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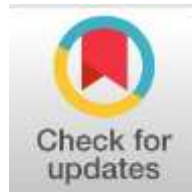
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Phonics Method Resolves Early Reading Difficulties In Elementary School Students: Metode Fonik Menyelesaikan Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Pada Siswa Sekolah Dasar

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Abstract

General Background Early reading forms the fundamental basis for overall academic achievement, yet foundational literacy challenges remain prevalent in primary education. **Specific Background** At SDN 003 Teluk Pandan, several second-grade pupils demonstrate severe literacy deficiencies, particularly in letter-sound recognition and syllable blending, resulting in low diagnostic assessment scores. **Knowledge Gap** Although phonics instruction proves successful for specific cognitive disabilities like dyslexia, its systematic application for regular pupils experiencing general literacy deficits remains insufficiently explored. **Aims** This study investigates the application of a structured phonetic approach to build fundamental literacy proficiencies among second-grade pupils experiencing learning challenges. **Results** Utilizing a Kemmis and McTaggart Classroom Action Research design across two cycles with five participants, the analysis revealed a steady score progression from 49.7 to 73.2, with all participants eventually satisfying the minimum mastery criterion. **Novelty** This research distinctly integrates structured instructional phases, such as targeted blending and interactive word-building activities, to provide individualized scaffolding within a regular inclusive classroom environment. **Implications** Deploying explicit letter-sound instruction alongside interactive visual media serves as a highly supportive pedagogical framework for resolving fundamental literacy deficits and cultivating active pupil participation.

Highlights

- ♦ Classroom action research across two instructional cycles demonstrated a mean score progression from 49.7 to 73.2.
- ♦ Targeted pedagogical interventions successfully guided all participating second-grade pupils to achieve minimum learning mastery standards.
- ♦ Structured letter-sound exercises and interactive word-building games stimulated active participation and peer collaboration during literacy tasks.

Keywords

Phonics Method; Early Reading Skills; Reading Difficulties; Classroom Action Research; Elementary School Education

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INTRODUCTION

The ability to read early is a basic skill for elementary school students because these skills are the basis for successful learning in a variety of subjects. Proficient reading skills enable students to acquire, understand and interpret information that helps to develop critical thinking, problem solving skills and academic achievement. On the other hand, poor reading skills disrupt the learning process and have a negative impact on overall academic achievement (Tiani, Simbolon, & Hermawati, 2023). Reading skills include letter recognition, vocabulary development, reading fluency, and understanding written texts of varying degrees of difficulty (Cubillos & Troncoso, 2025). Hence, the acquisition of early reading skills is an important prerequisite for the development of students' literacy competencies at higher levels of education. Although early reading is important, it remains a big problem in many elementary schools. However, many students still face difficulties in letter identification, distinguishing between sounds of letters and combining these sounds into syllables and simple words, which leads to a deficit in reading fluency (Pramayshela et al., 2023). Such challenges are affected by both internal and external factors such as lack of focus, overuse of digital devices, lack of adequate attention given towards learning activities and inadequate parental support for home learning. This condition causes low academic achievement and low persistence to learn in the classroom (Siregar et al., 2024). The matter of early reading is increasingly more relevant on the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia. Inclusive education is an educational service that aims to provide equal opportunities for all learners, including students with learning difficulties, to obtain quality educational services in a learning environment that respects diversity (Setiawan et al., 2020). This commitment is in line with Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System which ensures the right of every citizen to obtain education that is equitable and not discriminatory (Budijanto & Rahmanto, 2021). Inclusive classrooms are structured to address the academic, social, emotional, and communication needs of all students through the use of adaptive instructional strategies (Reading Rockets, 2023).

