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Implementation of Literacy Games Word Cards in Overcoming Reading Difficulties in Grade 1 Primary School Students

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A B S T R A C T

Preliminary studies indicate that lower grade students still experience difficulties in reading, such as recognising letters, sounds, and vocabulary, including at SD Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan. This study aims to describe the planning and implementation of the Word Card Literacy Game and its effectiveness in improving the reading skills of first-grade students. The method used is descriptive qualitative with data collection through observation, interviews, and documentation. The data were analysed based on the themes of planning, implementation, evaluation, and student responses, with data validity tested through triangulation and member checks. The results showed that the use of the Word Card Literacy Game increased students' enthusiasm, participation, and ability to recognise letters, spell, compose words, and understand vocabulary. Visual media and game activities proved to be effective in creating more engaging and interactive learning. The Word Card Literacy Game can be used as an alternative strategy to improve the reading skills of primary school students.

1. Introduction

Education is a key element that influences individual development and the progress of a nation. The education system in Indonesia, as regulated in Law No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, emphasises the development of students' potential so that they have spiritual strength, personality, intelligence, and skills that are useful for themselves, society, and the country. Education at the primary school level (SD) is an important foundation in shaping children's character and basic abilities, particularly in the areas of reading, writing, and arithmetic (Ananda et al., 2022). Reading ability is the foundation for all learning activities.

According to Rafika et al. (2020), reading difficulties can be defined as a condition in which students are unable to achieve adequate reading skills for their age. These difficulties can be caused by various factors, including family environment, ineffective teaching methods, and a lack of interest in reading among students (Wiratama et al., 2022). In the context of learning, appropriate teaching strategies are essential to overcome these difficulties. Hardhienata et al. (2021) state that learning strategies are systematic action plans that utilise various methods to achieve desired learning objectives, including student-centred approaches, innovative teaching techniques, and the creation of a conducive learning environment (Rofi'i & Susilo, 2020).

Approaches that can be used include phonetic methods, the use of visual and audio media, and cooperative learning that involves interaction between students. Teachers also need to conduct regular assessments to monitor student progress and adjust the teaching strategies used (Simarmata et al., 2021). Reading literacy skills are a fundamental aspect of children's academic development, especially at the primary school level (Inayah et al., 2023). Based on the 2021 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) report, Indonesia still faces major challenges in improving the reading literacy of primary school children, with literacy scores still below the international average (OECD, 2021). To address this challenge, various innovations in learning have been developed, one of which is educational games (Pratama & Santoso, 2022).

Educational games are designed to create a more engaging and interactive learning experience, thereby increasing student motivation and involvement in the learning process (Rahman & Sari, 2020a). Several studies show that educational games can help children understand reading concepts, expand vocabulary, and improve reading comprehension (Wulandari, 2021).Thus, it is important to examine more deeply how educational games contribute to improving children's reading literacy in primary schools. Although various studies have explored strategies to improve reading literacy, research on the effectiveness of educational games in the context of reading learning in primary schools is still limited (Isnani & Umam, 2023). Most existing studies focus on traditional approaches such as the use of storybooks or guided reading techniques (Firah & Elyas, 2024).

There are also differing opinions regarding the effectiveness of educational games compared to conventional methods in improving children's reading skills (Ulfa et al., 2022). This research is important given the increasingly widespread use of technology in education and changes in children's learning patterns, who are more attracted to interactive media (Kusuma & Nugroho, 2022). With growing access to digital devices, research is needed to explore how educational games can be optimised in reading instruction in primary schools (Hidayat, 2021).Reading ability is an essential basic skill because through reading, students can understand material, obtain new information, and broaden their horizons (Swihadayani, 2023; Muliawanti et al., 2022; Wagu & Riko, 2020). At the primary school level, reading encompasses recognising letter symbols to comprehending text content, so it needs to be introduced through enjoyable and developmentally appropriate activities (Habibah & Muftianti, 2020; Lubis et al., 2023; Syaifullah, 2022; Harianto, 2020).

However, these reading standards often do not align with actual classroom conditions, making more effective learning strategies necessary (Masri et al., 2022).

This phenomenon poses an obstacle to language learning. Ratnasari and Adiwijaya (2023) explain that reading plays an important role in enhancing the cognitive abilities of primary school students. When reading ability is weak, students struggle to communicate ideas verbally.Previous studies have shown that game-based media has great potential in improving reading literacy among primary school students. Afnida and Suparno (2020) emphasise the importance of early literacy through enjoyable approaches that stimulate letter recognition, phonological skills, and comprehension. Pratama and Hardini (2022) found that word-card games are effective for improving letter recognition, reading comprehension, and student motivation through visually attractive media.

