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Challenges in developing beginning reading skills among key stage 1 learners: Perspectives of teachers, parents, and learners

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ABSTRACT

Beginning reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners pose significant challenges to early literacy development, arising from the interplay of learner-related, instructional, and contextual/home factors. This qualitative study explored the experiences of 17 learners, 3 teachers, and 3 parents at Elizabeth Elementary School to identify factors contributing to early reading challenges. Semi-structured interviews revealed that learner-related issues, including deficits in phonological awareness, low reading fluency, and limited motivation, impede the acquisition of foundational reading skills. Instructional limitations, such as inadequate scaffolding, insufficient individualized support, and scarcity of reading materials, further constrain learners' opportunities for practice and skill development. Contextual and home-related factors—including low parental engagement, parental illiteracy, minimal literacy exposure at home, and socioeconomic constraints—exacerbate reading difficulties. The findings underscore the necessity for comprehensive, context-specific interventions that integrate targeted instruction, teacher professional development, and enhanced parental involvement. Addressing these cognitive, instructional, and environmental dimensions simultaneously can improve early literacy outcomes, mitigate persistent reading difficulties, and support sustainable educational engagement, consistent with the principles of the Simple View of Reading.

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Introduction

Early reading difficulties are strongly linked to deficits in oral language skills, such as phonological awareness and rapid naming, which predict later reading comprehension problems beyond word decoding (Hulme & Snowling, 2016). Kindergarten measures of language ability and response to language intervention uniquely predict third-grade reading comprehension difficulties, highlighting the importance of early screening and targeted support (Catinka et al., 2024). Struggling readers often experience increased internalizing symptoms, such as distress, which can affect their responses to

Research on second graders shows common challenges in letter recognition, word comprehension, and reading fluency, emphasizing the need for effective teaching strategies tailored to early reading difficulties (Fatonah et al., 2025). Early identification efforts benefit from assessing a broad range of phonological and language skills to accurately predict reading outcomes and guide interventions. Overall, early oral language deficits are a primary cause of both decoding and comprehension reading disorders, underscoring the necessity of early, language-focused interventions to improve reading success (Hulme & Snowling, 2016).

Persistent reading challenges among early elementary learners, such as slow and inaccurate decoding, limited word recognition, and poor fluency and comprehension, are common and significantly hinder engagement with grade-level texts and classroom participation (Fatonah et al., 2025). These difficulties often stem from both internal factors, such as low motivation, memory weaknesses, and lack of attention, and external factors, including limited parental support, insufficient literacy resources, and unengaging teaching methods (Casicas et al., 2023). Research shows that students with ongoing reading struggles frequently experience increased internalizing symptoms such as distress, which can further impede their academic progress and response to interventions (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2004).

Early identification and targeted interventions, including structured literacy programs and one-to-one or small group tutoring, have demonstrated positive effects on reading outcomes, especially when integrated within a response-to-intervention framework. However, challenges remain in identifying problems and consistently implementing effective strategies, highlighting the need for stronger collaboration among teachers, parents, and schools to support learners (Cañete & Eswan, 2025). Addressing motivational and behavioral barriers, as well as skill deficits, is critical to improving reading performance and fostering long-term educational engagement in struggling readers.

Beginning reading difficulties among young learners arise from a complex interplay of cognitive, instructional, and contextual factors. Core cognitive barriers include phonological processing deficits, particularly weaknesses in phonemic awareness and letter–sound correspondence, which impair the ability to connect sounds to print (Anku, 2024), as these deficits hinder learners' foundational decoding skills. Variations in oral language proficiency and vocabulary also limit comprehension even when decoding is adequate. Instructional challenges such as inadequate teaching methods, insufficient teacher training, and a lack of engaging or appropriate materials further hinder early reading development (Anku, 2024). Contextual factors include limited parental support and engagement in literacy activities, low motivation, and socio-economic disparities that restrict access to reading resources, all of which exacerbate reading difficulties (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2004). Effective interventions emphasize collaboration between teachers and families, individualized guidance, and interactive, student-centered learning strategies to address these multifaceted challenges.

