

Determinants of Reading Challenges among Urban Primary School Pupils

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.47772/IJRISS.2026.100300126>

Received: 11 March 2026; Accepted: 16 March 2026; Published: 28 March 2026

ABSTRACT

This research investigates the underlying causes, consequences, and remedial strategies associated with reading difficulties among primary school pupils enrolled in remedial programs in urban Kuala Terengganu. Persistent literacy underachievement has been closely associated with unstable family structures, limited community engagement in education, and learner-related factors such as low intrinsic motivation and inconsistent school attendance. Employing a qualitative research framework, the study gathered data through semi-structured interviews with three experienced remedial language teachers. The findings indicate that an uncondusive home literacy environment, socioeconomic constraints, and minimal community-based academic support significantly impede pupils' reading development. These constraints not only undermine academic performance but also adversely affect learners' emotional stability, self-confidence, and long-term educational progression. The study further identifies practical intervention measures, including the use of interactive teaching materials, activity-based learning approaches, positive reinforcement mechanisms, and strengthened parental and community involvement. It concludes by advocating for a coordinated and holistic strategy involving educators, school leaders, families, and policymakers to establish a sustainable support system that enhances literacy outcomes for struggling learners. The implications of this study are significant for informing inclusive, responsive, and equity-oriented educational policies.

Keywords - Reading difficulties, reading literacy, inclusive education, literacy intervention, remedial pupils

INTRODUCTION

Literacy acquisition among primary school pupils is influenced by a broad range of cognitive, biological, socio-emotional, and environmental variables. Previous research has highlighted that differences in intellectual capacity and neurological development can significantly affect a pupil's ability to process and retain information. For instance, variations in cognitive functioning—whether shaped by genetic predispositions or developmental conditions—influence how effectively pupils decode words and comprehend texts (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011). When these limitations are compounded by emotional stress, pupils struggle to sustain attention and participate in literacy-based activities.

Emotional disturbances constitute another significant barrier to literacy development. Pupils experiencing anxiety, fear, frustration, or anger often demonstrate reduced concentration and diminished academic engagement. Zulkifley (2006) notes that learners with lower cognitive readiness frequently exhibit emotional instability, which interferes with their focus during instructional activities. These emotional responses can be triggered by repeated academic failure, negative feedback, or challenging home circumstances, further reinforcing a cycle of low achievement and declining self-confidence.

Biological and health-related factors also play a considerable role in shaping reading development. Chronic illnesses such as asthma, sinus conditions, seizure disorders, and speech articulation difficulties can disrupt consistent school attendance and reduce pupils' capacity to engage effectively in classroom learning. Neurological factors affecting language processing and phonological awareness may additionally hinder reading

fluency and comprehension. Consequently, pupils facing such health challenges may display limited enthusiasm and sustained attention toward academic tasks.

Environmental influences represent another critical dimension in understanding reading difficulties. External factors related to the school system, language exposure, and socio-cultural background significantly shape literacy outcomes. Pupils who grow up in environments where non-standard language varieties are predominantly used may encounter challenges in adapting to formal academic language expectations. Furthermore, institutional constraints, such as overcrowded classrooms, limited differentiated instruction, and insufficient literacy resources can restrict the effectiveness of teaching and learning processes (Abdul Rasid Jamian, 2011).

Gaps in mastering fundamental reading and writing skills frequently result in diminished self-esteem and weakened self-regulation. Pupils who repeatedly struggle with decoding or comprehension tasks may internalize a negative academic self-image, perceiving themselves as incapable learners. Persistent setbacks contribute to declining motivation, reduced classroom participation, and reluctance to explore supplementary learning materials, including diagrams and visual aids provided by teachers. Yahya (2004) conceptualizes reading as a dynamic interaction between textual content and the reader's cognitive and imaginative processes. When pupils are unable to meaningfully engage with texts, this interactive process is disrupted, weakening overall literacy development.

In addition to learner-related and environmental factors, pedagogical practices significantly influence reading engagement. Instructional approaches that lack creativity, differentiation, or contextual relevance may fail to capture pupils' interest. Monotonous teaching strategies can diminish enthusiasm for reading activities and weaken intrinsic motivation. As motivation declines, pupils become less inclined to practice reading consistently, thereby slowing skill development and reinforcing literacy challenges. Taken together, these interconnected factors cognitive, emotional, biological, environmental, and instructional illustrate the multifaceted nature of reading difficulties among primary school pupils. Addressing such challenges requires a comprehensive understanding of the diverse influences shaping literacy acquisition and the implementation of targeted, responsive interventions that consider pupils' holistic developmental needs.

