

Original Article

Bridging the Gap: A Meta-Synthesis on Effective Practices in Remedial Reading Instruction

John Paul S. Medrano ^{1*}

1. San Isidro College, Bukidnon, Philippines.

* Correspondence: jmedrano@sic.edu.ph

Abstract: One of the most pressing problems for education systems worldwide is how to reduce the number of children who have difficulties in learning to read and write. A systematic approach was used to identify, screen, assess, and include relevant studies. As the studies in this paper have posited, reading teachers are now aware of the different effective strategies in remedial reading instruction. This paper highlights the importance of effective practices in remedial reading programs in addressing the needs of struggling readers. Implementing effective remedial reading programs is challenging, with common difficulties including diverse student needs, resource limitations, and inadequate teacher preparation. Direct and explicit instruction is a crucial component of effective reading remediation. Tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs of struggling readers is essential. Additionally, combining various instructional strategies, such as video materials, technology, and diverse assessments, can enhance reading remediation. Addressing foundational reading skills, like phonological awareness, is vital for preventing and remediating reading difficulties. Teachers need to be well-prepared, supported, and adaptable to effectively implement remedial reading programs. These evidence-based practices bridge the reading achievement gap by addressing early intervention, learner engagement, instructional consistency, foundational skills, and data-driven instruction. Implementing research-backed strategies at the earliest signs of difficulty helps prevent minor reading challenges from compounding into significant academic deficits. Engaging students through personalized, interest-based, and multimodal instruction fosters motivation and rebuilds confidence—critical components for sustained reading growth.

Keywords: remedial reading, reading intervention, struggling readers, reading difficulties

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing problems for education systems worldwide is how to reduce the number of children who have difficulties in learning to read and write. In low-income and middle-income regions, the proportion of 10-year-old children who cannot read a simple text was estimated to have increased from 57% to 70% between 2019 and 2022 (United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF), and the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic affected many pupils in high-income regions as well [1]. Learning to read in English is particularly challenging as it has an opaque orthography and the mapping of graphemes (letters) to phonemes (sounds) is complex [2]. The PISA reading test focuses on 15-year-old pupils' ability to read and understand texts, and students are scored from below level 1c (the lowest) to level 6 (the highest). The PISA 2022 outcomes reflect some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on schooling and hence the need to treat these 2022 data with caution due to the difficulties for data collection caused by the pandemic. Trends in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which assesses 10-year-old pupils (who in England are in primary schools), are more mixed.

Similar to the 2022 outcomes for PISA, the 2021 PIRLS results should be treated with some caution due to the impact of COVID-19. The score of 17.8% of pupils in the USA in the 5th percentile is unique across all PIRLS assessments, as is this sudden increase. If this is not due to a sampling or measurement issue, and is accurate, it is a concern. Prior to the 2021 assessment, there is a trend of very little change since the first PIRLS assessment, although the USA and Canada have a lower proportion of students performing in the 5th percentile in 2016 than in the first PIRLS assessment in 2001 [3]. In general, politicians' reactions to each new round of data from international comparisons tend to be influenced by the political agendas for education in a given jurisdiction and its socio-cultural context (e.g., in relation to PISA see Carvalho and Costa). In England, from 2023 onwards, the conservative government claimed that England was “the best in the West” on the basis of the 2021 PIRLS outcomes [4]; a view that was challenged in a variety of ways [5]. England's Department for Education's own funded report about the PIRLS 2021 release was more cautious, including noting the problems with data collection during the COVID-19 pandemic and the fall in the numbers of pupils who enjoyed reading [6]. However, this report did not have a main focus on children with reading difficulties. The full reports from international comparative studies such as PIRLS and PISA offer a much more nuanced picture of the implications of the headline scores and trends than political and media interpretations typically address. The headlines and reports are also subject to a great deal of independent critical scrutiny, both internal to the research teams and externally. For example, methodological critiques include reflections on sampling [7] and on other fundamental challenges for the methods of such studies [8]. What is more, establishing the point in time at which policies on teaching reading in any jurisdiction start to influence children's experiences of education, and potentially PISA and PIRLS outcomes, is a vital and not straightforward consideration; hence it has also been argued that systematic reviews (SRs) and peer-reviewed randomized control trials (RCTs) with longitudinal designs, particularly if undertaken in the region of interest, are a more reliable source of evidence about effective teaching than claims made about a single reporting point for PISA or PIRLS [9]. In addition to international comparative studies showing the proportions of children below the expected standard and those struggling with reading, some nations, states, and provinces also monitor standards of reading. England has become an interesting case internationally as a result of its national approach to mandating “systematic synthetic phonics” in all government-funded primary schools, particularly since 2012, and its subsequent influence in some of the other regions selected for comparison in this paper. For example, the influence in Australia, building on an invitation to England's Minister for Schools of the day [10], and in Ontario, Canada, through reference to England's Rose Report and subsequent policies that recommended discrete phonics teaching (Ontario Human Rights Commission). In England, primary schools have been required to assess all children at various points in their primary education since the inception of statutory assessment in 1988. These assessments now include a phonics screening check (PSC) taken by all children aged six, and again at age seven if they do not meet the required standard in the test. The PSC requires children to decode 20 real words and 20 pseudowords. The statutory national curriculum assessments when children are aged 10 to 11 (at the end of their primary schooling) include the test of English grammar, punctuation, and spelling, and the test of English reading. The reading test is designed to assess children's reading comprehension by requiring them to answer a series of questions about three texts of increasing complexity, during a 60-min test period that includes time for reading and answering the questions [11]. Reading literacy is widely recognized as a cornerstone of education and community participation, yet a significant number of students continue to struggle with reading despite years of instruction. Assessments such as the OECD's PISA emphasize that reading literacy involves not just decoding words but actively understanding and using text to achieve goals. This persistent challenge necessitates a deeper understanding of effective remedial reading practices to bridge the gap between struggling readers and their proficient peers [12]. Students with disabilities are not making adequate progress in reading, and observations suggest inadequate instruction prevails

