

Reading Difficulties among Grade Three Learners in Select Schools of Opol West District

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Abstract

Reading difficulties continue to be a common challenge in elementary education, as they can affect a child's learning progress and slow the development of important literacy skills needed for future success. This study was conducted to determine the reading difficulties of grade three learners in the Division of Misamis Oriental for the School Year 2023-2024. Specifically, this aimed to describe the respondents' profiles; find the learners level of reading difficulties; and determine the significant relationship between the respondents' reading difficulties and each of their profiles. A total of 188 learners were selected as respondents of the study. Utilizing a descriptive-correlational research design and a random sampling technique, the researcher employed researcher-made and adapted questionnaires to assess both learner profiles and reading performance. Descriptive statistics such as frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and Pearson r were used to analyze and interpret the data gathered in the study.

The findings revealed that most of the respondents were 8 years old, female, had college-graduate parents, had normal nutritional status, owned cell phones, and used gadgets for 5–6 hours. Further, the respondents' level of reading difficulties was "Easy," with vocabulary as the highest and fluency as the lowest. Moreover, there was no significant relationship between the respondents' reading difficulties and their profile variables, except for sex. The study concludes that vocabulary plays a big role in reading comprehension and that pupils have a good foundation in basic word recognition. It is recommended that teachers provide regular guided oral reading practice, repeated reading activities, and individualized support to improve learners' reading fluency.

Keywords: reading difficulties, phonics, phonological awareness, vocabulary, fluency

1. Introduction

Developing reading skills is an essential goal of primary education because it builds literacy and prepares learners for academic and career success. However, many Filipino students continue to struggle in reading, as shown in international assessments where a large number fail to meet minimum proficiency levels. These difficulties also affect performance in other subjects. Various factors contribute to reading challenges such as age, parents' educational background, nutrition, and technology use. Although early literacy has been widely studied, there is still limited focus on Grade Three learners in semi-rural areas

like Opol West District, highlighting the need for further investigation and targeted programs to improve reading skills.

This study is anchored on Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development theory, which emphasizes the importance of guidance from teachers and peers in helping children learn more effectively. Reading proficiency involves skills such as phonemic awareness, phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension, yet learners often experience difficulties in pronunciation, reading speed, word recognition, and understanding texts, especially when vocabulary is limited. This study aims to examine how learner factors such as age, sex, parental education, nutrition, and gadget usage are related to reading difficulties among Grade Three learners in selected schools, with the goal of supporting more effective reading interventions.

2. Research Questions

This study aimed to determine the level of reading difficulties among Grade Three learners in select schools of Opol West District in the Division of Misamis Oriental for the School Year 2023-2024.

Specifically, it sought to answer the following questions:

1. What is the respondents' profile in terms of age, sex, parents' highest educational attainment, nutritional status, gadget owned, and frequency of using gadget?
2. What is the respondents' level of reading difficulties based on phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency?
3. Is there a significant relationship between the respondents' reading difficulties and each of their profile?

Significance

The results of this study would be beneficial to teachers, pupils, parents, administrators, and researchers. It may help schools design seminars and workshops to improve teachers' instructional skills and better address reading difficulties among learners. Teachers may also gain deeper understanding of pupils' reading behaviors, which can guide more effective instruction and support. For pupils, the findings may help them overcome reading challenges early and develop stronger reading skills needed for academic success and personal growth. The study may also help parents realize the importance of their role in developing their children's reading abilities by providing proper guidance, discipline, and regular monitoring of reading progress at home. A more supportive home learning environment with appropriate reading materials can be encouraged. In addition, the findings may serve as a useful reference for future researchers in exploring reading difficulties and comprehension levels among learners.

Scope and Limitations

This study focused on the reading difficulties of one hundred eighty-eight (188) Grade Three learners in select schools of Opol West District, Division of Misamis Oriental, during the School Year 2023-2024. The respondents were one hundred eighty-eight (188) Grade Three learners. The research examines reading difficulties based on four key areas: phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency. Additionally, it explores how the respondents' profiles, including age, sex, parents' highest educational attainment, nutritional status, gadget ownership, and frequency of gadget use, correlate with their reading difficulties.

