

## Teachers' Perception of the Impact of Instructional Strategies on Children with Reading Difficulty in Ghana



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**Abstract:** The study investigated teachers' perception of the impact of instructional strategies on pupils with reading difficulties in selected districts in the Central Region of Ghana. A concurrent embedded mixed method design was used for this study. Proportionate stratified sampling procedure was used to select ninety-five (95) upper primary teachers for the study. The response rate was 100% representing 95 teachers. Data were collected using a questionnaire and interview schedules. Statistical tools used in data analysis were mainly frequency distribution and percentages, means and standard deviations and independent samples t-test, however, Braun and Clarke (2006) thematic analytic approach was used to analyse the qualitative data. The study revealed that Teachers had negative perceptions about pupils with reading difficulties. Also, role play, read aloud, direct instruction and group activities were the frequently used strategies teachers used in teaching pupils with reading difficulties. The study recommends that Ghana Education Service in collaboration with all the head teachers should organise a workshop on reading difficulty for teachers in the three districts. Further, the Ministry of Education through the Ghana Education Service should find means of providing resources to support teaching of reading in the schools in all the districts.

**KEYWORDS:** Strategies, Read-aloud, Reading fluency, Comprehension, Reading difficulty.

### INTRODUCTION

Globally, most classrooms of regular basic schools are characterized with at least one or more children with learning difficulties such as that of reading difficulty. Often, the children with severe learning problems enter the special schools meant for them (Mehta, 2003). If these difficulties are not recognised and catered for, or ignored, then the needs of the children may not be met hence make it difficult to fulfil the aim of universalisation of elementary education and equalisation of educational opportunity (Karande, 2008). Reading difficulties are related to short-term consequences, such as a more negative self-concept (Zelege, 2004), lower academic achievement (Judge & Watson, 2011), and delinquent behaviour (Gandhimathi & Eljo, 2010), and long-term consequences such as difficulty obtaining and retaining a job as an adult (Cortiella, 2009). Therefore, proper evaluation of how children read is paramount in order to inform prevention and intervention initiatives aimed at improving outcomes for children.

With the changing global educational system and the awareness gathered through different communication media, it has become inevitable to develop an educational system that accommodate and integrate students with reading difficulty. Integrating children with reading difficulty means that the student will be placed into regular class rooms and taught by regular teachers. The role of the teacher is to be responsive to the vast and varied needs of each child, and to promote an educational climate that facilitates motivation and the desire to read (Hamilton, 2012). If children are motivated to learn to read, they will try to learn to read, and continue to do so, even when faced with obstacles. The teacher is responsible for creating an environment that motivates children to read. Pedagogical strategies require specific measures to ensure the effectiveness of teaching and learning (Karande, 2008).

At this point, one might be interested to know the pedagogical methods that best serve the needs of children with reading difficulty. Another issue of concern would be to see if teachers differ with respect to their demographical variables (thus gender and years of experience) when it comes to the methods, they employ in teaching children with reading difficulty. In some developed countries like South Africa and Canada, studies have shown that teachers differ in their choice of teaching methods based on the demographical variables mentioned above (Rice, 2010; Connor & Petscher, 2009).

In Ghana, inclusive education has for a long time be embraced and practiced. This is to say that, the Ministry of Education and Ghana Education Service accept the fact that children with special educational needs should not be separated from other children, but that they should learn together whenever possible. Over the years, it appears that 'Special Education' in Ghana was and still is strongly focused at the 'traditional disabilities' (sight, hearing, intellectual and physical) (Special Attention Project, 2011). Again, in Ghana, it appears that children with normal intelligence but have a learning difficulty in a specific area (for example reading) are not formally recognised as children with special educational needs hence there appears to be no provisions made for

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such children in terms of assessment and support (Special Attention Project, 2011). However, in Ghana, statistics show that about 98% of children in the lower primary struggle to read and that in general, 2% or less were able to read with fluency and comprehension in a survey conducted across the country (Early Grade Reading Report, Ghana, 2015). This presupposes that there is the possibility that there exist quite substantial number of children with reading problems in basic schools in Ghana. This issue makes empirical investigation of pedagogical approaches of upper primary teachers and its role in remediating the reading problem very crucial and timely.