Given the multifaceted nature of beginning reading difficulties, including cognitive, instructional, parental, and environmental factors, it is crucial to investigate how these elements interact at Elizabeth Elementary School. Previous research highlights that internal factors, such as low student interest and

limited parental support, combined with external influences, including insufficient curriculum emphasis and a lack of reading materials, significantly contribute to early reading challenges (Mimbar, 2025). However, there is limited understanding of the specific experiences of learners, teaching practices, and home literacy influences unique to this setting. Qualitative exploration can generate context-specific, evidence-based insights to inform targeted instructional strategies, effective teaching materials, and parental engagement practices. Such research aims to improve early literacy development, enhance academic outcomes, and guide educators and policymakers in addressing persistent reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners. This approach aligns with findings that emphasize the importance of collaboration between schools and families to support struggling readers effectively

Literature review

This literature review examines learner-related, instructional, and home factors that contribute to beginning reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners.

Foundational linguistic skill barriers in early reading

The acquisition of initial reading skills during Key Stage 1 is frequently hindered by a range of interconnected linguistic, instructional, and contextual factors. Among these, the most commonly reported challenges are those associated with phonological and phonemic awareness, which are widely acknowledged as essential predictors of early reading achievement. Students who struggle to recognize, segment, or manipulate sounds in spoken language often show delays in decoding and word recognition. Consequently, research indicates that children who begin their early education with poor phonemic awareness face an increased risk of enduring reading difficulties unless early, focused interventions are implemented (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020).

Closely linked to these phonological issues are the challenges in decoding and utilizing the alphabetic principle. Beginning readers are required to form consistent associations between letters and their respective sounds; however, those who find it difficult to decode unfamiliar words often perceive reading as laborious and imprecise. Similarly, studies reveal that decoding difficulties in Key Stage 1 are significantly associated with limited exposure to print and inadequate mastery of grapheme–phoneme correspondences, which hinder the development of automatic word recognition (Kang & Mikyung, 2020).

In addition, reading fluency and automaticity pose considerable challenges for young learners. Fluency, which includes reading speed, accuracy, and appropriate expression, is crucial for effective reading comprehension. Learners with low fluency often devote significant cognitive resources to processing words, thereby limiting their ability to comprehend text. In Key Stage 1, the development of fluency remains in its early stages, particularly among students who receive little guided reading practice, leading to diminished confidence and understanding during oral reading activities (Kang & Mikyung, 2020).

Likewise, vocabulary knowledge and reading comprehension present ongoing challenges in the development of early literacy. Students with limited vocabulary find it difficult to extract meaning from texts, which adversely affects their comprehension. Research consistently indicates that children from

households with limited print exposure or low literacy levels start school with reduced vocabularies, thereby putting them at a disadvantage in reading comprehension activities. Moreover, comprehension challenges intensify when students focus excessively on decoding, limiting their capacity to participate in higher-order meaning-making processes (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020).

Instructional and classroom factors affecting reading acquisition

Beyond individual skill deficits, contextual and instructional elements play a crucial role in the development of early reading. The literacy environment at home is vital to early reading acquisition, as factors such as parental education, access to books, and shared reading experiences contribute to the development of phonemic awareness and vocabulary. Studies show that children who frequently participate in shared reading at home develop stronger early literacy skills, whereas socioeconomic limitations often restrict access to literacy resources and parental engagement, leading to slower reading development (Cañete & Eswan, 2025).

Furthermore, instructional methods and teacher practices significantly affect students' reading outcomes. High-quality early reading instruction is characterized by explicit, systematic, and structured instruction in phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension techniques. Nevertheless, variations in teacher training, insufficient instructional materials, and inconsistent application of evidence-based methods can impede student advancement. Accordingly, research indicates that classrooms that do not provide differentiated instruction often fail to meet the varied needs of students, especially those facing emerging or ongoing reading challenges (Bratsch-Hines et al., 2020).

At the same time, the classroom setting and the accessibility of educational resources play a crucial role in the development of early literacy. Common obstacles to effective reading instruction include insufficient reading materials, overcrowded classrooms, and limited access to appropriately leveled texts. In contrast, a classroom environment rich in print and conducive to literacy has been demonstrated to boost learners' motivation, engagement, and overall reading success (Wijaya, 2025).

Learner and family influences on early literacy success

Additionally, learner factors, such as developmental readiness, attentional control, language background, and motivation, contribute to variability in reading outcomes. Young learners who struggle with oral language skills or have trouble maintaining attention often show slower progress in their reading development. Similarly, motivation and self-esteem are vital, as students who find reading difficult are more likely to shy away from reading tasks, thereby perpetuating a cycle of disengagement and limited skill development (Guthrie & Wigfield, 2004).

