Early Reading: An Analysis of Beginning Reading Difficulties in First-Grade Elementary Students.

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ABSTRACT

Early reading ability is a crucial stage in primary education as it lays the foundation for students' literacy development at the next levels. However, many first-grade students struggle with letter recognition, distinguishing similarly shaped letters, spelling words correctly, and understanding texts. This study aims to identify early reading difficulties among first-grade students at SDN Keranggan, South Tangerang. The research employs a qualitative descriptive method using observation, interviews, and document analysis as data collection techniques. The findings indicate that several students face obstacles in recognizing letters, spelling words accurately, and comprehending reading materials. These difficulties arise due to a lack of practice at home and low learning motivation. Furthermore, students exhibit challenges in distinguishing visually similar letters, such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q," which leads to errors in reading accuracy. To address these issues, teachers implement various strategies, including visual media, multisensory approaches, and picture-based reading exercises, which have shown a positive impact on students' reading proficiency. Additionally, parental involvement plays a crucial role in supporting children's reading development, with activities such as reading together, using interactive learning tools, and fostering a reading-friendly environment. With adequate support from both the school and home environments, early reading difficulties can be minimized, allowing students to develop effectively and comprehend texts proficiently.

Keywords: Early reading; Literacy difficulties; Similar letters; Reading motivation; Multisensory learning.

ABSTRAK

Kemampuan membaca permulaan merupakan tahap penting dalam pendidikan dasar karena menjadi fondasi bagi perkembangan literasi siswa di jenjang berikutnya. Namun, banyak siswa kelas 1 SD mengalami kesulitan mengenali huruf, membedakan huruf yang memiliki bentuk serupa, mengeja kata dengan benar, serta memahami isi bacaan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengidentifikasi kesulitan membaca permulaan pada siswa kelas 1 SD di SDN Keranggan, Tangerang Selatan. Metode yang digunakan dalam penelitian ini adalah deskriptif kualitatif dengan teknik observasi, wawancara, dan studi dokumentasi sebagai metode pengumpulan data. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa beberapa siswa menghadapi hambatan dalam mengenali huruf dan mengeja kata dengan benar, serta kesulitan memahami isi teks bacaan. Selain itu, siswa juga mengalami kesulitan dalam membedakan huruf yang memiliki kemiripan bentuk, seperti "b" dan "d" atau "p" dan "q," yang menyebabkan kesalahan dalam akurasi membaca. Untuk mengatasi permasalahan ini,

guru menerapkan berbagai strategi, seperti penggunaan media visual, pendekatan multisensori, dan latihan membaca berbasis gambar, yang terbukti memberikan dampak positif terhadap keterampilan membaca siswa. Selain itu, keterlibatan orang tua berperan penting dalam mendukung perkembangan membaca anak melalui kegiatan seperti membaca bersama, penggunaan alat pembelajaran interaktif, serta menciptakan lingkungan yang mendukung minat baca. Dengan dukungan yang baik dari lingkungan sekolah dan keluarga, kesulitan membaca dapat diminimalisir sehingga siswa dapat berkembang dengan baik dan mampu memahami bacaan secara efektif.

Kata Kunci: Membaca permulaan; Kesulitan literasi; Huruf mirip; Motivasi membaca**;** Pembelajaran multisensori.

INTRODUCTİON

Reading is known to be a fundamental skill that must be mastered by every individual. (Prihatin & Sari, 2020) states that reading is an activity to understand the meaning of every action, either by vocalizing or simply internalizing. Reading can serve as a way to make people intelligent and broad-minded. (Muammar, 2020) emphasizes that reading is the key to acquiring knowledge and a means to open the window to the world. (Harianto, 2020) categorizes reading as a thought process that involves comprehension, storytelling, and interpretation of various written symbols, requiring the engagement of vision, eye movement, inner speech, and memory.