The results of classroom observations in the early stage of the Grade II at SDN 003 Teluk Pandan showed that 10 of 15 students have had the ability to read, while five students still have difficulties in early reading. Problems included poor letter recognition, poor letter-sound correspondence, difficulty distinguishing letter sounds, inability to read simple syllables like ba, bi, bu, be, and bo, and difficulty blending letters into syllables and simple words. When asked to read words such as buku (book), mata (eye) or sapi (cow), a number of students continued to rely on spelling out each letter individually, and frequently mispronounced words, taking a lot longer to complete reading tasks. In addition, these students did not seem confident when asked to read aloud in front of the class. An objective profile of the initial reading abilities of five students was established by means of a diagnostic assessment, which included letter recognition, syllable reading, and the reading of simple words. The results of the assessment showed that their early reading skill was still low with individual scores of 40.0 (AS), 43.3 (FR), 50.0 (HT), 55.0 (AL), and 60.0 (KH) and with an average score of only 49.7. The score for the letter recognition was 51.8 on average, and the score for the simple word reading was 47.6 only, which was the weakest aspect evaluated. The findings show that the students had basic problems in linking the letters to their sounds, which implies the need for instructional interventions that are tailored to the students' individual characteristics and learning needs.

In this study, the success of the intervention was not assessed based on the fulfilment of the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) set in the regular curriculum. Instead, it was measured against each student's own growth based on their baseline diagnostic assessment. This was deemed more appropriate since the participants were students experiencing difficulties in reading, thus individual improvement was a more suitable measure of the efficacy of the intervention. Initial assessment also found that children's reading problems were influenced by school and family problems. A small group of students came from families with no literacy background that provided adequate opportunities for reading practice at home. In addition, the teaching approaches used in the reading lessons did not yet fully meet the learning characteristics and specific needs of these students. These conditions indicate the need for a more systematic teaching approach appropriate for the needs of students with reading difficulties, e.g., the phonics method.

Phonics is a method of teaching that focuses on the relationship between the sounds of spoken words (phonemes) and written letters (graphemes). The instruction begins with the sounds of individual letters and then guides students to combine the sounds into meaningful syllables and words in order to better understand the reading process (Jarniah, 2023). This method has been shown to assist students in identifying familiar words and deciphering unfamiliar words more precisely (Wahjusaputri et al., 2023). Moreover, the phonics method can develop reading skills by systematically practicing the pronunciation of the letter sounds, then moving on to syllables and the whole words, so that this method is very suitable for early reading instruction in elementary schools (Lubis et al., 2023). This programme is carried out in a sequential manner through the introduction of letter-sound, blending sounds into syllables and words, repeated reading practice and ongoing assessment modified to the students' learning progress (Amelia, 2023). Previous studies have supported the effectiveness of phonics method. According to Fitri Ariyanti (2022), phonics instruction was effective in improving the early reading skills of students with dyslexia through classroom action research. Likewise, Jarniah (2023) reported that the phonics method greatly improved the early reading skills of students with intellectual disabilities. However, these studies have mainly focused on students with specific disabilities including dyslexia and intellectual disabilities. As a result, there is little research on the implementation of the phonics method for students with reading difficulties in the regular elementary school classrooms.

In view of the above, there is a need for instructional strategies that can progressively improve early reading skills in accordance with students' individual learning characteristics and reading difficulties. The phonics approach is seen as particularly suitable as it offers systematic learning experiences through explicit teaching of the relationship between letters and their corresponding sounds. Implementation is also helped through the use of instructional media such as letter cards, syllable cards, and phonics-based games that actively involve students in the learning process. The purpose of this study is

to improve early reading skills by implementing the phonics method for students with reading difficulties in grade II at SDN 003 Teluk Pandan.

METHOD

This study used Classroom Action Research (CAR) with a spiral model by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) with four stages of research activity including planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. This model was chosen as it is suitable for improving instructional practices based on continuous cycles of action based on reflective evaluation at the end of each cycle. The research was divided into two cycles of action, with a preparatory stage prior to each cycle to gather initial data on the students' early reading skills. Every cycle was focused around the gradual introduction of the phonics method, starting from letter-sound identification and progressing to blending sounds into syllables and simple words. The research was carried out in a grade II classroom of SDN 003 Teluk Pandan, East Kutai Regency, Indonesia. The sample comprised five students, 7–8 years of age, identified as having reading difficulties using classroom observations and results of diagnostic assessments. The selection of participants was done by purposive sampling based on the following criteria: (1) scores below the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of the school in the first assessment, (2) difficulties in recognizing letters, reading syllables, and reading simple words, and (3) participation in all stages of the intervention. The phonics intervention was implemented in a series of activities with introduction of letter-sounds, blending, simple word reading and phonics-based games according to students' individual learning progress.

