

Basic Reading Literacy Level of the Alternative Learning System (ALS) Learners

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DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2025.906000401>

Received: 17 June 2025; Accepted: 18 June 2025; Published: 19 July 2025

ABSTRACT

Reading is a major component of the literacy crisis; educators must examine the reading process and why so many students are struggling readers. This study highlights the increasing importance of reading literacy in today's educational landscape. The researchers identified the lack of focused research on the challenges faced by Alternative Learning System (ALS) students when it comes to reading comprehension skills. This study explores the basic reading literacy level of Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners. The study aimed to identify the significant differences between basic reading literacy levels and the demographic profiles of the respondents. This deeper understanding can guide the development of reading activities. These activities are designed to enhance the basic reading literacy skills of ALS learners.

The study employed a quantitative research design and utilized a researcher-made questionnaire as the data-gathering instrument, which was distributed to the 66 respondents of the Junior High School Alternative Learning System (ALS) Learner. The data-gathering instrument was distributed across four different schools in Bauan, Batangas, covering the entire population of enrolled Junior High School ALS learners. Furthermore, the focus group discussions (FGD) were conducted to gain deeper insights into the reading literacy levels of ALS learners. The collected data was analyzed using statistical tools such as frequency, weighted mean, percentage, t-value, p-value, standard deviation, and ANOVA to evaluate the findings from both the quantitative research and FGD sessions with the respondents.

The findings indicated that the majority of the respondents are in their mid-teenagers. There are also profound significant differences between the sexes where the male performed better in terms of interpreting parts of the documents. Furthermore, those ages 30 and above have a hard time following simple directions. Finally, the researchers proposed reading activities, particularly in interpreting parts of the documents, following simple directions, and interpreting important points in written materials to guide and help them improve their reading literacy

Keywords: Alternative Learning System, Basic Reading Literacy Level, Reading Activities, Reading Literacy Test, Comprehension Skills

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a vital skill that all students must master. It is a foundational skill for students that aids them inside and outside the classroom. Reading is essential for academic success as it provides access to every subject in the school curriculum. Hall and Barnes (2017) stated that reading is an important tool for study, awareness, future employment, and recreation. It indicates that individuals must have the ability to read to succeed academically.

Reading without comprehension is meaningless since comprehension is the most fundamental aspect of reading. Comprehension refers to the learners' capacity to fully understand a written text. A person must be able to correctly arrange and remember the word meanings, relate meanings to other words and symbols, select the right meaning given by the context, and comprehend the meaning of a broader range of concepts.

As stated by Dickens (2016), reading skill is the most pivotal instrument for studying. Reading ability refers to

a student's ability to make sense of written material. On the other hand, Liu Hao (2022) defines reading literacy as important not just for workers, but also for increasing the country's competitiveness and cultural soft power. There are also a variety of factors that influence the learners, including learning strategies, motivation, family support, and school instruction. Reading literacy is one of the most significant factors to consider while formulating educational policies and enhancing classroom procedures.

According to Idulog (2023), Filipino youngsters' reading literacy poses challenges for educators thus, the Philippine government has been attempting to increase the country's literacy rate, while other research findings show that many learners need help with vocabulary development, reading comprehension, and critical thinking. Low reading abilities can be attributed to a lack of resources as well as socioeconomic factors. However, several potential areas for progress have been identified, such as supporting teacher training, encouraging early literacy efforts, and developing engaging and culturally relevant reading materials for all students.

Based on the 2016 Annual Poverty Indicators Survey (APIS), there is an issue of low literacy rates and the primary factors are related to marriage/family issues, inadequate family income, and personal reasons. In response to this, the Education For All (EFA) 2015 initiatives addressed these challenges and ensured that everyone can access quality education. In addition, Aharon (2020) mentioned that there are various challenges encountered in terms of reading literacy, one of which is lack of interest in reading. When learners struggle with reading, it becomes frustrating which leads them to avoid reading. Aside from that, the learners had difficulties following directions, which occurred when they sensed overloaded information that was difficult for them to digest. Aside from that, the learners found it hard to comprehend what they read, particularly when processing information from the text.