Research by Belvar et al. (2024) highlights that children's low interest in reading is partly influenced by the dominance of digital media in daily life; therefore, more engaging media such as literacy games are needed. Rahman and Sari (2020) further affirm that educational games create enjoyable learning experiences through challenges, rewards, and interactive elements, making reading a meaningful activity. Overall, these studies indicate that literacy games effectively enhance motivation, early reading skills, and learning interest.

The problem identified in Grade I at SD Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan was that students' reading skills were still low, characterised by difficulties in recognising letters and sounds, halting reading, limited vocabulary, and low interest in reading. Learning was less engaging because previous instruction relied on conventional methods and minimal visual media, causing students to become easily bored. Teachers also faced obstacles in planning because creating flashcards required additional time and effort. In practice, some students still spelled incorrectly, and noisy classroom conditions made guidance less effective. Internal factors such as weak memory, low confidence, and lack of practice at home, along with external factors such as limited reading materials, lack of family support, and a weak literacy culture, also worsened reading ability.

This study differs from earlier research, which generally focused on the effectiveness of educational games or word-card media in improving motivation and reading ability. Previous studies (Afnida & Suparno, 2020; Pratama & Hardini, 2022; Rahman & Sari, 2020) emphasised literacy improvement through games or interactive media but did not examine the specific implementation of Word Card Literacy Games to address reading difficulties among Grade I students, including internal and external causal factors. This study provides an updated perspective by focusing on planning, implementation, and evaluation processes in lower-grade classrooms, along with analysing student and teacher responses at SD Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan. The study also maps specific forms of reading difficulties letter recognition, phonological confusion, limited vocabulary, and low interest which have not been previously described in depth.

The purpose of this study was to describe how the Word Card Literacy Game was used to improve reading skills among first-grade students at SD Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan. The study aimed to examine the planning stages, implementation process, and outcomes of using word cards to address difficulties in recognising letters and sounds, halting reading, and limited vocabulary and interest. It also sought to determine how literacy games made learning more engaging than previously ineffective conventional methods, and to identify the development of students' reading skills after the use of this media, along with analysing internal and external factors influencing reading difficulties to determine more appropriate strategies aligned with student needs.

2. Methodology

This research method uses a qualitative approach with a qualitative descriptive research type to describe in depth the implementation of game literacy in overcoming reading difficulties in first-grade elementary school students. The focus of the research is directed at the process of learning to read through the application of game literacy, starting from planning, implementation to evaluation of learning. The research was conducted at Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School on first-grade students by involving the class teacher as the main informant. Data were collected through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentation in the form of activity photos, learning videos, and school documents such as grade lists, lesson plans, and learning outcome notes. The researcher was present directly during the learning process to ensure the data collection process runs optimally and the learning situation remains safe.

Data validity was obtained using triangulation techniques by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation, as well as conducting member checks with teachers and students to ensure the appropriateness of data interpretation. Data analysis was conducted descriptively by identifying, grouping, and understanding the findings based on main themes such as participation levels, reading motivation, student responses to literacy games, and obstacles encountered in learning. Through this process, this study aims to provide a comprehensive overview of the effectiveness of literacy games in improving the reading skills of first-grade students and contribute to the development of innovative learning strategies in elementary schools.

3. Results and Discussion

This research is located at Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School, especially in grade 1. Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School is a private school located in Pekajangan Gg 15, Kedungwuni District, Pekalongan Regency, Central Java. The presentation of research results is based on data obtained through interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed according to the research focus. Therefore, the following description of research results is presented to answer the research focus that has been formulated regarding the implementation

of Word Card Literacy Games in Overcoming Reading for Grade 1 Students of Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School.

The classroom conditions during the implementation of this study consisted of a dynamic learning environment with 28 students, comprising 15 boys and 13 girls, each with varied levels of early literacy development. Several students had begun to master basic reading skills, while others were still struggling with letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and blending sounds. Prior to the intervention, learning activities were predominantly conducted using conventional methods such as teacher explanation, repetitive reading drills, and simple worksheets that provided limited visual support. These approaches often resulted in students becoming easily disengaged, particularly those with lower reading abilities. The class environment tended to be noisy during reading activities, making individual guidance less optimal. The absence of interactive media or structured literacy games also contributed to monotonous learning experiences. This situation highlighted a need for more engaging, visually supported, and child-friendly literacy strategies to facilitate early reading development more effectively.

