

## Profile of Early Reading Skills Among First-Grade Elementary Students

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### Abstract

*The problem addressed in this research concerns the early reading skills of First Grade of elementary school students, who are in a transition period from Kindergarten (TK) to elementary school (SD). The purpose of this research is to determine the early reading skills of First Grade elementary school students in Kecamatan Ceper. This research uses a descriptive qualitative research method. The steps in this research includes determining the research subjects, preparing research instruments, conducting reading tests using the instruments, analysing the test results, and drawing conclusions. The instrument of data collection used in this research are tests and documentation. The subjects of this research consist of 35 First Grade of elementary school students in Kecamatan Ceper. The test was conducted on 35 students using an early reading instrument consisting of five test items: reading vowel letters, consonant letters, syllables, basic words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, and affixed words), and simple sentences. Based on the tests that have been conducted, the results show that there are 22 students or around 63% who scored below the minimum passing grade of 75. So, from the data above, it can be concluded that the early reading skills of First Grade elementary school students in Kecamatan Ceper are underperforming, since more than half of the students scored below the passing grade.*

**Keywords:** *Early Reading Skills, Elementary School*

### Abstrak

Permasalahan dalam penelitian ini terletak pada keterampilan membaca permulaan peserta didik kelas 1 SD yang merupakan masa peralihan dari jenjang Taman Kanak-kanak (TK) ke jenjang SD. Tujuan penelitian ini adalah untuk mengetahui keterampilan membaca permulaan pada peserta didik kelas 1 Sekolah Dasar di Kecamatan Ceper. Metode penelitian kualitatif deksriptif digunakan pada penelitian ini. Langkah-langkah yang dilakukan dalam penelitian ini adalah menentukan subjek penelitian, menyusun instrument, melakukan tes membaca menggunakan instrument, menganalisis hasil tes, dan membuat kesimpulan. Instrumen pengumpulan data yang digunakan pada penelitian ini adalah soal test dan dokumentasi. Subjek penelitian terdiri dari 35 peserta didik kelas 1 SD di Kecamatan Ceper. Tes dilakukan kepada 35 peserta didik menggunakan instrumen membaca permulaan dengan 5 butir soal terdiri dari membaca huruf vokal, huruf konsonan, suku kata, kata dasar (kata benda, kata sifat, kata kerja, dan kata berimbuhan), serta kalimat sederhana. Berdasarkan tes yang sudah dilaksanakan diperoleh hasil bahwa terdapat 22 peserta didik dengan persentase 63% mendapat skor di bawah KKM yaitu 75. Jadi dari data di atas, dapat disimpulkan bahwa keterampilan membaca permulaan peserta didik kelas 1 SD di Kecamatan Ceper masih rendah, karena lebih dari setengah peserta didik yang menjadi subjek penelitian mendapat skor di bawah KKM.

**Kata kunci:** Keterampilan Membaca Permulaan, Sekolah Dasar



## INTRODUCTION

Education implemented in Indonesia is a planned endeavor to realize a student-centered teaching and learning process, aimed at developing students' internal potential. This process seeks to equip learners with religious spiritual strength, self-control, personality, intelligence, noble character, and the skills necessary for themselves, society, the nation, and the state, as mandated by the Law of the Republic of Indonesia No. 20 of 2003 concerning the National Education System, Chapter I, Article I, Paragraph 1 (Indonesia, 2003). Education can be acquired through educational units which organize formal, non-formal, and informal pathways. Formal education, ranging from primary to higher education, remains the most common pathway in Indonesia. Primary education, specifically Elementary School (SD), is a formal educational institution catering to children aged 7-12 years, as stipulated in the Government Regulation of the Republic of Indonesia No. 17 of 2010 concerning the Management and Implementation of Education (Indonesia, 2010).

