

Reframing Functional Literacy Instruction: A Case Study of Teaching Strategies for Learners with Atypical Language Development

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ABSTRACT

Effective functional literacy instruction for learners with atypical language development is strengthened by deliberately integrating core teaching strategies that enhance accessibility, engagement, and meaningful learning outcomes. Employing a qualitative single case study design, this study explored the practices of five purposively selected special education teachers from Central Elementary School Special Education Centers in the Davao Region, with five master teachers serving as key informants for triangulation. Data gathered through in-depth and key informant interviews revealed that teachers consistently implement essential strategies, including multisensory, scaffolded, differentiated, communication-oriented, and functional curriculum-based instruction. These findings underscore that effective functional literacy instruction is grounded in the consistent and purposeful application of these core strategies, enabling more responsive, inclusive, and meaningful learning experiences for learners with atypical language development.

Keywords: teaching strategies, functional literacy, atypical language development

INTRODUCTION

Teaching strategies for atypical language development are evidence-based instructional approaches designed to support children with language disorders, speech delays, and developmental language disorders through targeted interventions in both classroom and home settings. Amaliyah and Frety (2023) identified a range of effective practices, including modeling, expansion, scaffolding, repetition, visual supports, interactive activities such as storytelling and play-based learning, and modified communication techniques. In addition, Yuniari and Sudarmawan (2023) emphasized the importance of structured and guided language use, particularly for learners with expressive language difficulties. Supporting this, Bakhytzhmal et al. (2026) found that teachers use adaptable strategies such as scaffolding, differentiated instruction, cooperative learning, and technology-based support to promote equitable outcomes in inclusive classrooms.

Building on this evidence, across international contexts, teachers consistently report being insufficiently prepared to address atypical language development, particularly in inclusive and special education settings where learners exhibit delays and differences in communication, comprehension, and expression. For example, in Indonesia, Maysuroh et al. (2024) and Lasintia et al. (2021) found that instruction often relies on limited, narrowly applied strategies, with minimal institutional support to address complex language needs, such as echolalia, reduced verbal output, and comprehension difficulties. Similarly, Ustinovskaya (2024) identified significant gaps in both methodological and psychological readiness among teachers in Russia, limiting their capacity to respond to diverse language profiles in inclusive classrooms. In Bangladesh, Munni (2025) emphasized the urgent need for specialized training, appropriate assessment tools, and inclusive instructional strategies to support learners with communication disorders, particularly in second language acquisition. Collectively, these findings underscore a persistent global gap in equipping teachers with the knowledge,

strategies, and tools necessary to effectively support atypical language development, emphasizing the need for explicit instruction, multimodal approaches, and responsive assessment practices.

To connect these global trends with the Philippine context, even with policies such as Republic Act No. 11650 and DepEd Order No. 44, Series 2021, teachers still face challenges in implementing inclusive literacy strategies. Allam and Martin (2021) found that many Filipino SPED teachers feel unable to meet students varied developmental and language needs through appropriate teaching strategies. Montales (2026) reported that teaching LSEN in inclusive classrooms was hindered by weak policy implementation, limited teacher readiness, and limited learning resources. Factor and Saenz (2025) found that barriers were especially tied to family/community factors, policy gaps, and resource shortages, while only a small share of teachers had SPED specialization. For deaf education, Sulse and Hilario (2024) described practical challenges in implementing inclusive education in the Philippines, including communication barriers and inadequate professional training.

Focusing more narrowly on the Davao Region, Oyan et al. (2024) highlighted comparable challenges, reporting that while adaptive approaches such as visual aid and organized settings increase engagement, teachers face difficulties due to varying ASD characteristics and insufficient institutional support. Moreover, Bañados et al. (2024) found that, despite the benefits of innovative instructional approaches for students with special needs in Davao City, their effectiveness is limited by resource constraints, technological gaps, and the need for sustained teacher support and training. Narvacan (2025) found that teachers and parents in Davao City supporting inclusive education for students with learning disabilities had important gaps in understanding, resources, and collaboration. Rance (2022) found that teachers of learners with autism spectrum disorder in Davao del Norte use strategies such as visual support and video modeling, but implementation is inconsistent due to limited training and a lack of structured professional development, indicating the need for targeted teacher training. Carreon et al. (2025) found that SPED teachers in Davao Oriental face challenges in supporting atypical language development due to limited resources and training, despite using adaptive strategies like visual aids and structured routines.

