

Fear of The Page: Exploring Reading Distress and Its Influence on the Learners' Reading Performance

Jay Arr V. Sangoyo
Dr. Gloria D. Lacson Foundation Colleges, Inc.
jayarrsangoyo@gmail.com

Date Submitted:
March 13, 2026

Date Accepted:
April 27, 2026

Date Published:
May 31, 2026

DOI:
10.5281/zenodo.20476601

ABSTRACT

Reading distress can impede learners' comprehension, confidence, motivation, and classroom participation. This mixed-method study examined reading distress and its influence on learners' reading performance as a basis for a reading intervention program. Using a convergent parallel design, the quantitative component assessed selected Grade 6 learners from the Schools Division of Bulacan in terms of top-down, bottom-up, and classroom reading distress. Documentary analysis was also conducted on 243 Philippine Informal Reading Inventory (Phil-IRI) records. Semi-structured teacher interviews were analyzed thematically to identify reading challenges and existing support systems. Descriptive statistics and multiple regression analysis were used for the quantitative data. Results showed very high levels of top-down reading distress ($M = 3.84$), bottom-up reading distress ($M = 3.85$), and classroom

reading distress ($M = 3.90$). Despite these difficulties, the learners' mean Phil-IRI score was 15.96, corresponding to the Independent Reading Level. The regression model explained 2.8% of the variance in Phil-IRI scores ($R^2 = .028$). Classroom reading distress significantly predicted lower reading performance ($B = -3.351$, $\beta = -.150$, $p = .028$), while top-down and bottom-up distress were not significant predictors. The qualitative findings identified limited vocabulary, comprehension and higher-order thinking difficulties, and text- and task-related distress. Instructional, home literacy, and institutional support systems also emerged. The findings indicate that independent reading ability does not eliminate the emotional and instructional barriers that learners encounter during classroom reading activities. A focused intervention program is proposed to strengthen vocabulary, comprehension, supportive feedback, and coordinated literacy assistance.

Keywords: *reading distress; reading performance; Phil-IRI; classroom reading distress; reading intervention; Grade 6 learners*

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a foundational skill for academic achievement and lifelong learning. It enables learners to acquire knowledge, interpret information, develop critical thinking, and participate meaningfully in classroom activities. However, reading can also become a source of apprehension when learners encounter unfamiliar words, complex text structures, demanding comprehension tasks, or classroom situations that expose their perceived weaknesses. Reading distress refers to the negative emotional response associated with reading tasks and may reduce concentration, confidence, and willingness to participate.

Evidence suggests that reading-related distress can influence learning through cognitive and emotional pathways. Macdonald et al. (2021) reported that anxiety among struggling readers can distract attention and reduce concentration. Soares et al. (2023), however, found that reading anxiety did not necessarily correlate with academic achievement in all contexts. These mixed results indicate that the relationship between reading distress and performance may depend on the specific type of distress experienced by learners and the instructional context in which reading occurs.

In the Philippine context, reading proficiency remains a continuing educational concern. Idulog et al. (2023) emphasized persistent challenges in Filipino learners' reading abilities and the need for targeted interventions. Reading difficulties may be intensified when learners lack vocabulary, struggle to activate prior knowledge, or feel embarrassed when asked to read aloud or respond publicly. Such concerns require an approach that considers both measurable reading performance and learners' emotional experiences during reading.

This study examined reading distress among Grade 6 learners in the Schools Division of Bulacan and its influence on Phil-IRI performance. It described distress in terms of top-down, bottom-up, and classroom dimensions; analyzed learners' Phil-IRI scores; determined whether reading distress predicted reading performance; explored teachers' observations of learners' challenges and support systems; and proposed an intervention program based on the findings.

