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By Universitas Muhammadiyah Sidoarjo

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Contextual Pedagogy Facilitates Literacy Acquisition For Junior High Slow Learners: Pedagogi Kontekstual Memfasilitasi Akuisisi Literasi Untuk Anak Lamban Belajar Sekolah Menengah Pertama

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Abstract

General Background Reading ability functions as a fundamental competency supporting academic progression across all school subjects. **Specific Background** However, seventh-grade cohorts identified as slow learners at SMPN 1 Busang experience significant difficulties with word recognition, fluency, and text comprehension, which restricts their active classroom participation. **Knowledge Gap** Although literature documents the benefits of real-life learning connections, empirical research investigating its specific application for junior secondary slow learners within geographically remote rural environments remains limited. **Aims** This Classroom Action Research investigates the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning to develop the reading capabilities of seventh-grade slow learners. **Results** Following two interventional cycles utilizing familiar daily experiences and guided practice, student reading proficiency rates increased significantly from 30% to 90%, alongside mean score progressions from 58 to 78. The instructional adjustments also successfully stimulated active participation, word decoding accuracy, and the capacity to retell narratives. **Novelty** This study provides specific evidence that integrating familiar daily experiences with individualized pedagogical guidance directly accommodates the distinct cognitive requirements of junior high slow learners. **Implications** Educational institutions should adopt contextual pedagogical approaches and provide relevant visual resources to support inclusive literacy development in regular classrooms.

Highlights

- ♦ Meaningful real-life learning connections successfully stimulate classroom motivation and text comprehension.
- ♦ Guided instructional methods significantly raise word decoding accuracy alongside narrative retelling capabilities.
- ♦ Iterative action research cycles demonstrate substantial test score progressions and academic success.

Keywords

Contextual Teaching And Learning; Classroom Action Research; Reading Skills; Slow Learners; Junior Secondary School

INTRODUCTION

Reading ability as a fundamental competency is the basis of students' success in participating in the learning process at school. Reading is the ability to identify letters and words, but also to understand, interpret and use information from different types of texts to support the achievement of competencies in all subjects at the junior secondary school level. Students who have limited reading skills may not understand instructional materials, and this may impact their overall academic performance (Hamalik, 2019). Challenges related to reading ability become more complex among slow learners. Slow learners are students whose intellectual functioning is slightly below average and who therefore require more time to learn, more intensive repetition, and concrete and contextual instructional strategies to understand learning materials optimally (Nurdiana, 2020). These characteristics often cause slow learners to experience difficulties in recognizing words, reading fluently, understanding text content, and connecting information in a text with their prior experiences. Without appropriate intervention, the gap in their academic abilities may become wider as they progress to higher levels of education (Rahardjo, 2021).

Because it helps students to achieve different types of information that are necessary for their academic development, reading is an important part of education. Good reading skills help students understand lesson materials and stimulate critical thinking skills (Mulyasa, 2021). So, reading problems of slow learners should be tackled with the help of instructional strategies which are suitable to their learning characteristics and needs. The situation at SMPN 1 Busang indicates that many of the Grade VII students, especially those who are labeled as slow learners, still have problems in reading fluently, understanding the reading passages and answering questions of the texts they read. Students often read one word at a time, struggle to recognize long or unfamiliar words, and have trouble picking out the main ideas and important information in a passage. Initial observations also revealed that only about 40% of the students were able to read adequately while the remaining students continued to struggle to understand the texts presented during classroom instruction. The learning process has also been marked by the absence of student participation and engagement in reading activities. Many students were reluctant to participate in class discussions, read aloud, or join in group reading activities. According to observation data, about 30% of the students contributed actively to the discussion in the classroom. Low involvement might limit students' chances to practice reading, express their understanding and receive corrective feedback from the teacher.

