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Research Article

Critical Reading Skills in English of Incoming Grade 10 Learners: An Analysis and Interpretation

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ABSTRACT

Critical reading encourages students to think more deeply and actively to understand a reading material. It is a manner of broadening one's mind and enhancing their thought process. The study analysed the critical reading skills of Grade 9 students and assessed the difficulties they encountered to shed light and provide valuable solutions in the successful development and improvement of the students critical reading skills. The study utilized a qualitative research design involving Grade 9 learners and English teachers who are employed in a public high school in the Philippines. Data were gathered through the use of semi-structured survey questionnaires, both for Grade 9 learners and teachers. In this study, the researcher used a purposive sampling technique to select the three Grade 9 students, and three English teachers who became part of the study. The findings revealed that students' perception of their reading ability is below average. The majority of the respondents have poor reading skills. In addition to these, students have limited vocabulary and often disassociate themselves to reading. The different strategies used in motivating students to read were presented. The majority of the teacher respondents stated that critical reading skills are part of higher-order thinking skills. Moreover, a shortage in teaching facilities and resources in the classroom are the major factors why students have poor reading ability. Findings revealed that the majority of the teacher respondents claimed that improving critical reading skills of the students can also enhance their reading comprehension skills.

Keywords: *Critical reading, Philippine reading inventory, Secondary level*

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Introduction

English is one of the subjects that most students find to be difficult, not because it is foreign to them, but more because of its complexity as a whole subject that they need to experience every succeeding academic year. In studying English, students are expected to acquire all four skills which are speaking, listening, writing, and reading. These skills need mastery from the students in order to understand and communicate with others using the English language Oughton (2007). Reading, which was defined by Keskin and Akyol (2014) as the process of deciphering codes and forming a meaning in one's mind. It is a very complex process of thought that all humans acquire later in their life. No one is born to be good at reading immediately, people study and train their minds to be familiar with words and later develop the skill of reading.

Critical reading necessitates students to think more deeply and actively to understand a text, i.e., to read beyond and between the lines rather than engrossing in reading the lines (Al Roomy, 2022). In the study of Edman (2008), he emphasized that although teacher personnel see the need for teaching critical reading skills and see it as a significant educational goal, they still have not exactly defined what critical reading is. However, they claim that students should think and read critically whenever they are at school in order to practice their minds. In addition, one of the benefits of letting the students read critically is that this can enhance students' decision making. With the technologies around the world being able to read critically will help them keep up with the emerging innovations in the technology (Ennis, 2018)

Reading is one of the instruments of communication in written language in the form of texts. It is the most successful way of gathering information and knowledge. Grabe (2009) states that critical reading is a process in which readers learn something from what they read and incorporate it in an academic context as a part of education. People can absorb various data through reading. Reading plays an important role in every aspect of people's lives and is a daily necessity for every individual who wants to acquire information. Reading is also one of the basic skills of language learning,

mastery of reading skills can improve other language skills (Patel & Jain, 2008).

Critical reading skill is an important skill to achieve academic success. Critical reading does not only revolve on sourcing information but rather a course of action that allows every individual to consolidate and extend their body of knowledge. It is a manner of widening one's mind and enhancing their thought process. But having the critical reading skills is far more advanced than just reading itself. Milan (1995) stated that being critical demands an individual to have thorough evaluation, reasoning, and sound judgment. Taking advantage of these strategies can properly transform students into critical readers who apply higher-order thinking skills.

Based on the study of Epçaçan (2018), the academic achievement of primary school students with improved reading skills is far higher compared to those with poor reading skills. In line with this, having good reading skills is such an important factor in being excellent in academic performance. Evaluations on the school activities that might produce positive or negative effects on students' learning development is one aspect to look at. Including the issue of authoritative power inside the classroom in which students' active participation can be compromised by their teachers' role (Surkamp & Viebrock, 2018). Students and teachers should practice evaluating the teaching strategies and students' performance to develop a critical stance about the information and knowledge obtained after the discussion, especially in reading classes. A reading activity that does not result in comprehension cannot be considered to have achieved its real objective.

