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Literature Review: An Analysis of Early Reading Difficulties Among First-Grade Students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

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Abstract
Beginning reading is a fundamental skill that plays an important role in supporting students' learning success at the primary education level. However, first-grade students in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah continue to experience various difficulties in developing this skill. This study aims to analyze the forms of beginning reading difficulties and the factors influencing them based on findings from previous studies. The study employed a qualitative approach using a literature review method. Data were obtained from various scholarly articles addressing beginning reading difficulties among first-grade students in elementary schools and Madrasah Ibtidaiyah. The data were then analyzed descriptively through the stages of identification, selection, categorization, and synthesis of findings. The results indicate that beginning reading difficulties include recognizing and distinguishing letters, associating letters with sounds, combining letters into syllables and words, reading words and sentences, reading fluency, and understanding the meaning of texts. These difficulties do not occur independently but are interconnected progressively, ranging from the ability to recognize symbols to decoding and reading comprehension. In addition to cognitive and linguistic abilities, reading difficulties are also influenced by students' interest and learning motivation, psychological conditions, family support, learning environments, and instructional strategies employed by teachers. These findings highlight the importance of early identification of reading difficulties and the implementation of systematic, contextual, engaging, and individualized reading instruction tailored to students' needs.
Keywords: beginning reading, reading difficulties, first-grade students, Madrasah Ibtidaiyah, literature review.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the basic skills that plays a crucial role in students' academic success in elementary school. In the early stages of education, reading ability develops through the process of early reading, which includes letter recognition, understanding the relationship between letters and sounds, combining sounds into syllables and words, and developing reading fluency. Mastery of these components serves as the foundation for the development of reading skills in subsequent stages. Meta-analytic studies indicate that phonological skills are strongly associated with word-reading ability; thus, the development of phonological awareness is a key component in the acquisition of early reading skills (Ocsis et al., 2024).

For first-grade students, the process of early reading becomes increasingly important because they are in the initial stages of developing formal literacy skills. Difficulties at this stage can be seen in their inability to recognize letters, distinguish between letters with similar shapes, associate letters with their sounds, spell words, combine syllables, and read simple words and sentences fluently. Research on first-grade students shows that early reading difficulties are still found in the areas of letter recognition, spelling, and the ability to combine letter sounds into words. These findings indicate that early reading ability cannot be assessed solely based on a student's ability to read a text but must be analyzed based on the fundamental components that make up reading skills.

Theoretically, reading ability is a process involving several interrelated components, particularly phonological skills, word recognition, decoding, reading fluency, and language comprehension. Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2014), through a meta-analysis of 82 studies, demonstrated that decoding, phonological awareness, and language comprehension are key components related to the development of reading ability. More recent findings also indicate that early reading instruction should focus on phonological awareness, letter-sound correspondence, decoding, and reading fluency as mutually supportive components of literacy development. Therefore, early reading difficulties need to be understood in greater detail so that interventions can be tailored to the specific aspects of reading skills that students have not yet mastered.

In the context of elementary education in Indonesia, various studies indicate that early reading difficulties remain a problem among lower-grade students. A study by Arnisyah et al. (2022), for example, found that some students struggle to recognize letters and read simple sentences fluently. Other studies also indicate that the causes of reading difficulties can stem from internal factors related to the student—such as cognitive and psychological abilities, interest, and concentration—as well as external factors related to the family environment and the learning process at school. These findings suggest that early reading difficulties are a multidimensional issue; therefore, any analysis must consider both the characteristics of reading errors and the underlying factors contributing to them.

These issues have also been identified in more recent studies. Herlina et al. (2024) reported that students experiencing early reading difficulties exhibit problems such as an inability to recognize letters, slow reading speed, confusion in distinguishing between letters and words, and difficulty with spelling. Factors associated with these conditions include the students' psychological aspects as well as their family and school environments. Meanwhile, research by Deviani and Setiawan (2025) shows that reading difficulties can also take the form of an inability to distinguish between letters that are similar in shape, to distinguish between vowels and consonants, to decode words fluently, and to construct sentences. These findings emphasize that the identification of reading difficulties needs to be conducted in detail, rather than simply determining whether a student is able to read or not.

