

An Analysis of Early Reading Difficulties at First-Grade Students: A Case Study at MI Negeri 2 Jember

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Abstract:

Low levels of early literacy skills among some lower-grade students, including those at MI Negeri 2 Jember, suggest that the implementation of beginning reading instruction has not yet achieved optimal outcomes. This condition is reflected in students' difficulties in identifying letters, differentiating letter sounds, and reading syllables as well as simple words. The present study seeks to examine the types of early reading difficulties experienced by students and the factors contributing to these challenges. A descriptive qualitative approach was employed, utilizing classroom observations, diagnostic reading tests, and interviews as data collection techniques. The research participants consisted of several early-grade students identified as having difficulties in beginning reading skills. The findings indicate three dominant forms of difficulty, namely limited visual discrimination of letters, challenges in combining sounds into syllables or words, and low reading fluency. These difficulties are influenced by internal factors, such as students' learning readiness and cognitive abilities, as well as external factors, including the limited variety of instructional methods used by teachers and insufficient literacy stimulation in the home environment. The results highlight the importance of implementing appropriate and focused interventions, such as structured phonics-based instruction, the use of visual learning media, and individualized learning assistance. Through these strategies, schools are expected to enhance early literacy development and improve the overall effectiveness of beginning reading instruction.

Keywords: *Early Reading Difficulties, Early Grades, MI Negeri 2 Jember, Analysis.*

Introduction

Students' academic success depends on their reading skills, which are fundamental to literacy. Early reading skills are crucial in elementary school, especially in the early grades of Madrasah Ibtidaiyah (MI), as they help students understand various subject matter. Recognizing letters and sounds (phonemes), matching syllables, reading words, and simple sentences are all part of the early reading stage. Rahim (in Ihsanda et al., 2021) states that reading skills are the starting point for children's learning, and maturing these skills is crucial for their readiness for future learning¹.

Many elementary schools and Islamic schools still face challenges in early reading, despite it being a focus of the curriculum. Numerous studies have shown that early grade students generally

¹ Baiq Anggreni Ihsanda, Darmiany Darmiany, and Baiq Niswatul Khair, "Analisis Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Siswa Kelas II Di MI Raudatul Jannah Al Ma'arif," *Journal of Classroom Action Research* 4, no. 4 (2022): 27–34, <https://doi.org/10.29303/jcar.v4i3.2100>.

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struggle with phonological (connecting sounds and letters), decoding (spelling and blending syllables), and distinguishing between similar letters^{2,3,4}. Research conducted by Lestari & Ramadan (2024) shows that this problem directly impacts reading fluency and poor reading comprehension. Consequently, overall academic achievement is affected by this problem⁵. This literacy barrier can develop into a more serious problem later in life if not addressed early.

A similar phenomenon emerged at MI Negeri 2 Jember. Based on initial observations by first-grade teachers and the results demonstrated significant difficulties in early reading. They still struggled to read quickly, mismatch syllables, or distinguish certain letters. This condition indicates the need for the early reading stage. Various factors, both internal and external, contribute to reading problems that are not limited to the individual. Readiness to learn, phonological abilities, and cognitive development are internal factors, while external factors can stem from less varied learning methods, a lack of literacy stimulation at home, and a lack of parental guidance, as emphasized by research by Molinda & Ain (2025)⁶.

Previous research has addressed early reading difficulties, but most have focused on intervention models or the use of specific learning media. However, there is still little research specifically examining the types of early reading difficulties and their relationship to causal factors in the Madrasah context, particularly MI Negeri 2 Jember. This is where the novelty of this study lies: it provides a comprehensive diagnosis of the most common problems faced by first-grade students and the factors that influence them, based on actual field data.

Based on the background description, the purpose of this study is to identify and explain the types of early reading difficulties experienced by first-grade students at MI Negeri 2 Jember and to examine the factors contributing to these problems. It is hoped that these findings can serve as an empirical basis for teachers and madrasahs in creating more efficient learning strategies, media development, and early literacy intervention programs that are more appropriate for students.

