

**READING DIFFICULTIES AND LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS OF SENIOR
SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS IN RIVER STATE**

By

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated reading difficulties and learning environments of senior secondary school students in River State, Nigeria. This study adopted a descriptive survey research design with an ex-post facto approach to examine reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The study was carried out in Rivers State, The population of the study comprised 200,990 senior secondary school students, while the target population consisted of 128,477 SS1 and SS2 students in public secondary schools across Rivers State, as obtained from the Rivers State Senior Secondary Schools Board (RSSSSB, 2024). A sample size of 399 students, comprising 199 males and 200 females. A multistage sampling technique was employed to select respondents. Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire entitled "Recognizing Signs of Reading Difficulties Questionnaire (RSRDQ)." The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts: one in Educational Foundations, one in Measurement and Evaluation, and one in Statistics. These experts assessed the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the items in relation to ensure internal consistency and reliability. The reliability coefficients for the individual clusters ranged between 0.72 and 0.86, confirming that the instrument was suitable for data collection. Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while independent t-test statistics were employed to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The study concluded that reading difficulties among senior secondary school students are multidimensional and are influenced by both environmental and individual factors. One of the recommendations Made was that teachers should adopt more effective, student-centered, and interactive instructional strategies to improve reading engagement and comprehension.

KEYWORDS: Reading Difficulties, Learning Environments, Senior Secondary School Students.

INTRODUCTION

Reading is a fundamental academic skill that enables learners to decode written symbols, construct meaning from texts, and engage critically with information. It serves as the foundation for the development of other language skills such as writing, speaking, and critical thinking. Effective reading requires the integration of decoding and comprehension processes, supported by vocabulary knowledge, phonological awareness, syntactic understanding, and prior knowledge. In educational settings, reading facilitates knowledge acquisition and academic success. Students who possess strong reading skills are better equipped to understand subject content, analyze information, and perform effectively in examinations. Conversely, reading difficulties often result in poor academic achievement, reduced motivation, and limited educational opportunities.

Reading proficiency is influenced by several factors within the learning environment. The learning environment encompasses the physical, social, psychological, and instructional conditions under which learning takes place. It includes home experiences, classroom practices, peer relationships, and individual learner characteristics. These factors may either support or hinder students' reading development and academic performance.

One important aspect of the learning environment is family dynamics. The family serves as the child's first social and educational environment, influencing language development, literacy habits, and attitudes toward reading. Students from homes where parents encourage reading, provide educational resources, and participate in literacy-related activities often demonstrate stronger reading abilities than those from homes with limited literacy support. Factors such as parental education, socioeconomic status, family stability, and parental involvement have been found to influence students' reading achievement.

Instructional methods and pedagogical approaches also play a critical role in reading development. Effective teaching strategies help students develop comprehension, vocabulary, fluency, and critical thinking skills. However, in many Nigerian schools, reading instruction often emphasizes rote memorization rather than comprehension and analytical skills, thereby limiting students' ability to engage meaningfully with texts. Inadequate instructional materials, insufficient teacher preparation, and limited literacy-focused pedagogies further contribute to reading challenges among learners.

Peer influence is another factor associated with students' reading development. During adolescence, peer groups significantly shape attitudes, behaviours, and academic engagement. Students who associate with academically oriented peers are more likely to develop positive reading habits, participate in intellectual discussions, and engage actively in learning activities. Conversely, peer groups that place little value

on academic achievement may discourage reading and contribute to poor literacy outcomes.

Individual learner traits equally influence reading performance. Cognitive factors such as working memory, processing speed, and phonological awareness affect students' ability to comprehend and retain information from texts. Psychological characteristics including motivation, self-confidence, persistence, and reading interest also determine the extent to which students engage with reading materials. Students with positive attitudes toward reading tend to demonstrate higher levels of reading proficiency than those who experience reading anxiety or low motivation.