in both general and special education settings. A focus on intensive interventions for students with reading disabilities can maximize student potential and prepare them for success [13]. The ability to read proficiently is fundamental for academic achievement and participation in a literate society, yet a substantial portion of students experience persistent difficulties in acquiring adequate reading skills [14]. These difficulties can have far-reaching consequences, impacting not only academic performance but also self-esteem, social development, and future opportunities [15]. While some students may have inherent reading disabilities, many others struggle due to inadequate or inappropriate instruction [16]. Effective reading instruction should be founded on robust curricula, assessments, and professional development, ensuring educators are equipped to deliver targeted interventions [17]. Therefore, it is imperative to identify and implement effective practices in remedial reading instruction that can address the diverse needs of struggling readers and promote their reading development. This meta-synthesis synthesized findings from multiple research studies to provide a comprehensive overview of effective practices in remedial reading instruction. The synthesis will identify common themes, challenges, and evidence-based strategies to inform educators and improve reading outcomes for struggling readers.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This paper was conducted in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines [18]. A systematic approach was used to identify, screen, assess, and include relevant studies. Based on the steps of the PRISMA guidelines, the following were done: (1) Identification, (2) Screening, (3) Eligibility, and (4) Inclusion. The identification phase involved a comprehensive search of relevant databases and sources to identify potential studies. The following databases were searched: Academic Search Premier, ERIC (Education Resources Information Center), PsycINFO, and Google Scholar. The search strategy included combinations of the following keywords: "remedial reading," "reading intervention," "struggling readers," "reading difficulties," "effective instruction," and "reading programs." Additionally, reference lists of relevant articles were manually searched to identify further studies. In the screening phase, the titles and abstracts of the identified studies were reviewed to eliminate irrelevant articles. Studies were excluded if they did not focus on remedial reading programs or interventions, or if they did not address effective instructional practices. In the eligibility phase, the full texts of potentially eligible studies were retrieved and assessed against the inclusion criteria. Studies were included if they: focused on remedial reading programs or interventions for students with reading difficulties, examined the effectiveness of specific instructional practices or program components, were published in peer-reviewed journals, and were written in English. A final set of studies that met all inclusion criteria were included in the meta-synthesis. The articles were selected based on their relevance to the topic, methodological rigor, and publication in peer-reviewed journals. Data were extracted from the included studies, including study characteristics, participant information, intervention details, and key findings related to effective practices in remedial reading instruction. Thematic analysis was used to synthesize the extracted data and identify common themes and patterns. The findings from each study were extracted, compared, and synthesized to create a coherent and comprehensive overview of the research. Themes in this meta-synthesis are determined by a structured and methodical thematic analysis, reflecting the qualitative methodology of the included studies, particularly phenomenological and grounded theory approaches. The process began with data extraction from rigorously selected studies that met the PRISMA criteria. Key details such as the study objectives, contexts, participants, instructional approaches, and outcomes related to remedial reading instruction were carefully gathered. Following this, open coding, an approach rooted in grounded theory was used to label meaningful units of information, including teaching strategies, teacher experiences, and instructional challenges. These initial codes were then refined through axial coding, clustering them into broader categories based on shared features or functions. Through the

