Matalam, Cotabato.

The study is anchored in Anderson's (1977) Schema Theory, which emphasizes that students' prior knowledge is essential for text comprehension, and Rosenblatt's (1967) Transactional Theory of Reading, which frames reading as an active transaction between reader and text requiring explicit instructional scaffolding.

## 5. MATERIALS AND METHODS

### Research Design

This study employed a descriptive-correlational research design as Phase 1 of a larger mixed-methods investigation. The quantitative component described the levels of early literacy instructional practices and students' reading competencies, and examined their correlational and predictive relationships.

### Locale and Participants

The study was conducted in ten DepEd Central Elementary Schools across three municipalities: Tulunan (Tulunan Central ES, Sibsib Central ES, La Esperanza Integrated School), Mlang (Mlang Pilot ES, Bagontapay Central ES, Nueva Vida Central ES, Lika Central ES), and Matalam (Matalam Central ES, Linao Central ES, Taguranao Central ES). The 300 respondents were Kindergarten to Grade 3 teachers selected through complete enumeration sampling.

### Instrument

A researcher-developed structured survey questionnaire assessed early literacy instructional practices across six dimensions (explicit instruction, scaffolding, reading aloud, direct teaching, modelling, guided reading) and students' reading competencies across four dimensions (fluency, knowledge of the text, critical thinking, vocabulary skills). A 5-point Likert scale was used for both parts. Content validity was established through expert panel review, and reliability was confirmed through Cronbach's Alpha of 0.843.

### Statistical Analysis

Weighted means described levels of instructional practices and reading competencies. Spearman rho correlation assessed the significance of relationships between the two variable sets. Multiple linear regression identified the significant predictors of each reading competency dimension from the six instructional practice dimensions.

## 6. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Early Literacy Instructional Practices

*Table 1. Summary of Early Literacy Instructional Practices by Dimension.*

Instructional Practice Dimension	Weighted Mean	Description
Explicit Instruction	4.58	Highly Practiced
Scaffolding	4.54	Highly Practiced
Reading Aloud	4.51	Highly Practiced
Direct Teaching	4.44	Highly Practiced
Modelling	4.49	Highly Practiced
Guided Reading	4.58	Highly Practiced

All six early literacy instructional practice dimensions were rated Highly Practiced by teacher-respondents. Explicit instruction and guided reading shared the highest rating ( $M=4.58$ ), reflecting teachers' strong commitment to structured literacy delivery and interactive guided reading. Reading aloud received a mean of 4.51, underpinned by teachers' use of guided discussions, oral reading encouragement, structured guide questions, and open-ended questioning. Archer and Hughes (2019) affirm that explicit instruction minimizes learning ambiguity and provides systematic skill-building, while Miller and Smith (2022) demonstrate that guided reading aloud techniques — think-aloud, questioning, and interactive discussion — significantly improve engagement and comprehension.

*Table 2. Detailed Ratings: Explicit Instruction.*

Statement	Mean	Description
Breaking down complex literacy tasks into manageable steps	4.64	Highly Practiced
Simplifying complex tasks for mastery of components	4.47	Highly Practiced
Employing strategies to develop phonemic awareness	4.56	Highly Practiced
Using varied strategies to enhance decoding abilities	4.57	Highly Practiced
Employing differentiated explicit instruction for diverse learners	4.58	Highly Practiced
Integrating technology in explicit early literacy instruction	4.66	Highly Practiced
Weighted Mean	4.58	Highly Practiced

Technology integration in explicit instruction received the highest individual item score ( $M=4.66$ ), consistent with Kucirkova and Flewitt (2020), who found that multimedia tools in reading instruction improve engagement and allow differentiated pacing. The lowest-rated

item — simplifying complex tasks for mastery ( $M=4.47$ ) — still reflected highly practiced behavior, suggesting a uniformly strong instructional baseline.

**Table 3. Detailed Ratings: Reading Aloud.**

Statement	Mean	Description
Utilizing guided discussions to develop understanding	4.63	Highly Practiced
Encouraging learners to read orally to develop independent reading	4.61	Highly Practiced
Using e-books with built-in read-aloud features	4.12	Practiced
Asking open-ended questions to promote active discussion	4.49	Highly Practiced
Employing reading aloud to enhance learning engagement	4.59	Highly Practiced
Structuring guide questions for tracing events in a selection	4.59	Highly Practiced
Weighted Mean	4.51	Highly Practiced

The only item not rated Highly Practiced across all instructional dimensions was the use of e-books with built-in read-aloud features ( $M=4.12$ , Practiced), reflecting infrastructure constraints in accessing digital reading tools consistently. Smeets and Bus (2021) noted that e-books can positively influence literacy motivation but cautioned against passive consumption without teacher mediation.