Several factors contributed to these reading difficulties. The school is located in a relatively remote rural area, which limits students' access to varied and engaging reading materials. Students' reading interest also tends to be low because they are more interested in using mobile phones than reading books. In addition, parental assistance at home remains limited because many parents work in plantations or mining areas and therefore have little time to support their children's learning. There were lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, too, as students were promoted to higher grade levels without fully grasping foundational reading skills. There are also a number of issues concerning school facilities and educational practices. Teachers are generally so busy covering the objectives of the curriculum and teaching the content of the subject that they have little time for sustained reading practice. Classroom instruction is still largely lecture and assignment based rather than activity based such as guided reading, reading aloud, phonics practice and text based discussion. Moreover, there is still a lack of attractive reading materials for adolescents, and not all classes have literacy programs such as 15-minute reading activities before the start of lessons on a regular basis.

The instructional media used in reading lessons are also relatively conventional and less appealing to slow learners. Teachers often rely on textbooks with limited illustrations and repetitive reading activities. Such instructional conditions may reduce students' motivation and make it more difficult for them to understand abstract words and textual information. The use of attractive and varied instructional media is therefore important because it can increase students' motivation and support their understanding of reading materials (Nuraini, 2020). Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) is one of the learning approaches which is suitable to overcome these problems. CTL links learning materials to students' real-life experiences, allowing them to construct meaning through familiar situations and concrete contexts. Students learn words by contextual learning not only to identify and pronounce, but to understand their meanings and use them in appropriate situations. This method is particularly suitable for slow learners because they generally absorb information more easily if it is concrete, repeated and related to their daily lives.

In reading instruction, contextual learning can be implemented through several stages, including introducing familiar themes, presenting words and sentences in meaningful contexts, discussing the content of texts, asking and answering questions, and retelling information based on students' experiences. These activities can increase student engagement and facilitate the development of word recognition, reading fluency, vocabulary mastery, and reading comprehension. Contextual instruction also promotes active student participation through observation, discussion, questioning, and direct application of learning materials. Contextual learning has been shown to have a positive effect on students' reading capabilities. Students instructed using contextual methods showed more improvement in reading ability than students instructed using conventional methods (Fitria, 2021). Similarly, Prabowo (2021) discovered that students who learned using contextual approaches had a better understanding of the text they read. The use of relevant contexts can help students to retain information, understand the meaning of words and relate textual content to real life situations. Previous studies have shown the advantages of contextual learning, but most of them focused on regular students or students at the elementary school level. Research on the application of contextual learning to improve the reading ability of slow learners in junior secondary school level is still limited. This gap highlights the need for further investigation, especially in rural and remote school contexts where access to literacy resources and specialized instructional support is relatively limited. Thus, this study aims at improving the reading ability of slow learners of grade VII at SMPN 1 Busang through the implementation of contextual learning. The research is focused on improving the learning process and results in reading, which include word recognition,

reading fluency, comprehension and the ability to retell the content of a text. The findings are expected to offer a practical instructional alternative for teachers and contribute empirical evidence on the implementation of contextual learning in inclusive education at the junior secondary school level.

METHOD

The study used a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, following Kemmis and McTaggart's four-stage iterative model of planning, action, observation and reflection. Classroom Action Research was chosen with the purpose of improving the quality of instructional practices and improving the students' learning outcomes through continuous cycle of planning, implementing, evaluating and improving. The study was conducted to improve the reading skills of Grade VII slow learners by the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach. This study was conducted at SMPN 1 Busang, Kutai Timur Regency, East Kalimantan Province in the Academic Year of April-July 2026. The respondents were 30 Grade VII students with 10 students who are slow learners as the main focus of the intervention. Participants were selected on the basis of a number of criteria: mastery of the alphabet, no hearing impairment, adequate verbal comprehension, basic reading ability, and were identified by the school as slow learners.

