

# Identifying the Reading and Writing Challenges of Third Grade Students in the Digital Literacy Era

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## Abstract

This study aims to identify the reading and writing difficulties experienced by third-grade students at Purwantoro 02 State Elementary School and their implications for early-stage digital literacy interventions. The research was conducted using a qualitative descriptive method, involving observations, interviews with teachers and students, and documentation. The results showed that 6 out of 25 students had persistent difficulties in beginning reading and writing. The difficulties identified include lack of reading fluency, confusion in distinguishing similar letters, visual memory deficiencies, omission of letters or syllables, delayed writing, and errors in dictation. These literacy barriers hinder students' ability to engage with digital learning tools that require independent reading and writing skills. The findings highlight the importance of early identification of literacy difficulties and the need for digital tools that adapt to students' real literacy levels. This study recommends the integration of phonics based applications, visual tracing, and audio assisted writing tools into classroom instruction to support early digital literacy development in primary education.

## 1. Introduction

Primary education plays a very important role in a child's learning process, where learners are introduced to basic skills that will form the foundation for their future academic development. Early reading and writing skills are crucial at this stage, as they provide an important foundation for the development of further language and literacy skills (Nurhayati, 2020). Beginning the variety reading is the stage where learners start recognizing and understanding letters, words and simple sentences, which are an important foundation in their literacy development (Arifin, 2019). Beginning reading is one aspect of language skills that takes place over two years for grade one and grade two of primary school. Beginning reading in primary school includes (a) letter shape recognition, (b) recognition of linguistic elements, (c) recognition of the relationship between spelling and sound (voicing the writing), and (d) reading at a slow rate as reviewed by Tarigan (2008). According to Suastika (2019), writing is the result of a thought that contains meaning to express thoughts, ideas, feelings, emotions from the author. Through writing, students can convey messages or express something through writing. In early writing learning, the letter recognition stage is the first stage that must be trained to students and then enter the training stage in writing (Hadyanti, 2022). Beginning writing is a writing skill that is taught to students in the early stages, namely in grades I and II. A person's ability to write is due to a learning process that is honed continuously. If there is a disturbance or difficulty, it can be seen from the poor writing results and the writing cannot be read.

Learning difficulties can be said when students experience conditions where there are obstacles in the learning process. According to Mumpuno and Afifah (2022), teachers often face low-grade students who have difficulty reading, such as not recognizing letters, reading word for word, paraphrasing errors, as well as omission, repetition, reversal, insertion, replacement, to the use of gestures and difficulties with consonants. According to Aphrodita (in Nurfadhillah, 2022), students who have difficulty writing are characterized by inconsistent letter shapes, a mixture of capital and small letters, unbalanced letter size, difficulty holding a pencil, and inconsistency when copying writing. Due to the variety of learning difficulties found in practice, teachers must enrich their knowledge and understanding related to various types of student learning difficulties (Utami, 2020).

Although reading and writing difficulties in the early grades have been widely studied, most previous studies focus on first and second grade. There is still limited research that specifically explores how these foundational challenges persist among third-grade students who are expected to have mastered basic literacy. This study aims to fill that gap by investigating the types of beginning reading and writing challenges faced by third-grade students and how these challenges interfere with digital literacy engagement.

Even though reading and writing problems in lower primary grades have been widely studied, many students in higher early grades, such as third grade, still struggle with foundational literacy. For example, Harahap (2020) found that students in third grade were still unable to read fluently and required intervention using the syllable method to improve recognition and pronunciation. Likewise, Solihah and Hernawan (2023) revealed that students in early grades frequently experience learning difficulties due to various factors such as cognitive development, motivation, and lack of early childhood education. These findings indicate that literacy challenges can persist beyond the first and second grades and are important to monitor continuously as students advance.

Based on initial observations at Purwantoro 02 State Elementary School in Malang, several third grade students were found to still experience difficulty in recognizing letters, writing legibly, and understanding simple sentence structures. These difficulties not only impact academic performance but also inhibit participation in digital based learning activities that require independent literacy engagement.

