



Identification of Learning Functional Difficulties on Reading Skills in Elementary School and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah Students in East Lombok

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ABSTRACT

The implementation of inclusive education at the elementary level is eagerly awaited by education providers and students who have functional learning difficulties (FLD). This study aims to examine the trends of literacy assessment in reading skills based on the quantity and type of functional learning difficulties of students. It also seeks the risk of having difficulties (single or multiple) in reading ability in students. Data collection was carried out using purposive sampling techniques from the results of reading assessments conducted on students from 70 elementary and Madrasah units in East Lombok from Grades 1 to 4. Based on 6,384 data processed, only 503 students were identified as having both physical and non-physical disabilities. The assessment tool used in this data collection is a combination of Pratham's basic reading proficiency tools through Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL), which covers students' abilities to decode texts. Data analysis was carried out quantitatively using t-tests. The reading skills grouping consists of specialized, basic, advanced, and advanced interventions. The results revealed children with difficulties tend to have lower learning outcomes compared to students without learning difficulties. Meanwhile, children without difficulties achieving at least a 'basic' level of proficiency were almost four times greater than for children with difficulties and six times greater than for children with physical and non-physical difficulties.

Keywords: *Functional learning difficulties, reading literacy level, teaching at the right level.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning difficulties can result from physical and psychological factors and manifest as challenges in listening, thinking, speaking, reading, writing, and even performing mathematical calculations. They can also be influenced by adverse economic, cultural, and environmental factors (Nurjan, 2016). One of the learning difficulties is learning dysfunction or functional learning difficulty. Learners with functional learning difficulties are unable to demonstrate their learning process adequately. Most individuals with functional learning difficulties do not exhibit psychological disorders. These challenges can be categorized into two categories: physical difficulties (including vision, hearing, gross motor, fine motor, and speech difficulties) and non-physical difficulties (including cognitive difficulties, dyslexia, attention-related issues, and emotional difficulties).

Today, most elementary students face challenges in learning, especially in reading abilities. Reading ability is seen as an important factor of success in their learning activities at school. This is because reading activities are vital to comprehend concepts and theories across various subjects taught in school. Failing to acquire proficient reading skills can pose a substantial challenge, if not a primary cause of failure, in students' educational journey (Fauzi, 2018). Various studies conducted by experts have emphasized the critical roles of reading skills in learning activities and the necessity for students to master them from the early stages of their schooling.

Surveys conducted in various nations including Pakistan, Kenya, Tanzania, Uganda, Ghana, and Zambia revealed that students frequently exhibited inadequate proficiency in fundamental subjects. A parallel situation exists in Morocco, as annual reports consistently indicate that while students are advancing to higher grade levels and enrollment rates are increasing, they continue to fall short in acquiring essential competencies. This issue can be attributed to several factors, such as compulsory graduation targets, insufficient infrastructure, staff shortages, inadequate training, and the presence of diverse class compositions. Based on the division of phases, namely Phase A (grades 1 and 2) and Phase B (grades 3 and 4), students are expected to have achieved the following levels of reading proficiency: (a) Grade 1 should attain the basic comprehension level of Phase A, Grade 2 should attain the proficient comprehension level of Phase A, Grade 3 should attain the basic comprehension level of Phase B, and Grade 4 should attain the proficient comprehension level of Phase B. Moreover, the most recent PISA study also revealed that Moroccan students perform below the global average in reading, math, and science. This concerning situation results in a significant number of students lagging, requiring the government to give intervention (Binaoui & Moubtassime, 2023).

To provide effective intervention, teachers should gather data about their students. This information is essential for providing appropriate support to each learner. One of the methods is the use of diagnostic assessments. Regarding reading skill issues, a diagnostic assessment is an activity prior to teaching conducted by a teacher to evaluate a student's knowledge, skills, and understanding. Its primary purpose is to determine the student's current level of proficiency. The outcomes of this assessment can provide the teacher with insights about particular areas where a student may be encountering difficulties or demonstrating proficiency which then enables the teacher to customize their instruction accordingly. Consequently, the teacher can acquire valuable insights of a student's strengths and weaknesses, facilitating the provision of appropriate support and appropriate challenges at the student's unique level of development. The significance of a student's current individual level of learning has received substantial recognition from distinguished experts, among whom are renowned education researchers such as Dylan William and Robert J. Marzano.