Thus, recognizing illiteracy is one of the biggest hindrances to a country's economic success. This is evident in Southeast Asian and African countries, where fiscal problems caused poverty, which is intimately connected to illiteracy, as a major influence. The Philippines, in particular, has been listed as one of the countries in Southeast Asia with the highest poverty rates. Out-of-School Children (OSC), Out-of-School Youth (OSYs), and Out-of-School Adults (OSAs) are the most affected demographic groups by poverty and lack of educational opportunities. Illiteracy contributes to these phenomena which further aggravates the cycle of poverty (Apao et al., 2014)

Correspondingly, one of the imminent programs the government instituted to resolve this concern is the Alternative Learning System (ALS) which aids the learning needs of a variety of populations, including school leavers, adults, and marginalized individuals who have no access to formal education. Its goal is to educate those who are classified under the law as "deprived, depressed, and underserved" persons. One of the most significant aspects of ALS is the Accreditation and Equivalency (A&E) Test, which allows students to receive an elementary or high school diploma. It provides an alternate method of providing quality education for Filipinos and foreigners aged 15 and above who are deprived of the traditional school system. It also provides a learning avenue for those who dropped out of school not because of illiteracy but because of other personal or family reasons. Those who pass the A&E test can return to formal basic education, continue further education, or enroll in technical-vocational schools (Philippine Education for All 2015 Review Report).

However, former Department of Education (DepEd) Secretary, Leonor M. Briones cited in her article that there are many criteria as to why the November 2017 assessments for ALS students were more challenging than in the previous years. The previous DepEd chief felt that using English instead of Filipino may have hampered the testees' grasp of the assessment topics, posing a substantial obstacle, specifically for elementary-level children who were not fluent in English. This language shift had an impact on their comprehension and capacity to respond appropriately to the questions.

The above variables contributed to the poor passing rate in the ALS students' November 2017 examinations. It is crucial to address these issues and provide the required assistance to guarantee a fair and accessible testing environment for ALS students. The educational system can better help ALS learners in their learning and assessment journey by addressing language obstacles, reducing time gaps, providing clear communication, and taking test difficulty into account (ABS-CBN news, 2018).

Besides, reading difficulties often had a domino effect on a student's overall academic performance because it

hindered their ability to properly comprehend words and texts. This is particularly true when it comes to reading English texts, which poses a significant challenge. Consequently, it became critical for educators to prioritize and design programs that specifically targeted the development of reading and comprehension skills among ALS learners.

Hence, this study was underscored by the increasing importance of reading literacy in the educational landscape at that time. However, there was a lack of focused studies on the challenges faced by Alternative Learning System (ALS) students in terms of reading comprehension skills. This study explored the basic reading literacy level of Alternative Learning System (ALS) learners in Bauan, Batangas. The study aimed to identify the significant difference between basic reading literacy levels and the demographic profiles of the respondents. A deeper understanding and analysis of these issues can guide the development of reading activities to enhance the basic reading literacy skills of ALS learners.

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the Basic Reading Literacy Level of Alternative Learning System (ALS) Learners in Bauan, Batangas. Specifically, this sought answers to the following questions:

- 1.What is the demographic profile of the respondents in terms of:
 - 1.1 age; and
 - 1.2 gender?
- 2.What is the performance of the ALS learners in the basic reading literacy test with regard to:
 - 2.1 Interpreting the Parts of Important Documents;
 - 2.2 Follow Simple Written Directions; and
 - 2.3 Interpret Important Points in Written Materials
3. What is the significant difference between the basic reading literacy level and the profile of the respondents?
4. What reading activities may be proposed to improve the reading literacy of ALS learners

METHODOLOGY

The Quantitative research design using research made questionnaires and focus group discussion was utilized in this study. It was used to describe the difference between the demographic profile and the basic reading literacy level of ALS learners. Additionally, a focus group discussion was conducted to gain deeper insights into the reading literacy levels of ALS learners. It served as another reliable source to validate and contextualize the quantitative findings, uncovering nuances and individual perspectives.

