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Identifying challenges and different contributing factors in Grade 1 reading and literacy competencies: A multifaceted approach

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ABSTRACT

Although early literacy is well-studied, context-specific evidence on which reading competencies challenge Grade 1 learners and how home and school factors influence these difficulties remains limited. This study addressed this gap by examining literacy competencies and contributing factors among Grade 1 learners in selected private elementary schools in Ilocos Norte. An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design was used, collecting quantitative data from 21 teachers via a needs assessment survey, followed by qualitative data from open-ended responses. Descriptive statistics and thematic analysis were used to analyze the data. Findings show learners master basic phonological awareness and print knowledge but struggle with decoding, phoneme blending, high-frequency word recognition, and comprehension of informational texts. A gap was observed between strong oral language skills and performance in structured reading tasks. Contributing factors include limited vocabulary, insufficient foundational skills, a short attention span, minimal exposure to home reading, low parental involvement, inadequate resources, and low engagement. The study highlights the need for explicit, systematic, and differentiated instruction, print-rich environments, and strengthened home-school partnerships to support the transition to fluent reading.

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Introduction

Early literacy development is a fundamental component of children's academic success and long-term educational attainment. Reading proficiency enables learners to access knowledge, construct meaning, and actively participate in classroom learning. Studies have consistently shown that children who develop strong reading skills in the early grades demonstrate higher academic performance and are more likely to sustain positive learning outcomes across subject areas (Snow et al., 1998). As such, literacy is widely regarded as a critical skill that supports lifelong learning and meaningful participation in society. Despite the recognized importance of early literacy, many learners continue to experience

difficulties in reading during the early years of schooling. Evidence from previous studies indicates that a significant number of children struggle to achieve expected levels of reading proficiency, particularly in the foundational stages of education. Difficulties with reading at an early age often led to poor comprehension, limited academic progress, and reduced confidence in learning. This ongoing concern reflects broader issues in early education, where learners fail to acquire essential literacy skills at the expected level.

Multiple and interconnected factors influence the challenges in early reading development. Learner-related factors such as limited phonological awareness, inadequate vocabulary, and difficulties in decoding hinder the development of reading fluency and comprehension (Ehri, 2020; Cabell et al., 2019). Home-related factors, including limited exposure to print materials and insufficient literacy support, further restrict opportunities for practice and skill development. In addition, school-related factors—such as limited instructional resources, large class sizes, and difficulties in addressing diverse learner needs—may affect the quality and effectiveness of literacy instruction (Neuman & Celano, 2017; OECD, 2019). These factors collectively contribute to the persistence of reading difficulties among early-grade learners. While existing studies have explored early literacy development and its associated challenges, there remains a need for context-specific research to identify the specific reading competencies that Grade 1 learners find difficult to master. Many studies focus on general literacy outcomes without clearly determining which specific skills pose the greatest difficulty for learners. Furthermore, limited research has examined the factors contributing to these difficulties in private elementary schools in Ilocos Norte. This gap highlights the need for localized and evidence-based investigations that reflect the actual experiences of learners in specific educational settings.

Therefore, this study aimed to identify the reading and literacy competencies that Grade 1 learners find difficult to master and to determine the factors contributing to these difficulties. The findings of the study are expected to provide valuable insights into early literacy challenges and serve as a basis for improving instructional practices to support learners' reading development.

Literature review

This chapter presents a synthesis of related literature and studies that provide theoretical and empirical support for the present research. It discusses the early literacy instruction, reading competencies, and foundational literacy skills, factors contributing to literacy difficulties, and domains of reading and literacy.

Early literacy instruction

Literature consistently identifies early literacy instruction as a foundational process that enables young learners to acquire essential reading skills and participate meaningfully in academic learning. Early literacy instruction refers to the structured and systematic teaching of core components such as phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension, which collectively support children's ability to decode and construct meaning from texts (Snow et al., 1998). Phonological awareness, in particular, is recognized as a critical precursor to reading, as it involves the ability to identify and manipulate sounds in spoken language, while phonics focuses on the relationship between these sounds and their corresponding letters (Ehri, 2020). These components function together in early

reading development, as phonological awareness supports decoding, while phonics enables learners to translate written symbols into meaningful language. At the same time, vocabulary development plays a crucial role in supporting comprehension, as learners must understand word meanings to make sense of texts (Cabell et al., 2019). These elements are interdependent, with decoding and vocabulary knowledge working together to support fluent and meaningful reading.

Empirical studies further support the integrated nature of early literacy instruction. Cabell et al. (2019) found that early language and literacy skills, including vocabulary and oral language, significantly predict later reading comprehension, highlighting the importance of comprehensive literacy instruction in the early grades. Similarly, Ehri (2020) demonstrated that systematic phonics instruction contributes to the development of automatic word recognition, which in turn supports reading fluency and comprehension. In addition, Rasinski (2012) emphasized that reading fluency develops through guided and repeated reading practices, suggesting that instructional strategies that provide consistent opportunities for practice are essential for strengthening reading proficiency. These findings indicate that effective literacy instruction requires integrating multiple components through structured, purposeful teaching approaches.

Furthermore, early literacy instruction is shaped by both classroom practices and broader learning environments. Instructional quality, including the use of explicit teaching strategies, differentiation, and ongoing assessment, plays a significant role in learners' literacy development (OECD, 2019). At the same time, the home literacy environment contributes to children's exposure to language and print, which supports the development of early reading skills (Neuman & Celano, 2017). These factors highlight that literacy development is not solely dependent on individual learner ability but is also influenced by the quality of instruction and the availability of supportive learning environments. Overall, these findings suggest that early literacy instruction is a dynamic and multifaceted process shaped by cognitive, linguistic, and environmental factors, reinforcing its critical role in the development of reading proficiency among young learners.