This study is primarily grounded in the most critical research gaps identified through Miles (2017), particularly the persistent practice gap between inclusive education policies and their actual classroom implementation, alongside methodological, contextual, and conceptual gaps in literature. Despite the establishment of policies such as Republic Act No. 11650 and DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021, teachers continued to struggle to translate inclusive mandates into effective teaching strategies for atypical language development due to limited training, resources, and institutional support (Allam & Martin, 2021). Furthermore, a contextual gap exists, as most studies are conducted in international settings and provide limited localized evidence from Philippine classrooms, particularly in the Davao Region, where multilingualism and resource constraints shape instructional realities (Carreon et al., 2025). In addition, a conceptual gap persists in the limited focus on structured, evidence-informed teaching strategies specifically designed for atypical language development, rather than broader inclusive education frameworks.

Addressing these gaps aligns with the Sustainable Development Goals, particularly SDG 4 (Quality Education), by promoting inclusive, equitable, and effective learning opportunities and by strengthening teacher capacity and instructional practices that support functional literacy among learners with diverse communication needs.

This study is seen through the lens of constructivist theory (Piaget, 1952; Vygotsky, 1978). Grounded in the perspectives of Piaget and Vygotsky, constructivism emphasizes the importance of prior knowledge, social interaction, and scaffolding in facilitating learning.

The purpose of this case study is to explore the teaching strategies used by teachers working with learners with atypical language development to promote learners' functional literacy in the Department of Education Elementary School Special Education Centers within Davao Region. This study aims to answer the research question "*What teaching strategies are employed by teachers in promoting functional literacy of learners with atypical language development?*"

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative research approach grounded in a constructivist philosophical perspective, which views knowledge as actively constructed through individuals lived experiences and social interactions (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Specifically, it adopted a single-case study design to provide an in-depth exploration of a bounded educational context within central elementary school special education centers in the Davao Region. The case focused on teachers handling learners with atypical language development, specifically Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD), Intellectual Disability (ID), Down Syndrome (DS), Visual Impairment (VI), and Hearing Impairment (HI), with the unit of analysis centered on their instructional practices within self-contained classroom settings. A single-case study design was deemed appropriate because it allows for a holistic, context-rich examination of how teaching strategies are designed and implemented to promote functional literacy among learners with atypical language development (Yin, 2018). Within this framework, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and interpretation, engaging directly with participants to generate detailed, descriptive insights. This design aligns with the study's intent to deeply understand real-world teaching strategies in a specific context, emphasizing the complexity and situated nature of inclusive and specialized teaching.

Participants in the Case Unit

Participants in this single-case study were selected through criterion purposive sampling to ensure the inclusion of information-rich special education teachers with relevant experience in promoting functional literacy (Creswell & Creswell, 2023). The study involved five SPED teachers from central elementary school special education centers in the Davao Region, representing learners with ASD, ID, DS, VI, and HI, thereby offering varied perspectives within a bounded case. Selection criteria included: (a) at least five years of relevant teaching experience, (b) active involvement in designing and implementing functional literacy instruction, and (c) willingness to participate. Recruitment was facilitated by school authorities, with ethical safeguards such as informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, and flexible data-collection procedures observed throughout. To enhance credibility, triangulation was conducted through master teachers serving as raters. The study focused on how teachers implement teaching strategies to develop functional literacy across listening, speaking, reading, and writing, in line with DepEd Order No. 44, s. 2021.

Data Sources

The study utilized primary qualitative data gathered through in-depth semi-structured interviews with teacher-participants, enabling a flexible yet focused exploration of their teaching strategies in promoting functional literacy among learners with atypical language development (Creswell & Poth, 2018). An interview guide with open-ended questions—covering warm-up, core, and closing sections—facilitated rapport-building and elicited detailed insights, with follow-up prompts used to deepen responses (Seidman, 2019). Each 45–60-minute onsite interview was conducted with informed consent and audio-recorded, supplemented by field notes to enhance data richness and trustworthiness. To strengthen credibility, data triangulation was conducted through Key Informant Interviews (KII) with master teachers who served as raters, providing validation, clarifying context, and confirming emerging themes and teaching strategies (Denzin, 2017).

