

The Relationship between Reading Comprehension Levels and the Degree of Perceptual Difficulties among Primary School Children in Some Algerian Schools

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Abstract

The study aimed to explore the relationship between reading comprehension and perceptual difficulties among primary school students. The sample included 36 students from various primary schools in the M'sila region during the first semester of the 2023/2024 academic year. The researcher used two scales for data collection: one to measure reading comprehension and the other to assess perceptual difficulties.

The results revealed a strong negative correlation between reading comprehension levels and perceptual difficulties. As perceptual difficulties increased, reading comprehension decreased among the students. Based on these findings, the study recommended the importance of early intervention to address perceptual disorders and prevent learning difficulties. It emphasized the need to improve reading comprehension at the primary level and to identify the underlying causes of perceptual difficulties. Additionally, the study proposed developing intervention programs aimed at enhancing perception among primary school students to help improve their academic performance.

Keywords: Perceptual Difficulties; Reading Comprehension

1. INTRODUCTION

The field of learning difficulties is one of the modern areas in special education. It first appeared in the National Advisory Committee on Handicapped Children in the United States of America in 1963, introduced by Samuel Kirk. He emphasized that some children are unable to acquire language skills even though they do not suffer from deafness; some cannot learn through vision despite not being blind; and some cannot learn through traditional teaching methods, even though they are not intellectually disabled. Therefore, these children are considered to have learning difficulties and are the focus of researchers and specialists in the fields of psychology and education.

In light of the above, and in our attempt to enrich the topic of research, this study includes a paper titled: "Reading Comprehension and Its Relationship with the Degree of Perceptual Difficulties among Primary School Children in the Algerian Educational Environment."(Hassan, 1996, p. 62)

2. Study Problem

Reading is one of the most intricate cognitive tasks, involving both auditory and visual recognition of word forms, alongside critical thinking and predicting the meanings represented by words. It resembles problem-solving, where individuals form hypotheses and verify conclusions. Reading engages various types of thinking, such as evaluation, judgment, imagination, inference, and problem-solving.(Hassan, 1996, p. 62)

Reading is a dynamic process that students undertake, requiring a balance of mental, psychological, and physical abilities. It demands proficiency in language understanding, auditory skills to identify letter sounds (phonemic awareness), and visual capability to distinguish letters and words. Any disruption or imbalance in these areas diminishes a student's ability to read, contributing to what is known as reading difficulties. These difficulties are widespread, affecting 8-10% of students.(Mansouri, Mustapha; Abdel kader, Ben djaloul, 2018, p. 97)

It is widely accepted that genuine reading is tied to comprehension, which relies on how easily individuals apply concepts or meanings acquired through experience. For these concepts to be useful in reading, they must connect with the words or word groups that represent them. Over time, these words become an essential part of the vocabulary individual's use for speaking, understanding spoken language, and processing written texts.(Ahmed ,abdelah; Fahim, Mohamed, 1994, p. 86)

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Since difficulties in reading comprehension are challenges tied to the reading

process itself, they appear in children without sensory or motor impairments, but with challenges in understanding and translating linguistic symbols into meaningful letters, words, paragraphs, and sentences. Therefore, it is crucial to find early solutions for these issues in the academic lives of students.

One method for addressing difficulties in reading and interpreting linguistic symbols is the sensory-motor approach. This method, developed by Grace Fernald and Helen Keller, utilizes multiple senses combined with movement, earning the name "motor method." It is particularly helpful for children facing reading challenges. Generally, learning through tangible means is more effective than abstract methods, especially for children requiring special care. The sensory-motor method, abbreviated as V.A.K.T., involves multiple senses: **V** for visual (the child sees the word to be learned), **A** for auditory (the child hears and says the word), **K** for kinesthetic (the child moves while following the word), and **T** for tactile (the child traces the word with their finger). This method progresses from simple to complex, starting with letters that are not phonetically similar, gradually moving to those with more similar sounds, like 's' and 'ş.' Linking letters to their common sounds helps the learner follow the proper direction when reading words from right to left.(Qahtan, 2008, p. 270)

On another note, proponents of perceptual-motor or motor learning theories believe that children initially acquire knowledge through fundamental motor experiences. All learning processes are built upon sensory-motor foundations, which evolve into a higher organizational level known as cognitive perception. Advocates of this theory argue that many children with learning difficulties have neurological disorders in the perceptual-motor domain, impairing their ability to learn. Therefore, to facilitate natural learning for a child, the root cause, often a perceptual-motor disorder, must be addressed.(Mohamed & El-nouby, 2011, p. 71)