The respondents of the study were 66 students, the total ALS population from four schools enrolled in Junior High School in Bauan, Batangas. They were selected based on initial interviews with their teachers to assess their ability to answer questions about their reading comprehension skills. Given the small population size of ALS enrollees, the researchers consciously abstained from using a sampling method and instead included all 66 students from the four ALS schools as respondents. This decision was made to produce more comprehensive and representative outcomes, thereby substantiating the significance and relevance of the study.

They used a scoring guide to determine the basic reading literacy level of the ALS learners. Below is the scoring used in determining the performance level of ALS learners in interpreting important documents.

Table 1 Scoring And Interpretation

Level of Knowledge	Score	Range%
Excellent	24-30	80-100%

Average	18-23	60-79%
Limited	12-27	40-59%
Unable	0-11	0-39%

Table 2 Scoring And Interpretation For Following Simple Written Directions And Interpreting Important Points In Written Materials

Standard Score Range	Description
9-10	Excellent: Consistently follows simple directions accurately and interprets important points effectively.
7-8	Average: Follows directions adequately with occasional errors and interprets important points with moderate accuracy.
5-6	Limited: Struggles to follow directions, substantial errors in interpreting important points.
0-4	Unable or Minimal: Unable to follow directions or demonstrates minimal comprehension of important points.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This part covers the presentation, analysis and interpretation of data gathered from the basic reading literacy test administered to ALS learners in Bauan, Batangas. The data were interpreted based on the context of the objectives of the study.

Profile of the Respondents

The profile contains the personal information of the respondents which includes their age, and sex.

Age

It presents the respondents' age which is an important variable in this study. It would identify the factors that affect them on the level of performance based on their age gaps.

Table 3 Profile Of The Respondents Relative To Age

Age	Frequency	Percentage
15-17	13	19.7%
18-20	12	18.2%
21-23	10	15.2%
24-26	4	6.1%
27-29	4	6.1%
30-32	6	9.1%
33-35	6	9.1%
35-above	11	16.7%
Total	66	100%

As depicted in the table, the age ranges from 15-17 have the highest frequency count of 13 from the 66 total

respondents. It was followed by ages 18-20 which are closely similar and have a 12-frequency count. Meanwhile, the ages 24-26 and 27-29 have the lowest frequency count of enrolled ALS learners which have 4 frequency counts. This indicates that a large proportion of ALS enrolled in Bauan, Batangas are in their mid-teenagers. This finding aligns with the 2004 survey mentioned in the Education Policy Note (2018), which estimated that 16 million of the total population in the Philippines were either school dropouts or stay-outs. That is the reason why the ALS Program first prioritizes the 10.5 million population aged 16 years and above. Similar to the article of Mehra et al., (2021) which states that in 2015, around aged 15-29 years living in Manila dropped out of school due to a lack of personal interest. It suggests that individuals in this age group may face challenges or have different priorities that hinder their pursuit of education.

Sex

Table 4 presents the sex of the respondents as one of the important variables in this study. It pertains to a person who stands as male or female as a biological fact that is identical in any culture.

Table 4 Profile Of The Respondents Relative To Sex

Sex	Frequency	Percentage
Male	33	50%
Female	33	50%
Total	66	100%

The data presented in the table showed an equal distribution of male and female enrollees in the ALS program in Bauan, Batangas with a total population of 66 learners. This implies a balanced representation of each sex that helped to reduce biases, a fair comparison, and analysis of data in the basic reading literacy test. It contradicted the findings of Malipot (2019), who used the 2017 Annual Poverty Indicator Survey to highlight that more girls were out of school compared to boys.