The study is limited to the data gathered within the specified timeframe and location. It relies on reading assessments and questionnaires as primary research instruments, which may not capture other external factors influencing reading development, such as home learning environment or teaching methodologies. Furthermore, the study does not aim to establish causation but rather to identify possible relationships between the selected variables and reading difficulties among the respondents.

Literature Review

Respondents' Profile

Marja Kristiina et al. (2021), Heraña and Azarias (2024), and Roque et al. (2023) found that reading development is shaped by age-related cognitive growth, early literacy skills, and parental background. Early skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary, and letter knowledge strongly predict later reading performance, with learners showing varied reading profiles from struggling to proficient. Parental education also plays a key role, as studies (Santos, 2020; Reyes & Gomez, 2021; Geske & Ozola, 2020) show that more educated parents are more involved in literacy support, leading to better reading outcomes. The World Health Organization (2021), UNICEF (2002), and Taras (2020) highlighted that nutrition significantly affects brain development and learning capacity, with malnourished children showing weaker reading and academic performance. Meanwhile, Zain et al. (2022), Calixto (2025), and Cantao et al. (2025) reported that gadget use influences attention and comprehension, where excessive use can negatively affect reading skills. Similarly, UNESCO (2023), Panjeti Madan and Ranganathan (2023), and Mueller and Oppenheimer (2024) noted that heavy non-academic gadget use is linked to reduced vocabulary, weaker comprehension, and lower sustained attention. Overall, these studies show that cognitive, environmental, nutritional, and digital factors all influence children's reading development and academic success.

Reading Difficulties

Alonzo and Kim (2024) and Kilag et al. (2023) found that reading difficulties among elementary learners are mainly caused by weak phonemic awareness, vocabulary, decoding, fluency, and low reading motivation. Learners with limited foundational skills and reading practice often struggle in both comprehension and fluency, especially when exposed to inadequate reading environments and materials. They also noted that many pupils experience multiple reading problems at once, highlighting the need for structured intervention programs.

Similarly, Ehri et al. (2023), Foorman et al. (2022), and Ward (2022) emphasized that phonics and phonemic awareness are critical to early reading development, with systematic phonics instruction improving decoding and fluency, and strong phonemic awareness supporting better comprehension.

Rasinski and Hoffman (2022), Hudson et al. (2020), and Agtarap et al. (2023) further stressed the importance of vocabulary and reading fluency in achieving reading success. Their studies show that fluent readers are more confident and engaged, while weak fluency leads to avoidance and poor comprehension. Repeated reading strategies were found effective in improving fluency and understanding, while limited vocabulary remains a major barrier, especially for ESL learners. Overall, these studies show that reading difficulties are multifaceted and require targeted instruction in phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency.

3. Methodology

Research Design

This study utilized the descriptive-correlational research design to examine the reading difficulties of Grade 3 learners in select schools of Opol West District and their relationship with various factors, including learner-related, teacher-related, home, and school factors. A descriptive approach was employed to systematically document and analyze the existing reading challenges among the respondents, providing a clear picture of their reading proficiency levels. Meanwhile, the correlational aspect of the study aimed to determine the extent to which the respondents' profiles, such as age, socioeconomic background, and prior literacy exposure, and external factors influence their reading difficulties.

According to Fluet (2020), descriptive research involves defining traits, recording present conditions, and testing specific hypotheses to understand a particular phenomenon. In this study, the descriptive component was used to gather data on the nature and extent of reading difficulties, while the correlational component was used to assess the relationships between the learners' reading challenges and various contributing factors. By employing this approach, the study provided valuable insights into the root causes of reading difficulties, which can guide educators and policymakers in designing targeted interventions to improve literacy among Grade Three learners.

Participants

This study involved nine (9) elementary schools from the Opol West District, Division of Misamis Oriental, for the School Year 2023-2024. A total of one hundred eighty-eight (188) Grade Three pupils were selected as respondents from these schools, ensuring a diverse representation of learners. These respondents were chosen to provide a comprehensive understanding of the different levels of reading difficulties experienced by Grade Three pupils.

