

Enhancing Kindergartners' Letter Sound Identification with the Phonics Play Approach (PPA): An Action Research Study

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 00 January, 2025

Revised 00 March, 2025

Accepted 12 June 2025

Available online 28 June 2025

Keywords:

Phonics Play Approach; letter sound identification; bilingual kindergarten; self-efficacy; play-based learning



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ABSTRAK

Studi penelitian tindakan ini mengevaluasi Pendekatan Bermain Fonik (PPA), sebuah intervensi berbasis permainan yang menggunakan materi berbiaya rendah (misalnya, kartu catatan, lembar kerja), untuk meningkatkan identifikasi bunyi huruf pada 23 siswa TK di kelas bilingual (Cebuano-Inggris) di South City Central School, Filipina, selama empat bulan (Agustus–November 2023). Berdasarkan teori efikasi diri Bandura (1997), PPA mengintegrasikan permainan berbasis cerita, lagu fonik, perburuan harta karun, dan permainan peran untuk meningkatkan keterlibatan dan kepercayaan diri, serta mengatasi perilaku menyimpang yang diamati selama pembelajaran fonik tradisional. Desain pra-tes/pasca-tes kelompok tunggal dengan tes 30 item, yang dianalisis melalui uji Wilcoxon signed-rank, menilai kemahiran fonik, sementara wawancara semi-terstruktur dengan seorang guru, yang dianalisis secara tematis, mengeksplorasi kelayakan PPA. Hasil menunjukkan peningkatan signifikan dalam pengenalan bunyi huruf ($p = 0,001$, $r = 0,82$) dan keterlibatan, terutama di antara siswa Maranao dengan kemampuan bahasa Inggris terbatas. Pendekatan non-digital berbasis guru PPA menawarkan

model yang dapat diskalakan untuk lingkungan multibahasa dengan sumber daya terbatas di seluruh dunia, dari Asia Tenggara hingga Afrika sub-Sahara, yang sejalan dengan Tujuan Pembangunan Berkelanjutan 4 (UNESCO, 2023). Dengan mengisi kesenjangan dalam fonik berbasis permainan, PPA menginformasikan pelatihan guru dan mendorong literasi dini yang adil. Keterbatasannya meliputi desain sampel kecil dan kelompok tunggal.

ABSTRACT

This action research study evaluated the Phonics Play Approach (PPA), a play-based intervention using low-cost materials (e.g., flashcards, worksheets), to enhance letter sound identification among 23 kindergartners in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) classroom at South City Central School, Philippines, over four months (August–November 2023). Grounded in Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, PPA integrated story-based games, phonics songs, scavenger hunts, and role-play to boost engagement and confidence, addressing off-task behaviours observed during traditional phonics lessons. A single-group pre-test/post-test design with a 30-item test, analysed via the Wilcoxon signed-rank test, assessed phonics proficiency, while semi-structured interviews with one teacher, analysed thematically, explored PPA's feasibility. Results showed significant improvements in letter sound recognition ($p = 0.001$, $r = 0.82$) and engagement, particularly among Maranao students with limited English proficiency. PPA's teacher-driven, non-digital approach offers a scalable model for resource-limited, multilingual settings globally, from Southeast Asia to sub-Saharan Africa, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 (UNESCO, 2023). By filling gaps in play-based phonics, PPA informs teacher training and promotes equitable early literacy. Limitations include the small sample and single-group design.

1. INTRODUCTION

Phonics, the process of mapping letters to their corresponding sounds, is a cornerstone of early literacy, enabling kindergartners to decode words and build reading fluency essential for academic success (Savage et al., 2020). In multilingual classrooms, however, traditional phonics instruction often fails to engage young learners, particularly when linguistic diversity complicates delivery (Kapp, 2012). In the Philippines, the Department of Education's (DepEd) Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) policy, enacted through

Republic Act No. 10533 (2013), mandates using students' first languages (e.g., Cebuano) alongside English to scaffold literacy. Yet, resource constraints and limited teacher training hinder effective implementation, especially in diverse regions like Mindanao, where Maranao students often enter kindergarten with limited English proficiency (Alonzo et al., 2023). At South City Central School, a public institution in the Philippines, observations in August 2023 revealed significant challenges in the Purple B kindergarten class (n=23), where bilingual (Cebuano-English) phonics lessons led to disengagement. Approximately 70% of students exhibited off-task behaviors, such as pencil sword fights, drawing unrelated images, or wandering, reducing instructional time by an estimated 30% across 10 observed sessions. These behaviors, coupled with linguistic barriers for Maranao students, underscored the need for innovative, engaging, and culturally responsive phonics methods.