The intervention was implemented over two action cycles, with each cycle consisting of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, lesson plans, student worksheets, reading materials, and assessment instruments were developed based on the principles of Contextual Teaching and Learning. In the action stage, students engaged in reading activities that connected texts to their experiences, thru discussion, collaborative learning, vocabulary, and contextualized problem-solving tasks. The implementation involved classroom observations by a collaborating teacher to record students' participation, engagement, and reading performance. Reflections were performed at the end of each cycle to evaluate the effectiveness of the instructional process and to find improvements for the next cycle. Data were collected thru classroom observations and reading tests. Reading tests were used to measure students' reading skills before the intervention (pre-test) and after each action cycle (post-test). Classroom observations were made and teacher performance, student engagement and the use of the CTL approach in instruction were recorded using structured observation sheets. Data collected was analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative technique. Quantitative analysis was carried out by calculating students' reading scores, the mean scores and percentage of improvement between the pre-test and post-test results. Qualitative data from classroom observations were analyzed in a descriptive manner to determine changes in students' participation, learning behaviors, and effectiveness of the instructional intervention. The success criteria of the study were achieved when the improvement of the instructional process and students' reading performance was found after the implementation of contextual learning.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Baseline Condition (Pre-Intervention)

The preliminary observation at Grade VII SMPN 1 Busang showed that the reading skills of the students who were identified as slow learners were still relatively low. Most students had difficulties in performing basic reading tasks which are required of junior secondary school students, especially in reading words correctly and comprehending the meaning of written texts. These challenges limited their participation in classroom learning since reading is the primary way students access instructional materials in the various subjects. Several reading difficulties were consistently observed in the classrooms. First, many students had problems with word recognition, both in terms of accuracy and speed. They often sounded words out, letter by letter, and frequently got stuck on words they didn't know. This slow decoding process hampered reading fluency and the ability to understand the overall meaning of the text. Secondly, the students were poor in reading comprehension. Some students were able to read words correctly but often were unable to identify the main idea, answer comprehension questions, or retell what they had read. They understood the words in the passage, but not how the words worked together to make sense of the passage. Another problem frequently noted at baseline was reading fluency. Most students read haltingly, with many pauses, repetitions and mispronunciations. This would suggest that automatic word recognition was not yet sufficiently developed. These difficulties were reflected in the speed and confidence of students in reading aloud and reduced the effectiveness of reading activities in the classroom.

Along with the cognitive difficulties, the students also showed low interest and motivation toward reading activities [10]. In classroom instruction, few students volunteered to read aloud or participate actively in reading discussions. Most students seemed to be unwilling to participate in reading activities and needed constant encouragement from the teacher. The limited engagement also reduced opportunities for students to practice and hone reading skills. The pre-test results supported the findings gathered from classroom observations. The mean reading score of the ten slow learners was 58 which indicated that their overall reading performance was below the school's minimum mastery criterion (MMC) of 70. Of the 10 students who participated, 3 students (30%) were able to reach the level of mastery required and 7 students (70%) did not meet the standard. The baseline results show that the reading skills of Grade VII slow learners at SMPN 1 Busang need immediate instructional intervention. The low levels of word recognition, reading fluency, reading comprehension, and learning motivation implied that conventional instructional practices did not adequately address students' learning needs. So, it is needed to apply Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) to make the learning process more meaningful and improve the students' reading performance in the following action cycles.

Results of Cycle I

This cycle I used the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach to improve the reading skills of grade VII slow

learners. The instructional activities were designed to relate the reading materials to students' real life experiences so that the learning process became more meaningful and relevant in their lives. Each lesson started with the teacher introducing topics related to familiar situations so that the students could activate their prior knowledge before working on the reading texts. The teacher used visual learning aids to assist learners in comprehending the concepts. There were pictures and real-life stories to demonstrate the reading material. These visual supports helped students to identify unfamiliar vocabulary, to understand the meaning of the texts more easily and to keep their attention during the lesson. Then students had small-group discussions, sharing ideas, answering questions and helping each other understand the reading materials with the teacher's assistance. The central instructional strategy employed during Cycle I was guided reading. Students were asked to read the texts out loud and given immediate feedback on pronunciation, word recognition and reading fluency. The teacher scaffolded throughout the lessons by modeling correct reading, correcting mispronunciation, and encouraging students to reread difficult words and sentences. The slow pacing of support enabled the students to gain more confidence as they practiced their reading skills.

