Factors Contributing to Reading Difficulties Among Primary School Students

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Abstract: This study aims to identify the contributing factors, impacts, and intervention strategies related to reading difficulties among remedial pupils in primary schools within urban areas of Kuala Terengganu. Low reading literacy has been strongly linked to familial instability, unsupportive community environments, and internal factors such as poor motivation and irregular school attendance. Adopting a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews with three experienced remedial teachers. Findings revealed that the lack of a conducive home learning environment, low socioeconomic background, and limited community support significantly contributed to students' reading challenges. These issues hinder academic achievement and negatively affect students' emotional well-being, motivation, and long-term educational opportunities. Effective intervention strategies identified include engaging teaching aids, fun-learning activities, token reward systems, and the involvement of parents and the local community. The study recommends a collaborative and holistic approach among stakeholders, teachers, school administrators, parents, and policymakers to provide a comprehensive support system that enhances reading literacy among struggling learners. The implications of this study are vital in shaping inclusive and responsive educational policies for pupils with remedial learning needs.

Keywords: Reading Literacy, Remedial Pupils, Intervention Strategies, Primary Education, Holistic Approach

INTRODUCTION

Studies have shown that several factors contribute to literacy problems among primary school students. These include diverse levels of intelligence and psychological challenges among students due to genetic factors, physical disabilities, environmental influences, and more. These tend to create difficulties in learning and retaining information taught by teachers (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011). Additionally, health conditions and emotional disturbances often become major learning obstacles. Students with inherited low intelligence levels frequently exhibit emotional disruptions such as anxiety, fear, anger, and various other feelings that interfere with focus and attention during learning (Zulkifley, 2006). Apart from emotional issues, there are biological problems, such as physical health conditions and neurological functions. As a result, students' health is affected by inherited diseases, asthma, sinusitis, seizures, speech articulation disorders, and so on, which negatively impact their interest and attention in studies. Environmental problems are external phenomena caused by the school system and students' language development. Moreover, some students who fall behind in mainstream education often do so due to non-standard language practices (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011). In addition, certain influencing factors contribute to students' difficulties in mastering reading and writing skills. Gaps in mastering these skills lead to low self-esteem and declining self-discipline. Continuous failure causes students to develop a poor self-concept. These students also show weaknesses and lack interest in finding information from diagrams or visual stimuli teachers provide. According to Yahya (2004), reading is an interaction between the text and the reader's

imagination. Uninteresting teaching methods by teachers also contribute to students' lack of interest in the learning process, leading to decreased motivation to learn.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What are the contributing factors to reading difficulties among primary school students in urban areas of Kuala Terengganu?
2. To what extent do reading difficulties impact students' learning in the classroom?
3. What are the solutions to overcome reading difficulties to help students learn?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research by Usha and Vijayaletchumy (2019) identified that the primary factors contributing to students' difficulties in acquiring reading skills are their attitudes and interest in mastering the Malay language and the role of teachers in diversifying teaching and learning strategies in the classroom. Findings by Mohd Fauzan Zulkifli, Muhammad Faizal A. Ghani, Norfariza Mohd Radzi, and Maszuria A. Ghani (2021), based on a comparative study conducted in both urban and rural areas, highlighted both similarities and differences in several aspects. The analysis of reading literacy issues in urban settings revealed that the key factors include students' attitudes and reading awareness, the need to improve existing reading programs, shifts in reading habits influenced by current technological developments, an unsupportive reading environment, and the absence of designated time for reading activities. In contrast, findings from rural areas emphasized that the main contributing factors to reading literacy issues include a lack of family support, inadequate facilities, low student motivation and awareness, unappealing reading materials, limited reading resources, insufficient teacher training in reading instruction, poor literacy practices, and an unsupportive learning environment. The current reading habits and programs require significant improvements. In urban contexts, a notable issue is the lack of student interest in reading as a habitual activity. Students tend to engage with reading materials only when necessary, such as completing assignments or preparing for examinations.