Finally, parents' perceptions and involvement significantly impact the success of early reading. Parents' beliefs about literacy, their confidence in facilitating reading activities at home, and the time they dedicate to shared reading experiences have been shown to predict early reading success. Overall, research in basic education settings indicates that consistent parental involvement is especially influential during Key Stage 1, a critical period for establishing foundational reading skills (Caban, 2024).

Conceptual framework

This study is anchored on the Simple View of Reading, which explains that reading development relies on two essential components: decoding and language comprehension. Beginning reading difficulties occur when learners struggle with letter–sound recognition, phonological awareness, or understanding spoken language. This theory provides the foundation for examining how learner abilities, teaching practices, and home or school environments contribute to the reading challenges experienced by Key Stage 1 learners in Elizabeth Elementary School.

The conceptual framework highlights that beginning reading difficulties are influenced by the interaction of learner-related, instructional, and contextual factors. Learner-related factors include developmental readiness, language proficiency, attention, and motivation. Instructional factors involve teaching strategies, differentiated instruction, and the availability of reading materials, while contextual factors include parental involvement, home literacy practices, and access to learning resources. Together, these factors show that improving beginning reading skills requires coordinated support from both the school and the home environment.

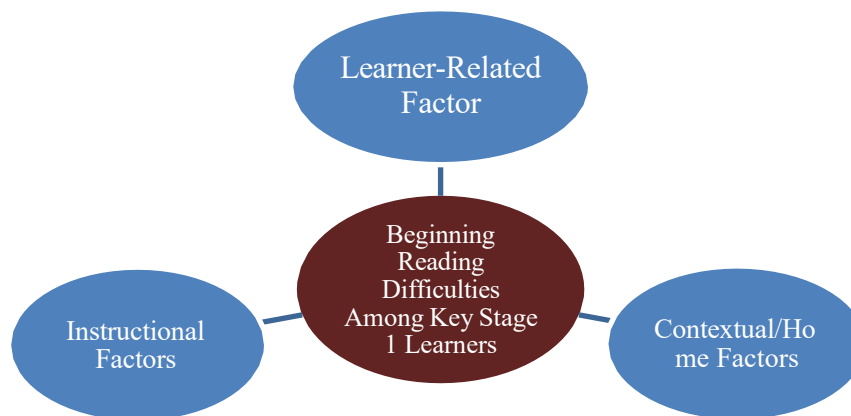


Figure I. Conceptual framework of the beginning reading difficulties influenced by learner, instructional, and home factors.

Statement of the problem

This study was conducted to explore the factors contributing to beginning reading difficulties among key stage 1 learners in Elizabeth Elementary School.

Specifically, it sought answers to the following questions:

1. What challenges do Key Stage 1 learners experience in developing beginning reading skills?
2. What contextual, instructional, and learner-related factors contribute to these beginning reading difficulties as perceived by teachers, parents, and learners?

Research methodology

This chapter presents the research design, study locale, population, and sampling, ethical research procedures, and data-gathering instruments used to examine challenges in the development of beginning reading among Key Stage 1 learners.

Research design

This research employs a qualitative framework to examine the factors that contribute to initial reading challenges among Key Stage 1 learners at Elizabeth Elementary School. A qualitative methodology is suitable because it facilitates a comprehensive understanding of learners' experiences and the viewpoints of teachers and parents regarding the obstacles to early reading development (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

In particular, a case study approach is employed to provide a thorough analysis of reading difficulties in the authentic school setting. Through semi-structured interviews, the research captures the interactions among learner-related, instructional, and contextual factors that affect early reading outcomes. This design enables the identification of patterns, themes, and insights that can guide potential interventions to enhance early literacy.

Locale of the study

The research was conducted at Elizabeth Elementary School in Elizabeth, Dingras, Ilocos Norte. This institution is included in District 1 under the Schools Division of Ilocos Norte. Elizabeth Elementary School serves learners from the local community, providing a foundation in education for Key Stage 1 learners. The selection of this school as the study's location was influenced by its diverse student population and the presence of learners facing initial reading challenges, making it a suitable environment for investigating learner, instructional, and contextual factors affecting early literacy development.

