



# Influence of early identification of reading difficulties among primary school pupils in Niger state

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## Abstract

The study was aimed at exploring early identification of reading difficulties among primary school pupils in Niger state. The study laid its focus on identifying observable reading difficulties among primary school pupils, causes of reading difficulties and proffering strategies that will help these categories of children. Three research questions guided the study. The study adopted descriptive survey method. The sample for the study was 200 primary school teachers drawn randomly from 20 primary schools. A 38-item structured questionnaire instrument was used in collecting the data for the study. The instrument was validated by three experts and the reliability was determined using Pearson Product Moment Correlation Coefficient which yielded values of 0.77, 0.76, and 0.81 respectively. The data collected were analyzed using mean scores. Based on the analysis, the following findings amongst others were revealed as the observable reading difficulties in children in primary school: skipping of words, reading laboriously, poor hand and eye coordination. Causes of reading difficulties among primary school pupils include lack of clarity of the information being taught, poor instruction by the teacher, bad early experience and parental background.

Among the strategies teachers can use to help children are; early screening by the teacher, phonemic awareness, letter sound training, assessing children's reading development, supportive parents and clarity of information being taught. Following the findings, the study recommends that parents, guardians and classroom teachers should ensure early screening such as right identification and pronunciation of words among the primary school pupils and effective instructional materials are employed to ensure effective reading skills among the primary school pupils.

**Keywords:** Reading difficulties, Early identification, Primary school, Primary pupils

## Introduction

Education plays vital roles in the development of every nation. It is the bedrock of societal development; hence every society strives to invest huge resources in education (Adesina, 2011) [2]. This is to enhance socio-political, economic and technological advancement that will put it on a pedestal to compete favourably in the global world (Njoku, *et al.*, 2017) [22]. No wonder, Olaleye (2015) [24] asserts that the quality of education of a nation is crucial to its sustainable development as it forms the basis for human capital development and facilitates socio-economic empowerment of the citizenry. Therefore, such education supposed to ameliorate difficulties in the life of the citizens' right from the primary school level so as to be able to read and write effectively.

Reading is an important aspect of education that influences all other aspects of child's learning. Every child is entitled to early reading instruction, as it has been argued that most of what learners learn in their life time is controlled by their ability to read written documents, write what needs to be written and speak according to their ages (Yusuf 2015). It is therefore very important to teachers especially at early childhood education to give adequate time to learners. Instead of waiting for a child's natural maturation to unfold, teachers at this level of learning should endeavour to be acquainted with language and literacy development because children depend so much on their teachers who they see mostly as their role models. To

Hakemulder *et al.* (2024) [11] reading is not just decoding but sustained cognitive and emotional engagement. Children's speaking and listening skills leads the way for their reading and writing skills, together these language skills are the primary tools of the mind for all future learning. Walsh (2023) [32] recommend digital literacy, which refers to the combination of text and other multimedia resources available exclusively within an electronic digital context.

Good readers according to Enemuo *et al.* (2018) [6] are phonemically aware, understand the alphabetic principles, apply these skills in a rapid and fluent manner, possess strong vocabularies and syntactical and grammatical skills and relate reading to their own experiences. Difficulties in any of the mentioned skills can impede reading development (Lyon, 2000) [20]. Children who have stimulating literacy experiences from birth onward have an edge in vocabulary development, understanding the goals of reading and developing an awareness of print and literacy concepts. Conversely, the children who are most at risk for reading failure can enter kindergarten and primary schools without these early experiences. Buzan (2010) [4] emphasized that a good reader is one who is able to read fast. A good reader does not read aloud to himself or make movement with lips when reading. A good reader does not have to look back often or follow a print with a finger. The speed at which he or she read does not impair his or her comprehension, in fact, he or she understands better

because he or she is able to take longer stretches of meaning at a time.

The National Policy on Education (2013) <sup>[7]</sup> refers to primary education as the education given in educational institution to children aged 6 to 11 plus. It is considered as a foundational level which provides children with good preparatory ground for further education. The hallmark of achievement of primary education graduates is the ability to read and write. If this is not achieved, the primary education attainment of that child is said to not been fulfilled.

Children's speaking and listening skills leads the way for their reading and writing skills, together these language skills are the primary tools of the mind for all future learning. Olaofe (2013) <sup>[25]</sup> noted that teachers can only give learners knowledge they themselves have acquired. There is great need for teachers of primary school pupils to emphasis reading instruction at each learning level. Before acquiring reading knowledge and skills to transfer across the curriculum, pupils must have guidance and direction in reading.