Reading competencies and foundational literacy skills

Foundational literacy skills are widely recognized as the building blocks of successful reading development among young learners. These skills include phonological awareness, phonics, vocabulary knowledge, reading fluency, and comprehension, which function collectively to support learners' ability to decode and construct meaning from texts (Cabell et al., 2019). Among these, phonological awareness plays a particularly critical role, as it enables learners to recognize and manipulate the sound structures of language, forming the basis for understanding the relationship between sounds and letters. This skill is closely linked to phonics, which involves the systematic mapping of sounds to written symbols, allowing learners to decode words accurately and efficiently.

Empirical evidence highlights the importance of explicit and systematic phonics instruction in developing early reading skills. Such instruction has been shown to significantly improve learners' decoding abilities and reading fluency, particularly among beginning readers (Ehri, 2020). Learners who acquire strong phonological awareness and phonics skills in the early years are more likely to achieve reading proficiency in later grades, as these skills support automatic word recognition and reduce

cognitive load during reading. In addition, vocabulary knowledge has been identified as a strong predictor of reading comprehension, as learners must understand word meanings to interpret and make sense of texts (Cain & Oakhill, 2016). This suggests that effective literacy instruction must integrate both decoding and language comprehension components to support overall reading development.

Despite exposure to structured reading instruction, some learners continue to struggle to master certain literacy competencies. These challenges are often evident in tasks that require higher-level cognitive processing, such as generating rhyming words, retelling stories, and interpreting the meanings of texts. Such difficulties indicate gaps not only in foundational skills but also in the integration of these skills for meaningful reading. This underscores the need to examine specific areas of difficulty among learners and to better understand the factors that influence their literacy development.

Factors contributing to literacy difficulties

Multiple factors influence learners' development of reading and literacy skills, encompassing home, classroom, and individual learner characteristics. Research consistently emphasizes the role of the home literacy environment, with studies indicating that children who have access to books, print materials, and supportive interactions with adults at home tend to develop stronger early literacy skills than those with limited exposure to print (Neuman & Celano, 2017). Exposure to rich language experiences and reading activities at home provides learners with opportunities to develop vocabulary, phonological awareness, and print familiarity, which are critical for later reading success.

Classroom factors also play a central role in shaping literacy outcomes. The quality of teachers' instructional practices, the availability of learning materials, and the structure of the classroom learning environment collectively influence how effectively learners acquire reading skills. Empirical evidence shows that children benefit from explicit and systematic instruction, guided reading sessions, and opportunities for independent practice, all of which support decoding, comprehension, and fluency development (Justice et al., 2018). Classrooms that promote engagement through interactive and meaningful reading activities further enhance learners' ability to internalize literacy skills.

In addition to environmental factors, learner motivation and engagement are essential determinants of literacy development. Motivated learners are more likely to participate actively in reading activities, practice reading regularly, and develop stronger comprehension skills (Guthrie & Klauda, 2014). Engagement, which includes behavioral, cognitive, and emotional involvement in learning tasks, sustains attention during reading activities and reinforces skill acquisition over time. Taken together, these findings highlight that literacy development is influenced by a complex interplay of home, classroom, and learner-related factors, suggesting that effective literacy instruction must consider both contextual and individual elements to support early reading success.

Domains of reading and literacy

Early literacy development encompasses multiple interrelated domains that collectively support the acquisition of reading and writing skills among young learners. Research consistently identifies six key domains—phonological awareness, phonics and word study, vocabulary and word knowledge, book and print knowledge, comprehending and analyzing text, and creating and composing text—as foundational

for successful literacy development (Cabell et al., 2019; Snow et al., 1998). These domains function synergistically, with early competencies in one domain supporting the development of others, thereby enabling learners to progress from recognizing sounds and letters to constructing meaning and expressing ideas through text.

Phonological awareness is recognized as a critical precursor to reading, involving the ability to identify, segment, and manipulate sounds in spoken language. Empirical evidence indicates that children who develop strong phonological awareness demonstrate more effective decoding skills, which are essential for word recognition and reading fluency (Ehri, 2020). Closely connected is phonics and word study, which involves understanding the systematic relationships between letters and sounds, enabling learners to translate written symbols into meaningful language. Systematic phonics instruction has been shown to improve word decoding, spelling, and reading fluency, particularly when combined with activities that reinforce sound-letter correspondences (Ehri, 2020; Rasinski, 2012).

Vocabulary and word knowledge constitute another essential domain, as comprehension depends on learners' understanding of word meanings. Children with limited vocabulary are more likely to experience difficulties in interpreting texts, even if they can decode words accurately (Cain & Oakhill, 2016). Research highlights that oral language development, interactive reading, and explicit vocabulary instruction contribute significantly to learners' comprehension and overall literacy growth. Complementing this is book and print knowledge, which refers to learners' familiarity with the conventions of written language, including letter recognition, directionality, and book structure. Children who acquire strong print awareness are better equipped to navigate texts and develop reading independence (Snow et al., 1998).

Higher-order literacy domains involve comprehending and analyzing text, as well as creating and composing text, reflecting the application of foundational skills to meaningful reading and writing. Comprehension requires integrating prior knowledge with textual information, enabling learners to interpret, evaluate, and synthesize meaning from written materials (Cabell et al., 2019). Creating and composing text provides learners with opportunities to express ideas, organize thoughts, and apply knowledge of language and text structures, thereby reinforcing reading skills through active engagement with writing (Rasinski, 2012). Studies suggest that integrating instruction across these domains yields the greatest gains in early literacy, as each domain reinforces the others in a dynamic, reciprocal manner. Overall, the literature indicates that early literacy is a multidimensional construct that requires balanced development across all domains. Effective literacy instruction addresses both foundational skills—such as phonological awareness, phonics, and vocabulary—and higher-order skills—such as comprehension and composition—within supportive learning environments. This integrated approach ensures that young learners develop the skills necessary to become proficient readers and writers, highlighting the importance of comprehensive literacy instruction in the early grades.

