



**LITERACY BEYOND LETTERS: INTEGRATING LOCAL FOLKTALES IN
DEVELOPING READING FLUENCY AMONG STRUGGLING
READERS IN NORALA**

¹Cristine L. Maxian, LPT

Tomas V. Balayon Sr. Elementary School

²Jaime Boy U Ngag, Jr., PhD

South Cotabato State College

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ABSTRACT

Literacy is a foundational skill that supports lifelong learning, personal empowerment, and socio-economic development. In the Philippines, struggling readers often face difficulties in achieving reading fluency, which affects their overall academic performance. This study aimed to investigate the effectiveness of integrating local folktales as a culturally responsive intervention to improve reading fluency among struggling readers in selected elementary schools in Norala District, South Cotabato, during the school year 2025–2026. Specifically, it sought to determine the quality of the instructional intervention, assess learners' reading fluency before and after the program, and examine the impact of folktale-based instruction on fluency outcomes. A quasi-experimental research design was employed, where struggling readers from Grades 4 to 6 participated in guided reading sessions using local folktales, while a control group continued with traditional reading materials. Data were collected using pretests and posttests to measure reading accuracy, speed, prosody, and comprehension.

Statistical analyses, including mean scores and paired t-tests, were conducted to determine the significance of improvements. Findings revealed that the integration of local folktales was implemented with high quality, demonstrating effective instructional strategies, culturally relevant materials, and appropriate complexity. Struggling readers initially performed at developing levels of reading fluency, but post-intervention results indicated significant improvements across all domains, with students achieving proficient levels. The paired t-test confirmed that the intervention significantly enhanced learners' reading fluency, indicating that culturally relevant texts and repeated guided reading can effectively improve accuracy, expressive reading, and comprehension. The study concluded that local folktales serve as an authentic and meaningful medium to strengthen literacy skills, engage learners, and connect classroom learning to cultural identity. It further suggested that reading programs incorporating culturally rooted texts can promote equitable literacy development among struggling learners.

***Keywords:** Reading Fluency, Struggling Readers, Local Folktales, Culturally Responsive Instruction*

INTRODUCTION

Background of the Study

In recent years, literacy has been universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of lifelong learning, personal empowerment, and socio-economic development. The ability to read fluently not only unlocks access to knowledge across subjects but also equips individuals with the critical thinking skills necessary for full participation in society and the workforce. Yet, despite various international efforts to address literacy gaps, millions of children—particularly those in marginalized and under-resourced communities—continue to struggle with basic reading skills (UNESCO, 2023). Although literacy instruction is globally prioritized, it often fails to account for learner's cultural and linguistic contexts, resulting in disengagement and minimal comprehension gains.

International research underscores the importance of incorporating culturally relevant materials to improve reading fluency, comprehension, and learner engagement, especially for those identified as struggling readers (Cummins, 2021; Pretorius & Spaul, 2019). When children encounter texts that reflect their own culture, environment, and experiences, they are more likely to connect meaningfully with the content and develop confidence in their reading abilities.

However, despite increasing advocacy for culturally responsive pedagogy, there remains a significant gap in indigenous narratives and local literature, such as traditional folktales, within structured literacy programs, in non-Western and multilingual education systems.

In the Philippine context, literacy remains a pressing concern. The 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) revealed that more than 80% of 15-year-old

Filipino students did not attain the minimum proficiency level in reading, a figure that points to deep-rooted systemic issues in foundational education (OECD, 2019). In response, the Department of Education implemented national literacy initiatives, including the *Every Child a Reader Program (ECARP)* and the *Brigada Pagbasa*, both aimed at boosting early-grade reading skills. However, these programs are often implemented using standardized materials that lack sensitivity to local languages, cultures, and contexts—limiting their effectiveness in linguistically and culturally diverse regions (Yazon et al., 2020). This is especially problematic in rural and remote areas, where learners often come from indigenous or minority communities with distinct cultural identities and oral traditions.