Comprehension is possible when the individual understands and is able to convey the meaning represented by printed symbols. Yilmaz and Köksal (2008) stated that reading without comprehension is not reading, but merely vocalization since one does not understand anything from the text. Reading comprehension is a manner of forming new ideas because it includes differentiating and synthesizing readers' prior knowledge with what they have learned from texts or passages (Çalışkan & Ulaş, 2002). Reading comprehension is the process of formulating meaning through

interaction with written language (Snow, 2002). Imam et al. (2014) stated that there are different skills one should attain to comprehend what they read such as establishing relationships between words, sentences, and paragraphs. And the skills in making synthesis, analysis, evaluation, and interpretation. When participating in reading activities, students are expected to get the content of the reading materials and attain their objective and expectations.

Moreover, reading comprehension also includes the capability of a person to convey the essence of the sentences or texts using his own words. This also consists of applying the text read in one's life and reflecting on what's written in the text with their reality. One aspect of reading comprehension is when a person articulates some of his life experiences and associates them to the text written. It is a sign that a person truly understands because some personal emotions are linked to it (Wilhelm, 2018). In the recent 2018 research conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) over 79 participating countries and tested around 600,000 students aged 15-year-old. The study found out that the Philippines ranked the lowest in terms of Reading Comprehension with a score of 340, which is the lowest score in all participating countries surveyed (OECD, 2019). With this in mind the researcher would like to focus on analyzing the critical reading skills and comprehension of the Grade 9 students in the Philippines. Numerous academicians argue why the Philippines, considered as one of the best English-speaking countries globally, ranks lowest in PISA 2018. Most of them claim that Philippine education, especially in reading, focuses more on primary word definition; this is essential, but it is an issue in the context of reading comprehension (Caraig & Quimbo, 2022).

Grounded on this premise, this study aims to analyse the critical reading skills of the Grade 9 students and assess the difficulties encountered to shed light valuable solutions in the successful development and improvement of the students critical reading skills. Reading is an important aspect of the curriculum. Honing the critical reading skills of the students will help in improving their reading comprehension. Majority of school activities, instructions,

and learning materials in general are written in the English language. Having excellent reading skills and comprehension will help students achieve their academic goals. To the knowledge of the researcher, no study exploring the critical reading skills of Grade 9 students in the Philippines has been conducted. The researcher contends that examining and analysing the performance of students, particularly their critical reading proficiency, can shed light in developing appropriate reading interventions supportive towards literacy improvement and fostering critical reading skills of struggling readers.

Related Literature

Literacy is among the fundamental skills an individual can learn (Department of Education, 2018). It is noticeable that students are still struggling in reading. Given that the majority of the students are classified as instructional readers, they still remain stationary with their reading competency level. In a study conducted by Garcia (2021) stated that a junior high school student should be able to read at a speed of 250 words per minute since it is the expected reading speed at their age. Filipino teachers have a special tool they use to measure their students' reading skills, that is the Philippine Reading Inventory or Phil-IRI published in the year 2018. Using this method, two major factors are being evaluated to determine the student's reading skills: word reading and comprehension scores (Department of Education, 2018). Students can be classified into three different levels: independent, instructional and frustrated reader. Students who are classified as independent readers are able to read without any assistance; students should have 97 to 100% and 82 to 100% scores in reading performance and comprehension, respectively. Meanwhile, instructional readers are the students who can read with the guidance of their teacher. Students should have 90% to 96% and 59% to 79% scores in word reading and comprehension, respectively. The frustrated readers are the students who are the lowest among the three levels. These readers are considered to be illiterate. They can no longer read or comprehend on his own. In this level for a student to be considered as a frustrated reader, one

should have a score lower than 89% in word reading and a score lower than 58% in comprehension (Garcia, 2021).

One of the problems in the Philippine educational system is that many Filipino children have a difficulty in reading which is especially linked to low achievement results particularly in public schools. The said low academic achievement results are further remarked to the mediocre development of reading skills among the students. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metric (SEA-PLM) reported in 2019 that Filipino fifth Graders exhibited least proficiency in three learning areas which are in mathematics, writing and reading (Bernardo et al., 2022). It can be seen from the data that the Philippines ranks second to the last in reading garnering a total of 10% in reading skills assessment (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020). The study of Rivera and Aggabao (2020) also revealed that the reading difficulties of Grade 5 pupils revolve in word recognition and reading comprehension. The Philippines' informal reading inventories as reading assessments, assist educators to evaluate the reading proficiency of the students. This has helped them unfold problems and see the gap in which they can do something to improve students reading proficiency and to regularly monitor students' progress. Baldevarona (2020) emphasized that Phil-IRI is efficient because it gradually revamps the performance of struggling learners by way of acquainting them from simplified texts to more inexplicable ones. The constant and uniform conduct of IRIs in school helps teachers control assessment and instruction to align all year long.