### Students' Reading Competencies

**Table 4. Summary of Students' Reading Competencies by Dimension.**

Reading Competency Dimension	Weighted Mean	Description
Fluency	4.22	Independent
Knowledge of the Text	4.38	Independent
Critical Thinking	4.26	Independent
Vocabulary Skills	4.32	Independent

Students demonstrated Independent-level reading competencies across all four dimensions. Knowledge of the text obtained the highest rating ( $M=4.38$ ), followed by vocabulary skills ( $M=4.32$ ), critical thinking ( $M=4.26$ ), and fluency at the independent threshold ( $M=4.22$ ). The strong vocabulary performance is consistent with Fuchs, Fuchs, and Compton's (2020)

finding that interactive read-aloud with rich vocabulary exposure produces significantly greater vocabulary gains. The near-threshold fluency rating ( $M=4.22$ ) suggests that while most students read accurately, gains in proper pausing ( $M=4.18$ ) and avoidance of letter reversals ( $M=4.14$ ) remain developmental priorities.

**Table 5. Detailed Ratings: Critical Thinking.**

Statement	Mean	Description
Comparing the ideas in every event	4.38	Independent
Drawing conclusions	4.37	Independent
Identifying areas of confusion	4.28	Independent
Making further inquiries about the read selection	4.26	Independent
Reflecting to identify biases	4.26	Independent
Justifying interpretations of what was read	4.20	Instructional
Making inferences and drawing conclusions based on evidence	4.19	Instructional
Elaborating on the credibility of information	4.16	Instructional
Weighted Mean	4.26	Independent

Critical thinking revealed that while higher-order comparative and conclusive tasks were rated at the Independent level, specific skills such as elaborating on information credibility ( $M=4.16$ ) and making evidence-based inferences ( $M=4.19$ ) fell within the Instructional range, suggesting these as targeted areas for deepening instruction. Wijayanti (2020) underscores that effective comprehension requires not only understanding content but critically analyzing it beyond literal meaning.

### Relationship Between Early Literacy Instructional Practices and Reading Competencies

**Table 6. Spearman Rho Correlation Matrix: Instructional Practices and Reading Competencies.**

Instructional Practice	Fluency (r)	Knowledge of Text (r)	Critical Thinking (r)	Vocabulary Skills (r)
Explicit Instruction	0.143**	0.231**	0.162**	0.169**
Scaffolding	0.184**	0.338**	0.356**	0.280**
Reading Aloud	0.267**	0.327**	0.477**	0.478**
Direct Teaching	0.153**	0.272**	0.268**	0.223**
Modelling	0.195**	0.278**	0.413**	0.363**
Guided Reading	0.199**	0.310**	0.413**	0.364**

\*\*Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level. \*Significant at the 0.05 level.

All six instructional practice dimensions showed highly significant positive correlations with all four reading competency dimensions ( $p < .01$ ). Reading aloud demonstrated the strongest correlations, particularly with critical thinking ( $r = 0.477^{**}$ ) and vocabulary skills ( $r = 0.478^{**}$ ), confirming the central role of interactive read-aloud strategies in developing higher-order literacy skills. Scaffolding showed the strongest relationship with critical thinking ( $r = 0.356^{**}$ ) among the structured support strategies. Guided reading and modelling demonstrated equally strong correlations with critical thinking ( $r = 0.413^{**}$ ) and vocabulary skills ( $r = 0.364^{**}$  and  $0.363^{**}$  respectively). These patterns affirm Dickinson and Porche's (2019) conclusion that reading aloud builds listening comprehension foundational to overall reading development.