Literature Review

Reading Distress and Reading Performance

Reading distress may occur when learners perceive reading tasks as difficult, threatening, or beyond their ability. It can generate task-irrelevant thoughts and reduced concentration, limiting the learner's capacity to process text effectively (Macdonald et al., 2021; Soares et al., 2023). Kaya et al. (2025) further showed that reading distress is negatively related to reading motivation and attitudes. However, the relationship between distress and achievement is not always uniform, making it important to examine specific dimensions of reading distress rather than treating it as a single construct.

Top-Down and Bottom-Up Reading Difficulties

Top-down reading requires learners to activate prior knowledge, interpret context, identify main ideas, and integrate details into an overall understanding of a text. Prior knowledge activation supports comprehension and retention because it helps learners connect new information with existing understanding (Belouiza et al., 2024). Bottom-up reading involves vocabulary, decoding, grammar, pronunciation, and word recognition. When these foundational processes are weak, learners may expend considerable cognitive effort on individual words and sentences, leaving fewer resources for comprehension. Vocabulary and academic language are strongly connected to reading proficiency (Lawrence et al., 2021; Rosyada-As & Apoko, 2023).

Classroom Reading Distress and Supportive Instruction

Classroom reading distress may arise when learners are asked to read aloud, answer comprehension questions, translate text, or respond to correction in front of others. A supportive classroom environment can reduce barriers to participation and improve engagement and self-efficacy (Molloy & Farrell, 2024). Instructional scaffolding, collaborative learning, and constructive feedback may also strengthen comprehension and reduce anxiety (Ibrahim et al., 2023). These findings support the use of targeted interventions that address both reading skills and the classroom conditions that shape learners' reading experiences.

METHODS

Research Design

The study employed a mixed-method approach using a convergent parallel design. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected within the same phase, analyzed separately, and integrated to provide a more comprehensive interpretation of learners' reading distress and performance. The quantitative component used a descriptive-predictive approach, while the qualitative component explored teachers' observations of reading challenges and support systems. A convergent design is appropriate when numerical patterns require contextual explanation from participant experiences (Slater & Hasson, 2024).

Research Locale and Participants

The study involved selected Grade 6 learners from the Schools Division of Bulacan. Universal sampling was used for the learner respondents, subject to parental consent and learners' assent. Teacher participants provided qualitative information through semi-structured interviews. The learners were selected because they were capable of reporting their reading experiences and because their Phil-IRI performance records could be examined alongside their reading-distress responses.

Research Instruments and Data Sources

Quantitative data were gathered through a structured reading-distress survey covering top-down, bottom-up, and classroom reading distress. Reading performance was assessed through documentary analysis of 243 Phil-IRI records. The qualitative component used semi-structured interview questions to elicit teachers' observations of learners' English-reading challenges and the support provided by teachers, parents, and schools.

Data Gathering Procedure

Permission to conduct the study was secured before data gathering. The survey and documentary analysis were administered in coordination with the relevant school personnel. Teacher interviews were conducted to obtain contextual explanations of the quantitative results. The quantitative and qualitative datasets were processed independently before their findings were integrated.

Data Analysis

Means were used to describe reading-distress levels, while the mean, median, standard deviation, minimum, and maximum were used to summarize Phil-IRI scores. Multiple regression analysis was applied to determine whether top-down, bottom-up, and classroom reading distress predicted learners' reading performance. Qualitative responses were analyzed thematically to identify recurring challenges and support systems.

Ethical Consideration

Participation was voluntary. Parental consent and learners' assent were obtained before the participation of Grade 6 learners. Confidentiality was observed by reporting results in aggregate form and by using the collected information only for research purposes.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Learners' Reading Distress

Learners reported very high reading distress across all three domains. Classroom reading distress obtained the highest overall mean (3.90), followed by bottom-up reading distress (3.85) and top-down reading distress (3.84). These findings show that distress was not limited to word-level or comprehension difficulties; it was also intensified by classroom situations involving public performance, correction, and evaluation.