Beginning reading is a crucial stage in literacy acquisition, where early grade students, particularly those in elementary schools (MI), begin to build connections between written symbols (letters)

² R Nurul Ain and Siti Quratul Ain, "Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Siswa Kelas 1 Sekolah Dasar" 13, no. 1 (2024): 1029–36.

³ Irfan Mulyani E Pulungan, "PERMULAAN DI KELAS II SD NEGERI 192 KOTANOPAN" (Universitas Islam Negeri Syekh Ali Hasan Ahmad Addary Padangsidimpuan, 2024).

⁴ Ulfiatul Inka Aprilia, Fathurohman Fathurohman, and Purbasari Purbasari, "Analisis Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Siswa Kelas I," *Jurnal Penelitian Dan Pengembangan Pendidikan* 5, no. 2 (2021): 227–33.

⁵ Lela Lestari and Zaka Hadikusuma Ramadan, "Faktor Penyebab Kesulitan Membaca Dan Dampaknya Terhadap Proses Pembelajaran Siswa Kelas II Sekolah Dasar," *Didaktika: Jurnal Kependidikan* 13, no. 001 (2024): 113–24.

⁶ Riska Molinda and Siti Quratul Ain, "Analisis Faktor-Faktor Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Pada Siswa Kelas III C Di SDN 193 Pekanbaru," *Cetta: Jurnal Ilmu Pendidikan* 8, no. 4 (2025): 283–94.

and language sounds (phonemes). Success at this stage is crucial for reading proficiency at subsequent levels⁷. In general, beginning reading involves two interrelated basic skills: phonological awareness (the ability to recognize and manipulate spoken language sounds) and the alphabetic principle (the understanding that letters represent sounds that form words). In the context of Islamic education in MI, these reading skills are not only emphasized in general texts, but are also an important prerequisite for reading simple religious texts.

Reading difficulties, often called dyslexia, are defined as specific learning disabilities characterized by difficulties in accurate or fluent word recognition, as well as poor spelling and decoding abilities⁸. These difficulties are neurobiological in nature and often go beyond the expectations of other cognitive abilities and the lack of effective classroom instruction. In the context of early grades at MI Negeri 2 Jember, analysis of reading difficulties should focus on specific observed symptoms, such as: (a) difficulty distinguishing similar letter shapes ('p', 'b', and 'd'). (b) difficulty blending sounds to form words, and (c) very slow or halting reading speed (weak decoding). Accurate analysis is needed to distinguish reading difficulties caused by intrinsic student factors from extrinsic factors such as teaching methods.

Analysis of early reading difficulties should be conducted multidimensionally, encompassing at least three main aspects. The first aspect is the basic skills dimension, which measures students' abilities in phonological awareness (syllable and phoneme identification) and letter recognition. The second aspect is the reading comprehension dimension, which, although still in its infancy, should begin to be measured. The third aspect is the affective and environmental dimension, which encompasses students' reading motivation and learning environment factors, including the quality of teaching materials and methods used by teachers⁹. Collecting data from these three dimensions, through diagnostic tests and observations, will provide a holistic and detailed map of each student's difficulties, which can then serve as the basis for developing effective intervention products.

Methods

The research and development (R&D) method used in this study, which focuses on the initial stages of the simplified Borg & Gall model, namely information gathering and research¹⁰. The pur-

⁷ Sulistiyono, R. (2018). *Psikologi Belajar Membaca*. Jakarta: Kencana. Hlm. 45.

⁸ J. M Smith, *The Handbook of Reading Difficulties* (London: Academic Press, 2020).

⁹ A Farida, "Diagnosis Kesulitan Belajar Membaca," *Jurnal Pendidikan Dasar* 10, no. 2 (2019): 150–65.