In the context of writing skills, reading also serves as a means to improve and improve language skills. (Ai Resti et al., 2023) argue that reading is an activity carried out so that a person can understand a problem in the form of writing, in line with (Astia, 2020). Reading is also defined as a process that is carried out to improve writing skills that is carried out by utilizing spoken and non-spoken language (S. N. Fadillah et al., 2024) in line with (A. A. Fadillah et al., 2022). Reading not only depends on the cognitive aspect, but is also influenced by biological, psychic, and environmental factors. (Asih Riyanti, 2021) explained that reading is an activity that applies language skills by involving biological, psychological, and environmental factors. Letters, syllables, words, and sentences become the objects of reading in the early stages of learning to read. Reading is also an interaction process in understanding language symbols through various strategies to understand written meanings, involving visual, thinking, psycholinguistic, and metacognitive activities (Fadhillah, 2019). Based on this, reading plays a role as a basic skill as well as a cognitive process in understanding the text more deeply.

Taking into consideration the views of previous experts, it can be concluded that reading is a complex process that involves the recognition and understanding of written symbols that involve various strategies and cognitive activities to understand the meaning of the text and increase knowledge and insight to acquire new information and be able to think critically.

In literacy learning, early reading is a crucial initial stage for elementary school students (Muslih et al., 2022). This stage focuses on letter, syllable, word, and sentence recognition, as well as the ability to articulate with proper pronunciation and intonation. (Hilmiyahl et al., 2023) emphasizes that reading literacy is part of the four fundamental language skills that play a role in written communication. (Nurfadhillah et al., 2023) explains that the early reading stage aims to enable students to clearly articulate written words, allowing them to read well and fluently. Dalman (2014) defines early reading as a skill that must be learned and mastered by readers. In the early reading stage, children are introduced to the form of alphabet letters from A to Z, which they then pronounce and memorize according to their sounds (Muammar,

2020). Juliati (2022), as cited in (Asip et al., 2022), defines early reading as the learning process of reading for early-grade elementary school students (grades I to II).

From various expert perspectives, it was found that beginning reading is an early stage in literacy learning that focuses on the recognition of letters, syllables, words, and sentences as well as the ability to voice with proper pronunciation and intonation. This stage plays an important role in building the foundation for good and fluent reading skills for elementary school students, as solid reading skills will contribute to the ability to understand and process written information well.

Referring to the research that has been conducted, initial reading is a mandatory skill that must be mastered by elementary school students so that they can develop academically and have a strong foundation in literacy. In line with the views of experts, the initial reading stage not only serves as a starting foundation for the development of more complex literacy skills at the next level of education but also plays a role in forming positive reading habits from an early age. Referring to the previous study, reading begins is not only about getting to know letters and words, but also helps build a more systematic mindset and supports children's cognitive development optimally for their readiness to face academic challenges in the future.

Although beginning reading has a crucial role in building students' literacy skills, the process doesn't always go smoothly. Early reading difficulties can arise due to obstacles from internal and external factors that affect students' ability to understand and process written texts. (Dwi L et al., 2021) explains that early reading difficulties refer to a condition where students face challenges in reading, triggered by various factors that cause them to struggle, be unable to spell words properly, read syllables slowly, and have below-average reading skills. Internal factors include intelligence, interest, talent, and motivation, while external factors involve family environment, school environment, and community environment (Yani et al., 2021).

(Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022) explain that early reading difficulties in students include challenges in letter recognition, distinguishing between vowels and consonants, reading individual words, replacing or omitting letters, neglecting punctuation, and struggling to combine letters and syllables into words. It can be defined that early reading difficulties are conditions in which students experience obstacles in the process of learning to read, caused by internal and external factors. Internal factors include intelligence, interests, talents, and motivation, while external factors include the family, school, and community environment. This difficulty can be characterized by an inability to recognize and spell letters, difficulty distinguishing vowels and consonants, sluggishness in reading syllables. Thus, early reading difficulties have an impact on students' reading skills that are below average and require appropriate interventions to improve their literacy skills.