Statement of the problem

This study aimed to identify the reading and literacy competencies that Grade 1 learners find difficult to master and to determine the factors contributing to these difficulties. Specifically, it sought to answer

1. Which reading and literacy competencies present the greatest challenges for Grade 1 learners?
2. What home, classroom, and learner-related factors contribute to the difficulties experienced by Grade 1 learners in mastering these competencies?

Methodology

This chapter presented the research design, sources of data, including the study locale, population, and sampling; data-gathering instrument; and data analysis, including its ethical standards.

Research design

This study employed an explanatory sequential mixed-methods research design to investigate the reading and literacy competencies that Grade 1 learners find difficult to master and the factors contributing to these challenges. In this design, quantitative data were first collected to identify and measure the specific literacy competencies that learners struggle with. Following the quantitative phase, qualitative data were gathered to explore in greater depth the contextual, classroom, and learner-related factors that contribute to these difficulties.

The explanatory sequential design is particularly appropriate for studies that aim not only to quantify a phenomenon but also to explain the underlying causes or contextual influences (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). By first identifying patterns of difficulty through quantitative measures, the researcher was able to focus the qualitative phase on understanding why learners encounter these challenges, providing richer and more meaningful insights. This approach ensures that the findings are both empirically grounded and contextually nuanced, allowing for a comprehensive understanding of early literacy difficulties in authentic classroom settings.

Locale of the study

The research was conducted in eleven private elementary schools in Ilocos Norte, focusing on Grade 1 classes.

Population and sampling

The study population consisted of teachers employed in private schools in Ilocos Norte during the first quarter of the 2025–2026 school year. Total enumeration was employed to include all eligible teachers.

Data gathering instrument

To gather data, the researcher employed a Needs Assessment Survey specifically designed to capture both the literacy competencies that Grade 1 learners find challenging and the factors contributing to these difficulties. The survey consisted of two parts. The first part collected quantitative data on learners' difficulties across various reading and literacy competencies, while the second part included an open-ended question to elicit qualitative insights into the contextual, classroom, and learner-related factors influencing these challenges. The competencies included in the survey were directly aligned with the Learning Competencies for Grade 1 Reading and Literacy issued by the Department of Education (DepEd, 2023), ensuring that the instrument reflected current curriculum standards.

The data-gathering process began after the researcher obtained administrative clearance from the Graduate School. Permission to conduct the study was formally requested from the heads of the selected private schools via an official letter seeking approval to administer the survey to Grade 1 teachers. The questionnaire was attached to the letter and made accessible via a QR code, enabling respondents to complete it online through Google Forms at their convenience. To ensure a high response rate and full participation, the researcher also personally distributed the survey to teachers who were unable to access the online version. The entire process was conducted over the course of one month, allowing respondents ample time to provide careful and accurate responses.

Data analysis tool

Quantitative data on the reading and literacy competencies that Grade 1 learners find difficult to master were analyzed using frequency counts and percentage distributions, allowing the researcher to determine the most commonly reported areas of difficulty. Qualitative data from the open-ended question were analyzed through thematic analysis. Responses were systematically reviewed, coded, and organized into recurring patterns and themes to identify the key factors contributing to learners’ challenges in mastering reading and literacy competencies.

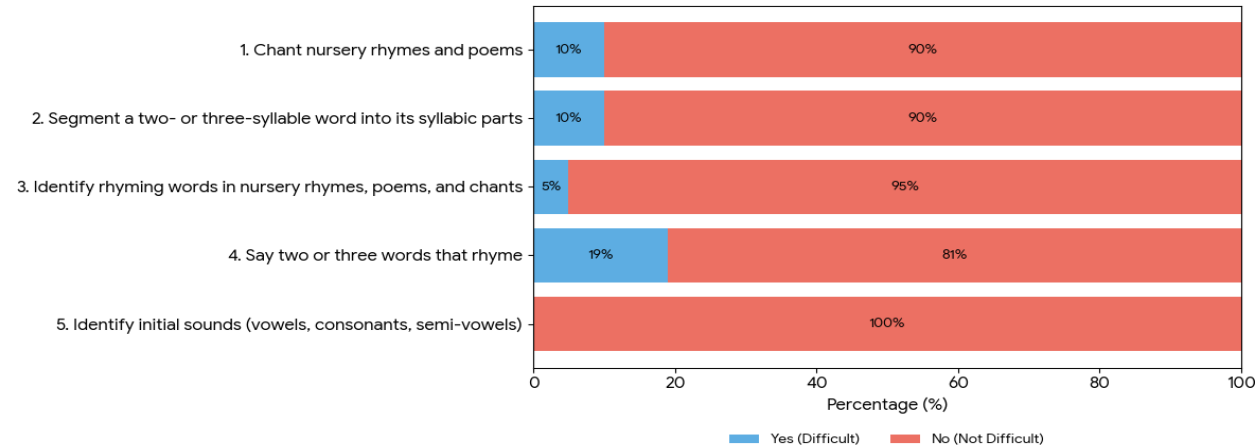
Ethical considerations

The study strictly adhered to ethical research principles, ensuring that participation was voluntary and based on informed consent, and safeguarding the confidentiality of all respondents. Data collection was conducted to minimize disruption to regular classroom activities, and participants’ identities were kept anonymous in all reports. Both experts and teachers were fully informed about the purpose of the study, how the collected data would be used, and their right to withdraw from the study at any point without any consequences.