Within Rivers State, several environmental and socio-cultural factors continue to affect students' reading development. Socioeconomic disparities, inadequate educational resources, limited access to libraries, cultural preferences for oral communication, and linguistic differences between home languages and English contribute to reading difficulties among many learners. These challenges are compounded by inadequate literacy support systems and insufficient exposure to reading-rich environments. Reading difficulties among senior secondary school students remain a major educational concern globally and in Nigeria. Studies have reported persistent challenges in reading comprehension, vocabulary development, fluency, and critical analysis among secondary school learners. These difficulties often lead to poor academic performance, low self-esteem, school disengagement, and reduced future opportunities. Although government and educational agencies have introduced various literacy improvement programmes, significant challenges persist among secondary school students in many parts of the country, including Rivers State.

Gender has also been identified as an important variable in reading achievement. Research generally indicates that female students tend to perform better in reading-related tasks than their male counterparts, although differences often vary across contexts and cultures. Understanding gender differences in reading performance may provide useful insights for designing inclusive literacy interventions.

Several empirical studies have examined factors associated with reading difficulties among students. For example, Okanezi and Braide (2025) investigated the relationship between study habits and academic performance, while Ogunlade, Oyediran, and Adeshina (2025) examined poverty and peer pressure as predictors of reading culture. Fatimayin (2015) emphasized the role of effective teaching methods in addressing reading difficulties. However, these studies did not adequately examine the combined influence of family dynamics, instructional methods and pedagogy, peer influence, and individual learner traits on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students, particularly within Rivers State. Therefore, despite the growing body of literature on reading difficulties, gaps remain regarding the influence of learning environment variables on students' reading challenges. It is against this background

that this study seeks to investigate the influence of learning environment factors—family dynamics, instructional methods and pedagogy, peer influence, and individual learner traits—on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, with gender serving as a moderating variable.

Statement of the Problem

Reading is a fundamental skill that underpins learning and academic achievement across all subject areas. At the senior secondary school level, students are expected to read fluently, comprehend complex texts, analyze information critically, and communicate ideas effectively. However, observations and reports from educators indicate that many senior secondary school students in Rivers State experience reading difficulties characterized by poor comprehension, limited vocabulary, weak fluency, and inability to interpret and analyze written texts effectively. These challenges often result in poor academic performance and reduced participation in classroom learning activities.

The persistence of reading difficulties among students has become a growing concern to educators, parents, and policymakers. Although reading proficiency is influenced by several factors, evidence suggests that aspects of the learning environment may contribute significantly to students' literacy development. Family dynamics such as parental involvement, socioeconomic status, and home literacy practices may affect students' exposure to reading activities. Similarly, instructional methods and pedagogical approaches adopted by teachers may either facilitate or hinder the development of effective reading skills. Peer influence can also shape students' attitudes toward reading, while individual learner traits such as motivation, self-confidence, cognitive abilities, and reading interest may determine the extent of students' engagement with literacy activities.

In Rivers State, challenges such as inadequate educational resources, limited access to reading materials, varying home backgrounds, and differences in instructional practices continue to raise concerns about students' reading achievement. Despite several efforts aimed at improving literacy outcomes, many students still struggle with reading-related tasks required for academic success. Furthermore, studies have produced varying findings regarding the extent to which learning environment factors influence reading difficulties, while limited attention has been given to examining these factors collectively among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

It is therefore unclear whether family dynamics, instructional methods and pedagogy, peer influence, and individual learner traits significantly contribute to reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State and whether gender moderates these relationships. Consequently, the problem of this study, posed as a question, is: To what extent do learning environment factors contribute to reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State?

Objectives of the Study

The main objective of this study is to investigate the influence of learning environment on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Specifically, the study seeks to:

1. Determine the influence of family dynamics on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.
2. Examine the influence of instructional methods and pedagogical approaches on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.
3. Investigate the influence of peer influence on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.
4. Determine the influence of individual learner traits on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Research question

1. What is the influence of family dynamics on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State?
2. What is the influence of instructional methods and pedagogical approaches on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State?
3. What is the influence of peer influence on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State?
4. What is the influence of individual learner traits on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State?

