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Enhancing Grade 5 Lao Language Literacy in the Lao PDR: Multi-Dimensional Factors and Strategic Guidelines from Administrative Perspectives

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Abstract

Reading skills in the Lao language serve as a crucial foundation for academic success and lifelong learning among Grade 5 students in the Lao PDR, bridging primary education with higher-level cognitive development. The objectives of this research were to: (1) examine the key factors influencing the Lao language reading ability of Grade 5 primary school students, and (2) propose strategic guidelines for developing these reading skills based on the perspectives and insights of educational administrators. Utilizing a qualitative research design, data were gathered through semi-structured interviews with a target group of 12 experienced educational administrators, including provincial and district officers as well as primary school principals. Data were analyzed using Content Analysis and Thematic Analysis.

The research encountered that: (1) Factors Affecting Reading Ability: Key factors spanned three major

dimensions: *Student-level factors*, particularly linguistic barriers related to ethnic/local dialects and the negative impacts of social media usage; *Internal/School-level factors*, including conventional teaching methods that lack student engagement, insufficient instructional media, and gaps in academic management; and *External/Family-level factors*, such as low socioeconomic status and limited parental supervision. (2) Development Guidelines: Strategic solutions focused on upgrading teacher competencies through Active Learning approaches, designing contextualized instructional materials, establishing classroom "Reading Corners," implementing a "Reading Diary" program to enhance home-school collaboration, and offering targeted remedial classes for ethnic minority students and struggling readers through participatory management.

Keywords: Lao Language Reading Skills, Grade 5 Students, Educational Administrators, Development Guidelines, Reading Factors

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Significance of the Problem

The Lao language serves as the official national language and an indispensable tool for communication, knowledge transmission, cultural preservation, and social cohesion across the Lao PDR. Within the national educational framework, primary education forms the fundamental building block for lifelong learning. Grade 5 (*Prathom 5*) represents a critical milestone as the final year of primary schooling and a bridge to lower secondary education. At this level, students are expected to move beyond basic decoding skills and master reading fluency, critical analysis, and reading comprehension to access complex core subjects such as Mathematics, Science, and Social Studies.

Despite the crucial role of primary literacy, national educational indicators reveal persistent systemic challenges. According to the Education and Sports Sector Development Plan (ESSDP 2021–2025) issued by the Ministry of Education and Sports (MoES), primary school students nationwide consistently exhibit underperformance in Lao language reading and writing skills, failing to meet basic national learning achievement standards. Recognizing these ongoing structural gaps, the Ministry of

Education and Sports has prioritized fundamental literacy under the Human Resource Development Plan (2026–2030), placing urgent focus on accelerating educational reform, achieving universal quality completion of mandatory Grade 5 primary education, and eradicating illiteracy across all provinces.

The challenges surrounding primary language acquisition are not unique to the Lao PDR; similar trends are observed regionally in neighboring Southeast Asian nations such as Thailand. According to the Thai Ministry of Education and national literacy assessments, primary learners in Thailand also face significant gaps in basic Thai word decoding, correct pronunciation of consonant clusters, and reading comprehension, leading to a steady decline in reading literacy on international benchmarks such as PISA. Both educational systems contend with shared multi-dimensional obstacles: (1) Student-level factors: Linguistic barriers among non-native speaking ethnic groups in remote areas who rarely use the official national language at home, compounded by emerging digital distractions such as social media. (2) Internal/School-level factors: A reliance on traditional, teacher-centered rote instruction, insufficient contextualized reading materials, and limited academic supervision. (3) External/Family-level factors: Low socioeconomic status, limited home learning environments, and a lack of close parental academic monitoring.

Because educational administrators serve as key *Instructional Leaders*—responsible for school-based policy implementation, resource allocation, teacher support, and pedagogical supervision—there is an urgent need to examine their empirical perspectives and operational insights. Investigating the root causes of reading underperformance through the lens of local administrators is essential to formulate practical, context-sensitive guidelines that can bridge policy mandates with classroom reality, ensuring the realization of national literacy targets.