Although research on early reading difficulties has expanded, some studies still focus on lower-grade elementary school students in general or on second and third graders. A study that specifically maps the forms of early reading difficulties among first-grade students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI) remains important because first grade marks the initial phase of formal reading instruction, and MI has a unique educational approach that integrates general education with religious education. Recent research on first-grade students also indicates that difficulties in recognizing letters, distinguishing letter shapes, spelling, and comprehending text remain issues that require special attention. Therefore, a more targeted analysis is needed to identify the types of difficulties students experience from the earliest stages so that teachers can provide appropriate interventions before

these difficulties escalate and hinder the learning process in subsequent grades.

Based on the above description, this study aims to analyze early reading difficulties among first-grade students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah by identifying types of reading errors, aspects of reading ability that are hindered, and factors that influence the emergence of these difficulties. The research findings are expected to provide an empirical picture of the early reading abilities of first-grade students and serve as a basis for teachers in designing remedial instruction that is more appropriate, systematic, and tailored to students' individual needs. Thus, this study is expected to contribute to strengthening basic literacy while providing practical information for madrasahs in detecting and addressing reading difficulties from the earliest stages of education.

2. METHOD

The method used in this study is a qualitative method employing a literature review approach. Qualitative research is a method that focuses on describing and understanding various social phenomena observed scientifically (Hardani et al., 2020). The literature review technique involves collecting various pieces of information relevant to the topic or issue under study, using scholarly sources as the primary references (Shandy et al., 2023). A literature review plays a crucial role for researchers in establishing a theoretical foundation that serves as a basis for formulating hypotheses and understanding the research phenomenon. The literature used is derived from previous research or studies conducted by other researchers. This information is utilized to deepen understanding of a phenomenon and to connect findings from various studies. The interrelationships among these research findings are then comprehensively organized to produce a more complete and optimal analysis.

The research data sources consisted of scientific articles and previous research findings obtained from various academic databases. The literature was selected based on its relevance to the research focus, year of publication, availability of full-text versions, and the quality and reliability of the sources. Next, the selected literature was analyzed descriptively through content analysis by identifying and categorizing information regarding the forms of early reading difficulties, their causes, and the efforts made to address them. Findings from various sources were then compared, interpreted, and systematically synthesized to gain a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon of early reading difficulties among first-grade students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah.

Table 1. Key Findings

No.	Source	Subject/Context	Type of Reading Difficulty	Key Findings
1	Muharom et al. (2024)	Grade 1 Elementary Students	Recognizing and distinguishing letters	Students struggle to recognize letters with similar shapes, such as 'b' and 'd', and make phoneme pronunciation errors.
2	Nurlina et al. (2024)	Grade 1 Islamic Elementary Students	Letter and sound recognition	Students struggle to recognize vowels, consonants, and specific letter combinations, and are inconsistent in linking symbols to their sounds.
3	Andini & Ahmadi (2024)	Grade 1 Elementary Students	Letter recognition and word reading	Students struggle to recall letter shapes and sounds, and tend to add or repeat letters while reading.

No.	Source	Subject/Context	Type of Reading Difficulty	Key Findings
4	Muharom et al. (2024)	Grade 1 Elementary Students	Blending letters and syllables	Students struggle to combine syllables into words and make phoneme pronunciation errors.
5	Yuniar (2023)	Grade 1 Islamic Elementary Students	Reading syllables and words	Students struggle to read letters ending in consonants and letter combinations such as 'ng', 'ngg', and 'ny'. Some students can read but do not yet understand the meaning of the words.
6	MI Al-Zaytun Study	Grade 1 Islamic Elementary Students	Reading words and sentences	Difficulties arise with words containing double consonants, double vowels, vowel-consonant combinations, and C-V-C patterns. Errors include omission, addition, letter reversal, pronunciation mistakes, and hesitation while reading.
7	Nurlina et al. (2024)	Grade 1 Islamic Elementary Students	Reading fluency and comprehension	Students struggle to read fluently, overlook punctuation marks, and comprehend the reading material.
8	Nurlina et al. (2024)	Grade 1 Islamic Elementary Students	Internal factors	Difficulties are linked to low interest and motivation, intellectual factors, and the students' physical condition.
9	Saprudin et al. (2021)	Elementary school students	Internal and psychological factors	Factors related to reading difficulties include students' intellectual ability, motivation, interest, social maturity, and emotional state.
10	Nurlina et al. (2024)	Grade 1 MI students	External factors	Family and school environments are factors associated with the development of early reading skills.
11	Ramadhan (2022)	Elementary school students	Environmental factors	Family support and the learning environment play a role in the development of students' reading skills.