In accordance with Law No. 35 of 2014 concerning Child Protection, every child has the right to receive education and teaching for personal development and intellectual growth according to their interests and talents (Indonesia, 2014). Elementary-aged children, particularly first graders, undergo a transition from Kindergarten (TK)—which is predominantly play-based—to Elementary School, which introduces basic instructional theories. Education in elementary schools fosters a culture of reading, writing, and arithmetic (literacy and numeracy) for students, especially in the first grade, as a foundation for further learning. This transition often results in learning obstacles in basic literacy and numeracy (*calistung*), particularly in reading skills. According to Circular Letter No. 1839/C.C2/TU/2009 issued by the Department of National Education, Kindergarten education focusing on the introduction of reading, writing, and arithmetic should not be taught directly as independent subjects (National, 2009). This policy aligns with the developmental stages of kindergarten-aged children, where literacy introduction is conducted through a play-based approach.

Preliminary observations at SD Negeri 1 Klepu, Ceper District, revealed that only 4 out of 19 first-grade students are fluent readers. The remainder are struggling or stuttering while reading. Some are capable of pronouncing CV-CV (Consonant-Vowel) syllable combinations but have not mastered CV-CVC patterns; furthermore, three students have not yet memorized several letters of the alphabet. Students encounter specific difficulties in distinguishing between the letters "b" and "d", "m" and "n", as well as rarely used letters such as "v", "x", "f", and "q". This occurs despite the *Kurikulum Merdeka* requiring students to read full sentences utilizing prefixes and suffixes. These obstacles are exacerbated by the post-kindergarten transition, where students are accustomed to play patterns without systematic phonics instruction.

Early reading skills are essential for lower-grade students (Grades 1 to 3), as they serve as the foundational stage toward advanced reading skills, namely reading comprehension. The aspects of early reading skills that must be mastered include the recognition of letter shapes, phonemes, syllables, words, and sentences. Early reading skills encourage students to recognize letters or sequences of letters as linguistic sounds using specific techniques, emphasizing fluency and clarity (Muammar, 2020). Understanding the stages of early reading is vital for effective learning. According to Darmiyati and Budiasih (Muammar, 2020), the stages of early reading include: First, the pre-reading stage, where students are taught proper sitting posture, book placement on the desk, how to hold a book, turning pages correctly, and observing images or text. Second, the reading stage, where students learn the pronunciation and intonation of simple words and sentences (by imitating the teacher) and familiarize themselves with frequently used letters (introduced gradually up to 14 letters). These stages serve as benchmarks for determining student achievement, spanning from mechanical aspects (posture) to cognitive aspects (phonemic sounds).

Based on the expert opinions above, it can be concluded that the early reading stage requires a systematic study to map students' actual abilities. Methodologically, this research focuses on describing the early reading abilities of first-grade students by referring to indicators of letter recognition and syllable pronunciation. These descriptive results will serve as a database to determine precise intervention models to overcome literacy barriers during the Kindergarten-to-Elementary transition. Mastery of early reading in lower grades relies heavily on phonological awareness. A relevant approach is the phonics method, which emphasizes the systematic relationship between letters and phonemes. The phonics method introduces letters and their sounds, which are then combined into syllables, words, and eventually sentences (Tsabitha & Arifin, 2023). The stages of the phonics method involve: (1) reading CV-CV syllables, (2) reading CV-CVC syllables, (3) reading words with double vowels or diphthongs, and (4) reading words with consonant clusters. Through this method, students do not merely memorize letter shapes but construct sounds into meaningful syllables and words, thereby accelerating the transition from symbol recognition to functional reading ability.

Considerable research has examined early reading skills as a common issue in lower grades. Relevant previous studies include Muliawanti et al. (2022), titled "Analysis of Reading Comprehension Ability of Grade III Elementary School Students." While both studies focus on lower-grade students, the distinction lies in the type of reading skill and the grade level; Muliawanti focuses on reading comprehension in Grade 3, whereas this study focuses on early reading in Grade 1. A second relevant study by Pratiwi (2020), titled "Analysis of Early Reading Skills of Elementary School Students: A Case Study of Grade 2 Students," also discusses early reading but differs in its subject, focusing on Grade 2 rather than Grade 1. The objective of this research is to determine the early reading skills of first-grade elementary school students.

