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Effective Reading Interventions for Slow Learners : Sight Word and Phonemic Awareness Approaches

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Abstract: This study investigates the effectiveness of sight words and phonemic awareness learning, delivered through drilling method, in enhancing reading skills in a child identified as slow learner. The subject of this study is a 9-year and 10-month-old boy in the fourth grade of elementary school. The research method employed in this study is a single-case intervention design. The process involved various assessment stages, including detailed observations, structured interviews with teachers and parents, and comprehensive psychological tests to understand the unique challenges faced by the subject. To evaluate the effectiveness of these interventions, both pre-tests and post-tests were administered, which assessed the subject's reading skills in terms of accuracy and reading speed. The analysis of the results revealed significant progress in the subject's reading abilities following the interventions. Notably, improvements were observed in both the accuracy of reading sight words and the overall speed at which the subject could read. These positive findings underscore the effectiveness of focused teaching strategies, demonstrating that systematic and structured interventions can substantially enhance reading abilities in slow learners. The study highlights the importance of tailoring educational approaches to meet the specific needs of slow learners, in order to maximize their potential and improving their overall academic performance. Furthermore, these results suggest that educators can employ similar methods to support other students facing similar challenges in reading.

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Introduction

Reading is one of the fundamental skills that serves as the foundation for children's academic and social development (Rasinski, 2017; Armbruster et al., 2009; Solari et al., 2017). To enhance vocabulary and comprehension, reading ability is essential for mastering all subjects; thus, difficulties in reading can pose challenges across the educational spectrum and affect a child's overall academic and personal development (Ata & Edillo, 2020). Conversely, good reading skills enable children to understand subject material, explore the world through texts, and develop critical skills necessary in various aspects of life (Smith & Johnson, 2018).

Among students with learning difficulties, which often referred as slow learners, the challenges in mastering reading skills become particularly evident and can hinder their academic progress (Olson & Griffith, 1993). Poor reading skills among slow learners often lead to overall low academic achievement, as reading ability is the gateway to understanding other subjects such as mathematics, science, and social studies (Nurfadhillah et al., 2022). The inability to keep up with lesson materials due to reading difficulties can trigger

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frustration and social isolation, ultimately worsening the situation for these children both in and out of the school environment (Nugrahayati & Mustadi, 2019).

Characteristically, slow learners face cognitive learning difficulties. They require more time to understand learning material and often struggle to grasp what they are learning (Saterlie & Loraditch, 1967). Slow learners, also known as those with borderline intellectual functioning, are categorized as having intelligence scores ranging from 70 to 85 (Alloway, 2010). In the DSM-5, borderline intellectual functioning refers to a specific level of severity within the spectrum of intelligence and is used as a category to describe the range of intelligence between normal intelligence and intellectual disabilities (APA, 2013).

Slow learners exhibit several inherent characteristics often recognized as part of their identity. According to Saterlie & Loraditch (1967), these characteristics are grouped into several categories: cognitive, language, auditory-perceptual, visual-motor, and social-emotional. Due to cognitive limitations, slow learners are more comfortable learning materials that are abstract rather than concrete. They also prefer direct instruction from teachers over independent learning, as this requires fewer skills. Saterlie & Loraditch (1967) further explain that slow learners experience difficulties in verbal language, auditory-perceptual, visual-motor, and social-emotional skills. Consequently, they are often found to withdraw from their social environments, and their social-emotional levels fall below expectations.

The criteria mentioned above is shown in the subject of this study. At school, the subject does not achieve academic success, shows suboptimal learning performance, struggles to comprehend the material being taught, has weak motor skills, does not respond appropriately to questions, lacks verbal expression, and appears withdrawn from his social environment. With these characteristics, the subject was recommended by their classroom teacher for psychological assessment. Generally, the subject, who is currently in the fourth grade of elementary school, still experiences difficulties in reading, writing, and arithmetic (calistung). As a result, he faces challenges in understanding all classroom materials. Moreover, the subject comes from a family background that does not support their academic endeavors, leading to frequent absences from school.

The classroom teacher has expressed concerns about the subject's slow development. Although the teacher has attempted to provide special instruction, there has been no significant progress. Qutratuain and Ariyanto (2023) explain in their article that there are specific methods to enhance skills in children with slow learning, one of which is the drilling method. The drilling method is considered effective and suitable for slow learners at the elementary school level. Drilling is an excellent way to teach certain habits to develop agility, accuracy, opportunity, and skills (Vinarahmah, 2022). The drilling method involves repetition to trigger stronger memory retention in slow learners (Mukhlis et al., 2023).