A quality sequential programme of reading instruction assists pupils to read at optimal manner. Developing a love of reading is an important objective for all pupils to achieve. Individualized reading in which a pupil chooses which books to read based on interest and comprehension and word recognition growth should be encouraged. The teacher and pupils can discuss changes and improvements, if any, must be made to make for optimal reading progress (Yusuf, 2015). In view of this, teachers in training should be exposed to various problem solving techniques and methods of gathering information pertaining to reading problems in order to proffer solutions.

Difficulty with reading is by far the most common characteristics of children with learning disabilities. It is estimated that 90% of all children identified as learning disabled are referred for special education services because of reading problems (Kavale & Forness, 2000) <sup>[15]</sup>. Specific reading disability also called dyslexia is persistent deficit, not simply a developmental lag in linguistic or basic reading skills (Lyon, 2000) <sup>[20]</sup>. The international dyslexia association defines dyslexia as a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. It is characterize with accurate and or fluent word recognition and by poor spelling and decoding ability. These difficulties typically result from a deficit in phonological component of language that is often unexpected in relation to other cognitive abilities and the provision of effective classroom instruction (Lyon, Shaywitz and Shaywitz, 2003). Children who failed to learn how to read by the first grade tend to fall father and father behind their peers, not only in reading but in general academic achievement as well.

Recent research has revealed a great deal about the fundamental nature of children reading disabilities and the type of instruction most likely to prevent and remediate reading problems (Good, Simmons, & Kame'enui, 2001; Jenkins & O'Conner, 2002; National reading panel, 2000) <sup>[10, 13, 21]</sup>. In summary, Torgesen & Wagner (2002) <sup>[28]</sup> stated that the most severe reading problems of children with learning disabilities lie at the word rather than text level of processing (that is

inability to accurately and fluently decode single words) and the most common cognitive limitation on these children involves a dysfunction in the awareness of the phonological structure of words in oral language. Adebayo & Oladunjoye (2025) <sup>[1]</sup> whose study reveal teachers display of low/no tolerance for reading errors in class; parents limited time to assist in reading texts and other school assignments. Also Aliyu (2023) <sup>[3]</sup> study that revealed lack of child's interest, professional teachers, reading materials and absenteeism and Yang *et al* (2022) <sup>[35]</sup> that provided an estimation of worldwide DD prevalence in primary school children.

Children with severe reading disabilities, particularly those who are resistant to interventions effective for majority of struggling readers, may share a second processing problem in addition to deficit in phonological awareness. Many children who with dyslexia show a significant deficit in visual reading speed (the ability to rapidly name visual presented stimuli) compared with a typical reader (Lovett, Steinbach & Frijters, 2000; Wolf, Bower & Biddle, 2000) <sup>[19, 34]</sup>. When asked to state the names of visually presented materials such as letters, many children with reading disabilities have difficulty in rapidly retrieving and stating the names of letters, even though they know the letter name. The term double deficit hypothesis is used to describe children who exhibit underlying deficit in phonological awareness and rapid naming speed (Wolf & Bowers, 1999) <sup>[33]</sup>. Comprehension is the goal of reading and comprehension lies at the phrase, sentence, paragraph and story level, not in identifying single words but the inability to rapidly identify single words impairs comprehension. Secondly, assuring that both word recognition and comprehension consume finite cognitive processing resources, a struggling reader who devotes more processing resources to identifying words has fewer cognitive processing resources available for comprehension.

There are varieties of reasons why children have reading difficulties. These may include limited experiences with books, speech and hearing problems and poor phonemic awareness. Difficulties in phonemically awareness, poor understanding of the alphabetic principles and applying these skills in rapid and fluent manner can impede reading development. Perhaps, many poor readers have not consistently engaged in the language play that develops an awareness of sound structure and language patterns or that they have limited exposure to bed time and lap time reading. Children raised in poverty, those with limited proficiency in English, those from homes where the parents reading levels and practices are low, and those with speech, language and diary handicaps are at risk of reading failure. Just as in Liu, *et al* (2022) <sup>[18]</sup> study that home literacy environment is a modifiable risk factor for reading difficulty. Early identification and intervention are critical in the prevention of reading problems in children. To accurately identify these reading problems in children in primary schools, proper screening tools must be employed to identify children who are at risk for developing reading difficulties. Accurate identification of children who experience delays in attaining critical early literacy skill is needed to prevent reading problems becoming increasingly more resistance to