Data were collected in terms of reading achievement tests and classroom observations. The reading assessment consisted of an oral reading performance test and was developed to assess early reading skills in three components: letter recognition, reading of consonant-vowel (CV) syllables, and reading of simple CV-CV patterned words. Classroom observations were used to record student participation, ability to mimic letter sounds, read syllables and simple words, and interact during instructional activities. The research instruments were oral reading performance assessment sheet and observation checklist. The instruments were conducted in the same way each research cycle, so that the comparison of students' progress over time can be made objectively. Quantitative and qualitative data analyses were used. Quantitative data were analysed descriptively by calculating mean scores and percentage of improvement on early reading skills of students in research cycles. The qualitative data analysis was performed by means of the interactive model proposed by Miles and Huberman (1994) based on data reduction, data display and conclusion drawing. Data were triangulated through test results, classroom observations, and documentation and member checking was done collaboratively with the classroom teacher to establish data trustworthiness. The success of the intervention was determined by the observable improvement of each student early reading skills as compared to the baseline assessment and the improvement of quality of the instructional process over the successive cycles of research.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

This classroom action research was carried out at SDN 003 Teluk Pandan, East Kutai Regency, Indonesia in April-June 2026. The study was composed of two cycles of action preceded by a pre-cycle stage to determine the initial early reading abilities of the students. Each cycle consisted of four stages: planning, action, observation and reflection. The educational intervention was conducted using the phonics method in a stepwise manner, beginning with letter-sound recognition, then blending sounds into syllables and finally reading simple words. At the end of each cycle, an assessment was done to determine the student's progress in early reading skills and to inform the improvement of the instructional intervention for the next cycle. The participants were five Grade II students who exhibited signs of early reading difficulties as evidenced by classroom observations and diagnostic assessment results. Most students' families were of low to middle socioeconomic status, with parents working in farming, labouring, or temporary jobs. The family situation provided few opportunities for parents to support learning at home, so children had relatively little exposure to reading activities outside the classroom. Also, several students expressed low self-confidence when asked to read aloud in front of the class, which negatively affected their reading fluency and overall reading development.

The measurement of students' early reading skills was based on the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of SDN 003 Teluk Pandan, which is 70. Students' reading performance was evaluated not only on their scores but also on their reading fluency, pronunciation accuracy and reading independence. Students who scored 70 or more were considered to have achieved learning mastery. Students scoring below 70 were identified as needing additional instructional support and continued reading practice. This assessment criteria are used in the pre-cycle, Cycle I and Cycle II assessment. Applying the same benchmark consistently at all phases allowed for an unbiased observation of the students' progress in reading and provided an overall assessment of the success of the phonics approach in improving early reading skills in students with reading difficulties.

Initial Student Condition (Pre-Cycle)

Preliminary classroom observations and diagnostic assessment were performed prior to the intervention in order to get an objective profile of the students' early reading skills. The diagnostic test was designed to assess three major areas: letter identification, reading of consonant-vowel (CV) syllables, and reading of simple words. The results obtained in this stage were used as a baseline for the evaluation of the progress of students during the intervention. In addition, the results of the assessment were used to design instructional strategies specific to the learning challenges of the individual student, which made the intervention targeted and effective. The result of the diagnostic test showed that none of the students reached the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) which is 70. The class average score was only 49.7, suggesting that students' beginning reading skills were still at a low level. KH had the highest average score of 60.0 out of five participants, followed

by AL with 55.0, HT with 50.0, and FR with 43.3. AS received the lowest average score of 40.0. The results presented here indicate that all students involved had basic reading difficulties that required systematic and sustained instructional intervention.

Prior to the intervention, preliminary classroom observations and diagnostic assessment were done to get an objective profile of the students' early reading skills. The diagnostic assessment was designed to measure three key components: letter recognition, reading consonant-vowel (CV) syllables, and reading simple words. The results obtained in this stage were used as baseline data for the assessment of the students' progress during the intervention. Furthermore, the results of the assessment were utilised to develop instructional strategies specific to each student's unique learning challenges, thus making the intervention targeted and effective. The result of the diagnostic test showed that none of the students reached the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) which is 70. The class average score was only 49.7, suggesting that students' beginning reading skills were still at a low level. KH had the highest average score of 60.0 out of five participants, followed by AL with 55.0, HT with 50.0, and FR with 43.3. AS received the lowest average score of 40.0. The results presented here indicate that all students involved had basic reading difficulties that required systematic and sustained instructional intervention.