Studies conducted in advanced jurisdictions have reported that children with reading difficulty need instruction in strategies that relate to the academic areas affected by their disability (Weinfeld, Barnes - Robinson, Jeweler, & Shevitz, 2002; Bisland, 2004). Furthermore, it has also been documented that teachers' adequate knowledge and experience on how to give appropriate and adequate support matters in the provision of quality education for individuals with specific learning disability like reading difficulty (Oluranti, 2014; Fosnot & Perry, 2005; Kozulin, 2003). There appears to be paucity of information regarding the methods that teachers in regular schools in Ghana employ to support children with reading difficulty. This is probably so because researchers have paid much attention to issues of challenges of inclusive education in Ghana (Adera & Asimeng-Boahene, 2011; Vanderpuye, Gyimah, & Deku, 2009; Vanderpuye & Deku, 2007; Vanderpuye, Deku, & Kwarteng, 2006). Others also investigated parent perception of inclusive education (Vanderpuye, 2013; Abosi, 2007; Obeng, 2004; Okyere, 2003; Avoke, 2002) and discriminatory issues for children with special needs (Anwar, 2010), leaving methods used to support children with reading difficulties unattended to, hence this study therefore sought to explore the methods used by teachers in teaching children with reading difficulty in the regular basic schools in Ghana.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This current investigate is founded on the theoretical position of Social Constructivism Cognitive Development Theory of Lev Semeonovich Vygotsky. Vygotsky (1978) believes that interpersonal relationship of learners with a more capable person improves their academic achievement, competency and dependency. He states that "an interpersonal process is transformed into an intrapersonal one, that every function in the pupil's cultural development appears twice that is, first on the social level (inter-psychological) and later on the personal level (intra-psychological)" (p.12). Vygotsky then, described Zone of Proximal Development as the distance between the actual development level as discovered by learner solving problem independently, and the level of potential development discovered through learner solving problem with the guidance of the adult or in cooperation with more capable peers. It is the problems that learners cannot solve independently that only go through the assistance of more competent people (Vygotsky, 1978). He described actual development level as indicative of exact mental function of the pupil, that is, only those things that learners can do independently are indicative of mental abilities. The implication of the theory for this study has to do with the researcher's conception that the direction of the capable individuals (i.e. teachers) will lead to acquisition of reading skills. It has been shown by researchers that what is in the zone of proximal development today will be actual development tomorrow (McCarthy, 1929, Vygotsky, 1978). This implies that what learners can do with the adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers today (ZPD), will be what they will be able to do independently later (Actual development).

Empirical studies conducted on the issue of reading difficulties have revealed inconclusive findings that necessitate the conduct of further investigations. For example, Talley (2017), examined the most effective teaching strategies that are implemented in the classroom to meet the needs of struggling readers, to find activities that motivate struggling readers, and to investigate the role of teachers in the development of struggling readers. Findings indicated that role play, poetry and group work were the common strategies used in teaching struggling readers. The findings further identified games and high interest texts to influence struggling readers to engage in the process of reading. With the same research interest of what teachers do to help struggling readers, Morgan (2017), explored the methods that educators used in teaching reading fluency in a low-fee private school in Pretoria and discovered that educators made use of synthetic phonic approach, dramatization and subtractive bilingualism predominantly. Interestingly, teachers also differed in the choice of methods based on qualification. On the same line of purpose, Marima (2016), explored early childhood teachers' methods used in teaching children with reading difficulty in Nairobi, Kenya. After analysing data taken from 10 primary schools from Dagoretti and 10 from Westlands Divisions, the study concluded that majority of pre-unit teachers used phonics and others whole-word methods. Although most teachers indicated that they were confident, they also indicated that they were not well equipped with the relevant teaching methods. From the foregoing studies, there is clarity that instructional methods that work for struggling readers appears to differ one jurisdiction to the other.

Like methods of teaching, empirical studies have also shown that problems that teachers face in the course of helping children with reading difficulties differ by context and for that matter by studies. Gündoğmuş (2018), sought to identify the difficulties that primary school teachers experience in the primary reading instruction. Taken data from 51 primary school teachers using a qualitative approach, the study revealed; poor parental support for pupils with reading difficulties, unreadiness of pupils for classroom learning activities, lack of professional development, frequent pupil absenteeism, lack of interest by pupils in reading, and inadequate teaching and learning materials as the challenges faced by teachers. Also, Yussif (2017), investigated problems that war against teaching of reading fluency. After drawing themes from the responses of the participants and analysed manually using

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the constant comparative method. The findings revealed that challenges that act as impediments to teaching and learning of English comprehension included: inadequate teaching-learning materials, unconducive classroom atmosphere for learning, lack of good reading foundation in the English language and pupils' truancy. Further, Akubuilu, Okorie and Onwuka (2015), investigated the causes of reading readiness deficiency and ways of improving reading readiness among pupils. Using documents content analysis, the study identified factors such as socio-economic background, physical abnormalities, mental imbalance, lack of interest, and unfamiliarity with symbols and teachers' inability to help pupils as causes of reading readiness deficiencies.