In the intervention conducted with the subject, the drilling method was used to teach phonemic awareness and sight words. Phonemic awareness is the beginning stage of reading and crucial in learning to read, as it helps children spell, recognize, and connect letters or groups of letters through the sounds that represent each letter (Neuman & Dickinson, 2013). Sight words are words that are visually recognized and stored in memory as children learn to read (Ehri, 2014). Visually recognized words are more strongly embedded in memory through the connection between the letters in their spelling and the phonemes in their pronunciation (Ehri, 1992 in Johnston & Watson, 2004). The reading of sight words, accompanied by phonemic awareness, will greatly assist in reading through analogy (Johnston & Watson, 2004). Therefore, this research aims to analyze the effectiveness of

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phonemic awareness and sight words learning delivered through the drilling method in enhancing reading skills among children with slow learning.

Research Method

The research method used in this study is a single-case intervention design, focusing on a 9-year and 10-month-old boy in fourth grade. In the case exploration and diagnosis process, several assessment stages were conducted on the subject. Psychological assessment was conducted by collection in case study research (Krishnamurthy et al., 2004). The assessments included observations, interviews, and the use of psychological tests, specifically intelligence test. The results of the intelligence test administered indicate that he has an intellectual capacity at the borderline level (IQ=76, Wechsler Scale).

In addition to formal testing, the author also conducted informal assessments to determine the subject's basic reading abilities. The assessment revealed that the subject's limited reading skills hindered his ability to follow classroom learning, including completing assignments and tests. Therefore, the long-term goal of this intervention was to improve the subject's academic performance in school by enabling him to understand the lessons presented by the teacher and to complete school assignments. Generally, the intervention was divided into 8 sessions consisting of two important parts: the first part focuses on sight words learning, and the second part addresses phonological awareness.

Tabel 1. Tasks and Activities for Each Intervention Session

Session	Activity	Description
Session I	Pre-Test & Sight Word - Introduction to sight words, reading syllables	In the first session, the subject performed a pre-test involving reading a paragraph. After completing the pre-test, the subject proceeded with learning to recognize each letter of the alphabet. The subject named each letter individually and then moved on to syllables consisting of two letters
Session II	Sight Word - Matching the appropriate syllables with pictures of objects	The task for the subject in this session was to match pictures with the correct words. The words provided were three-syllable words that were easy to read.
Session III	Sight Word - Reading sentences	The subject was assigned to read each sentence present. After reading each sentence, the subject had to repeat it several times until he could recognize the arrangement of letters in each word, enabling him to read it more quickly.
Session IV	Sight Word -	The subject was asked to read the provided paragraph. Initially, the subject was tasked with reading word by

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	Reading paragraphs	word. Subsequently, the instructor encouraged the subject to read more quickly, according to his ability. The goal was the same as in the previous session, which was for the subject to recognize the arrangement of letters in each word, eliminating the need to spell out each letter one by one.
Session V	Phonemic Awareness	After completing the lesson on sight words, the subject continued with phonemic awareness training. Although the subject had previously recognized each letter, in this session, he was asked to identify the sounds of the letters of the alphabet from A to Z and understand their functions as consonants.
Session VI	Phonemic Awareness - Learning to recognize the sound "ng"	The subject was trained to recognize, comprehend, and understand the function of "ng" as a consonant. The subject was repeatedly taught to read the syllables "nga," "ngi," "ngu," "nge," "ngo," "ang," "ing," "ung," "eng," and "ong."
Session VII	Phonemic Awareness - Learning to recognize the sound "ny"	The subject was also trained to recognize, understand, and know how "ny" functions. The subject was taught repeatedly to read the syllables "nya," "nyi," "nyu," "nye," and "nyo."
Session VIII	Phonemic Awareness & Post-Test - Practice	In the final session, the subject was asked to independently match sentences with complementary words. Following this, a post-test was conducted to assess the results of the intervention activities carried out over the eight sessions.

The success of the intervention can be evaluated using pre-tests and post-tests conducted at the beginning and end of the intervention period (Baena-Extremera et al., 2012). The pre-test is conducted at the beginning of the intervention to establish a baseline measurement of the subject's reading skills, specifically by assessing the number of words read correctly from a text of 50 words. After completing the eight-session intervention, a post-test is administered using the same text to measure any improvements in the subject's reading performance. The data collected from both tests are quantitatively analyzed by calculating the difference in the number of words read correctly (excluding "ke" and "di") and the overall reading time. This allows for a clear comparison of the subject's progress, indicating improvements in both reading accuracy and fluency.