In South Central Mindanao, particularly in Sultan Kudarat, regional learning assessments continue to expose significant deficits in reading fluency and comprehension among early-grade learners. The situation is even more critical in geographically isolated and disadvantaged schools where limited access to culturally responsive resources hampers effective literacy instruction (CHEDRO XII, 2022). While the region is rich in indigenous heritage and local folklore, these cultural assets remain underutilized in classroom instruction.

There is a dearth of research on how localized and culturally grounded materials specifically local folktales—can be systematically used to enhance literacy outcomes among struggling readers. This disconnect between cultural wealth of the community and the literacy resources used in schools presents a missed opportunity to leverage students' cultural backgrounds as tools for academic success.

Aligned with SDG 4 (Quality Education) and SDG 11 (Sustainable Communities), this study seeks to bridge that gap by examining how local folktales can enhance reading fluency among struggling readers in Norala. The goal is to develop and validate a culturally rooted reading intervention that not only improves literacy but also fosters cultural pride and identity among young learners.

Theoretical Framework

This study is grounded on the following theoretical frameworks:

Sociocultural Theory (Vygotsky, 1978)

Vygotsky (1978) emphasized that learning is inherently social and occurs through interaction with more knowledgeable others within a cultural context. Integrating local folktales into reading instruction aligns with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory, which posits that cultural tools, such as language and stories, are central to cognitive development. Folktales serve as familiar cultural texts that bridge students' home and school experiences, allowing struggling readers to engage with material that resonates with their background. This culturally responsive approach can enhance motivation, comprehension, and fluency.

Reader Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978)

According to Rosenblatt (1978), meaning in reading emerges through the dynamic interaction between the reader and the text. Reader Response Theory supports the readers construct meaning based on their personal and cultural backgrounds. By using local folktales—texts rooted in the students’ own community—struggling readers are more likely to make meaningful connections, thereby improving engagement and reading fluency through emotional and cognitive investment. This approach values the reader’s perspective, especially in diverse and multilingual settings like Norala.

Fluency Theory (Samuels, 2002)

Samuels (2002) defines reading fluency as reading with speed, accuracy, and proper expression, and this is foundational for comprehension. Fluency Theory highlights that repeated exposure to familiar and engaging texts helps struggling readers develop automaticity. Local folktales, due to their rhythmic structure, repetition, and cultural relevance, are ideal texts for fluency development. They promote oral reading, expression, and comprehension—essential components of fluency—especially when practiced in shared or guided reading settings.

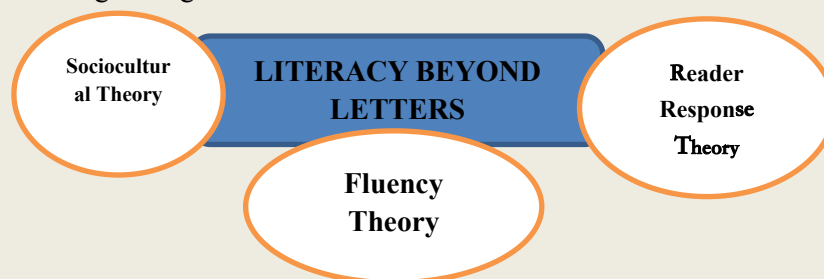


Figure 1. The Schematic Diagram of the study.

For the conceptual framework, the Independent Variable is the Quality of the Integration of Local Folktales in Reading Instruction, in terms of Cultural Relevance of Texts, Instructional Strategies, Text Complexity and Appropriateness, and Frequency of Exposure. The Dependent Variable (DV) is Reading Fluency Among Struggling Readers, covering Reading Accuracy, Reading Speed (Words per Minute), Prosody, Comprehension of Read Text.