Students facing early reading difficulties exhibit several characteristics that hinder their literacy development. According to Nini Subini (2015), these challenges include inaccurate reading, such as irregular voice intonation and slow reading. Additionally, students may struggle to pronounce word rhythms correctly and proportionally. Some frequently confuse similar letters or words, such as mixing up *b* and *d*, *p* and *q*, or misreading words like *palu* (hammer) as *lupa* (forget) and *kuda* (horse) as *daku* (me). They also experience difficulty distinguishing between words with slight differences, such as *rusa* (deer) and *lusa* (the day after tomorrow) or *batu* (stone) and *buta* (blind). Furthermore, students tend to repeat words

while spelling and guessing phrases, struggle with proper spelling, and have trouble understanding the texts they read. Some face confusion with short words like *jadi* (become), *dari* (from), *dan* (and), and *ke* (to). Lastly, they often fail to remember punctuation marks, such as periods and other necessary symbols (Muammar, 2020). These various obstacles indicate the importance of early interventions and effective teaching strategies to improve literacy skills among elementary students.

Based on the initial observations and interviews conducted with the homeroom teacher of Grade 1B at SD Negeri Keranggan, South Tangerang, on Thursday, September 26, 2024, with Mrs. Maria Ulfa, S.Pd., as the homeroom teacher of Grade 1B, several challenges were identified in early reading instruction for first-grade students. It was found that five out of 26 students in Grade 1B were still struggling with reading fluency. The difficulties were attributed to several factors. First, not all students had developed strong reading skills, as many entered elementary school without basic literacy and numeracy skills. Second, some students struggled with memorizing the alphabet letters and differentiating similar-looking letters, which hindered their ability to read words composed of multiple letters.

Image 1. Interview with SDN Keranggan Teacher

Findings on the difficulties of early reading among first-grade elementary school students align with education policies in the Merdeka Curriculum, which emphasize competency-based learning and flexible teaching methods tailored to students' characteristics. Ministerial Regulation No. 7 of 2022 sets the standards for basic literacy learning outcomes, while Ministerial Decree No. 56/M/2022 highlights the need for adaptive strategies to enhance students' reading skills. In this context, a multisensory approach and the use of interactive visual media can be solutions that align with these policies. Further studies can explore the implementation of these regulations in helping students overcome reading obstacles in the early stages of learning.

State of the Art and Novelty

Research on early reading difficulties among first-grade elementary school students has been conducted by various scholars, revealing different types of challenges students face. Some common difficulties include distinguishing similar letters, recognizing letters, spelling syllables, pronouncing consonant blends, diphthongs, and using punctuation correctly. The factors contributing to reading difficulties can be categorized into internal factors, such as intellectual ability, motivation, interest, and emotions, and external factors, including family support, learning environment, and teaching methods. Efforts to address these challenges

involve the use of engaging learning media, individualized learning strategies, early intervention programs, and collaboration between teachers and parents.

The novelty of this study lies in exploring the relationship between students' reading interest and their difficulty in distinguishing visually similar letters, such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q." However, this study does not merely view reading difficulties as a technical issue but also examines how students' motivation influences their ability to differentiate similar letters.

METHODS
Type and Design

The approach used in this study is a qualitative approach. (Agustini et al., 2023) explains that a qualitative approach applies a naturalistic perspective to examine issues related to phenomena, documents, individuals, symbols, or social symptoms. Therefore, qualitative research focuses on problems in social life that are set within real conditions or naturally occurring settings that are complex, broad, and more detailed.

Qualitative research involves data collection methods such as observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis, aiming to understand the meaning attributed by individuals or groups to the issues being studied. This study was conducted at SD Negeri Keranggan Kota Tangerang Selatan, located at Jalan Koceak, Keranggan, Setu, Kranggan, Tangerang Selatan, Kota Tangerang Selatan, Banten 15314.

