Applied Research and Innovation (ARI)

ISSN: 2993-8988 (ONLINE)

VOLUME 4 ISSUE 1 (2026)

PUBLISHED BY
E-PALLI PUBLISHERS, DELAWARE, USA

Applied Research and Innovation (ARI)

Volume 4 Issue 1, Year 2026
ISSN: 2993-8988 (Online)
DOI: https://doi.org/10.54536/ari.v4i1.7068
https://journals.e-palli.com/home/index.php/ari

Mapping National Literacy Gaps in Grades 7–10: Evidence from the Phil-IRI KS3 National Dashboard

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Article Information

Received: November 25, 2025
Accepted: February 07, 2026
Published: April 23, 2026

Keywords

Adolescent Literacy, Phil-IRI, Reading Proficiency, Secondary Education, National Assessment

ABSTRACT

This study analyzed national literacy performance patterns among Grades 7–10 learners in the Philippines using data from the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) KS3 National Dashboard for School Year 2025–2026 (N = 6,454,024). The analysis focused on proficiency classifications (Frustration, Instructional, Independent) in Filipino and English and described grade-level trends from Grades 7 to 10. Descriptive comparisons indicate stronger grade-linked improvement in Filipino than in English. In Filipino, Frustration decreases from 43.6% (Grade 7) to 13.3% (Grade 10), while Independent increases from 17.6% to 42.1%. In English, Frustration remains above 40% through Grade 10 (40.8%), and independent reaches 18.1%. Moreover, grade readiness for Grades 7–10 is 29.0% in Filipino and 14.8% in English, indicating a larger readiness gap in English. Findings support the need for sustained, language-specific adolescent literacy interventions and data-driven planning in secondary schools.

INTRODUCTION

Reading literacy is an essential foundation for academic success and lifelong learning. In secondary education, reading proficiency shapes learners' capacity to comprehend disciplinary texts and engage in higher-order cognitive tasks. Contemporary scholarship emphasizes that reading difficulties are multi-causal and may persist beyond the early grades when instruction and intervention are insufficiently aligned to learners' profiles (Duke & Cartwright, 2021). International assessment evidence likewise highlights continuing vulnerabilities in adolescent reading and widening inequities in learning outcomes (OECD, 2023). In multilingual contexts, adolescent literacy development is shaped by language proficiency and the demands of academic language in content learning (Snowling & Hulme, 2025).

In the Philippines, the Department of Education (DepEd) uses the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) as a diagnostic assessment tool to describe learners' reading performance and guide school-level reading programs (DepEd, 2022). Despite policy guidance, literacy difficulties continue to be documented in secondary schools and in local Phil-IRI-based studies (DepEd e-Saliksik, 2023; Balisoro, Funa, & Gabay, 2025). However, secondary-level literacy evidence is frequently derived from localized samples, while national dashboard data remain underutilized in peer-reviewed analyses. This limits national mapping of how reading classifications distribute across Grades 7–10 and whether patterns differ systematically by language (Filipino vs. English).

This study addresses this gap by analyzing national Phil-IRI KS3 dashboard data for Grades 7–10 to describe grade-level distributions of Frustration, Instructional, and Independent readers in Filipino and English and to summarize overall grade-readiness classification for Grades 7–10 in both languages.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Conceptual Foundations of Adolescent Literacy

Adolescent literacy extends beyond basic decoding and fluency to include comprehension, vocabulary growth, and the ability to interpret disciplinary texts (e.g., science, mathematics, social studies) that carry dense academic language. Contemporary reading science emphasizes that reading difficulties are not explained by a single cause; instead, they reflect interacting components such as word recognition, language comprehension, vocabulary, background knowledge, and motivation. As a result, instructional responses must be multi-component and matched to learners' profiles rather than limited to one-size-fits-all remediation (Duke & Cartwright, 2021).