Population and sampling

The research was carried out with Key Stage 1 learners, their educators, and parents at Elizabeth Elementary School.

The participants comprised Grades 1, 2, and 3. These learners were intentionally selected for their demonstrated early reading difficulties, as evidenced by CRLA BOSY results, to ensure that the data gathered would yield valuable insights into the factors influencing early literacy development.

Alongside the learners, three Key Stage 1 teachers and 3 parents of the chosen learners took part in the research. Purposive sampling was used to ensure that all participants had firsthand experience with reading difficulties, which is crucial for obtaining comprehensive qualitative data and understanding the interplay among learner-related, instructional, and home factors (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Ethical research procedures

This study strictly adhered to ethical guidelines for research involving human participants, specifically minors. Before data collection, written informed consent was obtained from parents and teachers. For

the 17 learner participants, a simplified child assent form was used to explain the study in the local dialect, ensuring they understood their right to decline participation or withdraw at any time without penalty. All identities were protected using pseudonyms (e.g., L1, T1, P1).

Data validity and triangulation

To ensure the trustworthiness and rigor of the qualitative findings, the researcher employed Data Source Triangulation. By collecting and comparing perspectives from three distinct groups—learners, teachers, and parents—the study cross-verified the identified reading challenges. Furthermore, Methodological Triangulation was achieved through the use of both semi-structured interviews and descriptive questionnaires, ensuring that the derived themes were consistent across data collection tools.

Data gathering instruments

To achieve data triangulation and gather extensive information, the research employed various qualitative tools. Semi-structured interviews were carried out with educators, learners, and parents to investigate their views on the obstacles and factors contributing to early reading challenges. The application of these tools facilitated a detailed, context-specific understanding of the factors influencing early reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners.

Data presentation and analysis

In this chapter, the researchers presented the themes generated from the participants' survey responses.

1. Problem 1: What challenges do Key Stage 1 learners experience in developing beginning reading skills?

This section presents the challenges encountered by learners as perceived by the three respondent groups. To ensure data triangulation, the struggles identified by learners are cross-verified against teachers' clinical observations and parents' behavioral reports.

Table 1: Themes, core ideas, respondent type, statement of respondents, and frequency of responses of the experiences of learners, teachers, and parents in determining the challenges in beginning reading skills of key stage 1 learners

Themes	Thematic Code	Respondent Type	Sample Statement	Frequency (n)
Phonological awareness deficits	LR-PA	Learners	“Nu dadduma ket mapagsisinnukatko dagiti uni ti letra...” (I sometimes mix up the sounds of letters...)	2 (L1, L4)
		Teachers	“The children struggle to distinguish between similar letter sounds.”	3 (T1, T2, T3)

Reading fluency challenges	LR-FL	Learners	“Nabayagnak nga agbasa isu marigatannak a mangbasa...” (I read slowly...)	1 (L5)
		Teachers	“They often skip lines or lose their place in the text.”	2 (T1, T2)
Low motivation & avoidance	LR-MOT	Learners	“Maawannak ti namnama... nagado kamalik isu... aglemmengnak” (I feel frustrated... I hide [from reading].)	6 (L1, L4, L8, L10, L13, L15, and L17)
		Parents	“My child cries or makes excuses when it is time to read.”	2 (P1, P3)

Source: Primary qualitative data collected from Elizabeth Elementary School (2026).

The data shows that the primary challenge is **Low Motivation (LR-MOT)**, which manifests as "avoidance behavior." While learners feel frustrated by their mistakes, parents confirm this at home through reports of "crying" or "excuses". This triangulation confirms that reading difficulty is not merely a cognitive deficit but an emotional barrier spanning both school and home environments (Nachshon & Horowitz-Kraus, 2020; Wu & Hiindman, 2024).

2. Problem 2: What contextual, instructional, and learner-related factors contribute to these beginning reading difficulties as perceived by teachers, parents, and learners?

This section details the root causes—environmental and systemic—that contribute to the challenges identified in Problem 1.

Table 2: Themes, core ideas, respondent type, statement of respondents, and frequency of responses of the experiences of learners, teachers, and parents in determining the related factors that contribute to the beginning reading difficulties of key stage 1 learners.