Data presentation and analysis

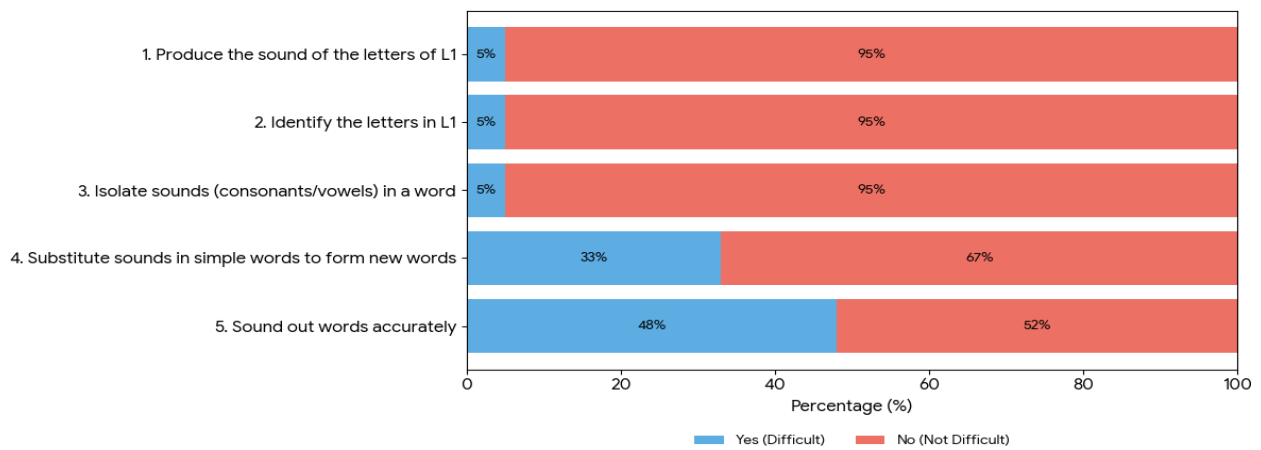
Problem 1: Which reading and literacy competencies present the greatest challenges for Grade 1 learners?

Table 1. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in phonological awareness (Oracy for Literacy)



The data reveal that learners generally exhibit a high level of phonological awareness, with most participants demonstrating no difficulty across the measured competencies. Identifying initial sounds emerged as the most accessible skill, with 100% of learners mastering it without difficulty, which aligns with research indicating that early sound recognition is typically acquired before more complex phonological tasks (Ehri, 2020; Cabell et al., 2019). In contrast, producing two or three words that rhyme was the most challenging task, though only 19% of learners experienced difficulty. Tasks such as chanting nursery rhymes and segmenting syllables showed equal difficulty at 10%, while identifying existing rhymes in text was slightly easier at 5%. These findings are consistent with prior studies suggesting that generative phonological tasks, which require children to actively manipulate sounds, are more cognitively demanding than recognition-based tasks (Anthony & Lonigan, 2004; Snow et al., 1998).

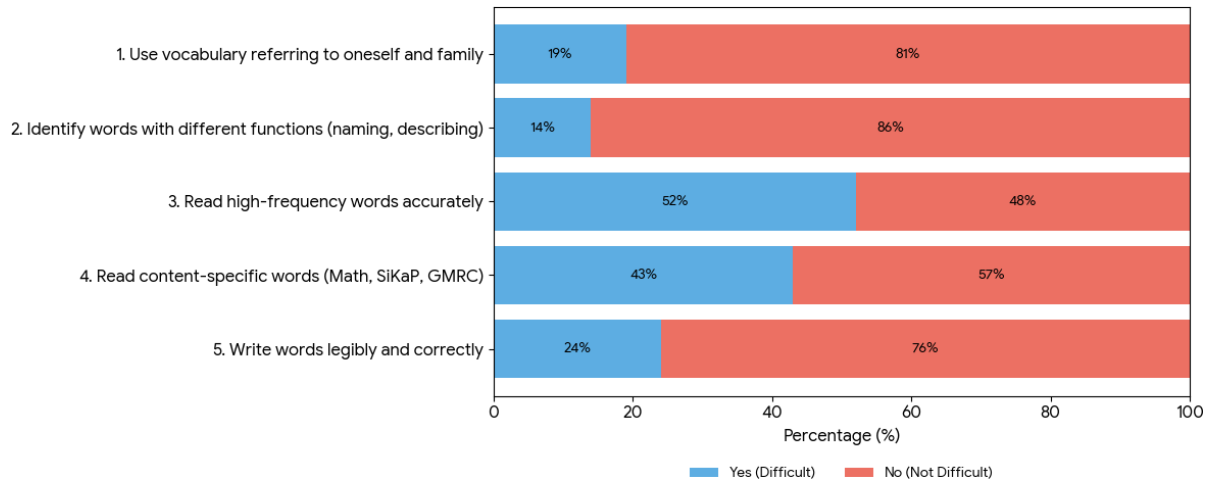
Table 2. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in phonics and word study (sounds to words)



Source: *Madamba (2026)*

The data in Figure 2 indicate a significant shift in difficulty as learners progress from basic letter recognition to active decoding and word manipulation. While foundational skills—such as producing letter sounds, identifying letters, and isolating individual sounds—are mastered by the vast majority (95%), challenges emerge with more complex tasks. Specifically, the difficulty increases significantly when learners are required to substitute sounds to form new words (33%), a process that Kilpatrick (2015) identifies as a hallmark of advanced phonemic awareness necessary for reading fluency. The most substantial hurdle is sounding out words accurately, which 48% of learners found difficult to master. This progression suggests that while students have a strong grasp of individual letter-sound correspondences, they struggle significantly with the synthesis and blending required for fluent reading and word study. According to Ehri (1995), these learners likely remain in the Partial Alphabetic Phase, in which they recognize some letter-sound correspondences but have not yet achieved the orthographic mapping required for the Full Alphabetic Phase of reading.