In the era of digital transformation, education increasingly relies on technology as a medium of instruction. As a result, digital literacy has become a fundamental skill for 21st-century learners. Digital literacy is not limited to the ability to operate digital tools, but also includes cognitive, critical, and communicative competencies to navigate digital environments effectively (Zhang et al., 2021). However, basic reading and writing skills remain the foundation of digital literacy, especially for young learners in primary education (Nurhayati, 2020). As digital learning platforms become more prevalent in primary classrooms, students are increasingly expected to read instructions, complete digital assignments, and engage in virtual discussions. For students with emerging or struggling literacy abilities, these expectations can create additional barriers and widen the digital learning gap (Luu and Freeman, 2023). Therefore, it is essential to ensure that the integration of digital literacy into learning is responsive to students' actual literacy levels and needs. Tools such as phonics-based mobile applications or interactive writing aids can support students when selected and applied appropriately.

Reading comprehension is influenced by students' ability to decode words and understand spoken language. According to the Simple View of Reading, reading is formed through two core components, word recognition and language comprehension. Both components are essential and interdependent, especially at the early stages of literacy development where decoding is still developing (Gough & Tunmer, 1986). Similarly, writing requires the integration of cognitive, linguistic, and motor processes. The Interactive Model of Writing explains that writing involves a dynamic coordination between idea generation, transcription, and executive control (McCutchen, 2000). These elements are crucial in supporting students who are still learning to form letters and organize ideas into coherent sentences. When these foundational skills are not yet established, students may experience difficulties in both print and digital learning environments.

This study aims to identify the types of reading and writing difficulties experienced by third-grade students at Purwantoro 02 State Elementary School in Malang. The findings are expected to serve as a basis for developing early-stage digital literacy interventions that are inclusive and grounded in the real learning profiles of elementary school students.

## **2. Method**

This research was conducted at Purwantoro 02 State Elementary School in Malang City in March 2025 using a qualitative descriptive approach. The research subjects were six third-grade students selected through purposive sampling. These students were identified based on initial interviews with the class teacher, who indicated that they exhibited significant difficulties in reading and writing. The selection criteria included observable signs such as poor word recognition, illegible handwriting, and challenges in constructing complete sentences. The researcher then validated these indications

through classroom observations, confirming consistent patterns of literacy difficulties among the same students.

Data were collected using three techniques: observation, interview, and documentation. Observations were conducted during three lesson hours (3 × 35 minutes) in which reading and writing activities took place. A structured observation guide was used to assess specific aspects, including spelling difficulties, trouble reading long words, limited understanding of simple texts, inability to write without copying, confusion between similar-looking letters, and errors in spelling.

Semi structured interviews were conducted with the class teacher and the selected students using an interview guide. The aim was to explore students' backgrounds, perceptions, and experiences regarding their reading and writing difficulties. All observation and interview sessions were recorded to ensure the accuracy of the data and to facilitate further analysis.

The data analysis used the Miles and Huberman model (in Sugiyono, 2015), which consists of three interrelated stages. The first stage is data reduction, where raw data from interview transcripts and field notes were selected, simplified, and organized to highlight the most relevant information. The second stage is data display, in which the data were presented in the form of descriptive narratives and organized into matrices to help identify patterns and themes. The final stage is conclusion drawing and verification, where interpretations were made, themes were identified, and findings were verified continuously through comparison across different data sources.

Documentation including student writing samples and interview transcripts was used to support the analysis and ensure triangulation. Source triangulation was applied to maintain data validity by comparing data obtained through observations, interviews, and documentation. These procedures were conducted systematically to enhance the trustworthiness of the findings and ensure replicability in future research.

