



Implementation of Early Syllable Games to Improve Early Childhood Reading Learning

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Abstract:

This study aims to improve early childhood reading skills through the implementation of an Initial Syllable Game. The importance of this research lies in providing an engaging, play-based strategy that supports early literacy development in a child-centered learning environment. This study employed a descriptive qualitative approach conducted at TK Istana Balita Cheng Hoo involving 26 children in Group A2. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The research was implemented using cyclical stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection to systematically evaluate and improve the learning process. Data were analyzed inductively using descriptive qualitative techniques. The findings indicate that the Initial Syllable Game effectively enhanced children's ability to recognize, identify, and pronounce initial syllables. Improvements were observed in children's confidence, participation, and reading accuracy, with a gradual increase in performance categories from "needs guidance" to "good" and "very good." The play-based and interactive nature of the game also fostered motivation and positive classroom engagement. The study implies that structured syllable-based games can serve as an effective instructional strategy for strengthening early literacy skills in kindergarten settings. Furthermore, the cyclical reflective model demonstrated in this research provides a practical framework for teachers to continuously improve classroom instruction through systematic evaluation and adaptation.

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INTRODUCTION

Reading is recognized as a fundamental skill that shapes a child's cognitive development, personality formation, and future academic success. Reading not only functions as a tool to acquire knowledge, but also as a medium to instill values, sharpen sensitivity, and broaden children's perspectives (Alramamneh et al., 2023; Gotlieb et al., 2022; Mihret & Joshi, 2025). Early exposure to reading enables children to develop independence in learning and adaptability in facing future challenges. Therefore, cultivating reading habits from early childhood, particularly during the "golden age" of 0–6 years (Majorano et al., 2023), is essential because learning experiences at this stage are internalized effectively without coercion and formal pressure.

Reading is one of the four essential language skills and plays a central role in determining a person's level of comprehension and mastery of information. It is a cognitive process that involves understanding written symbols, interpreting meaning,

and constructing knowledge from text (Khadijah et al., 2022; Rakimahwati et al., 2022). Reading is not merely the act of recognizing letters or words but an active thinking process aimed at comprehending written messages (Mumtazah et al., 2023; Sutapa et al., 2021; Wenham et al., 2023). Through critical and creative thinking, readers gain deeper understanding and are able to interpret the author's intent. Thus, reading represents a complex interaction between visual recognition, phonological processing, and meaning construction.

Beginning reading, often referred to as early reading, is the foundational stage in this process. It involves recognizing letters, sounds, and simple symbols before progressing to syllable blending and word formation. Early reading activities typically include letter identification, phoneme recognition, and simple spelling exercises. Beginning reading involves the use of sound-symbol correspondence in simple sentences as part of children's cognitive development (Adams et al., 2023; Masnan et al., 2024; Utamimah et al., 2025). Early reading requires children to articulate language sound symbols to construct meaning (Fitri, 2022; Kaukko et al., 2021; Rad et al., 2022). Therefore, strengthening phonological awareness is a crucial component in early literacy development.

However, children often encounter various challenges during the beginning reading process. These challenges stem from both internal and external factors. Internal factors include intelligence, interest, talent, and motivation, while external factors involve family environment, school conditions, and community influences. In classroom practice, children frequently struggle with memorizing alphabet letters, distinguishing similar letter shapes, differentiating vowels and consonants, and blending letters into meaningful words (Agarwal & Sharma, 2024). Teachers also face constraints such as large class sizes, limited instructional time, lack of innovative teaching strategies, insufficient parental involvement, and inadequate learning facilities. These conditions may hinder the effectiveness of early reading instruction.

From a developmental perspective, children aged 4–6 years are generally in the pre-operational stage of cognitive development, where abstract thinking is still limited (Heß et al., 2024; Naman, 2025). Psychologically, children at this age prefer play-based activities rather than formal academic instruction. Consequently, conventional and monotonous teaching methods often reduce children's interest in reading. In addition, the increasing influence of television, digital gadgets, and recreational distractions further contributes to low reading interest among young children. These realities indicate the need for attractive, interactive, and child-centered learning strategies to foster early literacy engagement.

Play-based learning is widely acknowledged as an effective approach in early childhood education. The Indonesian Ministry of Education Regulation (Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014) emphasizes that early childhood learning should be interactive, inspiring, enjoyable, contextual, and child-centered. Through play, children can actively participate while developing creativity and independence according to their developmental stage (Halim & Su, 2023; Martzoukou, 2022; Masykuroh et al., 2024). Previous studies have shown that game-based literacy activities can improve motivation and participation in early reading instruction (Al Anshori et al., 2022; Gupta, 2023; Odekeye et al., 2023). However, many existing studies focus primarily on general letter recognition rather than specifically strengthening initial syllable awareness as a bridge between letter identification and word reading.