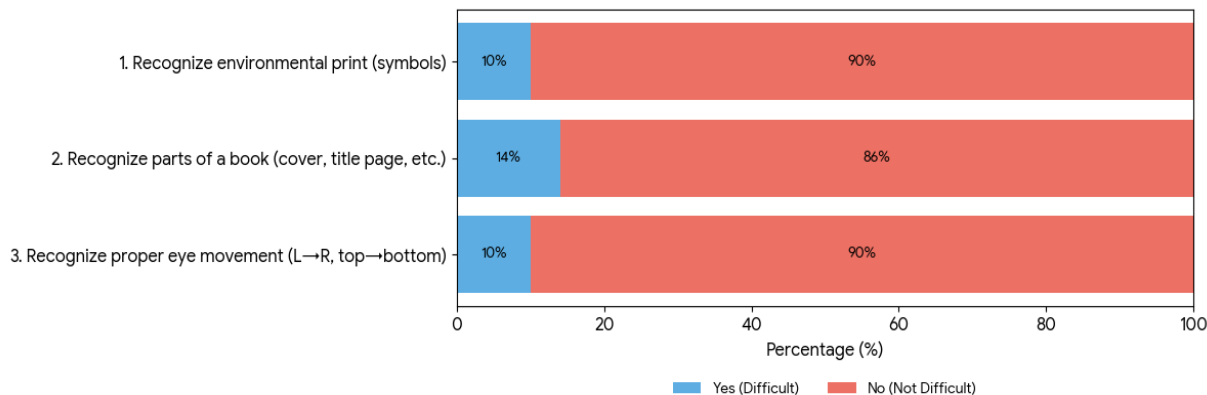
Table 3. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in vocabulary and word knowledge



Source: Madamba (2026)

The data in Figure 3 illustrates a clear distinction between contextual oral vocabulary and technical reading application, with learners showing high proficiency in familiar, personal language but experiencing a sharp increase in difficulty with the accuracy required for formal academic reading. While foundational oral skills—such as using vocabulary referring to oneself and family (81% mastery) and identifying basic word functions (86% mastery)—are well-established, a significant challenge arises in reading automaticity, with the most substantial hurdle being the accurate reading of high-frequency words, which 52% of learners found difficult to master. This is closely followed by reading content-specific words (e.g., Math, SiKaP, GMRC), which presented a challenge for 43% of the group, suggesting a "vocabulary gap" in technical and sight-word recognition. According to Biemiller (2003), the automaticity of high-frequency words is what allows cognitive resources to be shifted from decoding to understanding, and as noted by Justice et al. (2003), learners who struggle with these words often find it difficult to transition from "learning to read" to "reading to learn," confirming that while students have a solid base in personal oracy, they require targeted support in developing a robust sight-word lexicon to succeed in specialized subject areas.

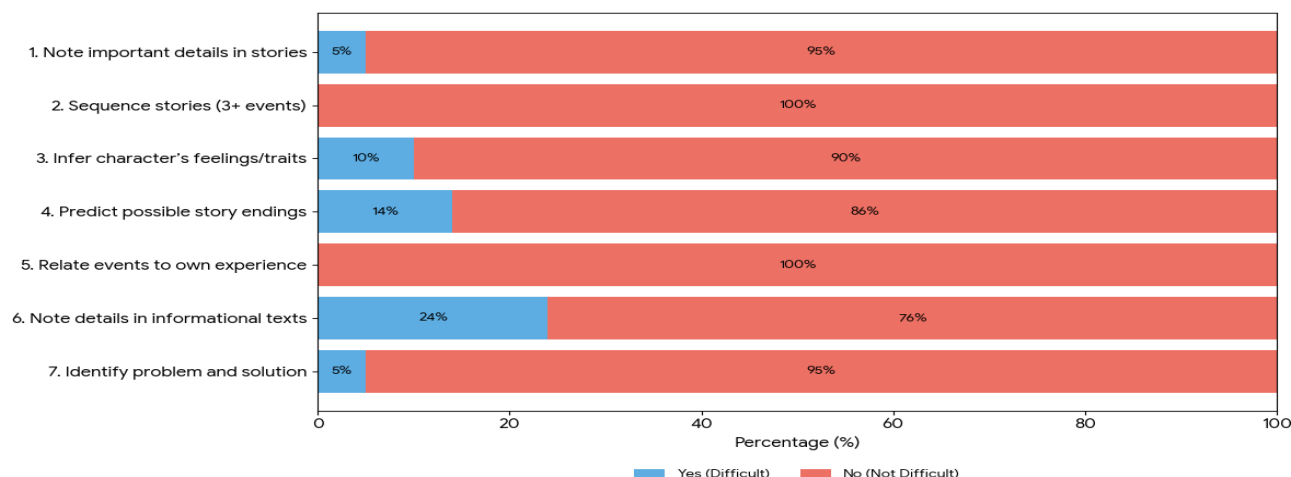
Table 4. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in book and print knowledge



Source: Madamba (2026)

