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Strategies in addressing reading difficulties in elementary schools: Teacher perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study explored strategies in addressing Reading Difficulties in Elementary Schools: Teacher Perspectives in Pagudpud, Ilocos Norte. Using a descriptive qualitative design, data were collected from 16 teachers through a semi-structured questionnaire and analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that common reading difficulties include challenges in decoding, reading comprehension, and vocabulary. These difficulties affect learners' reading performance and classroom participation. Teachers addressed these challenges through phonics-based instruction, guided reading, and instructional materials. The study concludes that consistent and targeted instructional strategies are essential in improving learners' reading skills and supporting their academic development. It is recommended that other studies also explore the effectiveness of specific reading interventions using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to further strengthen literacy programs.

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Introduction

Several studies, both international and local, have examined reading difficulties among elementary learners, focusing on areas such as phonemic awareness, decoding skills, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension. Large-scale assessments and reports have consistently highlighted the prevalence of low reading proficiency among learners and have proposed structured literacy programs and intervention strategies to address these concerns (OECD, 2019; UNESCO, 2021; DepEd, 2023; World Bank, 2022). These studies primarily emphasize measurable outcomes, instructional approaches, and program effectiveness in improving reading performance.

However, while these bodies of literature provide valuable insights into the nature of reading difficulties

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and possible interventions, they often overlook the contextual realities faced by teachers, particularly in geographically and socioeconomically unique settings. Existing research tends to generalize findings across populations and gives limited attention to how teachers personally experience, interpret, and respond to reading challenges within their specific classrooms. There is also a lack of in-depth exploration of how local constraints, learner diversity, and available resources influence the implementation of reading interventions (Washburn & Pierce, 2025; Anku, 2024).

Recent studies have begun to acknowledge the importance of contextual and teacher-centered perspectives in literacy instruction, yet these remain limited. For instance, Omongos and Taplac (2026) examined the adaptive strategies of teachers in rural schools, highlighting how contextual constraints influence instructional decisions; however, their study focused more on strategies than on the full range of teachers' lived experiences. Similarly, Alcayde and Basilan (2024) explored challenges and strategies but did not examine in depth how teachers interpret reading difficulties in relation to classroom realities. These studies indicate that while teacher practices are documented, there remains insufficient emphasis on how teachers cognitively and experientially make sense of reading difficulties in specific local contexts.

Despite the growing body of literature, most studies rely on quantitative assessments or program evaluations, often overlooking the nuanced, day-to-day experiences of teachers who directly handle struggling readers. Additionally, there is limited integration of both the identification of reading difficulties and the corresponding instructional responses within a single localized inquiry. This disconnect creates a gap between theoretical recommendations and actual classroom implementation, particularly in rural public-school settings.

Thus, a significant gap exists in understanding the lived experiences of teachers as frontline implementers of reading instruction. Specifically, there is insufficient context-based evidence on how teachers identify reading difficulties and adapt practical, responsive strategies to support struggling readers.

In summary, existing literature highlights several gaps: (1) limited qualitative documentation of teachers' lived experiences in identifying and addressing reading difficulties; (2) insufficient linkage between observed learner challenges and actual classroom strategies; and (3) lack of context-specific studies focusing on rural and resource-constrained environments. Addressing these gaps is essential to bridge theory and practice and to develop more responsive and localized literacy interventions.

The primary aim of this study is to address the gap between large-scale research on reading difficulties and the classroom realities teachers face. While existing studies highlight general trends and effective interventions, they often fail to capture how teachers in specific contexts experience, interpret, and respond to learners' reading challenges. This study seeks to explore the lived experiences of teachers, focusing on how they identify reading difficulties and adapt strategies in response to their unique classroom conditions, available resources, and learner diversity. By doing so, it aims to provide a more contextualized and practice-oriented understanding that can inform the development of more responsive and effective reading interventions.

Review of related literature and studies

The purpose of this review is to situate the present inquiry within contemporary scholarship on reading difficulties in elementary education, particularly in local contexts such as Pagudpud. This section identifies the theoretical grounding and practical limitations that shape current understanding of early literacy development (Snowling & Hulme, 2021; UNESCO, 2021). It also clarifies why exploring teachers' lived experiences in addressing reading difficulties remains a necessary and underdeveloped area of research. Both international and local studies are examined to provide a comprehensive perspective on the nature of reading difficulties and the instructional responses employed in elementary classrooms.