Themes	Thematic Code	Respondent Type	Sample Statement	Frequency (n)
Instructional constraints	IF-TE	Teachers	“Narigat gapo ti kinaado ti agad-adal ti maysa a klase”	3 (T1, T2, T3)
	IF-RM	Teachers	“Kurang dagiti libro... tapno pagpraktisanda”	3 (T1, T2, T3)
Home literacy environment	CF-HE	Parents	“Awan libro diay balaymi...”	1 (P1)

	CF-PI	Parents	“Nagrigat met sir ta adda met ubrak a sabali”	3 (P1, P2, P3)
Socioeconomic gaps	CF-SES	Parents	“Awan igatangmi kadagiti usaren ti anakmi...”	1 (P3)

Source: Primary qualitative data collected from Elizabeth Elementary School (2026).

The findings indicate that **Instructional Factors**, specifically class size (IF-TE) and lack of materials (IF-RM), prevent teachers from providing the scaffolding necessary to correct phonological deficits. Furthermore, **Parental Illiteracy (CF-ILL)** and **Socioeconomic Constraints (CF-SES)** create a "literacy gap" where the child receives no reinforcement outside the classroom, directly contributing to the slow progress observed in Table 1.

Results and discussion

The findings of the study reveal that beginning reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners in Elizabeth Elementary School are shaped by interconnected cognitive, emotional, instructional, and home-related factors. One of the most evident challenges was low motivation and reading avoidance, where learners tended to hide, make excuses, or disengage from reading activities due to repeated frustration. This reflects how reading difficulties can become both an academic and emotional concern, limiting learners' confidence and participation in literacy tasks (Nachshon & Horowitz-Kraus, 2020; Soares et al., 2023).

The study also found that deficits in phonological awareness significantly affected learners' reading fluency. Learners struggled to recognize letter sounds, decode words, and read smoothly, resulting in slow reading and frequent errors. These challenges were further intensified by instructional constraints, including large class sizes, limited reading materials, and insufficient opportunities for individualized support (Elhassan et al., 2017; Lu et al., 2026)

Home-related factors likewise played an important role in learners' reading development. Limited parental involvement, lack of books at home, and socioeconomic demands reduced opportunities for consistent reading practice outside the classroom. As a result, learners experienced a gap between school expectations and the support available at home (Li et al., 2025; Liu et al., 2022).

Anchored on the Simple View of Reading, the findings highlight that successful reading development requires not only decoding and language comprehension, but also learner motivation and emotional support. The study emphasizes that addressing beginning reading difficulties requires a holistic approach that includes effective teaching strategies, accessible learning resources, strong family engagement, and supportive literacy interventions in both school and home settings.

Conclusion

The study demonstrates that beginning reading difficulties among Key Stage 1 learners at Elizabeth Elementary School are multifactorial, arising from the dynamic interaction of learner-related, instructional, and contextual/home factors. Learner-related challenges, including phonological

awareness deficits, reading fluency difficulties, low motivation, reading anxiety, attention and focus limitations, and sensory constraints, significantly affect early literacy development (Anku, 2024; Kang & Mikyung, 2020; Cañete & Eswan, 2025). Instructional factors, such as limited teacher scaffolding, inadequate reading materials, and rapid pedagogical pacing, further constrain learners' opportunities to develop decoding, fluency, and comprehension skills (Bratsch-Hines & Jordan, 2020; Wijaya, 2025). Contextual and home-related factors, including low home literacy exposure, language dissonance, limited parental involvement, parental illiteracy, and socioeconomic constraints, exacerbate these difficulties, highlighting the critical role of the home environment in early reading acquisition (Caban, 2024; Casikas & Quirap, 2023; William et al., 2025; Romeo, Uchida, & Christodoulou, 2022).

The findings reinforce the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986) while extending its scope to include socio-environmental and motivational dimensions, underscoring the interdependence of decoding, language comprehension, and contextual support in reading development. In practice, the study provides evidence supporting the implementation of holistic interventions, including adequate reading materials, manipulatives, individualized scaffolding, culturally responsive instruction, and parental engagement programs. At the policy level, support for families with limited literacy resources and targeted home literacy initiatives is essential to enhance early reading outcomes. Overall, this research highlights that addressing beginning reading difficulties requires integrated strategies that consider learner abilities, instructional practices, and home and environmental contexts to promote literacy proficiency among Key Stage 1 learners.

Author's contribution: The author wrote the paper

Ethical statement: The study followed the ethical procedure, and informed consent was secured before conducting the study

Conflict of interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

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