Indonesia through the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research & Technology (MoEC-RT) has been campaigning for the transformation of national education through Kurikulum Merdeka (Freedom Curriculum), in which diagnostic-formative assessment and differentiated learning become two fundamental principles to lay down the shifting paradigm for educators. This paradigm has been globally recognized and utilized in education. Formative assessment involves gathering information about students' knowledge and skills throughout the learning process to inform instructional decisions. Thus, these learning difficulties will later make the teacher combine methods of assessing students' learning outcomes according to their abilities. In other words, diagnostic reading tests allow teachers to assess students' reading comprehension. This assessment helps teachers identify the specific reading challenges experienced by individual students in the classroom.

The studies above examined the obstacles and functional challenges faced by students with both physical and non-physical disabilities. These challenges were identified through student learning profiles and interview guidelines, which were used to gather data on their learning outcomes. However, the mentioned research has not been connected to materials pertaining to student learning assessments, particularly with respect to the reading abilities of students dealing with functional difficulties.

Learning will be meaningful when it aligns with the child's abilities or levels. Besides, learning according to ability will improve learner's motivation and foster genuine learners. Motivated learners will embrace challenges, think creatively, and seek solutions actively (Banerji & Chavan, 2016). In the video "How to Teach Kids to Read in as Little as 50 Days", Pratham emphasizes the importance of assessment when commencing the teaching process. Students are grouped into small groups and then engage in individual writing to facilitate their development.

A further endeavor to collect more information about students is to collect their functional learning difficulties. This information may be useful for teachers to plan differentiated learning plans for each student. Students are not expected to be similar or equal in many ways, including their learning abilities from various aspects. This consideration has led into ideas of identifying students' functional learning difficulties (FLDs), in which the teacher is expected based on his/her knowledge and experience to assess students' possible condition to engage in learning meaningfully.

A study conducted by Oktaviyanti, Nasaruddin, Setiawan, and Jiwandono (2021) investigated various types of functional difficulties experienced by elementary students in Central Lombok Regency. By using the profiles of 27 fourth-grade students, guidelines for interviews with teachers and parents, and supporting documents such as student learning outcomes, student work, student personal records, or student medical history records during the odd semester in 2020-2021, the results showed that some students (N=8) at the school had functional difficulties. Seven of them experienced moderate intellectual difficulties. One student has specific learning difficulties. The results of this study

only focused on student students' learning profiles and did not investigate the outcomes of students' reading assessments.

Furthermore, Rohiani (2022) described the types of FLDs experienced by Islamic secondary school students in East Lombok Regency. The steps for learning services were carried out by the teacher and the madrasah. The study investigates the impact of teacher learning services on the functional development of the participants. The learning outcome profiles of 1,923 students, along with interview guidelines for schoolteachers at 40 Mi schools in East Lombok, revealed that 163 students, equivalent to 8.48%, experienced specific difficulties: visual difficulty (2.45%), hearing difficulties (3.07%), gross motor difficulties (2.45%), fine motor difficulties (3.07%), difficulty speaking (52%), specific learning difficulties (62.58%), difficulty controlling behavior (4.29%), difficulty controlling emotions (6.13%), and double difficulty (10.43%). The study also found that male students experienced more functional learning difficulties than female students. In the learning, students were grouped based on their level of ability and involved accompanying teachers, literacy volunteers, and regional facilitators. The impact of this treatment on students was the increase in academic learning outcomes, especially in cognitive, attitudes, and behavior as well as social-emotional development (Rohiani, 2022).

Research related to FLDs experienced by students related to reading ability in elementary school students has been limited. The ability to read among elementary school students, especially students with disabilities in East Lombok, is considered important to raise awareness among teachers, principals, parents, and other stakeholders. By addressing the student's needs, those parties may consider students' FLDs to improve their learning processes. This should be essential to the entire learning process in the classroom. The result of this study may inform the risks that possibly occur in students with various FLDs, both with single and/or multiple FLDs.

2. METHOD

A quantitative approach was employed to explore reading proficiency through the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. The quantitative method is based on positivism, and research data in the form of numbers will be measured using statistics as a calculation test tool to produce a conclusion (Sugiyono, 2018). TaRL approach developed by Pratham is an approach that adapts teaching to students' abilities, through participatory teaching methods as a form of effort to improve reading skills below average (Binaoui & Moubtassime, 2023). The key questions addressed in this article include (a) what is the initial propensity of learning outcomes of students with disabilities and non-disabled students to achieve basic reading proficiency levels? (b) what is the comparison among students without disabilities, students with disabilities, and people with physical and non-physical disabilities in reading proficiency opportunities? In this study, the data were obtained from 70 elementary schools and Islamic elementary schools enrolling in Grades 1 to 4 in East Lombok. A total of 6,384 were collected and only 503 students were identified as having physical and non-physical disabilities. To collect the data, test tools from Pratham's basic reading skills: the general text reading test and the literary text were employed.