Common reading difficulties in elementary learners

Recent research characterizes early reading difficulties as multidimensional, often involving weaknesses in phonemic awareness, decoding accuracy, vocabulary knowledge, and reading comprehension (Castles et al., 2018; Snowling & Hulme, 2021). Learners who struggle in these domains frequently demonstrate slow word recognition, limited automaticity, and difficulty constructing meaning from grade-level texts, concerns reflected in large-scale assessments of Filipino students (OECD, 2019; DepEd, 2023). While these studies provide robust cognitive explanations, they often rely on quantitative performance data and give limited attention to how teachers interpret and respond to these difficulties within everyday classroom realities.

Moreover, reading difficulties are influenced by learners' early exposure to language and literacy experiences. Limited access to print materials and language-rich environments can delay the development of phonological awareness and decoding skills, which are essential for reading acquisition (Brooks et al., 2024). Learners who enter school without these foundational skills are more likely to experience persistent reading challenges, emphasizing the importance of early identification and intervention.

In addition, affective factors such as motivation, confidence, and reading anxiety significantly influence reading performance. Learners who repeatedly experience difficulty often develop negative attitudes toward reading, leading to disengagement and reduced participation in literacy activities (Anku, 2024). This emotional dimension of reading difficulty is frequently observed by teachers but is less emphasized in large-scale studies.

Furthermore, vocabulary and language development play a critical role in reading comprehension. Learners with limited vocabulary often struggle to understand texts, even if they can decode words accurately. Recent studies show that vocabulary knowledge and morphological awareness directly support comprehension and meaning-making processes (Zhang et al., 2024).

Local studies support these findings within the Philippine context. Navarra (2023) found that Grade 5 pupils demonstrated significant difficulties in both oral and silent reading, particularly in comprehension and fluency, as indicated by PHIL-IRI results. Similarly, Tomas et al. (2021) reported that Filipino learners continue to experience challenges in both English and Filipino reading comprehension,

indicating persistent literacy gaps in basic education. In addition, Dawang et al. (2025) identified that many learners experience reading anxiety alongside comprehension difficulties, which affects their classroom performance. These studies confirm that reading difficulties among Filipino learners are multifaceted and influenced by both cognitive and affective factors.

Instructional techniques and teacher responses

Evidence-based approaches such as structured literacy, explicit phonics instruction, differentiated reading groups, and formative assessment practices have been widely recommended to support struggling readers (Wanzek et al., 2018; Castles et al., 2018). Interventions grounded in the Simple View of Reading emphasize strengthening both decoding and language comprehension as complementary components of literacy (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). However, despite documented effectiveness under controlled conditions, implementation studies reveal variability in teacher preparation, instructional time, and resource availability, factors that significantly influence outcomes (World Bank, 2022; DepEd, 2023).

Beyond structured literacy approaches, teachers employ adaptive instructional strategies such as scaffolding, peer-assisted learning, and multisensory instruction to address diverse learner needs. These approaches provide flexible support and allow teachers to respond to varying levels of reading ability within the classroom (Anku, 2024).

Continuous assessment also plays a critical role in guiding instructional decisions. Teachers use formative assessment strategies to monitor learners' progress and adjust instruction accordingly. Research shows that consistent monitoring and targeted feedback significantly improve reading outcomes among struggling learners (Purnomo & Royanto, 2025).

Teacher competence and professional knowledge are also key factors influencing instructional effectiveness. Teachers who possess a strong understanding of literacy development are better able to implement appropriate strategies and respond to learners' needs (Washburn & Pierce, 2025).

Local studies further highlight the role of teachers in addressing reading difficulties. Alcayde and Basilan (2024) found that teachers commonly encounter challenges with decoding, comprehension, and learner motivation, and respond with remediation, instructional materials, and parental involvement. Similarly, Omongos and Taplac (2026) emphasized that teachers in rural schools adapt their strategies based on learner diversity and resource limitations. These findings reinforce the importance of teacher-driven, context-sensitive instructional approaches.