Data Collection

Data collection followed a systematic, ethical, and culturally appropriate process to explore teaching strategies that promote functional literacy among learners with atypical language development. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews served as the primary method, allowing participants to describe their practices while enabling the researcher to probe for deeper insights. Ethical clearance was secured from the university's Institutional Research Ethics Committee (IREC), followed by permissions from the Department of Education (DepEd) Regional Office XI, Schools Division Offices, and school heads. Teacher-participants were purposively selected and provided with clear, multilingual explanations of the study before voluntarily signing informed consent forms. Primary data were gathered through 45–60-minute onsite interviews guided by open-ended questions, audio-recorded

with permission, and supported by field notes. To enhance credibility, triangulation was conducted through Key Informant Interviews (KII) with master teachers who validated emerging themes. Data collection was conducted in private, comfortable settings, with flexibility to ensure participant convenience and minimize discomfort. Ethical safeguards included voluntary participation, the right to withdraw, cultural sensitivity, and strict adherence to the Data Privacy Act of 2012 through anonymization and secure data storage. All data were transcribed using transcription software, contextualized, verified through member checking, wherein participants reviewed the synthesized interpretations to ensure that their responses were accurately represented, and organized for thematic analysis. The procedures ensured rigor, confidentiality, and the production of credible, meaningful findings.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed a systematic thematic approach guided by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Creswell and Creswell (2023) to generate meaningful insights into teachers' teaching strategies for promoting functional literacy among learners with atypical language development. First, data preparation and familiarization involved verbatim transcription of interviews and repeated reading of transcripts and field notes to ensure accuracy and immersion in the data. Second, initial coding was conducted by identifying and labeling meaningful segments of text using both theory-driven and inductive approaches. Third, theme development involved grouping related codes into broader categories representing patterns in teaching strategies. Fourth, reviewing and refining themes ensured each was distinct, well-supported, and aligned with the research questions, with revisions made as needed. Fifth, defining and naming themes involved clearly describing each theme and its relevance to the study. Finally, data interpretation and integration connected the emergent themes with existing literature and theoretical perspectives, providing a comprehensive understanding of teaching strategies and their implications.

Ethical Considerations

The study adhered to the highest ethical standards, with prior approval obtained from the University of the Immaculate Conception Research Ethics Committee (UIC-REC) to ensure alignment with the principles of respect for persons, beneficence, and justice, and the assigned protocol code was reflected in all research documents. Adequate academic preparation was ensured, and close coordination with the adviser and panel members was maintained to uphold methodological rigor and ethical integrity. Institutional resources supported the research process, while all measures were taken to safeguard participants' rights, confidentiality, and well-being, thereby strengthening the study's credibility and ethical compliance.

Trustworthiness of the Study

The trustworthiness of the study was ensured using the criteria of credibility, dependability, confirmability, and transferability (Guba & Lincoln, 1985; Creswell & Creswell, 2023). Credibility was established through prolonged engagement, member checking, and triangulation using teacher in-depth interviews, Key Informant Interviews (KII) with master teachers, and field notes. Dependability was maintained through a detailed audit trail documenting all research processes, while confirmability was supported by reflexive journaling to ensure findings were grounded in participants' perspectives rather than in the researcher's bias. Transferability was enhanced through rich, contextual descriptions of participants and settings, allowing readers to assess applicability to similar contexts. Collectively, these strategies ensured methodological rigor and produced credible, consistent, and meaningful findings.

Role of the Researcher

In this qualitative single case study, the researcher served as the primary instrument for data collection and analysis, conducting interviews and follow-up conversations to gain an in-depth understanding of how teachers adapt strategies to support the functional literacy of learners with atypical language development (Creswell & Creswell, 2023; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Recognizing that personal and professional experiences in special and integrative education may influence interpretation, the researcher employed reflexive practices such as bracketing assumptions, maintaining a reflexive journal, and engaging in peer debriefing to minimize bias and ensure interpretations remained grounded in participants' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Ethical

responsibilities were observed by securing permissions, obtaining informed consent, ensuring confidentiality using pseudonyms, and promoting voluntary participation. During data analysis, the researcher followed systematic procedures including transcription, coding, and within-case analysis, while repeatedly revisiting the data and participant feedback to strengthen credibility, dependability, and confirmability (Yin, 2018; Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

RESULTS

Teaching Strategies Promoting Functional Literacy among Learners with Atypical Language Development

The analysis of teaching strategies promoting functional literacy among learners with atypical language development yielded five major themes: multisensory instruction, scaffolded instruction, differentiated instruction, communication-oriented instruction, and functional curriculum-based instruction. These themes reflect the varied but complementary approaches employed to support learners' literacy development, communication, and independence.