Based on preliminary observations, student interactions were active but not always conducive to structured literacy learning. Some students showed high enthusiasm when visual materials or concrete objects were introduced, while others preferred direct teacher guidance when attempting to read words or syllables. Internal factors such as low confidence, limited memory retention, and difficulty distinguishing similar letters contributed to their challenges in reading. External factors including limited reading exposure at home, insufficient parental support, and a weak literacy culture further affected students' progress. The teacher had not previously used digital media or structured literacy games due to time constraints and limited training in educational technology. As a result, many students had not yet achieved the expected reading competencies for first grade. These classroom conditions strengthened the urgency of implementing an engaging media-based approach, specifically the Word Card Literacy Game, to stimulate students' interest and support their letter–sound recognition and early reading fluency.

The learning process began with a structured planning stage in which the teacher and researcher collaboratively designed the flow of instructional activities using the Word Card Literacy Game. The teacher was first introduced to the design of the cards, the types of word games, and the recommended instructional steps for first-grade students. At the beginning of each session, the teacher conducted an apperception activity to link the material to students' prior knowledge before introducing the word cards containing letters, syllables, and simple images. This initial phase aimed to build curiosity and prepare students for more interactive learning activities. The lesson structure was intentionally designed to ensure that all students could participate actively through individual tasks and small-group activities.

During the implementation, the teacher presented the word cards gradually while guiding students to pronounce each letter and syllable accurately. Students were then invited to match picture cards with the corresponding word cards, which

effectively supported their understanding of the relationship between symbols and sounds. Their enthusiasm increased as new game variations were introduced, such as matching pairs, assembling syllables into complete words, and competing in small groups to read words more fluently. Throughout the activities, the researcher documented students' responses, challenges, and developmental progress in detail. These observations were used to identify indicators of improvement in letter recognition, decoding skills, and reading confidence.

Data collection was conducted not only through direct observation but also through video recordings, photographs, and field notes. Important moments such as students' mispronunciations, breakthroughs in identifying letters, or expressions of excitement during the game were recorded to support qualitative analysis. Documentation allowed the researcher to track behavioral changes and literacy development more systematically. The teacher also provided continuous verbal feedback during the activities, which encouraged previously passive students to participate more actively. Classroom interaction became noticeably more lively and focused compared to previous conventional lessons.

To strengthen the findings, semi-structured interviews were conducted with the classroom teacher after each learning session. The interviews explored the teacher's perspective on the effectiveness of the Word Card Literacy Game, observable changes in student behavior, and any instructional challenges encountered. The teacher reported that the visual and concrete nature of the cards made it easier for lower-ability students to recognize letters and sounds. She also noted that students became more focused and motivated because the learning process felt like a game rather than a rigid reading task. Insights from the interviews were then triangulated with observation data to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the intervention's impact.

At the end of the intervention, evaluation activities were conducted using an advanced version of the literacy game to assess students' mastery of the introduced words. Students were asked to read cards individually as the researcher assessed reading fluency, accuracy, and speed. The results indicated notable improvements in letter recognition, syllable blending, and word reading ability for most students. Several students who had previously struggled demonstrated meaningful progress, including increased confidence and reduced hesitation when reading unfamiliar words. These findings support the conclusion that the Word Card Literacy Game serves as an effective instructional strategy to enhance early reading skills among first-grade learners.

Implementation of the Word Card Literacy Game

Based on the results of interviews with first-grade teachers at Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School, information was obtained that the background to the use of the Word Card literacy game media in reading learning was based on the need to provide a more effective, interactive, and interesting learning method for students. The teacher explained that conventional learning that only uses textbooks is less able to attract student interest, especially in lower grades who are still in the

early stages of developing reading and writing skills. Through the use of Word Cards, students are considered to be able to understand letters and words more easily because of the support of visual images that help the process of recognizing and reinforcing word meanings. In the planning stage, the teacher took several important steps such as searching for and studying learning media references that are appropriate to the characteristics of first-grade students, adjusting the game design from the image selection section to the level of word difficulty, compiling learning tools such as lesson plans, student worksheets, and teaching materials that integrate the use of Word Cards in core activities, and determining learning strategies that are fun and actively involve students so that the learning process is more lively and meaningful. The teacher also revealed that the biggest challenge in planning is creating lesson plans and media independently, which requires time, creativity, and precision, but the effort is considered worth it because the Word Card media has been proven to be able to increase student interest in learning and help overcome reading difficulties.

During the implementation phase, literacy games were incorporated into core reading learning activities. The teacher began with apperception and motivation, then introduced the material using picture cards. Implementation was carried out through individual activities, where students came forward to attach or match the cards to the pictures, and group activities, where students collaborated to construct words or sentences according to the theme with their group members. Students responded very positively to these activities, as they appeared happy, enthusiastic, and eager to learn to read.