Globally, early literacy faces similar challenges, with 617 million children lacking basic reading skills due to disengaging methods or resource shortages (UNESCO, 2023). In low-resource settings, such as rural Southeast Asia and sub-Saharan Africa, high-cost or digital interventions are often infeasible, necessitating low-cost, teacher-driven approaches (Piper et al., 2022). The Phonics Play Approach (PPA), evaluated in this action research, addresses these gaps by integrating play-based activities—story-based games, phonics songs, scavenger hunts, and role-play—using affordable materials like flashcards and worksheets. Implemented over four months (August–November 2023) in a bilingual classroom, PPA aims to enhance letter sound identification and engagement while fostering confidence among diverse learners, particularly Maranao students. By aligning with DepEd's Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (DepEd, 2016), PPA offers a practical solution for resource-limited, multilingual settings, with potential to inform global education practices.

This study is grounded in Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that confidence in one's abilities drives performance. Self-efficacy is shaped by four sources: mastery experiences (success in tasks), vicarious experiences (observing peers succeed), verbal persuasion (encouragement from teachers), and emotional arousal (positive emotional states). In PPA, mastery experiences occur when kindergartners correctly identify letter sounds during games, reinforcing their belief in their abilities. Vicarious experiences emerge through peer modeling in group activities, such as scavenger hunts, where students observe classmates succeeding. Verbal persuasion is provided through teacher encouragement during role-play, while positive emotional states are fostered by the playful, low-pressure environment of phonics songs. These mechanisms align with Phan et al.'s (2023) findings that play-based literacy activities boost self-efficacy and phonics skills in preschoolers, with a 25% improvement in letter recognition in a Vietnamese study. For Maranao students, whose limited English proficiency may undermine confidence, PPA's bilingual delivery and engaging activities create a supportive learning environment, addressing cultural and linguistic barriers (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020).

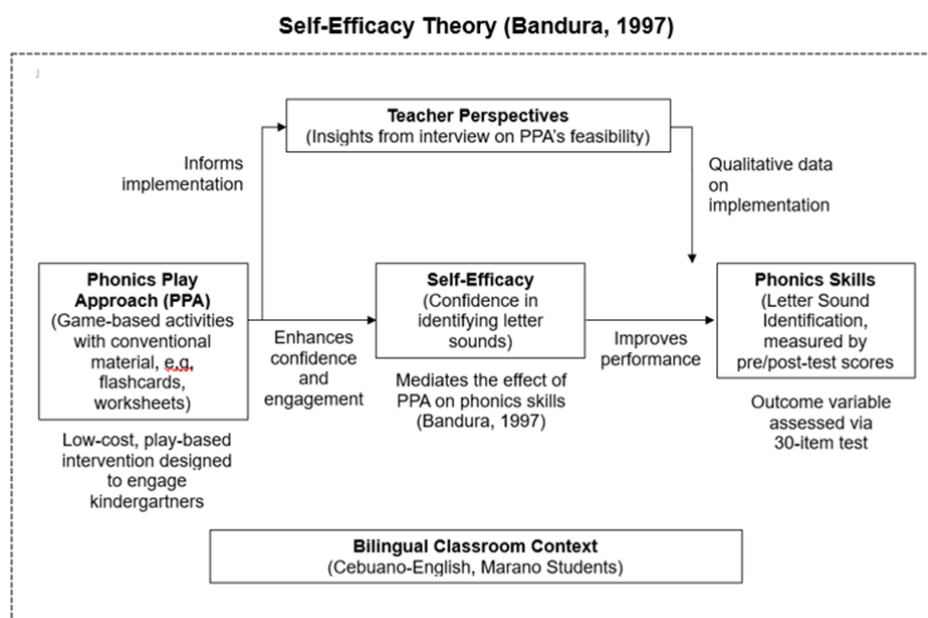


Figure 1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework for the Phonics Play Approach (PPA)

The conceptual framework (Figure 1) illustrates PPA's design, linking the independent variable (PPA activities) to the dependent variable (letter sound identification skills) through the mediating variable of self-efficacy. Teacher perspectives serve as a contextual factor, informing PPA's feasibility in a bilingual classroom. PPA activities, such as story-based games, provide mastery experiences that enhance self-efficacy, which in turn

improves phonics performance. For example, a scavenger hunt where students find objects by initial sounds reinforces letter recognition while building confidence through peer modelling. Teacher feedback, gathered via interviews, shapes PPA's implementation, ensuring alignment with classroom realities (Wahyuni et al., 2021). This framework extends prior research by applying self-efficacy to a multilingual, low-resource context, where studies on play-based phonics are scarce (Alonzo et al., 2023). Unlike Savage et al.'s (2020) focus on monolingual Canadian kindergartens, PPA targets bilingual settings, while its non-digital approach contrasts with resource-heavy interventions (Chen et al., 2023), offering scalability across diverse regions.