Table 1 Major Themes and Core Ideas on Teaching Strategies Promoting Functional Literacy among Learners with Atypical Language Development

Major Themes	Core Ideas
Multisensory Instruction	Use of concrete and tactile materials; multisensory learning (visual, auditory, tactile); repetition strategies (naming drills, alphabet sounds); visual aids, flashcards, and manipulatives; sensory activities (matching, coloring, sorting); real objects and environmental exposure; integration of speech awareness, sign language, and Braille; visual-tactile reinforcement for literacy and numeracy.
Scaffolded Instruction	Step-by-step guided learning; modeling and demonstration; hand-over-hand support; structured routines; prompting and guided conversations; breaking tasks into manageable steps; tracing and guided writing; gradual release of responsibility; support adjusted to attention span and learner readiness.
Differentiated Instruction	Individualized instruction and pacing; modified tasks and assessments; flexible grouping; one-on-one teaching; use of alternative materials (including Braille); adaptive mobility and orientation training; instruction aligned with learner strengths, abilities, and needs; responsive and flexible teaching strategies.
Communication-Oriented Instruction	Simplified and clear language; voice modulation and visual cues; gestures, dramatization, and facial expressions; interactive dialogue and storytelling; bilingual spoken and signed communication; building trust and engagement; development of functional communication through guided interaction and participation.
Functional Curriculum-Based Instruction	Focus on daily living skills and independence; orientation and mobility training; functional numeracy (e.g., abacus use); progression from basic recognition to functional communication; safety awareness; self-expression and participation in real-life tasks; practical application of learned skills.

Multisensory Instruction: This teaching strategy emerged as a central theme characterized by the integration of multiple sensory modalities to facilitate understanding and retention. Teachers reported using objects, toys, and concrete materials to support hands-on learning, alongside manipulative-based activities that allow learners to engage with abstract concepts in tangible ways. Instruction frequently incorporated visual supports such as visual aids, flashcards, and visual-supported reading materials, as well as visual materials for alphabet, sound, and number learning. Repetition was consistently emphasized through naming drills, listening to alphabet sounds, and long-term reinforcement strategies. Sensory engagement was further enhanced through activities such as coloring, color-matching, sorting, cutting, and outlining. Sequential visual and tactile reinforcement, along with songs and flashcards, supported concept acquisition and retention. In addition, learners were exposed to real objects and environmental contexts to reinforce their mastery of the alphabet and conceptual understanding. For learners with visual impairments, literacy development included Braille-based reading, while learners also benefited from the simultaneous use of multiple modalities, including multisensory speech

awareness and the integration of sign language with printed resources. Concept discrimination and word recognition were strengthened through consistent visual and tactile support.

Teachers emphasized the use of manipulative and real objects to facilitate object recognition, vocabulary development, and visual discrimination. Teacher ASD stated:

“I use assistive or manipulative tools like toys, flashcards, objects, or wooden shapes.” (T-ASD)

The findings demonstrate that multisensory instructional strategies—anchored in visual supports, tactile engagement, repetition, and real-world experiences—play a crucial role in developing functional literacy skills for learners with diverse needs. These strategies collectively enhance reading readiness, phonemic awareness, vocabulary development, numeracy skills, and communication competencies.

Scaffolded Instruction: This teaching strategy highlighted the structured and supportive progression of learning tasks designed to gradually build independence. Teachers employed hand-over-hand tracing to guide initial skill acquisition, particularly in early writing tasks. Instruction was facilitated through greeting interactions and the use of personal questions to initiate engagement, followed by guided and structured conversational exchanges, including question-and-answer techniques to reinforce understanding. Classroom routines were structured to accommodate learners with limited attention spans. Instructional delivery often involved one-on-one teaching with physical prompting, along with demonstration and modeling of tasks. Learning tasks were systematically broken down into manageable steps, supported by step-by-step guided instruction. Writing skills were developed through guided tracing before independent writing. Progression of skills followed a stepwise approach, including transitions from sign language to spelling and sentence construction, as well as mastery of tools such as the abacus. Teachers also provided structured support with flexible timing to ensure task completion, while gradually fostering learner independence through scaffolding strategies.

Hand-over-hand support and tracing serve as foundational scaffolds in developing early writing skills. Teacher ASD and DS revealed:

“For writing, learners are assisted in holding the pencil while tracing letters, broken lines, shapes, numbers, and basic strokes to develop pencil grip and pre-writing skills.” (T-ASD)

“Tracing is provided before independent writing so learners can develop hand coordination and writing skills prior to writing on their own.” (T-DS)

The findings demonstrate that scaffolded instruction is characterized by systematic support, gradual progression, and continuous guidance, enabling learners to acquire functional literacy skills and move toward independent task performance.