System-Level Evidence on Persistent Literacy Gaps

Large-scale international assessments consistently report that many learners reach adolescence without adequate reading proficiency, and these gaps often widen when inequities in access to instruction and learning supports persist. System-level reporting also highlights that academic achievement declines and persistent inequities tend to cluster among vulnerable populations, reinforcing the need for sustained literacy supports beyond the early grades (OECD, 2023). These patterns support the importance of examining secondary-level literacy outcomes using population-scale data to inform targeted intervention priorities.

Language and Literacy in Multilingual Contexts

In multilingual education contexts, literacy development

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is shaped not only by decoding and comprehension skills but also by learners' proficiency in the language of instruction and the academic language required by subject-area texts. Reading in a second language or in a language with limited exposure outside school may compound comprehension difficulty, particularly when learners have limited vocabulary, limited opportunities for authentic reading practice, or reduced access to language-rich learning environments. This makes it necessary to interpret literacy outcomes by language (e.g., Filipino vs. English) rather than treating literacy as a single uniform construct (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; OECD, 2023).

Evidence on Effective Adolescent Literacy Interventions

Recent syntheses indicate that effective adolescent literacy programs commonly include explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, vocabulary, and structured opportunities to apply these skills in reading tasks. Multicomponent approaches are often emphasized because secondary learners may simultaneously require support in foundational skills and higher-level comprehension depending on their current classification (e.g., Frustration vs. Instructional). This aligns with evidence that interventions are more effective when they are skill-targeted, consistent, and sustained rather than short-term or purely remedial (Henry, 2025).

Teacher Professional Development and Implementation Supports

Teacher professional development (PD) is consistently identified as a critical enabling factor because the effectiveness of literacy interventions depends on instructional quality, fidelity, and continuity. Meta-analytic evidence suggests that sustained PD programs focused on reading comprehension can improve teacher knowledge and instructional practice when implemented with sufficient duration and support. However, PD is most impactful when paired with implementation structures such as coaching, monitoring, and alignment to classroom realities (Rice *et al.*, 2024). These findings are relevant to secondary education settings where teachers often manage heavy subject loads and may have limited preparation for adolescent literacy intervention delivery.

Philippine Context: Policy Guidance and Local Evidence

In the Philippine basic education system, Phil-IRI is used as a diagnostic assessment intended to inform reading program design, learner support, and monitoring of progress. DepEd guidance frames Phil-IRI as a basis for targeted reading interventions and decision-making at the school and division levels (DepEd, 2022). Local evidence using Phil-IRI in junior high school contexts reports persistent literacy challenges, particularly among learners classified at the lowest reading levels, and recommends structured remediation and systematic reading program implementation (DepEd e-Saliksik, 2023; Balisoro *et al.*, 2025).

Research Gap and Contribution of the Present Study

Despite the availability of national dashboard-scale Phil-IRI outputs, secondary-level literacy patterns across Grades 7–10 and across languages remain underexamined in peer-reviewed work. Most studies do not leverage national-scale descriptive evidence to map how reading classifications distribute by grade level and language. Consequently, there is limited evidence to guide adolescent literacy planning that is both population-informed and language-specific.

Synthesis and Conceptual Frame of the Literature Review

Taken together, recent international and local evidence supports three core propositions relevant to secondary-level literacy monitoring. First, adolescent literacy development is cumulative and multi-component; learners who do not achieve strong foundational and comprehension competencies in earlier grades tend to carry these deficits into secondary schooling unless they receive sustained, targeted instruction (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Henry, 2025). Second, system-level reports indicate that reading gaps frequently persist at scale and are patterned by inequities in opportunity to learn, reinforcing the value of using national datasets to describe the magnitude and distribution of literacy outcomes (OECD, 2023). Third, in multilingual contexts, reading outcomes are expected to vary by language, as academic-language demands and second-language proficiency can affect comprehension and progression, particularly in English (OECD, 2023; DepEd, 2022).