Data and Data Sources

The data sources used in this qualitative research are descriptive data, which are collected for further analysis. The types of data used in this study include:

- **Primary data**: Data gathered directly by the researcher through field data collection.
- **Secondary data**: Information obtained from other sources.

Data collection technique

Based on (Sugiyono, 2022) explanation, data collection is a crucial stage in research as it aims to obtain important information. In this study, the researcher used observation, interviews, and documentation as data collection methods. The observation conducted was non-participant observation, as explained by (Elfrinato & Lesmana, 2022), in line with (Abdussamad, 2021). This means that the researcher observed without directly engaging in the activities being studied. Interviews, as defined by (Fadhallah, 2021), involve direct communication between the interviewer and the respondent to gather information or data. There are three types of interviews: structured, unstructured, and semi-structured (Nawawi & Hardari, 1992, as cited in (Fadhallah, 2021)). In this study, the researcher conducted structured interviews with first-grade teachers, students, and parents to identify obstacles in early reading learning. Documentation serves as a complementary technique in data collection, aiming to gather supporting materials such as interview photos and relevant literature related to the study (Abdussamad, 2021). This technique strengthens findings obtained from interviews and observations in qualitative research.

Data analysis

The researcher employs the Miles and Huberman data analysis model, which consists of three main steps: data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing. These stages of data analysis can be described as follows.
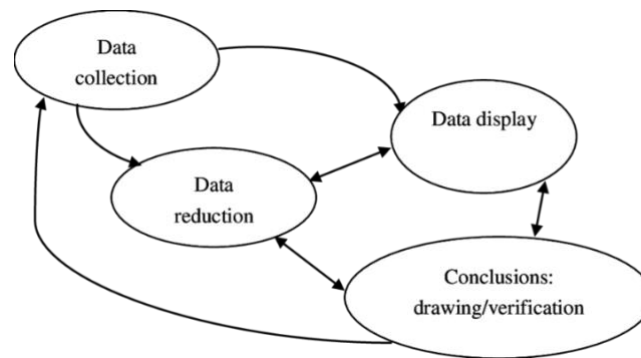
Miles and Huberman's Analysis Technique
Source: ResearchGate.com

As an effort to verify the accuracy of the presentation of valid data and have a level of trust, a validity verification methodology was applied with a triangulation approach that included source triangulation, technique triangulation, and time triangulation. (Sugiyono, 2022), explained that triangulation is a check of data from various sources by uniting various ways, and various times, where there are three categories, namely source triangulation, method triangulation, and researcher triangulation. One method to verify the validity of data is triangulation.

First, source triangulation is carried out by utilizing data obtained from observations and data collected through interviews with teachers, students and students' parents. Second, technical triangulation includes verifying the validity of data using research results obtained through various data collection techniques, such as observation, interviews, and documentation studies. To ensure the validity of the information in this study, a triangulation technique was carried out. Third, time triangulation In this context, the researcher collects information related to obstacles in reading learning for grade 1 elementary school students such as research conducted in the morning.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the observations conducted on first-grade students in Class 1B on Friday, May 2, 2025, to analyze early reading difficulties at SDN Keranggan, South Tangerang, it was found that several students faced challenges in reading. These difficulties included recognizing letters, distinguishing similar letters, spelling words correctly, and understanding the content of a text.

The research findings indicate that five students in Class 1B are experiencing difficulties in reading, consisting of two female students with the initials **A.A** and **F.A**, and three male students with the initials **Y.A, M.F**, and **N.R**. **A.A** and **N.R** tend to stutter when reading sentences and frequently repeat words after spelling them out. **M.F** and **F.A** struggle with recognizing letters that have similar shapes, such as b, d, p, q, u, w, m, and n. Meanwhile, **Y.A** faces challenges in accurately segmenting words, leading to incorrect word breaks.

