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Reading Together, Rising Together: A Thematic Exploration of Challenges and Responses in Buddy Reading

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***Abstract*:** This study examined the effectiveness of the Buddy Reading intervention in improving the reading performance of struggling Grade 2 learners and explored the challenges encountered by little teachers as well as the reading difficulties experienced by the struggling readers. A mixed-method sequential explanatory design was employed, integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches to provide a comprehensive evaluation of the intervention. The quantitative phase utilized the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) to measure learners' proficiency before and after the four-week program. The qualitative phase involved semi-structured interviews that captured the perceptions, experiences, and responses of both struggling readers and little teachers, allowing for deeper interpretation of the numerical results. The study was conducted at Cabaasan Elementary School in Butuan City and involved sixteen participants: eight Grade 2 struggling readers, three Grade 2 little teachers, and five Grade 3 little teachers selected through purposive sampling based on CRLA results. Data collection followed a structured buddy reading program using Phil-IRI Grade 2 passages, implemented twice weekly for 30 minutes per session, with Fridays allotted for interviews and assessments. A Grade 3 teacher and the school head served as independent observers to ensure fidelity of implementation. Quantitative data were analyzed using CRLA scoring benchmarks, while qualitative data underwent thematic analysis. Findings revealed a clear improvement in reading performance, as all struggling readers showed higher post-test scores, with seven reaching grade-ready levels and one improving to a light refresher level. Thematic analysis indicated two main challenges: foundational literacy deficits, such as weak decoding, fragmented reading, and letter reversals, and behavioral issues, including inattentiveness and low motivation. Little teachers addressed these challenges through correction, repetition, modeling, and encouragement, demonstrating emerging tutoring competencies that contributed to improved reading outcomes. The study concludes that buddy reading is an effective classroom-based intervention for enhancing early-grade literacy

Keywords: ***Buddy Reading, Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA), Reading Performance, Struggling Readers***

INTRODUCTION

Proficiency in reading is more than just a skill it is the cornerstone of academic success across all subject areas and a vital foundation of elementary education (Deodato, 2024). When children struggle to read, their difficulties often ripple across other subjects, making early identification and intervention essential. Comprehensive assessment tools such as the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) allow educators to spot these challenges early and provide targeted support before reading difficulties become deeply rooted. Systematic evaluation, therefore, plays a crucial role in preventing long-term academic setbacks.

In the early years of schooling, reading fluency and comprehension are especially critical. These skills not only unlock access to higher-order thinking and language acquisition but also nurture lifelong learning habits (Parrales, 2023). Within this context, peer-assisted strategies like buddy reading offer a powerful scaffold. Drawing from Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, buddy reading creates opportunities for more capable peers to guide struggling readers through collaborative interaction, modeling, and encouragement—transforming reading into a shared journey rather than an isolated struggle.

for developing students' critical thinking and digital literacy

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) has introduced several initiatives to strengthen literacy instruction, most recently the CRLA under DepEd Memorandum No. 153, series of 2025. These programs reflect the government's commitment to improving foundational literacy. Yet, despite these efforts, significant gaps remain in both teaching and learning.

Data from the 2024 CRLA report revealed that 40% of Grade 2 learners in the Southeast District of Butuan City were classified as "High Emerging Readers," indicating persistent challenges in word recognition and comprehension. At Cabaasan Elementary School, these

difficulties were particularly evident. The school's end-of-year literacy assessment showed that nearly half of the Grade 2 learners fell into the "moderate refresher" category, with reading profiles ranging from high emerging to developing reader. Teachers voiced concerns about limited instructional materials and emphasized the urgent need for targeted interventions to help learners meet grade-level expectations.

This study responds to that need by examining the buddy reading technique as a strategic, classroom-based intervention. Specifically, it evaluates the impact of buddy reading on the reading proficiency of Grade 2 learners at Cabaasan Elementary School, while also exploring the challenges faced by little teachers and the strategies, they employed to support struggling readers. By focusing on a practical, low-cost approach, the research aims to generate actionable insights for educators and contribute to the broader discourse on literacy interventions in resource-constrained settings. Ultimately, the study underscores the transformative potential of reading together—where learners rise together through shared effort, resilience, and collaboration.