Critically examining the multidirectional nature of previous studies findings, it may be worth concluding that context situational variables and the methodology employed in various studies may be the determining factor of studies results. Most importantly, all the findings add up to give a comprehensive view about how teachers in several jurisdictions have approached the teaching of children with reading difficulty. Several empirical studies are therefore needed for scholars to understand findings of studies in line with the economies that they are emerging from.

### RESEARCH PURPOSES

The following specific purposes guided the study:

1. Instructional strategies that teachers use in supporting children with reading difficulties in an inclusive classroom.
2. The differences in the instructional strategies used by male and female teachers.
3. The challenges that teachers face in the teaching of pupils with reading difficulty.

### RESEARCH QUESTIONS

The following research questions were posed to guide the study:

1. What instructional strategies do teachers in the Central Region use to support pupils with reading difficulties in an inclusive classroom?
2. What challenges do teachers in the Central Region face when teaching pupils with reading difficulties?

### RESEARCH HYPOTHESIS

A hypothesis guided the study:

H<sub>0</sub>: There is no statistically significant difference between male and female teachers in the Central Region with respect to instructional strategies used in the inclusive classrooms.

H<sub>1</sub>: There is a statistically significant difference between male and female teachers in the Central Region regarding instructional strategies used in the inclusive classrooms.

### RESEARCH METHODS

A concurrent embedded mixed method design was used for this study. This research strategy can be identified by its use of one data collection phase, during which both quantitative and qualitative data are collected simultaneously (Creswell, 2003). The researcher found this approach useful because, the mixing of the data from the two methods would help to integrate the information and compare one data source to the other (Halcomb & Andrew, 2009). Moreover, this approach provided an overall composite assessment of the problem (Halcomb & Andrew, 2009). The target group for the study was all regular teachers in the Central region of Ghana. From the target region, three district which were Assin South district, Gomoa West district and Komenda Edina Eguafo-Aberim Municipality were selected purposefully for the study. Although there were 12 districts and one Municipality in Central region, the study made use of the "adjudged best", (Assin South district) and poorly performed district (thus, Gomoa West district) in the 2017 League Table. Komenda Edina Eguafo-Aberim (KEEA) was also included because it was the only Municipality as at the time the study was conducted. In this case, for the three districts 30 schools were targeted with the corresponding number of teachers for the upper primary teachers estimated to be 95 teachers. Out of the 95, 53 of them were male while 42 were female.

Since the teachers were relatively few in number, they were all involved in the study as the study respondents. However, six teachers (i.e. two teachers from each district) were interviewed. The instruments that were used for data collection were questionnaire and interview schedule. The questionnaire was a unidimensional type with ten items that measured instructional procedures of teachers. The Cronbach Alpha reliability index of the questionnaire was .86. Like the questionnaire, the interview schedule was also a unidimensional instrument with seven items. The instruments were developed by the researchers, pilot-tested to finetune them in other to improve the validity and reliability of the instrument. Prior to the data collection, all ethical procedures such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity were followed in other to gain maximum participation of the respondents. Data to answer research questions 1 was analysed using Mean and standard deviation whereas the hypothesis was tested using independent samples t-test. However, qualitative data to answer research question 2 was analysed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). Data were presented in tables (i.e. quantitative data) and discussion followed afterwards.

**RESULTS OF THE STUDY**

**What instructional strategies do teachers in the Central Region use to support pupils with reading difficulties in an inclusive classroom?**

The research question sought to investigate the instructional strategies that respondents use in helping pupils with reading difficulty. Summary of the analysis is shown in Table 1.

**Table 1-Instructional strategies that teachers use to support pupils with reading difficulty**

Statements	Mean	Std.
I write key words on the board and ask pupils to pronounce them after me.	3.7	.51
I use pictures and other objects for my children to make connections between words and the associated objects.	3.2	.76
I ask pupils to read aloud.	3.5	.59
I ask pupils to explain in their own words how they understand what they have read.	3.3	.65
I sometimes make my pupils listen to stories in oral audio tape format and ask them to mention new words that they heard in the story.	2.0	.94
I encourage my pupils to read faster to improve their reading.	3.0	.94
I give room for peer correction, self-correction and later teacher correction.	3.1	.84
I employ "role play" to encourage pupil-pupil communication.	2.7	.83
I use literary texts to teach reading.	2.8	.77
I ask pupils to do a group activity about what they have read.	2.9	.84
Average Mean and Std. Deviation	3.0	.77