This gap highlights the need for structured syllable-based learning strategies that integrate phonological awareness with engaging play activities. The novelty of this study lies in the implementation of an Initial Syllable Game designed to systematically improve children's ability to recognize and blend initial syllables in a collaborative and competitive play setting. Unlike conventional reading drills, this approach combines visual media, peer interaction, repetition, and positive reinforcement within a classroom action research framework.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to improve early childhood reading skills through the implementation of an Initial Syllable Game. Specifically, this research aims to enhance children's ability to recognize, identify, and pronounce initial syllables accurately while fostering motivation and active participation in literacy learning. Through a cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection, this study seeks to provide practical and pedagogical contributions to early childhood literacy instruction.

RESEARCH METHOD

The study employed a descriptive qualitative approach to explore comprehensively and contextually the implementation of the Initial Syllable Game in improving early childhood reading skills. The qualitative design was selected because it allows the researcher to describe phenomena in their natural setting without testing hypotheses or examining statistical correlations (Matta, 2022). In qualitative research, the researcher serves as the key instrument who directly interacts with participants and interprets the data. A descriptive approach presents research findings in the form of detailed narratives supported by data excerpts to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under study.

The research was conducted at TK Istana Balita Cheng Hoo, located at Jalan Masjid Cheng Hoo No. 9, Surabaya. The participants were children in Group A2, totaling 26 students. The study focused on examining how the Initial Syllable Game was implemented in classroom learning activities and how it contributed to the development of children's early reading abilities. The natural classroom setting was maintained throughout the research to ensure authenticity and contextual relevance.

Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. Observation was conducted systematically using observation guidelines to record classroom interactions, children's participation, confidence, and reading performance during the game. Interviews were carried out directly with selected informants, including the classroom teacher and school representatives, using purposive and snowball sampling techniques to ensure that participants had relevant knowledge and experience related to the learning process. Documentation was used to complement observational and interview data.

Data analysis was conducted using descriptive qualitative techniques (Klingberg et al., 2024). The collected data were analyzed inductively, beginning with data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. The researcher organized and interpreted the data to identify patterns, themes, and meaningful insights regarding the implementation of the Initial Syllable Game. This analytical process enabled a systematic and comprehensive description of how the intervention influenced children's early reading development. The indicators of research success were reflected in the improvement of children's ability to recognize, identify, and pronounce initial syllables, as well as increased interest and active participation in the learning process.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Implementation of the Cycles

This classroom action research was conducted at TK Istana Balita Cheng Hoo involving 26 children in Group A2. The study applied the stages of planning, action, observation, and reflection in each cycle to improve children's early reading skills through the Early Syllable Game. In the initial reflection, it was found that most children were able to recognize and mention individual letters, yet they experienced difficulty when combining letters into syllables or simple words. Their reading skills were still limited to letter recognition rather than phonological blending. Based on this condition, the researcher designed an intervention in the form of an Early Syllable Game to strengthen children's ability to identify and read initial syllables.

During Cycle I, the teacher prepared a lesson plan aligned with language development indicators, particularly identifying groups of pictures with the same sound, recognizing initial sounds of objects, and mentioning pictures with the same initial syllable. The teacher also designed the rules of the Initial Syllable Game, prepared picture-word cards, initial syllable cards, baskets, and display stands, and developed an observation instrument with a scoring scale ranging from 0 to 3, categorized from "needs guidance" to "very good." The action stage was implemented according to the prepared lesson plan, while a collaborator observed the learning process. Two to three children participated in each round, searched for picture-word cards with the same initial syllable, and read them aloud with teacher guidance. Rewards in the form of stickers were given to increase motivation. The implementation was carried out across several meetings and followed the same procedural structure in each cycle, with improvements made based on reflection results. The cycle stages are summarized in the following Table 1.

Table 1. Stages of the Classroom Action Research Cycles

Stage	Description of Activities
Planning	Preparing lesson plans aligned with language indicators; designing the Early Syllable Game rules; preparing picture-word cards and syllable cards; developing observation and assessment instruments (score 0–3).
Action	Implementing the Early Syllable Game in small groups (2–3 children); guiding children to identify and read picture-word cards with the same initial syllable; providing rewards for achievement.
Observation	Collaborator observed children's participation, confidence, accuracy in selecting cards, and reading performance using the prepared scoring rubric.
Reflection	Analyzing strengths and weaknesses of the implementation; identifying children who still needed guidance; revising strategies for subsequent meetings to improve reading.

The cyclical implementation demonstrates a systematic effort to improve early reading skills through structured planning and continuous evaluation. Each stage contributed to refining the learning process, ensuring that instructional strategies were adjusted according to children's responses and performance. The repetition of the game activities across meetings provided consistent practice opportunities, which are essential in strengthening phonological awareness and early decoding skills.

The classroom action research model was effective in identifying learning gaps and implementing targeted interventions. The Early Syllable Game functioned not only as a learning medium but also as a diagnostic tool to observe children's reading development. The gradual improvement observed throughout the cycles suggests that interactive, play-based strategies can significantly support early literacy acquisition when implemented systematically and reflectively.