Table 1. *Summary of Learners' Reading Distress Levels*

| Reading Distress Domain | Overall Mean | Interpretation | Highest-Rated Indicator |
|----------------------------|--------------|----------------|--|
| Top-down reading distress | 3.84 | Very High | Culturally unclear ideas in the text (3.92) |
| Bottom-up reading distress | 3.85 | Very High | Difficulty determining meanings of unknown words (3.99) |
| Classroom reading distress | 3.90 | Very High | Correction of pronunciation or translation mistakes (3.95) |

Top-down distress was most evident when learners encountered culturally unclear ideas and had difficulty identifying the main idea of a paragraph. This indicates the importance of activating prior knowledge and introducing context before reading. Belouiza et al. (2024) explained that prior knowledge helps learners employ more effective reading strategies and improves comprehension. Bottom-up distress was strongest when learners could not determine the meaning of unfamiliar words. This result highlights the continuing need for explicit vocabulary instruction, contextual word learning, and grammar support (Lawrence et al., 2021; Rosyada-As & Apoko, 2023).

Classroom distress was most pronounced when the teacher corrected pronunciation or translation mistakes and when learners were asked to read aloud. The result indicates that the instructional environment can amplify learners' discomfort even when they possess the basic capacity to read. Supportive feedback and scaffolded participation are therefore important for reducing distress while maintaining instructional rigor (Molloy & Farrell, 2024; Ibrahim et al., 2023).

Learners' Phil-IRI Reading Performance

Documentary analysis of 243 Phil-IRI records showed an average score of 15.96, with a median of 17.00 and a standard deviation of 2.47. The mean score corresponded to the Independent Reading Level. This indicates that the learners, as a group, could read and comprehend texts with minimal teacher assistance. However, the score range also shows that some learners remained within the Instructional Reading Level and may still require targeted support.

Table 2. *Descriptive Statistics of Learners' Phil-IRI Scores*

| N | Lowest | Highest | Mean | Median | SD | Adjectival Equivalent |
|-----|--------|---------|-------|--------|------|-----------------------|
| 243 | 10 | 20 | 15.96 | 17.00 | 2.47 | Independent |

Note. Phil-IRI interpretation in the uploaded manuscript: ≤ 8 = Frustration; 9-14 = Instructional; ≥ 15 = Independent.

Influence of Reading Distress on Reading Performance

Multiple regression analysis was conducted to determine whether the three reading-distress dimensions predicted Phil-IRI scores. The model explained 2.8% of the variance in reading performance ($R^2 = .028$; adjusted $R^2 = .016$). The overall model was marginally significant ($F = 2.278$, $p = .050$), indicating that reading distress had limited explanatory power when the three dimensions were considered together.

Table 3. *Multiple Regression Analysis of Reading Distress Predicting Phil-IRI Scores*

| Variable | B | SE | β | t | p-value | Interpretation |
|----------------------------|--------|-------|---------|--------|---------|-----------------|
| Constant | 37.472 | 9.305 | - | 4.027 | .000 | - |
| Top-down reading distress | -2.386 | 1.276 | -.144 | -1.870 | .063 | Not significant |
| Bottom-up reading distress | .184 | 1.674 | .008 | .110 | .913 | Not significant |
| Classroom reading distress | -3.351 | 1.517 | -.150 | -2.210 | .028 | Significant |

Note. Dependent variable: learners' Phil-IRI score. $R^2 = .028$; adjusted $R^2 = .016$; $F = 2.278$; $p = .050$.

Classroom reading distress was the only statistically significant predictor of lower Phil-IRI scores ($B = -3.351$, $\beta = -.150$, $p = .028$). Top-down distress showed a negative but non-significant effect ($p = .063$), while bottom-up distress did not significantly predict performance ($p = .913$). The result suggests that classroom-based emotional and instructional factors may influence performance more directly than learners' reported word-level or contextual difficulties. This finding does not diminish the importance of vocabulary and comprehension support; rather, it emphasizes that learners may perform better when teachers reduce the social and emotional pressure associated with classroom reading.