**Source:** Field survey (2019)

On the questionnaire, respondents indicated (M= 3.7, SD= .51) that as a strategy, they begin instruction by writing key words on the board as they (teachers) teach the children how to pronounce those words. Again, teachers also showed (M= 3.5, SD= .59) on the questionnaire that they assist struggling readers through read aloud strategy. Moreover, responses of teachers tend to indicate that most (M= 3.3, SD= .65) of them ask pupils to explain in their own words how they understand what they have read. Furthermore, teachers through their responses on the questionnaire said (M= 3.2, SD= .76) that they use pictures and other objects for my children to make connections between words and the associated objects.

In a nut shell, the mean of mean scores (M= 3.0, SD= .77) support the fact that respondents are of the view that beginning lesson with writing of key words, helping pupils to read aloud, allowing pupils to explain what they read in their own words are effective strategies for teaching pupils with reading difficulty. In addition to the already mentioned strategies, respondents believe that the use of literary text, role play and group activities are among the effective strategies for teaching pupils with reading difficulty.

**What challenges do teachers in the Central Region face when teaching pupils with reading difficulties?**

The research question sought to investigate and outline the challenges that teachers face when teaching pupils with reading difficulty. Interview data was taken from the respondents and analysed as follows: After the coding of the data had been successfully done, the following themes emerged for further analysis. They include:

1. Inadequate teaching and learning materials.
2. Lack of Parental involvement in the children's education.

The views of respondents were presented based on the up listed thematic areas which were seen by respondents as the problem areas impeding the smooth teaching of children with reading difficulty.

The first and most prominent theme that resonated in every single interview was inadequate teaching and learning materials (TLMs). And the respondents have these to say:

*"Well, I think if you ask of problems then you have asked the right question. The truth is TLMs are major problem in this school but for this class we are even worse of. When it comes to TLMs, they are woefully inadequate. It will interest you to know that a class of 32 children we have only 10 English reading books, how do you expect me to teach them reading?"* (Respondent 1, 32years). In a different session for a different person, the next respondent response was not too different from the first respondent:

*"For me I think I have several problems in this class but if I should narrow it down to problems that confront my teaching of reading, then I can say we don't have reading books. We don't have some at all. I always have to painstakingly write a whole passage on the board before I can teach reading and comprehension. Things like small small dictionaries, literature books and story books are all needed but we do not have them"* (Respondent 2, 35years).

As if it were not enough, the other respondent had this to say:

*"Oh, for problem, the only problem that I have is that our text books are not enough. We are 38 in class but our books are only 25 in number and even with the 25 some are torn apart"* (Respondent 4, 31years).

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It is quite obvious from the interview data that all the interviewees acknowledge that inadequate teaching and learning materials is a problem for smooth teaching of reading in class to children with reading difficulty. Another theme which emerged was lack of parental involvement, on this new theme, respondents have these to say:

*"Hmmm, the community is such that if people bring their children here, that is all. They do not for once, within the term pass by to even ask whether the child's performance is good or not"*

The respondent further intimated that:

*"You see sometimes, the parents think that if they pay their wards a visit, we will be bothering them with financial issue but that is not the case, if you need to buy something, for that one, I will tell you"*(Respondent 2, 35years).

In addition to what has been said, the next respondents also touched on the same issue in the same way but different words. The respondent has this to say:

*"As for the parents of the children in this class, if you do not call them, they will not come oooo. I think you understand what I want to say? Yes! If you don't call them, they will not come. I feel their commitment as far as their children schooling is concern is not encouraging. That is all that I can say for now"* (Respondent 5, 42years).

Further, the third respondents also did not deviate from the content of problems already shared by colleagues. In the respondent's lamentation, the respondent has this to say:

*"Madam researcher, let me tell you, in this community, the problems that the parents of the children that we have here are thinking about, I can tell you that their children reading problems are not part of it. For example, this child (name withheld) is a poor reader. At the beginning of the term I called for the father that he should come for us to discuss how we can help the child both at school and home. Hmmm, my sister, we are in the 8<sup>th</sup> week now he has not step foot here"* He continued:

*"It is good that you are researching into this, please for this school, parents are not cooperative at all"* (Respondents 6, 29years).

Again, interview data has also shown that teachers who served as respondents had a directional response to suggest that parental involvement was a problem. In all, inadequate teaching and learning materials as well as low parental involvement constitute the challenges that bedevils the teaching of reading to struggling readers.

The next research question that follows is a quantitative one which conducted a test of difference.