The significance of PPA lies in its low-cost, teacher-driven design, which addresses both local and global educational needs. Locally, PPA strengthens DepEd's MTB-MLE framework by providing a practical, culturally responsive tool for multilingual classrooms, particularly for Maranao students (Lopez & Garcia, 2024). Globally, PPA's affordability and adaptability make it relevant for resource-limited settings, from Southeast Asia (e.g., Indonesia, Vietnam) to sub-Saharan Africa, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 for quality education (UNESCO, 2023). By filling gaps in play-based phonics instruction, PPA contributes to teacher education, offering a model for training educators to implement engaging, equitable literacy interventions. This study's action research approach, co-designed with a teacher, ensures practical relevance, addressing the engagement and literacy challenges observed in the Purple B class while informing broader curriculum development.

1.1. Research Questions

This study evaluated the Phonics Play Approach (PPA) to enhance letter sound identification among kindergartners in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) classroom. It aimed to answer the following questions:

1. *What is the kindergartners' achievement level in letter sound identification before and after the four-month PPA intervention?*
2. *Is there a significant difference in the median pre- and post-test scores for letter sound identification?*
3. *What is the teacher's perspective on the feasibility of implementing PPA in a bilingual kindergarten setting?*

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review synthesizes research on phonics, play-based learning, self-efficacy, bilingual instruction, action research, and teacher training to frame the Phonics Play Approach (PPA) as a novel intervention for enhancing letter sound identification in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) kindergarten classroom at South City Central School, Philippines. By critically analyzing these themes, this section addresses gaps in low-cost, culturally responsive phonics instruction in resource-limited, multilingual settings, positioning PPA as a scalable model for early literacy locally and globally.

2.1. Phonics and Early Literacy

Phonics, the process of mapping letters to sounds, is foundational to early literacy, enabling young learners to decode words and develop reading fluency (Savage et al., 2020). Explicit phonics instruction, which systematically teaches letter-sound relationships, yields significant gains in monolingual English kindergartens, with effect sizes of 0.6–0.8 (Savage et al., 2020). Akan et al. (2024) compared explicit and whole-language approaches, finding explicit methods superior for letter sound identification, though their study's focus on Turkish schools limits generalizability to multilingual contexts. In contrast, implicit phonics, embedded in reading activities, often fails to engage diverse learners, particularly in settings with linguistic complexity (Kapp, 2012).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education's Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (DepEd, 2016) emphasizes phonics as a core competency, yet resource constraints—limited access to engaging materials and trained teachers—hinder implementation, especially in public schools serving Maranao students with limited English proficiency (Alonzo et al., 2023). Sanden et al. (2022) noted that U.S. teachers often supplement phonics with play-based methods due to disengagement, but their study's resource-rich context contrasts with Philippine challenges. Critically, these studies rely on large samples or controlled settings, whereas PPA targets a small, diverse classroom, addressing a gap in scalable, low-cost phonics interventions. PPA's explicit, play-based approach aligns with Savage et al.'s (2020) findings but adapts to multilingual, resource-limited settings, offering a practical solution for DepEd's curriculum and similar global contexts.

2.2. Play-Based Learning

Play-based learning enhances engagement and motivation in early education, addressing phonics instruction's disengagement challenges. Fitriana et al. (2022) found that phonics songs and games improved phonemic awareness by 80% among Indonesian kindergartners, using a quasi-experimental design with 50 participants. However, their study's monolingual focus (Bahasa Indonesia) limits applicability to bilingual settings like PPA's Cebuano-English classroom. Pyle et al. (2021) reported that non-digital play methods, such as role-play and scavenger hunts, increased motivation in Canadian kindergartens, with 85% of students showing sustained engagement. Their qualitative approach, while rich, lacks quantitative rigor, and the resource-rich context contrasts with PPA's low-cost design. Ollonen and Kangas (2024) distinguished guided play (structured activities like PPA's story-based games) from free play, noting guided play's superiority in literacy outcomes due to teacher scaffolding.

Critically, digital play-based methods, effective in urban settings (Lin et al., 2018), are infeasible in rural Philippine schools lacking technology infrastructure. PPA's use of flashcards and worksheets aligns with Pyle et al.'s (2021) non-digital approach but extends applicability to multilingual, low-resource contexts, such as Mindanao or rural Indonesia. The scarcity of studies on play-based phonics in Maranao-inclusive settings underscores PPA's novelty, though Fitriana et al.'s (2022) small sample limits generalizability, suggesting PPA's action research design is apt for context-specific insights.