The classroom observation conducted in Cycle I showed that there was a positive change in students' participation and engagement compared to the baseline condition. Most of the students became more interested in reading activities and were more willing to participate in classroom discussions. Several of the students who had been reluctant to read aloud previously, gained confidence and volunteered to read short passages in front of their classmates. The use of the context materials and visual media seemed to motivate the students and decrease their anxiety toward the reading tasks. However, despite these improvements, a number of challenges were still apparent during the implementation. Some students still displayed passive learning behaviors and needed frequent teacher encouragement before they would participate in reading activities. These students still paused when reading unfamiliar words and sometimes depended on their peers for help, indicating that additional instructional support would be needed in the next cycle.

The reading assessment at the end of Cycle I showed a clear improvement compared to the pre-intervention results. The mean reading score improved from 58 to 68, indicating a significant enhancement in students' reading performance after the application of contextual learning. Likewise, the number of students who reached the school's minimum mastery criterion (MMC) of 70 increased from three students (30%) in the baseline assessment to six students (60%) in Cycle I. However, four students (40%) were still below the expected level of mastery suggesting a need for further refinement in instruction. The reflection carried out after Cycle I highlighted a number of factors that limited the effectiveness of the intervention. The students' engagement had increased; however, some students still felt unsure about reading aloud and often hesitated when decoding new words. In addition, the time given for instruction was not sufficient to give individual help to all slow learners, especially to those who needed a lot of practice. The teacher also concluded that more varied and visually attractive instructional media would be beneficial for maintaining students' motivation and facilitating reading comprehension. These findings became the basis for revising the instructional strategy and planning improvements for Cycle II.

Results of Cycle II

After the reflection in Cycle I, several changes were made in Cycle II to improve the implementation of the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach. The main goal of these improvements was to remove the last obstacles that were preventing the learning process for slow learners, and to create a more motivating and supportive learning environment. The instructional activities continued to focus on meaningful learning experiences through reading materials related to students' daily lives, but were supplemented with more attractive instructional strategies. One of the main improvements was the use of more engaging learning media. Colorful illustrations, simplified reading texts and visually relevant materials were employed in classroom instruction to hold students' attention and enhance comprehension. These materials helped students recognize unfamiliar vocabulary more easily and reduced the cognitive demands associated with reading longer or more complex texts.

The teacher also provided more intensive individualized guidance throughout the learning process. Students who continued to struggle with reading were provided with additional scaffolding during guided reading activities including repeated practice, pronunciation modeling, vocabulary explanations, and immediate corrective feedback. This one-on-one help allowed struggling students to work at their own speed and steadily get better at reading accurately and fluently. In an effort to increase students' motivation even more, verbal encouragement and simple rewards were used during classroom activities. Students were recognized for their efforts and achievements no matter how small their improvement was, thus creating a positive learning atmosphere that encouraged greater participation. Classroom instruction also became more interactive with students engaging in collaborative reading tasks, group discussions, and question-and-answer sessions, which enabled students to actively construct meaning from the reading texts rather than passively receiving information.

The classroom observations in Cycle II showed a substantial enhancement in the student engagement and learning behaviors. Students were more active in the reading activities compared to Cycle I. They were significantly more confident to read aloud in front of their classmates. They depended less on the teacher to encourage them to participate in discussions, and were more likely to answer comprehension questions about the reading passages. Students' reading performance also showed improvements. Most students were able to recognize words more accurately, read more fluently and demonstrate better comprehension of simple reading texts. They increasingly used contextual clues and visual supports to figure out unfamiliar vocabulary and select the main points of the passages. The results proved that the improvements in Cycle II succeeded in improving the learning process as well as students' reading competence.