Theoretical framework

This study is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes that learning is inherently a social process shaped by interaction with more knowledgeable others such as peers, teachers, and parents. Central to this theory is the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the space between what a learner can accomplish independently and what they can achieve with guidance and encouragement. Within this zone, scaffolding and collaborative learning enable learners to gradually internalize skills and build confidence. In the context of literacy, Vygotsky's theory highlights that reading development is not merely cognitive but also social, as children construct meaning, develop strategies, and expand vocabulary through dialogue and shared activities. The buddy reading approach directly reflects these principles by positioning "little teachers" as the More Knowledgeable Other (MKO) who provide support through modeling, correction, and encouragement. Unlike adult-centered tutoring, peer-assisted learning fosters mutual understanding and two-way dialogue, allowing knowledge to be socially mediated before becoming individually internalized. In this study, Reading Together, Rising Together: A Thematic Exploration of Challenges and Responses in Buddy Reading, Sociocultural Theory served as the guiding framework for designing the intervention, ensuring that social interaction, scaffolding, and collaborative meaning-making were embedded in practice. The findings affirm the theory by showing that struggling readers improved significantly when supported by peers, that scaffolding strategies facilitated progress within the ZPD, and that collaborative learning fostered both skill acquisition and positive attitudes toward reading. Thus, the study not only applies but also supports Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, demonstrating that when learners read together, they rise together through shared effort, resilience, and social interaction

Methodology

This study employed a mixed-method sequential explanatory research design, integrating both quantitative and qualitative approaches to comprehensively evaluate the effectiveness of Buddy Reading as an intervention for struggling Grade 2 readers. In the first phase, quantitative data were gathered using the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA) to measure learners' reading levels before and after the four-week intervention. This allowed the researchers to determine measurable improvements in decoding, fluency, and comprehension. In the second phase, qualitative interviews were conducted with selected participants to capture their perceptions, experiences, and attitudes toward peer-assisted reading, providing deeper insight into the quantitative results.The study was conducted at Cabaasan Elementary School in P-14, Maguinda, Butuan City, a public school located approximately 40 to 45 minutes from the city proper and accessible via bus or motorcycle. The primary research instruments used were the CRLA, a standardized DepEd tool for assessing foundational literacy skills, and a semi-structured interview guide that elicited feedback regarding learner experiences during the buddy reading intervention. The interview guide underwent expert validation by a school head and two master teachers, while the CRLA required no further validation due to its standardized nature.

Before data collection, parental consent was secured through formal communication outlining the study's objectives, procedures, and potential benefits. Data gathering followed a structured four-week buddy reading program. Before implementation, a pilot test was conducted with selected learners to refine the procedures and ensure clarity of instructions. For the actual intervention, learners were paired into little teacher–struggling reader dyads based on their initial CRLA results. Reading materials were primarily sourced from the Phil-IRI Grade 2 Leveled Reading Passages. Each buddy reading session lasted approximately 30 minutes and involved individual reading, error identification, modeling, and correction facilitated by the little teachers. New reading passages

were introduced twice weekly, and Fridays were designated for guided interviews and teacher assessments. To ensure quality and consistency, a Grade 3 teacher and the school head served as independent observers throughout the intervention period. At the end of the four-week cycle, a post-intervention CRLA was administered to determine gains in reading proficiency. The qualitative data collected from interviews and learner journals underwent thematic analysis to generate meaningful insights about the intervention's effectiveness and the peer-assisted learning experience.

For scoring and quantifying reading outcomes, CRLA benchmarks for word recognition and sentence reading were applied, categorizing learners into levels such as Full Refresher, Moderate Refresher, Light Refresher, and Grade Ready. Quantitative results were analyzed using frequency counts, while qualitative data were examined through thematic coding to interpret patterns in learner experiences and tutor responses.

Sampling technique and Sample

The study employed a purposive sampling technique, wherein participants were selected based on their assessed reading levels using the Comprehensive Rapid Literacy Assessment (CRLA). Learners who demonstrated Grade Ready proficiency were intentionally chosen to serve as little teachers, while those identified as below the transitioning level were designated as struggling readers. This ensured that all participants met the specific criteria necessary for the effective implementation of the buddy reading intervention. In total, sixteen learners from Cabaasan Elementary School participated in the study, including eight Grade 2 struggling readers with identified foundational reading difficulties, three Grade 2 little teachers who achieved Grade Ready levels, and five Grade 3 little teachers who also demonstrated Grade Ready proficiency and were included to provide adequate peer tutors for one-on-one pairing. Together, these participants formed the buddy reading dyads for the four-week intervention, representing the intended population of early-grade learners needing targeted literacy support.