Research Hypotheses

The following null hypotheses were formulated to guide the study:

H₀₁: There is no significant influence of family dynamics on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

H₀₂: There is no significant influence of instructional methods and pedagogical approaches on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

H₀₃: There is no significant influence of peer influence on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

H₀₄: There is no significant influence of individual learner traits on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Literature Review

Reading is widely recognized as a fundamental academic competency that underpins learning across all subject areas. It is a complex cognitive process that involves decoding written symbols, constructing meaning, and interpreting information within context. Beyond basic word recognition, effective reading requires higher-order cognitive skills such as inference, critical analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. At the senior secondary school level, reading becomes even more demanding as students are

expected to engage with increasingly abstract, discipline-specific texts in subjects such as English language, sciences, and social studies. Consequently, deficiencies in reading skills can significantly hinder academic achievement and limit students' ability to participate meaningfully in classroom learning.

The development of reading competence is strongly influenced by the learning environment, which comprises the physical, social, psychological, and instructional conditions under which learning takes place. The learning environment extends beyond the classroom to include home experiences, peer relationships, teacher-student interactions, and access to learning resources. A supportive learning environment enhances literacy development by providing opportunities for practice, guidance, and exposure to rich reading materials, whereas an unsupportive environment contributes to disengagement, poor motivation, and reading difficulties.

Family dynamics represent a critical component of the learning environment. The home serves as the first learning context for children and plays a foundational role in shaping early literacy behaviors. Parental education level, socioeconomic status, emotional support, and the availability of reading materials at home all influence children's reading development. Students from families that actively promote reading through storytelling, reading routines, and educational support tend to develop stronger vocabulary, comprehension skills, and reading confidence. In contrast, students from economically disadvantaged or low-literacy households often experience limited exposure to books and may struggle to develop consistent reading habits, thereby increasing their risk of reading difficulties at the secondary school level.

Instructional methods and pedagogical practices are also central to reading development. Effective reading instruction requires the use of learner-centered strategies that promote comprehension, engagement, and critical thinking. Such strategies include guided reading, reciprocal teaching, explicit instruction in comprehension strategies, and interactive classroom discussions. However, in many educational contexts, including Nigerian secondary schools, reading instruction is still largely dominated by traditional teacher-centered approaches that emphasize memorization and mechanical decoding rather than meaning-making. This instructional gap often results in students who can pronounce words but cannot fully understand or interpret textual meaning, thereby contributing to persistent reading difficulties.

Peer influence is another important environmental factor affecting students' reading behavior. During adolescence, peer relationships become increasingly significant in shaping attitudes, motivation, and academic engagement. Students tend to adopt behaviors, values, and study habits that are prevalent within their peer groups. When students associate with academically motivated peers who engage in reading and discussion of texts, they are more likely to develop positive attitudes toward reading and improve their literacy skills. Conversely, peer groups that discourage academic effort or prioritize non-academic activities may negatively influence students' reading

habits and reduce their engagement with academic texts performance. These include cognitive abilities such as working memory, attention span, phonological awareness, and processing speed. Psychological factors such as motivation, self-efficacy, reading interest, and anxiety also plays a crucial role in determining how students engage with reading materials. Learners with strong cognitive capacity and high intrinsic motivation are more likely to persist in reading tasks, comprehend complex texts, and develop advanced literacy skills. On the other hand, students with low motivation, poor concentration, or reading anxiety often avoid reading tasks, resulting in weaker comprehension and academic underperformance.

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in Lev Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), which emphasizes that learning is socially constructed through interaction within cultural and environmental contexts. According to Vygotsky, cognitive development occurs when learners engage with more knowledgeable others such as teachers, parents, and peers. In the context of reading development, this theory suggests that students acquire literacy skills through guided interaction, scaffolding, and participation in literacy-rich environments. Therefore, differences in family support, instructional quality, and peer interaction can significantly influence students' reading development outcomes.

Empirical evidence supports the view that reading difficulties are influenced by multiple interacting factors. Studies have shown that socioeconomic conditions, instructional quality, and peer environments significantly affect students' literacy outcomes. For instance, research has indicated that students from disadvantaged backgrounds often exhibit lower reading achievement due to limited access to learning materials and reduced academic support at home. Similarly, ineffective teaching methods that overemphasize rote learning have been associated with poor comprehension and weak reading fluency. Peer group influence has also been identified as a strong predictor of academic engagement, with positive peer interactions enhancing reading motivation and performance.