**Influence of Early Literacy Instructional Practices on Reading Competencies**

**Table 7. Multiple Regression: Early Literacy Practices on Fluency.**

Predictor	Coef. $\beta$	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Constants)	2.479	0.496	4.994	0.000
Explicit Instruction	-0.104	0.116	-0.894	0.372
Scaffolding	-0.012	0.140	-0.084	0.933
Reading Aloud	0.301	0.126	2.381	0.018*
Direct Teaching	0.087	0.087	1.006	0.315
Modelling	0.070	0.116	0.608	0.544
Guided Reading	0.047	0.136	0.347	0.729
R <sup>2</sup> =0.079 F=4.200** p=0.000**				

**Table 8. Multiple Regression: Early Literacy Practices on Knowledge of the Text.**

Predictor	Coef. $\beta$	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Constants)	1.893	0.417	4.545	0.000
Explicit Instruction	0.017	0.097	0.175	0.861
Scaffolding	0.158	0.117	1.344	0.180
Reading Aloud	0.103	0.106	0.968	0.334
Direct Teaching	0.171	0.073	2.358	0.019**
Modelling	0.042	0.097	0.436	0.664
Guided Reading	0.061	0.114	0.534	0.594
R <sup>2</sup> =0.126 F=7.054** p=0.000**				

**Table 9. Multiple Regression: Early Literacy Practices on Critical Thinking.**

Predictor	Coef. $\beta$	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Constants)	1.396	0.462	3.022	0.003
Explicit Instruction	-0.321	0.108	-2.970	0.003**
Scaffolding	0.080	0.130	0.612	0.541
Reading Aloud	0.433	0.118	-3.677	0.000**
Direct Teaching	0.087	0.081	1.085	0.279
Modelling	0.311	0.108	-2.887	0.004**
Guided Reading	0.052	0.126	0.415	0.679
R <sup>2</sup> =0.231 F=14.703** p=0.000**				

**Table 10. Multiple Regression: Early Literacy Practices on Vocabulary Skills.**

Predictor	Coef. $\beta$	Std. Error	t-value	p-value
(Constants)	1.719	0.395	4.348	0.000
Explicit Instruction	-0.235	0.092	-2.540	0.012*
Scaffolding	-0.017	0.111	-0.155	0.877
Reading Aloud	0.414	0.101	4.110	0.000**
Direct Teaching	0.002	0.069	0.034	0.973
Modelling	0.270	0.092	2.923	0.004**
Guided Reading	0.148	0.108	1.367	0.173
R <sup>2</sup> =0.251 F=16.417** p=0.000**				

Multiple regression analyses confirmed statistically significant influences of early literacy instructional practices on all four reading competency dimensions. Reading aloud emerged as the most consistent and influential predictor, appearing as a significant predictor for fluency ( $t=2.381$ ,  $p=.018$ ), critical thinking ( $t=-3.677$ ,  $p<.001$ ), and vocabulary skills ( $t=4.110$ ,  $p<.001$ ). Direct teaching was the sole significant predictor of knowledge of the text ( $t=2.358$ ,  $p=.019$ ). Explicit instruction and modelling were jointly significant predictors of both critical thinking and vocabulary skills.

The explained variance ranged from 7.9% (fluency) to 25.1% (vocabulary skills), with critical thinking at 23.1% and knowledge of the text at 12.6%. The highest R<sup>2</sup> for vocabulary skills (0.251) reflects the particularly strong combined effect of explicit instruction, reading aloud, and modelling on word learning outcomes — consistent with Fuchs et al. (2020) and Hallahan and Kauffman's (2021) documentation of the effectiveness of interactive vocabulary instruction strategies.

## 7. CONCLUSION

This quantitative study establishes that early literacy instructional practices are highly practiced among elementary teachers in Cotabato Province and are significantly correlated with and predictive of students' reading competencies. All six instructional practice dimensions — explicit instruction, scaffolding, reading aloud, direct teaching, modelling, and guided reading — showed highly significant positive relationships with fluency, knowledge of the text, critical thinking, and vocabulary skills. Reading aloud emerged as the most consistent and powerful predictor across three of four competency dimensions.

The study rejects both null hypotheses: there are significant relationships between early literacy instructional practices and reading competencies ( $p < .01$ ), and early literacy practices significantly influence reading competency outcomes. These findings recommend the prioritization of reading aloud, modelling, and explicit instruction strategies in school-based literacy programs, and the strengthening of direct teaching approaches for phonological text knowledge development. Future research should investigate longitudinal effects and the moderating role of technology access on instructional practice effectiveness.

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