### **3. Results and Discussion**

Based on interviews and observations with third grade teacher and students of Purwanto 02 State Elementary School. It was found that out of a total of 25 students there were 6 students who experienced difficulties in reading and writing the beginning. The types of difficulties that students often face in reading and writing beginnings include: (1) Not fluent in reading (2) Difficulty distinguishing letters (3) Deficiencies in visual memory, (4) Omitting letters or words (5) Hesitation and stammering in reading (6) delay in writing (7) letter writing errors (8) students showed challenges in achieving reading fluency omission of letters or syllables and (9) difficulty in copying and writing dictations.

#### **3.1. Not Fluent in Reading**

The findings revealed that several students showed challenges in achieving reading fluency. For example, student AM read words by spelling each letter before recognizing the whole word, indicating a lack of automatic word recognition. Similarly, students RF and GH often paused or stammered due to forgetting letters mid-sentence, which disrupted reading flow and comprehension. This observation aligns with the finding that lack of reading fluency hinders their ability to engage with texts at their independent reading level (95–100% accuracy). Texts that match students' capabilities reduce cognitive overload and allow them to focus on recognizing words automatically. In the case of AM, RF, and GH, their difficulties suggest they are being exposed to reading materials beyond their fluent level, which hinders progress and reinforces hesitation. Therefore, to support these students' fluency development especially in digital learning environments where reading autonomy is essential teachers should consider using adaptive reading platforms that tailor text difficulty to student ability. This approach reflects Ehri's recommendation and provides a targeted pathway toward improving fluency and digital engagement.

In addition, similar findings were also presented by Soleha et al. (2021), whose study highlighted that reading fluency problems in lower-grade elementary students were often caused by a combination of intellectual, environmental, and motivational factors. Their research observed that students lacking parental support and home literacy stimulation often struggle with decoding and

fluency. The study further emphasized that these challenges were not isolated cases but prevalent in early grade classrooms and required teacher adaptation through methods suited to students' developmental stages.

Moreover, the inability to decode or read fluently has broader implications in digital learning environments. Students with low reading fluency often struggle to follow written instructions, navigate learning platforms, or engage in self-paced online assignments. According to Chen et al. (2020), students with poor foundational literacy skills tend to experience higher cognitive load when using digital media, as they must focus simultaneously on decoding text and understanding content. This mismatch between their literacy ability and digital task demands can result in frustration, disengagement, and incomplete assignments. Therefore, literacy difficulties are not isolated to traditional classroom settings but carry substantial consequences in technology-integrated learning.

### 3.2. Difficulty Distinguishing Similar Letters

RF student read the word "tanam" into "taman" because they confused the letters n and m. Difficulty distinguishing similar letters (b-d-p-q-m-n-u-w) was experienced by students AM, RF, and GH, while other students did not encounter these difficulties. For example, student AM read the word "abad" into "abab" due to difficulty distinguishing the letters "b" and "d". RF read the word "tanam" into "taman" because of confusion between "n" and "m", while GH read the word "warna" into "marna" due to difficulty distinguishing "w" and "m". Student TZ experienced a similar issue in distinguishing "u" and "o" because their pronunciation was similar. Students with visual memory deficiency often confuse letters such as lowercase "b" and "d". This happens due to the similarity in their shapes "b" has a stem on the left and a circle on the right, while "d" has a stem on the right and a circle on the left. The students who belong to this group are AM, RF, and GH. Difficulties in distinguishing letters that sound similar, such as "u" and "o", are also related to visual memory deficiency due to similarities in pronunciation. Students who belong to this group are TZ. While GH student read the word "warna" into "marna" because they had difficulty distinguishing the letters w and m.

This is in line with Abdurrahman's (2018) opinion who states that students have not been able to read letters correctly due to confusion in distinguishing left-right or up-down positions, resulting in reversal of letters that are almost the same shape, such as d with "b", "p" with "q" or "g", and "m" with "n" or "w". This condition is also supported by the findings of Chumairoh et al. (2023), who found that second-grade students also struggled to distinguish similar letters due to weak visual discrimination ability and undeveloped short-term memory. Similar to the present findings, confusion often occurred in letters such as b-d, u-n, or p-q. Students with these difficulties are prone to make errors in reading and spelling because they process letters based on shape rather than sound or meaning. Kumara et al. (2014:5) also state that short term memory plays an important role in remembering letter strings and sounds, especially in spelling. Therefore, memory weakness also affects students reading fluency. In the context of digital learning, difficulties in visual discrimination become even more problematic. Students are required to recognize and type letters correctly when navigating digital tools, such as logging into learning platforms, following typed instructions, or answering text-based tasks. Errors in letter recognition may hinder their ability to complete digital assignments independently. Addressing this issue through interactive tracing apps with real-time feedback can provide the necessary visual and auditory reinforcement to strengthen memory and letter orientation.