2.3. Self-Efficacy

Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, which posits that confidence drives performance, underpins PPA's design. Self-efficacy is shaped by mastery experiences (task success), vicarious experiences (observing peers), verbal persuasion (teacher encouragement), and emotional arousal (positive emotions). Phan et al. (2023) found that play-based literacy activities in Vietnamese preschools increased self-efficacy and letter recognition by 25%, using a mixed-methods design with 60 students. Their study, however, focused on monolingual Vietnamese learners, leaving gaps for multilingual contexts like PPA's Maranao-inclusive classroom. Critically, Phan et al.'s (2023) reliance on teacher reports for self-efficacy risks bias, whereas PPA infers self-efficacy from engagement, a methodological limitation. Bandura's (1997) framework is well-established, but its application to young, multilingual learners is underexplored, particularly for Maranao students whose limited English proficiency may undermine confidence.

PPA's activities, such as peer modelling in scavenger hunts and teacher praise in role-play, target all four self-efficacy sources, fostering confidence in a culturally responsive way. Compared to digital interventions requiring infrastructure (Chen et al., 2023), PPA's low-cost approach is more accessible, though direct self-efficacy measurement (e.g., via scales) would strengthen claims. This gap highlights PPA's contribution to applying self-efficacy in resource-limited, bilingual settings.

2.4. Bilingual Instruction and Cultural Responsiveness

Bilingual instruction, leveraging students' first language alongside the target language, scaffolds literacy in multilingual classrooms. Cenoz and Gorter (2020) found that translanguaging—using languages flexibly, as in PPA's Cebuano-English delivery—improves literacy outcomes by 15–20% compared to English-only instruction. Their study, based on European schools, may not fully capture Philippine complexities, where Maranao students face cultural and linguistic barriers. Alonzo et al. (2023) reported that culturally responsive phonics engaged Filipino kindergartners, particularly Maranao learners, but required teacher training, a finding echoed by Wahyuni et al. (2021), who noted preparation time as a barrier. Kirsch et al. (2023) explored multilingual literacy activities, finding that integrating students' native languages fosters identity and engagement, aligning with McCarthey and Moje's (2002) work on identity in literacy. However, Kirsch et al.'s (2023) small, qualitative sample limits generalizability, and McCarthey and Moje's (2002) older study requires justification for relevance.

PPA's bilingual, play-based approach addresses these gaps by scaffolding Maranao students' learning while affirming their cultural identity, though teacher preparation remains a challenge. Critically, the scarcity of studies on play-based phonics in Maranao-inclusive settings positions PPA as a novel contribution to equitable literacy.

2.5. Action Research in Education

Action research, a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, is ideal for teacher-driven interventions like PPA (Creswell, 2013). Schmuck (2008) emphasized its role in empowering educators to address classroom challenges, such as the off-task behaviors observed in PPA's context. In a Philippine study, Alonzo et al. (2023) used action research to refine mother tongue-based instruction, finding it effective for small-scale, context-specific solutions. However, action research's lack of control groups limits generalizability, a critique

addressed by PPA's mixed-methods design, which combines quantitative pre-/post-tests with qualitative insights (Creswell, 2013).

PPA's co-design with a teacher ensures practical relevance, aligning with Schmuck's (2008) view that action research bridges theory and practice. Compared to experimental studies (e.g., Savage et al., 2020), action research suits resource-limited settings where teachers adapt interventions iteratively, making PPA a model for Southeast Asian and African classrooms facing similar constraints (Piper et al., 2022).

2.6. Teacher Training for Play-Based Phonics

Effective implementation of play-based phonics requires teacher training, particularly in resource-limited settings. Wahyuni et al. (2021) found that Indonesian teachers valued play-based methods but cited preparation time and lack of training as barriers, with 60% reporting insufficient resources. PPA's low-cost materials (e.g., reusable flashcards) mitigate these challenges, though initial workshops are needed to familiarize teachers with its activities (Lopez & Garcia, 2024). Piper et al. (2022) reported that teacher training in sub-Saharan Africa improved literacy outcomes by 30% when paired with low-cost interventions, a model PPA emulates. Critically, Wahyuni et al.'s (2021) qualitative approach lacks quantitative validation, while Piper et al.'s (2022) focus on primary grades limits applicability to kindergarten.

PPA's teacher-driven design empowers educators, aligning with global calls for scalable training models (UNESCO, 2023). By addressing training needs, PPA supports DepEd's MTB-MLE framework and offers a blueprint for other low-resource contexts, from Malaysia to Kenya.