Despite these findings, most existing studies tend to examine reading difficulties from isolated perspectives, focusing on either home background, instructional methods, or peer influence independently. There is limited empirical integration of these variables within a unified framework that considers their combined effect on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students, particularly in Rivers State. This gap in literature necessitates further investigation, as understanding the interaction of these factors may provide deeper insights into the persistent reading challenges observed among students.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by examining how family dynamics, instructional methods and pedagogy, peer influence, and individual learner

traits collectively influence reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, thereby providing a more holistic understanding of the problem.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive survey research design with an ex-post facto approach to examine reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State, Nigeria. The design was considered appropriate because it allows the researcher to investigate existing conditions and relationships among variables as they naturally occur, without manipulation or experimental control. Since the study focuses on educational, behavioural, and environmental factors that have already influenced learners' reading abilities, the ex-post facto approach provides a suitable framework for generating empirical evidence that can guide educational intervention and policy formulation.

The study was carried out in Rivers State, located in the South-South geopolitical zone of Nigeria. The state is characterized by significant linguistic, cultural, and socioeconomic diversity, with over 30 indigenous languages and English serving as the official language of instruction. It is divided into three educational zones: Rivers East, Rivers West, and Rivers South-East, with over 350 public senior secondary schools distributed across urban, semi-urban, and rural communities. Despite its economic importance as Nigeria's oil and gas hub, the state continues to experience educational challenges such as overcrowded classrooms, inadequate instructional materials, limited access to functional libraries, and disparities in school infrastructure. These conditions make it a suitable context for investigating reading difficulties among students.

The population of the study comprised 200,990 senior secondary school students, while the target population consisted of 128,477 SS1 and SS2 students in public secondary schools across Rivers State, as obtained from the Rivers State Senior Secondary Schools Board (RSSSSB, 2024). The use of SS1 and SS2 students was informed by their relatively stable exposure to secondary school learning experiences and their relevance to assessing reading development at an intermediate stage of secondary education.

sample size of 399 students, comprising 199 males and 200 females, was determined using Taro Yamane's sample size formula to ensure statistical representativeness and generalizability. A multistage sampling technique was employed to select respondents. In the first stage, three Local Government Areas were selected from each of the three educational zones, resulting in nine LGAs. In the second stage, one public senior secondary school was randomly selected from each LGA, giving a total of nine schools. In the final stage, proportionate sampling was used to select respondents from SS1 and SS2 classes in each school, ensuring balanced representation across gender and school locations.

Data for the study were collected using a structured questionnaire titled "*Recognizing Signs of Reading Difficulties*." The instrument was carefully designed by the researcher based on literature review and study objectives. It consisted of two sections.

Section A collected demographic information such as class level, gender, and school location, while Section B contained 20 items arranged into five clusters, each measuring specific dimensions of reading difficulties among students.

The items were measured using a four-point Likert scale response format: Strongly Agree (4), Agree (3), Disagree (2), and Strongly Disagree (1). The mean score interpretation followed standard decision rules for determining agreement or disagreement with each item. The instrument was subjected to face and content validation by three experts: one in Educational Foundations, one in Measurement and Evaluation, and one in Statistics. These experts assessed the relevance, clarity, and appropriateness of the items in relation to the study objectives, and necessary modifications were made before final administration.

To ensure internal consistency and reliability, a pilot study was conducted using 20 students outside the main study sample. The test-retest method was employed, and Cronbach's alpha coefficient was used to determine reliability. The overall reliability coefficient of the instrument was 0.86, indicating high internal consistency. The reliability coefficients for the individual clusters ranged between 0.72 and 0.86, confirming that the instrument was suitable for data collection.