The results of the study indicate that difficulty recognizing letters is one of the most common types of difficulties encountered. Students have trouble remembering the shapes and sounds of letters and distinguishing between letters that look similar. A study by Muharom et al. (2024) found that first-grade students had difficulty recognizing letters with similar shapes, such as b and d, and made errors in phoneme pronunciation. Similar findings were reported by Nurlina et al. (2024), who found that first-grade students at Islamic elementary schools (MI) had difficulty recognizing letters, including vowels, consonants, and certain letter combinations.

Difficulties during the letter recognition stage are also evident in students' ability to identify the relationship between written symbols and their sounds. Andini and Ahmadi (2024) found that first-grade students still struggle to memorize the shapes and sounds of letters and to add or repeat letters when reading. Thus, mastery of the alphabet is not yet fully automatic for some first-grade students.

Difficulties in Combining Letters and Syllables

Further findings in the literature indicate difficulties in combining letters into syllables and words. Students who have recognized individual letters are not

necessarily able to combine them correctly into meaningful sound units. Research by Muharom et al. (2024) shows that first-grade students have difficulty combining syllables into words and make errors in phoneme pronunciation.

In the context of Islamic elementary schools (MI), Yuniar (2023) found that first-grade students struggled to read words ending in consonants as well as words containing letter combinations such as ng, ngg, and ny. Some students were even able to read fluently but did not yet understand the meaning of the words they were reading. These findings indicate that early reading difficulties are not only related to the technical ability to sound out written words but also begin to involve the comprehension of the words being read.

Factors Contributing to Early Reading Difficulties

Based on a synthesis of various studies, the factors contributing to early reading difficulties can be categorized into internal and external factors. Internal factors include low interest and motivation in reading, memory skills, attention to detail, intellectual ability, readiness to learn, and the student's psychological state. Meanwhile, external factors include the family environment, parental support, the school environment, teachers' instructional strategies, and students' opportunities to practice reading.

Nurlina et al. (2024) found that internal factors related to reading difficulties include interest and motivation, intellectual factors, and physical conditions, while external factors are related to the school and family environments. These findings are supported by Noor Saprudin et al. (2021), who identified intellectual factors, the family environment, and psychological factors such as motivation, interest, and social and emotional maturity as factors associated with early reading difficulties.

Difficulties in Reading Words and Sentences

The results of the literature review also indicate difficulties in reading words with more complex structures. A study of first-grade students at MI Al-Zaytun found difficulties in reading words with double consonants, double vowels, vowel-consonant combinations, and consonant-vowel-consonant patterns. The types of errors observed included omitting letters or words, mispronunciation, reversing letters, and hesitation or pauses while reading.

Research by Nurlina et al. (2024) also showed that, in addition to difficulties recognizing letters and forming words, first-grade students at MI struggled with reading fluently, ignoring punctuation, and understanding the content of the text. These findings indicate that the more complex the structure of the text provided, the greater the demands on students' decoding skills and reading fluency.

3. RESULT & DISCUSSION

Result

Reading Difficulties Stem from Basic Skills

A review of the literature indicates that early reading difficulties among first-grade students primarily stem from suboptimal mastery of basic skills, particularly letter recognition and the relationship between letters and sounds. Findings regarding difficulties in distinguishing between the letters "b" and "d," recognizing vowels and consonants, and identifying letter combinations suggest that students' decoding processes have not yet developed optimally. This condition is important to note because the ability to recognize and manipulate language sounds is a crucial part of early reading development. A meta-analysis by Putra et al. (2024) revealed a strong relationship between phonological skills and the acquisition of reading skills; thus, weaknesses in phonological aspects can be a source of difficulties in early reading.

These findings indicate that students who have difficulty recognizing letters cannot be immediately introduced to more complex reading material. Instruction should begin with reinforcing the grapheme–phoneme correspondence, followed by the combination of sounds,

syllables, words, and sentences. Thus, early reading instruction must be conducted systematically and gradually.