The data were collected by having a conversation first before starting the reading test and assessing students' reading results according to their abilities. The reading proficiency test determines the categorization of assessment:

- (a) Students at the story level (2): fluent in reading the story (not misreading 3 words in the story) and able to answer questions related to the story (even if only 1 question);
- (b) Story-level students (1): fluent in reading the story (not misreading the 3 words in the story) but unable to answer questions related to the story;
- (c) Paragraph level students: fluent in paragraph reading (not misreading 3 words in paragraph) but not fluent in reading the story (misreading 3 or more words in the story);
- (d) Word level students: fluent in reading words (not misreading 3 words) but not fluent in paragraphs (misreading 3 or more words in one paragraph);
- (e) Letter level students: able to read letters (not misread 3 letters) but not fluent in reading words (misread 3 or more words).

These steps were carried out one by one by 639 trained teachers who served as enumerators in this study with close supervision by 16 school supervisors in 70 schools and madrasahs (Islamic schools). After having reading assessments, 639 trained teachers conducted another set of assessment protocols for each student to identify FLDs that may be experienced by the students. Data were collected using a paper-based tool that contained guided questions addressing ten types of FLDs. Through this process, 503 students were identified as having physical and/or nonphysical FLDs, in which some students were identified as having multiple ones.

After the data were obtained, the data were analyzed quantitatively using statistical t-tests. The reading proficiency consists of specific, basic, advanced, advanced, and specialized interventions. Furthermore, the sample categories were grouped into: "have no difficulty", "have one type of difficulty (physical or non-physical)", "have only physical difficulty", "have only non-physical difficulty", and "have physical and non-physical difficulty". Both data were then gathered as part of this study to see how students' FLDs may contribute to their reading abilities. To justify whether students were found "under" their proper reading level, this study used statements of learning outcomes (LOs) for phase A and phase B literacy of Bahasa Indonesia. The LOs were issued by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology to measure the minimum literacy level of students in various school phases. In this case, phase A and B refer to students in grade 1 to 4 at the primary school level.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Based on two sets of assessments, reading, and FLD, it was found that among 6.384 students, 5.881 or 75% of them were under the minimum reading level as expected in the LOs for phases A and B but had no FLD. The results of FLD identification show that 503 or 8% of the entire students experienced one of ten FLDs, of which 468 or 93% of them were low-level readers. Hence, students with only physical disability were 34 students, or 1% of the total population, of which 31, or 91% were low-level readers. Then, 369 or 6% of the students had nonphysical FLDs, of which 339, or 92% were low-level readers. Furthermore, 100 or 2% of the population experienced both physical and nonphysical FLDs, and 96 or 96% were low-level readers.

Teaching children with incorrect methods and without considering age-appropriate, psychological development, and individual educational needs can lead to uncomfortable learning experiences and hinder their reading skills. Researchers and educators, including Charismiadi (in Wyatt-Smith, 2011), have pointed out that learning loss often occurs due to improper teaching approaches. Therefore, ensuring that students' needs are met is crucial. In this context, the TaRL teaching strategy offers a solution. TaRL provides a flexible approach where teachers assess students using a simple tool and group them based on their current learning level, regardless of age or grade. Each group builds upon their existing knowledge and engages in hands-on, student-centered activities. Progress is swift; for example, children who master letters progress to word-based groups. Throughout this process, teachers continuously assess students' progress through ongoing, straightforward measurements of foundational skill performance, rather than relying solely on year-end exams.

Based on the statistical analysis, low-level reader students without FLD have a 25% opportunity to reach a basic comprehension level or more. Meanwhile, opportunities for students with FLDs have varied percentages to reach this minimum reading comprehension level. Those with one physical or nonphysical FLD may have 7%, with only physical FLD 9%, nonphysical FLD 8%, and both physical and nonphysical FLDs 4%. These findings show that students with FLDs performed lower learning outcomes compared to those without FLDs, which is significantly resulted by using t-test statistical analysis (p-value 0.000).