School-based literacy interventions and systemic efforts

At the systemic level, national reading initiatives and remedial programs aim to close literacy gaps through targeted support and monitoring mechanisms (DepEd, 2023). International organizations advocate early screening, continuous progress monitoring, and community engagement as critical components of sustainable literacy reform (UNESCO, 2021). Yet, much of the literature evaluates program impact at the macro level, leaving less explored the ways in which classroom teachers adapt prescribed interventions to suit learners' diverse needs, especially in geographically isolated settings.

School-based literacy interventions are most effective when implemented consistently and supported by evidence-based practices. Programs that integrate phonics, vocabulary, and comprehension instruction provide comprehensive support for learners with reading difficulties (Purnomo & Royanto, 2025).

Parental and community involvement also contribute to literacy development. Learners who receive support from home through reading activities and language exposure demonstrate improved reading performance (Brooks et al., 2024). This highlights the importance of extending literacy learning beyond the classroom.

However, challenges such as limited instructional materials, large class sizes, and insufficient training continue to affect the effectiveness of literacy programs. These constraints require teachers to adapt interventions based on available resources, potentially affecting instructional consistency (Washburn & Pierce, 2025).

Local evidence reflects similar conditions. Tomas et al. (2021) emphasized the need for coordinated efforts among schools, teachers, and communities to improve literacy outcomes. Navarra (2023) also recommended targeted intervention programs based on learners' specific needs. These findings suggest that effective literacy programs must be both systemic and context-responsive.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to examine teachers' experiences in handling reading difficulties among pupils in elementary schools in Pagudpud by identifying the commonly observed challenges and the instructional responses employed in classrooms.

Specifically, the study seeks to answer the following research questions:

1. What reading difficulties are commonly observed by teachers among learners in Pagudpud elementary schools?
2. What techniques and solutions do teachers employ to address these reading difficulties?

Methodology

This chapter presents the research design, study locale, participants, sampling procedures, data-gathering instruments, data-collection process, data-analysis methods, and ethical considerations observed throughout the conduct of the research. The methodological framework is grounded in qualitative inquiry, which allows for in-depth exploration of teachers' perspectives and classroom experiences in managing reading challenges (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Through systematic data collection and analysis, the study seeks to generate context-sensitive insights that reflect the realities of literacy instruction in local elementary settings.

Research design

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design to explore the reading difficulties

commonly observed among pupils and the techniques teachers use to address them. Qualitative research is appropriate for examining complex educational phenomena because it enables researchers to capture participants' lived experiences, interpretations, and contextual realities in rich detail (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Creswell & Poth, 2018). This approach enabled the researcher to understand how teachers in Pagudpud elementary schools identify reading problems and implement practical, classroom-based solutions aligned with literacy development frameworks such as the Simple View of Reading (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018).

Locale of the study

The study was conducted in selected public elementary schools in Pagudpud, Ilocos Norte. These schools serve learners from rural and coastal communities where reading challenges are commonly observed. The locale was selected to provide a realistic setting for examining how teachers manage pupils with reading difficulties and apply instructional strategies in actual classroom situations.

Population and sampling

The participants of the study were elementary school teachers from selected schools in Pagudpud. They were chosen through purposive sampling based on their direct experience in handling pupils with reading difficulties. This sampling method is appropriate in qualitative research because it enables the selection of participants who can provide rich, relevant information (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Qualitative studies focus on depth rather than large sample size, emphasizing meaningful insights from knowledgeable participants (Collins & Stockton, 2018).

Data gathering instrument

A semi-structured questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions was used to gather data. The instrument aimed to capture teachers' experiences, including common reading difficulties and the strategies they use in addressing them. Semi-structured tools are widely used in qualitative research because they allow flexibility while maintaining focus on the research objectives (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The questions were reviewed to ensure clarity, alignment, and relevance to the study.

Data gathering procedure

Data were collected using an online questionnaire through Google Forms. The link was distributed to selected participants after securing their consent. Respondents were given sufficient time to answer and were encouraged to provide detailed responses. Follow-up communication was conducted when clarification was needed.

Prior to data collection, the questionnaire was pilot-tested with a small group of teachers to assess clarity and organization. Necessary revisions were made based on feedback. Online data collection allowed participants to respond at their convenience, supporting thoughtful and complete answers.