Differentiated Instruction: This teaching strategy accommodates diverse learner needs, abilities, and preferences. Teachers implemented structured time to address limited attention spans and differentiated tasks based on individual ability levels, with emphasis on foundational concepts. Assessment practices were modified to incorporate both alternative and individualized approaches to better capture learner performance. Instruction was frequently delivered through individualized one-on-one sessions, supplemented by guided grouping with support when appropriate. A range of alternative instructional materials and structured academic resources were utilized, alongside responsive guidance aligned with learners’ needs. Teachers also assessed learners’ strengths and preferences to inform instruction. For learners with visual impairments, Braille reading and writing served as the primary mode of instructional access, complemented by orientation and mobility training adapted to their needs to promote independence and safety.

Tasks are differentiated according to learners’ current communication abilities. Teacher ID stated:

“Question-and-answer techniques are used, where learners can respond to simple questions but are not yet able to narrate independently.” (T-ID)

Differentiated instruction is characterized by flexible time allocation, individualized and ability-based tasks, adapted assessments, varied instructional materials, and responsive teaching strategies that collectively support functional literacy development across diverse learners.

Communication-Oriented Instruction: This teaching strategy focuses on facilitating meaningful interaction and language development. Teachers employed voice modulation techniques and attention-gaining strategies to engage learners effectively. Instruction was adapted through language translation for understanding, simplified instructional language, and clear verbal communication. Interactive communication strategies were commonly used, including responding to simple questions and engaging learners in recognizing stories and rhymes. Establishing trust and confidence was identified as a foundational element for supporting communication, alongside the use of guided, supportive interactions. Bilingual instruction integrating spoken and signed languages was also evident, often complemented by dramatization and facial expressions to enhance comprehension and expressive communication.

Use of vernacular language supports understanding and response during instruction. Teacher ID explained:

“I use English instructions but translate them into Bisaya if the learner does not understand to ensure comprehension.” (T-ID)

Communication-oriented instruction is characterized by adaptive language use, attention-focusing strategies, interactive communication, and socio-emotional support, all of which enhance learners’ comprehension, participation, and functional communication skills.

Functional Curriculum-Based Instruction: This teaching strategy focuses on equipping learners with essential life skills, independence, and practical literacy through real-life applications. Instruction emphasizes daily living skills, mobility training, and safety awareness to prepare learners for independent functioning. Opportunities for participation and self-expression are also encouraged to build confidence and social inclusion. Additionally, functional numeracy and literacy are developed through specialized tools and structured progression, particularly for learners with visual and hearing impairments, where tactile, visual, and language-based strategies are integrated to support meaningful communication and real-world application of skills.

Orientation and mobility training support independence in navigating the environment. Teacher VI revealed:

“They are guided in walking safely to become independent.” (T-VI)

Functional curriculum-based instruction emphasizes practical life skills, independence, and real-world application through structured, learner-centered approaches that develop autonomy, confidence, and functional literacy.

DISCUSSION

Teaching Strategies Promoting Functional Literacy among Learners with Atypical Language Development

Teaching strategies that promote functional literacy among learners with atypical language development include multisensory instruction, scaffolded instruction, differentiated instruction, communication-oriented instruction, and functional curriculum-based instruction.

Regarding multisensory instruction, teachers employed approaches that engage multiple sensory modalities—such as visual, auditory, and tactile inputs—to facilitate learning and comprehension among learners with atypical language development. This shared practice emphasizes enhancing accessibility, reinforcing understanding, and supporting retention by presenting information through varied sensory channels. The result suggests that multisensory instruction is a foundational teaching strategy for promoting functional literacy among diverse learners.

Recent evidence supports the effectiveness of multisensory approaches in facilitating learning among diverse learners. Anuar et al. (2025) found that multisensory instruction integrating visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities provides substantial benefits for learners with dyslexia by supporting neural integration. Similarly, Nurjanah et al. (2024) reported that multisensory approaches effectively address learning diversity, enhance concept comprehension, and support students with special needs, including dyslexia and sensory processing challenges. In addition, Wallace et al. (2020) demonstrated that multisensory integration is closely associated with cognitive abilities across both typical and atypical populations, highlighting its broader relevance in educational contexts.

The theoretical underpinnings of multisensory instruction are grounded in constructivist learning theory, particularly the works of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978). Piaget posits that learners actively construct knowledge through direct interaction with their environment, making multisensory, hands-on experiences essential for developing understanding. In contrast, Vygotsky emphasizes the importance of social interaction and guided support, where teachers scaffold learning to help learners progress within their zone of proximal development. Together, these perspectives support multisensory instruction as an approach that engages learners through varied sensory inputs while providing structured guidance, thereby enhancing understanding, retention, and functional literacy among learners with atypical language development.