Thus, studying reading comprehension cannot be separated from the related capabilities that may either support or hinder it. In this context, numerous researchers focusing on learning difficulties have investigated reading comprehension abilities and their connection with various learner variables. Some studies have even examined the relationship between perceptual aspects in learning and cognitive development during early childhood. Noteworthy research includes studies by Perfetti and colleagues (2005, Oakhill, Landi, Perfetti), who demonstrated that reading comprehension occurs at various levels across language units. Lexical processes operate at the word level, syntactic processes at the sentence level, and interactions between word recognition and inferential processes with the reader's conceptual knowledge help create a mental representation of the text (Al-Othman, 2017, p. 3)

Another study by Logsdon (2010) highlighted that reading comprehension difficulties stem from issues in language processing and visual inference areas of the brain, unrelated to problems with vision, hearing, speech, or general learning

disorders. Students with these difficulties struggle to grasp main ideas in texts and have trouble with basic reading skills, such as word recognition. These students may read aloud but fail to comprehend or retain what they've read. Consequently, students with reading comprehension challenges require effective strategies to help them understand and remember the material they read.

In his 2017 study, Mustafa Abdelqader Bin Jalloul explored reading difficulties among primary school students who enrolled in school at an early age. His research aimed to answer whether these students (who started school before the age of six) face learning difficulties in reading, and whether gender plays a role. The study revealed that students who started school early do indeed experience reading difficulties, ranging from moderate to severe. Additionally, the findings showed statistically significant gender differences, with males being more affected.

Hiba Markoun's 2021 study aimed to investigate the relationship between reading comprehension and academic learning difficulties among primary school students. Using a descriptive method, the study employed tools such as the learning difficulties and reading comprehension scales on a sample of 100 intentionally selected learners. The data were statistically analyzed using SPSS software. The results revealed a significant correlation between reading comprehension and general learning difficulties, as well as between reading comprehension and the three dimensions of academic learning difficulties (reading, writing, and arithmetic). (Markoun, 2011, p. 145)

From the theoretical framework of the study problem, the research questions are as follows:

- What is the level of reading comprehension among primary school students in the study sample?
- What is the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students in the study sample?
- Is there a correlation between the level of reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students?

3. Study Hypotheses

- Reading comprehension levels are low among primary school students in the study sample.
- The degree of perceptual difficulties is high among primary school students in the study sample.
- There is a correlation between reading comprehension levels and perceptual difficulties among primary school students.

4. Study Objectives

- To identify the level of reading comprehension among primary school students.
- To identify the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students.
- To understand the nature of the relationship between reading comprehension levels and perceptual difficulties among primary school students.

5. Study Terms

5.1 Perception

"The individual's ability to receive external and internal stimuli through the senses, analyze, interpret, and respond to them. External stimuli are received through the five senses, while internal stimuli come from joints, muscles, and ligaments, which are sources of sensory-motor perception".(Saeed, 1989, p. 212)

Thus, perception is a developmental process (mental and cognitive) that many children with learning difficulties struggle with, involving assigning meaning to sensory stimuli, whether visual, auditory, tactile, etc.(Qahtan, 2008, p. 268).

5.1.1 Perceptual Difficulties

Perceptual disorders or difficulties hold a central position among developmental learning difficulties and cognitive process disorders.(Al-Hilfawi, 2016, p. 02).

Perceptual difficulties are primary difficulties alongside attention and memory difficulties. These difficulties are related to brain functions and mental processes needed by the child in academic achievement.(Al-Hilfawi, 2016, p. 02)

They are disorders many children with learning difficulties suffer from, manifested in difficulty giving meaning to sensory stimuli, whether visual, auditory, tactile, etc.

5.1.2 Operational Definition

The degree of visual, auditory, and motor perception difficulty among primary school students, based on selecting the appropriate answers to questions within the dimensions of the study tool, the reading comprehension test for primary school students.

5.2 Reading Comprehension

Hamdi El-Faramawi (1986) indicates that "reading comprehension is recognizing words and their meanings, assembling them into intellectual units, and focusing on these units to understand the complete meaning of sentences and perceive relationships between sentences to understand paragraph meaning and relationships between paragraphs, thus comprehending the complete text".(Ibrahim, 2013, p. 31)

Heilman & All (1981) defined reading comprehension as understanding written ideas through purposeful and intentional interpretation and interaction with language. Reading comprehension is a multifaceted process influenced by various linguistic and cognitive abilities. Harris and Sipay (1980) mentioned that

"reading is obtaining appropriate meanings".(Hargrove, Poteet, & (ranslated by: Al-Sartawi, 2013, p. 39)

It is "the child's understanding of the meanings of written words and phrases and awareness of the various relationships between parts of the linguistic text, measured by recognizing the meaning of words, sentences, and paragraphs" (Miroud, 2008, p. 144)

5.2. Operational Definition

In the current study, reading comprehension is defined as the ability to select the appropriate answer to questions within the dimensions of the reading comprehension scale for primary school students, including auditory interpretation skills, discrimination and memory skills, and phonetic spelling skills.