Furthermore, the increasing complexity of texts regarding reading, comprehension, and interpretation necessitates that students possess a strong vocabulary, an expanded knowledge base, and the ability to think openly and critically (Chall & Jacobs, 2003). Research also indicates that early reading experiences play a vital role in fostering strong literacy skills among children, subsequently influencing their success or failure in learning to read (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 2009). Studies have shown that a delayed start in literacy development can worsen outcomes progressively if no timely intervention is implemented (Grossen, 1997). Given the crucial role of reading literacy and its correlation with academic achievement, students must acquire these skills early in schooling. Additionally, research has demonstrated a strong link between poor academic performance and weak reading literacy skills, as students who struggle with literacy often face challenges not only within the school environment but also throughout their lives (Clark & Burke, 2012; National Literacy Trust, 2012). High reading literacy proficiency is essential for academic and lifelong success, as it is a foundational prerequisite for achievement across subjects. It requires students to read and write across diverse

disciplines, genres, and materials with increasing skill levels, adaptability, and insight (Snow & Biancarosa, 2003).

Reading literacy is critical across all nations (National Literacy Trust, 2012). Students must acquire strong reading literacy skills to achieve academic success. Findings also indicate that early mastery of reading literacy is crucial (Connolly, 2004; Jones, 2003; Lindsay & Muijs, 2005; Rathvon, 2004; Warrington & Younger, 2006), as in the long term, "the ability to read and write is essential for success in becoming integrated into society" (Jones, 2003). Therefore, it is essential to identify the factors influencing students' reading literacy abilities and to propose targeted measures for improvement in this area. Additionally, existing findings highlight the importance of assessing students' literacy capabilities. At the international level, several reading literacy assessments have been implemented to monitor literacy development across various stages of schooling. One prominent example is the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), which evaluates the performance of 15-year-old students in reading literacy, mathematics, and science every three years (OECD, 2010). Another is the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), conducted every five years since 2000, which assesses reading comprehension in two domains: reading for literary experience and reading to acquire and use information (TIMSS & PIRLS International Study Center, 2011).

In Malaysia, the mastery of reading literacy is both a foundational pillar and a core aspiration of the national education system (Chew, 2012), and improving students' reading literacy proficiency remains an urgent priority (Preliminary Report Executive Summary of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, 2012). In line with this, the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) program was introduced to identify students with reading, writing, and fundamental arithmetic difficulties to provide all Malaysian children with a strong foundation in literacy and numeracy during the first three years of primary education. This initiative was launched under the Malaysian Government Transformation Programme (GTP) 1.0 as one of the focal points in the National Key Result Areas (NKRA) (Nazariyah Sani & Abdul Rahman Idris, 2012; Preliminary Report – Executive Summary of the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025, 2012). Implemented in 2010, the LINUS program assesses students from Year 1 to Year 3 on literacy and numeracy performance (Ministry of Education Malaysia, 2013).

However, this initiative has primarily focused on assessing students' literacy levels, with limited research addressing the underlying factors contributing to reading literacy challenges. Therefore, this study seeks to identify the key factors contributing to reading literacy difficulties among primary school students. The findings are expected to provide valuable insights for policymakers and education stakeholders in enhancing teaching and learning processes, ultimately aiming to reduce literacy-related issues in the school system.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The research methodology constitutes the strategic framework adopted to systematically address the research questions and achieve the study's objectives. It involves a coherent set of methods and procedures for data collection, analysis, and interpretation, ensuring methodological rigor and validity in the investigative process. This study adopted a qualitative research design appropriate for capturing a comprehensive and contextualized understanding

of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell, 2013). The research process was implemented in two sequential phases. The first phase involved an extensive review of the literature to conceptualise and construct the theoretical framework. In contrast, the second phase focused on developing interview protocols as primary instruments for empirical data collection.