Despite this, the article mentioned that there were still more boys enrolled in the ALS program. To address this disparity, the “No One Left Behind: Better Life for Out-of-School Girls to Fight Against Poverty and Injustice in the Philippines” initiative was implemented. The main focus of this initiative was to provide equal opportunities for out-of-school girls, without limiting their capabilities. The equal distribution of male and female enrollees in the ALS program in Bauan, Batangas was the result of the efforts made by the education department to ensure that all girls had access to education and the benefits of the ALS program. It also broke down stereotypes and encouraged boys and girls to pursue their interests without limitations.

Performance of the Alternative Learning System Learners in the Basic Reading Literacy Test

Interpreting the parts of important documents. It involves analyzing and understanding the specific sections or components of a document to extract relevant information and derive meaning from it.

Table 5 Performance Of The Als Learners In The Basic Reading Literacy Test In Interpreting The Parts Of Important Documents

Level of Performance	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Excellent	51	77.2%	22.6667	4.09628
Average	14	21.2%		
Limited	1	1.5%		
Unable	0	0		
Total	66	100%		

Based on the table, the majority of ALS learners fall under an excellent level wherein students can interpret important points effectively in terms of interpreting important documents. It was followed by the students who fall under the average level wherein they have moderate accuracy in interpreting parts of important documents. However, there are learners at a limited level who have substantial errors in interpreting important documents. This finding supports the result of the study conducted by Lintvedt (2004), which revealed that students were proficient in understanding documents that did not require a higher level of language. It is not surprising as the documents used in the test were familiar to the learners as they are commonly encountered in daily life and work.

Follow simple written directions. It consists of understanding the sequence of information in the most appropriate steps. It includes analyzing particular guidelines for the effectiveness of a given task.

Table 6 Performance Of The Als Learners In The Basic Reading Literacy Test In Following Simple Written Directions

Level of Performance	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Excellent	10	15.2%	4.0000	2.60768
Average	15	22.7%		
Limited	34	51.5%		
Unable	7	10.6%		
Total	66	100%		

The majority of the learners fall under the limited level wherein most of the time students struggle in terms of following simple directions even though they were written directions. It was followed by the students at an excellent level and they can consistently follow the directions accurately. However, some students fall under the table level. It suggests an inability to follow simple written directions. During the focus group discussion, it was revealed that ALS learners faced difficulties in comprehending specific directions due to a lack of vocabulary. These findings contradicted the study by Duhman (2020), which indicated that most students preferred written directions rather than spoken instruction because it provided a large amount of detailed information that students could rapidly read while following directions.

Interpret important points in written materials. It is the process of understanding and extracting the key information or main ideas from written texts. It involved reading and analyzing the text to identify the main message, key details, and the author's perspectives.

Table 7 Performance Of The Als Learners In The Basic Reading Literacy Test In Interpret Important Points In Written Materials

Level of Performance	Frequency	Percentage	Mean	SD
Excellent	32	48.5%		
Average	24	36.4%		
Limited	8	12.1%	6.0455	2.70289
Unable	2	3.0%		
Total	66	100%		

The table shows that most respondents, a total of 32 individuals, fall under the excellent level wherein the ALS learners can effectively interpret the important points in written materials. The respondents who achieved an excellent level of understanding of the important points had a good grasp of vocabulary, which enabled them to process information effectively and make reasonable inferences. These skills likely helped them to comprehend the written materials and identify the key points. This matches the findings of Joseph in 2014, which disclosed

that students who struggle to understand text often have trouble with unfamiliar words, missing important information, and not being able to make good inferences.

However, the table also indicates that some students can be classified under the average level wherein they have moderate accuracy in interpreting important points in written materials. Aside from that, some ALS students fall under the unable level which signifies that students demonstrate minimal comprehension in interpreting the important points in the written materials. This shows that these individuals may have faced difficulties with unfamiliar words, missing important information, or not being able to make accurate inferences, as mentioned in Joseph's study. The overall result mean is 6.0455 and a standard deviation of 2.70289 which implies that the student responses in terms of interpreting written materials are relatively consistent and aligned with the average understanding of the materials used.