Image 2. Observation and Interview with Students (**Y.A**) and (**A.A**)

The difficulty in understanding the content of the text was observed in all students involved in the study, indicating that they are still focused on letter and word recognition rather than comprehending the meaning of the reading material. According to (Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022), early reading difficulties include letter omission or substitution, difficulty in reading individual words, and a lack of attention to punctuation. This finding is supported by research conducted at SDN Keranggan, where students struggling with reading face challenges not only in letter recognition but also in reading complete words.

The analysis of the teacher interview indicates that reading difficulties are largely caused by a lack of letter and sound recognition, which leads students to guess words rather than read them correctly. Additionally, insufficient reading practice at home contributes to these challenges. Teachers have made efforts to address these issues by implementing strategies such as introducing vowel letters first and repeatedly practicing words, using image-based reading exercises, and fostering a habit of reading stories to improve students' literacy skills.

Meanwhile, interviews with parents revealed that children struggle with reading fluently and distinguishing similar words, which affects their confidence in reading. Most parents have made efforts to assist their children by reading together, using letter cards, and implementing word games. However, they still face challenges in fostering their children's motivation to read. According to (Dwi L et al., 2021), students who experience reading difficulties tend to struggle with spelling, read at a slow pace, and exhibit below-average literacy skills. Here is a summary table illustrating the reading difficulties experienced by students based on observation and interview results:

Table 1. Observation and Interview Results of Student

Initials	Slow Reading	Difficulty Recognizing Letters	Difficulty Pronouncing Words	Difficulty Understanding Text
A.A	√	Does not recognize the letters "q" and "w"	Struggles to pronounce diphthongs and consonant blends	√
N.R	√	Does not recognize the letter "q"	Struggles to pronounce diphthongs and consonant blends	√

Y.A	√	Mistakenly recognizes the letters "p" and "q"	Can identify the letter but struggles to pronounce it correctly	√
M.F	√	Struggles to differentiate "p" and "q"	Struggles to read full sentences after spelling out words	√
F.A	√	Struggles to differentiate "p" and "q"	Struggles to read full sentences after spelling out words	√

Based on the observations and interviews conducted, the reading challenges faced by first-grade students in Class 1B exhibit similar patterns, primarily caused by several key factors. These difficulties include struggles in recognizing letters and sounds, insufficient reading practice, and obstacles in distinguishing visually similar letters.

The most dominant students in this study are **A.A, N.R**, and **Y.A**, who experience significant difficulties in reading fluently. They tend to spell out words one by one and struggle to read full sentences smoothly. Meanwhile, **M.F** and **F.A** face challenges in recognizing letters with similar shapes, such as b, d, p, and q, which often leads to reading errors.

Difficulty in word segmentation was observed in students like **Y.A**, who struggle with forming words into coherent sentences. Additionally, all students face challenges in understanding the meaning of the text, indicating that they still have difficulty connecting the words they read to the underlying meaning within the passage.

Image 3. Interview with Parents (**A.A**) and (**M.F**)

Interviews with teachers and parents revealed a gap between reading instruction methods at school and at home. Teachers have implemented various strategies to assist students struggling with reading, such as introducing vowel letters first and repeatedly practicing words. They also use image-based reading exercises and word cards to enhance letter and word recognition. Additionally, encouraging students to read stories regularly helps improve reading fluency and text comprehension. However, parents reported that their children still face difficulties in understanding the content of texts due to a lack of fundamental reading skills.

According to Subini (2015), the characteristics of students with early reading difficulties include slow reading, frequent letter reversals, and difficulty understanding the content of the text they read (Muammar, 2020). This is consistent with the findings of a study at SDN Keranggan, where students experiencing reading difficulties exhibited similar error patterns, such as hesitant reading, mistakes in recognizing similar letters, and a lack of comprehension of the reading material.