The reading assessment administered at the end of Cycle II confirmed the success of the instructional changes. The mean reading score was 78 for Cycle II compared to 68 for Cycle I an overall improvement of 20 points compared to the baseline assessment. Furthermore, nine students (90%) reached the school Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC) of 70, while only one

student (10%) was below the expected standard. The result of the study indicates that most of the slow learners involved in the study showed satisfactory progress in reading skills after the implementation of the revised contextual learning activities. The reflection after Cycle II showed that the instructional objectives were met successfully. The changes made during this cycle were successful in addressing many of the challenges identified in Cycle I, especially those related to students' confidence, participation and reading comprehension. The use of contextual learning, attractive instructional media, intensive teacher guidance and positive reinforcement created a conducive learning environment for the development of reading skills among slow learners. Thus, the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach was considered effective to apply to improve the reading skills of slow learners of Grade VII of SMPN 1 Busang.

Tabel 1. *Improvement in Students' Reading Achievement Across the Research Cycles*

Stage	Mean Score	Mastery (%)
Pre-Intervention	58	30%
Cycle I	68	60%
Cycle II	78	90%

Table 1 demonstrates a consistent improvement in students' reading achievement throughout the implementation of the classroom action research. At the pre-intervention stage, the participating slow learners achieved a mean score of 58, with only 30% of students meeting the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC). The results confirmed that students did not have adequate initial reading skills and indicated that instructional intervention was needed. The result showed that there was an improvement in the students' reading performance after the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach was implemented in Cycle I. The average scores went to 68, and the percentage of students who mastered the material doubled from 30% to 60%. The results indicated that contextual learning was successful in increasing student motivation as well as in helping with word recognition, reading fluency, and reading comprehension; however, some students still needed additional teaching assistance. The additional improvements in Cycle II were the result of the instructional refinements implemented. The average reading score improved to 78 and the mastery rate to 90%. This means that almost all students who participated achieved the expected reading proficiency. The improvement of both achievement indicators is significant, which shows that the modified instructional strategies such as interesting learning media, intensive teacher guidance, interactive learning activities, and motivational reinforcement have successfully met the learning needs of slow learners. The results show a positive trend over all three phases. Overall the results show The upward trend of the mean reading scores and the mastery percentages are good evidence that the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach was effective in enhancing the reading skill of the slow learners of Grade VII at SMPN 1 Busang. The findings also point to the potential of contextualized instruction as a pedagogical approach to support the literacy development of students who require additional support in their learning.

Discussion

The result of this classroom action research showed that the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach is effective to improve the reading skills of the grade VII slow learners at SMPN 1 Busang. Not only was there an improvement in students' reading achievement, but also in the quality of the learning process. Students participated more actively in classroom activities, expressed more confidence when reading aloud, and understood reading texts better. The increase of learning mastery from 30% to 90% indicated that contextual learning provided meaningful learning experiences that supported the development of students' reading abilities. This was evidenced by the progressive increase in the mean reading scores from 58 in the pre-intervention stage, to 68 in Cycle I and 78 in Cycle II. These findings support the hypothesis that learning activities that are strongly related to students' real-life experiences facilitate literacy development among slow learners. One of the findings of this study was that contextual learning improved students' reading comprehension. Students were able to make meaning easier than learning through conventional text-based instruction by relating reading materials to familiar situations and daily experiences. Slow learners find it difficult to understand abstract information, they need concrete examples to understand new concepts. Students were able to connect new information with what they already knew and this helped them to improve their word recognition and understanding through the use of contextual stories, familiar vocabulary and meaningful classroom discussions. This finding aligns with contextual learning theory, which emphasizes the need for students to actively connect academic content to real-life experiences to enable knowledge acquisition.

