

Improving Reading Skills of Grade II Students at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja Through the Phonics Method

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Abstract

This classroom action research aimed to improve the reading skills of Grade II students at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja through a structured phonics method. The study used Kurt Lewin's action research model, which consists of planning, action, observation, and reflection. The research was conducted in two cycles involving 26 students as the research subjects. Data were collected through a diagnostic reading test, reading performance tests, observation sheets, and teacher reflection notes. The data were analyzed descriptively by comparing students' mean scores, mastery percentages, reading speed, and blending accuracy across the pretest, Cycle I, and Cycle II. The findings showed a consistent improvement in students' reading skills. The mean reading score increased from 55.38 in the pretest to 69.80 in Cycle I and 81.30 in Cycle II. Classical learning mastery increased from 26.9% at the initial stage to 65.4% in Cycle I and 92.3% in Cycle II. Reading speed also improved from 5.1 words per minute to 15.7 words per minute, while blending accuracy reached 89.6% at the end of Cycle II. These results indicate that the structured use of phonics, supported by sound cards, phonemic songs, and repeated blending practice, helped students recognize phoneme-grapheme relationships and read words more accurately. The findings are limited to the classroom context studied and should be interpreted as evidence of improvement through classroom action rather than as a controlled test of effectiveness.

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Introduction

Reading skill is a fundamental literacy competency that serves as an important prerequisite for students' success at subsequent levels of education (National Reading Panel, 2000). Reading ability is not only related to recognizing letter symbols, but also to understanding the relationship between letters and sounds, blending sounds into words, reading words accurately, and understanding the simple meaning of the text being read (Ehri, 2020). In the early grades of elementary school, beginning reading skills need to be developed systematically because they serve as the foundation for mastering other subjects.

Challenges in mastering beginning reading are still found in various educational settings, including elementary schools in areas with limited resources. This condition is consistent with educational literacy reports that emphasize the need to strengthen reading ability from the early grades (Kementerian Pendidikan, Kebudayaan, Riset, dan Teknologi, 2023; Mullis et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). In the context of SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja, preliminary observations and diagnostic reading tests showed that most Grade II students had not yet achieved the reading

mastery criterion established in this study. The operational mastery threshold used was a score of 70. Of the 26 students, 19 students, or 73.1%, had not reached this threshold, while 7 students, or 26.9%, had achieved initial mastery. The main difficulties identified included recognizing letter sounds, blending sounds into syllables and words, and reading simple words fluently.

This condition was related to reading instruction practices that still tended to emphasize repeated visual memorization of words. Such an approach may help students recognize certain words, but it does not always help them adequately understand phoneme-grapheme relationship patterns. As a result, students experience difficulty when encountering new words because they do not yet have strong decoding, blending, and segmenting strategies. In beginning reading instruction, the ability to connect sounds with written symbols is an important component that needs to be trained in a structured manner (Ehri, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000).

The phonics method is an approach that emphasizes the recognition of the relationship between language sounds and letter symbols. Through this method, students are trained to recognize phonemes, connect phonemes with graphemes, blend sounds into syllables or words, and segment words into their constituent sounds. Studies on reading instruction show that systematic phonics can help early-grade students improve reading accuracy and initial fluency, especially when implemented through targeted, gradual, and consistent practice (Ehri, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2019).

Several previous studies have shown that the phonics method can support beginning reading ability in both early childhood learners and elementary school students (Alfian, 2021; Arianti, 2023; Ariyanti, 2022; Istiqomah et al., 2023; Putri, 2023; Satriawan et al., 2023; Sihombing & Damanik, 2024; Tiani et al., 2023; Tsabitah & Arifin, 2023; Tufahati et al., 2025). The use of attractive learning media has also been reported to support students' interest and engagement in reading literacy activities (Apriliani & Radia, 2020; Fikriyah et al., 2020). However, the implementation of phonics in regular Grade II elementary school classrooms with limited facilities still needs to be developed contextually. In this study, phonics was adapted by using analog media that are easy for teachers to create and use, such as colored sound cards, phonemic songs, and blending exercises using consonant-vowel and consonant-vowel-consonant word patterns. This adaptation was chosen so that instruction would not depend on digital media and could still be implemented in classrooms with limited facilities.

The novelty of this study lies in its effort to integrate structured phonics instruction with interactive analog media in the context of a Grade II elementary school classroom. This novelty is presented proportionally, namely as the development of reading instruction practices based on the specific needs and conditions of the classroom, rather than as a claim that the phonics approach has never been used before. In this study, the phonics method was adapted using simple and accessible analog media, such as sound cards, phonemic songs, and repeated blending exercises. These media were selected because they are practical, easy for teachers to prepare, and suitable for classrooms with limited technological facilities. Therefore, the study offers a contextual contribution to the implementation of phonics-based reading instruction in elementary schools.