Data Collection

The questionnaire was designed to gather valuable insights into the reading difficulties of Grade Three learners in selected schools of Opol West District, Division of Misamis Oriental. It is divided into two parts: The first part is a researcher - made questionnaire that collects the respondents' profile, including age, sex, parents' highest educational attainment, nutritional status, type of gadget owned, and frequency of gadget use. The second part inquires about the respondents' reading difficulties based on phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency. This is based on the DepEd K to 12 Curriculum Guide Competencies for English 3. It consists of forty (40) researcher-made indicators, categorized into phonics (10 items), phonemic awareness (10 items), vocabulary (10 items), and fluency (10 items). This section assesses learners' reading difficulties using a Likert Scale to ensure a structured and measurable evaluation.

Data Analysis

The data gathered was recorded and analyzed using the following statistical tools. Descriptive statistics such as frequency and percentage were used to determine the respondents' profile in terms of age, gender, family monthly income, and parents' highest educational attainment. Frequency, percentage and mean, standard deviation was employed to determine the respondents' level of difficulties based on phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency. To determine the significant relationship between the respondents' level of difficulties and their profile, Pearson Product-Moment Correlation was utilized.

4. Results and Discussions

Problem 1. What is the respondents' profile in terms of age, sex, and parents' highest educational attainment, nutritional status, gadget owned, and frequency of using gadget?

Table 1
Distribution of Respondents Profile in terms of Age

Category	Frequency	Percent
10 years old	9	4.79
9 years old	53	28.19
8 years old	126	67.02
Total	188	100.00

Table 1 shows that most respondents were 8 years old, representing 67.02 percent of the total. This indicates that most Grade 3 learners in the selected schools of Opol West District are at the expected age level, as children are typically 6 years old in Grade 1 and 8 years old in Grade 3. This suggests that many learners followed the normal progression of schooling, which allows teachers to design age-appropriate reading lessons. However, age alone does not guarantee reading proficiency since cognitive skills and learning support also play important roles in reading development.

The smallest group of respondents were 10 years old, representing 4.79 percent. Their presence in Grade 3 may be due to late school entry, grade repetition, or personal and family challenges. Being older than classmates may affect confidence and participation, which can also influence reading performance. This highlights the need for teacher intervention such as individualized instruction, small group activities, and engaging learning strategies to support struggling learners. It also reinforces the importance of effective teaching methods, as studies suggest that instructional approaches and teacher factors have a strong impact on reading proficiency regardless of learner characteristics.

Table 2
Distribution of Respondents' Profiles in terms of Sex

Category	Frequency	Percent
Male	72	38.30
Female	116	61.70
Total	188	100.00

Table 2 shows the distribution of respondents in terms of sex, where the majority were female with 61.70 percent while males comprised 38.30 percent. This indicates that more girls participated in the study compared to boys. Previous research suggests that girls often develop reading skills earlier due to stronger language processing skills and greater patience in reading tasks. Support from parents and teachers may also contribute to the stronger reading performance observed among female learners. However, differences in reading ability may also reflect varying learning needs and preferences between boys and girls.

The lower number of male respondents suggests that boys may face more challenges or less interest in reading activities, possibly due to lower confidence or lack of motivation at home and in school. Boys may also respond better to interactive and hands on learning strategies rather than stext-based activities.

This highlights the need for teachers to use varied instructional approaches to engage male learners and improve their reading skills. Parents also play an important role in encouraging reading at home through support and exposure to reading materials. Overall, reading proficiency is influenced not only by gender but also by other factors such as teaching methods, home environment, and learner motivation.

Table 3
Distribution of Respondents' Profiles in terms of Parents' Highest Educational Attainment

Category	Father		Mother	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
College Graduate	133	70.74	126	67.02
College Level	35	18.62	41	21.81
High School Graduate	13	6.91	17	9.04
High School Level	4	2.13	4	2.13
Elementary Graduate	2	1.06	0	0
Elementary Level	1	0.53	0	0
Total	188	100.00	188	100.00

Table 3 presents the respondents' profile in terms of parents' educational attainment. For fathers, most respondents, 70.74 percent, had college graduate fathers, suggesting that higher education levels may be linked to better employment and the ability to provide learning materials and support for their children. Educated fathers are also more likely to value reading and encourage academic growth at home, which may contribute to stronger reading performance among learners. In contrast, only a very small percentage, 1.06 percent, had fathers with only primary education, which may limit their capacity to provide academic support and learning resources at home, possibly affecting their children's reading development.

