Early Reading Learning in a Private Elementary School in Bandung
An Ethnographic Study

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ABSTRACT

Various research has found that students' reading abilities in Indonesia need to be improved. Several difficulties are the cause of students' low early reading skills. To effectively solve these problems requires a deeper understanding of how early reading learning is currently implemented. This paper discusses an ethnographic study at a private elementary school in Bandung City, Indonesia, aiming to gain an in-depth understanding of early reading learning in that school. The respondents in this study are four teachers and 195 students of first-grade classes who participated in early reading learning. Data was collected via interview and observation to be analyzed based on component analysis focusing on the methods and techniques, media, and difficulties of early reading learning. The findings show that teachers mostly employed the SAS method and observational learning (modeling) technique to teach early reading learning. They also used teaching media such as books, flashcards, direct objects, videos, and hand puppets. The most prominent difficulties that students faced in early reading learning included difficulties in recognizing letters, pronunciation being influenced by mother tongue, difficulties in combining double consonants/vowels sound, difficulties in reading fluently, and difficulties in comprehension.

Keywords: Early reading learning, elementary school, reading difficulties.

1. INTRODUCTION

Reading ability is one of the most useful basic skills for students. Good reading skill is the foundation for developing literacy that will determine students' success in the future, both in academics and general. In fact, reading skill is an important skill for improving quality of life (Grabe & Stoller, 2019; Lonigan, Burgess, & Anthony, 2000). According to Tarigan (2008), reading is one of the four basic language skills. Reading, in general can be described to gain and interpret information from a text (Grabe & Stoller, 2019). A more specific definition of reading is a complex and dynamic cognitive process that involves the abilities to identify and recognize letters, read words, find meaning, and translate written symbols (text) into sound through syntactic and semantic integration, and to comprehend the meaning of that text so that the reader can get the message that the writer delivers through the words (Dalman, 2013; Tarigan, 2008; Abidin, 2010; Javed, 2015).

Reading learning is usually conducted in two steps, early reading, and advanced reading. Early reading learning focuses on students' ability to translate written symbols (letters) into sounds and comprehend the meaning of what they read (Garcia & Cain, 2014). It aims to improve students' skills in recognizing letters, identifying words and sentences, understanding the main ideas of sentences, and restating what they read (Sunendar & Wassid, 2008; Abidin, 2010; Pratiwi & Ariawan, 2017). To summarize, early reading learning is a learning activity provided to lower grade students so that they will be able to recognize letters, read the written symbols correctly, fluently, and naturally, and comprehend the meaning of the text they are reading.

Early reading learning is given to lower grade students (first and second graders) (Zubaidah, 2013; Darmiyati & Budiasih, 1997). In early reading learning, students develop the ability to pronounce the written symbols. This ability will be the foundation for reading in later stages of school. Early reading learning specifically aims to enable students to recognize letters, read syllables, words, sentences, and comprehend texts. In other words, early reading learning aims to equip students with the skills to comprehend and read text using

natural intonation as a foundation for reading at advanced levels (Widhiyanto & Gunarhadi, 2014). As Leahy and Fitzpatrick (2017) mentioned, good early reading skills can support students' future academic performances.

In Indonesia, students' reading ability is considered low. PIRLS assessment (Mullis, Martin, Foy, & Drucker, 2012) found that in terms of students' reading skills, Indonesia ranked 42nd of 45 countries. Meanwhile, PISA (OECD, 2018) reported that Indonesia ranked 72nd of 77 countries in student's reading ability. Indonesian students' low reading skills are caused by many factors, including students' difficulties in recognizing and memorizing letters, in combining letter sounds into syllables, in combining syllables into words, and in reading sentences fluently (Kahraman, 2016; Rizkiana, 2016; Pratiwi & Ariawan, 2017; Oktadiana, 2019; Pratiwi, 2020). These difficulties need to be solved to improve students' reading ability.