The reading inventory tool proposed by the Department of Education (DepEd) is conducted individually to students to determine their reading performance. In line with this, DepEd has developed and established programs to improve reading and to encourage the development of reading skills among Filipino students. One of the outstanding programs is the Philippine Informal Reading Program (Phil-IRI) with DepEd mandatory implementation in all public schools to address the never-ending issues regarding literacy improvement (Department of Education, 2018). The said program is composed of Graded reading passages to identify

the performance of students in silent reading, oral reading and their comprehension. Reading assessment or the implementation of reading inventory programs are utilized to determine the reading proficiency of students in school which will then serve as the baseline data for conducting enhancement reading programs. Nevertheless, after years of program enactment since 2011 in the elementary level, there are still inquiries, apprehensions and struggles encountered particularly by the teachers on the effectiveness of the program. A revised guideline for Phil-IRI enactment was drafted through DepEd Order No. 14, series 2018 introducing the reading assessment to secondary level. With this in mind, considering that this program has been conducted at elementary level, substantial elementary graduates were still considered as slow or non-readers (Department of Education, 2018). Evidently, the Philippine educational system is still challenged with issues involving literacy enrichment especially on many students' status who fall behind in reading and writing skills, and those who exhibit poor performance in reading comprehension.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative study is to analyze the current reading skills of the Grade 9 students and further explore the development of their critical reading skills. Students' reading difficulties and teachers' perspective with critical reading skills to improve comprehension will be evaluated. Specifically, this sought answers to the following questions:

1. What are the students' views about their ability to understand written materials in English?
2. What difficulties do students encounter when they read materials that are written in English?
3. What strategies do teachers employ to help improve the reading skills in English of the Grade 9 students?
4. What are the English teachers' views about critical reading skills?
5. Based on the English teachers' perspective, can critical reading skills improve the reading comprehension of Grade 9 students?

Significance of the Study

The analysis of critical reading skills of the students will provide enough evidence to develop and enhance the reading comprehension in English to the personnel who will utilize it in improving reading skills. In relation to the problems and objectives, the findings of the research may be beneficial to the following:

Students. The result of this study can provide helpful strategies that will further enhance the students critical reading skills. Analyzing the perception of the students on the usage of critical reading skills in improving their reading comprehension will help other students practice and train their mind to read critically in order to easily understand academic materials that are written in English.

English Teachers. The result of this research will be useful for the English teacher to develop teaching strategies that will facilitate critical reading skills therefore enhancing students' English reading comprehension level.

Future Researchers. Researchers and even scholars can be encouraged to conduct scholarly studies about critical reading skills with the hopes to increase the body of knowledge on reading skills, they may use this research as a basis for their investigation.

Scope and Delimitation

The study analysed the current reading skills of the Grade 9 students and explored the development of their critical reading skills. This research study involved six respondents, three Grade 9 students and three English teachers who are employed in public high schools in the Philippines. The study utilized a qualitative research method in gathering the data needed in the investigation.

It is important to note that only the insights of the Grade 9 students and English teachers in selected public high schools in the Philippines was qualitatively analyzed and no other form of analysis was done on the paper. Students in higher levels and those who are outside the country of the Philippines were not included in the study. In addition, no other instruments nor platforms were involved in the study.

Ethical Consideration

Several steps were taken to protect the rights of respondents during this study. Several weeks prior to the study, an application for approval to conduct the study was submitted to the researcher's university. While awaiting university approval, the research proposal was presented to the researcher's program adviser and panel members. Upon receipt approval from the university, approval from the site of the study was sought. A letter of request to gather data for the research was written and forwarded to the school principal and teacher who approved the conduct of the study (Creswell, 2009; Mertens, 2005). Once permission was granted by the school principal, the study began. Next, informed consent was given to the respondents and their approval to be part of the study was obtained. Letters describing the purpose and scope of the study as well as the procedures taken to protect their confidentiality and anonymity were given to all respondents before the study began. The research proposal was included with the request letter. The researcher waited for the official letter granting permission to conduct the study from the school principal and school teacher.