Anchored on these propositions, the present study adopts a descriptive conceptual frame in which grade level and language (Filipino vs. English) are treated as key grouping variables that may be associated with differences in reading proficiency classifications. Consistent with the Phil-IRI framework, learner outcomes are represented through the categorical distribution of Frustration, Instructional, and Independent readers across Grades 7–10. In this framing, improvement across grade levels would be reflected in decreasing proportions of Frustration-level readers and increasing proportions of Independent readers, while persistent literacy gaps would be reflected in sustained concentrations of learners in Frustration and Instructional levels, especially in English. This synthesis justifies the study's focus on national dashboard-scale mapping of literacy classifications and supports the interpretation of observed trends as indicators of secondary-level literacy progression and remaining remediation needs (DepEd, 2022; Rice *et al.*, 2024).

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study employed a quantitative descriptive design using aggregated secondary data from the Phil-IRI KS3 National Dashboard for School Year 2025–2026. The dataset represented 6,454,024 learners across public secondary schools nationwide (Grade 7: 1,865,606; Grade 8: 1,717,630; Grade 9: 1,389,677; Grade 10: 1,481,111).

The dashboard reports the percentage distribution of learners classified as Frustration, Instructional, or Independent readers in Filipino and English, and it also reports overall grade-readiness classification for Grades 7–10 (3-levels down, 2-levels down, grade ready) consistent with Department of Education guidance on Phil-IRI implementation and interpretation (DepEd, 2022). Data were transcribed directly from dashboard summary outputs and organized by grade level and language. Analyses were limited to descriptive statistics (percentages, grade-level trend comparisons, and between-language contrasts), because the dashboard provides aggregated proportions rather than learner-level records; this approach is consistent with the use of large-scale assessment reporting for profiling system-level learning patterns (OECD, 2023) and with evidence syntheses emphasizing the value of descriptive mapping as a basis for targeting literacy interventions and teacher support (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Rice *et al.*, 2024). No inferential tests were conducted.

Ethical Considerations

This study used aggregated secondary data from the Phil-IRI KS3 National Dashboard for School Year 2025–2026. The dataset contains no learner-level records, names, identifiers, or personally sensitive information; therefore, it presents minimal risk to individuals. Data were used strictly for academic and research purposes, and all interpretations were reported at the national and group level (by grade and language) to avoid attributing outcomes to specific schools, divisions, or individuals. The study adhered to Department of Education guidance on the appropriate use of Phil-IRI results for diagnostic and planning purposes and ensured responsible reporting by avoiding causal claims beyond what aggregated descriptive data can support. (DepEd, 2022)

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the percentage distribution of learners across reading proficiency classifications in Filipino and English by grade level.

Table 1: Distribution of learners by reading proficiency and grade level (Phil-IRI KS3, 2025–2026)

Grade Level	Language	Frustration (%)	Instructional (%)	Independent (%)
7	Filipino	43.6	38.8	17.6
7	English	51.8	36.1	12.1
8	Filipino	29.6	45.1	25.3
8	English	51.7	35.1	13.2
9	Filipino	21.8	43.2	35
9	English	40.3	42.9	16.8
10	Filipino	13.3	44.6	42.1
10	English	40.8	41.2	18.1

As shown in Table 1, Filipino reading performance improves consistently from Grades 7 to 10. Frustration decreases from 43.6% (Grade 7) to 13.3% (Grade 10), while Independent increases from 17.6% to 42.1%. In contrast, English proficiency remains concentrated at lower levels: Frustration remains above 40% through Grade 10 (40.8%) and Independent reaches only 18.1%. These patterns are consistent with international evidence that adolescent literacy requires sustained, explicit instructional support and that academic-language demands can intensify difficulty in second-language contexts (OECD, 2023; Snowling & Hulme, 2025).