Difference between the basic reading literacy level and profile of the respondents

The reading literacy level of the respondents in this study was determined through a researcher-made test consisting of three parts: interpreting parts of documents, following simple directions, and interpreting important parts of written materials. The profile of the respondents, on the other hand, included information about their age and sex. This section presented the significant difference between the basic reading literacy level of ALS learners in Bauan, Batangas, and the profile of the respondents.

Table 8 Difference Between The Ages Of The Respondents In Terms Of Following Simple Written Directions

	Age	Mean Difference	p-value	Decision on H0	Intepretation
	18-20	-.18590	.844	not reject	not significant
Follow Simple Written Directions	21-23	-.36923	.710	not reject	not significant
	24-26	.98077	.468	not reject	not significant
	27-29	-2.0923	.138	not reject	not significant
	30-32	3.39744*	.005	reject	significant
	33-35	-1.60256	.172	not reject	not significant
	35-above	1.32168	.175	not reject	not significant
	21-23	-.18333	.856	not reject	not significant
	24-26	3.583333*	.005	reject	significant
	27-29	-1.41677	.181	not reject	not significant
	30-32	1.50758	.003	reject	significant
	33-35	1.35000	.232	not reject	not significant
	35-above	-1.65000	.129	not reject	not significant
	24-26	3.76667*	.003	reject	significant
	27-29	-1.23333	.240	not reject	not significant
	30-32	1.69091	.003	reject	significant
	33-35	-3.00000	.313	not reject	not significant
	35-above	2.41667	.105	not reject	not significant
	27-29	-2.58333	.076	not reject	not significant

	30-32	.34091	.116	not reject	not significant
	33-35	5.41667*	.001	reject	significant
	35-above	.41667	.804	not reject	not significant
	30-32	3.34091*	.018	reject	significant
	33-35	-5.0000*	.000	reject	significant
	35-above	-2.92424*	0.17	reject	significant

A close look at the table shows that there is a significant difference in following simple written directions when it comes to their age. It revealed that learners who are ages 30 and above have difficulties comprehending the instructions. These individuals are considered young adults in terms of their chronological age as a marker for the timing of adulthood. Interestingly, the researchers found that one of the main causes why students struggle with following directions is because they are not familiar with the vocabulary used. This lack of familiarity makes it difficult for them to understand and follow 52 instructions effectively. This finding harmonizes with the idea of Schmidt (2017) that students, particularly those in the age group of 30 years old and above found it easier to remember sequences of spoken instructions. They also faced challenges in completing tasks due to the time constraints resulting from not fully considering the given directions. This was because their main focus was to complete the task rather than fully understanding and following the instructions.

Besides, the study observed individuals aged 18 to 57 years old and found that younger adults faced difficulties in tasks that required working memory. This could have been a contributing factor to the results of the study, where individuals aged 30 and above had a hard time following directions. Working memory has a limited capacity and is responsible for temporarily storing and manipulating information needed for complex mental tasks, such as following directions. As individuals age, there may be changes in working memory capacity, which could affect their ability to effectively process and retain instructions. The result is connected to the study of Freitas et al., (2007) which emphasized the significance of working memory in younger adults and how age could impact task performance.

In addition, the study revealed that individuals aged 15 to 29 years old did not show significant differences in their ability to follow directions. This could be attributed to their relatively easier retrieval of information from memory and recognition of previously encountered information. This finding aligns with the research conducted by De Facto (2022), which found that students below 22 years old performed better and showed advancement in performing given tasks. Moreover, the ALS learners in Bauan, Batangas, aged 16 to 29 years old, demonstrated no significant differences in their ability to follow directions.

This falls into the literal reading dimensions as it involves understanding specific instructions and carrying out necessary steps to accomplish a given task, which represents the literal information present in the instructions provided during the test. This was related to the findings of Labrette (2019) highlighting the proficiency of ALS learners, specifically those aged 16 to 21, in literal reading dimensions but they experience difficulty in terms of inferential, evaluative, and creative dimensions.