#### METHOD

The approach employed in this research is a qualitative approach, specifically utilizing a descriptive qualitative research design. This approach was selected because the study focuses on describing the early reading skills of first-grade elementary school students. Qualitatively, research methods are essentially tools for meaning-making or interpreting phenomena, whether manifested in the actors or the products of an action (Saleh, 2023). Consequently, this qualitative framework allows the researcher to understand reading instruction phenomena based on the direct experiences of both students and teachers. Quantitative data, such as percentages and scores, are utilized solely as guides to identify the typology of students' learning difficulties, which are subsequently analyzed through a qualitative lens. The research subjects consist of first-grade teachers and students. Specifically, the participants include 2 teachers and 35 students. The study was conducted at two sites: SD Negeri 1 Klepu, with 19 students, and SD Negeri 2 Klepu, with 16 students. Both schools are located within the same administrative area in Klepu Village, Ceper District, Klaten Regency.

The data explored regarding early reading skills include student performance in letter recognition, synthesizing letters into syllables, combining syllables into words, and constructing words into simple sentences. Furthermore, students' reading fluency and specific difficulties are also recorded as data points. Data sources are categorized into primary and secondary sources. Primary data sources include the first-grade students as the main subjects and the first-grade teachers as key informants. Secondary data sources comprise documentation of reading test instruments, grade lists, and teacher notes. The research procedure was carried out through several stages: (1) the preparation stage, involving the development of early reading skill assessment instruments and socialization with teachers; (2) the implementation stage, where the researcher assisted in conducting the early reading tests using the prepared instruments; (3) the data collection stage, where information was gathered from test

results and documentation such as photographs; (4) the analysis stage, where collected data were analyzed qualitatively by emphasizing the percentage of students according to their early reading stages; and (5) the reporting stage, where the analysis results were compiled into a comprehensive research report describing the findings.

Data collection techniques included testing, interviews, and documentation. Testing was conducted to measure the existing early reading skills of first-grade students. The assessment tool consisted of five scopes: reading vowels, consonants, syllables, words (nouns, adjectives, verbs, and words with affixes), and simple sentences. In-depth interviews were conducted with teachers as key informants to gain insight into students' backgrounds regarding their reading fluency and classroom-level obstacles. The interview tools included interview guides, field notes, or recording devices. Interview results were reduced through a coding process based on phonetic barriers (vowels and double consonants) and morphological barriers (affixes). Documentation in the form of photographs or videos capturing the testing process and student results served as supporting evidence.

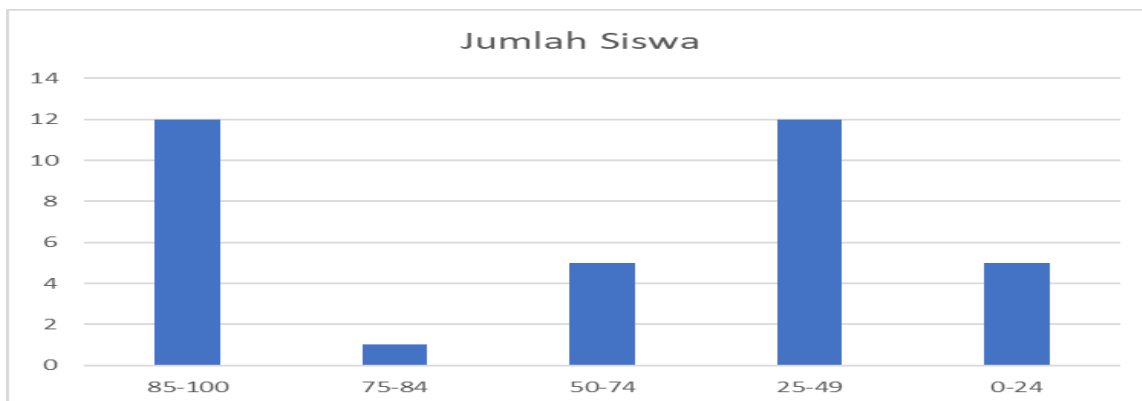
Data analysis followed the Miles and Huberman interactive model, consisting of: (1) data reduction, involving selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data into essential information; (2) data display, organizing information into descriptive narratives for clarity; and (3) conclusion drawing and verification, interpreting the data to fulfill research objectives while ensuring validity. The categories analyzed spanned the stages of reading letters, syllables, and words, up to full sentences. Achievement percentages served as preliminary data to categorize the typology of student abilities. Subsequently, the researcher performed a deep analysis of students' error patterns in pronouncing phonemes and morphemes. Data validity was ensured through technical triangulation by comparing reading test results with in-depth teacher interviews and classroom observations. Ethical considerations were maintained by obtaining formal permission from the schools. The identities and data of teachers and students were kept confidential to ensure that participation was safe, voluntary, and respectful of the participants' rights.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Based on the early reading skills test conducted with 35 first-grade students at SD Negeri 1 Klepu and SD Negeri 2 Klepu, the data obtained show fairly varied achievement scores. The results of the early reading skills test are presented in the form of an interval table and a bar chart as follows.