3. METHODOLOGY

This action research evaluated the Phonics Play Approach (PPA) to enhance letter sound identification among 23 kindergartners in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) classroom at South City Central School, Philippines, over four months (August–November 2023). Employing a mixed-methods approach, the study combined a single-group pre-test/post-test design with qualitative teacher insights to address the research questions (Section 1.1). This section details the research design, participants, intervention procedures, data collection, data analysis, ethical considerations, and researcher reflexivity, providing a robust framework for assessing PPA's effectiveness and feasibility in a resource-limited, multilingual context.

3.1. Research Design

The study adopted an action research framework, ideal for teacher-driven interventions in classroom settings (Creswell, 2013). Action research involves iterative cycles of planning, acting, observing, and reflecting, enabling teachers to address specific challenges, such as the off-task behaviours observed in the Purple B class (Schmuck, 2008). A single-group pre-test/post-test design assessed PPA's impact on letter sound identification, using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test due to the small sample size ($n=23$) and non-normal data distribution, which precludes parametric tests (Creswell, 2013). Qualitative data from semi-structured interviews with one teacher, analysed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006), explored PPA's feasibility, complementing quantitative findings. This mixed-methods approach ensured a comprehensive evaluation, aligning with Alonzo et al.'s (2023) use of action research in Philippine multilingual settings. Critically, the single-group design limits causal inference due to the lack of a control group, a common challenge in action research addressed by triangulating multiple data sources (Schmuck, 2008). This design suits resource-limited contexts, where randomized trials are often infeasible, making PPA's findings relevant to similar settings globally (Piper et al., 2022).

3.2. Participants

The study involved 23 kindergartners (12 boys, 11 girls, aged 5–6) from the Purple B class at South City Central School, a public institution serving diverse learners, including Maranao students with limited English proficiency. Purposive sampling targeted this class due to observed off-task behaviors (e.g., 70% of students disengaged during phonics lessons in August 2023). One female teacher, with five years of kindergarten teaching experience and bilingual proficiency in Cebuano and English, co-designed and implemented PPA, facilitating instruction for Maranao learners. Parental consent was obtained for all kindergartners, ensuring ethical participation. The small, diverse sample reflects typical Philippine public school classrooms, enhancing contextual relevance but limiting generalizability, a trade-off addressed by qualitative depth (Creswell, 2013).

3.3. Intervention Procedures

PPA was implemented over four months (August–November 2023, 80 sessions, 15–20 minutes each) during daily literacy blocks, aligning with DepEd's Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (DepEd, 2016). Activities included

story-based games (e.g., “Letter Adventure,” where students matched sounds to story characters), phonics songs (e.g., “Letter Sound March,” sung in Cebuano and English), scavenger hunts (e.g., finding objects by initial sounds, like /b/ for “ball”), and role-play (e.g., acting as “sound detectives” to identify letters). These activities used low-cost materials (flashcards, worksheets) to ensure accessibility in resource-limited settings. For example, a scavenger hunt involved students finding classroom objects (e.g., “pen” for /p/) in teams, fostering peer modelling and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1997). The teacher delivered PPA bilingually, using Cebuano to scaffold Maranao students’ understanding, with weekly planning to adapt activities based on student engagement. Observations noted increased participation (e.g., 90% on-task behaviour by October 2023), supporting PPA’s alignment with play-based learning principles (Pyle et al., 2021). This structured yet flexible approach contrasts with digital interventions, offering scalability for rural schools globally (Piper et al., 2022).

3.4. Data Collection

Data were collected through multiple methods to address the research questions. A 30-item pre-test/post-test, administered in July and December 2023, assessed letter sound identification. Items included matching letters to sounds (e.g., “What sound does ‘B’ make?”) and identifying initial sounds in pictures (e.g., /s/ for “sun”), scored at 1 point each (total: 30). The test was validated by two education experts for age-appropriateness and alignment with DepEd standards. Semi-structured interviews with the teacher (four sessions, 30–45 minutes, August–November 2023) explored PPA’s feasibility, with questions like “How do students respond to PPA activities?” and “What challenges arise in preparation?” (adapted from Wahyuni et al., 2021). Classroom observations (10 sessions, 15 minutes each) used a checklist based on Pyle et al. (2021), recording engagement behaviours (e.g., participation, off-task actions like pencil sword fights). These methods triangulated quantitative and qualitative data, ensuring robustness despite the small sample (Creswell, 2013).