The focus of this study was to improve the learning process through classroom action cycles. Through these cycles, the teaching strategy could be planned, implemented, observed, and refined based on the results of reflection. This process allowed improvements in students' reading skills to be observed gradually from the initial condition to Cycle I and Cycle II. In addition, the reflection conducted after each cycle provided important information for

improving the instructional process, particularly in strengthening students' phoneme recognition, blending ability, reading fluency, and confidence in reading simple words.

Based on this background, the research questions were formulated as follows: (1) How is the phonics method based on interactive analog media implemented among Grade II students at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja? and (2) How do students' reading skills improve after the implementation of the phonics method in Cycle I and Cycle II? Accordingly, this study aimed to describe the implementation of the phonics method and to analyze improvements in students' reading skills based on several indicators, including mean reading scores, classical learning mastery, reading speed, and blending accuracy. Through these indicators, the study sought to provide a clear description of students' reading development after the implementation of structured phonics instruction.

Research Method

Research Design

This study used a classroom action research (CAR) design based on Kurt Lewin's model, which consists of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Lewin, 1946). This design was chosen because the main purpose of the study was to improve the reading instruction process in the classroom through actions that were designed, implemented, observed, and refined based on reflection results.

Research Subjects and Location

The study was conducted in Grade II at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja, Ogan Ilir Regency, South Sumatra. The research subjects were all 26 Grade II students, consisting of 14 male students and 12 female students aged 7-8 years. Because the study involved all students in the target class, the appropriate terms were research subjects or total class, not purposive sampling. The inclusion criteria included active participation in learning, absence of severe hearing or visual impairment based on teacher information, and parental or guardian consent.

Action Procedure

The study was carried out in two cycles. In the initial stage, the teacher and researchers administered a diagnostic reading test to determine students' initial ability. Cycle I focused on recognizing vowel and basic consonant phonemes, understanding sound-letter relationships, and practicing simple syllable blending using sound cards. The reflection results from Cycle I showed that some students still needed more intensive practice and media variation. Therefore, Cycle II was strengthened through the use of phonemic songs, blending exercises with consonant-vowel-consonant word patterns, and repeated word reading in small groups.

Research Instruments

The research instruments consisted of: (1) a diagnostic reading test to identify students' initial ability; (2) a reading skills test covering phoneme recognition, decoding, blending, reading fluency, and simple comprehension; (3) an observation sheet for student activities and learning implementation; and (4) teacher reflection notes. The reading test was prepared in the form of reading passages and lists of simple words appropriate for Grade II students. The observation sheet was used to record students' responses, emerging difficulties, and the effectiveness of media use. The assessment indicators were developed by referring to components of beginning reading, particularly phoneme recognition, phoneme-grapheme

relationships, decoding, and simple comprehension (Ehri, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000). The content validity of the instruments was examined through expert review and discussion with the classroom teacher to ensure that the assessment indicators were aligned with the objectives of beginning reading instruction.

Data Analysis Technique

The data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis was conducted by calculating mean scores, the percentage of classical learning mastery, reading speed, and blending accuracy at the pretest, Cycle I, and Cycle II stages. Classical learning mastery was calculated based on the number of students who achieved a minimum score of 70. Qualitative analysis was conducted by reviewing observation notes and teacher reflections to identify learning barriers and improvements in the action. This study did not use regression analysis or multivariate inferential tests because the number of subjects was limited and the research design focused on improving the learning process through action cycles.

Research Findings and Discussion

Initial Condition

The diagnostic test results showed that the reading ability of Grade II students still needed improvement. The students' initial mean score was 55.38. Of the 26 students, 7 students, or 26.9%, had achieved mastery, while 19 students, or 73.1%, had not reached the minimum score of 70. The most frequent difficulties were consistently recognizing letter sounds, blending sounds into syllables, and reading simple words fluently.

Cycle I Results

In Cycle I, instruction focused on phoneme recognition and simple blending practice using sound cards. Students were asked to observe letters, pronounce sounds, blend sounds into syllables, and then take turns reading simple words. The results of Cycle I showed an improvement compared with the initial condition. The mean reading score increased to 69.80 with a standard deviation of 7.91. Classical learning mastery reached 65.4%, or 17 of the 26 students.

Table 1. Development of Phoneme Recognition Ability in Cycle I

Meeting	Mean Score	Increase
1	58.20	-
2	63.50	+5.30
3	67.10	+3.60
4	69.80	+2.70

Although improvement occurred, the reflection results showed that several students still read hesitantly and were not yet consistent in blending sounds into words. The average reading speed at the end of Cycle I was still 8.2 words per minute, with a blending accuracy of 72.5%. Therefore, Cycle II required strengthened practice, more varied media, and more intensive assistance for students who had not yet achieved mastery.

Cycle II Results

In Cycle II, the action was improved by adding phonemic songs, blending exercises using consonant-vowel-consonant word patterns, and repeated reading practice in small

groups. The teacher also provided direct feedback when students mispronounced sounds or blended phonemes incorrectly. These improvements made students more active and more confident in reading new words.