As shown in the table below, three variables were tested to determine the performance level of ALS learners in Bauan, Batangas, specifically their ability to interpret important documents. The results indicated a significant difference between the basic reading literacy level and sex. The p-value of .034, which is lower than the commonly used 0.05 level of significance, implies that the null hypothesis is rejected. This means that the performance of ALS students at the basic reading literacy level is significantly different based on sex.

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Table 9 Difference Between The Basic Reading Literacy Level And The Sex Of The Respondents

	Sex	Mean	SD	t-value	p-value	Decision on H0	Interpretation
Interpreting the parts of important documents	Female	21.6061	4.06155	-2.162	.034	Reject	Significant
	Male	23.7273	3.90731				
Follow simple written directions	Female	4.1818	2.36451	-.563	.557	Not Reject	Not Significant
	Male	3.8182	2.85542				
Interpret important points in written materials	Female	6.2121	2.65468	.498	.620	Not Reject	Not Significant
	Male	5.8788	2.78116				

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Concerning the other variables, in terms of following simple written directions and interpreting the parts of written documents, the obtained t-values of .563 and .498, and the corresponding p-values of .575 and .620, were higher than the commonly used significance level of 0.05. This indicated that there was no significant influence of gender on the ability to follow directions or interpret written documents. Although there were slight differences in the mean and standard deviation, the scores remained close to their 55 respective averages and exhibited some consistency, as shown in the table.

Therefore, the null hypothesis was not rejected, suggesting that gender did not play a significant role in these aspects. These findings contradict the study by Moe and Pazzaglia (2006), which revealed that both women and men showed different levels of performance based on the directions they received. It was suggested that if there was already a pre-existing superiority in accomplishing different spatial tests, women tended to be more motivated than men.

However, in terms of interpreting documents, the obtained t-values of .498 and p-value of .620 were also higher than the commonly used significance level, implying that the null hypothesis was not rejected. Despite the slight similarities in the mean and standard deviation, the scores remained close to the average result and displayed some consistency. These findings sustain the study of Graves et al., (2019) which revealed that there was no significant difference in performance based on gender. Gender only influenced performance when it emerged in adulthood and impacted language-specific processes.

CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings, the following conclusions were drawn:

1. The ALS learners in Bauan, Batangas have an equal distribution of males and females, most of them fall to mid-teenagers.
2. There are profound ALS learners who have limited knowledge, particularly in following simple written directions.
3. There is a significant difference between the basic reading literacy level and the profile of the ALS

learners as age and sex have an impact on the level of performance in basic reading literacy.

4. The proposed reading activities will help and motivate ALS learners to improve their basic reading literacy level.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

The researchers would like to express their deepest gratitude and profound appreciation to the following individuals who generously provided their valuable insights and assistance, contributing to the successful completion of this academic endeavor.

Asst. Prof. Marian S. Santos, their thesis adviser, for the support and motivation to continue this study, and for technical advice, expertise, and guidance during the entire period of the study;

To my Tatay Roberto C. Mangubat, your unwavering support and belief in me gave me the strength to keep going, especially during the most difficult times.

To my Tita Nelia Mangubat, thank you for your wisdom, constant prayers, and emotional support.

Marites A. Ibañez, CESO V, for her support in allowing the study to be conducted on her school's jurisdiction in Congressional District 2;

Mrs. Aurelia A. Aguila, Mrs. Baby Marites M. Abel, and Mrs. Rowena A. Azucena, Bauan District School Principals, for their endless guidance and understanding during this undertaking;

Bernarda M. Reyes, Ed.D., and Niña D. Dimaculangan for allowing the researchers to conduct the pilot testing in their respective school; and

All the school heads and teachers in charge of Junior High Schools offering Alternative Learning System (ALS), for their assistance and encouragement in the conduct of the study.

Above all, we thank Almighty God for blessing us with strength, knowledge, and perseverance. Without His grace, none of this would have been possible.

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