Results of Cycle I

Cycle I was using the phonics method to develop the students' basic early reading skill by strengthening the understanding of the relationship between letters and sounds. The instructional process was implemented progressively through four instructional phases: (1) introduction of vowel sounds, (2) introduction of consonant sounds, (3) independent sound practice, and (4) the Guess My Sound phonics game. All activities were carried out using the instructional media of letter cards, syllable cards, and student worksheets (LKPD) in order to assist students in recognising, pronouncing, and systematically connecting letters with the sounds they represent. The teacher gave guidance and reinforcement to students who still had difficulties in reading during the instructional process. Continuous classroom observations were carried out to record the participation of students, letter-sound recognition, syllable reading, simple word reading and the general responses to the phonics method. All students were assessed at the end of Cycle I with an early reading assessment to determine their learning outcomes after the intervention and to provide a basis for instructional improvements in Cycle II.

Table 1. *Summary of Early Reading Skills Scores in Cycle I*

No.	Student	Phase 1: Vowel Sounds	Phase 2: Consonant Sounds	Phase 3: Independent Practice	Phase 4: "Guess My Sound"	Cycle I Average
1	AS	68	68	69	69	68.5
2	AL	73	72	74	75	73.5
3	FR	69	69	64	70	68.0
4	KH	75	75	79	77	76.5
5	HT	71	68	75	70	71.0
Class Average		71.2	70.4	72.2	72.2	71.5

The results of Cycle I showed that students' early reading skills were significantly better than in the pre-cycle condition. The class average increased from 49.7 to 71.5, an increase of 21.8 points (43.9%) which is above the school Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of 70 and is categorised as good performance. All instructional phases showed improvements, such as vowel sound recognition, consonant sound recognition, independent sound practice, and the phonics game, indicating a fairly consistent learning progress throughout the intervention. Student KH got the highest average score (76.5), AL and HT also achieved the learning mastery criterion. However, average score of AS was 68.5 and for FR was 68.0, thus both had not achieved the KKM yet. These results suggest the implementation of the phonics method in Cycle I had a positive impact on the improvement of early reading skills in students. However, the intervention needed additional refinement through more intense blending practice, individualised instructional support, and more guided practice reading simple words in Cycle II to ensure all students would reach learning mastery.

Besides the results of the quantitative assessment, data on classroom observations were also collected during the implementation of Cycle I. Observations were carried out through an observation checklist with six aspects of assessment. The results showed that the students were more actively engaged in the learning activities than before the intervention. Students who were previously passive and hesitant when pronouncing letter sounds became more and more eager to pronounce both the vowel and consonant sounds when the teacher prompted them. Efficacy of Using Letter Cards as Visual Instructional Media in Supporting Students' Ability in Making Letter-Sound Correspondence During paired learning activities, positive peer interactions were observed as students helped each other and modelled correct pronunciation of letter sounds. Moreover, the "Guess My Sound" phonics game used in Phase 4 established a fun and interesting learning environment, which increased students' motivation and involvement in classroom activities a lot.

The reflection stage was conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention through the analysis of quantitative data of the assessment and the results of qualitative observations of Cycle I. Finally, the phonics method was effective in improving the students' early reading skills as indicated by the increase of the class average from 49.7 to 71.5. However, the intervention was not yet considered to be fully successful, because two of the five students (AS and FR) still obtained average scores below the KKM. With this reflection, the researcher and classroom teacher agreed to make some improvements in Cycle II. These were to provide more intensive blending exercises to reinforce students' decoding skills, to increase the amount of guided reading practice supported by individualised scaffolding for AS and FR, to continue to use phonics games but to modify them into word-building activities to foster meaningful reading of simple words, and to introduce a wider variety of CV-CV patterned words to enrich students' reading experiences. These instructional improvements were then put into practice in Cycle II.