1.2 Research Objectives

- To survey opinions of the factors affecting the Lao language reading ability of primary school students in the Lao PDR, focusing on the actual perspectives and experiences of educational administrators.
- To propose guidelines for improving and developing the Lao language reading skills of primary school students (Grade 5) to achieve higher efficiency.

1.3 Expected Benefits

- To understand the actual conditions, internal factors, and external factors that hinder or promote Lao language reading ability based on interview data from educational administrators in real fields.
- To obtain concrete guidelines, mechanisms, and administrative methods that schools, teachers, and parents can apply to solve the problems of slow readers or illiterate students.
- To serve as policy input and academic references for educational management agencies at all levels in curriculum planning, teacher training, and budget allocation support.

2. Literature Review

In this section, the researchers reviewed documents, theoretical concepts, and related research, categorized into three main themes:

2.1 Concepts and Components of Reading Skills

Reading is a complex cognitive process and behavior. According to the concept of Harris & Sipay (1990) [5], effective reading ability consists of two main components: $R = D \times C$, where R (Reading) represents reading ability, D (Decoding) represents the decoding of letters and syllables, and C (Comprehension) represents understanding the meaning of the content. Grade 5 students are developmentally transitioning from the stage of "Learning to Read" to "Reading to Learn." Therefore, if children face obstacles in the decoding stage, it will directly affect their comprehension and long-term academic success.

2.2 Instructional Leadership Theory and Participatory Management

The role of educational administrators in the modern era is not limited to general administration or paperwork, but must demonstrate "Instructional Leadership" according to Bush (2011) [1]. Instructional leaders are responsible for setting clear school goals, managing curriculum and instruction, promoting a learning climate, and systematically conducting internal supervision. Furthermore, Participatory Management theory emphasizes that solving complex educational problems requires coordination and network building among three main institutions: schools, families, and communities (The Three-Way Partnership).

The above is shown in Fig 1:

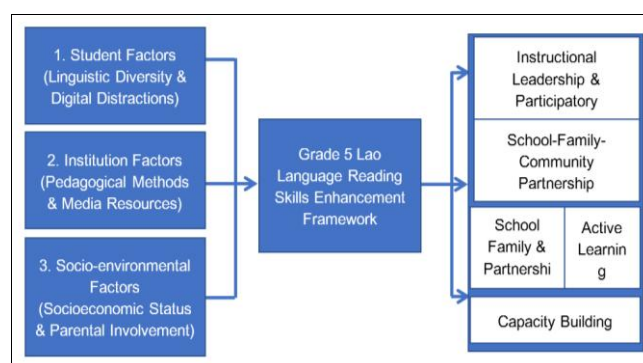


Fig 1: Conceptual Framework

3. Research Methodology

This research implemented qualitative methods through content analysis by collecting and analyzing qualitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) [4].

3.1 Key Informants

12 educational administrators who hold administrative positions in primary education, of whom representatives from 3 regions, 4 people from each region (North, Middle, and South) in Lao PDR, were selected via Purposive Sampling.

3.2 Research Instruments

A Semi-Structured Interview Form designed to align with the objectives and conceptual framework of the research, validated for Content Validity (IOC) by experts.

Five specialists validated the content of an in-depth interview form. The Index of Item Objective Congruence (IOC) for each question ranged from 0.80 to 1.00, confirming that the interview form met qualitative validity criteria with an IOC exceeding 0.50. The Semi-Structured Interview Form received a suitability score of 4.85

(Tanthawanich and Jindasri, 2018; Phanakij and Ninraphanh, 2016; Srisa-Art, 2015; Holz, 2012) ^[25, 16, 24, 6].

3.3 Data Collection

The researchers conducted on-site field visits and direct interviews, utilizing audio recording systems (with informed consent) to ensure data accuracy.

To capture in-depth qualitative insights, the primary data collection relied on semi-structured, face-to-face interviews with a targeted sample of 12 key informants (comprising educational administrators, principals, and senior pedagogical specialists). The data collection process in the Lao PDR context was executed through five systematic phases, complying with institutional protocols and academic rigor (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) ^[4, 8].