Table 2. Blending Ability and Reading Speed

Meeting	Reading Speed (words/minute)	Blending Accuracy (%)
1	8.20	72.50
2	11.40	81.30
4	15.70	89.60

The results of Cycle II showed better improvement. The mean reading score reached 81.30 with a standard deviation of 6.24. A total of 24 out of 26 students, or 92.3%, achieved mastery. Reading speed increased to 15.7 words per minute, while blending accuracy reached 89.6%. The two students who had not yet achieved mastery still had difficulty distinguishing certain vowel sounds and required more personalized assistance.

Summary of Reading Outcome Development

Table 3. Summary of Pretest, Cycle I, and Cycle II Results

Stage	Mean Score	SD	Classical Learning Mastery	Reading Speed
Pretest	55.38	-	26.9% (7 students)	5.1 words/minute
Cycle I	69.80	7.91	65.4% (17 students)	8.2 words/minute
Cycle II	81.30	6.24	92.3% (24 students)	15.7 words/minute

Table 3 shows that improvement occurred gradually from the initial condition to Cycle I and Cycle II. Initial mastery of 26.9% indicates that a small number of students were already able to read according to the mastery threshold. Thus, the initial mastery data were aligned with the preliminary observation results, which showed that 73.1% of students had not yet achieved mastery. The increase in mastery to 92.3% at the end of Cycle II shows that the action provided successfully helped most students achieve the learning target.

Discussion

The implementation of the phonics method helped students understand the relationship between language sounds and letter symbols. In the initial stage, some students still memorized word forms without understanding the sound elements that composed them. Through phonics practice, students began to recognize letter sounds, blend sounds into syllables, and read simple words more systematically. This process supports the view that beginning reading instruction requires phonological reinforcement and explicit decoding practice (Ehri, 2020; National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgerson et al., 2019).

The use of colored sound cards helped students focus their attention on the relationship between letters and sounds. These media are easy to create, do not depend on digital devices, and can be used flexibly in both whole-class and small-group activities. The addition of phonemic songs in Cycle II also made learning more engaging and helped students remember sounds through repetition. Therefore, analog media can serve as a relevant alternative for schools with limited technological facilities, in line with studies emphasizing the importance of learning media in supporting students' interest, engagement, and early reading ability (Apriliani & Radia, 2020; Istiqomah et al., 2023; Tufahati et al., 2025).

The increase in reading speed from 5.1 to 15.7 words per minute indicates development in reading fluency. However, this figure should be interpreted carefully because it cannot yet be equated with higher reading fluency standards in large-scale literacy assessments (Mullis et al., 2023; OECD, 2023). This result is more appropriately interpreted as internal classroom progress after the intervention, rather than as evidence that students had reached international standards. Therefore, continued practice is still needed so that reading speed and reading comprehension can continue to improve.

The two students who had not achieved mastery by the end of Cycle II indicate that the phonics method still needs to be complemented by differentiated instruction. Students who have difficulty distinguishing vowel sounds or blending certain phonemes require more personalized practice, such as multisensory approaches, individual assistance, and repetition using example words that are closer to their everyday experiences. The need for individual assistance is consistent with findings that beginning reading instruction should be adapted to students' characteristics and learning difficulties (Ariyanti, 2022; Satriawan et al., 2023).

In general, the findings of this study show that the phonics method can serve as a strategy for improving reading instruction in Grade II at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja. However, because this study used a classroom action research design without a control group and involved only one class, the results are not intended to claim broad causal effectiveness. These findings are more appropriately understood as evidence of improved reading skills in the classroom context studied through actions that were designed and refined gradually.

Conclusion

This classroom action research shows that the implementation of structured phonics can improve the reading skills of Grade II students at SD Negeri 26 Tanjung Raja. Improvement was indicated by the increase in the mean reading score from 55.38 in the pretest to 69.80 in Cycle I and 81.30 in Cycle II. Classical learning mastery also increased from 26.9% in the initial condition to 65.4% in Cycle I and 92.3% in Cycle II. In addition, reading speed and blending accuracy showed positive development after the use of sound cards, phonemic songs, and repeated reading practice. This conclusion is limited to the classroom context studied and is not intended to be generalized to all elementary schools.

Recommendations

Early-grade teachers are advised to integrate phonics systematically into beginning reading instruction, particularly through activities involving letter-sound recognition, blending, segmenting, and reading practice with simple word patterns. Schools can support the implementation of this method by providing easy-to-use analog media, such as sound cards, syllable cards, and simple reading materials. Students who still experience difficulties need to

receive individual assistance and multi-sensory practice. Future research is recommended to use a broader design involving more than one class and to add follow-up data to examine the sustainability of students' reading development (Ehri, 2020; Torgerson et al., 2019).

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