constant comparative method, these categories were synthesized into overarching themes that encapsulated the core elements of effective remedial reading instruction. For instance, instructional methods like explicit teaching, modeling, and guided practice were integrated under the theme of Direct and Explicit Instruction. To ensure the robustness and relevance of these themes, cross-case analysis was conducted, retaining only those consistently supported across multiple studies. Finally, the themes were interpreted through a dual lens: the phenomenological emphasis on lived teaching and learning experiences, and the grounded theory focus on constructing a conceptual framework. This interpretive step situated the findings within the broader educational discourse, offering practical insights for both classroom application and policy development. Overall, the thematic analysis enabled a coherent synthesis of diverse research findings and produced a comprehensive understanding of what constitutes effective remedial reading practices.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The six studies included in this paper have met the criteria based on the variables involved: remedial reading, reading intervention, struggling readers, reading difficulties, effective practices, and reading programs. Table 1 is an overview of these studies.

Table 01: Summary on the effective practices in remedial reading instruction

Study Number	Proponents/ Author	Purpose of the Study/ Paper	Context	Method	Effective Practices
1	Acita et al. (2022)	Evaluating and determining the challenges, difficulties, and effective enactment of the remedial reading program	San Luis National High School in the Division of Agusan del Sur, Philippines	Qualitative-phenomenological approach	Focused on challenges and difficulties
2	Rupley, Blair, & Nichols (2009)	Emphasizing the role of direct/explicit teaching in reading instruction for struggling readers	-	Literature review and synthesis	Direct/explicit teaching
3	Garcia & Doronio (2024)	Exploring the lived experiences, strategies, best practices, and suggestions of reading teachers in teaching reading	Montevista District, Davao de Oro, Philippines	Qualitative-phenomenological research	Individualized teaching methods, use of video materials, and the early introduction of phonological awareness
4	Lee, Gable, & Klassen (2012)	Describing practical teaching	Public primary	Micro genetic study	Graphemic/phonemic association

		strategies that were successfully used with a learning-disabled student	school in Midwest, USA		through a computer keyboard, Identifying the individual words of the sentence, using linguistic clues, meaning clues, and visual memory, Physical and visual attention to print, write journal entries and stories, take piano lessons, and participate in readers theater
5	Sancada (2022)	Describing remedial reading program challenges and effective practices	Schools Division of Iloilo, Philippines	Grounded theory using the Glaserian approach	Authentic Tasks, Instructional Strategies and Materials, Learner-Centered Instruction, Reading and Writing Connection, Strategies in Teaching Reading, and Support for Struggling Readers
6	Guio & Santos (2024)	Identifying the best practices for the implementation of the Remedial Reading Program	Division of Urdaneta, Philippines	Mixed research design, incorporating a descriptive research design	Technology orientation, facilitator approach, assessment combination,

					and class adaptation
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This summary of effective practices in remedial reading instruction reveals the following key themes and approaches: An author [19] emphasize direct/explicit teaching. This approach involves clear, structured lessons with specific objectives, modeling, guided practice, and independent application. It is particularly beneficial for struggling readers who need systematic and sequential instruction. An author [20] highlights the importance of tailoring instruction to meet individual student needs. This can involve using varied materials, providing different levels of support, and adapting the pace of instruction. An author [21] also underscores the importance of individualized strategies. Several studies suggest that effective remedial reading programs incorporate a variety of strategies. An author [22] includes video materials and early phonological awareness instruction, while [23] emphasizes authentic tasks, reading and writing connections, and support for struggling readers. He highlights technology orientation, diverse assessments, and class adaptation. This suggests that a combination of approaches may be most effective. He specifically mentions the importance of early phonological awareness instruction. This foundational skill is crucial for decoding and reading fluency, and addressing it can prevent further reading difficulties. The studies also highlight the importance of the teacher's role in creating effective remedial reading programs. An author [24] emphasizes learner-centered instruction and support for struggling readers, while discuss the importance of a facilitator approach. These findings suggest that teachers need to be knowledgeable, supportive, and adaptable to meet the diverse needs of struggling readers. Effective implementation of remedial reading programs requires well-prepared and supported teachers. This includes providing teachers with the knowledge and skills to implement evidence-based instructional strategies and addressing the diverse needs of struggling readers [25]. Based on the synthesized findings from the six selected studies, a conceptual framework was developed to illustrate the core components consistently identified as effective in remedial reading instruction. This visual representation consolidates the themes derived from the meta-synthesis and serves as a guide for educators and policymakers in designing and implementing impactful reading interventions.