In this regard, students without FLD have four times greater opportunity to achieve a minimum basic reading comprehension level or more compared to those with FLDs (25% vs. 7%) and 6 times greater compared to students with both physical and nonphysical FLDs (25% vs. 4%). This provides an opportunity to carry out *Semua Anak Cerdas* (SAC) in a systematic, structured, massive, and affordable manner. Systematic means that SAC is implemented as a whole and integrated into the curriculum. Structured means that SAC has a person in charge, a clear schedule of activities, and can be measured/evaluated. Massive means that SAC should be implemented in all elementary schools, not only schools that are the target of the program, while affordable means that it can be implemented easily and inexpensively. The SAC approach in its implementation uses three stages, namely: assessment, grouping, and learning based on level/ability.

In the SAC approach, literacy learning activities are carried out in three steps, including building student learning readiness, reading stories by teachers, and reading activities according to level. This activity lasts for 60 minutes at the beginning of the lesson. In building student learning readiness, there are two things that are recommended, namely:

- a. Conversing with students. The teacher invites students to talk about their feelings that day and other things that can build positive character. This activity to build student learning readiness is carried out for five minutes.
- b. Building calm and concentration of learning. It can be done by practicing breathing techniques. Students are invited to take a deep breath of air like when they inhale the scent of flowers and exhale slowly as if they were about to blow on a windmill. This activity is a core activity in literacy learning according to level. This activity was carried out for 40 minutes.

The testing assessment of the SAC program includes letter cards, word cards, paragraph text, and short story texts. After the assessment is carried out, the level of the child's reading ability will be obtained. The levels of children's reading literacy skills are as follows:

1. Beginner Level. At the beginner level, children do not know or only know a few letters.
2. Letter Level. At the letter level, children already know most of the letters.
3. Word Levels. At the word level, children can already read familiar words or words that they have often heard.
4. Paragraph Level. At the paragraph level, children can read familiar words and are able to read simple short sentences in the form of paragraphs. At this level, the child is also able to read according to the correct punctuation marks and the correct intonation.
5. Story Levels. At this story level, besides the child is already fluent in reading according to the right punctuation and the correct intonation, the child is also able to understand the content of the reading. At this level, the story is divided into two sublevels. Story level 1 is that the child is already fluent in reading according to the correct punctuation marks and the correct intonation but still cannot answer the questions about the content of the story. Story level 2 is where the child is fluent in reading according to the correct punctuation and intonation and is able to answer questions about the content of the story he is reading.

In relation to the assessment in this study, these 5 levels are used to further assess the students who fall into the special intervention category. The levels in TaRL (1--5) are interpreted as specific interventions within the levels used in the Ministry during the Computer-Based National Exam (UNBK).

The results of the TaRL assessment based on reading levels and student conditions (with disabilities and without disabilities) were presented in Table 1. There are several categories in the data that represent the number of individuals in each group as well as the success rate of the intervention in achieving a minimum level of reading skills.

Table 1. Data tabulation of students' learning functional difficulties identification in reading ability

Reading Level	Without difficulty (N=5.881)	Having one type of difficulty (physical or nonphysical) (N=503)	Only having physical difficulty (N=34)	Only having non-physical difficulty (N=369)	Having both physical and nonphysical difficulties (N=100)
Special intervention	75%	93%	91%	92%	96%
Basic	10%	4%	3%	5%	2%
Proficient	6%	1%	3%	1%	0%
Advanced	9%	2%	3%	2%	2%
Chance for students to achieve the minimum reading level of basic or higher	25%	7%	9%	8%	4%

Table 1 shows 6,384 students who have taken the TaRL assessment. This number consists of 5,881 students without disabilities and 503 of them have physical or non-physical disabilities. Of the 503 disability students, 34 of them are students with physical disabilities, 369 students have non-physical disabilities, and 100 students have both disabilities. Gaurav, Aldersey, Lewis, and Batorowicz (2023) explained physical disability refers to a range of impairments, with different severities that affect not only mobility (i.e., legs and walking) but also how children handle objects in daily activities (i.e., arms, hands use to perform manual activities). Ergo, physical disability in this research was understood as impairments in vision, hearing, gross motor, fine motor, and speech difficulties. Meanwhile, cognitive difficulties, dyslexia, attention, and emotional difficulties are categorized as non-physical disabilities. Physical and non-physical disabilities are interpreted as functional difficulties in learning. As Table 1 shows most students with disabilities fall into the special intervention category, there are 91–96% of 503 students with disabilities that categorized into the 'special intervention' reading level. Based on the type of disability, students with both physical and non-physical disabilities have the highest percentage within the category. This means that most of them have only a limited ability to identify information about a text and have not met the basic comprehension skills. Furthermore, it can be inferred that the students in this category are somewhat able to identify letters if not all letters), words, and short paragraphs although more investigation must be carried out to know specifically on which level of criterion they fall into.