This study shows that early reading difficulties among first-grade students at SDN Keranggan include challenges in recognizing similar-looking letters such as b and d or p and q. These findings align with Juliati's (2022) research, which highlights the importance of early phoneme recognition, as well as the study by (Nurfadhillah et al., 2023) on the effectiveness of letter cards in helping students distinguish letter shapes. A lack of reading practice at home is also a major factor affecting students' motivation, as stated by (Muslih et al., 2022). Interviews with parents revealed that the absence of systematic reading strategies at home leads to minimal literacy stimulation outside of school.

However, this study has several limitations, such as a small sample size and a short observation period, making the results not yet widely generalizable. Social aspects and family environment have also not been deeply analyzed, even though these factors significantly influence students' reading motivation. For future research, a broader scope and exploration of technology-based learning methods and multisensory approaches are recommended to enhance reading effectiveness. A longitudinal study is needed to observe the impact of learning strategies on students' literacy development over time. Through collaboration between teachers and parents, as well as a structured learning environment, early reading obstacles can be minimized, allowing students to develop optimal reading skills and text comprehension.

Intervention approaches such as letter-card-based reading exercises, multisensory techniques, and interactive visual media can serve as solutions to improve students' literacy skills. Moreover, strong collaboration between teachers and parents is essential to ensure a consistent and supportive learning environment. With the implementation of systematic and continuous strategies, reading challenges can be minimized, enabling students to develop their literacy skills effectively.

This study has identified patterns of early reading difficulties experienced by first-grade elementary school students, including challenges in letter and sound recognition, distinguishing similar words, and achieving reading fluency. These findings align with the study conducted by (Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022), which states that early reading difficulties include challenges in letter recognition, word-by-word reading, and a lack of attention to punctuation. Additionally, this research successfully designed intervention strategies that can be applied in early-grade reading instruction, such as the use of letter cards, image-based learning methods, and habitual reading as a tool to enhance students' literacy skills. The multisensory approach implemented in this study refers to the method developed by (Meilina et al., 2023), which demonstrates that multisensory techniques can improve early reading skills by engaging multiple senses—visual, kinesthetic, auditory, and tactile.

In an effort to improve the quality of education, this study also encourages increased collaboration between teachers and parents to create more effective and sustainable learning methods, both in school and at home. The role of parents in supporting children's reading skills

has been discussed by (Aysah & Maknun, 2023), who emphasizes that parental involvement in guiding children's reading impacts students' reading speed and comprehension. Parental support can be provided through various activities, such as encouraging children to read together, providing books that match their reading level, and fostering reading interest in enjoyable ways. Additionally, communication between teachers and parents is crucial in identifying students' learning difficulties and designing more effective strategies to overcome them. With a structured and collaborative approach, students can not only improve their reading skills but also build motivation and confidence in understanding texts more deeply.

CONCLUSION

Early reading difficulties experienced by first-grade students at SDN Keranggan include slow reading speed, difficulty recognizing similar-looking letters, and inaccurate word segmentation. Based on observations and interviews, it was found that some students still read hesitantly, often repeat words after spelling them out, and struggle to understand the text content.

Teachers have attempted to overcome these obstacles through various strategies, such as introducing vowel letters first, picture-based reading exercises, and storytelling routines. These approaches have had a positive impact on some students, but challenges remain in building motivation and consistency in reading practice at home. Education policies like the Merdeka Curriculum emphasize the importance of flexibility in teaching methods and competency-based approaches. Ministerial Regulation No. 7 of 2022 sets the basic literacy standards, while Ministerial Decree No. 56/M/2022 underscores the need for adaptive strategies in reading instruction. The findings of this study align with these regulations, highlighting how multisensory approaches and the use of visual media can help students overcome reading difficulties.

Moving forward, this study recommends stronger collaboration between teachers and parents in creating a conducive reading environment. Additionally, further research is needed to examine the effectiveness of technology-based learning methods and multisensory approaches in enhancing students' literacy skills. With more systematic strategies and the right environmental support, early reading obstacles can be minimized, allowing students to develop optimal text comprehension skills.

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