■ Administrative Approval and Official Clearance

In accordance with local administrative protocols in the Lao PDR, formal permission was obtained before field data collection:

1. An official request letter (*Notice of Cooperation*) issued by the researcher's host university/institution was submitted to the relevant Provincial Department of Education and Sports (PESS) and District Education and Sports Bureau (DESB).
2. Upon receiving formal authorization, introductory letters were presented to the school principals and targeted administrators to establish institutional trust and facilitate field access (Chaleunvong, 2009) ^[2].

■ Participant Recruitment and Informed Consent

1. The 12 participants were selected using purposive sampling based on predefined criteria (e.g., minimum 5 years of educational management experience).
2. The researcher contacted each participant individually to explain the research objectives, potential risks, and benefits.
3. Informed Consent Forms translated into official Lao language were provided. Participants signed the consent form, agreeing to voluntary participation and granting permission for audio recording (The Asia Foundation, 2024) ^[26].

■ Interview Preparation and Cultural Etiquette

1. Instrument Pre-testing: The semi-structured interview guide was pre-tested with 2 non-participant administrators to verify language clarity and appropriateness.
2. Contextual Protocol: Respecting Lao cultural norms,

interview schedules were customized to accommodate the participants' professional routines. Interviews were scheduled at quiet, comfortable locations preferred by participants (e.g., private office or school reading corner).

■ Field Execution of Interviews (N=12)

1. Rapport Building: Each session commenced with 5–10 minutes of informal conversation to establish psychological safety and open dialogue (Ruslin *et al.*, 2022) ^[19].
2. Conducting the Interview:
 - Interviews followed the semi-structured guide, utilizing open-ended questions accompanied by flexible probing (*Questioning & Probing*) to explore emerging themes.
 - Language used during all sessions was official Lao language to ensure complete comprehension and authentic expression.
 - Each interview session lasted approximately 45 to 60 minutes.
- Data Recording: With participant consent, interviews were recorded using a digital voice recorder. Concurrently, the researcher maintained detailed field notes (*Field Notes*) capturing non-verbal cues, emotional expressions, and contextual observations.
- Post-Interview Procedure and Data Validation
 1. Debriefing: At the conclusion of each session, key points were summarized orally to the participant for immediate validation (*Member Checking* at the interview site).
 2. Transcription: Audio recordings were transcribed verbatim (*Word-for-Word Transcription*) into Lao text within 48 hours of each interview to ensure high contextual fidelity.
 3. Data Anonymization: To protect participant privacy, unique alphanumeric codes (e.g., P01 to P12) were assigned to replace real names and specific institution names in all written records.

3.4 Data Analysis

The contents of the in-depth interviews were analyzed based on thematic analysis, making concepts, concept groups, and categories, and interpreted based on the analytic description.

4. Research Results

Interview results are presented in A1-A12 for representative interviewers, and summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: The results of content analysis

<i>Code</i>	<i>Categories/ Issues</i>	<i>Interpret and summarize</i>
A1, A3; A4; A7, A11, A9; A12;	Most administrators agreed that students themselves are directly involved and impacted. This is especially true in the context of ethnic students who do not use Lao as their primary language at home (mother tongue), causing confusion in pronunciation, vowel blending, and tone application. Additionally, children's attention spans and focus have decreased due to excessive and uncontrolled screen time on technology and smartphones. "...Ethnic student groups face many issues because they speak local dialects at home. When they learn Lao as a second language, combined with smartphone and gaming addiction, it leads to shorter attention spans and a lack of interest in reading books..."	1. Student-level Factors
A2, A5, A6, A8, A11	Factors related to the instructional process and academic environment. A portion of teachers still rely on conventional, passive learning styles that emphasize rote memorization or copying from the blackboard, lacking engaging teaching aids such as storybooks, illustrations, or language games. Furthermore, reading promotion activities and internal supervision by some administrators remain inconsistent. "...Some teachers still lack innovative reading instruction techniques that emphasize student engagement. Instructional media like extracurricular reading books or illustrations are scarce and fail to attract children..."	2. Internal (School) Factors
A10; A12; A1; A2; A3; A4; A6	The socioeconomic status and lifestyle of parents significantly impact students. Most parents must focus heavily on earning a living, lack understanding, and have no time to read with their children or monitor homework at home, completely delegating this responsibility to teachers and schools.	3. External (Family and Environmental) Factors