POPULATION AND SAMPLING (QUALITATIVE APPROACH)

In alignment with the interpretivist paradigm, this study utilized a qualitative approach to obtain in-depth insights from individuals within a specific context. The methodology was grounded in formulating research questions, which guided the design of the data collection strategies and the analytical procedures employed. Qualitative inquiry is inherently flexible and adaptive, allowing for iterative refinement throughout the research process. Its strength lies in uncovering complex social realities through detailed, context-rich data.

Qualitative research is underpinned by the principles of humanism, with a central focus on individuals and their behaviors, recognizing that human actions are deeply influenced by internal constructs such as personal beliefs, cultural values, political orientations, and social backgrounds. Thus, this methodological approach enables a nuanced exploration of the multifaceted nature of human experience, offering interpretative depth that is often unattainable through quantitative methods alone.

In this study, data were obtained through in-depth interviews with selected informants, specifically teachers, to explore their insights into the underlying causes of reading difficulties among students. The participants comprised Malay language teachers purposively selected based on their professional experience teaching students with reading-related challenges. The selection criterion ensured that the informants possessed relevant pedagogical exposure and contextual understanding of literacy issues in the primary school setting. All ethical protocols were rigorously adhered to throughout the data collection process, including safeguarding participants' anonymity and the confidentiality of the information disclosed during the interviews, per standard research ethics guidelines.

DATA COLLECTION PROCESS

The data collection process involves a series of structured procedures that must be adhered to by the researcher to ensure methodological compliance and ethical integrity. Data collection represents a critical component of the research process, designed to obtain accurate and relevant information from respondents in alignment with the selected research approach. Before the commencement of data gathering, the researcher was required to obtain an official letter of introduction from the affiliated university. This was followed by securing formal approval from the Educational Planning and Research Division (EPRD), the Terengganu State Education Department, and the Kuala Terengganu District Education Office. These approvals were necessary to access participants and research within designated educational institutions.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The findings are presented following the objectives outlined for this research, which focuses on the issue of reading difficulties among remedial pupils in primary schools.

Objective i: To Examine the Contributing Factors to Reading Difficulties Among Primary School Pupils in Urban Kuala Terengganu

The data analysis reveals that multiple interrelated factors contribute to reading difficulties among pupils receiving remedial instruction.

The first category of factors pertains to familial influences. Pupils from unstable family structures, such as those experiencing parental separation, being raised by grandparents, or living in single-parent households, often exhibit emotional instability, which significantly impacts their motivation to learn to read. Furthermore, the absence of parental guidance and support at home diminishes opportunities for literacy reinforcement outside of the classroom. Economic constraints, especially among families in the B40 income group, were also found to influence school attendance, with some pupils required to stay home to care for younger siblings or assist with domestic tasks. This not only interrupts their schooling but also reduces their exposure to structured learning environments. Additionally, parents' low levels of education and the lack of a supportive and resource-rich home learning space further exacerbate the problem.

The second factor relates to the broader community context. In specific urban communities, there is an observable apathy toward the value of education, which can affect pupils' attitudes toward learning. Limited access to reading materials, the absence of literacy enrichment programs outside school hours, and weak community engagement in supporting educational initiatives all contribute to pupils' underdevelopment of reading skills.

The third and final factor concerns individual learner characteristics. Many pupils demonstrate low levels of intrinsic motivation and interest in learning, often shaped by the unsupportive environments in which they live. Persistent absenteeism among these pupils further disrupts the continuity of learning, leading to delays in foundational reading acquisition and reinforcing the cycle of literacy difficulties.

Objective ii: To Examine the Impact of Reading Difficulties on Pupils' Classroom Learning

Reading difficulties significantly and multidimensionally impact pupils' learning experiences, encompassing academic, emotional, psychological, and future-oriented outcomes.