Objectives

This study was undertaken to explore the multifaceted issue of reading difficulties among remedial pupils in urban primary schools in Kuala Terengganu. Specifically, the research sought to identify the key factors contributing to pupils' reading challenges, to examine the extent to which these difficulties affect classroom learning and overall academic development, and to propose practical and policy-oriented solutions to mitigate literacy-related problems. By framing the inquiry around these three dimensions causes, impacts, and interventions the study aims to generate a comprehensive understanding of literacy struggles within the urban schooling context and to inform targeted educational improvement strategies.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Scholarly literature consistently emphasizes that reading proficiency is shaped by a dynamic interaction between learner characteristics, instructional practices, and socio-environmental influences. Research conducted by Usha and Vijayaletchumy (2019) highlighted that pupils' attitudes toward language mastery and teachers' ability to diversify instructional strategies significantly determine literacy outcomes. When pedagogical approaches lack engagement and variation, pupils' motivation to read declines, resulting in weaker literacy acquisition.

Comparative research by Mohd Fauzan Zulkifli and colleagues (2021) further demonstrated that literacy challenges manifest differently across contexts. In urban settings, contributing factors include declining reading habits, limited reading awareness, inadequate structured reading time, and increased exposure to digital distractions. In rural areas, however, the primary constraints involve insufficient family support, limited educational resources, inadequate teacher preparation, and restricted access to appealing reading materials. These findings underscore that literacy difficulties are context-sensitive yet universally complex.

From a cognitive perspective, Jeanne Chall and Vicky Jacobs (2003) argue that reading comprehension requires extensive vocabulary knowledge, conceptual understanding, and higher-order thinking skills. Early literacy exposure plays a critical developmental role, as emphasized by Emilia Ferreiro and Ana Teberosky (2009), who contend that children's early encounters with print shape their long-term literacy trajectories. Delayed intervention may lead to progressively widening achievement gaps.

Globally, literacy competence is monitored through international assessments such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) and the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), which evaluate students' reading abilities and provide comparative benchmarks. In Malaysia, literacy development is positioned as a national priority under the Malaysia Education Blueprint 2013–2025. The implementation of the Literacy and Numeracy Screening (LINUS) reflects the government's commitment to ensuring foundational literacy mastery in the early years of schooling. Nevertheless, while such initiatives focus on assessment and early detection, further exploration into the underlying determinants of persistent reading difficulties remains necessary.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a qualitative research design rooted in the interpretivist paradigm to obtain an in-depth and contextualized understanding of reading difficulties among remedial pupils. Qualitative inquiry was deemed appropriate due to its flexibility and its capacity to capture participants' lived experiences and professional reflections.

The research process was conducted in two sequential phases. The first phase involved an extensive review of relevant literature to construct the conceptual and theoretical framework guiding the investigation. The second phase focused on empirical data collection through semi-structured interviews, enabling the researcher to explore teachers' insights regarding pupils' literacy challenges and intervention strategies. This methodological approach ensured analytical depth and interpretative richness.

a. Population and Sampling (Qualitative Approach)

Aligned with qualitative research principles, participants were selected purposively to ensure relevance and expertise. The informants comprised Malay language teachers with substantial experience in teaching remedial pupils facing reading difficulties. Their professional backgrounds provided valuable, context-specific insights into literacy challenges within urban primary schools.

Qualitative research emphasizes understanding human experiences within their social contexts. Therefore, this approach facilitated a nuanced exploration of how familial, cognitive, and environmental factors interact to influence pupils' reading development. Ethical protocols were strictly observed, including obtaining informed consent and safeguarding participants' confidentiality and anonymity.

b. Data Collection Process

The data collection process adhered to formal institutional and ethical procedures. Prior to fieldwork, official authorization was obtained from the relevant educational authorities to ensure compliance with regulatory requirements. Upon approval, interviews were conducted systematically using structured guiding questions while allowing flexibility for elaboration.

The interviews were documented and analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and key themes related to contributory factors, impacts, and solutions concerning reading difficulties. This systematic procedure ensured the reliability and credibility of the findings.

c. Data Analysis and Thematic Process

To ensure a rigorous interpretation of the qualitative data, this study employed a systematic **Thematic Analysis** approach. The analysis followed a structured coding framework consisting of three primary stages:

- **Open Coding:** Raw data from the semi-structured interviews were broken down into discrete parts to identify initial concepts regarding reading barriers and interventions.
- **Axial Coding:** These concepts were then grouped into sub-categories to explore the relationships between familial, individual, and environmental factors.
- **Selective Coding:** Finally, overarching themes were refined to form the core findings related to the causes, impacts, and solutions for literacy challenges.

d. **Research Credibility and Validation**

To uphold the integrity and credibility of the findings, several validation strategies were implemented:

- **Data Triangulation:** Insights were cross-referenced among the three experienced remedial language teachers to identify consistent patterns in pupil behavior and academic performance.
- **Member Checking:** Participants were given the opportunity to review their interview transcripts to ensure the documented reflections accurately captured their professional experiences.
- **Audit Trail:** A clear record of the data collection and analysis process was maintained to ensure transparency in how the final themes were derived from the original responses.

FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

Objective I: Contributing Factors to Reading Difficulties

The findings reveal that reading difficulties among remedial pupils arise from interrelated familial, community, and individual dimensions. Familial instability emerged as a significant determinant. Pupils from economically disadvantaged or emotionally unstable households often lack consistent parental guidance and structured literacy support at home. Financial hardship, particularly among low-income families, sometimes compels pupils to prioritize domestic responsibilities over schooling, thereby reducing consistent exposure to literacy-rich environments. Additionally, parents with limited educational backgrounds may be unable to provide effective academic assistance.

Community-level influences further shape literacy development. In certain urban neighborhoods, limited emphasis on academic culture and insufficient literacy enrichment programs restrict opportunities for pupils to cultivate sustained reading habits. Without supportive community initiatives, reading becomes perceived as a compulsory academic task rather than a meaningful lifelong skill.

At the individual level, pupils frequently demonstrate low intrinsic motivation, weak phonological awareness, limited working memory capacity, and difficulties in word recognition. Chronic absenteeism exacerbates these issues by disrupting instructional continuity, reinforcing cycles of academic underperformance.

Objective II: Impact of Reading Difficulties on Classroom Learning

Reading difficulties significantly affect pupils' academic performance and psychosocial well-being. Academically, pupils who struggle with decoding and comprehension are unable to follow written instructions effectively, complete assignments independently, or engage actively in text-based learning tasks. These challenges accumulate over time, resulting in widening knowledge gaps across subjects.

Emotionally, pupils often experience frustration, embarrassment, and diminished self-esteem. Such emotional responses may lead to withdrawal from classroom participation or the manifestation of disruptive behaviors as coping mechanisms. Cognitively, persistent reading struggles weaken concentration and reduce confidence in academic abilities.

In the long term, unresolved literacy difficulties limit educational progression and restrict access to advanced academic opportunities. This may subsequently affect employment prospects and social mobility, highlighting the urgent need for early and sustained intervention.

Objective III: Solutions to Overcome Reading Difficulties

Teachers reported implementing various innovative and context-responsive strategies to support remedial pupils. Engaging, multisensory instructional approaches—such as phonics-based modules, interactive storytelling, visual aids, and game-oriented learning—were found to enhance pupils' engagement and reading fluency. Repetition, guided practice, and structured reading exercises contribute to memory retention and comprehension improvement.

Behavioral reinforcement strategies, including token reward systems and verbal encouragement, effectively promote attendance and sustained participation. Beyond classroom practices, the study emphasizes the importance of strengthening parental involvement through guided home-reading routines and continuous school–parent communication.

At the policy level, prioritizing foundational literacy skills during the early years of primary education is essential. Adequate teaching resources, professional development for remedial educators, and structured mentorship initiatives can further strengthen intervention efforts. Community-based literacy programs, reading camps, and collaborative partnerships between schools and local organizations are also recommended to extend literacy support beyond formal schooling hours.

DISCUSSIONS OF FINDINGS

The findings of this study reinforce the understanding that reading difficulties among remedial pupils cannot be reduced to a singular cause or narrowly defined cognitive limitation. Instead, the evidence demonstrates that literacy challenges emerge from a complex convergence of cognitive, socio-emotional, familial, institutional, and community-based influences. The data gathered from experienced remedial teachers suggest that while deficits in phonological awareness, word recognition, and working memory are evident among struggling readers, these cognitive constraints are frequently intensified by environmental instability and insufficient academic reinforcement beyond the classroom.

One of the most prominent insights from the findings is the central role of the home environment in shaping pupils' literacy development. Pupils who experience emotional instability due to parental separation, financial hardship, or limited supervision often enter the classroom already burdened by stressors that undermine concentration and motivation. These socio-emotional pressures appear to weaken pupils' readiness to engage with reading tasks, thereby reinforcing cycles of disengagement and underachievement. In line with literacy development theories, early and consistent exposure to supportive language environments is critical for strengthening vocabulary acquisition and comprehension skills. When such exposure is absent, schools must shoulder a disproportionate responsibility in compensating for these foundational gaps.