The data also shows that the percentage of students with only one type and both types of disabilities is no more than 5% who are in the basic category, 3% in the proficient category, and 3% in the advanced category. This number and its distribution suggest that the type of disabilities, i.e., the number of disabilities a student has is not a significant factor in the literacy skills, but rather a functional difficulty in learning that might be affected by the type of disability.

The results of the analysis showed that there was a (preliminary) trend in the results of the assessment of literacy ability in terms of the number and type of functional learning difficulties of students, showing that children who have disabilities tend to have lower learning outcomes than students who do not have disabilities. Meanwhile, the chances of children who do not have disabilities to achieve at least the 'basic' skill level are almost 4 times greater than children who have disabilities (25% vs 7%) and 6 times greater when compared to children who have both physical and non-physical disabilities (25% vs 4%).

The analysis of students' learning functional difficulties identification in reading ability provides valuable insights into the challenges that students encounter across different reading levels. This study sheds light on the prevalence of various difficulties, both physical and non-physical, and underscores the importance of tailored interventions to facilitate effective reading development. The discussion of the findings is crucial for educators, researchers, and policymakers to design targeted strategies that address the diverse needs of students and ensure their academic success. Some points can be highlighted based on the data.

3.1. Variability in Learning Functional Difficulties

The data clearly illustrates the wide range of learning functional difficulties experienced by students across different reading levels. It is evident that a significant proportion of students in the Special Intervention group face challenges in their reading abilities. The findings reveal that a substantial percentage of students in this group have either physical or non-physical difficulties, and some even experience both simultaneously. This variation highlights the need for a nuanced approach that considers the unique nature of each difficulty and its impact on reading proficiency.

3.2. Importance of Targeted Interventions

The findings emphasize the significance of tailored interventions to address the specific needs of students based on their learning functional difficulties. For instance, the high percentage of students in the Special Intervention group with both physical and non-physical difficulties suggests the need for comprehensive strategies that combine physical accommodations with cognitive support. On the other hand, the prevalence of non-physical difficulties among different reading levels underscores the importance of cognitive interventions to overcome comprehension and cognitive processing challenges.

3.3. Reading Levels and Difficulty Profiles

The data showcases how the distribution of learning functional difficulties varies across different reading levels. As more students progress to reach the more advanced reading levels, the percentage of those facing difficulties generally decreases. However, even at the Proficient and Advanced levels, a portion of students still grapple with challenges, whether they are physical, non-physical, or a combination of both. This suggests that learning functional difficulties persist even among students who have achieved higher reading proficiency, indicating the need for ongoing support to ensure continuous progress.

3.4. Equity in Reading Education

The analysis of the chance for children to achieve basic proficiency or higher in reading highlights the equity gap in reading education. Students with learning functional difficulties face varying degrees of opportunity to attain these proficiency levels. Ensuring equitable access to quality reading education is essential for all students, regardless of their difficulties. This requires the implementation of inclusive practices and resources that address individual needs, allowing students to reach their full potential.

4. CONCLUSION

The research underscores the significance of diagnostic assessments, which enable teachers to understand students' strengths and weaknesses, thereby facilitating appropriate support and challenges. The study's findings indicate that students with disabilities are more challenged to achieve at least a basic level of reading skill compared to those

without disabilities. Furthermore, the number of students with both types of disabilities within the special intervention level is higher than those who only have one type of disability. Subsequently, the number of students with both types of disabilities within the basic, proficient, and advanced levels is lower than those who only have one type of disability.

This research provides a solid foundation for further investigations into the nature and impact of learning functional difficulties on students' reading abilities. Future studies could delve deeper into the specific types of difficulties that hinder reading comprehension and explore innovative interventions that can effectively address these challenges. Additionally, examining the long-term effects of tailored interventions on students' academic trajectories and overall well-being would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of how to support students with diverse learning profiles.

While inclusive education faces challenges, strategies such as the TaRL approach and diagnostic assessments offer promising avenues to ensure equitable learning outcomes for all students, irrespective of their diverse abilities. Through these efforts, Indonesia can work towards achieving its goal of providing accessible and effective education for every child.

In conclusion, this research finding underscores the importance of recognizing and addressing learning functional difficulties in students' reading abilities across different levels. By acknowledging the variations in difficulties and their impact on reading proficiency, educators and policymakers can design interventions that cater to individual needs, ultimately fostering a more inclusive and effective learning environment for all students.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to express our deepest gratitude to INOVASI NTB organizations who contributed to the completion of this research paper. Their support, guidance, and assistance were instrumental in the research.

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