

Reading Difficulties Among Learners During Prolonged School Closures

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Abstract

Prolonged school closures reduced direct opportunities for teachers to hear learners read, examine errors, and adjust instruction. The resulting concern is often summarized as reading difficulty, although the breakdown may occur in access to print, word recognition, fluency, oral language, background knowledge, or comprehension. This conceptual review proposes a Reading Difficulty Localization Ladder that moves from learning opportunity to increasingly complex reading processes. Evidence through 2021 supports brief, targeted checks rather than assigning a broad label from a single passage or completion record. The ladder begins by verifying access and language, then examines decoding, connected-text fluency, meaning at sentence and passage levels, and transfer to unfamiliar text. Each rung is paired with a distinct response and a rule for referral when progress remains limited. The framework also recommends short daily practice, decodable or appropriately leveled text, oral interaction, and feedback that preserves learner dignity. This article does not estimate prevalence or diagnose a reading disorder. It provides a structured route for locating instructional need after disrupted schooling.

Keywords: reading difficulty; school closure; decoding; fluency; comprehension; learning recovery

Introduction

A learner who avoids a printed passage may not be facing the same problem as a learner who reads words accurately but cannot explain the meaning. Limited book access, unfamiliar language, weak decoding, slow fluency, and insufficient background knowledge can produce similar visible hesitation.

During school closures, teachers lost many informal observations that normally guide reading instruction. Returned worksheets emphasized written products and could be completed with adult help. Recovery requires listening to reading processes again, not simply assigning more pages.

Purpose of the Article

This article asks how teachers can locate the earliest unstable process and choose a response without prematurely labeling the learner.

Conceptual Approach

Design and Source Base

The review draws on reading science, formative assessment, and pandemic education reports available through 2021. It treats skilled reading as coordination among word recognition, language comprehension, fluency, knowledge, and motivation.

The ladder is an instructional screen, not a clinical diagnostic instrument. Persistent difficulty, sensory concerns, developmental history, or limited response to appropriate instruction may require specialist assessment.

The Reading Difficulty Localization Ladder

Verify Opportunity, Print, and Language

The first check asks whether the learner had books or modules, could see the print, understood the language of instruction, and received opportunities to read aloud or discuss meaning. Absence of exposure should not be recorded as a stable learner deficit.

Schools can restore access through take-home text sets, audio support, large print, home-language explanation, and short teacher contact. The response should address the identified barrier before a harder text is used as a test.

Examine Word Recognition

Brief lists and decodable text can reveal knowledge of letter-sound relationships, blending, common spelling patterns, and familiar high-frequency words. Error analysis matters more than speed at this stage.

Instruction should be explicit and cumulative, with guided practice and immediate correction. Memorizing whole passages can create the appearance of reading without transferable word-solving ability.

Listen to Connected-Text Fluency

Fluency includes accuracy, appropriate pace, and phrasing that supports meaning. Timed rate alone can encourage rushing. A short oral reading with error and phrasing notes provides a more useful picture.

Repeated reading of a manageable text, echo reading, and teacher modeling can build automaticity. Text difficulty should allow successful practice rather than repeated public failure.

Probe Language and Meaning

A learner may decode accurately yet struggle with vocabulary, syntax, inference, or background knowledge. Oral questions and retelling help separate reading comprehension from the burden of writing an answer.

Before reading, teachers can build essential knowledge and clarify a few critical words. During and after reading, prompts should move from literal information to connection, inference, and explanation using evidence from the text.

Check Transfer and Response

Progress should be tested with an unfamiliar but comparable text. Improvement only on a rehearsed passage does not establish transfer. The next check should occur after a defined period of instruction, not after repeated testing alone.

If the learner makes limited progress despite accessible, explicit, and sufficiently intensive teaching, the school should review attendance, language, hearing and vision, instructional history, and the need for specialist referral.

Table 1*Reading difficulty localization ladder*

Rung	Evidence	Matched response
Opportunity	Access, print visibility, and language	Restore materials and accessibility
Word recognition	Patterned decoding errors	Explicit cumulative instruction
Fluency	Accuracy, pace, and phrasing	Modeled and repeated reading
Meaning	Vocabulary, retelling, and inference	Build language and knowledge
Transfer	Performance on comparable new text	Continue, intensify, or refer

Note. The table is an analytic tool proposed in this article; it does not report field measurements.

Discussion

The ladder directs attention to the earliest unstable process. This prevents comprehension worksheets from being assigned to a decoding problem and prevents a fluent reader with weak language comprehension from receiving only speed practice.

Scope and Research Agenda

This review does not identify individual disorders or quantify closure-related decline. Home assistance and missing baseline data complicate interpretation. Future studies should use repeated process measures, include out-of-school exposure, document language and disability, and evaluate response to specified instruction.

Conclusion

Reading recovery is most humane and efficient when difficulty is localized. Verify opportunity, listen to words and connected text, probe language and meaning, teach the identified process, and check transfer. A precise instructional question is more useful than a broad label.

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