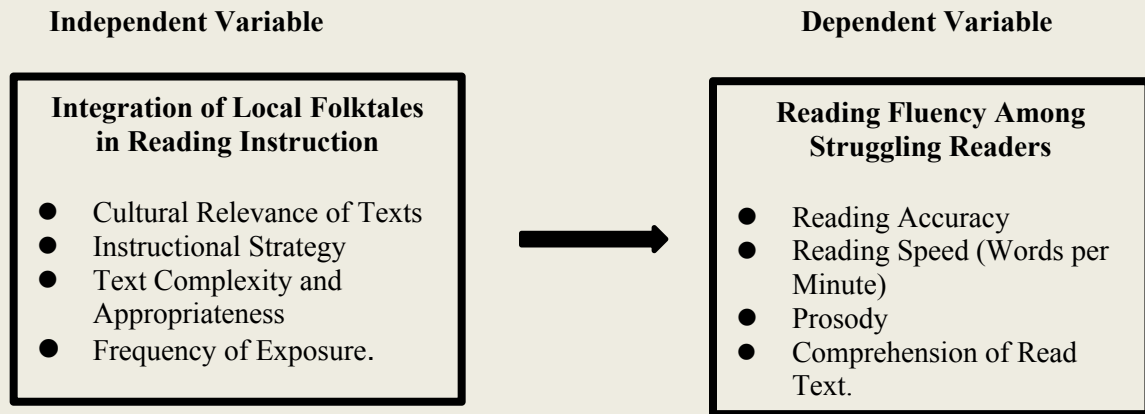


Figure 2. The Conceptual Framework of the Study

Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to develop and validate a culturally rooted reading intervention that not only improves literacy but also fosters cultural pride and identity among young learners in Norala District, South Cotabato during school year 2025-2026.

Specifically, this sought to answer the following:

1. What is the quality of Integration of Local Folktales in Reading Instruction, in terms of:
 - 1.1. Cultural Relevance of Texts;
 - 1.2. Instructional Strategies;
 - 1.3. Text Complexity and Appropriateness; and
 - 1.4. Frequency of Exposure?
2. What is the level of learners Reading Fluency Among Struggling Readers in pretest and posttest, in terms of:
 - 2.1. Reading Accuracy;
 - 2.2. Reading Speed (Words per Minute);
 - 2.3. Prosody; and
 - 2.4. Comprehension of Read Text?
3. Is there a significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores in the Reading Fluency Among Struggling Readers in terms of:
 - 1.1. Reading Accuracy;
 - 1.2. Reading Speed (Words per Minute);
 - 1.3. Prosody; and
 - 1.4. Comprehension of Read Text?

Hypothesis

There is no significant difference between the the pretest and posttest in the Reading Fluency Among Struggling Readers in terms of Reading Accuracy, Reading Speed (Words per Minute), Prosody and Comprehension of Read Text.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The study was quantitative using a quasi-experimental design, as it sought to measure the effectiveness of integrating local folktales as a culturally rooted reading intervention in improving reading fluency among struggling learners. A quasi-experimental approach is appropriate because it allows for the outcomes between groups while accommodating the practical limitations of conducting true experiments in school settings, such as random assignment (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

By systematically implementing and validating the intervention, the study aimed not only to enhance literacy skills but also to promote cultural pride and identity among young learners. Embedding reading instruction within culturally meaningful contexts strengthens both academic achievement and socio-cultural development, making this design well-suited for educational settings where culture plays a vital role in shaping learners' engagement and success (Creswell & Creswell, 2021; Thomas et al., 2021).

Respondents of the Study

The respondents in this study were the 10 reading teachers and 40 Grade 5 pupils from selected elementary schools in the District of Norala, Division of South Cotabato for the school year 2025–2026. Grade 5 pupils are chosen because this stage is critical for the transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," and the difficulties in fluency at this level may significantly hinder their comprehension and academic progress. Reading teachers are included as respondents because of their direct role in implementing reading interventions, assessing student performance, and providing professional insights into the effectiveness of culturally based strategies (Afflerbach et al., 2020).