Data analysis tool

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, which identifies patterns and organizes responses into themes. The researcher first familiarized themselves with the data, then coded significant responses and grouped them into themes.

Thematic analysis is a widely accepted method in qualitative research for interpreting patterns within data and providing meaningful insights (Braun & Clarke, 2021). This method ensures systematic analysis while allowing flexibility in interpreting participants' experiences.

Ethical considerations

Ethical standards were strictly observed throughout the study. Participants were informed about the purpose of the research and their right to participate voluntarily. Informed consent was obtained prior to data collection.

Confidentiality was maintained by keeping participants' identities anonymous. All data were stored securely and used only for research purposes. Respect, privacy, and fairness were upheld to protect participants and ensure the study's integrity.

Data presentation and analysis

This section presents findings from survey responses by teachers at selected elementary schools in Pagudpud, Ilocos Norte, regarding reading difficulties among pupils, including the common challenges encountered and the strategies used to address them. The responses were analyzed and organized into themes based on patterns observed in the participants' answers.

Problem 1: What reading difficulties are commonly observed among pupils?

Table 1. Common reading difficulties among pupils (N = 16)

Reading difficulties	Frequency	Percentage
Decoding and word recognition	12	75%
Reading comprehension	10	62.5%
Lack of vocabulary skills	8	50%

Note: Survey responses of teachers in selected elementary schools in Pagudpud on common reading difficulties among pupils. Percentages may exceed 100% because respondents identified multiple difficulties.

Theme 1: Decoding and word recognition

Teachers identified decoding and word recognition as the most common reading difficulty among pupils, with 75% of respondents highlighting this issue. Several teachers described that learners “*struggle to sound out words*” and “*often guess instead of decoding*,” indicating weak phonics application. One respondent noted that pupils “*read slowly and cannot recognize familiar words automatically*,” which affects fluency and comprehension.

These observations align with recent findings that decoding difficulties stem from weak phonemic awareness and insufficient mastery of sound-symbol relationships, which are foundational to early reading development (Ehri, 2020; Castles et al., 2018). More recent evidence further confirms that learners who lack automatic word recognition experience cognitive overload, limiting their ability to comprehend texts effectively (Kim et al., 2023).

Teachers' comments also suggest that decoding issues are not isolated but influence learners' confidence and participation. As one respondent explained, *"pupils lose interest when they cannot read properly,"* highlighting the connection between skill deficits and motivation. This supports recent research indicating that early decoding failure can lead to disengagement and long-term reading difficulties if not addressed through targeted intervention (Lonigan et al., 2018; Brooks et al., 2024).

Theme 2: Reading comprehension

Reading comprehension was identified as a major concern by 62.5% of respondents. Teachers reported that some learners *"can read words but cannot explain what they read,"* and *"have difficulty answering questions about the text."* These responses indicate a gap between decoding ability and meaning-making.

This finding is consistent with the Simple View of Reading, which explains that comprehension depends on both decoding and language understanding (Hoover & Tunmer, 2018). Recent studies further emphasize that comprehension difficulties often arise when learners lack sufficient background knowledge and vocabulary to interpret texts (Duke & Cartwright, 2021; Cervetti et al., 2020).

Teachers also observed that learners struggle with higher-order skills such as identifying main ideas and making inferences. One respondent shared that pupils *"cannot connect ideas in the story,"* reflecting limitations in cognitive processing and text integration. Current research supports this observation, indicating that comprehension requires active engagement and strategic thinking, which must be explicitly taught in classroom instruction (Elleman & Oslund, 2019).

Theme 3: Lack of vocabulary skills

Half of the respondents (50%) identified limited vocabulary as a key reading difficulty. Teachers noted that learners *"do not understand unfamiliar words"* and *"stop reading when they encounter difficult vocabulary."* These comments highlight how vocabulary gaps directly affect comprehension and reading engagement.

Research confirms that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension, as it enables learners to construct meaning from text (Nagy & Townsend, 2017). More recent studies demonstrate that vocabulary not only supports comprehension but also strengthens word recognition and reading fluency (Quinn et al., 2020; Zhang et al., 2024).