The administration of the instrument was carried out through direct contact with respondents in the selected schools. Six trained research assistants, who were teachers employed by the Rivers State Government, assisted in the data collection process to ensure efficiency and high response return. The researcher personally supervised administration in selected schools within Rivers East educational zone, while the assistants covered the remaining zones. The questionnaires were administered to SS1 and SS2 students under guided supervision to ensure accurate completion, and all instruments were retrieved immediately after completion, yielding a 100% response rate. The entire data collection process spanned ten working days.

Data collected were analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. Mean and standard deviation were used to answer the research questions, while independent t-test statistics were employed to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance. The choice of t-test was appropriate for examining significant differences and relationships between variables as defined in the study objectives.

Results

This section presents the results of data analysis in line with the study objectives and hypotheses. Mean and standard deviation were used to address the objectives, while independent t-test statistics were used to test the hypotheses at 0.05 level of significance.

Objective One

To determine how family dynamics as a learning environment influence reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Table 4.1 shows that all items on family dynamics recorded mean scores ranging from 2.83 to 2.98, indicating agreement among respondents. The cluster mean for female students was 2.96 (SD = 0.99), while male students recorded 2.92 (SD = 1.04). The result indicates that respondents agree that family-related factors such as parental support, financial capacity, household stress, and parental separation influence reading difficulties among students.

| S/N | Family Dynamics Items | Female Mean | SD | Male Mean | SD | Mean of Means | Decision |
|-----|---|-------------|------|-----------|------|---------------|----------|
| 1 | My parents cannot afford to buy me reading materials. | 2.89 | 1.06 | 2.98 | 1.00 | 2.94 | Agree |
| 2 | My parents are too strict; it makes it hard for me to ask for help with my studies. | 2.85 | 1.07 | 2.81 | 1.05 | 2.83 | Agree |
| 3 | My parents are too busy to assist with my reading assignments. | 3.02 | 0.94 | 2.91 | 1.07 | 2.97 | Agree |
| 4 | My home is stressful with house chores, making it difficult for me to practice reading at | 3.08 | 0.91 | 2.87 | 1.05 | 2.96 | Agree |

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|---------------------|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| | home. | | | | | | |
| 5 | My parents' separation makes me lack academic support. | 2.98 | 0.96 | 2.89 | 1.03 | 2.94 | Agree |
| Cluster Mean | | 2.96 | 0.99 | 2.89 | 1.04 | 2.92 | Agree |

Objective Two

To examine how instructional methods and pedagogy as a learning environment influence reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Table 4.2 shows that all items recorded mean scores between 2.75 and 3.10, falling within the "Agree" category. The cluster mean for female students was 3.01 (SD = 1.00), while male students recorded 2.94 (SD = 1.02). This indicates that students perceive instructional methods, classroom environment, and availability of learning materials as significant contributors to reading difficulties.

| S/N | Instructional Method Items | Female Mean | SD | Male Mean | SD | Mean of Means | Decision |
|-----|--|-------------|------|-----------|------|---------------|----------|
| 6 | Teacher does not help me when I don't understand a word. | 2.75 | 1.03 | 2.77 | 1.02 | 2.76 | Agree |
| 7 | My teacher makes reading lessons boring. | 3.16 | 0.91 | 3.02 | 1.00 | 3.09 | Agree |
| 8 | My school does not have specific | 2.99 | 1.06 | 2.91 | 1.02 | 2.95 | Agree |

| | | | | | | | |
|----|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|--------------|
| | reading lessons. | | | | | | |
| 9 | My classroom is too noisy and distracts reading. | 2.99 | 1.03 | 2.95 | 1.02 | 2.97 | Agree |
| 10 | My school does not have enough reading books. | 3.16 | 0.99 | 3.03 | 1.02 | 3.10 | Agree |
| | Cluster Mean | 3.01 | 1.00 | 2.94 | 1.02 | 2.98 | Agree |

Objective Three

To determine how peer influence as a learning environment influences reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Table 4.3 reveals that all items recorded mean scores between 2.85 and 3.06, indicating agreement. The cluster mean for male students was 2.99 (SD = 1.01), while female students recorded 2.93 (SD = 1.02). This shows that respondents agree that peer-related and community factors influence reading difficulties among students.