The combination of learners and teachers as participants ensured that the study captured both the measurable outcomes of the intervention on reading fluency and the pedagogical perspectives necessary for validating the cultural and educational relevance of the program. Selecting respondents within this scope also makes the research feasible, focused, and aligned with its objective of improving literacy while fostering cultural identities.

Sampling Technique

First, Simple Random Sampling Technique was used to select the 40 grade 5 learners from the same schools. Simple random sampling is one of the most widely accepted probability sampling methods because it gives each member of the population an equal chance of being selected, minimizing selection bias and ensuring that the sample is representative of the larger teacher population (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

On the other hand, purposive sample was used to identify the 10 reading teachers from selected elementary schools in Norala, South Cotabato for the school year 2025–2026.

Locale of the Study

This research was conducted in the identified elementary schools in Norala District, Division of South Cotabato, for the school year 2025–2026. Norala District represented a culturally diverse learning environment where local folktales are still part of the community's oral traditions. Conducting the study in this context ensured that the intervention authentic, meaningful, and relevant to the learners' cultural background, essential for enhancing engagement and literacy outcomes (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Moreover, setting the research within actual classroom settings allows for the practical testing of instructional strategies that can be directly implemented by teachers and experienced by students (Creswell & Creswell, 2021).

Elementary schools are chosen because literacy development at this stage is foundational for future learning success, and interventions targeting struggling readers at the elementary level can have long-term positive effects on academic performance (National Reading Panel, 2000). By anchoring the study in Norala District schools, the research addressed a local educational need but also contributes to the broader goal of integrating culturally responsive pedagogies in Philippine classrooms (Ladson-Billings, 2021).

Research Instruments

This study employed a researcher-made evaluation tool for the reading materials, while pretest and posttest adopted from DepEd PhilIRI (2015).

Data Gathering Procedure

To ensure reliable and authentic findings, the researcher adhered to a methodology that aligns with the objectives of the study to measure the effectiveness of integrating local folktales as a culturally rooted reading intervention in improving reading fluency among struggling learners

Initially, the study's implementation required the endorsement of the DepEd-Division Superintendent and the College of Graduate School Dean. An additional letter of authorization was dispatched to the District Supervisors and school principals of selected elementary school. To ensure the accuracy of the collected data, a validated survey questionnaire was used. The

researcher intended to employ a random sampling technique by utilizing self-generated random number tables to select participants for the study.

Before the conduct, the research proposal underwent ethical considerations. The researcher sought for approved clearance from EWMCI Research Ethics Committee (EREC).

Provided that the health protocol is adhered to, the researcher initiated the dissemination of the Survey Questionnaire via face to face manner. Ultimately, the outcomes derived from the distributed survey questionnaire was compiled, assessed, and analyzed.

Statistical Treatment

The collected data were presented in tabular form, rigorously analysis, and subsequently interpreted. Statistical techniques outlined in Chapter I were used to address the issues.

In this study, the mean was employed as a statistical tool to analyze the level of integration of local folktales in reading instruction. Specifically, it measured the extent to which folktales were used vis-a-vis cultural relevance, instructional strategies, text complexity, appropriateness, and frequency of exposure. By computing mean scores from the responses, the study determined whether the integration of local folktales is low, moderate, or high.

This approach was essentials, as it provided a clear picture of how effectively teachers incorporated culturally grounded texts into reading instruction, enhancing learners' engagement and connection to the materials. Furthermore, the mean was used to assess learners reading fluency among struggling readers in the pretest and posttest phases of the study.

Reading fluency was examined across four dimensions: reading accuracy, reading speed (word per minute), prosody, and comprehension. By comparing the mean scores in these areas, the study identified patterns of progress or stagnation among the learners. The pretest means reflected baseline performance before the intervention, while the posttest means captured the extent of improvement after integrating local folktales in reading instruction.