### 3.3. Errors in Pronunciation and Omitting Words

Student RF mispronounced words in a way that changed their meaning, for example when reading the word "taman" into "tanam" because they mixed up the letters "m" and "n" which are similar in shape. TZ and GH had difficulties in mispronouncing words but the meaning remained the same, such as when reading the sentence "Ibu sedang memasak di dapur" into "Ibu memasak di dapur" due to the omission of the word "sedang". Meanwhile, student AM mispronounced words into meaningless forms, who showed hesitation and lack of confidence when reading, and was unable to pronounce the words even though the teacher waited for a while. This aligns with (Abdurrahman, 2017: 20) which states that the difficulties of beginning reading students are influenced by the factor of mispronunciation of words which consists of three kinds, namely, mispronunciation of words and different meanings, mispronunciation of words with the same meaning, mispronunciation of words and meaningless. These findings are also supported by (Yusuf, 2003: 37) which states that there are several characteristics of students experiencing reading difficulties, namely: not fluent in reading, often many mistakes in reading, having deficiencies in visual memory, difficulty distinguishing similar letters.

Similar results were found by Nurkhasanah (2023), who revealed that phonological errors such as omissions and substitutions often interfere with students' ability to comprehend digital texts or use features like automated readers. This becomes a challenge in digital learning environments that rely on accurate pronunciation, especially for technologies like speech-to-text, voice commands, or interactive reading software. Students who frequently mispronounce words may find it difficult to access digital features designed to assist reading, as their inputs are not recognized by the system. Poor pronunciation and word recognition thus directly

affect students' interaction with digital platforms. They may struggle to follow instructions, search for information, or engage in voice-assisted learning tasks. As such, digital interventions should also incorporate audio-visual reinforcement, phoneme recognition, and pronunciation scaffolding to strengthen oral reading skills while supporting literacy development in digitally enriched classrooms.

### 3.4. Delay in Writing

Observations on beginning writing showed that six students experienced difficulties in writing. This difficulty was reflected in students' inability to complete tasks on time, often due to distractions such as excessive talking during class activities. For example, students with the initials AM, RF, GH, SA, and TZ frequently failed to complete writing tasks within the allotted time, as they were distracted by talking with classmates or playing with stationery. According to Lerner as cited in Abdurrahman (2012:181), students who are hyperactive or easily distracted may struggle to complete their tasks on time, including writing assignments. In this study, students who failed to complete their assignments were typically those who engaged in unrelated activities, such as excessive talking or playing during class. The presence of environmental distractions, such as a noisy classroom, peer interaction, or lack of routine, can significantly hinder students' focus and task completion (Solihah & Hernawan, 2023). This is consistent with findings by Chumairoh et al. (2023), who highlight that a disharmonious home environment, lack of parental involvement, and minimal academic supervision correlate with lower motivation and attention span in school tasks.

In the context of digital learning, these writing delays become more problematic. Many digital platforms expect students to complete and submit assignments within a certain timeframe. Students who are easily distracted or have poor time management skills may fall behind, resulting in incomplete tasks or lower performance. According to Daryanti et al. (2019), digital media demands a higher level of self-regulation compared to traditional learning environments, and students lacking this ability may struggle more. Therefore, interventions that train time-awareness and structured digital task engagement such as gamified timers or visual scheduling tools can be helpful in bridging this gap.