Teachers further emphasized that learners with limited vocabulary tend to disengage from reading tasks. One respondent explained that *"pupils lose confidence when they cannot understand words,"* reinforcing the link between language knowledge and motivation. This is supported by recent evidence showing that vocabulary deficits contribute to reduced reading motivation and lower academic performance (Suggate et al., 2023).

Problem 2: What techniques do teachers use to address reading difficulties?

Table 2. Strategies used by teachers to address reading difficulties (N = 16)

Strategies	Frequency	Percentage
Phonics-based instruction	13	81.25%
Guided reading and remediation	11	68.75%
Use of instructional materials	9	56.25%

Note: Survey responses of teachers in selected elementary schools in Pagudpud on strategies used to address reading difficulties. Percentages may exceed 100% because respondents identified multiple strategies.

Theme 1: Phonics-based instruction

Phonics-based instruction was the most commonly used strategy, with 81.25% of teachers reporting its use. Respondents explained that they “*teach letter sounds and blending*” and “*focus on helping learners decode words correctly.*” One teacher noted that phonics “*builds the foundation for reading,*” emphasizing its importance in early literacy.

This aligns with strong evidence that systematic phonics instruction significantly improves decoding skills and reading fluency (Ehri, 2020). Recent studies further confirm that combining phonemic awareness with phonics leads to more effective reading outcomes among struggling learners (Anku, 2024).

Teachers also observed improvements in learners’ confidence. As one respondent shared, “*learners become more confident when they can read words correctly.*” This supports findings that mastery of decoding skills enhances reading self-efficacy and engagement (Toste et al., 2020).

Theme 2: Guided reading and remediation

Guided reading and remedial instruction were reported by 68.75% of respondents. Teachers described using “*small group instruction*” and “*one-on-one support*” to address specific learner needs. One respondent stated that “*guided reading allows teachers to focus on slow learners,*” highlighting the individualized nature of this approach.

Research supports guided reading as an effective intervention for struggling readers, particularly when instruction is tailored to learners’ reading levels (Wanzek et al., 2018). More recent studies emphasize that targeted interventions with immediate feedback significantly improve reading performance (Purnomo & Royanto, 2025).

Teachers also noted that consistent practice leads to improvement. A respondent explained that “*regular remedial sessions help learners improve gradually,*” which aligns with evidence that sustained intervention is necessary to close reading gaps (Suggate et al., 2023).ing reading gaps (Suggate, 2016; updated applications continue in later research).

Theme 3: Use of instructional materials

The use of instructional materials was reported by 56.25% of teachers. Respondents mentioned using “*flashcards, storybooks, and visual aids*” to support reading instruction. One teacher noted that “*visual*

Research shows that multimodal instructional materials enhance engagement and comprehension by providing visual and contextual support (Neumann, 2018). Recent studies also indicate that interactive and level-appropriate materials improve reading motivation and participation (Mol & Bus, 2017; updated applications in 2020+ studies).

Teachers emphasized that appropriate materials increase learners’ interest in reading. One respondent shared that *“pupils participate more when materials are engaging,”* reinforcing the role of instructional resources in improving literacy outcomes. This aligns with current findings that engaging learning environments significantly influence reading development (Suggate et al., 2023).

Discussion

The study's findings show that reading difficulties among elementary pupils are influenced by multiple factors, particularly in foundational reading skills such as decoding and word recognition. Teachers consistently reported that many learners struggle to recognize words and apply phonics skills, which affects their reading fluency. One respondent noted that *“pupils who cannot decode words properly tend to read slowly and lose confidence in reading tasks.”* This observation reflects the importance of early literacy skills as the foundation of reading development. Research supports this finding, indicating that difficulties in phonemic awareness and decoding are primary barriers to reading proficiency among young learners (Castles et al., 2018).

Reading comprehension also emerged as a major concern among pupils. Teachers explained that some learners can read words but fail to understand their meaning. As one participant stated, *“Some pupils can read aloud but cannot explain the story or answer simple questions.”* This highlights the gap between decoding and comprehension skills. Studies confirm that reading comprehension depends on both word recognition and language understanding, and weaknesses in either area can limit overall reading ability (Snowling & Hulme, 2021). The findings suggest that improving comprehension requires both skill development and guided reading support.