A plausible interpretation of this pattern is that literacy development depends strongly on language comprehension and vocabulary, not only on decoding skill. Filipino literacy classifications may improve more consistently across grades due to greater exposure to Filipino in everyday communication and classroom interaction. English reading, however, often involves heavier academic-language demands in secondary education, where learners must comprehend increasingly complex informational and subject-area texts. This can slow progression in English proficiency classifications, especially for learners who enter Grade 7 already at Frustration level. This interpretation aligns with reading science emphasizing the multi-component nature of reading and with international system evidence that adolescent literacy gaps may persist when learners' language and comprehension foundations remain weak. (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; OECD, 2023)

Local policy and research further support the need to read these patterns as indicators for intervention planning rather than as mere descriptive statistics. DepEd guidance emphasizes that Phil-IRI results should be used to identify learner needs and to guide targeted and sustained reading interventions. The persistence of high Frustration classifications in English across grades suggests that secondary-level supports may require stronger differentiation by reading level and more consistent implementation over time. Local Phil-IRI-based studies and DepEd e-Saliksik reports similarly document continuing literacy challenges among junior high school learners and recommend structured remediation aligned with diagnosed classifications. (DepEd, 2022; DepEd e-Saliksik, 2023; Balisoro, Funa, & Gabay, 2025).

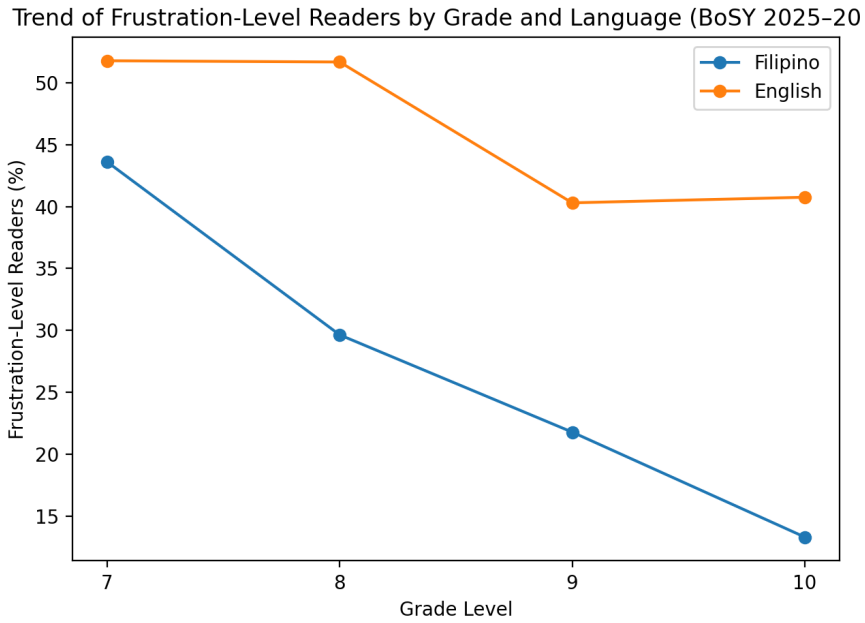

Figure 1: Trend of Frustration-Level Readers in Filipino and English

As shown in Figure 1, the percentage of Frustration-level readers declines across grades in Filipino, whereas English shows only a limited reduction from Grades 7 to 10. In Filipino, Frustration decreases from 43.6% (Grade 7) to 13.3% (Grade 10). In English, Frustration remains high in Grades 7–8 (51.8%–51.7%), drops in Grade 9 (40.3%), and remains above 40% in Grade 10 (40.8%). This pattern suggests smaller cumulative gains in English literacy despite continued curricular exposure and supports the need for sustained and differentiated adolescent literacy supports.