**Table 1. Frequency Distribution of Early Reading Skills Scores**

No	Score Range	Number of Students	Percentage (%)	Category
1	85-100	12	34	Highly Proficient
2	75-84	1	3	Proficient
3	50-74	5	14	Beginning to Develop
4	25-49	12	34	Underdeveloped
5	0-24	5	15	Very Low
Total		35	100	



**Figure 1. Results of the Early Reading Skills Test for First Grade Elementary School Students**

The test results reveal a sharp disparity in reading abilities among first-grade elementary school students. Generally, the students' reading profiles are polarized into two extreme poles: a group that has achieved reading automaticity and a group that remains at the basic symbol recognition stage. This data underscores a significant gap between proficient and non-proficient readers. The largest clusters are found in the "highly proficient" and "not yet developed" categories, each consisting of 12 students. This indicates high inequality in early reading skills within the classroom. Furthermore, data shows that some students scored within the 0–24 range ("very low" category), suggesting a lack of understanding of some or even all alphabetical symbols (A–Z). The most frequent score range, 25–49, held by 12 students in the "not yet developed" category, indicates a need for intensive instruction in syllable recognition. Meanwhile, the "starting to develop" category (scores 50–74) includes 5 students, suggesting a need for deeper focus on word recognition, including nouns, adjectives, verbs, and affixed words. Based on these findings, a significant degradation in ability occurs when students transition from symbol recognition to sound synthesis. While the average score for letter recognition reached 80%, the score for syllable blending dropped drastically to 45%. This implies that the primary obstacle is not alphabetical memorization, but rather the physiological and cognitive ability to blend consonant-vowel (CV) structures.

Students who fulfilled the minimum proficiency criteria—serving as an indicator of developmental stage achievement—were further classified into two categories: 'highly proficient' and 'proficient.' The 'highly proficient' category constituted the largest group, comprising 12 students with a score range of 85–100. Students in this category have mastered all reading components, including vowels, consonants, syllables, words (verbs, nouns, adjectives, and affixed words), and simple sentences. Within this group, various typologies were observed: some read fluently without spelling, while others read haltingly or used spelling techniques; regardless, all successfully read the test items correctly through their respective methods. Additionally, the "proficient" category includes one student who can read words but has not yet mastered simple sentences.

The discussion regarding the high percentage of non-proficient students (63%) illustrates that early reading skills in Ceper District have not been evenly mastered. Qualitatively, this phenomenon indicates the presence of systematic barriers and gaps. Students in the "not yet developed" category tend to recognize letters A–Z randomly but fail when asked to synthesize them into meaningful and correctly pronounced words. Conversely, students in the "very low" category cannot yet recognize the alphabet in its entirety. This is corroborated by interviews with the first-grade teacher at SD Negeri 1 Klepu, who stated that many students can recite letters A through Z when

singing together, yet become confused when letters are randomized or combined (e.g., merging 'b' and 'a' into 'ba') due to incomplete letter mastery.