| S/N | Peer/Community Items | Female Mean | SD | Male Mean | SD | Mean of Means | Decision |
|-----|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 11 | No bookshops in my community. | 2.92 | 1.03 | 2.77 | 1.03 | 2.85 | Agree |
| 12 | My community has no libraries. | 3.00 | 1.05 | 3.03 | 1.00 | 3.02 | Agree |
| 13 | My friends do not like reading. | 2.82 | 1.05 | 3.07 | 1.05 | 2.95 | Agree |
| 14 | My community does not organize reading programs. | 2.93 | 0.98 | 2.97 | 0.98 | 2.95 | Agree |
| 15 | Adults around me cannot help with reading. | 3.00 | 0.99 | 3.12 | 0.99 | 3.06 | Agree |
| | Cluster Mean | 2.93 | 1.02 | 2.99 | 1.01 | 2.97 | Agree |

Objective Four

To determine how individual learner traits as a learning environment influence reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State.

Table 4.4 indicates that all items recorded mean scores between 3.01 and 3.21, also within the "Agree" range. The cluster mean for female students was 3.11 (SD = 0.96), while male students recorded 3.10 (SD = 0.97). This demonstrates strong agreement that individual learner traits such as attention span, memory, reading speed, and word recognition difficulties influence reading difficulties.

| S/N | Individual Trait Items | Female Mean | SD | Male Mean | SD | Mean of Means | Decision |
|-----|--|-------------|-------------|-------------|-------------|---------------|--------------|
| 16 | I stutter when I read. | 2.98 | 0.99 | 3.13 | 0.99 | 3.06 | Agree |
| 17 | I lose focus when reading. | 3.05 | 1.01 | 2.97 | 1.04 | 3.01 | Agree |
| 18 | I skip or guess words when reading. | 3.24 | 0.88 | 2.99 | 0.99 | 3.12 | Agree |
| 19 | I read slowly. | 3.17 | 0.97 | 3.06 | 0.95 | 3.12 | Agree |
| 20 | I forget words easily after learning them. | 3.09 | 0.95 | 3.32 | 0.91 | 3.21 | Agree |
| | Cluster Mean | 3.11 | 0.96 | 3.09 | 0.97 | 3.10 | Agree |

Hypotheses Testing

Hypothesis One

There is no significant difference between male and female students on the influence of family dynamics on reading difficulties.

Table 4.5 shows that t-calculated (0.689) is less than t-critical (1.96) at 0.05 level of significance (df = 397). Therefore, the hypothesis is not rejected. This indicates that there is no significant gender difference in perceptions of family dynamics.

| Sex | N | Mean (x̄) | SD | DF | t-cal | t-crit | Decision |
|--------|-----|-----------|------|-----|-------|--------|-----------------|
| Female | 200 | 2.96 | 0.99 | 397 | 0.689 | 1.96 | Not Significant |
| Male | 199 | 2.89 | 1.04 | | | | |

Hypothesis Two

There is no significant difference between male and female students on the influence of instructional methods and pedagogy on reading difficulties.

Table 4.6 shows that t-calculated (0.692) is less than t-critical (1.96). Therefore, the hypothesis is not rejected, indicating no significant gender difference.

| Sex | N | Mean (x̄) | SD | DF | t-cal | t-crit | Decision |
|--------|-----|-----------|------|-----|-------|--------|-----------------|
| Female | 200 | 3.01 | 1.00 | 397 | 0.692 | 1.96 | Not Significant |
| Male | 199 | 2.94 | 1.02 | | | | |

Hypothesis Three

There is no significant difference between male and female students on the influence of peer environment on reading difficulties.

Table 4.7 shows that t-calculated (-0.591) is less than t-critical (1.96). The hypothesis is not rejected, indicating no significant gender difference.

| Sex | N | Mean (x̄) | SD | DF | t-cal | t-crit | Decision |
|--------|-----|-----------|------|-----|--------|--------|-----------------|
| Female | 200 | 2.93 | 1.02 | 397 | -0.591 | 1.96 | Not Significant |
| Male | 199 | 2.99 | 1.01 | | | | |

Hypothesis Four

There is no significant difference between male and female students on the influence of individual learner traits on reading difficulties.