6. Methodological Procedures of the Study

6.1 Study Methodology

The current study employs a descriptive methodology by highlighting the level of reading comprehension and the degree of cognitive difficulties among primary school students who are part of the study sample. It also explores the relationship between the level of reading comprehension and the degree of cognitive difficulties in primary school students.

6.2 Study Sample

The study sample consisted of 36 students who were selected purposefully as a targeted sample.

6.3 Study Scope

The study was conducted at several primary schools in the province of M'sila, during the period from October 2023 to January 2024.

6.4 Study Instruments

Based on previous studies, a review of the theoretical framework, and several scales that addressed the study variables (reading comprehension - cognitive difficulties), the researcher gathered a set of scales that serve the study's objectives. These included the scale by "Ibrahim Bin Abdullah Othman" (2017), the scale by "Hussein Tahoun et al." (2015), and the Learning Difficulties Scale prepared and standardized by "Abdul Aziz Al-Sartawi" and "Heba Hussein Ismail." The researcher used these to develop and utilize the study instruments to define the dimensions of the study tools, which are as follows:

6.4.1. Reading Comprehension Scale: This scale consists of three dimensions with 19 items that measure students' reading comprehension ability: understanding the context of meaning (7 items), understanding pronouns (6 items),

and understanding the text meaning (6 items).

6.4.2. Cognitive Difficulties Scale: This scale consists of three dimensions with 21 items that measure the cognitive difficulties among students: visual perception difficulties (8 items), auditory perception difficulties (7 items), and motor perception difficulties (6 items).

6.4.3. Psychometric Properties of the Study Instruments

First - Validity of the Study Instruments:

-Expert Validity: To ensure the validity of the study instruments (Reading Comprehension Scale and Perceptual Difficulties Scale), the researcher consulted a panel of experts to evaluate their relevance, suitability, and clarity, as well as to verify that the items accurately measure what they are intended to measure. The experts reached a consensus, with an 80% agreement on all items across both scales.

-Content Validity: The content validity of the instruments was verified by administering them to 16 students from the study population. Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated for each item against the overall score of the instrument to ensure the coherence of the items within each domain. Additionally, the correlation between each domain and the overall score was assessed. The results for both scales were as follows:

Reading Comprehension Scale:

-The correlation between each item and the overall score ranged from 0.51 to 0.97, with statistically significant values at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between each item and the domain it belongs to ranged from 0.54 to 0.91, with statistically significant values at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between the total score of each domain and the overall score of the instrument was as follows: Domain 1: 0.88 - Domain 2: 0.86 Domain 3: 0.83. All values were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between the total scores of each domain and the other domains were: Domain 1 with Domain 2: 0.85- Domain 1 with Domain 3: 0.83- Domain 2 with Domain 3: 0.89 .All values were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Perceptual Difficulties Scale:

-The correlation between each item and the overall score ranged from 0.62 to 0.91, with statistically significant values at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between each item and the domain it belongs to ranged

from 0.63 to 0.95, with statistically significant values at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between the total score of each domain and the overall score of the instrument was as follows: Domain 1: 0.81- Domain 2: 0.85 Domain 3: 0.78. All values were statistically significant at the 0.01 level.

-The correlation between the total scores of each domain and the other domains were: Domain 1 with Domain (2: -0.76)- Domain 1 with Domain 3: (-0.83)- Domain 2 with Domain (3: 0.88) . All values were statistically significant at the 0.05 level.

Second - Reliability of the Study Instruments:

Reliability coefficients were calculated using the test-retest method by re-administering the study instruments to the experimental sample of 16 students after a two-week interval. Pearson correlation coefficients between the first and second administrations were calculated for each instrument.

Table 1.displays the stability coefficients and internal consistency coefficients for the overall instruments and their subdomains based on the responses of the study sample.

Reading Comprehension Scale			
Domains	Number of Items	Pearson Correlation (Test-Retest)	Cronbach's Alpha
Understanding Contextual Meaning	7	0.8676	0.528
Understanding Pronouns	6	0.8762	0.538
Understanding the Meaning of the Text	6	0.6741	0.341
Total Score	19	0.8903	0.505
Perceptual Difficulties Scale			
Domains	Number of Items	Pearson Correlation (Test-Retest)	Cronbach's Alpha
Visual Perception Difficulties	8	0.7888	0.845
Auditory Perception Difficulties	7	0.8844	0.408

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Motor Perception Difficulties	6	0.6731	0.578
Total Score	21	0.8801	13.50

Statistical significance at ($\alpha= 0.01$).