For mothers, 67.02 percent were college graduates, indicating a strong potential for home support in reading through guidance, access to materials, and literacy related activities. Meanwhile, only 2.13 percent of mothers reached high school level, which may limit the support they can provide due to fewer resources and other responsibilities at home. Overall, the findings suggest that higher parental education is associated with better reading support and development among children, while lower educational attainment may require stronger school-based interventions to help learners improve their reading skills.

Table 4
Distribution of Respondents' Profiles in terms of Nutritional Status

Category	Frequency	Percent
Normal	178	94.68
Wasted	6	3.19
Severely Wasted	4	2.13
Stunted	0	0
Obese	0	0
Total	188	100.00

Table 4 presents the respondents' nutritional status, showing that 94.68 percent had a normal nutritional status. This indicates that most Grade 3 learners were receiving adequate food intake to support their

growth, health, and learning needs. Proper nutrition helps improve concentration, energy levels, and cognitive development, which are important for reading and overall academic performance. Although most learners were well nourished, the findings suggest that nutrition alone is not enough to ensure strong reading skills, as other factors such as teaching methods, learning environment, and motivation also play important roles.

A small percentage, 2.13 percent, were severely wasted, indicating undernutrition among some learners. These children may experience low energy, frequent illness, poor attendance, and reduced attention in class, all of which can negatively affect reading development. Poor nutrition can also weaken cognitive abilities such as memory and focus, making it harder for learners to keep up with lessons. This highlights the importance of addressing both health and learning needs through proper nutrition programs, as well as continued support from schools and families to improve learners' academic performance, especially in reading.

Table 5
Distribution of Respondents' Profiles in terms of Gadget Owned

Category	Frequency	Percent
Cellphone	160	85.11
Tablet	17	9.04
Laptop	4	2.13
I-pod	0	0
Desktop	7	3.72
Total	188	100.00

Table 5 shows the respondents' gadget ownership, where 85.11 percent owned a cellphone, making it the most common device among learners. This is mainly because cellphones are more affordable, accessible, portable, and widely available compared to other gadgets. Parents often provide cellphones for communication and learning purposes, as they can access educational applications and online resources that may support reading development. However, the small screen size and possible distractions may also affect reading practice, especially when learners are exposed to long texts or non-educational content.

Only 2.13 percent of respondents owned a laptop, making it the least common gadget. This is due to its higher cost and limited accessibility for many families, as well as the preference for more practical devices like cellphones. While laptops offer better reading visibility and access to richer learning materials, their availability is often limited in households. Overall, gadget ownership reflects both opportunities and challenges in supporting learners' reading development, where proper guidance from parents and teachers is essential to maximize the educational benefits of technology.

Table 6
Distribution of Respondents' Profiles in terms of Frequency of Using Gadget

Category	Frequency	Percent
5-6hours	128	5.32
3-4 hours	50	26.60
1-2 hours	10	68.09
Total	188	100.00

Table 6 shows that most respondents, 68.09 percent, used gadgets for 1 to 2 hours. This suggests that most learners had limited screen time, often guided by parents and teachers who set rules on proper gadget use. In many cases, children were allowed to use gadgets only after finishing their schoolwork. Shorter gadget use may help reduce stress and provide learning support, but it still requires proper monitoring to prevent overuse that could affect focus, rest, and learning habits.

Only 5.32 percent of respondents used gadgets for 5 to 6 hours, indicating that very few learners had prolonged screen time. This may be because they were also engaged in school tasks and household responsibilities, and parents often limited gadget use due to concerns about health and academic performance. Excessive screen time may reduce opportunities for reading practice and affect concentration, sleep, and eye health. This highlights the importance of balanced gadget use, where parents and teachers work together to ensure that learners develop healthy study habits and maintain time for reading activities.

Problem 2. What is the respondents' level of reading difficulties based on phonics, phonemic awareness, vocabulary, and fluency?

Table 7

Summary Distribution of Learners' Level of Reading Difficulty

Variable	Mean	SD	Interpretation
Phonics	4.44	0.87	Easy
Phonemic Awareness	4.58	0.60	Very Easy
Vocabulary	4.93	0.37	Very Easy
Fluency	3.79	1.16	Easy
Overall	4.43	0.75	Easy

Table 7 shows that the overall level of reading difficulty among Grade Three learners was interpreted as Easy, with a mean of 4.43. This indicates that most pupils did not experience major difficulties in reading, which may be attributed to exposure to reading materials and the teaching strategies used by teachers to help learners understand words and sentences. However, even if the level appears easy, continuous support is still necessary to ensure learners do not experience learning gaps in higher grade levels and to further strengthen their reading skills for future academic demands.