intervention and treatment after primary 3 in school. Given this, early literacy screening of young children for potential problems with beginning literacy skill is particularly important and serves a variety of purposes. It provides a mechanism for identifying those children who are at risk for reading failure, in need of a more thorough and detailed assessment, and in need of targeted intervention for improving literacy skills and reading acquisition so that they do not fall behind their peers. Lerner (2000) <sup>[17]</sup> argues that children come to school without the literacy experiences (reading, writing and numeracy skills), and some struggle because they have received poor or inadequate reading instruction. Dickinson and Neuman (2006) <sup>[5]</sup> point out that the socio economic and domestic environment of a child have an impact on learning to read. Dickinson and Neuman (2006) <sup>[5]</sup> stress that children raised in poverty, those with limited proficiency in English, those from in which the parents reading levels and practices are low, and those with speech, language and hearing difficulty, are at increased risk of reading failure because often they are not exposed to literacy practice. Children's experiences in the classroom, for example whether they are to read every day in the school, can play significant role in most type of reading difficulties. In addition, difficulty with reading may be linked to a person's genetic makeup and therefore passed on from one generation to the next. For instance, some cases of reading disability are associated with one or more reading alteration in gene that plays a role in potential brain development.

Identifying the children as struggling readers on basis of risk, rather than deficit early in their educational career and providing timely instruction in phonological awareness, has several benefits. Rather than waiting for children to fail, it helps to set them up to succeed. Vaughn, Linhan-thompson and Hickman (2003) <sup>[31]</sup> observed that most children who become poor readers experience early and continuing difficulties in learning how to accurately identify printed words. The classroom environment can either reinforce learner's positions as struggling, but properly designed, it will enable to take on a leadership role with their peers. On the basis of the above background the researcher is motivated to identify observable reading difficulties in primary school children, their causes and strategies teachers can use to help the children overcome these difficulties.

### Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to explore early identification of reading difficulties among primary school pupils in Niger state. The study was focused on identifying observable reading difficulties among primary school pupils, causes of reading difficulties and proffering strategies to be used to help these categories of children. This study specifically sought to:

- Identify the observable reading difficulties among primary school pupils
- Examine the causes of reading difficulties
- Determine strategies teachers can use to help pupils with reading difficulties in primary schools.

### Research questions

The following research questions were posed to guide this study:

- What are the observable reading difficulties among primary schools pupils?
- What are the causes of reading difficulties?
- What are the strategies that teachers can use to help pupils with reading difficulties in primary schools?

### Method

The study employed a descriptive survey research design. The area of study was Niger State, Nigeria. The population of the study was made up of 554 primary schools teachers in the three Senatorial Zones in Niger State (Source: SUBEB office Minna, Niger State, October, 2025). Primary school teachers were used for this study because they are responsible in teaching the children and guiding them on how to read and write. The study sample comprised of 200 primary school teachers from 20 schools. The sample was drawn through simple random sampling procedure.

A structured questionnaire instrument was used to collect data for the study. The instrument was titled "Early Identification of Reading Difficulties in Primary Schools (EIRDPS)". The questionnaire was structured on a four point scale with a rating options ranging from 4, 3, 2, to 1, depicting the following options; Strongly Agreed (SA), Agreed (A), Disagreed (D), and Strongly Disagreed (SD).

The instruments were face-validated by three (3) experts; one from Curriculum Department of Faculty of Education, Federal University of Education Kontagora and two from Primary Education Unit in the Department of Educational Foundations, Usman Danfodio University, Sokoto. The experts did a face validation of the instruments by examining the appropriateness of items, correctness of grammar, and suitability of the instruments in addressing the purpose of the study. Their inputs were used in improving the quality of the final versions of the instruments.

The validated instrument was pilot tested using test retest method. Copies of the questionnaire were administered on 20 primary school teachers in one of the Senatorial zone in Niger state who did not participate in the main study. There after two weeks later, the items were reshuffled and administered on the same teachers. The two scores were correlated using Pearson Product Correlation Coefficient which gave values of 0.77, 0.76, and 0.81 respectively. This value is high enough to be used for data collection.

### Data analysis

Data collected were analyzed using statistical mean scores to answer the research questions. Mean score of 2.50 and above was regarded as an indication of "acceptance" of an item while any mean score below 2.50 indicated "not accepted".

### Results

The results were presented in Tables in line with the research questions formulated for the study.