¹⁰ Sulastrri Rini Rindrayani et al., *Metode Penelitian Dan Pengembangan: R&D Research and Development* (Jambi: Buku Sonpedia, 2025).

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pose of this study was to identify needs and determine the initial reading problems faced by first-grade students at MI Negeri 2 Jember. This study did not reach the product development stage, but concentrated on analyzing needs to build an intervention design. With first-grade teachers as supporting informants, 27 research subjects were selected using a purposive sampling technique. Data were collected through semi-structured guidelines through early reading diagnostic tests, observations of the reading proses in the classroom, and in-depth interviews.

The research data were analyzed qualitatively by categorizing reading errors, open coding the interview results, and reducing and grouping observational data. Furthermore, data validity was strengthened through technical triangulation, source triangulation (teacher and student), and member checking with class teachers to ensure that the researcher's interpretations were in line with actual conditions in the field. The application of the R&D model in the initial stage was deemed appropriate because it provided space for an in-depth needs analysis as a basis for developing early reading learning interventions, while also producing a complete diagnostic picture of the form of reading difficulties and the factors that influence them in grade 1 students

Results and Discussion

The results of diagnostic tests conducted on 27 first-grade students at MI Negeri 2 Jember showed that approximately 45% of students experienced early reading difficulties in the moderate to severe category. Phonological awareness and decoding abilities are two main components of early literacy that cause these difficulties. One of the biggest obstacles is the inability to distinguish consonant sounds that have similarities (such as p-b-d), the guarantee of combining sounds into words (blending), and the slow or inaccurate decoding process when reading simple words and syllables. These results are in line with the phonological theory proposed by Liberman & Liberman (1989), Wolf (2007), and Adams (1990), which states that limited phonological abilities are the main factor indicating that reading problems begin to appear at an early stage.

Observations conducted during the learning process indicate that most students continue to make repeated visual and phonological errors, such as reversals and mispronunciation of basic phonemes. Furthermore, classroom reading activities are not systematically tracked and do not emphasize phonics practice. As a result, many students do not have sufficient opportunities to develop alphabetic principles through gradual and structured learning. In a study by Hidayati et al. (2024), students experienced reading difficulties due to instructional and environmental factors¹¹.

¹¹ Anisa Hidayati et al., "Analisis Faktor Penyebab Rendahnya Kemampuan Literasi Siswa Sekolah Dasar," *Jurnal Inovasi, Evaluasi, Dan Pengembangan Pembelajaran (JIEPP)* 4, no. 1 (2024): 75–80.

This is reinforced by the findings of Lestari et al. (2025) who stated that students experience reading difficulties because learning that focuses on overall word recognition does not support students who need synthetic phonics practice that develops gradually from letters to sounds, syllables, and words. Furthermore, there is a lack of learning media and a lack of literacy stimulation.¹²

Furthermore, comprehensive interviews with first-grade teachers revealed that classroom reading instruction remained focused on overall word recognition rather than enhancing the relationship between letters and sounds, which is the foundation of phonics skills. Furthermore, teachers reported that the school had limited teaching materials. Consequently, efforts to provide differentiated learning for students who needed additional support were less effective. Furthermore, educators stated that some students did not receive sufficient literacy stimulation at home, resulting in a decline in their baseline reading skills.¹³

Quantitative analysis using a five-point Likert scale was conducted to assess the feasibility of the initial product concept and evaluation instrument.