Results of Cycle II

The implementation of Cycle II was based on the reflection results of Cycle I to improve the instructional strategies that are not yet optimal. The intervention focused on students' ability to blend letter sounds into syllables and read simple CV-CV patterned words through four instructional phases: (1) blending activities, (2) guided word reading, (3) independent word reading practice, and (4) the "Word Building" phonics game. For this cycle, the teacher provided more intensive scaffolding for students who had not reached learning mastery in Cycle I, especially AS and FR, through progressive reading exercises, repeated pronunciation practice of letter sounds and individualised instruction. The learning process continued to utilise instructional media such as letter cards, syllable cards, word cards, and student worksheets (LKPD). To maintain consistency in documenting student progress in early reading skills, the same observation instrument used in Cycle I was used to conduct classroom observations. At the end of Cycle II, all students were given an early reading assessment to determine the effectiveness of the intervention and whether the study's success indicators were met.

Table 2. Summary of Early Reading Skills Scores in Cycle II

No.	Student	Phase 1: Blending	Phase 2: Guided Word Reading	Phase 3: Independent Reading	Phase 4: Word Building	Cycle II Average
1	AS	70	70	70	70	70.0
2	AL	79	74	73	74	75.0
3	FR	71	71	70	70	70.5
4	KH	81	76	75	80	78.0
5	HT	72	72	71	75	72.5
Class Average		74.6	72.6	71.8	73.8	73.2

The results in Table 2 reveal that all students demonstrated improvement in early reading skills when compared with Cycle I. The mean scores for each instructional phase were 74.6 in blending, 72.6 in guided word reading, 71.8 in independent word reading, and 73.8 in the Word Building activity. The average for the whole class in Cycle II was 73.2, higher than the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) set by the school which was 70 and was in the good performance category. Most importantly, all students including AS and FR who have not reached mastery in Cycle I have an average score of 70 and above. It shows that all students have successfully achieved the learning mastery standard. Cycle II results showed a greater improvement in early reading skills than Cycle I. All students have increased continuously from the beginning of the pre-cycle to the Cycle II and finally reached above the KKM of 70. The results indicate that the modifications made to the instruction in Cycle II were successful in overcoming the learning difficulties that had remained throughout the previous cycle. The highest improvement was achieved by student AS with a score of 70.0 in Cycle II, while the average score in the pre-cycle assessment was 40.0, an improvement of 30 points. Meanwhile, KH got the highest performance with an average score of 78.0. The performance showed a more and more fluent and accurate reading performance.

Classroom observations also showed positive improvements in all observed aspects of learning. Students were more active in blending activities, guided reading activities and Word Building phonics game. Those who had been reluctant to read aloud became more confident reading independently in front of the teacher and their peers. The provision of individualised scaffolding for AS and FR allowed these students to develop a more systematic understanding of how letter sounds are blended into syllables and words. Besides the gains in individual reading performance, peer interaction also improved during the course of instruction. In paired reading, the stronger readers helped their classmates identify letter sounds, combine syllables, and read simple words. The collaborative learning environment provided all students with multiple opportunities to practice reading in a positive and encouraging environment. In addition to the increase in reading fluency, students also demonstrated a notable improvement in reading CV-CV words, as shown by the decrease in spelling words letter by letter and increase in fluency of reading entire words.

From the results of the reading test and the results of observations in the classroom, it can be concluded that the application of the phonics method in Cycle II has successfully achieved the predetermined indicators of success in the study. All participants scored an average of 70 and above which met the learning mastery standard of the school. Results suggest that the modified instructional intervention (which consisted of intensive blending practice, guided word reading, independent reading exercises, and the Word Building phonics game) was successful in improving early reading skills for students with reading difficulties. The classroom action research was stopped at the end of Cycle II because all research objectives and success indicators had been reached.

Comparative Analysis Across Cycles

In order to examine the general trend of enhancement in students' early reading skills across the pre-cycle, Cycle I and Cycle II, a comparative analysis was carried out across the research cycles. The analysis includes comparison of average scores of individual students, average scores of classes in each cycle, and learning mastery of students based on the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) in the school in each stage of the study. Table 3 reports the average early reading scores for each student over the course of the intervention.