Table 4.8 shows that t-calculated (0.207) is less than t-critical (1.96). Therefore, the hypothesis is not rejected.

| Sex | N | Mean (x̄) | SD | DF | t-cal | t-crit | Decision |
|--------|-----|-----------|------|-----|-------|--------|-----------------|
| Female | 200 | 3.11 | 0.96 | 397 | 0.207 | 1.96 | Not Significant |
| Male | 199 | 3.09 | 0.97 | | | | |

Discussion of Findings

The study examined the influence of family dynamics, instructional practices, peer environment, and individual traits on reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State. Findings from the analysis indicate that all the identified variables significantly influence students' reading difficulties, with no statistically significant gender differences across the tested hypotheses.

- **Family Dynamics and Reading Difficulties**

Findings revealed that family dynamics significantly influence students' reading difficulties. Students indicated that parental financial capacity, level of support, home stress, and parental involvement affect their reading development. This finding is consistent with Simon (2021), who reported that limited parental involvement negatively affects literacy development, and Opara and Enyi (2022), who linked low socioeconomic background to poor reading performance. The implication is that the home environment plays a foundational role in shaping reading habits and academic engagement.

- **Instructional Methods and Pedagogy**

The results further showed that instructional methods and classroom practices significantly influence reading difficulties. Poor teaching approaches, inadequate reading materials, and lack of structured reading lessons were identified as key challenges. This supports Ogungbeni and Amadi (2015), who emphasized that ineffective teaching strategies and poor reading culture contribute to literacy challenges. It also aligns with Sani et al. (2017), who observed that insufficient teacher preparation in reading instruction affects learners' literacy outcomes. This suggests that classroom pedagogy remains a critical determinant of reading success.

- **Peer and Community Influence**

The study also found that peer and community environments significantly influence reading difficulties. Limited access to libraries, weak peer reading culture, and lack of community literacy initiatives were identified as contributing factors. This finding aligns with Nwosu and Okpara (2024), who noted that absence of reading support systems increases literacy challenges, and Dike and Ebi (2020), who emphasized the importance of community-based literacy exposure. The result highlights the role of social environment in shaping students' reading behavior.

- **Individual Traits and Reading Difficulties**

Findings revealed that individual learner traits significantly influence reading difficulties. Factors such as poor concentration, slow reading speed, word recognition challenges, and memory limitations were reported. This agrees with Okonkwo and Nwankwo (2018), who associated behavioral and cognitive factors with reading difficulties, and Chukwu and Obi (2022), who linked anxiety with poor reading comprehension. Aramide (2024) also confirmed that cognitive deficits strongly affect literacy acquisition. This shows that reading difficulties are also internally driven by learner-specific characteristics.

CONCLUSION

The study concludes that reading difficulties among senior secondary school students in Rivers State are influenced by a combination of environmental and personal factors. Specifically, family background, instructional practices, peer/community environment, and individual learner traits jointly contribute to students' reading performance.

The findings further establish that no single factor independently explains reading difficulties; rather, they interact in complex ways to shape students' literacy outcomes. Additionally, the absence of significant gender differences suggests that these influences cut across both male and female students equally.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the findings, the following recommendations are made:

1. Teachers should adopt more effective, student-centered, and interactive instructional strategies to improve reading engagement and comprehension.
2. Schools should implement structured reading support programmes such as reading clinics, literacy clubs, and mentorship initiatives to supplement home-based learning deficits.
3. Government and community stakeholders should collaborate to provide functional libraries and promote community-based literacy programmes.
4. Instruction should be differentiated to accommodate learners' individual differences in cognitive ability, attention span, and reading pace.

Suggestions for Further Studies

Future research may consider:

1. Expanding the study to other geopolitical zones for comparative analysis
2. Investigating teacher competence and training in literacy instruction
3. Examining digital literacy and its influence on reading development
4. Exploring the role of socioeconomic status and home literacy environment in greater depth

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