

TESS: A Computerized Oral Reading Assessment System for incoming Grade 7
students

A Special Problem Proposal
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Contents

1	Introduction	1
1.1	Overview	1
1.2	Problem Statement	2
1.2.1	General Objective	2
1.2.2	Specific Objective	2
1.3	Scope and Limitations of the Research	2
2	Review of Related Literature	3
3	Research Methodology	6
3.1	Description and Functionality of TESS	6
3.1.1	Voice Functionality and Collected Voice Data	7
3.2	Developing TESS	7
3.3	Testing the Program	9
3.4	Focus Group Discussion Outline	9

Chapter 1

Introduction

1.1 Overview

Iloilo City National High School is one of the few schools that has a dedicated remedial reading program. It is a program that aims to address the learning gaps of students with reading difficulties (reading levels of grades 0-2). The program starts with identifying the individuals in need of intervention and remediation. Once identified, they are grouped together in a section or two so that remedial reading classes can be easily scheduled in hopes of improving their reading levels. Activities are also arranged to encourage students to persevere despite their circumstances.

Incoming students are assessed using the Slosson Oral Reading Test (SORT) to determine the grade level of their word recognition skills. A qualified teacher administers the test on a one-on-one basis.

Every year, there are over 1200 Grade 7 students enrolled in Iloilo City National High School. However, since the school doesn't have the manpower to administer the test to every incoming student, they have narrowed it down to students who have an average grade of below 80% (over the pandemic they have increased it to 83% and below). Still, every year there are at least 300 students requiring assessment. In conducting this test, they identify over 60 students with reading difficulties every year. With this volume of students to be assessed, the process requires multiple teachers to volunteer their time. This is all on top of their other enrollment responsibilities. Due to this, only about 6 teachers volunteer every year in a span of a couple of days.

Students with reading difficulties face more challenges in their education than their peers. Thus, it is important for the school to recognize these issues early on and work with the students and parents to address these learning gaps.

1.2 Problem Statement

The Remedial Reading Program of Iloilo City National High School does not have enough qualified faculty to efficiently assess the incoming Grade 7 population for any frustrated or non-readers. They are in need of a Computerized Reading Assessment that can efficiently and accurately assess student test-takers in order to identify those that would benefit from remediation.

1.2.1 General Objective

To create a program that could conduct the Slosson Oral Reading Test at a larger scale and cater to the specific needs of Iloilo City National High School during enrollment.

1.2.2 Specific Objective

To compare and contrast existing voice recognition software in regards to which one works best in a school environment and non-english speaker

1.3 Scope and Limitations of the Research

TESS will only be launched and tested within Iloilo City National High School (ICNHS). The test group will consist of a select group of students from the school's Remedial Learning Program.

Chapter 2

Review of Related Literature

Reading is one of the basic and most essential literacy skills required to be successful in today's world of technology and information. Reading proficiency can affect not only a student's ability to perform in school, but also their self esteem and their attitude towards schooling. This in turn can severely impact the student's future prospects and social mobility. Therefore it is important to ensure that a student is able to achieve the reading milestones / achievements set for their grade.

DepEd's Program "Every Child a Reader", which was started S.Y. 2002-2003, mandates that every pupil shall not proceed to the next grade level unless they have achieved mastery over the basic literacy skills of their grade level; however, despite this and the many efforts of DepEd to encourage and develop the reading skills of the nation's learners, there are still slow and even non-readers in incoming 7th grade students Sancada (2022). Additionally in the 2018 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Philippines ranked last in the world in terms of reading and improved slightly in the 2022 PISA now ranking 6th lowest in the world instead. (PISA, 2018; PISA, 2022)

There is much research and evidence that supports that early intervention, such as during elementary school, is effective at helping slow and frustrated readers improve, catch up, and even excel beyond the literacy milestones of their grade. Lee et al. (2012) Failure to intervene early can lead to the student developing poor reading skill which in turn leads to poor academic performance, creating consecutive experiences of failure that can further demotivate students to learn. (Fosudo, 2010 as cited in Sancada R., 2022)