Among the specific reading areas, vocabulary obtained the highest rating and was interpreted as Very Easy, showing that learners generally understood word meanings due to exposure to stories, classroom activities, media, and support from teachers and parents. In contrast, fluency received the lowest rating, although still interpreted as Easy, suggesting that learners may struggle with reading smoothly and quickly due to limited reading practice, slow decoding, and lack of exposure to varied texts. This highlights the need for continued fluency activities such as repeated reading and guided oral reading to improve speed, accuracy, and overall reading confidence.

Problem 3. Is there a significant relationship between the respondents’ reading difficulties and each of their profile?

Table 8
Result of the Test on the Relationship Between the Respondents
Reading Difficulties and Each of Their Profile

Respondents' Profile		Reading Difficulty				Overall
		Phonics	Phonemic Awareness	Fluency	Vocabulary	
Age	Pearson r	0.100	0.095	-0.062	0.069	0.051
	p-value	0.172	0.195	0.401	0.348	0.484
		NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Sex	Pearson r	0.086	0.214	0.038	0.199	0.169
	p-value	0.241	0.003	0.601	0.006	0.020
		NS	S	NS	S	S
Father's Educational Attainment	Pearson r	-0.017	-0.104	-0.149	0.106	-0.112
	p-value	0.820	0.156	0.041	0.146	0.126
		NS	NS	S	NS	NS
Mother's Educational Attainment	Pearson r	-0.028	-0.148	0.074	-0.284	-0.069
	p-value	0.702	0.043	0.313	<0.001	0.346
		NS	S	NS	S	NS
Nutritional Status	Pearson r	-0.003	0.103	0.109	0.046	0.107
	p-value	0.964	0.160	0.138	0.534	0.145
		NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
Gadget Owned	Pearson r	0.004	0.035	0.094	-0.229	0.026
	p-value	0.952	0.635	0.201	0.002	0.718
		NS	NS	NS	S	NS
Frequent of Using Gadget	Pearson r	0.043	0.052	0.122	0.130	0.136
	p-value	0.556	0.480	0.095	0.074	0.062
		NS	NS	NS	NS	NS

Table 8 shows that there is no significant relationship between learners’ profiles and reading difficulties, except for sex. This means that only sex has a weak but significant relationship with reading difficulties, while age, parents’ educational attainment, nutritional status, gadget ownership, and gadget use showed no significant relationship. The result suggests that boys and girls may differ slightly in how they experience reading, possibly due to differences in learning styles, exposure to reading materials, and social

expectations. It also implies that instructional approaches should consider gender differences to better support both groups in developing reading skills.

Since other variables were not significantly related to reading difficulties, the findings indicate that factors such as age, parental education, nutrition, and gadget use may not directly determine reading performance in this study. Instead, teaching strategies and learning support appear to play a more important role in improving reading skills. This highlights the need for effective reading interventions, consistent practice, and engaging instructional methods to help all learners, regardless of background, develop stronger reading abilities.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

Conclusion

The following conclusions were drawn from the research results. First, the students did well in vocabulary but did poorly in fluency. Second, there was no correlation between the respondents' profiles and the difficulties they encountered while reading; although there was a weak correlation between respondents' genders and their reading difficulties. Therefore, while the students' reading skills have improved, there may be other factors affecting their reading skills, including fluency and gender, and ongoing intervention is needed to improve the reading skills of Grade Three students.

Recommendations

Based on the results of this study, the following recommendations can be made:

1. First, teachers should devote more time to teaching phonology and fluency by providing a variety of instructional activities like reading sessions, identifying sounds, and using oral reading strategies.
2. School administrators should use reading intervention approaches to address phonological and fluency issues, and provide training on addressing early reading difficulties to teachers.
3. Learners should participate in guided reading sessions as well as phonemic awareness and fluency activities regardless of their gender, since there is a significant correlation between gender and reading difficulties.

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