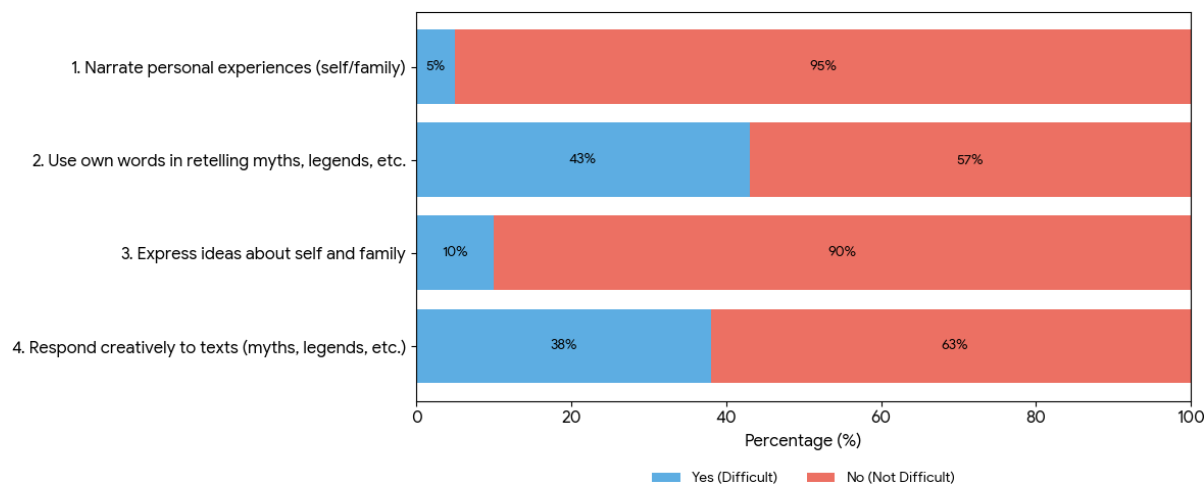
The data in Figure 4 indicate that learners have a high level of mastery of foundational reading conventions and the physical structure of books, suggesting a successful transition into the Emergent Literacy Phase. Specifically, 90% of learners reported no difficulty with recognizing environmental print and understanding proper eye movement (left-to-right, top-to-bottom), while 86% successfully recognized parts of a book, such as the cover and title page. According to Clay (2000), mastery of these "concepts of print" is a critical predictor of future reading success, as it allows learners to focus their cognitive energy on decoding and comprehension rather than navigating the physical medium of the text. These relatively low difficulty rates suggest that the classroom environment has effectively introduced the "mechanics" of reading, ensuring that students are better prepared for the more complex tasks of orthographic mapping and word recognition (Justice & Ezell, 2001). Ultimately, these findings indicate that the learners possess the necessary structural foundation to support their ongoing development in phonics and vocabulary.

Table 5. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in comprehending and analyzing text



Source: Madamba (2026)

The data in Figure 5 indicate that learners possess a robust foundation in narrative comprehension while showing an emerging struggle with technical non-fiction content, particularly when personal connection and story structure are absent. Mastery remains remarkably high in areas that require empathetic engagement, such as sequencing stories and relating events to personal experience (100%), identifying problems and solutions (95%), and inferring characters' feelings (90%). However, a distinct "informational gap" appears when students transition to dense, factual structures, with 24% of learners finding it difficult to note significant details in informational texts. According to Harvey and Goudvis (2007), the "inner conversation" used to process narrative stories does not automatically transfer to non-fiction, which requires specialized strategies for identifying main ideas. This suggests that while students have a powerful asset in their high levels of linguistic comprehension (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), they require targeted instruction to bridge the gap between story-based processing and the analytical demands of academic and technical literacy.

Table 6. Competencies that learners find difficult to master in creating and composing text

Source: Madamba (2026)

The data from Figure 6 highlights a significant "creative gap" when learners transition from personal expression to the formal retelling and analysis of literature. While students demonstrate mastery of personal narratives, they encounter substantial challenges when required to engage with more complex external texts, such as myths and legends. Specifically, learners show exceptional proficiency in narrating personal experiences (95% mastery) and expressing ideas about themselves and their families (90% mastery). These results indicate that when the subject matter is familiar and internally motivated, students have the linguistic tools to compose and create text. However, a sharp decline in mastery is observed in more formal academic tasks: 43% of learners find it difficult to retell myths and legends in their own words, and 38% struggle to respond creatively to these texts. This suggests that the difficulty lies in the transition from receptive understanding to productive synthesis of unfamiliar literary content. According to Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development, these learners are highly capable of independent performance in "authentic" contexts (personal life) but require significant scaffolding when moving into "academic" literacy. As noted by Morrow (2012), retelling is a complex cognitive task that requires a student to reorganize and synthesize another's ideas, a process that is significantly more demanding than personal narration. These findings imply that while students have a strong foundation in oral and personal expression, they need targeted support in summarization strategies and creative analysis to bridge the gap between self-expression and academic textual engagement.

Problem 2: What home, classroom, and learner-related factors contribute to the difficulties experienced by Grade 1 learners in mastering these competencies?

Mastering Reading and Literacy competencies was essential in the early grades; however, many learners continued to experience difficulties despite regular instruction. These difficulties stemmed from various instructional, learner-related, and resource-related factors that affected learners' acquisition of foundational reading skills.

This study identified the factors that contributed to learners' difficulties in mastering Reading and

Literacy. Data were obtained from Part II of the survey questionnaire, which included open-ended questions answered by Grade 1 teachers from private schools in Ilocos Norte. The responses were analyzed and grouped into common themes to determine the main factors affecting learners' reading and literacy development.