The discussion also highlights the significance of motivation as both a cause and consequence of reading difficulties. Teachers observed that many remedial pupils exhibit low intrinsic motivation toward reading, perceiving it as a frustrating or unattainable task rather than a meaningful activity. This perception often stems from repeated academic failure, which gradually diminishes self-efficacy. As pupils struggle to decode texts or comprehend instructions, they may internalize a belief that they are incapable learners. Such negative academic self-concepts not only affect literacy performance but also influence broader classroom participation and social interactions. Therefore, motivational deficits must be addressed concurrently with cognitive skill development to ensure sustainable literacy improvement.

Institutional and instructional factors further compound these challenges. Although teachers demonstrate commitment to supporting remedial pupils, constraints such as limited differentiated teaching materials, time restrictions, and insufficient specialized training can reduce the effectiveness of intervention efforts. The findings suggest that remedial instruction requires a highly adaptive and resource-intensive approach, incorporating

multisensory techniques, scaffolded learning, and consistent formative assessment. Without adequate systemic support—such as professional development opportunities and access to high-quality literacy resources—teachers may struggle to implement sustained and impactful interventions.

Another critical dimension emerging from the discussion is the reciprocal relationship between reading difficulties and broader academic outcomes. Literacy functions as a foundational skill underpinning performance across all subject areas. Pupils who cannot read fluently encounter barriers in understanding mathematical problem statements, interpreting scientific explanations, or engaging with social studies texts. Consequently, reading difficulties extend beyond language subjects and contribute to generalized academic underperformance. Over time, cumulative learning gaps widen, potentially limiting pupils' access to higher educational pathways and long-term socioeconomic mobility.

The findings also underscore the importance of adopting a whole-system perspective in addressing literacy challenges. Effective intervention cannot rely solely on remedial teachers operating in isolation. Instead, a coordinated framework involving school leadership, curriculum planners, parents, and community stakeholders is essential. Strengthening early intervention programs in the lower primary years, enhancing teacher capacity through targeted training, and fostering structured home-school collaboration can collectively create a more supportive literacy ecosystem. Community engagement initiatives—such as reading camps, volunteer tutoring programs, and neighbourhood literacy centers—can further extend the reach of school-based efforts and cultivate a culture of reading beyond formal instruction.

The findings of this study resonate with global literacy trends, particularly regarding the influence of the home environment. The correlation between economic disadvantage and literacy gaps in Kuala Terengganu aligns with the PIRLS (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) benchmarks, which consistently show that students from higher socio-economic backgrounds benefit from more robust literacy support.

Furthermore, the observation that urban pupils are increasingly affected by digital distractions reflects contemporary international concerns highlighted by Halamish and Elbaz (2019) regarding the impact of screen-based consumption on reading comprehension. By addressing low intrinsic motivation alongside cognitive skill development, this study supports a holistic instructional model that is essential for bridging the achievement gap in inclusive education.

Importantly, the discussion affirms that reading difficulties are both preventable and remediable when identified early and addressed comprehensively. Delayed intervention risks entrenching academic disadvantage and amplifying psychosocial distress. Therefore, proactive screening, continuous monitoring of reading progress, and individualized support plans are vital components of an equitable education system. By integrating cognitive skill development with emotional support and environmental enrichment, educators can create conditions that foster resilience and renewed engagement among struggling readers.

In summary, the discussion of findings illustrates that reading difficulties among remedial pupils in urban primary schools are deeply embedded within broader structural and contextual realities. Addressing this issue requires moving beyond isolated instructional adjustments toward systemic reform and sustained collaboration. Only through a holistic, multi-tiered strategy that integrates pedagogical innovation, institutional commitment, and community partnership can meaningful and lasting improvements in literacy outcomes be achieved.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, reading difficulties among remedial pupils in urban primary schools constitute a complex and multidimensional educational challenge. These challenges are shaped by cognitive, socio-emotional, familial, and environmental influences that collectively hinder literacy acquisition. Addressing this issue requires coordinated action at multiple levels, including enhanced classroom instruction, strengthened institutional support, active parental involvement, and community engagement. Through sustained and collaborative efforts, educational stakeholders can create inclusive and supportive learning environments that empower struggling readers and promote equitable access to foundational literacy skills essential for lifelong academic success.

ACKNOWLEDGMENT

This paper is part of a research project supported by Universiti Sultan Zainal Abidin (UniSZA) under Dana Penyelidikan Universiti (UniSZA/2023/DPU-FKI2.0/09).

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