The study used a t- test to identify whether differences in learners' performance before and after the intervention were statically significant. This statistical tool was appropriate since the same group of learners was tested twice: before (pretest) and after (posttest) the instruction intervention. The t-test analyzed the differences in reading accuracy, reading speed, prosody, and comprehension between the two test administrations. If the computed t-value exceeded the critical value at the set level of significance, it would indicate that local folktales in reading instruction had a significant effect on the reading fluency of struggling readers.

Ethical Considerations

In preparation for implementation, all the plans and recommendations were presented to East-West Mindanao Colleges Inc. to ensure compliance with prescribed procedures and protocols. Within the context of the research f on the effectiveness of integrating local folktales as a culturally rooted reading intervention in improving reading fluency among struggling learners, it was imperative to emphasize the paramount importance of ethical considerations. Before commencing this study, the following ethical principles were highlighted:

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Informed Consent:

Before participation, consent was obtained from all school heads involved in the study. They must possess a comprehensive understanding of the study's objectives, methodologies, potential risks, and benefits. Furthermore, participation remained entirely voluntary, allowing participants to withdraw at any stage without adverse consequences.

Anonymity and Confidentiality:

To safeguard the identities and responses of the students, rigorous measures were implemented to ensure anonymity and confidentiality. Pseudonyms or codes were used instead of actual names, and the collected data were securely stored with access restricted solely to the research team.

Avoiding Harm:

Delicate subjects, such as challenges inherent in participants' roles, were discussed with careful consideration of their potential emotional and psychological impact. Strategies were in place to minimize distress, and a support system was made available when needed.

Researcher-Participant Relationship:

The researcher maintained a professional and respectful rapport when engaging with the school heads. Actions that could exploit or harm participants were strictly avoided, ensuring their dignity and respect throughout the research process.

Data Protection:

Data protection regulations and laws were strictly followed to safeguard participants' personal information. Stringent measures were employed to ensure secure storage and transmission of data.

Voluntary Participation:

Participants were assured that their involvement was entirely voluntary and free from coercion or external pressure.

Researcher Bias:

The researcher remained vigilant regarding potential biases that might influence data collection and analysis, maintaining objectivity and transparency throughout the research process.

Institutional Approval:

Before initiating the study, ethical clearance was obtained from the appropriate institutional review boards or ethics committees.

Honesty and Integrity:

Research findings were reported truthfully and accurately, without manipulation or distortion to fit preconceived notions.

Beneficence:

The potential benefits of the research to educational practices and policies were carefully considered to ensure positive contributions to the education system.

Cultural Sensitivity:

The researcher demonstrated cultural sensitivity by respecting local customs, beliefs, and practices and refrained from imposing external values on participants.

Inclusion and Diversity:

The study's structure prioritized inclusivity and diversity in integrating local folktales as a culturally rooted reading intervention in improving reading fluency among struggling learners.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

In recent years, literacy has been universally acknowledged as a cornerstone of lifelong learning, personal empowerment, and socio-economic development. The study was quantitative and employed a quasi-experimental design to measure the effectiveness of integrating local folktales as a culturally rooted reading intervention in improving reading fluency among struggling learners in Norala District, South Cotabato Division, for school year 2025-2026.

The quality of integrating local folktales into reading instruction was exceptionally high across all measured domains, with mean scores ranging from 4.7 to 4.9, collectively yielding an overall mean of 4.83, which falls within the "Meets above 91–100% quality standard" category. This suggests that the incorporation of culturally relevant texts, effective instructional strategies, appropriately complex and suitable reading materials, and frequent exposure to local folktales in reading lessons were all executed at a highly satisfactory level.