Obstacles encountered by students are specifically identified in three areas. First, difficulties with diphthongs (double vowels such as *au*, *ai*, and *oi*) indicate weak phonemic awareness in distinguishing single vowels from gliding vowels. Second, challenges with digraphs (double consonants such as *ng*, *ny*, and *kh*) suggest that students are still at a simple decoding stage and are unable to perform complex sound encoding. Third, obstacles in reading affixed words often stem from the presence of double consonants within those words (e.g., *menyanyi*, *bermain*, *menggoreng*). This points to a barrier in morphological awareness, where students may recognize the base word but lose meaning or fail at pronunciation when encountering consonant clusters.

The finding that students struggle with digraphs and diphthongs demonstrates that their reading development is stalled at the alphabetic decoding stage. Theoretically, according to the phonics method, beginning readers should be capable of sound synthesis or blending. The failure to arrange syllables into meaningful words indicates that the literacy instruction they received may have emphasized rote memorization of letter shapes over the understanding of phonemes (sounds).

The low scores of the majority of students can be attributed to several factors. **Internal factors** include learning readiness; notably, one student skipped Kindergarten B and moved directly from Kindergarten A to Elementary School. This likely impacted their linguistic maturity, which would have been more optimally developed through a full preschool cycle. **Pedagogical factors** involve the teacher's use of conventional spelling methods, which makes it difficult for students to process affixed words or complex sentence structures. The lack of differentiated instruction further contributes to the low scores. **Cognitive factors** include students with special needs who have not yet recognized all alphabetical letters. Lastly, **external factors** involve the influence of the home and family environment. Proficient students likely receive additional stimulation at home or in study groups, whereas the other 63% rely solely on the reading process provided at school.

Students scoring 100 demonstrate mature reading readiness, while those scoring below 25 require specialized remedial intervention. Two students in the "very low" category present unique challenges: one did not complete the full two-year preschool cycle (Kindergarten A and B), leading to suboptimal developmental readiness, while the other is a student with special needs experiencing a different cognitive development pattern compared to their peers.

In conclusion, the high non-proficiency rate of 63% reflects a literacy gap triggered by a lack of learning readiness and the ineffectiveness of conventional instructional methods. The specific difficulties with digraphs, diphthongs, and affixes prove that students have not yet reached the stage of reading automaticity. This situation necessitates a shift in approach from mere letter recognition toward strengthening phonemic awareness, supported by appropriate media and teaching methods. Educators are encouraged to move away from conventional techniques in favor of **differentiated instruction** to accommodate the diverse cognitive development levels present within the classroom, ranging from proficient readers to those requiring fundamental assistance with letter recognition.

## CONCLUSION

Based on the qualitative descriptive data analysis of early reading skills, it can be concluded that there is a high gap in early reading skills within the classroom. A total of 13 out of 35 students (37%) have achieved high proficiency, with score ranges of 75–100. However, a larger number of students, 22 out of 35 (63%), have early reading skills below the minimum standard.

Qualitatively, the main obstacle identified is the low ability to pronounce letter sounds. Students in the lower group experienced difficulties in recognizing letter sounds and symbols, as well as in synthesizing syllables. The low scores of the majority of students indicate variations in readiness in reading when entering the elementary school (SD) level.

The results of the study bring several important implications in the field of education, namely pedagogical implications and curriculum implications. The pedagogical implications encourage teachers to no longer use a classical, 'one-size-fits-all' approach and instead apply differentiated approach, where teaching must be adjusted to the readiness levels of each student. Curriculum implications need to be considered in terms of strengthening literacy, which is essential to be implemented from an early age as a primary foundation. Early reading skills must be mastered by students because they influence cognitive development and the ability to understand all other subjects in the classroom and at subsequent educational levels.

The results of this study can be used as recommendations for future research. Through practical recommendations, schools are advised to hold School Literacy Movement programs or special extra hours or reading lessons for students who have not yet achieved mastery, with a stronger focus on more intensive phonics-based methods. In addition, build collaborations with parents to supervise student's learning at home by creating a literacy-rich environment to support accelerated letter recognition.

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