Methods

Research Design

The study utilized a qualitative research design involving Grade 9 students and English teachers who are employed in a public high school in the Philippines. The students' ability to comprehend written materials in English and teachers' views about critical reading skills was explored with the use of questionnaires. Their insights on the utilization of critical reading skills in improving students' reading comprehension was also investigated. Qualitative method enabled the researcher to describe and analyze people's individual and collective social actions, beliefs, thoughts, and perceptions (McMillan & Schumacher, 2001), in an in-depth level of a phenomenon in its natural context and from the perspective of the respondents involved in the phenomenon (Gall, Gall, & Borg, 2003). Interviews with the respondents and focus group discussions were conducted to address the research questions.

Research Instrument

A researcher-constructed interview was used to lead the semi-structured interview. It is composed of 6-item questions based on the research questions of the statement of the problem of the study. The research instrument was validated by experts whose area of expertise are in line with the topic of the study. This provided the data for comprehensive findings and emerging themes to help answer the overarching research questions.

Data Analysis

The purpose of this study was to analyze the current reading skills of the Grade 9 students and further explore the development of their critical reading skills. Students' reading experiences and teachers' concepts on critical reading skills to increase reading comprehension was explored and evaluated. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) stated that qualitative methods are more suitable than quantitative methods in discovering meanings which are not "easily handled by statistical procedures" (p. 2). Indeed, the study was to explore respondents' experiences, perception, and recommendations regarding the challenges and improvements in an important aspect of their learning development particularly in the English subject. To answer the research question, the researcher transcribed the audio recording and subject for content analysis. According to Elo and Kyngäs (2008), utilizing content analysis allows systematic coding of data by organizing the gathered information into categories. And lastly, data were presented in a narrative form.

Sampling procedure

In this study, the researcher utilized purposive sampling technique to select the three Grade 9 students, and three English teachers, a total of six respondents. This method was used to focus on the depth of the topic with relatively small samples.

Data Gathering Procedure

Qualitative data for this study were collected through in-depth, semi-structured interviews facilitated by the researcher. Before gathering the information needed, the researcher had presented the guide questions for

the self-made survey questionnaire to the School Research Committee (SRC) for further comments and suggestions. It was sent then to the assigned experts in research panelling for validation purposes.

The respondents were interviewed via Messenger application wherein the researcher asked the interview guide questions ensuring the maintenance of set protocols. During the interview, the researcher guided the respondent with protocols of the interview. The researcher gave them time to speak freely about their ideas that were pertinent to the study. Each interview was scheduled to last between 10 and 20 minutes. However, in certain cases, the natural flow of the interview session often ended earlier or later than expected.

Results and Discussions

This part of the research presents the analysis of the findings from this study.

1. What are the students' views about their ability to understand written materials in English?

Respondents were asked to describe their ability to understand written materials in English. One of the respondents stated that he is not that excellent in reading in English, despite being at a higher level. He considered himself as an average reader when it comes to reading English material. He also added that he always tries to understand what he reads. Another respondent stated that his reading ability depends on the type of reading material he is reading. He also added that he often encounters unfamiliar words. Moreover, another respondent stated that she can understand English a little. She is not that confident when it comes to her reading skills. In the recent 2018 research conducted by the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA) over 79 countries participated and tested around 600,000 students aged 15-year-old. The study found out that the Philippines ranked the lowest in terms of Reading Comprehension with a score of 340, which is the lowest score in all participating countries surveyed (OECD, 2019).

In relation to the students' ability to read is their perseverance to understand the material they are reading. The majority of them stated that they cannot always grasp the meaning of

the material they were reading at once. They always read it twice or more until they are able to understand it and explain it using their own words. And this can sometimes happen when the student is not really trying to understand the text. Comprehension is possible when the individual understands what he reads and is able to convey the meaning represented by printed symbols. Yilmaz and Köksal (2008) stated that reading without comprehension is not reading, but merely vocalization since one does not understand anything from the text. It can be seen that they are still having difficulties and struggling to master their reading skills. However, they are persistent in improving their reading skills if only there are available resources and teachers that will guide them.