In line with these findings and theoretical support, the Department of Education (DepEd) in the Philippines emphasizes inclusive and differentiated instruction as part of its commitment to quality education for all learners, including those with disabilities. DepEd Orders such as DO No. 44, s. 2021 on Special Education (SPED), DO No. 023, s. 2022 on Child Find, and DO No. 021, s. 2019 on the K to 12 Basic Education Program advocates tailoring teaching strategies to learners' individual needs and ensuring equitable access to learning opportunities (DepEd, 2019, 2021, 2022). By supporting multisensory and manipulative approaches, these policies reinforce practices that engage multiple senses, provide hands-on experiences, and scaffold learning, thereby enhancing literacy and numeracy outcomes for learners with atypical language development.

From an applied linguistics perspective, multisensory instruction effectively promotes functional literacy among learners with atypical language development by engaging multiple senses and providing hands-on learning experiences. Teachers in this study demonstrated the importance of tailoring instructional materials and activities to learners' developmental and sensory profiles, showing that responsive, individualized practices enhance engagement, comprehension, and language development. These findings highlight how theory and practice converge in inclusive classrooms to support meaningful and functional literacy outcomes.

In terms of scaffolded instruction, teachers used it to guide learners from simple to complex literacy tasks. This included the progressive layering of skills through guided tracing, writing, or sequential activities. These findings suggest that while scaffolded instruction is universally applied, the sequencing and progression of tasks are responsive to the learners' abilities and cognitive readiness.

These teaching strategies are supported by research demonstrating the effectiveness of scaffolded instruction. For instance, Baker et al. (2019) described the use of task analysis in emergent literacy for learners with autism spectrum disorder, emphasizing systematic, stepwise instruction. Similarly, Salehomoum et al. (2019) highlighted the importance of scaffolding for deaf and hard-of-hearing learners, guiding progression from signing to written literacy. More broadly, Swanson et al. (1999) identified scaffolding as a key instructional component that predicts positive literacy outcomes across 180 intervention studies.

The theoretical foundation of scaffolded instruction is strongly supported by constructivist learning theory, particularly the perspectives of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978). Piaget's theory explains that learners construct knowledge through active engagement with appropriately challenging tasks, thereby assimilating and accommodating new information. Complementing this, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction and teacher mediation, where scaffolding enables learners to accomplish tasks they cannot yet perform independently. Together, these perspectives provide a clear rationale for scaffolded instruction as an approach that promotes active learning, guided support, and gradual independence, making it particularly effective in facilitating literacy development among learners with atypical language development.

These findings and theoretical foundations are supported by the DepEd, which emphasizes inclusive and differentiated instruction to meet learners' individual needs. DepEd Orders on Special Education, Child Find, and the K to 12 Basic Education Program advocates tailoring instruction and scaffolding learning to ensure equitable access, highlighting that structured, stepwise approaches are consistent with national policy goals for supporting learners with diverse abilities.

Viewed through the principles of applied linguistics, scaffolded instruction demonstrates how literacy and language development can be supported through carefully sequenced, responsive teaching. While the principle of scaffolded instruction is universal, its effectiveness depends on adapting task progression, modality, and complexity to learners' sensory, cognitive, and developmental profiles. This approach reflects the convergence of theory, policy, and practice: scaffolded instruction provides systematic support for functional literacy, aligns with inclusive education principles, and is practically implemented to meet the diverse needs of learners with atypical language development.

Evidence from the participating teachers supports the importance of differentiated instruction as a complement to scaffolded teaching in addressing diverse learner needs. Yunani et al. (2024) found that differentiated instruction enables teachers to adjust content, materials, and pacing for learners with intellectual disabilities, supporting more accessible learning experiences. Diron and Baldonado (2024) further demonstrated that scaffolded activities, small-group instruction, tiered tasks, and metacognitive strategies enhance literacy development and learner engagement.

The findings on differentiated instruction are better understood through constructivist learning theory, particularly the perspectives of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978). From a Piagetian standpoint, learners construct knowledge actively through interactions with tasks appropriately matched to their developmental level. From a Vygotskian perspective, differentiated instruction supports learning through guided interaction and scaffolding, where teachers provide individualized or small-group support to help learners progress within their zone of proximal development. Together, these constructivist principles explain how differentiated instruction, when combined with scaffolded teaching, enables learners to engage meaningfully with literacy tasks, build understanding through supported experiences, and gradually develop independence in functional literacy despite variations in their language and cognitive abilities.