**Research question one:** What are the observable reading difficulties among primary schools pupils?

**Table 1:** Mean ratings of primary school teachers on observable signs in reading difficulties

S/N	Items observable reading difficulties identified are	Mean	Std Dev.	Remark
1	He squints, blinks and frowns a lot when reading	1.8550	.35298	Disagreed
2	He guesses words while reading	2.4200	1.04292	Disagreed
3	He skips words	3.0450	.87848	Agreed
4	Sometimes he reads laboriously	3.1600	.67616	Agreed
5	He shows signs of difficulty in distinguishing letters of the alphabets	2.8850	.82151	Agreed
6	He exhibits poor hand and eye coordination	2.7600	.81449	Agreed
7	He can match like words	3.1300	.90398	Agreed
8	Reads with increased sign of energy clenching their fist, taking deep breath and smearing	2.7600	.95963	Agreed
9	Inability to decode	2.8250	.84136	Agreed
10	Inability to comprehend	2.7650	.91246	Agreed
11	He cannot read easily	2.6600	.85059	Agreed
12	He reads materials with expression	2.9400	.85402	Agreed
13	He jerks while reading	3.0100	.86534	Agreed
14	He does not recognize words rapidly with little attention to the word appearance	2.7330	.87651	Agreed
15	The child cannot read words by sight automatically	2.8400	.88127	Agreed
16	He confuses words that sound alike	2.9650	1.04336	Agreed

Table 1 showed that respondents agreed that items 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 15, and 16 whose means were above 2.50 are observable signs in reading difficulties. Table 1 further showed that respondents agreed that squints, blinks, frowns and guesses of words are not observable signs in reading difficulty

as items 1 and 2, have mean scores of 1.8550 and 2.420 respectively which were below the decision mean of 2.50.

**Research question two:** What are the causes of reading difficulties?

**Table 2:** Mean ratings of primary school teachers on the causes of reading difficulties

S/N	Items cause of observable reading difficulties includes	Mean	Standard deviation	Remark
17	The instructional materials are ineffective	2.5000	1.0562	Agreed
18	The design of the classroom curriculum is flawed	3.2400	.74510	Agreed
19	Lack of clarity of the information being taught	2.9450	1.04760	Agreed
20	Poor instruction by teacher	2.5000	1.04184	Agreed
21	Bad early experience	2.5550	.94946	Agreed
22	Poor learning condition at the school	2.4800	1.02217	Disagreed
23	Inexperienced teacher	3.3950	.79507	Agreed
24	Parental background	3.3800	.72680	Agreed
25	Financial inability	2.9500	.98608	Agreed
26	Ill-health of the child	3.0550	.89778	Agreed
27	Overcrowding of pupils in classroom	2.7100	.99036	Agreed

Table 2 showed that respondents agreed that item 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, 23, 24, 25, 26, and 27 having scored above 2050 which were above decision mean, indicating that these items are causes of reading difficulty. However, the disagreed on item 22

which were not up to 2.50.

**Research question three:** What are the strategies that teachers can use to help children with reading difficulties in primary schools?

**Table 3:** Mean ratings of primary school teachers on the strategies that teachers can use to help children with reading difficulties in primary school

S/N	Items strategies teachers can use to help children with reading difficulties	Mean	Standard deviation	Remark
28	Early screening by the teacher	2.8350	.96188	Agreed
29	Phonemic awareness	2.9050	.95469	Agreed
30	Letter sound training	3.3200	.67944	Agreed
31	Assessing children's reading development	3.2450	.70653	Agreed
32	Employing qualified instructors	3.4550	.67079	Agreed
33	Good learning condition in the school and at home	3.4200	.61305	Agreed
34	Supportive parents	3.5100	.62569	Agreed
35	Clarity of information being taught	3.5150	.62308	Agreed
36	Effective instructional materials	3.3950	.61515	Agreed
37	Appropriate classroom curriculum	3.1600	.62004	Agreed
38	Good health of the child	3.5100	.62579	Agreed

Table 3 showed that respondents agreed that items 28, 29, 30, 31, 32, 33, 34, 35, 36, 37, and 38 having scores above 2.50 which were decision mean, indicating that these items can provide solutions to reading difficulties in primary schools.

## Discussion

The findings showed observable signs in reading difficulties thus; skipping words, laborious reading, difficulty in distinguishing letters of alphabets, poor hands and eye coordination, unable to match like words, reading with increased sign of energy, inability to comprehend, reading with expression, jerks while reading and confusion of words that sound alike. These findings are in line with Yang *et al* (2022) [35] that provided an estimation of worldwide DD prevalence in primary school children and Vaughn, Linan-Thompson and Hickman (2003) [31] who observed that most children who become poor readers experience early and continuing difficulties in learning how to accurately identify printed words. Torgesen and Wagner (2002) [28] stated that most severe reading problems of children with learning difficulties lie at the word rather than text level of processing.