Table 3. Comparison of Early Reading Assessment Results Across Research Cycles

No.	Student	Pre-Cycle Average	Cycle I Average	Cycle II Average	KKM	Status
1	AS	40	68,5	70	70	Mastery
2	AL	55	73,5	75	70	Mastery
3	FR	43,3	68	70,5	70	Mastery

4	KH	60	76,5	78	70	Mastery
5	HT	50	71	72,5	70	Mastery
Class Average		49,7	71,5	73,2	70	Mastery

Table 3 shows that all students have steadily progressed in the mean scores from pre-cycle to Cycle I and from Cycle I to Cycle II. The class average improved from 49.7 in the pre-cycle to 71.5 in Cycle I and again to 73.2 in Cycle II. All students had achieved 70 or above by the end of Cycle II, fulfilling the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM), and so achieving learning mastery. Table 4 shows the percentage of improvement in students' early reading ability from the pre-cycle to Cycle II.

Table 4. Percentage Improvement in Early Reading Skills

No.	Student	Pre-Cycle Average	Cycle I Average	Cycle II Average	Percentage Improvement (Pre-Cycle → Cycle II)
1	AS	40.0	68.5	70.0	75.0%
2	AL	55.0	73.5	75.0	36.4%
3	FR	43.3	68.0	70.5	62.8%
4	KH	60.0	76.5	78.0	30.0%
5	HT	50.0	71.0	72.5	45.0%
Class Average		49.7	71.5	73.2	47.3%

The best percentage improvement was achieved by student AS with 75.0% of improvement followed by FR who improved by 62.8% (Table 4). In total, the average class score rose by 47.3% from pre-cycle to Cycle II. This pattern of improvement indicates that the phonics method worked for students with varying levels of initial reading ability. The next section then presents a line graph to give a clearer visual representation of the progress made by the students throughout the study, highlighting the trend of the class mean scores starting from pre-cycle to Cycle II.

Discussion

The results of this study indicate that the implementation of the phonics method has been able to improve the early reading skills of students with reading difficulties in a gradual and consistent way between the cycles of the intervention. The most dramatic increase occurred from the pre-cycle to Cycle I, when the class average score increased from 49.7 to 71.5 for a gain of 21.8 points. The findings suggest that the instruction that focused on the relationship of graphemes (letters) and phonemes (speech sounds) through activities such as vowel sound recognition, consonant sound recognition, independent sound practice, and the "Guess My Sound" phonics game provided students with systematic learning experiences that strengthened the students' decoding skills which are the foundation of early reading development. Even though the average score of the class was above the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of the school, there were still two students (AS and FR) who had not mastered the learning, which made it necessary to refine the instructional intervention further in the next cycle. The improvement in Cycle I can be explained by the theory of phonemic awareness of Shaywitz (2003) that students with reading difficulties tend to have deficits in phonological processing that prohibit them from linking the written symbols with its corresponding sounds. Students were systematically taught individual letter sounds through structured phonics instruction, which enabled them to make grapheme-phoneme connections and apply them during reading activities. The employment of letter cards as visual instructional media also helped to combine visual and auditory information, thus hastening the development of basic reading skills. These results are similar to the report of the National Reading Panel (2000), which determined that systematic phonics instruction is one of the most effective components of early reading instruction. The present study found that independent sound practice and phonics-based games seemed to significantly contribute to students' progress by actively engaging learners in the practice of reading skills, rather than just receiving explanations from the teacher.

The post-Cycle I reflection resulted in several instructional refinements during Cycle II, such as more blending practice, guided word reading, independent reading activities, and the "Word Building" phonics game. These modifications were designed to support students in transitioning from identifying individual letter sounds to blending sounds into syllables and reading whole simple words. With these improvements, the class average rose to 73.2 and all of the students who participated successfully met the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion. The increase of the class mean from Cycle I to Cycle II was not as high as from the pre-cycle to Cycle I, but the educational meaning of the increase was that all students finally reached learning mastery. Student AS improved from 68.5 to 70.0 and FR from 68.0 to 70.5. Thus, both students reached the learning objectives of the study after falling below the mastery criterion. The successful outcomes achieved in Cycle II confirm the important role of blending skills in the development of early reading. Once students learned the individual letter sounds, they could more easily combine those sounds to make syllables and simple words. These findings are consistent with the principles of synthetic phonics advocated by Hatcher et al. (2004) who highlighted that blending is a crucial step that helps novice readers move from identifying separate sounds to reading whole words fluently. The Word Building phonics game also offered a more engaging learning environment by integrating visual, auditory and kinesthetic learning experiences. In these activities, students had to identify the sounds of the letters, arrange, read and pronounce the words several times, so the learning became more meaningful and effective.