Initial observation in the research site showed that first graders' early reading skills were low. More than half (58%) of the students demonstrated early reading skills in the moderate category, while 28% of students showed a low level of early reading skills. 11% of students had good early reading skills, and only two students (1%) demonstrated very well early reading skills. This means that first graders' early reading skills in that private elementary school in Bandung need to be improved.

To effectively solve early reading difficulties requires in-depth understanding of the current condition of early reading learning in Indonesia's elementary schools, including how early reading learning is conducted, what teaching methods, techniques, and media are used, and what difficulties students face. The present study is an ethnographic study conducted in a private elementary school in Bandung City. It aims to gain an in-depth understanding concerning early reading learning in that school. Aspects of early reading learning analyzed in this study include learning methods and techniques, early reading media, and early reading difficulties experienced by students.

2. METHOD

The present study is an ethnographic study, which is an attempt to explain a particular culture (Spradley, 2007). In this case, culture is understood as an idea, experience, or knowledge that a particular group uses to guide their conduct (Spradley, 1997). The ethnographic study is conducted through domain analysis, taxonomy analysis, component analysis, and theme analysis to understand the observed phenomenon in-depth. This study aimed to explain a phenomenon, namely early reading learning implementation in the research site. It particularly focused on the teaching methods and techniques for early reading, learning media in early

reading, and students' difficulties in early reading learning.

2.1. Research Site and Participants

The present study was conducted on lower grade classes, i.e., grade 1 and grade 2, in a private elementary school in Bandung City. The participants in this study were four early reading teachers and 195 first-grade students.

2.2. Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative method, using an ethnographic approach, to collect and analyze the data. Data was collected via interviews with teachers and field observations. Data were then categorized based on the aspects of early reading learning implementation being observed. Component and theme analysis was conducted on the relevant data to get the result of the study.

2.3. Research Procedure

The research procedure implemented in this study followed the procedure proposed by Spradley (2007). The steps were: 1) selecting a social phenomenon to study, 2) observing the phenomenon, 3) taking field notes, 4) conducting descriptive observation, 5) formulating domain analysis, 6) conducting focused observation, 7) formulating taxonomy analysis, 8) conducting selective observation, 9) formulating component analysis, 10) formulating theme analysis, 11) drawing a conclusion.

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Teaching Methods and Techniques for Early Reading Learning

There are several methods to implement early reading learning. They are letter (alphabet) method, spelling method, syllabic method, whole word method, global sentence method, and structural analytic-synthetic (SAS) method (Abidin, 2010). Interviews with teachers showed that they implemented these methods in their classes. In the letter or alphabet method, students were introduced to letters one by one in the order of the alphabet (Piasta & Wagner, 2010). Then, they were taught how to form syllables by combining letter sounds. The spelling method was similar to the alphabet method except that students were introduced to the letters based on their phonemic sounds (Reed, 2012). This method was sometimes also called the phonic method.

The syllabic method began with introducing students to syllables (Setyowati & Sukmawan, 2016). Once students were able to recognize syllables, they were taught how to combine syllables into meaningful words and further to combine words into sentences. Then,

students were guided to break the sentences into their constituent words and syllables again. Reading learning started with a meaningful word that students commonly found and used in their daily lives in the whole word method. The word was broken down into its syllables before being put together again into the original word. The global sentence method was based on reading a whole sentence (Halimah, 2014). A sentence was broken down into smaller linguistic units so that students could identify the words, syllables, and letters that comprised it.

SAS method focused on the structural, analytical, and syntactical aspects of sentences. Early reading learning using this method began with the structural aspect, i.e., the whole sentence. When students were able to read sentences, the analytical aspect was implemented by guiding students to break down those sentences into words, syllables, and letters. The next step after students understood the concepts of words, syllables, and letters and how each element was related to one another was the syntactic aspect. The syntactic aspect was implemented by combining the smaller elements (letters, words, syllables) into the structural form of a whole sentence that was introduced in the beginning (Muhyidin, Rosidin, & Salpariansi, 2018). These early reading learning methods could be implemented using different teaching techniques, including question-and-answer, exercise, task, and modeling.