From an instructional and academic standpoint, pupils who lack essential reading competencies often struggle to engage meaningfully with the curriculum. Their inability to decode and comprehend written texts prevents them from understanding instructions, completing tasks, and participating in reading-based learning activities. This academic disengagement places them at a disadvantage across subjects that require textual interpretation, resulting in cumulative learning gaps and poor academic performance.

These pupils frequently experience negative self-perceptions regarding emotional and behavioral implications, including shame, frustration, and inferiority. Such emotional distress may lead to social withdrawal, a lack of classroom participation, or the manifestation of disruptive behaviors as coping mechanisms. In severe cases, pupils develop avoidance

tendencies, including habitual absenteeism, due to a perceived lack of efficacy or benefit in attending lessons they cannot fully comprehend.

From a cognitive and psychological lens, the inability to recall previously taught content, hesitation in word recognition, and deficits in phonemic awareness suggest underdeveloped cognitive processing related to literacy. These challenges often reduce learners' self-confidence and intrinsic motivation, weakening their capacity to remain focused and engaged during instruction.

The long-term ramifications of unresolved reading difficulties are equally concerning. A weak literacy foundation constrains future educational attainment, limits access to higher-level academic pathways, and reduces employment prospects. Consequently, reading difficulties may perpetuate disadvantage and social exclusion cycles if not addressed through targeted intervention and support.

Objective iii: To Recommend Solutions for Overcoming Reading Difficulties to Support Pupils' Learning

The findings of this study indicate that teachers have implemented a variety of strategic interventions to address reading difficulties among pupils, particularly within the remedial education context. One of the most frequently cited and practical approaches is incorporating fun-based learning strategies. These include engaging teaching aids, edutainment activities, and structured, leveled reading modules such as Bacalah Anakku, which employs phonics-based instruction. This pedagogical strategy reinforces reading fluency through repeated exposure, guided practice, and interactive tasks like copying short stories. These methods enhance comprehension, support memory consolidation, and increase learner engagement.

Another effective strategy informants reported is using a token reward system to stimulate pupil motivation. Tokens are awarded for consistent attendance, completion of assigned tasks, and positive classroom behavior, which can be exchanged for simple rewards such as stationery items. This extrinsic motivational approach effectively promotes student participation, increases attendance, and creates a more positive learning environment.

The study also underscores the importance of family and community involvement in successful literacy intervention. Parents are encouraged to support reading development at home. In contrast, local community groups, including NGOs and village development committees (JKKKs), can be instrumental in offering supplementary literacy support through community tuition programs or reading centers.

At the policy level, the study recommends revising the national curriculum to emphasize the mastery of foundational reading and basic literacy (3M) skills in the early years of primary education (Years 1 and 2) before progressing to higher-order reading comprehension and sentence construction. In addition, early intervention modules should be designed for pupils who enter Year 1 without preschool exposure. Sufficient Teaching and Learning Materials (BBM) are also necessary to ensure effective lesson delivery and differentiated instruction.

To complement these curricular efforts, literacy enrichment programs such as reading camps, teacher-led workshops, and community-organized seminars should be organized to provide additional scaffolding for pupils struggling with literacy acquisition.

In sum, this study offers a comprehensive account of the key challenges contributing to reading difficulties among remedial pupils in urban primary schools in Kuala Terengganu. These include family instability, low parental involvement, socioeconomic hardships, limited community emphasis on literacy, and internal pupil-related factors such as lack of interest and chronic absenteeism. These factors hinder academic progress and negatively affect pupils' emotional well-being, social adjustment, and long-term educational trajectories.

Addressing these challenges requires a collaborative, multi-level response. Remedial teachers play a critical role in implementing targeted interventions, but their efforts must be supported through systemic reforms, adequate resources, and active stakeholder engagement. Sustainable improvement in literacy outcomes can only be achieved through the concerted efforts of educators, school administrators, parents, community leaders, and policymakers working in unison toward a shared educational goal.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

This qualitative study explored the underlying factors, consequences, and potential solutions for reading difficulties among remedial pupils in primary schools within the urban context of Kuala Terengganu. Through semi-structured interviews with three experienced remedial education teachers, the study offers a comprehensive insight into the challenges faced by pupils and the pedagogical responses adopted by educators.