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the results of SPSS

From the above, it is clear that the study demonstrates acceptable levels of validity and reliability,justifying its use for the study purposes.

Third: Scoring of Study Tools

In order to assess the value of the arithmetic mean within the three categories: (Good, Fair, or Poor) for the reading comprehension scale, or (Low, Medium, or High) for the perceptual difficulties scale, the range between the highest and lowest score on the scale was divided by the number of new categories for the arithmetic mean distribution, which equals 0.66. This calculation is derived as follow($3 - 1 = 2 /$ points, hence $2/3 = 0.66$). Therefore, the arithmetic mean that falls within one of these categories is represented in the following table as follows:

Table 2.illustrates how to determine the level of reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties

Perceptual Difficulties Scale	Reading Comprehension Scale
2.34 to 3.00: High difficulty level.	2.34 to 3.00: Good comprehension level.
1.67 to 2.33: Medium difficulty level.	1.67 to 2.33: Fair comprehension level.
1.00 to 1.66: Low difficulty level.	1.00 to 1.66: Poor comprehension level.

Source: Prepared by the researcher based on the arithmetic average score equation.

7. Presentation and Discussion of Study Results

7.1. Presentation of Study Results

7.1.1. Presentation of the First Research Question Results

-What is the level of reading comprehension among primary school students in the study sample?

To answer this question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations for the three domains related to the level of reading comprehension among primary school students were calculated, followed by the overall score, as shown in the following table:

Table 3.shows the arithmetic means and standard deviations for the dimensions of reading comprehension according to their levels among the study sample participants, ranked.

No.	Domains	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank Level	
1	Understanding Context	1.11	0.865	3	Poor
2	Understanding Pronouns	2.25	0.623	1	Fair
3	Understanding Text Meaning	1.24	0.802	2	Poor
Overall Score		1.56	0.701	Poor	

(**) Correlation is significant at the level of ($\alpha = 0.001$).

The results in this table indicate that the findings obtained through the study tool show that the level of reading comprehension among the students in the study sample is generally "Poor," as reflected by the overall tool and in most of the domains. However, an exception was found in the domain of "Understanding Pronouns," which ranked first with a "Fair" level, achieving an arithmetic mean of (2.25) and a standard deviation of (0.623). As for the overall score, the arithmetic mean was (1.56) with a standard deviation of (0.701). The domain of "Understanding Text Meaning" ranked second with an arithmetic mean of (1.24) and a standard deviation of (0.802).

7.1.2. Presentation of the Second Research Question Results

-What is the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students in the study sample?

To answer this question, the arithmetic means and standard deviations for the three domains related to the level of perceptual difficulties among primary school students were calculated, followed by the overall score, as shown in the following table:

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Table 4.shows the arithmetic means and standard deviations for the dimensions of perceptual difficulties according to their levels among the study sample participants, ranked.

No.	Domains	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Rank	Level
1	Visual Perception Difficulties	2.11	0.890	3	Medium
2	Auditory Perception Difficulties	2.99	0.121	2	High
3	Motor Perception Difficulties	3.00	0.111	1	High
Overall Score		2.62	0.879		High

(**) Correlation is significant at the level of ($\alpha = 0.001$).

The results in this table indicate that the findings obtained through the study tool show that the degree of perceptual difficulties among the same students in the study sample is generally "High" for the overall tool and in most of the domains. However, an exception was found in the domain of "Visual Perception Difficulties," which ranked first with a "Medium" level, achieving an arithmetic mean of (2.11) and a standard deviation of (0.890). As for the overall score, the arithmetic mean was (2.62) with a standard deviation of (0.879). The domain of "Auditory Perception Difficulties" ranked second with an arithmetic mean of (2.99) and a standard deviation of (0.121).

7.1.3. Presentation of the Third Research Question Results

-Is there a correlation between the level of reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students?

To answer this question, Pearson's correlation coefficient was used, and the results are shown in the following table:

Table 5.shows the Pearson correlation coefficient value between the level of reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties among the students in the study sample.

Reading Comprehension Level	Perceptual Difficulties Degree	Pearson Correlation (r)	Statistical Significance
Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation		
1.56	0.701	2.62	0.879

The results in this table indicate that the Pearson correlation coefficient (r) is (-0.74), indicating a strong negative (inverse) correlation between the level of reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties. This relationship is statistically significant at the level of ($\alpha = 0.01$).