Qualitative Themes: Challenges and Support Systems

The teacher interviews provided contextual explanations for the quantitative findings. Three reading challenges emerged: limited vocabulary, comprehension and higher-order thinking difficulties, and text- and task-related distress. These themes show that learners' difficulties involve both foundational language knowledge and the cognitive demands of interpreting texts.

Table 4. *Emerging Themes on Learners' Reading Challenges*

| Theme | Observed Challenge | Instructional Implication |
|--|--|--|
| Limited vocabulary | Difficulty with unfamiliar words, meaning, pronunciation, and word use | Strengthen explicit and contextual vocabulary instruction. |
| Comprehension and higher-order thinking difficulties | Difficulty identifying meaning, main ideas, inferences, and deeper interpretations | Use guided reading, questioning, text-structure support, and scaffolded comprehension tasks. |
| Text- and task-related distress | Complex texts and demanding activities intensify discomfort and hesitation | Provide level-appropriate texts, gradual task progression, and supportive feedback. |

Limited vocabulary was identified as a central barrier affecting fluency, confidence, and comprehension. This finding supports the quantitative result that unknown word meanings generated the highest bottom-up distress. Rosyada-As and Apoko (2023) similarly identified pronunciation, spelling, usage, and retention as recurring vocabulary difficulties. Comprehension challenges extended beyond word recognition and included identifying key ideas and interpreting meaning, consistent with the comprehension processes described by Oakhill et al. (2023).

Three support systems also emerged: instructional support from teachers, home literacy support from parents, and institutional support through school programs and materials. These supports are complementary. Classroom strategies address immediate learning needs, while home and school structures reinforce regular reading practice and sustain intervention efforts.

Table 5. *Support Systems for Learners Experiencing Reading Challenges*

| Support System | Examples Reflected in the Findings | Contribution |
|-----------------------|---|--|
| Instructional support | Vocabulary instruction, guided reading, feedback, and remedial activities | Builds skills and reduces distress during reading tasks. |
| Home literacy support | Parent encouragement and reading practice at home | Extends literacy practice beyond the classroom. |
| Institutional support | School reading programs, learning materials, and literacy activities | Provides structured and sustained assistance. |

Proposed Reading Intervention Program

Based on the integrated findings, a reading intervention program should address both literacy skills and classroom reading distress. The proposed priorities are presented in Table 6. The activities are aligned with the actual findings and may be adapted to the school context during implementation.

Table 6. *Proposed Reading Intervention Priorities*

| Priority Area | Suggested Activities | Primary Participants | Expected Outcome |
|---|---|-------------------------------|---|
| Vocabulary development | Contextual word learning, word maps, pronunciation practice, and vocabulary games | Learners and reading teachers | Improved word knowledge and reduced bottom-up distress |
| Comprehension and higher-order thinking | Guided reading, scaffolded questioning, main-idea tasks, inference exercises, and text-structure activities | Learners and reading teachers | Stronger comprehension and confidence in interpreting texts |
| Supportive classroom reading | Gradual oral-reading participation, constructive correction, peer reading, and low-risk response formats | Learners and teachers | Reduced classroom distress and more confident participation |

| | | | |
|--------------------------------|--|---------------------------------|--|
| Home literacy support | Parent orientation and manageable home-reading routines | Learners, parents, and teachers | More consistent reading practice at home |
| Institutional literacy support | Reading materials, monitoring, teacher capacity-building, and school literacy activities | School heads and teachers | Sustained implementation and coordinated support |

CONCLUSION

The study showed that learners experienced very high reading distress in top-down, bottom-up, and classroom contexts, even though the average Phil-IRI score corresponded to the Independent Reading Level. This finding demonstrates that the ability to read independently does not necessarily eliminate the emotional and instructional difficulties associated with reading. Classroom reading distress was the only significant predictor of lower Phil-IRI performance, highlighting the importance of supportive classroom practices, constructive feedback, and gradual participation. The qualitative findings further identified limited vocabulary, comprehension and higher-order thinking difficulties, and text- and task-related distress as central challenges. A coordinated intervention that integrates literacy instruction, classroom support, home reading, and institutional assistance is therefore necessary to strengthen reading proficiency and reduce distress.