The result of the findings further revealed that that squinting, blinking and frowning when reading as well as guessing words while reading was not signs of reading difficulties, as this might be inability to see the print clearly or word pronunciations. These may include limited experiences with books as children come to school without the literacy experiences.

The findings of the study revealed that ineffective instructional materials, flawed classroom curriculum, lack of clarity of the information being taught, poor instruction by the teacher, bad early experience, inexperienced teacher, parental background, financial inability, ill health of the child and overcrowding of pupils in the class are causes of reading difficulties among children. The findings is also in agreement with Adebayo & Oladunjoye (2025) [2] whose study reveal that continuing difficulties in learning how to accurately identify printed words, teachers display of low/no tolerance for reading errors in class; parents limited time to assist in reading texts and other school assignments; pupils' after school activities do not give time to improve their reading ability; students had no extra lesson for reading after school hours; students lacked the interest to improve on their reading; bad/poor vision and peer shaming are among as the causes leading to reading complications among children in primary school. Also, the study is in agreement with Aliyu (2023) [3] study that revealed lack of child's interest, professional teachers, reading materials and absenteeism were the major causes of reading difficulty. From the foregoing, it can be construed that an elimination of factors that causes difficulties in reading will likely result in a decrease in children problem of reading.

The result of the study shows that early screening by the teacher, phonemic awareness, letter sound training, assessing children's reading development, employing qualified instructors, good learning condition in the school and at home, supportive parents, clarity of information being taught, effective instructional materials, appropriate classroom

curriculum, and good health of the child are the strategies that teachers can use to help children with reading difficulties in primary schools. These findings corroborate with Invernizzi, *et al*, (2005) [12] that observed that beginning screening young children should take place before formal literacy instruction begins. Justice (2002) [14] belief underpinning this stance is that the prevention of reading problems can only be realized if early literacy skills are assessed before children come in the mechanics of formal literacy instruction and in Dickson and Newman (2006) direct instruction in phonemic awareness as a statistically significant gains in word reading, reading fluency, and reading comprehension. The findings also lend support to the findings of the study by Usman (2017) [30] who reported that phonemic awareness instructional strategy had significant effect in improving the reading ability and reading behaviours of the pupils. The above findings therefore suggest that any positive improvement in the structured of the classroom, low-cost modifications and shared storybook reading can enhance print awareness in at risk preschoolers and may serve as practical strategy for early literacy prevention in home and classroom settings.

## Conclusion

Based on the findings of this study, it was concluded that skipping words, laborious reading, difficulty in distinguishing letters of alphabets, poor hands and eye coordination, unable to match like words, reading with increased sign of energy, inability to comprehend, reading with expression, jerks while reading and confusion of words that sound alike are the observable signs of reading difficulties. Also, ineffective instructional materials, flawed classroom curriculum, lack of clarity of the information being taught, poor instruction by the teacher, bad early experience, inexperienced teacher, parental background, financial inability, ill health of the child and overcrowding of pupils in the class are causes of reading difficulties among children. Furthermore, it was concluded that squints, blinks, frowns and guesses of words are not observable signs in reading difficulty. Likewise, the study concluded that early screening by the teacher, phonemic awareness, letter sound training, assessing children's reading development, employing qualified instructors, good learning condition in the school and at home, supportive parents, clarity of information being taught, effective instructional materials, appropriate classroom curriculum, and good health of the child are the strategies that teachers can use to help children with reading difficulties in primary schools.

## Recommendations

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations are made:

- The classroom curriculum should be well designed to meet the need of the children and the information being taught by the teacher should be clear and also good instruction should be given by the teacher.
- The teacher should help the children with reading difficulties in primary schools by early screening in phonemic awareness, letter sound among others.

- Parents, guardians and classroom teachers should ensure early screening such as right identification and pronunciation of words among primary pupils.
- School authorities should ensure that qualified teachers and effective instructors are employed to ensure effective learning skills among the pupils.
- Continuing training for teachers should be encouraged to enhance their knowledge and skills in both oral and reading to make them effective teachers on whom learners can model.
- Parents should assist and monitor their wards in carrying out their homework and ensure right pronunciation of words in a friendly manner.
- Parents should also ensure adequate balanced diet for their wards in other to ensure proper development of the brain/central nervous system.

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