A plausible reason for the sharper improvement in Filipino is that learners generally have more frequent exposure to Filipino in everyday communication and school interactions, which strengthens language comprehension—an essential component of reading. DepEd policy guidance recognizes that Phil-IRI results should be used to diagnose reading difficulty and guide targeted interventions, implying that improved classifications can reflect cumulative support and continued reading development when instruction is responsive to learner needs. (DepEd, 2022)

In contrast, the persistence of Frustration-level readers in English may reflect the heavier demands of academic English in junior high school, where learners must read increasingly complex subject-area texts. Local school-based studies using Phil-IRI in junior high school settings similarly report continuing challenges in English literacy and emphasize that many learners require structured remediation and sustained reading support rather than short-term activities. Evidence from DepEd e-Saliksik studies highlights persistent foundational reading skill gaps among junior high school learners and supports the need for systematic reading interventions aligned to diagnosed levels. (DepEd e-Saliksik, 2023)

Additionally, localized Phil-IRI-based research indicates that reading difficulties may remain unresolved when interventions are limited in intensity, inconsistent, or not sufficiently differentiated across proficiency groups—especially for learners who begin secondary schooling at the lowest classifications. This aligns with the Grade 7–8 plateau observed in English, where Frustration remains high before improving modestly in later grades (Balisoro, Funa, & Gabay, 2025).

To extend the descriptive profile, Table 2 summarizes overall grade-readiness classification for Grades 7–10 by language.

Table 2: Overall grade-readiness classification for Grades 7–10 learners by language (Phil-IRI KS3, 2025–2026)

Language	3-Levels Down (%)	2-Levels Down (%)	Grade Ready (%)	Below Grade Ready (%)
Filipino	28.2	42.7	29	71
English	46.8	38.5	14.8	85.2

Table 2 shows that grade readiness is higher in Filipino (29.0%) than in English (14.8%). English also has a higher share of learners three levels down (46.8%) than Filipino (28.2%). When combined, below-grade-ready classifications (3-levels down + 2-levels down) account for 71.0% in Filipino and 85.2% in English, indicating a more severe readiness gap in English. This overall pattern aligns with the grade-level results and reinforces the need to prioritize English adolescent literacy programming and implementation supports for teachers (Rice *et al.*, 2024).

A plausible reason for this pattern is that reading performance is shaped by both decoding and language comprehension, and learners may have more stable exposure to Filipino as a language of everyday

communication and classroom interaction. In contrast, English reading often requires proficiency in academic vocabulary and comprehension of complex expository texts typical of junior high school subject areas. These linguistic and academic demands can constrain reading readiness, particularly for learners who enter secondary education already below expected levels. Such language-linked patterns are consistent with broader reading science accounts of how comprehension and language proficiency influence reading outcomes. (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; OECD, 2023)

From a local policy and implementation perspective, DepEd guidance emphasizes that Phil-IRI results should directly inform the design of reading interventions and monitoring of learner progress. The high concentration of below-grade-ready learners—especially in English—supports the need for structured, proficiency-matched remediation and sustained implementation rather than one-time activities. Local Phil-IRI-based studies and DepEd e-Saliksik reports similarly highlight persistent reading difficulties among junior high school learners and recommend more systematic, level-appropriate reading support. (DepEd, 2022; DepEd e-Saliksik, 2023; Balisoro, Funa, & Gabay, 2025).