Table 1 illustrates the multifaceted factors affecting the Lao language reading capabilities of Grade 5 students. Based on the synthesis of administrator interviews, these factors are categorized into three major domains:

- **Student-level Factors:** Administrators highlighted that learners are directly impacted by ethnic-linguistic barriers and modern digital habits. A primary obstacle for students from ethnic minority backgrounds is using Lao as a second language, which causes phonetic confusion, pronunciation issues, and difficulties in tone placement. Furthermore, excessive screen time and smartphone usage have shortened students' attention spans and diminished their engagement with traditional reading materials. As emphasized by an administrator:

"Ethnic student groups face many issues because they speak local dialects at home. When they learn Lao as a second language, combined with smartphone and gaming addiction, it leads to shorter attention spans and a lack of interest in reading books..."

- **Internal (School-level) Factors:** The findings reveal critical constraints within the school environment and pedagogical practices. Traditional teacher-centered instruction relying on rote memorization and board copying remains prevalent, while active learning strategies and interactive media—such as storybooks, language games, and visual aids—are severely lacking. Additionally, inconsistent internal academic supervision by school leadership hampers sustained literacy improvement. One administrator noted:

"Some teachers still lack innovative reading instruction techniques that emphasize student engagement. Instructional media like extracurricular reading books or illustrations are scarce and fail to attract children..."

- **External (Family and Environmental) Factors:** Socioeconomic conditions and home environments strongly influence student reading outcomes. Most parents face financial pressures that limit their

availability to assist with homework or foster home reading routines, often delegating literacy development entirely to the school.

In addition, the insight from the in-depth interview we had encountered on the Guidelines for Developing Lao Language Reading Skills.

- **School Administration and Policy:** Administrators must establish "Reading Development" as a vital agenda and strategic plan of the school. Activities like "Love of Reading Hour" or "15-Minute Reading Before Class" must be organized regularly. Furthermore, the environment must be improved by creating attractive and well-equipped "Reading Corners" in Grade 5 classrooms.
- **Teacher Competency Development:** Provide training workshops and establish Professional Learning Communities (PLC) for teachers to transition their instructional styles to Active Learning, such as phonics/spelling-based reading instruction, the use of videos, storybooks, and storytelling techniques that stimulate students' passion for reading.
- **Building Networks with Parents:** Utilize a "Reading Diary" as a linking tool. Students are assigned to take storybooks or short reading passages to read to their parents at home, and parents sign to acknowledge and provide feedback, actively engaging families in a tangible manner.
- **Support for Specific Student Groups:** Schools must screen Grade 5 students who face slow reading or illiteracy issues to establish "Remedial Classes" on weekends or after school, using remedial teaching by teachers or peer-to-peer tutoring systems.

5. Conclusion and Discussion

5.1 Conclusion

The study synthesized the qualitative perspectives of educational administrators and identified that the factors influencing Grade 5 students' Lao language reading abilities are multi-dimensional, spanning three interrelated domains:

1. Student-Level Factors: Primary constraints include linguistic barriers experienced by non-native Lao-speaking ethnic minority students who use local dialects

at home, causing phonological confusion and tone acquisition difficulties. Additionally, excessive digital device and smartphone usage has significantly reduced learners' attention spans and reading motivation.

2. Internal/School-Level Factors: Key challenges involve the prevalence of traditional, teacher-centered rote instruction, a critical shortage of supplementary reading media (such as storybooks or visual aids), and inconsistent internal academic supervision by school leaders.
3. External/Family-Level Factors: Low household socioeconomic status forces parents to prioritize daily livelihood over academic support, leading to minimal home-school engagement and a lack of parental reading supervision.