The study also found that contextual learning increased students' motivation and interest in reading. In the beginning of the research, lots of students were not willing to participate in reading activities due to the fact that they found reading difficult and frustrating. Yet, with the inclusion of colorful illustrations, contextual stories, interactive discussions and guided reading activities, the classroom environment slowly turned into a more pleasurable learning environment. Students were increasingly willing to read aloud, ask questions, and join in classroom discussions. This improvement was more noticeable in Cycle II when nearly all the students took part actively in reading activities with more confidence. These findings agree with earlier studies that have reported contextual learning improves student engagement by making instructional activities more meaningful and enjoyable for learners. Another significant contribution of the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach was its ability to cater to the different learning characteristics of slow learners. Students who learn slowly typically require more teaching support, practice, clear directions, and time to learn academic skills. During the intervention, teachers provided intensive scaffolding thru guided reading, individual help, corrective feedback, and chances for repeated reading. These instructional supports allowed students to work at a pace that met their individual learning needs and decreased anxiety about reading tasks. Thus, the students' reading fluency, word recognition and comprehension consistently improved across both action cycles. The results are in line with other studies which demonstrate that personalized and contextualized instruction is particularly helpful for students with learning disabilities.

In addition, the improvement in students' reading achievement further validates the efficacy of the instructional intervention. Quantitatively, the average reading score increased by 20 points from 58 in the baseline assessment to 78 at the end of Cycle II. The percentage of students who achieved the Minimum Mastery Criterion increased from 30% to 90%. The significant achievements point to the fact that many of the learning barriers faced by slow learners could be overcome by using contextual materials, visual aids, cooperative learning, guided reading, and positive reinforcement. Furthermore, the continuing improvement from one cycle to another shows that the systematic reflection and instructional refinement played a major role in the overall success of the classroom action research. The results of this study show that the Contextual Teaching and Learning approach is very compatible with the cognitive characteristics of slow learners. Compared to traditional instruction, which is often abstract and passive, contextual learning provides concrete experiences, authentic learning situations, meaningful interactions, and active student participation. Such characteristics help slow learners to understand the reading materials better because of their learning through direct experiences that are closely related to their daily lives. Active exploration of texts, peer collaboration, and ongoing teacher support provide students with the opportunity to develop reading skills in a way that is aligned with their learning needs.

In conclusion, this study provides empirical evidence that the Contextual Teaching and Learning is an effective instructional approach in enhancing the reading skills of slow learners. In addition to improving the students' academic achievement, the approach also improved classroom participation, learning motivation, reading confidence, and general engagement in the instructional process. Contextual learning can therefore be proposed as an alternative teaching method for teachers who are working with slow learners or other students with reading difficulties, especially in inclusive and regular classrooms where individualized support is still important for meaningful learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The findings of classroom action research on the application of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach in teaching reading at Grade VII slow learners of SMPN 1 Busang showed that the application of CTL approach was effective to improve students' reading skills. Both the learning process and the learning outcomes showed an improvement. During the intervention, students showed greater participation, motivation, confidence, and reading comprehension. In numbers, the average reading score went from 58 in the pre-intervention phase to 68 in Cycle I and then to 78 in Cycle II. Likewise, the percentage of students who achieved the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC) also rose significantly from 30% at the baseline to 60% in Cycle I and 90% in Cycle II. Students learned at their own pace and related the reading materials to meaningful real life experience through the use of contextual learning activities, interesting teaching materials and intensive teacher guidance. In this situation, the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach can be viewed as an effective instructional strategy to improve the reading skills of slow learners. Based on the result of this study, it is suggested that teachers use the Approach of Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) as the alternative teaching approach to improve the reading ability of slow learners by associating reading materials with the students' real-life experiences, using visual learning media that is interesting, and providing intensive individual guidance. Schools are encouraged to facilitate the implementation of contextual learning through the provision of appropriate instructional resources, contextual reading materials and professional development opportunities to enhance teachers' capacity for inclusive instruction. Also, students should be encouraged to take an active part in the classroom learning and to practice reading regularly both at school and home to improve their reading Fluency and comprehension. Similarly, for future researchers it is recommended to develop this study by involving larger samples, different educational levels or other categories of students with special educational needs to give wider empirical evidence of the effectiveness of contextual learning in improving reading achievement.

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