Table 7. Factors contributing to Grade 1 learners' difficulties in mastering reading and literacy

Theme	Category (Problems)	Responses from Teacher-Respondents
Learner-related factors	Lack of attention span	Teacher A: <i>"The main factors that affect the ability of learners in mastering Reading and Literacy are their short attention span... Learners sometimes think the lessons are repetitive, which causes them to lose focus."</i>
	Lack of vocabulary knowledge	Teacher A: <i>"...limited vocabulary."</i> Teacher F: <i>"If learners do not know many words, they find it hard to understand what they read."</i>
	Lack of mastery of basic reading skills	Teacher B: <i>"Learners have not yet fully mastered reading. Many are still beginning to recognize letters, sounds, and words, so comprehension becomes a challenge."</i>
Home and environmental factors	Lack of reading practice at home	Teacher C: <i>"Some pupils struggle due to lack of reading practice at home..."</i>
	Lack of parental guidance and support	Teacher C: <i>"...and limited parental guidance."</i> Teacher H: <i>"Some learners do not have someone at home who guides or encourages them to read."</i>
	Lack of reading resources and exposure	Teacher D: <i>"Limited vocabulary, poor comprehension skills, and lack of reading exposure at home affect learners' mastery."</i>
		Teacher J: <i>"Inadequate learning materials in reading and literacy also contribute to learners' difficulties."</i>
Motivation and instructional factors	Lack of interest and engagement	Teacher E: <i>"Lack of interest and motivation affects learners... learners do not practice."</i> Teacher K: <i>"When students are not interested in stories or reading activities, they do not engage or learn well."</i>
	Lack of consistent instruction and teacher training	Teacher L: <i>"Inconsistent teaching and insufficient training affect learners' reading progress."</i>

Source: Madamba (2026)

The findings show that learner-related factors significantly affect the development of reading and literacy skills among Grade 1 pupils. One of the most common issues is learners' short attention span, which makes it difficult for them to stay focused during reading activities. When lessons are perceived as

repetitive, learners tend to lose interest, resulting in reduced engagement and limited learning. Young learners, therefore, require interactive and varied instructional approaches to maintain attention and support active learning (OECD, 2019). Another identified challenge is limited vocabulary, as learners with limited vocabulary struggle to understand texts due to difficulties with word recognition and meaning-making. Recent studies emphasize that vocabulary knowledge is a strong predictor of reading comprehension and overall literacy development (National Institute for Literacy, 2020). In addition, many learners have not yet mastered basic reading skills such as recognizing letters, sounds, and simple words. Without these foundational skills, higher-level comprehension becomes difficult, highlighting the importance of phonemic awareness and decoding skills in early reading development (International Literacy Association, 2020).

Home and environmental factors also play a crucial role in learners' reading development. The lack of reading practice at home limits learners' opportunities to reinforce skills taught in school, as regular reading practice is essential for developing fluency and confidence (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, limited parental guidance and support further contribute to learners' difficulties. When parents or guardians are unable to assist with or encourage reading at home, learners may lack motivation and guidance to improve their skills. Parental involvement has been shown to significantly influence children's literacy development and academic success (UNICEF, 2020). Another concern is the lack of reading resources and exposure, as learners who are not exposed to books and print materials have fewer opportunities to develop vocabulary and comprehension skills. Access to print-rich environments and learning materials is therefore essential for strengthening early literacy skills (World Bank, 2018).

Motivation and instructional factors are also key influences on learners' reading and literacy development. The findings reveal that a lack of interest and engagement hinders learners' participation in reading activities. When learners are unmotivated, they are less likely to practice reading, which slows skill development. Learner engagement is a critical factor in improving reading outcomes, particularly in the early grades (OECD, 2019). Furthermore, inconsistent instruction and limited teacher training can affect the quality of reading instruction. When teaching strategies are not aligned with learners' needs, it becomes difficult for pupils to develop their reading skills effectively. Teachers' competence and continuous professional development are therefore essential in delivering effective literacy instruction (World Bank, 2020).

Results and discussion

The findings of the study indicate that while learners demonstrate a strong foundation in early literacy skills, several factors influence their performance as tasks become more complex. One major factor is the developmental progression of phonological awareness, in which learners easily master basic skills such as identifying initial sounds but struggle with more advanced tasks such as generating rhymes and manipulating phonemes. This aligns with the work of Ehri (1995, 2020) and Anthony and Lonigan (2004), who explain that higher-order phonological tasks require deeper cognitive processing. Additionally, learners show limited mastery of advanced phonemic awareness, particularly in blending and segmenting sounds, which affects their ability to decode words accurately. Kilpatrick (2015) emphasizes that these skills are essential for reading fluency, and difficulty in this area suggests that

Another contributing factor is the lack of automaticity in recognizing high-frequency words, which slows and makes reading effortful. According to Biemiller (2003) and Justice et al. (2003), automatic word recognition is crucial for shifting focus from decoding to comprehension, which helps explain why learners struggle with formal reading despite strong oral language skills. Furthermore, learners exhibit strong oral language abilities but have limited academic vocabulary, likely due to greater exposure to conversational language than to technical terms used in school subjects.

In contrast, the high level of mastery in print awareness and book handling indicates effective classroom instruction, as supported by Clay (2000) and Justice and Ezell (2001), who highlight the importance of print-rich environments in early literacy development. The results also show that learners perform well in narrative comprehension due to familiarity and personal connection, consistent with Gough and Tunmer's (1986) view that comprehension is influenced by language understanding and prior knowledge.

However, difficulties arise with informational texts, as these require different strategies, such as identifying key details and main ideas, which Harvey and Goudvis (2007) note must be explicitly taught. Moreover, learners struggle with higher-order literacy tasks such as retelling and responding creatively to texts, indicating a need for scaffolding. Vygotsky's (1978) Zone of Proximal Development posits that learners require guidance to perform complex tasks, while Morrow (2012) notes that retelling involves organizing and synthesizing information, thereby making it more cognitively demanding.