1. Underlying Factors Contributing to Reading Difficulties

The findings suggest that reading difficulties among pupils extend beyond phonetic limitations or mere inability to recognize letters. Teachers reported that cognitive limitations played a primary role; pupils often struggled with word recognition, had difficulty recalling previously taught content, and frequently misread or added non-existent words when reading aloud. These symptoms indicate broader deficits in working memory, phonological awareness, and reading fluency. In addition, socio-emotional and environmental factors were found to exacerbate these difficulties. Pupils from fragmented or unsupportive family environments, those without parental guidance or consistent school attendance, tended to exhibit low levels of confidence, reduced classroom engagement, and behavioral challenges. The absence of emotional stability at home often translated into poor focus and discipline within the learning environment.

Moreover, limitations in classroom infrastructure and instructional resources were also cited. Teachers highlighted the scarcity of differentiated reading materials, a lack of stimulating teaching aids, and classroom dynamics that were not conducive to literacy support. These constraints required educators to adopt adaptive strategies, including personalized instruction and integrating interest-based learning materials, to sustain pupils' attention and engagement.

2. Educational and Emotional Impact of Reading Difficulties

The effects of poor reading ability were found to be both immediate and far-reaching. Academically, pupils with limited literacy skills could not follow classroom instruction effectively, resulting in consistent underperformance across subjects that rely heavily on textual understanding. Their lack of reading fluency hindered their ability to complete assignments and participate actively in class, contributing to an overall decline in academic self-efficacy.

From a psychosocial standpoint, the inability to read effectively led to negative emotional responses, including anxiety, shame, and social isolation. Pupils often exhibited signs of demotivation, frustration, and disengagement, sometimes withdrawing from peer interactions or displaying disruptive behaviors as a coping mechanism. If left unaddressed, these emotional stressors could compound over time and significantly impair pupils' broader developmental outcomes. The findings reinforce the multidimensional nature of reading difficulties, demonstrating the interplay between cognitive deficits, socio-environmental pressures, and institutional limitations. Therefore, a holistic and sustained intervention strategy is essential, involving targeted instructional support, family involvement, and systemic improvements in learning infrastructure.

3. Solutions and Intervention Strategies

Responding to the persistent reading difficulties observed among remedial pupils, the informants reported a series of proactive and contextually grounded intervention strategies to improve reading proficiency. A key emphasis was placed on developing an enabling classroom environment where the physical and emotional climate is conducive to focused learning. Teachers adopted multimodal instructional approaches, incorporating visual teaching aids, interactive media, and game-based learning elements, such as songs, animated videos, and storytelling sessions. These methods aimed to stimulate cognitive engagement and foster a positive attitude towards reading. Another prominent strategy involved using behavioral motivation mechanisms, including token reward systems and verbal reinforcement, which effectively increased school attendance and sustained pupil interest. Informants highlighted that consistent reading practice in school and at home was crucial to consolidating reading skills. Visual reinforcement through illustrated flashcards and sentence reconstruction exercises also played a vital role in improving retention and comprehension.

From a curricular and instructional standpoint, participants proposed that simplified and focused syllabi be introduced at the early stages of primary education, particularly for learners without preschool exposure. This should be supported by distributing sufficient pedagogical resources, such as structured reading kits and differentiated instructional tools, to ensure that teaching strategies can be tailored to diverse learner needs. At a systemic level, the findings underscored the necessity of collaborative engagement between key educational stakeholders. Programs like Anak Permata Sayang and the implementation of the "teacher-as-mentor" model (guru anak angkat) were perceived as instrumental in providing additional academic and emotional support to struggling learners. These initiatives allow teachers to monitor progress more closely and offer personalized guidance outside regular classroom sessions.