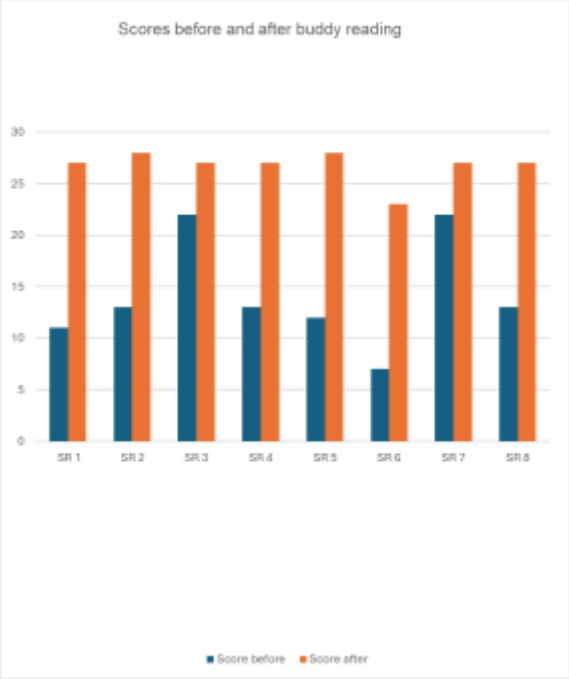
Results and Discussions

The illustration of the scores of the participants before and after the conduct of the buddy reading intervention is presented in Figure 1

The data in Figure 1 present the pre-test (before) and post-test (after) scores of eight struggling readers (SR 1–SR 8) who participated in the Buddy Reading Intervention. As can be seen, the blue -colored bars are the scores before buddy reading engagement, while those in red-colored bars denote the scores of the participants after the buddy reading activity. The results indicate that every struggling learner achieves a higher score after the intervention, suggesting a positive impact of the Buddy Reading approach on reading performance. This result is similar to the study of Jumuad, S. S., Mendez, et al (2023) titled, "Effects of peer-tutoring on the level of reading comprehension of young learners ", reporting a significant gain in reading comprehension after a peer-tutoring intervention.

Figure 1

Graphical illustration of the scores of the participants before and after the buddy reading intervention



Post-intervention data showed that seven learners reached grade-ready levels, and one improved to light refresher, demonstrating the effectiveness of buddy reading in improving reading proficiency. Astrero and Eugenio (2025) found that peer-assisted reading programs significantly enhanced students' reading comprehension, with post-test results showing substantial gains and movement from frustration to instructional and independent reading levels. The study emphasized that guided interaction, modeling, and cooperative learning provided learners with opportunities to strengthen decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills. This supports the conclusion that structured buddy reading activities are an effective classroom-based intervention for improving literacy among struggling learners.

Participants' Perception of Buddy Reading in terms of Challenges Encountered, Responses to Challenges.

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This part is presented in Tables showing the results of the thematic analysis of the challenges encountered by the little teachers and struggling readers.

Table 1 presents the thematic analysis of the challenges encountered by the little teacher in this buddy reading activity. Data show that the little teachers identified several challenges while assisting their peers in reading. There is a concern of their partners' limited reading skills, such as *"dili kabalo sa letra… dili kabasa… hinay mo basa"* (LT1, LT5, LT6, LT7). This shows that many struggled with basic decoding and fluency.

Table 1

Thematic analysis of the challenges encountered by little teachers

Participant (LT)	Code	Category	Theme
LT1	Partner does not know letters; cannot read; reads slowly	Learner's Basic Reading Deficiencies	Struggles in assisting partners with very limited reading skills
LT2	Partner does not listen, plays around, makes many mistakes, guesses/creates words	Behavioral & Accuracy Challenges	Difficulty managing inattentive partners with frequent reading errors
LT3	Skips words, mispronounces, does not admit mistakes	Word Recognition & Attitude Issues	Partner avoids acknowledging errors, making correction harder
LT4	Reads but in broken/fragmented manner; misreads words (e.g., dilis → bilis)	Fluency & Word Confusion	Challenge of guiding partners with weak fluency and letter-sound confusion
LT5	Reads slowly; reverses or jumbles letters/words	Slow Reading & Letter Reversal	Supporting learners with persistent decoding problems
LT6	Reads very slowly, fragmented; more errors than correct words	Severe Fluency & Accuracy Problems	Struggles with partners who take long pauses and commit frequent mistakes
LT7	Reads slowly; not yet able to read fluently	Emergent Reading Difficulty	Difficulty mentoring partners with very limited reading development
LT8	Partner cannot read some words; slow reader	Partial Word Recognition Difficulty	Challenge of handling learners with incomplete word mastery