Decoding Difficulties Affect Reading Fluency

Students' difficulties in combining letters and syllables indicate that decoding ability is one of the critical factors in early reading. When students still have to sound out each letter separately, the reading process becomes slow and non-automatic. This situation may explain the findings of several studies that show hesitation, repetition, pauses, and mispronunciations when students read. Findings among first-grade students at MI Al-Zaytun, for example, revealed the omission of letters or words, letter reversals, mispronunciations, and hesitation while reading.

Theoretically, these conditions indicate that students are still in the stage of developing reading automation. Rafiki et al. (2025) explain that decoding ability is a key component in the development of reading skills. If students must devote significant attention to recognizing and sounding out each word, the cognitive capacity available for comprehending the text's meaning becomes more limited. Therefore, improving decoding accuracy and reading fluency should be the primary goals of reading instruction in the early grades.

Reading Difficulties Are Not Merely Technical

The finding that some students can read words but do not yet understand their meanings indicates that reading ability cannot be measured solely based on the accuracy of pronunciation. Yuniar (2023), for example, found that some first-grade students were able to read fluently but were not yet able to understand the meanings of the words they read. This demonstrates a distinction between the ability to read mechanically and the ability to comprehend language.

Therefore, early reading instruction needs to begin integrating simple comprehension activities. After students read a word or sentence, teachers can ask simple questions about the meaning of words, characters, objects, activities, or information contained in the text. This approach is important so that reading instruction does not stop at the ability to pronounce written words but gradually develops comprehension.

Internal and External Factors Interact with One Another

The study's findings show that early reading difficulties cannot be explained solely by students' academic abilities. Factors such as interest, motivation, memory, family environment, and learning strategies also contribute to reading development. Fitriah and Rafiah (2024) and Nurlina et al. (2024) both demonstrate that internal and environmental factors play a significant role in the emergence of early reading difficulties.

These findings imply that addressing reading difficulties must be a collaborative effort. Teachers need to assess each student's reading ability, while parents need to provide opportunities for and support reading at home. Research by Saprudin et al. (2022) indicates that strategies teachers can use to address reading difficulties include providing specialized guidance, using engaging learning materials, creating a pleasant learning environment, monitoring student progress, and offering motivation.

Implications for Learning in Madrasah Ibtidaiyah

In the context of MI, the study's findings indicate the need for diagnostic, step-by-step, and differentiated reading instruction. Students who have not yet recognized letters require practice in symbol and sound recognition, while students who have mastered letters but struggle to blend syllables need practice in blending and decoding. Meanwhile, students who are already able to read words should be guided toward fluency and comprehension.

This approach aligns with the findings of Rezeki et al. (2026), who emphasize the importance of specialized guidance, engaging materials, a pleasant learning environment, and motivation in addressing the reading difficulties of first-grade MI students. More recent research also indicates that targeted instructional interventions, including the use of

worksheets tailored to students' needs, can support the development of early reading skills.

Thus, the results of the literature review show that early reading difficulties among first-grade MI students are a multi-layered and multidimensional problem. These difficulties can begin with letter recognition, progress to challenges in grapheme–phoneme correspondence and decoding, and subsequently impact reading fluency and comprehension. The contributing factors are not isolated but result from the interaction between student characteristics, the family environment, and instructional practices. Consequently, early detection, explicit instruction, gradual practice, differentiated instruction, and collaboration between teachers and parents are crucial components in addressing early reading difficulties.

4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of a literature review, early reading difficulties among first-grade students at Madrasah Ibtidaiyah encompass several interrelated aspects, namely letter recognition, distinguishing between letter shapes and sounds, combining letters and syllables, reading words and sentences, reading fluency, and comprehension. Difficulties in the early stages—particularly in recognizing letters and linking graphemes to phonemes—can lead to difficulties in decoding, reading fluently, and understanding information in texts. Thus, early reading skills should be viewed as a gradual and continuous process.

Research also indicates that reading difficulties are not solely due to students' abilities but are influenced by the interaction of various internal and external factors. These include interest and motivation to learn, cognitive abilities, psychological conditions, and students' readiness to engage with support from their families, the school environment, learning materials, and strategies implemented by teachers. Therefore, addressing early reading difficulties must begin early through systematic assessment to identify the specific challenges each student faces. Teachers need to provide appropriate guidance, use engaging learning materials and activities, and offer gradual and repetitive reading practice. This approach is essential for building decoding skills while fostering fluency, self-confidence, and reading comprehension in students starting in the early grades.

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