2. What difficulties do students encounter when they read materials that are written in English?

The research question two sought to gather problems students have encountered which makes it difficult for them to understand the reading material that is written in English. The majority of the students responded that they often encounter words that are unfamiliar to them. And because of that, they cannot follow through the text they read. They find it difficult to understand the text they read because of the words that are unknown to them. This incident impedes the students to focus and understand their lectures, their class participation as well as their performance during the activity sessions. This is similar to the study of Baldevarona (2020) that studied a total of 207 senior high school students both in public and private schools. He revealed that students' difficulty in understanding the word vocabulary is one of the factors why learners participate less during the class discussion.

The teacher respondents stated that some of their students are still below average reader. One of them stated that they have already implemented the Phil-IRI proposed by the DepEd for secondary level. And yet, the same number of slow readers was observed. Moreover, another teacher respondent stated that it is difficult to give activities to the learners since the majority of the students do not know some of

the words included in the activity. Another observation made by a teacher respondent is that the students vocabulary is limited to basic words. And sometimes even the basic words are unfamiliar to the learners. The teacher respondent claimed that this happens because students are not engaged in reading. They are not able to expand their vocabulary because they do not read occasionally. One of the problems in the Philippine educational system is that many Filipino children have difficulty in reading. This is especially linked to low achievement results particularly in public schools. The Southeast Asia Primary Learning Metric (SEA-PLM) reported in 2019 that Filipino fifth Graders exhibited least proficiency in three learning areas which are in mathematics, writing and reading (Bernardo et al., 2022). It can be seen from the data that the Philippines ranks second to the last in reading garnering a total of 10% in reading skills assessment (UNICEF and SEAMEO, 2020).

3. What strategies do teachers employ to help improve the reading skills in English of the Grade 9 students?

The majority of the teacher respondents stated that they use the internet, which is a very accessible tool for them. They use applications which are helpful to their students such as online dictionaries, thesaurus and many more. This is because the school lacks enough reading materials in which the students can browse and look for unfamiliar words. The use of technology can be essential to help students enhance their reading comprehension. Teachers and learners today are heavily reliant on technologies. It is noticeable that advancement in technology is helpful and is being incorporated even in schools. Technology application can be used as a guide to aid in improving students' vocabulary and improving their reading comprehension (Quinto et al., 2020). Moreover, another teacher respondent revealed that they still encourage their students to use books to aid in improving their vocabulary. She also added that the books should prompt students' curiosity to develop critical thinking. On other hand, a teacher respondent stated that they had conducted Phil-IRI during the first quarter of

school year 2022-2023. The teacher respondent said that the conduct of Phil-IRI is not fully effective because after the class hours, the educators do not have allotted time for the remedial class. After knowing the results of the reading assessment, students who were classified as slow readers should have remedial classes to improve students' reading skills. However, due to time constraint there is no follow up remediation. Another respondent stated that the lack of reading resources hinders them to motivate the students to read. This is also consistent with the study of Caraig and Quimbo (2022) that a shortage of teaching personnel, facilities, and resources in school are the major factors why students have poor reading proficiency. And currently the Department of Education is still trying to find solutions to these issues. Among the prominent assessment reading tools is the conduct of Phil-IRI.

4. What are the English teachers' views about critical reading skills?

Research question four sought to gather information on how English teachers understand critical reading. One teacher respondent stated that critical reading skill is a part of higher-order thinking skills. She also added that one should be able to read literally first before moving to critical reading. Another respondent stated that critical reading is when a person focuses on the deep message of the text rather than the surface message being portrayed. She also added that being able to read critically stimulates the mind of the reader. Moreover, another respondent asserts that if one can read critically, they are also capable of applying what they read in real-life situations. Similar concept was stated by another respondent saying that critical reading should not revolve on the literal meaning of the text. She also added that questions should arise, most importantly questions that start with how and why. Taking these into consideration, students are on the path of being analytical and therefore a critical reader. Several definitions have been presented by different authors to define critical reading. One of which is the definition given by Bağ and Gürsoy (2021), where they defined critical reading as a self-regulatory judgment which yields interpretation, inference and

evaluation including explanation of conceptual considerations upon which the critical judgment is based. A similar definition is suggested by Al Roomy (2022), who regard critical reading as a vital English skill which includes purposeful judgment that ends in context interpretation, analysis, inference and evaluation. It can be seen from the two given definitions that critical reading entails various things to be achieved.