Reflective Analysis of Learning Outcomes

The observation results indicate that the implementation of the Early Syllable Game generated a highly positive response from the children. From the first meeting, most children showed enthusiasm and curiosity toward the learning activity. They eagerly volunteered to participate and demonstrated strong engagement during the game. This positive classroom atmosphere created supportive conditions for early reading development.

During the initial implementation, several children still experienced difficulties in identifying picture-word cards with the correct initial syllable. Some children selected incorrect cards, while others hesitated when asked to read the words aloud. These challenges reflect that their phonological awareness skills were still developing. Intensive guidance from the teacher was therefore necessary, particularly for children who were categorized as “needs guidance” and “fair.”

As the activity was repeated in subsequent meetings, noticeable progress began to emerge. Children became more confident when participating in the game and showed greater independence in selecting cards. The frequency of incorrect answers gradually decreased, indicating improved understanding of initial syllable recognition. This development suggests that consistent practice contributed significantly to strengthening early decoding skills.

The reward system also played an important role in increasing children’s motivation. The use of stickers as positive reinforcement encouraged children to participate actively and complete tasks enthusiastically. Children who received rewards expressed pride and excitement, while others were motivated to improve their performance. This indicates that extrinsic motivation supported the development of intrinsic interest in reading activities.

Peer interaction during the game further enhanced the learning process. Children who were waiting for their turn acted as supporters, clapping and encouraging their friends. This collaborative environment reduced anxiety and fostered a sense of belonging within the classroom. As a result, children felt more comfortable practicing reading in front of their peers.

The reflective analysis demonstrates that the Early Syllable Game effectively improved children’s early reading skills, particularly in recognizing and pronouncing initial syllables. The improvement was evident in the increased number of children achieving “good” and “very good” categories by the end of the cycle. The combination of play-based learning, repetition, teacher guidance, and positive reinforcement contributed to measurable literacy gains. Therefore, the strategy can be considered an effective approach for enhancing early reading competence in early childhood education settings.

Discussion

The findings from Cycle I demonstrate that the systematic implementation of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages contributed to structured improvements in early reading instruction. The initial reflection revealed that children were limited to letter recognition and had difficulty blending letters into syllables. This condition aligns with the view that early literacy development requires explicit phonological awareness training before children can decode simple words (Burke et al., 2023). Therefore, the introduction of the Early Syllable Game was an appropriate pedagogical response to the identified learning gap.

The implementation stage showed that structured play-based learning can create meaningful literacy experiences for young children. By engaging children in identifying picture-word cards with the same initial syllable, the activity stimulated both visual recognition and auditory discrimination skills. This approach is consistent with the principle that early childhood learning should integrate play and structured guidance to optimize developmental outcomes (Mastikawati et al., 2022; Yimit et al., 2024). The cyclical model allowed the teacher to refine strategies continuously based on observed classroom dynamics.

The reflective analysis of learning outcomes indicates gradual improvement in children's phonological awareness and reading confidence. Although some children initially required intensive assistance, repeated exposure to syllable recognition tasks reduced errors and increased independence. This supports the argument that repetition and guided practice are essential components in early decoding instruction (Khadijah et al., 2022). The improvement in performance categories from "needs guidance" to "good" and "very good" suggests that the intervention effectively strengthened foundational literacy skills.

Motivational factors also played a significant role in enhancing learning outcomes. The use of stickers as positive reinforcement increased children's enthusiasm and willingness to participate. Extrinsic rewards, when used appropriately, can stimulate engagement and reinforce desirable learning behaviors in early childhood settings (BZ et al., 2024). Moreover, peer encouragement during the game fostered a supportive social environment that reduced anxiety and promoted active participation.

The findings further highlight the importance of teacher facilitation in early literacy development. Teacher guidance during card selection and reading activities ensured that misconceptions were addressed immediately. This immediate feedback mechanism aligns with formative assessment principles, which emphasize ongoing monitoring and adjustment of instruction to support student progress (Kuncoro et al., 2025; Safitri & Lateh, 2025). The classroom action research design proved effective in identifying instructional weaknesses and implementing timely improvements.

This study contributes to the development of practical strategies for enhancing early reading skills in kindergarten settings. The Early Syllable Game offers an innovative yet simple approach that integrates phonological awareness training with play-based learning. The implications of this research suggest that early childhood educators should incorporate structured syllable-based games into literacy instruction to strengthen decoding skills systematically. Furthermore, the cyclical reflective model demonstrated in this study can serve as a framework for continuous professional improvement in early childhood classrooms.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of the Initial Syllable Game at TK Istana Balita Cheng Hoo effectively improved early childhood reading skills, particularly in recognizing and pronouncing initial syllables. The structured cyclical process of planning, action, observation, and reflection enabled continuous improvement in instructional strategies and children's learning outcomes. The play-based approach successfully increased children's motivation, participation, and confidence in reading activities. Gradual progress was evident from the improvement in performance categories and reduced errors in syllable identification. Therefore, the Initial Syllable Game can be considered an effective and engaging strategy for strengthening early literacy development in kindergarten settings.

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