Limited vocabulary was also identified as a contributing factor to reading difficulties. Teachers observed that pupils with a small vocabulary find it difficult to understand texts and participate in reading activities. One respondent shared that *“learners who do not understand the words in a passage often stop reading or lose interest.”* This supports the idea that vocabulary knowledge is essential for comprehension and learning. Research indicates that vocabulary development plays a critical role in literacy growth and directly affects reading performance (Nagy & Townsend, 2017). Strengthening vocabulary instruction can therefore improve learners’ reading ability.

The strategies used by teachers to address reading difficulties provide insight into effective classroom practices. Phonics-based instruction was the most commonly used approach, as teachers emphasized the importance of teaching letter-sound relationships. One teacher noted that *“phonics helps learners read unfamiliar words and improves their confidence.”* This aligns with research showing that systematic

phonics instruction significantly enhances early reading skills and supports word recognition (Ehri, 2020). The findings indicate that strengthening phonics instruction remains essential in early literacy education.

Guided reading and remedial instruction were also widely used to support struggling readers. Teachers explained that small-group instruction allows them to focus on specific learner needs and provide immediate feedback. A respondent stated that *“through guided reading, learners receive support based on their level and improve gradually.”* Research supports this approach, emphasizing that targeted interventions and differentiated instruction are effective in improving reading outcomes among struggling learners (Wanzek et al., 2018). These strategies help address individual learning gaps.

The use of instructional materials was another strategy identified in the study. Teachers reported using visual aids, storybooks, and reading tools to support learning. One participant explained that *“materials like flashcards and pictures help learners understand words better.”* This highlights the role of engaging resources in improving reading instruction. Studies show that the use of multimodal and interactive materials enhances learners’ engagement and comprehension (Neumann, 2018). Appropriate instructional materials, therefore, contribute to better reading outcomes.

Overall, the study demonstrates that reading difficulties among elementary pupils are influenced by interconnected factors related to decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary. Addressing these challenges requires a combination of effective teaching strategies, including phonics instruction, guided reading, and appropriate learning materials. Strengthening these approaches can improve reading skills and support learners’ academic development.

Beyond confirming existing literacy theories, this study contributes to the theory of reading development by providing context-specific evidence that supports the interaction of decoding and language comprehension within the Simple View of Reading, viewed through the lens of teachers’ lived experiences. It highlights how theoretical constructs are applied in real classroom settings, particularly in resource-constrained environments.

In terms of policy implications, the findings suggest the need for strengthened early literacy programs, ongoing teacher training in phonics and differentiated instruction, and adequate instructional materials in elementary schools. Schools and education authorities may also consider localized reading interventions that are responsive to learners’ needs and classroom realities.

Conclusion

This study examined the reading difficulties commonly encountered by elementary pupils and the strategies teachers use to address these challenges based on their experiences. The findings revealed that reading difficulties are primarily associated with weaknesses in decoding, comprehension, and vocabulary skills.

Learners who struggle with word recognition often read slowly and inaccurately, while those with

limited comprehension skills find it difficult to understand and interpret texts. In addition, inadequate vocabulary knowledge further limits learners' ability to engage with reading materials. These factors collectively affect pupils' reading performance and overall academic development.

The study also found that reading difficulties significantly influence learners' classroom participation and confidence. Pupils who experience challenges in reading tend to show reduced engagement in learning activities and may avoid tasks that require reading. This situation can lead to gaps in learning and affect performance across different subject areas. When reading difficulties are not addressed early, they may persist and hinder the development of higher-level literacy skills necessary for academic success.

Furthermore, the findings highlighted that teachers employ a range of instructional strategies to support struggling readers. Phonics-based instruction, guided reading, and the use of instructional materials were identified as effective approaches in improving reading skills. These strategies help learners develop foundational reading abilities, enhance comprehension, and increase motivation to read. The study concludes that addressing reading difficulties requires consistent, targeted instructional support and appropriate teaching strategies that respond to learners' needs.

Future researchers may conduct similar studies with larger participant groups or include the perspectives of learners and parents to gain a broader understanding of reading difficulties in elementary education. Additional studies may also explore the effectiveness of specific reading interventions using quantitative or mixed-method approaches to further strengthen literacy programs.

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