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Results and Discussion

The initial condition indicated that the subject was still struggled with his reading abilities. The pre-test results showed the subject's performance with a score of 38, taking 3 minutes and 17 seconds to read. During this time, the subject read slowly and lacked confidence in what he was reading. After conducting the pre-test, the examiner implemented the intervention over eight sessions. Due to his status as a slow learner, his limited reading ability was accompanied by low self-confidence (Mumpuniarti, 2017). Each time he read the text, he would spell it out slowly in a very quiet voice until he eventually became brave enough to read it out loud with a slightly louder voice. Essentially, the reading difficulties faced by slow learners lie in their ability to quickly and accurately identify and recognize words (Hartini et al., 2017). However, his slow spelling made him even slower at reading.

At the beginning of the intervention sessions, the subject was asked to review his memory of recognizing the alphabet. It became clear that he still could not differentiate between the letters “U” and “Y.” To help the subject distinguish between these letters, the author provided a clue based on their shape (Wong et al., 2018). After practicing distinguishing between the two letters, the subject was finally able to recognize the differences between “U” and “Y.”

Throughout the process, the author observed that the subject benefited significantly from the drilling method. This method not only reinforced his memory of the material but also allowed him to practice producing verbal language, as he actively participated in the learning process (Foushee et al., 2022). Children with slow learning tendencies often have limitations in verbal language (Saterlie & Loraditch, 1967). Moreover, the subject had rarely been given opportunities to express his verbal language, especially at school. He continued to be trained in this manner until he eventually showed a willingness to read aloud more confidently. He was able to read simple words, each consisting of two letters per syllable. However, he found it very difficult to read certain words, such as “pepaya” (papaya), “menara” (tower), and “rebana” (tambourine). According to Arita & Zubaidah (2019), the subject was unable to read a word because it was unfamiliar or he did not understand its meaning.

In accordance with the sight words learning taught using the drilling method, the author asked the subject to read repeatedly until he could recognize the arrangement of letters that form words without having to spell them (Ehri, 2014). The same approach was also applied when practicing reading sentences and paragraphs. As he read repeatedly, the subject became more fluent and confident in reading each word (Verrawati et al., 2022). When the subject was considered sufficiently fluent in reading a paragraph composed of simple words (without consonant clusters), the intervention progressed to phonemic awareness training. Appropriate phonemic training can enhance a slow learner's ability to segment words into individual sounds and blend those sounds to form words, thus laying the foundation for fluent reading (Law et al., 2014).

The phonemic awareness training began by introducing the sounds of letters to the subject (Mumpuniarti, 2017). Recognizing letter sounds is very useful for learning about consonant clusters (Harrison et al., 2017). In this session, the subject took a considerable amount of time to recognize the sounds of the letters. This was due to the cognitive limitations often associated with slow learners in understanding the production of letter sounds (Wolf et al., 2016). One underlying reason for this capability is the limited exposure to language learning that the subject has received (Snow & Matthews, 2016). Although it took time and he could not memorize the sounds of all the letters immediately, the

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intervention in phonemic awareness proved to be progressive. In addition to recognizing individual letter sounds, the intervention also helped the subject recognize the sounds "ng" and "ny."

After completing the entire intervention program, at the end of the session, the subject was given practice to implement the results of the intervention. During this practice, the subject's abilities showed noticeable progress. The outcomes of the intervention were then measured using a post-test with the same reading text as the pre-test. The post-test results indicated that the subject achieved a score of 47 with a reading time of 2 minutes and 57 seconds. During this time, he was able to read more fluently, although he spent considerable time trying to read "yang" in the middle of the paragraph. Nonetheless, these results showed an improvement of 9 points in score (Figure 1) and an increase in reading speed by 20 seconds (Figure 2).