The findings on differentiated instruction are supported by DepEd policies, which advocate inclusive and responsive instruction to meet learners' diverse needs. DepEd Order on Special Education emphasizes tailoring teaching strategies to support learners with disabilities. DepEd Order Child Find highlights identifying and providing appropriate interventions for learners requiring additional support. DepEd Order on the K to 12 Basic Education Program reinforces differentiated instruction to ensure equitable access and effective learning for all students. These policies collectively justify the use of individualized guidance, scaffolded tasks, and tailored support observed in the study.

From an applied linguistics perspective, differentiated instruction demonstrates how language and literacy development can be supported through responsive, learner-centered instruction. Teachers' adaptation of tasks—through one-on-one support, modeling, and small-group activities—reflects how instruction can be tailored to learners' communicative abilities, processing needs, and language acquisition profiles. These practices align with research on differentiated instruction and inclusive education, as well as DepEd policies promoting equitable and language-rich learning opportunities for diverse learners.

In communication-oriented instruction, teachers used varied communication modes—such as verbal explanations, sign language, visual cues, and gestures—to facilitate interaction, enhance comprehension, and support meaningful engagement between teachers and learners. This shared practice reflects a common instructional emphasis on ensuring that communication is accessible and responsive to learners' diverse language abilities. The convergence across all cases highlights communication-oriented instruction as a central strategy in promoting functional literacy among learners with atypical language development.

Research supports the effectiveness of communication-oriented instruction in facilitating meaningful interaction, comprehension, and functional literacy among learners with atypical language development, reinforcing the

findings of the present study. The use of varied and accessible communication modes—such as verbal explanations, sign language, visual cues, and gestures—aligns with strategies that promote active engagement, repetition, and guided participation, which are critical for learners with diverse language abilities. For instance, Elkot et al. (2025) demonstrated that guided conversational practices, even when supported by structured or AI-mediated tools, improve communication skills by providing repeated, meaningful opportunities for interaction. Similarly, Senan et al. (2025) found that incorporating repetition techniques within interactive learning environments enhances memory retention and language acquisition among learners with autism. Complementing these, Sabih and Kuyini (2025) emphasized that personalized strategies such as visualization, association, and spaced repetition strengthen both short-term and long-term retention for learners with neurodevelopmental disorders. These findings collectively affirm that communication-oriented instruction, when delivered through structured, repetitive, and multimodal approaches, effectively supports comprehension, engagement, and the development of functional literacy skills among learners with atypical language development.

These findings on communication-oriented instruction are strongly supported by constructivist learning theory, particularly the perspectives of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978), which emphasize that learners actively construct meaning through interaction and guided social experiences. The use of varied communication modes—such as verbal explanations, sign language, visual cues, and gestures—reflects how teachers create opportunities for learners to engage with input in ways that align with their existing knowledge and communication abilities, allowing them to build understanding through meaningful interaction. From a Piagetian perspective, learners assimilate and accommodate new information when it is presented in accessible and concrete forms, while Vygotsky's sociocultural view underscores the importance of teacher mediation and scaffolding in facilitating comprehension within the zone of proximal development. The convergence of communication strategies across all case units indicates that when instruction is made accessible and interaction is supported through multiple communication channels, learners with atypical language development are better able to participate.

The findings also align with DepEd policies advocating inclusive and responsive education. DepEd orders on Special Education, Child Find, and the K to 12 Basic Education Program promote tailoring instruction to learners' individual needs, ensuring equitable access and supporting memory, comprehension, and functional literacy outcomes.

From a communication-based instruction perspective, the use of structured language mediation, repetition, and memory reinforcement reflects how teachers intentionally design interaction to support learners' comprehension, expression, and engagement. By adapting communication through verbal explanations, sign language, visual cues, and gestures, instruction becomes more accessible to learners with atypical language development, allowing them to process input, respond meaningfully, and participate in shared exchanges despite differences in language and sensory modalities. The variation in strategies across learner groups demonstrates responsiveness to individual communicative profiles, in which meaning is co-constructed through interaction rather than transmitted passively. These practices underscore that communication-based instruction is not only about delivering content but also about facilitating meaningful exchanges that enable learners to construct understanding, reinforce language use through repetition, and progressively develop functional literacy within inclusive and supportive learning environments.

Regarding functional curriculum-based instruction, teachers demonstrated its use, emphasizing real-life application, independence, and the development of practical life skills. Instruction in these contexts is designed to enable learners to perform meaningful daily activities and apply learned concepts in real-world situations.