However, even if early intervention was not possible, remediation during their

adolescence or in later grades, such as high school, is possible and effective (as an example, Rafanan & Raymundo, 2024; Lovett et al, 2021). As part of DepEd's efforts to improve the literacy of pupils and students in the Philippines, many schools have established Remedial Reading Programs in an effort to identify students in need of help. A study aimed to test the efficacy of remedial reading programs in helping struggling readers of Grade 7 students of Bolo Norte High School, found that intervention had a substantial impact on student's reading comprehension. Students were able to improve after a 5-month period of remedial classes, highlighting the positive impact of educational intervention. Abergos et al. (2024)

Despite the efficacy and the potential of these reading programs, there can still be a lack of support for them. A study looking into the challenges and effective practices of Remedial Reading Programs in Iloilo found that one problem that these programs face is a lack of support from the Parents, School, and even the Local Government Units. A lack of support could mean not enough attention from the parents to support their children, a lack of funds to purchase books and equipment, a lack of interest from teachers to participate and proctor in the program and even a lack of interest from the school to support the program due to it not being a flagship program of the school, which can result in a lack of classroom space and no available schedules to conduct the program. It follows that schools with successful and more effective programs are ones that have the support needed to have proper implementation. (Sancada R., 2022)

The process of assessing students is the first step to providing support to students in need of remedial reading classes. If these schools cannot efficiently and effectively identify students in need, then the reading programs will not be able to perform to their full potential. Currently, reading assessments are conducted one-on-one with teachers' having to proctor and assess the student's results manually and all on their own.

For example, every year, as mentioned above there are over 1200 Grade 7 students enrolled in Iloilo City National High School. However, the school doesn't have the manpower to administer the test to every incoming student. Even after narrowing down potential students in need, they identify over 60 students with reading difficulties every year. With this volume of students to be assessed, the process requires multiple teachers to volunteer their time. This is all on top of their other enrollment responsibilities. Due to this, only about 6 teachers volunteer every year in a span of a couple of days.

This lack of available staff and resources proves to be a significant bottleneck in being able to identify students in need. One such solution created to streamline the process of student assessment is to make use of current and emerging technology to

create computerized assessments. In a 2023 study by Auphan et. al., they tested the efficacy of using computer-based assessments (CBA) for reading and found that such tools provide a low-cost and easy-to-use tool for professionals to assess reading skills. They even further suggested that CBA's have many advantages and developing tests to make use of the technological advantages of CBA can further improve the efficacy of a reading assessment.

In 2022, All Children Reading (ACR) Philippines, in coordination with the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and DepEd, developed a Computer-Based Reading Assessment (CoBRA) Pilot and tested the program in 42 schools in the Philippines. CoBRA would allow students to independently take the Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) – a standardized reading assessment used as the primary means to determine the reading levels of students based on set benchmark scores. CoBRA would also provide them with instant feedback and assessment through an automated grading system and also used voice recognition software to facilitate the test – mainly Poodll and also Google Speech Recognition for the Filipino language.

The pilot itself was conducted on school premises and made use of the school's available equipment. Ultimately, the pilot was successful with positive reception from students and teachers alike. A teacher was quoted to be saying “it saved them weeks of calculating and counting words, and at same time saved the school from printing papers.” CoBRA offered a more efficient and streamlined way to assess students – although its automated grading system and the voice recognition software used was not accurate and still required significant human intervention to be able to produce accurate results.

A planned second pilot for CoBRA would not proceed as planned for a few reasons. (1) The sponsoring unit with DepED ICTS was dissolved during a transition in leadership. (2) Licensing costs for the software escalated to what were deemed unsustainable levels.

One can learn a few things from the CoBRA pilot. (1) Secure an accurate voice recognition software that can operate in a school setting as well as detect accented english. (2) The program itself must be able to stand on its own or at least be developed using software that schools or the reading program can reasonably sustain.

In regards to voice recognition software, there are a few that come to mind. VOSK, Whisper, and Wav2Vec. All are open source voice recognition software that can be used to develop a computerized reading assessment system.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This chapter lists and discusses the specific steps and activities that will be performed to accomplish the project. The discussion covers the activities from pre-proposal to Final SP Writing.

3.1 Description and Functionality of TESS

TESS is a computerized reading assessment program that will allow students to take the SORT with minimal to no assistance from a teacher. The following steps described were specifically requested and specified by the faculty of ICNHS.