Field observations showed that the most frequent method teachers implemented in early reading learning in the private school were the spelling method. According to one of the teachers,

> "[for students] who are not familiar with letters will be taught to recognize letters first before moving on to syllables. When [students are] able to read syllables, the lesson continues with reading words and reading sentences" (EE, interview, 2020).

The teachers deemed that the spelling method was suitable for students who were not yet fluent in reading or unfamiliar with letters. In the spelling method, teachers introduced students to how to sound the letters. When students were familiar with the letters and easily recognized them, teachers gradually guided students to combine the letter sounds (spelling) into syllables. Then, teachers guided students to combine words and sentences until they were able to read fluently. Teachers assessed students' early reading skills through reading demonstration (Reed, 2012; Akhadiah, 2001).

The second most frequently implemented method in the private elementary school was the SAS method. In this method, teachers started early reading by asking students to break down a simple sentence into its constituents (words, syllables, and letters) and recombine those elements into a whole sentence. In the interview, Teacher EE stated

> ". . . But I sometimes challenge students to read the sentence first, to vary [the lesson]. [It is] to see if they are able to recognize the words or syllables that form the sentence." (EE, interview, 2020)

This was congruent with the description of the SAS method outlined by Muhyidin et al. (2018). Muhyidin et al. mentioned that the SAS method began with the structural aspect of the whole sentence. The analytical aspect was implemented by guiding students to break down sentences into words, syllables, and letters. The syntactic aspect was implemented by combining the smaller elements (letters, words, syllables) into the structural form of a whole sentence that was introduced in the beginning.

In addition to the two teaching methods, teachers also implemented the syllabic method, global sentence method, and whole word method in early reading learning. However, these methods were not used as frequently as spelling and SAS methods.

In regard to techniques to teach early reading, field observation showed that teachers mostly implemented the modeling (demonstration) technique. Teachers demonstrated examples of how to read to students and asked students to imitate the example. Using this technique, teachers made sure that students read correctly and fluently.

3.2. Teaching Media for Early Reading Learning

Based on interviews with teachers, it was known that the primary source and media of early reading learning in the research site were textbooks. However, the four teachers also utilized other media to aid the learning process. According to Teacher RM, early reading learning that had been implemented in the school mostly relied on books and flashcards. Regarding this, Teacher EE argued that lower grade students preferred early reading learning that involved more interesting media, such as video or computer. The use of computers in early reading learning helped students in improving their ability to recognize letters and create words. Teacher EE also mentioned that she often showed a video pertaining to the topic being learned in early reading learning, such as a video of The Alphabet Song. In addition, Teacher DR also utilized computers (equipped with overhead projector and speaker) as media to implement early reading learning, particularly by

> ". . . watching the video [through] overhead projector [and] reading while singing along" (DR, interview, 2020).

Besides books, computers, overhead projectors, videos related to reading materials, and flashcards, teachers also used other media to aid in early reading learning. Such media included hand puppets or finger

puppets, direct objects (familiar objects that students recognize), and compact discs. However, teachers admitted that those media had been used so frequently that most students felt that the early reading learning process was boring. Teachers also stated that they needed more innovative, modern, and interesting media to reengage students in early reading learning.

3.3. Students' Difficulties in Early Reading Learning

The most prominent difficulty in early reading learning that the observed students displayed was the difficulty of recognizing and memorizing letters. Field observation showed that students had difficulties in reading certain letters, particularly those that they did not see too often, those that had nearly similar shapes, and those that sounded similar. This finding indicated that there was a problem with students' visual discrimination ability. Visual discrimination ability is the ability to differentiate the shape of letters they read (Jamaris, 2014).

This finding was congruent with findings of previous studies (Oktadiana, 2019; Pratiwi & Ariawan, 2017; Rizkiana, 2016) that lower grade students had difficulties in combining letters, recognizing letters, and memorizing certain letters. In addition, studies conducted by Yani (2019), Pratiwi (2020), and Windrawati, Solehun, and Gafur (2020) mentioned that among the personal factors that led to early reading difficulties was the low ability to memorize letters.