Finally, a gap exists between learners' ability to express personal ideas and their performance in formal academic tasks, suggesting that while they are confident in familiar contexts, they require structured support when engaging with unfamiliar texts. Recent research emphasizes that academic language proficiency develops through explicit instruction and guided practice, particularly when learners are provided with structured and meaningful literacy experiences (OECD, 2021). These findings imply that literacy instruction should go beyond basic skill development by incorporating explicit teaching of phonemic awareness, structured practice in blending and decoding, and systematic exposure to high-frequency and academic vocabulary. Contemporary studies highlight that phonemic awareness remains a critical foundation for reading development and must be taught using evidence-based strategies, especially for learners at risk of reading difficulties (Castles, Rastle, & Nation, 2018; updated applications in 2023 literacy frameworks). Furthermore, integrating phonics and vocabulary instruction has been shown to significantly improve reading fluency and comprehension among early learners (UNESCO, 2022). Teachers should also apply differentiated and scaffolded strategies, particularly when teaching informational texts and higher-order comprehension tasks, to support learners' transition to more complex literacy demands, as recent studies on structured literacy and guided instruction indicate (Ehri, 2020). Additionally, creating print-rich and language-rich classroom environments, along with providing opportunities for guided reading and meaningful engagement, continues to play a crucial role in bridging the gap between oral language and academic literacy (International Literacy Association, 2023). Overall, targeted and responsive instruction grounded in current research is necessary to support learners as they progress from foundational skills to fluent reading and deeper comprehension.

The findings also reveal that the difficulties experienced by Grade 1 learners in mastering reading competencies are influenced by several home-, classroom-, and learner-related factors, as reflected in challenges with attention, vocabulary development, foundational reading skills, and learning engagement. These findings suggest that learner-related, home, and instructional factors significantly influence the development of reading and literacy skills among Grade 1 pupils, as they directly affect learners' attention, language processing, and opportunities for practice. Recent studies affirm that vocabulary knowledge, motivation, and learner engagement play a crucial role in reading achievement, as these factors strongly influence comprehension and overall academic performance (International Literacy Association, 2023). Moreover, the home literacy environment, including parental involvement and exposure to reading materials, significantly contributes to children's vocabulary growth and early literacy development (UNESCO, 2022). Limited access to reading resources, insufficient support at home, and low motivation to learn have also been identified as contributing factors to difficulties with fluency and comprehension among young learners (OECD, 2021). Furthermore, both learner-related and environmental factors collectively shape literacy outcomes, highlighting the importance of providing supportive, structured, and engaging learning environments to enhance reading development (Ehri, 2020).

One key reason for the observed difficulties is learners' short attention spans, which limit sustained engagement in reading tasks; when lessons are repetitive or lack variety, learners lose interest, reducing meaningful learning opportunities, as supported by the OECD (2019). Additionally, limited vocabulary knowledge restricts learners' ability to understand texts, since reading requires both decoding and meaning-making; thus, learners with insufficient vocabulary struggle with comprehension, consistent with the National Institute for Literacy (2020). The lack of mastery of foundational skills such as letter recognition and phonemic awareness further explains learners' difficulty in progressing to higher-level reading tasks, as these are essential building blocks of literacy (International Literacy Association, 2020).

Home and environmental factors also contribute to these results, as limited reading practice at home reduces opportunities for reinforcement, which is necessary for developing fluency and confidence (UNESCO, 2021). Moreover, insufficient parental support lowers learners' motivation and guidance, affecting their reading habits and overall progress (UNICEF, 2020), while lack of access to reading materials limits exposure to print, slowing vocabulary and comprehension development (World Bank, 2018).

Instructional factors, such as low learner engagement and inconsistent teaching strategies, further explain the outcomes, as unmotivated learners participate less in reading activities, and ineffective instruction fails to address diverse learning needs (OECD, 2019; World Bank, 2020). These results imply that improving early literacy requires a holistic approach: teachers must use interactive and differentiated strategies to sustain attention and develop foundational skills; schools should strengthen reading programs and provide access to print-rich materials; and parents should be actively involved in supporting reading at home. Without addressing these areas, learners may continue to struggle in transitioning from basic decoding to fluent reading and comprehension, ultimately affecting their overall academic achievement.

The findings support the Simple View of Reading, showing that despite strong oral language and narrative comprehension, learners' difficulties in decoding, phoneme blending, and word recognition constrain overall reading proficiency (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). This aligns with Ehri's concept of orthographic mapping, indicating that many learners remain in the Partial Alphabetic Phase and require systematic phonics instruction (Ehri, 2020). The results also reflect Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development, as learners perform well in familiar contexts but struggle with more complex tasks, particularly informational text comprehension, highlighting the need for scaffolding and differentiated strategies (Vygotsky, 1978; Harvey & Goudvis, 2007).

Practically, the study underscores the need for explicit and systematic literacy instruction and strengthened early literacy policies (Ehri, 2020; International Literacy Association, 2023). It also highlights the importance of parental involvement and home literacy support (UNESCO, 2022). Schools should provide print-rich environments and teacher training, while teachers implement scaffolded and differentiated approaches (OECD, 2019).

However, the study is limited by its small sample, reliance on teacher-reported data, cross-sectional design, and limited consideration of contextual variables.

Conclusion

The findings synthesized in this study demonstrate that while Grade 1 learners exhibit a robust foundation in oral language and narrative comprehension, they encounter a significant "performance cliff" when transitioning to technical decoding and analysis of informational texts. This disparity indicates that although students have successfully navigated the Emergent Literacy Phase, a mechanical bottleneck persists in their orthographic mapping and the synthesis of sounds into fluent word recognition. By identifying this specific developmental hurdle, the research contributes new knowledge regarding the "informational gap," revealing that high proficiency in personal storytelling does not automatically translate to the cognitive processing required for dense, factual, or non-fiction content. These results reinforce the Simple View of Reading (Gough & Tunmer, 1986), illustrating that robust language comprehension alone cannot achieve reading proficiency if the technical decoding component remains a critical barrier. Accordingly, it is recommended that educators move beyond general storytelling to implement explicit, systematic interventions in synthetic blending and informational text structures, thereby bridging the gap between students' existing oral strengths and the specialized demands of academic literacy.

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