Visualizing the images helped them understand the meaning of the words, while matching and constructing words improved their memory of letter shapes and word structures. The teacher also made various modifications according to class conditions, such as adjusting the card size, number of words, and difficulty level. Challenges that arose were that some students who were still in the early stages of reading often misspelled letters, and the teacher needed additional time to prepare the tools and media for the game. Nevertheless, the implementation of the literacy game was deemed successful in increasing student participation and fostering a higher enthusiasm for learning compared to conventional learning.

Evaluation of the success of the literacy game was conducted through direct observation during the activity and a final assessment. The teacher assessed students' reading skills based on observations during the game and through word completion tasks. The results showed that students' reading skills improved, particularly in recognizing letters and letter sounds correctly, composing and spelling simple words, and increasing insight and understanding of word meanings. Most students showed significant progress after learning with the literacy game media. The teacher plans to continue developing the media and seeking new references to make it more engaging. He also suggested that other teachers adapt the implementation of literacy games to the conditions and needs of their respective classes so that reading learning can be more effective and enjoyable for students.

Forms of listening experienced by students

Based on results interview with the first grade teacher of Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School, it was found that student Still face various form difficulty in the learning process read. Results with teachers showed that the main problems faced by first grade students include:

1. starting to recognize letters and sounds, such as the letter "b" being pronounced "d".
2. Reading is still hesitant and spelling **.**
3. Limited understanding and comprehension of the meaning of words.
4. Low interest in reading outside the classroom.
5. Lack of use of school libraries because the book collection has not been updated

Teachers address this by providing specific time for reading practice, using word and picture cards, and involving interactive reading activities in between lessons. Furthermore, social environmental factors also influence student motivation. Students who have friends with a strong interest in reading tend to be motivated to learn to read.

Factors that cause students' reading difficulties

Based on results interview related planning Implementation of the Word Card Literacy Game in class I of Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School, found that difficulty reading experience student influenced by internal and external factors

a. Internal Factors

The teacher explains that part student Still be at the stage beginning development read so that experience difficulty in recognize letters and sounds with right. This is shown with often student switched in differentiate letters that are shaped similar, such as “b” and “d”, as well as read with stuttered because must spell one word at a time. Limitations ability remember or Power retention letters and syllables also create student difficulty moment requested repeat or read return to the previous word Already studied, so that activity read become felt heavy and tiring. Besides the aspect cognitive factors psychological like low trust self and the fear of being wrong increases manipulative difficulty reading, because a number of student tend reluctant proceed to front class or participate in activity read.

The teacher added that part students also have interest low reading, so that not enough involved in a way active in learning read good at school or at home. As a result, attention and concentration student during the learning process often split, make they difficult follow instructions and understanding material optimally. This internal condition show that ever student own characteristics and challenges

different learning, so that need a more approach creative, fun, and appropriate needs to be able to help they increase ability read in a way gradual and effective.

b. External Factors

External factors also become reason main Appearance difficulty reading to students Class I of Muhammadiyah 3 Elementary School, Pekajangan. Based on results interview, the teacher conveys that environment Study students, both at school or at home, have influence big to development ability read they. One of them obstacles encountered is lack variation method learning before use of Word Card Literacy Games, so that student easy feel bored compilation Study read only with book text and exercises mechanical. The lack of source interesting and limited reading collection books in the library school also causes student not enough get chance for train read in a way independent. In the environment family, some student not enough get support because of parents own limitations time for accompany child train reading at home, so that motivation Study child become low. In addition, the culture literacy in the environment around that which has not been strong make student seldom see or involved in activity reading outside class. Condition crowded classes and the teacher's abilities are deep manage time for preparing learning media is also a Challenge alone in create atmosphere effective learning. All factor external the contribute to slowness development ability read students, so that More learning strategies are needed innovative and supportive a better environment strong for help student overcome difficulty read optimally.

4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the study, the implementation of the Word Card Literacy Game proved to be effective in improving the early reading skills of first-grade students at Muhammadiyah 3 Pekajangan Elementary School. This medium was successfully implemented through careful planning, interactive learning, and continuous evaluation. The use of word cards was able to increase students' enthusiasm, motivation, and participation, while also helping them to recognise letters, spell, form words, and understand meanings more easily.

Before the implementation of this medium, students experienced various reading difficulties, such as difficulty recognising letters and sounds, stuttering, limited vocabulary, and low interest in reading. These difficulties were influenced by internal factors (low basic skills, poor memory, lack of confidence) and external factors (monotonous learning methods, lack of family support, and limited reading resources). Through literacy games, many of these obstacles can be overcome because learning becomes more interesting, creative, and suited to the characteristics of lower grade students. With the support of teachers and schools, the Word Card Literacy Game is worthy of being used as an innovative learning media alternative to improve early reading skills and strengthen the culture of literacy in lower grades. This media makes a real contribution in helping students overcome reading difficulties gradually and effectively.

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