Research supports the findings on functional curriculum-based instruction by emphasizing the importance of contextualized, real-life learning experiences in promoting independence, engagement, and holistic development among learners with disabilities. The focus on applying skills in meaningful, everyday contexts aligns with studies showing that learning becomes more effective when instruction is connected to learners' lived experiences and practical needs. Biggs et al. (2023) found that structured home-based literacy environments enhance not only literacy skills but also psychosocial outcomes such as motivation and self-confidence among children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. Similarly, Gadiraju et al. (2024) demonstrated that visually impaired learners develop greater independence in daily living when supported through guided prompts, structured routines, and opportunities for autonomous practice at home. Furthermore, Roberts et al. (2025) highlighted that

caregivers contribute to expanded learning experiences that integrate communication, social interaction, and participation in activities such as arts, music, and cultural engagement, thereby reinforcing functional and meaningful learning. These findings collectively support the present study by affirming that functional curriculum-based instruction, when implemented through real-life tasks and supported by both instructional and environmental contexts, fosters independence, active participation, and the development of practical skills among learners with atypical language development.

The study's findings are grounded in constructivist learning theory, particularly the perspectives of Piaget (1970) and Vygotsky (1978), which emphasize that learners construct knowledge through active engagement with meaningful experiences. In functional curriculum-based instruction, learners develop understanding through real-life tasks that require them to apply concepts in practical contexts, consistent with Piaget's view that learning is built through direct experience and adaptation. Vygotsky's sociocultural theory further explains how guided participation, scaffolding, and social interaction with teachers, peers, and caregivers support learners in performing tasks within their zone of proximal development. Through structured guidance and contextualized activities, learners can progressively internalize skills, build independence, and connect classroom learning to everyday life. This constructivist lens highlights how functional curriculum-based instruction enables learners with atypical language development to actively construct meaning, develop practical competencies, and achieve functional literacy through supported, real-world learning experiences.

The study's findings on functional curriculum-based instruction are supported by national inclusive education policies, particularly the Enhanced Basic Education Act of 2013 (Republic Act No. 10533) and DepEd Order No. 42, s. 2017, which promotes learner-centered, flexible, and individualized instruction. These policies emphasize the development of functional literacy and practical life skills, alongside appropriate scaffolding and stakeholder collaboration, reinforcing inclusive practices that foster independence, psychosocial growth, and meaningful participation among learners with disabilities.

From an applied linguistics perspective, this study posits that functional curriculum-based instruction for learners with disabilities is most effectively developed through socially mediated, scaffolded, and multimodal literacy experiences that are responsive to learners' communicative needs and contexts. By integrating individualized support with learner-centered approaches, instruction facilitates meaningful language use, interaction, and comprehension, enabling learners to connect linguistic input with real-life functions and progressively develop functional literacy skills.

Implications for Educational Practice

The findings have several implications for educational practice, particularly for promoting functional literacy among learners with atypical language development. Teachers should implement multisensory and individualized instruction, combining visual, auditory, tactile, and kinesthetic modalities to accommodate diverse sensory, cognitive, and communication needs. Such approaches enhance engagement, comprehension, and retention, supporting learners to progress within their Zone of Proximal Development. Educational policies and school programs should reinforce differentiated instruction, scaffolded learning, and inclusive practices, as advocated by DepEd Orders. Schools should provide continuous teacher training and resources to support evidence-based strategies, ensuring all learners have equitable access to functional literacy development. Collectively, these practices highlight the need for a holistic, learner-centered approach that integrates multisensory supports, individualized scaffolding, and professional collaboration to promote meaningful literacy engagement and lifelong learning for students with atypical language development.

Recommendations for Future Research

Building on the findings of this study, several directions for future research on functional literacy instruction for learners with atypical language development are recommended. First, future studies should explore disability-specific adaptations, particularly for learners with visual or hearing impairments, as current evidence is stronger for ASD and general intellectual and developmental disabilities. This would provide a clearer understanding of modality-specific strategies and their impact on learning outcomes. Second, longitudinal research is encouraged to examine the sustained effects of multisensory, individualized, and scaffolded instruction on functional literacy

development over time, capturing progression and retention beyond immediate classroom performance. Collectively, these directions aim to expand the evidence base for effective, contextually responsive, and sustainable functional literacy interventions for learners with diverse needs.

Concluding Remarks

This study highlights how special education teachers meaningfully support learners with atypical language development by consistently using effective teaching strategies. Grounded in careful planning, multisensory engagement, scaffolded instruction, differentiated approaches, and communication-oriented practices, these strategies enable learners to access and engage with literacy at their own pace. The findings reveal that functional literacy is developed not through isolated efforts, but through deliberate, sustained instructional practices that respond to learners' needs. Ultimately, the study underscores that the thoughtful and consistent application of these core teaching strategies plays a vital role in fostering meaningful participation, understanding, and functional use of language among learners with atypical language development.

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