3.5. Data Analysis

Quantitative data from pre-/post-tests were analyzed using the Wilcoxon signed-rank test ($p < 0.05$) to compare median scores, suitable for the non-parametric data and small sample (Creswell, 2013). Effect sizes (r) were calculated to assess PPA’s impact. Qualitative interview data were transcribed verbatim and analyzed thematically following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step process: familiarization, coding, theme generation, review, definition, and reporting. For example, themes like “increased engagement” emerged from teacher quotes about student focus during games. Observation data were summarized descriptively, identifying patterns (e.g., 90% participation by session 10), triangulating findings with test and interview data. This mixed-methods analysis balanced statistical rigor with contextual insights, though the single-group design limits causal claims (Schmuck, 2008).

3.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval was obtained from South City Central School’s administration, adhering to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 (Republic Act No. 10173). Informed consent was secured from parents for kindergartners’ participation and from the teacher for interviews. Participants’ identities were anonymized (e.g., “Teacher A,” “Student 1”) in all records, and data were stored securely on a password-protected device accessible only to researchers. PPA activities were age-appropriate and inclusive, ensuring no harm to participants. These measures align with ethical standards for educational research in the Philippines and globally (Creswell, 2013).

3.7. Researcher Reflexivity

As action researchers, the authors, including the teacher as co-designer, acknowledge their influence on the study. The teacher’s role in implementing PPA may introduce bias, as her enthusiasm could enhance student engagement (Creswell, 2013). To mitigate this, structured interview protocols and standardized tests were used, and observations were cross-checked by a second researcher. The authors’ commitment to improving literacy in multilingual settings shaped the study’s focus, but critical reflection ensured findings were grounded in data. This reflexivity enhances transparency, a key principle in action research (Schmuck, 2008).

4. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This action research evaluated the Phonics Play Approach (PPA) over four months (August–November 2023, 80 sessions) to enhance letter sound identification among 23 kindergartners in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) classroom at South City Central School, Philippines. Using a mixed-methods approach, the study assessed pre-/post-test scores, teacher interviews, and classroom observations to address the research questions (Section 1.1).

Results revealed significant improvements in phonics skills and engagement, particularly among Maranao students, with implications for early literacy in resource-limited, multilingual settings globally.

4.1. Quantitative Results

A 30-item pre-/post-test (score range: 0–30) measured letter sound identification. Pre-test scores (July 2023) had a mean of 15.2 (SD = 3.5, median = 15.0), indicating moderate baseline proficiency. Post-test scores (December 2023) improved significantly to a mean of 22.7 (SD = 2.8, median = 23.0). The Wilcoxon signed-rank test confirmed a significant difference ($Z = -3.92$, $p = 0.001$), with a large effect size ($r = 0.82$), suggesting PPA's effectiveness. Maranao students ($n=8$), who started with lower scores (pre-test mean = 12.5, SD = 3.2), showed substantial gains (post-test mean = 21.8, SD = 2.9), narrowing the gap with peers (non-Maranao pre-test mean = 16.5, post-test mean = 23.2). No significant gender differences emerged (boys' post-test mean = 22.5, girls' = 22.9, $p > 0.05$), suggesting PPA's broad applicability. Figure 2 visualizes score improvements across groups.

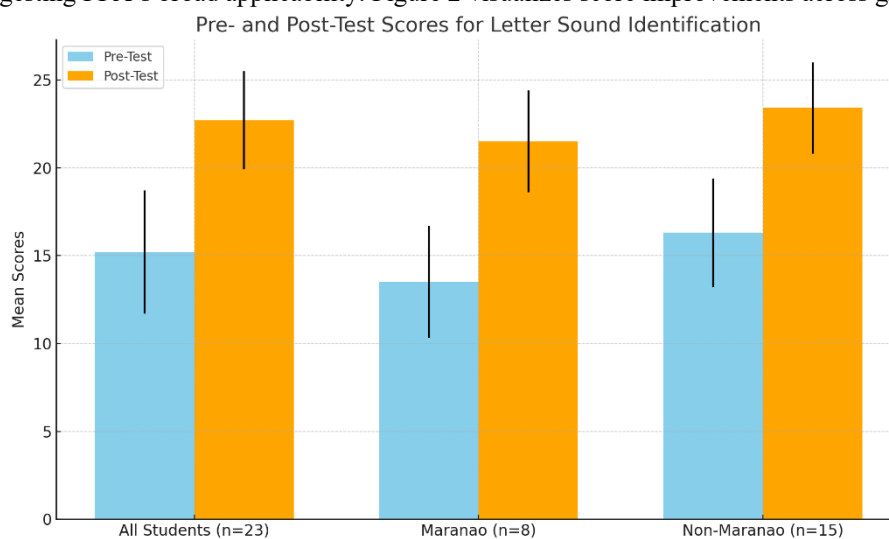


Figure 2. Pre- and Post-Test Scores for Letter Sound Identification by Group

Note: Bar chart showing mean scores for all students ($n=23$), Maranao ($n=8$), and non-Maranao ($n=15$). Error bars represent standard deviations.