In summary, the results showed that the phonics approach was effective in improving the early reading skills of students with reading problems. Three main indicators were used to measure the effectiveness. The class average score increased

steadily from pre-cycle to Cycle II at 49.7 and 73.2 respectively, an overall improvement of about 47.3%. The second is all students achieved mastery of learning at the end of the study. Third, classroom observation data indicated significant improvement in the quality of the instructional process. Students in Cycle II were more active in learning activities, more confident in reading aloud, better at reading syllables and simple words, and more positive in interacting with peers in paired learning activities and phonics games. These results show that the intervention was successful not only in the respect of the assessment scores but also in the respect of positive change of students' learning behaviours during the instructional process.

The success of the phonics method in this study can also be explained by the application of three complementary instructional principles. The first is the principle of gradual progression. Here the instruction started with the recognition of letter sounds, then progressed to blending sounds into syllables, and finally to reading simple words. This enabled the students to develop their reading skills systematically. The second principle is meaningful repetition: each instructional concept was reinforced through a variety of activities including whole class practice, paired activities, independent exercises and phonics games, providing students with repeated opportunities to practice reading skills in varied learning contexts. Third, the principle of immediate feedback where the teacher corrected the pronunciation mistakes immediately while giving positive reinforcement for successful attempts, thus preventing from the wrong reading patterns to be ingrained. The results also suggest that the phonics method was flexible enough to include students with different initial reading skills. Student KH had relatively stronger reading skills at the beginning of the study and continued to improve whereas AS and FR who had the weakest reading performance at the beginning showed the greatest gains after the individualised scaffolding. The findings provide support for Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) in which it is proposed that the most effective learning takes place when instructional support is matched to the developmental level of the learner. The personalised orientation given to AS and FR allowed each student to make gradual steps until they finally achieved learning mastery at the end of Cycle II.

The present data also are consistent with prior empirical data on the efficacy of phonics instruction in early reading development. The National Reading Panel (2000) found that systematic phonics instruction produces consistently superior reading results to alternative instructional methods. Similarly, Hatcher et al. (2004) revealed that the integration of phonics instruction and phonological awareness training results in a considerable improvement of the reading abilities of students with reading difficulties. The present study adds to this evidence by demonstrating that systematic phonics instruction is effective for Indonesian language instruction in elementary schools, particularly for students with reading difficulties in areas with limited access to educational resources. Finally, the findings can also be interpreted in terms of Sweller's Cognitive Load Theory (1988). Students who have difficulty with reading tend to have limited working memory capacity, so they benefit from instructional materials that are presented simply and sequentially. In the present study, phonics instruction progressed systematically from recognising individual letter sounds to blending activities and then to reading simple words. This teaching sequence probably reduced the cognitive load of students making learning more effective. The successful attainment of the KKM in Cycle II by AS and FR, with the gradual improvement observed in both, indicates that the effective management of cognitive load via systematic instruction was a significant factor in the success of the early reading intervention.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of this classroom action research which was carried out in two intervention cycles, it can be concluded that the phonics method was effective to improve the early reading skills of students who had reading difficulties in Grade II at SDN 003 Teluk Pandan. The results showed that the students made continuous improvement from pre-cycle until Cycle II in letter-sound recognition of vowels and consonants, the ability to blend sounds into syllables and the ability to read simple words with the guided and independent reading activities. In all three research cycles, the average reading scores of students increased and all students (AS, AL, FR, KH, HT) successfully met the Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM) of the school at the end of Cycle II. The results indicate that the phonics method is an effective, systematic and suitable instructional method to improve early reading skills particularly for elementary school students with reading difficulties. These findings imply that teachers should consistently use the phonics method with interesting teaching media such as letter cards, syllable cards, word cards and phonics-based games so that early reading instruction is more active, meaningful and student-centered. Schools should support this approach by providing appropriate instructional resources, reinforcing literacy-supportive learning environments and providing professional development opportunities that reinforce teachers' competence in early reading instruction. Future researchers are encouraged to investigate the application of phonics method in various educational levels with larger participants' samples and different instructional media to provide more extensive empirical evidence on its effectiveness in enhancing students' fundamental literacy skills.

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