Recommendations

Reading teachers should use level-appropriate texts, explicit vocabulary instruction, guided comprehension activities, and constructive feedback strategies that reduce the pressure associated with classroom reading. School heads should provide capacity-building activities on supportive reading instruction and establish monitoring mechanisms for learners who require additional assistance. Parents should be engaged through manageable home-reading routines and orientation activities. Schools and districts may adapt the proposed intervention priorities according to their available resources and learner needs. Future studies should specify the number and characteristics of survey and interview participants, examine additional predictors of reading performance, and evaluate the effectiveness of the proposed intervention through longitudinal or experimental designs.

References

- Belouiza, O., Er-Rechydy, A., & Koumachi, B. (2024). Prior knowledge activation through the use of effective reading strategies. *International Journal of English Literature and Social Sciences*, 9(3), 389-394. <https://doi.org/10.22161/ijels.93.4>
- Ibrahim, K. A. A., Carbajal, N. C., Zuta, M. E. C., & Bayat, S. (2023). Collaborative learning, scaffolding-based instruction, and self-assessment: Impacts on intermediate EFL learners' reading comprehension, motivation, and anxiety. *Language Testing in Asia*, 13(1). <https://doi.org/10.1186/s40468-023-00229-1>
- Idulog, M. V., Gadiano, R., Toledo, E., Hermosada, M., Casaldon, H., Mariposa, M., Geron, C., Dequito, E., Genanda, J., Malipot, M. A., Pentang, J., & Bautista, R. (2023). Filipino students' reading abilities: A note on the challenges and potential areas for improvement. *International Journal of Education and Teaching Zone*, 2(2), 233-242. <https://doi.org/10.57092/ijetz.v2i2.128>
- Kaya, M., Aydın, E., Kaya, M., & Aydın, E. (2025). The impact of reading motivation on reading anxiety and attitude in secondary school students: Reading anxiety as a mediator. *SAGE Open*, 15(3). <https://doi.org/10.1177/21582440251376174>
- Lawrence, J. F., Knoph, R., McIlraith, A., Kulesz, P. A., & Francis, D. J. (2021). Reading comprehension and academic vocabulary: Exploring relations of item features and reading proficiency. *Reading Research Quarterly*, 57(2), 669-690. <https://doi.org/10.1002/rrq.434>
- Macdonald, K. T., Cirino, P. T., Miciak, J., & Grills, A. E. (2021). The role of reading anxiety among struggling readers in fourth and fifth grade. *Reading & Writing Quarterly*, 37(4), 382-394. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10573569.2021.1874580>
- Molloy, C., & Farrell, R. (2024). Cultivating positive classroom environments: Exploring the efficacy of immersive technologies in removing barriers to learning among primary school students. *Computers in the Schools*, 41(2), 164-192. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07380569.2024.2325441>

- Oakhill, J., Cain, K., & Elbro, C. (2023). Reading comprehension and reading comprehension difficulties. In *Reading development and difficulties* (pp. 83-115). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-26550-2_5
- Rosyada-As, A., & Apoko, T. W. (2023). Investigating English vocabulary difficulties and its learning strategies of lower secondary school students. *Journal of Languages and Language Teaching*, 11(3), 489. <https://doi.org/10.33394/jollt.v11i3.8404>
- Slater, P., & Hasson, F. (2024). Quantitative research designs, hierarchy of evidence and validity. *Journal of Psychiatric and Mental Health Nursing*, 32(3), 656-660. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpm.13135>
- Soares, S., Boyes, M. E., Parrila, R., & Badcock, N. A. (2023). Does reading anxiety impact on academic achievement in higher education students? *Dyslexia*, 29(3), 179-198. <https://doi.org/10.1002/dys.1738>