### 3.5. Letter Writing Errors

Meanwhile, missing or reversed letter errors were also prevalent among the students. For example, student AM wrote "buku" as "duku", reversing the letter "d" with "b". In addition, the word "sebagai" was written as "sebagi". Other errors were also found in the student with the initials RF who wrote the word "tidak" into "tidik", showing indicating confusion between the letter "a" into "i". Student SA wrote "kantin" into "kanting" due to confusion between the letters "n" and "g", while student AZ wrote "bayam" into "banyam" due to confusion in distinguishing the letters "m" and "n". According to Richmond and Taylor (2014), students who reverse letters when writing often have difficulty with visual memory and letter orientation. This means that students may know the correct letter but still write it incorrectly because of confusion in the direction or form of the letter. These difficulties can affect students' ability to spell and write words correctly. Furthermore, writing errors like letter reversals or substitutions are often rooted in visual perceptual disorders, where students struggle to interpret, organize, and reproduce visual symbols such as letters. These disorders can manifest as difficulties distinguishing directionality, size, or spatial arrangement of letters, which are critical in early handwriting development.

Dewi and Hernawan (2023) found that many early grade elementary school students, including in grade 3, exhibited letter writing difficulties due to underdeveloped fine motor skills and inadequate exposure to structured motoric based writing instruction. The study emphasizes that insufficient early stimulation of motor and visual perception areas can result in frequent reversal errors and inconsistent letter shapes in student writing. In addition, Luu and Freeman (2023) explain that using digital media such as tracing letters with audio instructions or visual color cues can help students reduce errors in writing letters. This is because digital tools provide immediate feedback and help strengthen memory through visual and auditory repetition. These findings highlight the potential of digital interventions to support students struggling with writing, by improving letter formation and enhancing engagement in digital learning.

These issues in basic letter writing and visual recognition are particularly problematic when students are expected to use digital tools that require accurate input, such as typing, completing online forms, or using software for reading and writing tasks. Zhang et al. (2021) argue that digital literacy must be scaffolded with strong basic literacy instruction, especially for primary grade learners. Without foundational handwriting and spelling accuracy, students may find it difficult to communicate or complete tasks in digital spaces. This emphasizes the need for developmentally aligned digital tools that accommodate early-stage writing challenges, such as letter-tracing applications and gamified spelling tools that adapt to user error and provide corrective feedback.

### 3.6. Dictation Difficulties

In copying writing from the blackboard to the notebook, students have been able to copy well, but when given writing exercises through dictation there are still 5 students who have difficulty, they often make mistakes.

Students with the initials “AM, GH, and RF” wrote the word “sesuai” into “sesuay”. Other students, such as “RF”, wrote the word “tidak” into “tidik”, which showed errors in recognizing and writing the letter “a” into “i”. While students TZ, AM, RF, SA and GH wrote the word “mangga” into “manga” due to difficulties in distinguishing the sound of the letter “g” which should be combined with the vowel “a”, thus omitting one consonant letter in the writing. Dictation is considered one of the more complex literacy tasks as it requires simultaneous auditory processing, phoneme grapheme correspondence, and motor coordination. According to Chumairoh et al. (2023), dictation exercises often become a challenge for students with poor auditory discrimination and low short-term memory, leading to frequent omissions or phonetic confusions during transcription.

In digital learning contexts, such challenges are compounded when students are expected to type dictated content or follow auditory instructions in apps or learning platforms. Many primary grade students struggle with accurate typing, especially when their literacy foundation is still weak. This aligns with the findings by Soleha and Hernawan (2023), who emphasize that the transition to digital tasks like typing or audio to text input can widen the gap for students who still rely on teacher scaffolding for basic phonetic awareness. To address these dictation related difficulties in digital contexts, educators may implement interactive dictation tools that provide visual reinforcement and real time feedback. Voice to text tools with error correction prompts or auditory support in educational apps can also assist students in bridging the gap between traditional and digital literacy modalities.