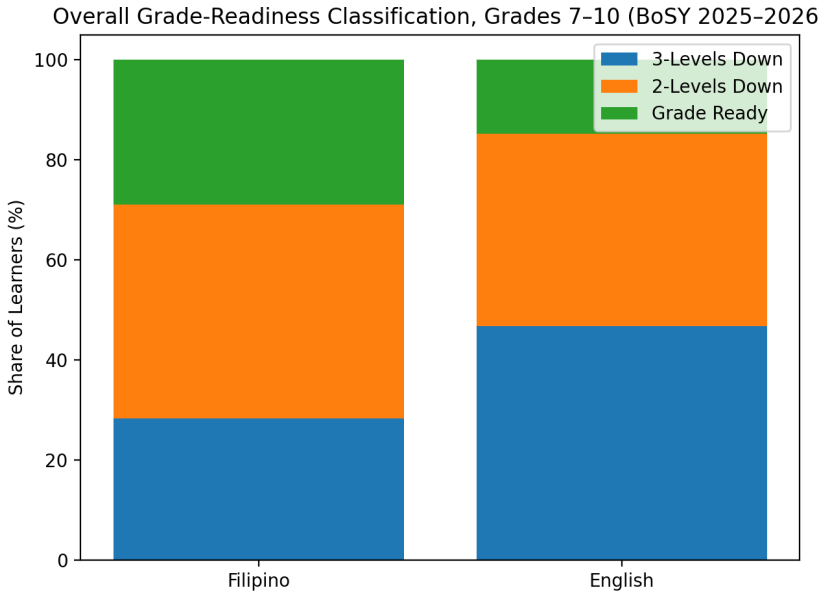

Figure 2: Overall Grade-Readiness Classification, Grades 7–10 (Filipino vs. English)

Figure 2 presents the overall distribution of learners across three grade-readiness categories (3-levels down, 2-levels down, and grade ready) for Grades 7–10 in Filipino and English based on Phil-IRI KS3 national dashboard results. The figure shows a clear language-linked gap in literacy readiness. In Filipino, a larger share of learners is classified as grade ready (29.0%), while English shows a much smaller grade-ready segment (14.8%). Conversely, English has a substantially higher proportion of learners classified as 3-levels down (46.8%) compared with Filipino (28.2%), indicating that a greater share of learners are far below the expected reading level in English. These dashboard-based distributions suggest that, at the system level, literacy readiness in English remains more constrained than literacy readiness in Filipino across junior high school learners. (DepEd, 2025–2026; DepEd, 2022).

A plausible reason for this pattern is the added linguistic demand of academic reading in English, particularly in multilingual contexts where learners have more consistent exposure to Filipino in daily communication while English is more often encountered in academic settings and subject-area texts. Reading proficiency is influenced not only by decoding skill but also by language comprehension, vocabulary, and background knowledge; when these components are less developed in the language of the text, comprehension and grade-level performance are expected to lag. This aligns with reading science frameworks emphasizing that reading difficulties are multi-component and language-linked, and with international assessment evidence highlighting persistent and widening learning gaps, particularly where opportunity to learn and language access are uneven (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; OECD, 2023).

CONCLUSIONS

The Phil-IRI KS3 national dashboard profile for Grades 7–10 indicates that literacy gaps persist into adolescence, with a markedly larger and more enduring deficit in English than in Filipino. Filipino reading classifications show a coherent developmental progression across grades, characterized by declining Frustration and increasing Independent readers, suggesting cumulative gains in comprehension and language resources as learners advance through junior high school. In contrast, English exhibits structural persistence of low proficiency, reflected in consistently high Frustration-level proportions through Grade 10 and a comparatively smaller grade-ready segment. This pattern implies that many learners continue to move through secondary

schooling without attaining the reading proficiency necessary to access academic texts, especially where English mediates textbooks, assessment demands, and content-area literacy tasks. Because the dashboard provides aggregated distributions, findings should be interpreted as population-level risk concentration rather than evidence of a single causal factor. Nevertheless, the magnitude of below-grade-ready classifications—particularly those three levels down in English—positions adolescent literacy support as a core instructional priority for secondary school improvement planning. Overall, the results reinforce the diagnostic purpose of Phil-IRI and the need to translate reading classifications into sustained, level-appropriate instructional responses and monitoring systems across Grades 7–10.

Recommendations

Schools and divisions may prioritize the following evidence-aligned actions:

1. Adopt a tiered secondary literacy support model (MTSS/RTI-aligned) linking Phil-IRI classifications to differentiated intervention intensity.
2. Prioritize English adolescent literacy recovery through explicit academic vocabulary and comprehension instruction across English and content-area subjects.
3. Institutionalize protected instructional time for structured literacy intervention in junior high school schedules.
4. Strengthen sustained teacher professional development and coaching focused on adolescent and disciplinary literacy implementation.
5. Improve data-use routines by requiring documented links between Phil-IRI results, learner grouping, intervention delivery, and progress monitoring.
6. Support future research using ethically managed learner-level datasets to examine subgroup patterns and evaluate which interventions produce the largest gains.

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