Based on the empirical insights of administrators, four core development guidelines were proposed:

1. Teacher Capacity Enhancement: Upskilling teachers in Active Learning methodologies specifically designed for language decoding (D) and comprehension (C).
2. Resource Optimization and Reading Environment: Establishing classroom "Reading Corners" and providing contextualized, culturally relevant instructional materials.
3. Institutionalizing Home-School Synergy: Implementing a structured "Reading Diary" mechanism to foster parental involvement and home monitoring.
4. Targeted Remedial Interventions: Organizing specialized remedial classes for ethnic minority students and struggling readers through participatory school-community management.

5.2 Discussion

The findings of this study offer critical insights into the literacy dynamics of Grade 5 primary school students in the Lao PDR. The discussion below interprets these findings in relation to established theoretical frameworks and empirical literature across three key themes.

5.2.1 Student and Socio-Linguistic Factors

The finding that ethnic minority students face acute reading obstacles due to mother-tongue interference aligns directly with the Simple View of Reading theory ($R = D \times C$) proposed by Harris and Sipay (1990) [5]. When non-native Lao learners struggle with word decoding (D) due to dialectal differences, their cognitive capacity for reading comprehension (C) is severely compromised.

This empirical finding is consistent with the UNICEF Lao PDR (2023) [27] *Lao Social Indicator Survey (LSIS III)*, which reported that only 33%–36% of primary children in rural and ethnic minority regions (e.g., Hmong-Mien or Sino-Tibetan groups) demonstrate foundational reading skills compared to 52% of Lao-Tai learners, emphasizing how linguistic background directly shapes literacy performance. Furthermore, these results concur with Nonaka (2020) [14], who examined classroom language dynamics in Savannakhet and Huaphanh provinces and concluded that the absence of formal bilingual education in Lao primary schools exacerbates learning gaps unless supported by active, scaffolded language instruction.

5.2.2 Pedagogical Practices and Instructional Leadership

The identification of traditional teaching methods and scarce reading media as internal school-level barriers reinforces Bush's (2011) [1] Instructional Leadership Theory, which posits that school administrators must actively drive

curriculum innovation, media development, and regular pedagogical supervision rather than focusing solely on administrative routines. This finding resonates with research conducted by Save the Children & AIR (2022) [20] under the *USAID Lao PDR Learn to Read Activity*, which revealed that early-grade reading failure in Lao primary schools is heavily driven by a lack of supplementary reading books and teacher-centered pedagogical practices. Similarly, a study by Pineda *et al.* (2023) [15] demonstrated that integrating contextualized, student-centered learning materials significantly accelerated reading comprehension among Grade 5 pupils by bridging abstract vocabulary with familiar cultural references.

5.2.3 Home-School Partnership and Remedial Frameworks

The necessity of establishing "Reading Diaries" and remedial classes through participatory management aligns with Epstein's (2018) School-Family-Community Partnership Framework (as cited in modern participatory administration theory by Bush, 2011) [1]. Literacy acquisition cannot occur in isolation within the classroom; it requires structured collaboration between home and school environments. This finding strongly aligns with global empirical evidence. *UNICEF Lao PDR (2023)* [27] highlighted that 90% of children from high-income households in Laos receive home reading support compared to less than 50% in disadvantaged rural households, directly influencing reading outcomes. Furthermore, a regional primary reading study by Chansomsak and Thomas (2018) [3] emphasized that school-community partnerships and structured home-based reading logs are essential mechanisms for sustaining literacy habits in developing Southeast Asian contexts, validating the development guidelines proposed in this study.

6. Recommendations

6.1 Recommendations for Utilizing Research Findings

- School administrators should adopt the "Love of Reading Hour" and "Reading Diary" models as practical implementations in schools.
- Lao language teachers should receive support in terms of media and Active Learning instructional techniques to transform the learning atmosphere into an engaging one.

6.2 Recommendations for Future Research

- Research and Development (R&D) should be conducted to create handbooks or primary school administrative models aimed at systematic reading promotion, with trials implemented in target school groups.
- The scope of research should be expanded using Mixed Methods to collect quantitative data from teachers and students nationwide.

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