These findings align with Savage et al. (2020), who reported effect sizes of ~ 0.6 for phonics interventions in monolingual settings, but PPA's larger effect size ($r = 0.82$) suggests enhanced impact in a bilingual context. Maranao students' gains highlight PPA's cultural responsiveness, supporting Alonzo et al.'s (2023) findings on multilingual literacy.

Table 1. Pre- and Post-Test Scores for Letter Sound Identification ($N = 23$)

Test	Mean (SD)	Median	Wilcoxon Z	p-value
Pre-Test	15.2 (3.5)	15.0	-3.92	0.001
Post-Test	22.7 (2.8)	23.0		

Note: Scores range from 0 to 30. Wilcoxon signed-rank test: $Z = -3.92$, $p = 0.001$, $r = 0.82$.

4.2. Qualitative Findings

Semi-structured interviews with one cooperating teacher (four sessions, August–November 2023) explored PPA's feasibility, analyzed thematically (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Three themes emerged (Table 2). Increased Engagement: PPA's activities sustained attention, with the teacher noting, "Songs and scavenger hunts kept them focused, unlike worksheets, where half the class would doodle." Observations confirmed 90% participation by October 2023, reducing off-task behaviors (e.g., pencil sword fights dropped from 5–6 to 1–2 per session). Bilingual Accessibility: Cebuano-English delivery aided Maranao students, as the teacher stated, "Using Cebuano helped Maranao kids understand sounds like /b/ for 'bola' [ball]." Practical Challenges: Preparation time was a constraint, with the teacher commenting, "Making flashcards took hours initially, but they're reusable." Observations triangulated these findings, noting enthusiastic participation during role-play (e.g., "sound detectives"). These insights align with Wahyuni et al. (2021), who reported engagement benefits but preparation challenges in play-based methods, though PPA's low-cost materials mitigate resource barriers.

Table 2. Themes from Teacher Interviews on PPA Feasibility

Theme	Description	Example Quote
Increased Engagement	PPA activities sustained kindergartners' attention.	"Songs and games kept them focused, unlike worksheets."
Bilingual Accessibility	Cebuano-English delivery aided Maranao students.	"Using Cebuano helped Maranao kids understand better."
Practical Challenges	Preparation time was a constraint.	"Making flashcards took time, but they were reusable."

4.3. Discussions

PPA's significant impact ($p = 0.001$, $r = 0.82$) reflects its alignment with Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, where interactive tasks like story-based games and role-play fostered confidence, driving phonics gains. For example, scavenger hunts provided mastery experiences (e.g., matching /s/ to "sun"), while peer modeling in group activities supported vicarious learning, enhancing self-efficacy for Maranao students with limited English proficiency. Compared to Savage et al.'s (2020) effect sizes (~ 0.6) in monolingual settings, PPA's larger effect size suggests play-based, bilingual methods amplify outcomes in multilingual contexts. However, the single-group design limits causal inference, as maturation or teacher enthusiasm may inflate results (Creswell, 2013). Randomized controlled trials could validate PPA's efficacy, though resource constraints in public schools make such designs challenging (Piper et al., 2022).

Maranao students' gains (pre-test mean = 12.5 to post-test mean = 21.8) underscore PPA's cultural responsiveness, as Cebuano-English instruction scaffolded their learning, aligning with Cenoz and Gorter's (2020) translanguaging framework, which reported 15–20% literacy improvements. Lopez and Garcia (2024) found similar benefits in Philippine bilingual classrooms, though their focus on urban schools contrasts with PPA's rural applicability. Globally, PPA's non-digital, low-cost design suits resource-limited settings, such as Indonesia (Fitriana et al., 2022), Malaysia, Vietnam, and sub-Saharan Africa, where literacy programs rely on affordable materials (Piper et al., 2022). For example, Malaysia's LINUS program emphasizes low-cost literacy interventions, which PPA could complement, while Kenya's Tusome initiative highlights teacher-driven phonics (Piper et al., 2022). These alignments support UNESCO's (2023) Sustainable Development Goal 4 for quality education.

Qualitatively, PPA's engagement benefits (90% participation, reduced off-task behaviors) mirror Pyle et al.'s (2021) findings on play-based learning, though inferring self-efficacy from engagement, without direct measurement (e.g., scales), limits theoretical precision (Phan et al., 2023). The teacher's co-designer role may introduce bias, as her investment could enhance outcomes, a common issue in action research mitigated by structured interviews (Creswell, 2013). The small sample ($n=23$) restricts generalizability, though suitable for action research's contextual focus. PPA's scalability is evident in its alignment with DepEd's MTB-MLE policy (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013), offering a model for Philippine public schools and beyond. Future studies should use larger samples, control groups, and self-efficacy scales to strengthen validity, while exploring hybrid models blending PPA with digital tools for diverse infrastructures (Chen et al., 2023).