In this computerized SORT, students will read out loud from a randomized list of words flashed to them, word-by-word on the screen. This list of words is predetermined and is categorized by reading level. If the student is deemed correct, the program will proceed with the next word in the list. If the student was incorrect, then the program will remain at the current word. The student is allowed to attempt the word three times, with a timer of 10 seconds per attempt.

Additionally, the faculty of the remediation program wants to decrease the amount of stress and frustration the examinee will experience during the assessment, so TESS includes a built-in timer for each item in the test. Once eleven (11) seconds have passed an item will be skipped, and once ten words in a row have been skipped, the test will end and the examinee's reading level will be calculated.

A progress bar will also be visible in the bottom, so that students are able to track their progress through the assessment.

The program will also evaluate the students and provide the teacher with an excel sheet for each student containing their results, which includes an itemized list of which words in the SORT they got right and wrong.

The test portion of the program is voice activated, and the examinee can make use of certain keywords to navigate through the test. Such as START to start the test; SKIP to skip a word; and STOP to end the test prematurely.

TESS should be able to run on an offline computer with a headset.

3.1.1 Voice Functionality and Collected Voice Data

TESS' voice functionality is the most important part of the program. The speech-to-text program included should be able to function in a school environment and also be able to accurately assess accented English.

Student's voice will be recorded by the program, assessed, and then discarded. The program does not need to store data of any examinee's voice to function.

Other Collected Data

TESS will take note of the following information:

1. Student Name
2. Student's School
3. Proctor's Name

This information is used to generate the excel report after the test is finished. TESS does not save this data after the completion of the test.

3.2 Developing TESS

TESS is developed using Python and a voice recognition software. The three main choices for our voice recognition software are the following:

1. Vosk,

2. Wav2Vec, and
3. Whisper

These software were chosen because all three are open source software and do not require any payment to keep it running. The program is also designed to work on a computer with a dedicated headset and microphone.

In order to determine which of the three to use, we developed a TESS prototype that can evaluate the voice input using all three software. We then conducted an informal test to see which of the three is most effective.

However, Whisper was out of the running early on as it was unable to be run quickly enough to use in real time. This left Vosk and Wav2Vec to be tested.

After further research we decided to use Vosk. Vosk was chosen because of the following advantages:

1. Offline Capability,
2. Lightweight and Fast,
3. Customizable Models,
4. Open-Source, and
5. Cost-Effective.

Although, Vosk does have a few disadvantages. Most notably, it has difficulty dealing with the following:

1. Accuracy with Complex Speech,
2. Limited Support for Certain Accents, or Dialects
3. Limited Context Understanding.

In order to further improve Vosk's accuracy in dealing with complex speech as well as to deal with accented English, Jellyfish was used in the post-processing. Jellyfish compares two strings to see how phonetically close they are.

The program is also designed to work on a computer with a dedicated headset and microphone.

3.3 Testing the Program

TESS will be tested at the Iloilo City National High School with a group of ten (10) students within the Remedial Reading Program.

The group will take the SORT twice. First with a faculty member and the second with TESS. Each of these tests will be timed, and the results of these tests will be recorded for comparison. After the testing, a focus group discussion will be held to determine what the user experience was like.

TESS will then be compared with Manual SORT along the following metrics:

1. Speed - how fast does each student complete their assessment?
2. Accuracy - how accurate are the results of each student?
3. Ease of Use - how easy was the test to be administered / taken?

The Speed and Accuracy metrics can be determined using the information gathered during the assessment. However, the Ease of Use metric will be derived from a Focus Group Discussion composed of participating students and faculty. Consent Forms Students participating in the TESS testing will be required to fill out parental consent forms in order to participate.

3.4 Focus Group Discussion Outline

The focus group discussion will center around the experience of the faculty and students while using TESS. The discussion will last for around 30 minutes. The following is the set of questions we will use as a guideline for the discussion.

1. What was the experience of using TESS to take the reading test like?
2. How did using TESS differ from taking / administering SORT manually?
3. What difficulties did you encounter while using TESS?
4. Among the three TESS models, which one did you like using most?
5. If you could add one feature or function to TESS what would it be?

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