Figure 01: The Key Components of Effective Practices on Remedial Reading Instruction

The findings from the six research indicate that effective remedial reading instruction practices should be explicit, individualized, multifaceted, and emphasize both foundational skills and the teacher's role.

4. CONCLUSION

As the studies in this paper have posited, reading teachers are now aware of the different effective strategies in remedial reading instruction. This paper highlights the importance of effective practices in remedial reading programs in addressing the needs of struggling readers. Implementing effective

remedial reading programs is challenging, with common difficulties including diverse student needs, resource limitations, and inadequate teacher preparation. Direct and explicit instruction is a crucial component of effective reading remediation. Tailoring instruction to meet the specific needs of struggling readers is essential. Additionally, combining various instructional strategies, such as video materials, technology, and diverse assessments, can enhance reading remediation. Addressing foundational reading skills, like phonological awareness, is vital for preventing and remediating reading difficulties. Teachers need to be well-prepared, supported, and adaptable to effectively implement remedial reading programs. Schools should prioritize early identification of struggling readers and provide timely interventions. Remedial reading programs should be based on research-supported instructional strategies. Teachers need ongoing professional development to implement effective remedial reading practices. Adequate resources, including materials, technology, and personnel, are necessary for successful programs. Effective remediation involves addressing foundational skills, individualizing instruction, and using a variety of strategies. Finally, continuous monitoring of student progress is essential to inform instruction and ensure program effectiveness. These practices in remedial reading instruction are effective because they combine strategies that have demonstrated real-world success and are tailored to meet the specific needs of struggling readers. Approaches such as direct and explicit instruction, individualized teaching, and multifaceted interventions are grounded in a strong research base from diverse educational settings, lending both credibility and adaptability. These methods are particularly effective because they accommodate various learning styles and paces through flexible, multimodal instruction, ensuring accessibility for a wide range of learners. The integration of structured, teacher-directed methods with student-centered, adaptive strategies provides a balanced instructional approach that fosters clarity, engagement, and retention. Additionally, these practices highlight the crucial role of well-prepared teachers who are equipped to use reflective, data-informed teaching to diagnose and address individual learning needs. By embedding essential reading components—decoding, fluency, comprehension, and writing—into cohesive and authentic learning experiences, these strategies align with real-world literacy demands and promote transferable academic skills. Together, these research-based elements offer educators a comprehensive and responsive toolkit to close reading gaps and support long-term student success. These evidence-based practices bridge the reading achievement gap by addressing early intervention, learner engagement, instructional consistency, foundational skills, and data-driven instruction. Implementing research-backed strategies at the earliest signs of difficulty helps prevent minor reading challenges from compounding into significant academic deficits. Engaging students through personalized, interest-based, and multimodal instruction fosters motivation and rebuilds confidence—critical components for sustained reading growth. Furthermore, many students struggle due to inconsistent or ineffective instruction; thus, applying proven practices ensures that teaching is more structured, intentional, and impactful. Reinforcing foundational skills, particularly phonemic awareness and decoding, equips learners with the necessary tools to tackle higher-order comprehension and fluency tasks. Lastly, integrating ongoing assessments and progress monitoring allows for adaptive, data-informed instruction that meets each student's needs in real time and ensures that no learner is left behind. Together, these components form a comprehensive and responsive framework that not only enhances reading outcomes but also meaningfully closes the gap between struggling and proficient readers. By implementing these practices, schools can bridge the gap in reading achievement and improve reading outcomes for all students.

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