Others pointed out frequent reading mistakes and guessing, as one little teacher shared, *"daghan siya'y mali-mali...magpataka siyag storya"* (LT2, LT4, LT 6). As can be seen in the category column, fluency issues are also evident, with learners often reading in a fragmented way, *"kabasa siya teacher pero putol-putol"* (LT4), or mispronouncing words like "*dilis kay mahimong bilis*" (LT3, LT4). Some observed letter and word reversals like: ang iyang sila kay lasi" (LT5), while others noted the predominance of errors, "*mas daghan iyang wrong*" (LT6). In addition to reading difficulties, behavioral challenges surfaced, particularly when partners were inattentive or playful, leading to frustration, as expressed by LT 2: *"masuko ko sa iyaha… dili man maminaw."*

In summary, this implies that the challenges encountered by the little teachers are two-fold 1) addressing their peers' basic literacy gaps while also managing (2.) motivation and classroom behavior during peer-assisted reading.

Little teachers reported challenges such as their peers' foundational reading deficits, low motivation, and difficulty maintaining engagement. Caballo (2025) noted that early literacy development often requires consistent support, collaboration, and targeted strategies to overcome barriers such as insufficient parental involvement and heterogeneous learner abilities. This literature underscores that even student tutors face challenges when peers lack foundational skills, highlighting the importance of training little teachers, providing scaffolding, and monitoring peer interactions to ensure that tutoring efforts translate into meaningful learning gains.

Table 2 presents the results of the thematic analysis of how little teachers respond to the challenges they encountered in the buddy reading activity.

Table 2

Thematic analysis of how little teachers respond to the challenges they encounter in the buddy reading activity

Participant (LT)	Code	Category	Theme
LT1	Made the partner read, taught the correct way, and explained the right pronunciation.	Corrective Guidance	Providing direct correction through modeling and explanation
LT2 LT7	Taught properly, asked the partner to repeat the reading	Repetition & Correction	Encouraging practice and repeated reading for accura
LT3	Corrected mistakes (e.g., bilis vs. dilis), reminded to read the right part, and gave direct guidance.	Explicit Correction	correction and guidance
LT4	Corrected wrong words, gave focused attention during reading.	Focused Tutoring	
LT5	Made the partner read carefully, corrected misread words, and encouraged them to read louder.	Error Correction & Voice Support	Correcting mistakes while encouraging proper voice projection
LT6	Modeled reading first, then let partner follow; asked to repeat when wrong.	Modeling & Repetition	
LT7	Corrected mistakes, made the partner repeat with the right word.	Repetition & Corrective Feedback	Repetition and practice
LT8	Pointed out unreadable words and gave the correct reading.	Direct Correction	Telling the right word wher partner cannot read it

Findings show that in addressing the challenges they encountered, the little teachers consistently relied on corrective and supportive strategies. Most emphasized direct correction, as stated by LT 1, "*pabasaon… tudluan… giingnan unsay sakto nga pagbasa*", and LT4 who said, "*kadto nga gebasa niya nga mali*, kay *akong tudloan ug tama*." Others used repetition and practice to reinforce accuracy, with LT2 sharing, *"ako nalang pabalikon",* and LT7 noting, *"katong mali akong ge utro."* Some employed modeling techniques, excerpt says: *"ako una magbasa… siya sunod."* (LT 6). Encouragement for reading confidence is noted as coded from the excerpt *"kusgon gamay"* of LT5 reminding the partner when reading too softly. It can be observed that the primary responses of the little teachers to challenges encountered involved tutoring through correction, repetition, and modeling to help their classmates improve in reading.

Conclusions

The study concludes that buddy reading fosters both academic improvement and peer collaboration, making it a practical and developmentally appropriate intervention for early-grade literacy. The experience also highlights the importance of providing guidance and scaffolding to little teachers so they can more effectively facilitate reading tasks. Strengthening such peer-assisted strategies can help schools cultivate a supportive reading environment that addresses literacy gaps, promotes confidence, and nurtures a culture of collaborative learning. It is recommended that students engage in buddy reading activities, practice reading beyond classroom sessions, and maintain focus and cooperation to maximize learning gains. Teachers are encouraged to integrate buddy reading as a regular instructional strategy, provide orientation and simple training to little teachers, use appropriate reading materials, and closely monitor peer interactions to ensure accuracy and sustained motivation. The school principal may support the institutionalization of buddy reading by providing adequate resources, instructional materials, and opportunities for teacher capacity-building in early literacy and peer tutoring. Future researchers, may explore the intervention with larger groups, examine long-term effects on learners' motivation and comprehension, investigate additional scaffolding techniques for peer tutors, and consider the use of digital tools to enhance the buddy reading experience.

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