The identification of these reading and writing difficulties highlights the importance of developing targeted early stage digital literacy interventions. For instance, students who struggle with reading fluency may benefit from phonics-based mobile applications that adapt to their reading level and provide audio support. Similarly, writing tools that include real-time feedback, visual cues, or interactive tracing activities can assist students in overcoming common letter formation errors. These interventions should not stand alone, but be integrated into classroom instruction through a blended learning model, ensuring that students with literacy challenges are not left behind as schools adopt more digital modes of learning. Aligning digital tools with students' actual literacy profiles ensures a more inclusive, effective, and developmentally appropriate approach to digital transformation in primary education.

The reading and writing difficulties identified in this study not only hinder students' academic performance but also pose serious challenges in the digital learning environment. As technology becomes central to instruction, digital literacy encompassing cognitive, critical, and communicative skills is essential for students to engage effectively with digital platforms (Zhang et al., 2021). However, as emphasized by Nurhayati (2020), basic literacy skills remain the foundation of digital competence. Students with difficulties in reading fluency, letter recognition, and visual memory like those observed in this study are at risk of falling behind, especially when digital tasks require independent reading and writing (Chen et al., 2020). To bridge this gap, early stage digital literacy interventions should be aligned with students' actual learning profiles. Tools such as phonics-based applications, interactive writing aids, and visual tracing software can support skill development identifying difficulties toment when integrated into classroom practice (Luu & Freeman, 2023). This study, involving 25 third grade students, found that six exhibited persistent literacy difficulties. These findings underscore the need for inclusive and adaptive digital learning strategies that empower all students, particularly in foundational education settings undergoing digital transformation.

To support students experiencing early literacy challenges in digital contexts, teachers should consider integrating digital tools that specifically target phonemic awareness and decoding, such as interactive phonics games or audio-visual storytelling apps. For writing, the use of digital handwriting platforms that allow for tracing and provide immediate feedback may help reinforce correct letter formation and reduce common reversal errors. Moreover, guided digital reading activities with built-in text-to-speech features can enhance accessibility for struggling readers. These practical steps not only address individual difficulties but also promote engagement, self-confidence, and digital fluency in foundational learners. As emphasized by Soleha et al. (2021), targeted teacher strategies that combine digital support with traditional instruction can bridge learning gaps and foster inclusive learning environments.]

### **3.7. Conclusion**

This study identified key early stage reading and writing difficulties among third grade students at Purwanto 02 State Elementary School, particularly in recognizing letters, spelling, and forming complex words. These findings align with the study's objectives and underscore the importance of addressing issues in reading fluency, letter confusion, and concentration during writing tasks. The study highlights the need for more supportive and adaptive literacy instruction and encourages the development of targeted digital and classroom based interventions. To address these challenges, practical steps for teachers include integrating phonics-based digital tools, using guided reading and writing platforms with visual and auditory cues, and incorporating interactive writing exercises into daily instruction. These strategies aim to build decoding, fluency, and writing confidence in a

supportive manner. These conclusions are consistent with existing literature and suggest the importance of early identification and responsive teaching strategies.

The implications of this study point to the urgency of integrating digital literacy tools that accommodate individual student profiles, especially in schools undergoing digital transformation. The contribution of this research lies in providing practical insights for teachers, curriculum developers, and policymakers to design more inclusive and personalized literacy interventions. Furthermore, the findings may serve as a reference for schools with similar student profiles in identifying early literacy challenges and determining appropriate remedial steps. Future research should explore effective instructional models and investigate additional contributing factors to literacy difficulties, including the role of family support, learning environment, and digital access. Further studies are encouraged to use experimental designs—such as control group comparisons—to evaluate the impact of digital interventions on early literacy. Longitudinal research would also be beneficial to understand how literacy skills evolve over time and how consistent exposure to digital tools influences student progress.

### Author Contributions

Septya Ulfa Dzakiyyah: Conceptualization, Investigation, Data curation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing, Visualization. Santy Dinar Permata: Supervision, Validation, Methodology, Writing – review & editing.

All authors have equal contributions to the paper. All the authors have read and approved the final manuscript.

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