Tabel 1.2
Likert Scale Scoring

| Score | Explanation |
|-------|-------------------|
| 5 | Strongly Agree |
| 4 | Agree |
| 3 | Disagree |
| 2 | Disagree |
| 1 | Strongly Disagree |

Validity scoring is determined using the formula:

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{\text{total score obtained} \times 100\%}{\text{Maximum score}}$$

Based on the result of the calculation algorithm, educational media can be considered valid if it meets the following requirements:

Tabel 1.3
Validation Percentage Based on Likert Scale¹⁴

| Score | Explanation |
|---------|------------------------------|
| 0%-20% | Invalid (Not Appropriate) |
| 21%-40% | Less Valid (Not Appropriate) |
| 41%-60% | Fairly Valid (Eligible) |
| 61%-80% | Valid (Eligible) |

¹² Putri Lestari, Erna Zumrotun, and Dwiana Asih Wiranti, "Analisis Kesulitan Membaca Permulaan Siswa Kelas III Sekolah Dasar Berdasarkan Teori Belajar Decoding," *JANACITTA: Journal of Primary and Children's Education* 8, no. 2 (2025): 346–58.

¹³ Wawancara dengan Guru Kelas A, 20 september 2025. Data menunjukkan adanya keterbatasan pelatihan guru dalam mengaplikasikan metode pembelajaran membaca yang bersifat multisensori. (n.d.).

¹⁴ Baso Intang Sappaile, "PEMBOBOTAN BUTIR PERNYATAAN DALAM BENTUK SKALA LIKERT DENGAN PENDEKATAN DISTRIBUSI Z", (Makassar: Jurnal Pendidikan dan Kebudayaan, 2007)

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81%-100%

Very Valid (Eligible)

The results of the validation calculations demonstrate that the product concept falls within the “Very Valid” category ($\geq 81\%$), indicating that both the developed instrument and the initial intervention design are feasible for implementation in instructional settings with only minor revisions required, thereby confirming the adequacy of the product’s foundational structure from a quantitative perspective. This quantitative evidence reinforces the qualitative findings, which emphasize that a structured phonics-based intervention is not only necessary but also highly relevant to students’ actual learning needs, particularly in addressing early reading difficulties, and it further suggests that the preliminary design of the research and development product is well aligned with the real conditions and challenges encountered in the classroom.

The alignment between the product design and students’ needs implies that effective support for early reading development must be grounded in a systematic and interactive intervention framework, one that allows students to progress gradually through carefully sequenced learning stages while receiving appropriate scaffolding to strengthen their decoding skills and reading fluency over time. Through comprehensive diagnostic mapping and the integration of both theoretical foundations and practical considerations in the development process, this study makes a meaningful contribution to the field by providing a well-validated structured phonics R&D product that has the potential to enhance the effectiveness of early reading instruction and support sustainable literacy development in primary education.

Conclusion

This study revealed that some first-grade students at MI Negeri 2 Jember still face challenges in their early reading skills, particularly related to phonological aspects and the ability to decode letter sounds. The most common types of errors found include errors in differentiating letters with similar sounds, difficulties in combining syllables, and a lack of fluency in reading simple words. The contributing factors are immature basic reading skills, a learning approach that does not emphasize phonics, limited learning media, and low literacy support within the family environment.

Through diagnostic analysis, this study provides a detailed overview of the nature and root causes of the problems experienced by students. These results provide an important foundation for designing more appropriate structured phonics-based interventions, supported by validation data categorized as highly feasible. These findings emphasize the urgency of implementing gradual phonics learning and utilizing engaging media to improve early reading skills. The study’s primary

contribution is the mapping of learning needs, which can be directly used as a basis for development more effective learning models.

Acknowledgment

The research would like to express our deepest gratitude to MI Negeri 2 Jember for the opportunity and warm welcome that has been given. Our highest appreciation is addressed to the principal of MI Negeri 2 Jember for the support and adequate facilities, as well as to the homeroom teacher of grade 1 for the extraordinary dedication and tireless cooperation in guiding students. Lastly to all students who participated in the reading class, your joy and enthusiasm are the main inspiration that brings this research to life. We also thank our friends at PLP and field supervisor lecturers of PLP UIN Kiai Haji Achmad Siddiq Dr. Asep Maulana, M.Pd. for the guidance, direction, and continuous support that became the way to complete the entire series of this research successfully.

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