Ho: There is no statistically significant difference between male and female teachers in the Central Region with respect to instructional strategies used in the inclusive classrooms.

The hypothesis sought to find out whether significant differences exist between male and female teachers with respect to their choice of instructional strategies for teaching pupils with reading difficulty. The hypothesis was tested using independent samples t-test at 0.05 alpha level. Detail of the results is shown in Table 2.

**Table 2-Independent Sample t-test of teachers' instructional strategies based on gender**

Group	N	Mean	SD	t	df	p-value
Male	53	31.13	4.3	2.31	93	.023
Female	42	29.05	4.4			

**Source:** Field survey (2019);  $\eta^2 = .054$

After testing for relevant assumptions (i.e. normality and equality of variance) The independent samples t-test for equality of means shows statistically significant difference,  $t(93) = 2.31, p = .023$ . This implies that there is a calculable difference between male ( $M = 31.13, SD = 4.3$ ) and female ( $M = 29.05, SD = 4.4$ ) teachers with respect to their use of instructional strategies. The magnitude of the differences in the mean scores was moderate ( $\eta^2 = 0.054$ ) (Cohen, 1988).

## DISCUSSION

Research question one sought to explore the instructional strategies that teachers use in teaching children with reading difficulties. On this theme, findings showed that they have strategies of beginning lesson with writing of key words (mostly on the chalkboard), helping pupils to read aloud (especially the key words before the text), allowing pupils to explain what they read in their own words, the use of literary text, role play method and group activity method. It is worthy of mentioning that a lot of strategies for teaching pupils with reading difficulty exist in practice but the above listed strategies were those that were frequently. In the literature, similar findings were noted. For example, the practice of identification of key vocabulary or words and its meaning as shaped by the context were identified as relevant (Talley, 2017; Fisher & Frey, 2014). Again, teaching pupils monitoring strategy has also been identified as effective. This strategy requires teachers to demonstrate how to monitor one's own reading by using 'read aloud' (McEwan-Adkins, 2007). Role play, poetry and group work were also found in the literature to be among commonly used strategies for the teaching of reading difficulties.

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Research question two aimed at further exploring the challenges that teachers face when teaching children with reading difficulty. Findings revealed available but inadequate essential teaching and learning materials such as English reading textbooks, charts, dictionaries, story books etc. for the pupils and parents not supervising their wards' learning at home constitute the problems that war against teaching children with reading difficulties. Finding supported earlier studies. For example, Gündoğmuş (2018), discovered the same result in a study that the difficulties teachers encounter included; poor parental support for pupils with reading difficulty, lack of interest by pupils in reading, and inadequate teaching and learning materials. The findings further corroborate with several others in the literature that in the same fashion project poor parental involvement and inadequate teaching and learning materials (Yussif, 2017; Bano, Jabeen and Qutoshi, 2018).

The hypothesis sought to investigate whether differences teachers differ on the usage of instructional procedures with respect to gender. Findings showed that there was a statistically significant difference in the use of teaching strategies based on gender. In other words, male teachers were found to differ from their counterpart female teachers in the teaching strategies that they often use when teaching children with reading difficulty. The finding is in line with Murphy, Eduljee, Parkman and Croteau (2018) who obtained significant gender difference in the preferred teaching methods of teachers. Moreover, Ghaleb, Abdulwahed and Hatem (2017) investigated the differences between male-female teachers' strategies used in teaching English language in elementary schools in the United Arab Emirates. Results show some significant differences between male and female teachers in the strategies they use in their classes.

### CONCLUSIONS

Based on the findings of the study the study can conclude that teachers in the inclusive schools are more likely to use role play method, group activity, read aloud method, literary text and direct instruction when the need arise for them to teach a pupil with reading difficulty.

Children who exhibit reading difficulties are more likely not to improve in the near future if public school continue to run out of teaching and learning materials while parents also sit aloof and remain passive in their ward's academic pursuit. Finally, the study can conclude that male teachers use different methods when teaching children with reading difficulty compared to their counterpart female.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

In line with the research findings and the conclusions drawn, the following recommendations are made for policy and practice:

1. Ministry of Education through the Ghana Education Service as a matter of priority should ensure that all the schools in the two districts and municipality as well as similar schools across the region and even in the country are provided with all the needed materials such as English reading text books, dictionaries, charts and all other relevant materials to assist teachers to teach reading effectively in schools.
2. Head teachers should at regular point in time encourage teachers through award schemes and recognition to continue using the effective methods such as role play, read aloud, group activity and direct instruction which they already know of.

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