5. Based on the English teachers' perspective, can critical reading skills improve the reading comprehension of Grade 9 students?

Findings revealed that the majority of the teacher respondents claimed that improving critical reading skills of the students can also enhance their reading comprehension skill. One respondent added that in order for a school to foster reading minds, one should be equipped with necessary materials. Providing books to read, school libraries that are functional, and extra facilities for remedial classes. Moreover, the critical reading skills of the students will make them more aware of what is being stated in the text. Based on the study of Epçaçan (2018), the academic achievement of primary school students with improved reading skills is far higher compared to those with poor reading skills. Critical reading is one of the higher-order of thinking that one can acquire and should be developed. Critical reading skills is one of the skills that all English teachers should introduce to their students. Encouraging learners to think and read critically inside and outside school premises can improve their abilities to observe, infer, decide and create new ideas. However, to achieve this goal learners should be involved in different activities that will stimulate their mind to read critically. In addition, one of the benefits of letting the students read critically is that this can enhance students' decision making. Nevertheless, the teacher respondents claimed that critical reading skills help students to focus on the things beyond the literal meaning of the text. It also enables the students to understand better the reading material limiting sources of distraction therefore increasing their comprehension. With the technologies around the world, being

able to read critically will help them keep up with the emerging innovations in the technology (Ennis, 2018).

Conclusion

1. The majority of the respondents have poor reading skills. Aside from that, students have limited vocabulary and often disassociate themselves to reading. The majority of them stated that they cannot always grasp the meaning of the material they were reading at once. And this sometimes happen when the student is not really trying to understand the text. Comprehension is possible when the individual understands what he reads and he is able to convey the meaning represented by printed symbols.
2. Students often have difficulty understanding the reading material when they encounter words that are unfamiliar to them. This incident makes it difficult if not impossible for the students to focus and understand their lectures and lower their class participation. The teacher respondents stated that some of their students are still below average reader. It was revealed that they have already conducted the Phil-IRI proposed by the DepEd for secondary level. And yet, the same number of slow readers was observed.
3. The majority of the teacher respondents stated that they use the internet which they claim to be a very accessible tool for them. Moreover, another teacher respondent revealed that they still encourage their students to use books to improve their vocabulary. She also added that reading materials should prompt students' curiosity to develop critical thinking. However, due to time constraint, the lack of reading resources, and facilities, these factors hinder them to motivate the students to read.
4. The majority of the teacher respondents stated that critical reading skills are part of higher-order thinking skills. They also added that one should be able to read literally before moving to critical reading. Critical reading is when a person focuses on the deep message of the text rather than the superficial message being portrayed. Most

importantly questions that start with 'how' and 'why' should be answered by the students. By considering these findings, students are on the path of being analytical and therefore on their way of becoming a critical reader. Moreover, if one can read critically, they are also capable of applying what they read in real-life situations where the information they have obtained is most applicable.

5. Findings revealed that the majority of the teacher respondents claimed that improving critical reading skills of the students can also enhance their reading comprehension skills. Nurturing reading proficiency among students should be the priority of the teachers as this will be their students' foundation to achieve academic excellence. Based on the findings, it can be clearly seen that the lack of materials, facilities and teaching force restricts the students to enhance their reading skills. In order for a school to develop critical reading skills among students, the school should be equipped with necessary materials. Providing books to read, school libraries that are functional, and extra facilities for remedial classes.

Recommendations

Based on the foregoing findings, the researcher would like to recommend an innovative remedial reading project to help learners who are still classified as slow readers. In the same manner, those who are classified as an average reader could be motivated to improve their reading proficiency to the fast level category. The Phil-IRI provided educators with primary insights of the reading ability of the students. However, the effectiveness of the said reading program depends on its suitability and appropriateness to the target learners. There is a need for every learning institution to guarantee the availability of learning facilities that support revitalizing the students' reading skills such as libraries, reading spaces, reading materials, teaching personnel. Acquainting the students to different reading materials and intervention lay the foundation for enhanced reading proficiency.

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