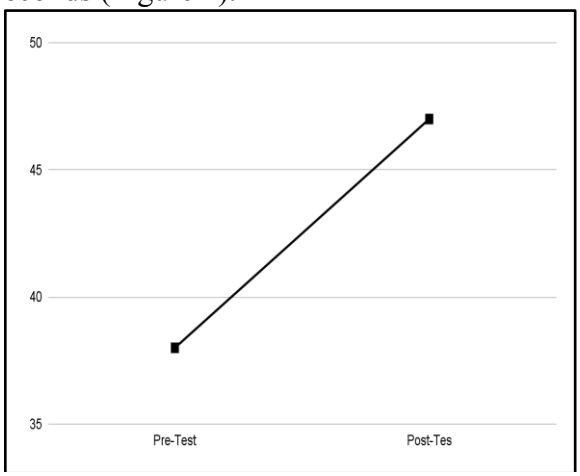

Figure 1. Text Reading Accuracy

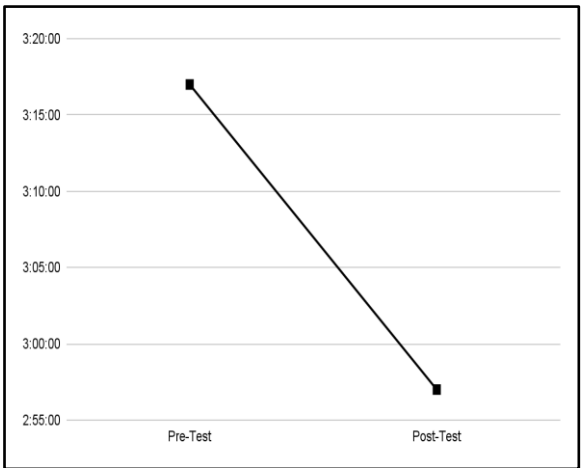

Figure 2. Text Reading Duration

To reinforce the results of the intervention, the subject's mother was also involved in continuing the learning process. To achieve optimal results, the subject requires more intensive and personalized support to enhance their reading abilities, and family involvement can play a crucial role in achieving these outcomes (Abidin et al., 2019). This aligns with the characteristics of slow learners, who need more intensive practice in both quality and quantity compared to their peers (Nugrahayati & Mustadi, 2019). Therefore, practice outside of school hours becomes very important.

The results of this study present significant conceptual and practical implications for educational practices regarding slow learners. Conceptually, the findings underscore the necessity for personalized learning approaches tailored to the specific needs of slow learners, highlighting that structured and systematic instructional methods, such as the drilling technique and phonemic awareness training, can effectively address the unique cognitive challenges these students face. This aligns with existing literature emphasizing the relationship between improved self-confidence and enhanced learning outcomes, suggesting that emotional support and confidence-building interventions are critical components of effective educational strategies for slow learners (Bessing, 2017).

Practically, the study provides empirical evidence for specific intervention techniques that can be readily implemented in educational settings to improve reading abilities, including repetitive practice and targeted phonemic awareness training. Moreover, the involvement of family members in the learning process emerged as a vital factor; the data indicate that parental engagement in reinforcing reading practice at home significantly contributes to

student progress (McConnell & Kubina, 2016; Boyes et al., 2017). Consequently, it is imperative for educational institutions to promote parental involvement as an integral element of intervention programs, thereby fostering supportive learning environments that enhance the educational outcomes for slow learners.

Conclusion

The main finding of this study is that interventions aimed at improving reading abilities in children with slow learning difficulties, using the drilling method in sight words and phonemic awareness instruction, showed significant progress. The pre-test results indicated that the subject struggled with reading, as evidenced by low scores and lengthy reading times. However, after a series of interventions, the subject was able to read more accurately and at a faster pace. These interventions demonstrated that with appropriate support and sufficient repetition, the subject could develop reading skills more effectively.

These findings support the hypothesis that focused and well-planned instruction can help improve the reading abilities of children with slow learning difficulties and emphasize the importance of environmental support in their learning processes. Furthermore, with individualized instruction, the subject was able to focus better, reduce social pressure from the environment, increase engagement, and receive personalized learning tailored to their needs. This success underscores the necessity for sustained strategies and active parental involvement in helping children overcome challenges in learning to read.

Recommendation

This study reveals that the intervention based on the drilling method in sight word learning and phonemic awareness is effective in improving the reading abilities of children with slow learning tendencies. However, further research is needed to develop and test interventions that focus more on other aspects of literacy skills, such as reading comprehension and vocabulary. Additionally, it is important to explore the use of technology or digital media as teaching aids, which have the potential to enhance the effectiveness of learning for children with slow learning.

There are several challenges to consider for future implementation, such as the availability of time for the learning facilitator and the possibility that the subject, who is a slow learner, may be difficult to reach at school due to low attendance rates. Therefore, ongoing support from parents and teachers is crucial during the intervention. Providing training programs for parents and teachers will be very beneficial in enhancing their readiness to support children's learning processes more effectively.

Specific strategies include teachers using individualized instruction with repetitive practice and regular communication with parents about progress. For parents, establishing a daily reading routine, engaging in interactive reading sessions, and using visual aids can significantly enhance their child’s literacy development. By collaborating and implementing these strategies, both teachers and parents can create a nurturing environment that addresses the specific needs of slow learners, ultimately improving their reading abilities and boosting their self-confidence.

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