Based on interviews and field observations, it was found that students' failure in reading letters was not entirely due to students not recognizing the letters. Even though students could recognize the letters and knew how to sound them, some students had difficulties in properly pronouncing those letters. It was particularly because students tended to pronounce the letters in a strong local dialect, Sundanese, which was their mother tongue. This happened because Bahasa Indonesia was a second language for most students. In the process of second language learning, it was common for students to experience a language interference process. Chaer and Agustina (2004) mentioned that interference was a process of using elements of one's first language in a second language. In this case, students used Sundanese pronunciation to read letters in Bahasa Indonesia. Language interference caused students to pronounce /ve/ as /pe/, /ef/ as /ep/, and /zed/ as /jet/.

These difficulties were carried over to the next stages of early reading. Since students had problems with reading letters, their ability to read syllables was hindered. Field observation showed that language interference caused students to pronounce syllables using Sundanese dialect, which was quite different from Bahasa Indonesia. For example, students pronounced the sound /d/ at the end of '*osed*' and '*lukad*' as /t/. In addition, /b/ sound at the end of '*wijab*' was pronounced /p/ and syllables ending in vowels were read with Sundanese dialect.

This finding indicated that students' difficulties in reading letters affected their ability to read syllables properly. This was in line with Rizkiana's (2016) finding that students had difficulties combining letters into syllables. Furthermore, Pratiwi and Ariawan (2017) found that first graders experienced difficulties in spelling, reading diphthongs, double vowels, and double consonants. Oktadiana (2019) further confirmed that lower grade students in Indonesia experienced difficulties in reading syllables.

Field observation also showed that difficulties in reading double vowels or double consonants occurred in word reading as well. It was particularly apparent in words containing double consonant 'ng'. Some students often added /g/ sound when reading such words, hence /ingin/ was pronounced /inggin/. As Oktadiana (2019) concluded, students' difficulties in reading letters and syllables affected their ability to combine syllables into words. This finding was also congruent with studies by Rizkiana (2016) and Pratiwi and Ariawan (2017) that lower grade students had difficulties in spelling and reading words.

In terms of reading sentences and reading comprehension, the main problem identified in field observation was that students could not finish reading the provided short passage in a timely manner. It meant that those who failed to finish reading were not fluent enough in reading sentences. Since they did not finish the passage, they missed important information they needed to answer comprehension questions related to the passage. This problem was inseparable from the previous difficulties. In other words, students' difficulties in recognizing and memorizing letters, combining sounds into syllables, and combining syllables into words, as well as language interference, affected their skills in reading sentences fluently and comprehending the text they read. Students' problem in reading comprehension was also apparent in their difficulties in answering questions pertaining to 'why' something happened in the story. As Rizkiana (2016) stated, first graders usually had difficulties in understanding the text they were reading.

Interviews and field observation also showed that students would feel bored with early reading learning delivered using traditional teaching media such as flashcards, textbooks, direct objects, videos, and hand puppets. Students' boredom was apparent in their short span of attention towards the topics or examples of early reading skills. Even though using a computer and overhead projector might be interesting enough for students to pay attention to teachers' explanations and examples, students seemed to have difficulties maintaining their attention (focus) for a long time. Most

students displayed signs of boredom such as looking around the room, daydreaming, talking to their classmates, and fidgeting in their seats.

4. CONCLUSION

Teachers primarily used the spelling method and SAS method, implemented using modeling/observational learning, to teach early reading learning in a private elementary school in Bandung. Teaching media utilized by these teachers were traditional media, such as textbooks, videos, flashcards, and hand puppets. This study recommends that teachers complement early reading learning with the use of more modern media, internet-based media, to make early reading learning more interesting for students. Students' difficulties in early reading learning included problems in memorizing and recognizing letters, combining sounds into syllables, reading words and sentences, and understanding the text they read. An early reading learning model that can attract students' interest and maintain students' attention is necessary to solve these problems. The model should also improve students' motivation to read to be more focused and persistent in early reading learning.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The first author contributed to conducting the research and writing the report, while the other authors contributed to the supervisory role before, during, and after the research.

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