7.2. Discussion of Study Results in Light of the Hypotheses

7.2.1. Discussion of the First Hypothesis Results

The first hypothesis posits that "the level of reading comprehension is weak among primary school students in the study sample." The results presented in Table 3 reveal that, in most of the study's domains, the level of reading comprehension among the students was indeed weak. Therefore, it can be concluded that the first hypothesis is validated concerning the overall score and the specific domains of "Understanding Text Meaning" and "Understanding Context." The exception was the domain of "Understanding Pronouns," which was rated as "Fair," although this did not impact the overall score on the scale.

When comparing these results with previous studies, they align with the findings of Mustafa Abdelkader Ben Djaloul (2017), which indicated that primary school students who began school at an early age face reading difficulties, ranging from moderate to severe. The results also agree with Aisha Bahaz's (2018) study on the reading and writing levels of deaf children.

The researcher attributes the weak level of reading comprehension among primary students in the sample to potential disruptions in one of their fundamental psychological processes. Some studies suggest that such difficulties might be due to disorders in the central nervous system, which could impact basic psychological functions. Additionally, Lou Gessdon's perspective suggests challenges in language processing and visual inference centers in the brain. As mentioned earlier, students with reading comprehension difficulties struggle with understanding main ideas in reading passages and basic reading skills, such as word recognition.

According to Samuel Kirk (1962), learning disabilities refer to disorders in one or more fundamental processes related to speech, language, reading, writing, arithmetic, or other educational materials. This disorder may result from brain dysfunction, emotional impairments, or behavioral issues, and is not attributable to intellectual disability, sensory deprivation, or cultural or educational deprivation (Ali, 2011, p. 28)

7.2.2. Discussion of the Second Hypothesis Results

The second hypothesis states that "the degree of perceptual disorders is high among primary school students in the study sample." The results shown in Table 4

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indicate that the degree of perceptual difficulties among the students was "High" for the tool overall and in most domains, validating the second hypothesis.

Comparing these results with previous studies, they also align with the findings of Mustafa Abdelkader Ben Jaloul (2017), which reported high levels of reading difficulties among primary students who started school early. The results are consistent with Haidar Karim Al-Jazairi's (2019) study on "Auditory Perception Difficulties among Primary School Students," which found high levels of auditory perceptual difficulties among the study sample. Additionally, some studies, such as those by Al-Iraqi (2013), confirm that perceptual difficulties are among the most prevalent issues among students with learning disabilities.

7.2.3. Discussion of the Third Hypothesis Results

The third hypothesis posits that "there is a correlation between reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students." The results show a statistically significant relationship between reading comprehension and perceptual difficulties, with a Pearson correlation coefficient (r) of -0.74, significant at the level of ($\alpha = 0.01$). The tabulated value for the same significance level and degrees of freedom (34) is 0.432. Since the calculated value is greater than the tabulated value, it is statistically significant, indicating a strong negative (inverse) correlation between reading comprehension and perceptual difficulties.

Thus, as the degree of perceptual difficulties increases among primary school students, their level of reading comprehension decreases, and vice versa. These results align with Kirk and Calvert's views that developmental learning difficulties lead to academic learning challenges and that perception plays a crucial role in learning reading comprehension skills.

8. CONCLUSION

This study examined the relationship between levels of reading comprehension and the degree of cognitive difficulties among primary school children in some Algerian schools, and the following results were reached:

The level of reading comprehension is weak among primary school students in the study sample.

The degree of perceptual disorders is high among primary school students in the study sample.

There is a strong negative correlation between reading comprehension and the degree of perceptual difficulties among primary school students, where

increased perceptual disorders lead to weaker reading comprehension.

Based on these results, the following recommendations were proposed:

-Revise preparatory stage programs to focus on developing the child's sensory and basic mental and psychological abilities, such as memory, perception, intelligence, and attention, and delay the start of formal education until later to ensure full development of cognitive abilities.

-Conduct training workshops for primary school teachers to clarify and explain various developmental and academic learning difficulties.

-Carry out statistical studies on the prevalence of learning difficulties in school settings to facilitate intervention projects for this important educational group.

-Develop tools and measures specifically for detecting various learning disorders.

-Implement early intervention strategies to address perceptual disorders, as they are crucial for preventing different learning difficulties and improving reading comprehension among primary school students.

-Identify the root causes of perceptual disorders and develop guidance and therapeutic programs to enhance perception among primary school students.

-Train primary school teachers to have a comprehensive understanding of various learning difficulties, whether developmental or academic.

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