High cultural relevance means that the texts used were likely meaningful and relatable to learners' lived experiences, the pretest results for struggling readers in Norala District indicate that learners were generally performing at a developing level of reading fluency, as shown by moderate mean scores across all key components: reading accuracy (2.99), reading speed (2.90), prosody (2.96), and comprehension of read text (2.63), resulting in an overall moderate fluency level (2.296). This suggests that while students could decode text with some degree of correctness, their ability to read smoothly, at an effective pace, and with expressive phrasing was still emerging.

The posttest results show that struggling readers in Norala District achieved proficient levels of reading fluency across all measured domains—reading accuracy (3.58), reading speed (3.41), prosody (3.41), and comprehension of read text (3.31)—culminating in an overall posttest mean of 3.427, which falls within the "Good Accuracy/Proficient" category. This indicates that learners were able to read texts with few errors, at an appropriate pace, with expressive prosody, and adequate understanding after participating in the intervention or instructional program. Finally, the results from Table 8 indicate a significant improvement in the reading fluency of struggling readers following the integration of local folktales into reading instruction. The mean score increased from 2.296 (SD = 0.42) in the pretest to 3.427 (SD = 0.38) in the posttest, reflecting a mean difference of 1.131, suggesting a substantial enhancement in the students' ability to read accurately, fluently, and with proper comprehension.

The paired t-test confirmed that this improvement was statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), indicating that the intervention had a meaningful impact on learners' reading performance.

Conclusion

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The following conclusions were made considering of this study's findings:

The integration of culturally relevant texts, effective instructional strategies, appropriately complex and suitable reading materials, and frequent exposure to local folktales in reading lessons can deepen engagement and comprehension by connecting learners' own cultural backgrounds to the curriculum content, making reading instruction more authentic and personally significant.

Learners read texts with few errors, appropriate pace, expressive prosody, and adequate understanding after participating in the intervention or instructional program like the use of local folktales as reading materials.

Culturally relevant instructional materials, such as local folktales, can effectively engage students and improve literacy outcomes, particularly among struggling readers who may benefit from familiar and contextually rich content.

Recommendations

In light of the findings of the study, the following were recommended:

1. The Department of Education (DepEd) is encouraged to institutionalize the use of local folktales and culturally relevant texts in reading programs, especially in early and remedial reading initiatives. Since learners initially showed only developing fluency levels, DepEd may strengthen nationwide reading frameworks by including localized reading modules, teacher guides, and assessment tools that focus on improving reading speed, prosody, and comprehension. Additional funding and support may also be provided for the production and distribution of high-quality local reading materials to ensure the sustainability of the program
2. School Administrators are encouraged to continuously support reading programs by allocating time, resources, and personnel for regular reading interventions. Considering that learners started at a developing level, administrators may organize school-based reading camps, storytelling sessions, and fluency clinics using local folktales. They may also strengthen monitoring systems to ensure that reading strategies are consistently implemented and that struggling readers receive timely support.
3. Reading Coordinators may enhance their programs by designing structured reading plans that emphasize fluency development, particularly in reading speed and prosody, which were initially weak. They may conduct regular training workshops for teachers on using folktales effectively in instruction. Establishing peer mentoring and reading buddy systems can also help sustain learners' progress and prevent regression to developing levels.
4. Reading Teachers are encouraged to integrate local folktales consistently and creatively in daily lessons through storytelling, dramatization, guided reading, and repeated reading activities. Since learners previously struggled with smooth and expressive reading, teachers may focus more

on oral reading practice, modeling, and feedback. Providing individualized remediation plans and celebrating learners' reading achievements can further boost confidence and motivation.

5. Future Researchers are encouraged to conduct longitudinal and comparative studies to determine whether the gains in reading fluency are sustained over time. They may also explore the effectiveness of local folktales in different grade levels, learning contexts, and regions. Investigating the impact of digital or multimedia versions of folktales may also help enhance reading interventions in the modern classroom.

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Declaration AI Tools Declaration

I do hereby declare the use of AI tools, such as Chat GPT and Grammarly for grammar checking and sentence organization purposes only.

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