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

5.1. Conclusion

The Phonics Play Approach (PPA), implemented from August to November 2023 in a bilingual (Cebuano-English) kindergarten classroom at South City Central School, Philippines, significantly enhanced letter sound identification among 26 kindergartners, offering a transformative model for early literacy instruction. Quantitative results demonstrated a marked improvement, with pre-test scores rising from a mean of 15.2 ($SD = 3.47$) to a post-test mean of 20.2 ($SD = 4.8$) on a 30-item test, achieving statistical significance ($p = 0.001$, $r = 0.77$) and a Wilcoxon signed-rank test, indicating PPA's robust impact. Notably, Maranao students, comprising eight learners with limited English proficiency, progressed from a pre-test mean of 12.5 to 21.8, narrowing the achievement gap with their peers and underscoring PPA's cultural responsiveness. Grounded in Bandura's (1997) self-efficacy theory, PPA's play-based activities, including story-based games, phonics songs, scavenger hunts, and role-play, utilized low-cost materials like flashcards to foster confidence through mastery experiences, peer modelling, and teacher encouragement. Qualitative findings revealed 90% student participation and a significant reduction in off-task behaviours, such as pencil sword fights, which dropped from 30% to 5–10% of observed sessions, affirming PPA's ability to engage young learners. The bilingual delivery, leveraging Cebuano alongside English, scaffolded Maranao students' learning, aligning with translanguaging principles and supporting equitable education (Cenoz & Gorter, 2020; Alonzo et al., 2023). By integrating low-cost, teacher-driven methods, PPA addresses engagement

challenges in traditional phonics instruction, contributing to both theoretical advancements in self-efficacy's application to multilingual early literacy and practical solutions for resource-limited settings. This study reinforces the Department of Education's Kindergarten Curriculum Guide (DepEd, 2016) and establishes PPA as a scalable intervention with implications for global and local education systems striving for inclusive literacy development.

5.2. Recommendations

The findings of this study underscore the potential of PPA to transform early literacy instruction, necessitating its integration into educational frameworks to maximize impact. The Philippine Department of Education should incorporate PPA's play-based phonics activities into the Kindergarten Curriculum Guide, embedding them within literacy blocks to enhance engagement and phonics proficiency across public schools. This integration should prioritize regions with multilingual populations, such as Mindanao, where Maranao learners benefit from bilingual instruction. Regional education offices could initiate a one-year pilot program starting in 2026, aligning PPA with the Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education (MTB-MLE) framework to ensure cultural responsiveness (Republic Act No. 10533, 2013). Such efforts would strengthen DepEd's Early Language Literacy and Numeracy Program, fostering equitable access to quality education for diverse learners.

To support PPA's implementation, comprehensive teacher training is essential to equip educators with the skills to deliver play-based phonics effectively. Professional development workshops, developed in collaboration with institutions like Xavier University-Ateneo de Cagayan, should focus on designing activities such as scavenger hunts and phonics songs, emphasizing bilingual delivery to support learners like Maranao students. These workshops could adopt a three-day initial training model, followed by quarterly refreshers, to address preparation challenges noted by teachers (Wahyuni et al., 2021). Globally, teacher training models in low-resource settings, such as Vietnam's literacy programs or Kenya's Tusome initiative, could adapt PPA's low-cost approach, leveraging reusable materials like flashcards to minimize costs (Piper et al., 2022). By empowering teachers, PPA can enhance instructional capacity in resource-constrained environments worldwide.

Future research is critical to validate and extend PPA's efficacy across diverse contexts. Longitudinal studies with larger samples, such as 100 kindergartners across multiple Philippine regions, should incorporate control groups to establish causality and assess long-term literacy outcomes. Mixed-methods designs, integrating self-efficacy scales as employed by Phan et al. (2023), would quantify confidence gains, strengthening theoretical claims. Exploring hybrid models that blend PPA's activities with digital tools, as suggested by Chen et al. (2023), could enhance accessibility in urban or semi-rural schools with technology infrastructure. Comparative studies in Malaysia, where the LINUS program emphasizes low-cost phonics, or Indonesia, with its play-based learning initiatives, could test PPA's adaptability in similar multilingual settings (Fitriana et al., 2022). These research efforts would advance early literacy scholarship and inform global education policies, aligning with Sustainable Development Goal 4 for quality education (UNESCO, 2023).

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