Furthermore, integrating community- and school-based literacy enhancement initiatives, including reading camps, parent workshops, and outreach seminars, was recommended to broaden intervention impact. These collective efforts reflect a holistic understanding that overcoming literacy challenges requires pedagogical innovation and robust institutional and community support.

Comprehensive Educational Recommendations

Drawing upon the findings of this study, a set of holistic and evidence-informed recommendations is proposed to enhance literacy development among remedial pupils. These recommendations address three key domains: instructional design and pedagogy, institutional support and capacity building, and home–community collaboration.

1. Instructional and Pedagogical Enhancements

To ensure that teaching practices effectively address pupils' reading challenges, educators should be provided with a repertoire of developmentally appropriate and differentiated teaching materials, including phonics-based modular resources, visual aids, and structured reading guides. Pedagogical strategies should adopt a multisensory approach that actively engages learners through rhythmic singing, storytelling, dramatization, and kinaesthetic learning. Instruction should be scaffolded according to learners' current proficiency levels, prioritizing foundational literacy skills—phonemic decoding, syllabic segmentation, and short-text reading fluency. Moreover, positive behavioral supports such as token economies and verbal encouragement should be embedded to sustain learner motivation and classroom participation.

2. Institutional and Administrative Support Mechanisms

Effective literacy intervention necessitates the backing of robust school-level support structures. School administrators should allocate protected time for remedial sessions and promote structured mentorship frameworks, such as personalized pupil support, via the "teacher–guide" initiative. Schools should invest in resource-rich remedial classrooms with high-quality instructional tools tailored to early literacy needs. To sustain teacher efficacy, it is recommended that remedial educators engage in ongoing professional development, including workshops on literacy intervention strategies and active participation in Professional Learning Communities (PLCs), where reflective practices and best teaching models can be shared.

3. Community and Parental Engagement

Beyond the classroom, active parental involvement is pivotal in reinforcing literacy skills. Parents should be encouraged to engage in guided home reading routines with simplified home-based reading modules for structured parental use. School–parent collaboration must be continuously strengthened through regular communication platforms, formal consultation sessions (e.g., Temu Murni), and transparent tracking of pupil progress. Simultaneously, community-based organizations, NGOs, and local leaders should be mobilized to enhance literacy through volunteer programs, literacy clubs, or neighborhood reading corners that provide supplementary support to children outside formal schooling hours.

These comprehensive measures emphasize the necessity of a whole-system response integrating pedagogical reform, institutional support, and community partnership to address reading difficulties' complex and multidimensional nature. Through sustained collaboration and the alignment of policy and practice, literacy outcomes for remedial pupils can be meaningfully improved, thereby contributing to a more equitable and inclusive education system.

Conclusion

This study concludes that the issue of reading difficulties among pupils in remedial education is multifaceted, arising not solely from cognitive deficits but also from a complex interplay of socio-emotional, familial, and environmental influences. Pupils' struggles with literacy are often exacerbated by unstable home conditions, limited parental support, low socioeconomic status, and inadequate learning environments, all of which hinder sustained engagement with reading tasks.

The findings underscore the importance of context-sensitive and multi-tiered intervention strategies tailored to these learners' needs and challenges. Success in mitigating reading difficulties requires collaborative and sustained efforts from all stakeholders, including educators, school leaders, parents, and community members, which are underpinned by strong policy support and institutional commitment.

Moving forward, the study advocates for the systematic strengthening of early literacy interventions, the enhancement of teacher training in remedial pedagogy, and the expansion of community literacy programs. By embracing an inclusive and child-responsive approach, educational stakeholders can collectively empower struggling readers, ensuring that every child has equitable access to the foundational literacy skills necessary for lifelong learning and academic advancement.

Acknowledgements

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