



IMPROVING FIRST-GRADE STUDENTS' BEGINNING READING SKILLS THROUGH IMAGE MEDIA

Nani¹, Ade Irma², Husnul Khatimah³, Nurjannah^{4*}

¹ Elementary School Teacher Education Study Program (PGSD), Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, Universitas Terbuka, Makassar, Indonesia.

^{2,4} Elementary School Teacher Education Study Program (PGSD), Faculty of Teacher Training and Education, University of Muhammadiyah Makassar, Makassar, Indonesia.

³ SD Negeri Unggulan Bontomanai, Gowa, Indonesia

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Corresponding Author:
Author Name*: Nurjannah
Email*: jannahh021@gmail.com
DOI:

ABSTRAK

Penelitian tindakan kelas ini bertujuan meningkatkan kemampuan membaca permulaan siswa kelas I melalui media gambar. Penelitian dilaksanakan di SD Negeri Unggulan Bontomanai, Kabupaten Gowa, pada tahun ajaran 2025/2026, dengan melibatkan 10 siswa yang berdasarkan asesmen diagnostik memerlukan dukungan dalam mengenali huruf, membaca suku kata, dan membaca kata sederhana. Penelitian mengikuti dua siklus yang masing-masing mencakup perencanaan, tindakan, observasi, dan refleksi. Data dikumpulkan melalui tes membaca, lembar observasi aktivitas siswa, dan catatan lapangan, lalu dianalisis secara deskriptif kuantitatif dan kualitatif. Dengan Kriteria Ketuntasan Minimal (KKM) 60, sebanyak 6 siswa (60%) tuntas pada Siklus I dan 10 siswa (100%) tuntas pada Siklus II. Nilai rata-rata meningkat dari 70 menjadi 83, sedangkan proporsi siswa aktif meningkat dari 60% menjadi 90%. Hasil ini menunjukkan bahwa penggunaan media gambar dalam kelas penelitian berkaitan dengan peningkatan kemampuan membaca permulaan dan partisipasi siswa. Media perlu disesuaikan dengan indikator membaca dan karakteristik siswa.

Kata Kunci: media gambar, membaca permulaan, literasi awal, penelitian tindakan kelas, sekolah dasar

ABSTRACT

This classroom action research aimed to improve first-grade students' beginning reading skills through image media. The study was conducted at SD Negeri Unggulan Bontomanai, Gowa Regency, during the 2025/2026 academic year and involved ten students who, based on a diagnostic assessment, required support in letter recognition, syllable reading, and simple-word reading. The study comprised two cycles, each involving planning, action, observation, and reflection. Data were collected through reading tests, student-activity observation sheets, and field notes and were analyzed using quantitative and qualitative descriptive techniques. With a minimum mastery criterion (KKM) of 60, six students (60%) achieved mastery in Cycle I and ten students (100%) in Cycle II. The mean score increased from 70 to 83, while the proportion of active students increased from 60% to 90%. These results indicate that the use of image media in this classroom was associated with improved beginning reading performance and student participation. Its use should be aligned with the targeted reading indicators and students' characteristics.

Keywords: *image media; beginning reading; early literacy; classroom action research; elementary*

INTRODUCTION

Beginning reading skills are foundational to later literacy development and academic learning. At the early-primary level, students are expected to recognize letters, connect letters with sounds, blend

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sounds into syllables, and read simple words with increasing accuracy. Weaknesses in these foundational processes can hinder subsequent reading comprehension and written communication (Kim et al., 2021; Quinn et al., 2020). Therefore, instructional support in the first grade needs to be concrete, developmentally appropriate, and responsive to students' initial reading profiles.

A diagnostic assessment in the research class identified ten first-grade students who required additional support in beginning reading. Their difficulties were observed in letter recognition, syllable blending, and reading simple words. However, the original classroom record did not provide separate numerical totals for each indicator or a complete pre-cycle score distribution. These details should be added from the teacher's assessment records to strengthen the baseline description.

In this study, beginning reading was operationally assessed through three observable indicators: (1) recognizing and naming letters presented in words, (2) reading open syllables and blending them into words, and (3) reading familiar simple words accurately and with sufficient confidence to participate in oral reading. The test score represented the combined performance on these indicators, while participation was observed through attention, willingness to respond, involvement in matching images and words, and willingness to read aloud.

Image media refers to printed picture cards paired with letters, syllables, or familiar words. The cards contained clear, age-appropriate illustrations of objects encountered in students' daily lives and were used for teacher modelling, letter and syllable identification, image-word matching, guided reading, and individual oral-reading practice. The exact card dimensions and number of items per meeting were not documented in the original manuscript and should be verified by the authors.

Visual support can connect abstract written symbols with concrete representations and can reduce unnecessary cognitive demands during initial decoding (Mayer, 2021; Liu, 2024). Picture-supported activities may also increase attention and willingness to participate, especially when images are familiar and directly aligned with the target words (Takacs & Bus, 2018; Cabell et al., 2019). Recent elementary-school studies similarly report improvements in beginning reading and reading interest after image-supported instruction (Kambu et al., 2025; Lestari et al., 2025; Widayanti et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, much recent work emphasizes digital or multimedia environments, whereas low-cost non-digital media remain important in classrooms with limited technological resources (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Neumann, 2020). In addition, experimental studies often emphasize final outcomes rather than the iterative refinement of instruction in an authentic classroom. Classroom action research is therefore useful because it allows the teacher to identify instructional weaknesses, revise the action, and examine changes across cycles (Burns & Dikilitaş, 2024).

Accordingly, this study aimed to improve the beginning reading skills and classroom participation of first-grade students through printed image media. Its practical contribution lies in documenting how a simple visual intervention was refined across two action-research cycles in a specific classroom context.

METHOD

This study used classroom action research following the cyclical structure of planning, action, observation, and reflection associated with the Kemmis and McTaggart model. It was conducted at SD Negeri Unggulan Bontomanai, Gowa Regency, during the [AUTHOR TO VERIFY: semester, month, and academic year] period. The intervention comprised two cycles. The authors should insert the verified number of meetings per cycle and the duration of each meeting from the lesson plans or teaching records.

The participants were ten first-grade students who were selected because the diagnostic assessment indicated difficulties in letter recognition, syllable reading, and simple-word reading. The classroom teacher implemented the lessons, while the collaborating researcher assisted with lesson planning, observation, documentation, and reflection. The study focused on instructional improvement within this class and was not designed to produce population-level causal estimates.

The instructional media consisted of printed image cards paired with target letters, syllables, and familiar words. During the lessons, the teacher introduced the picture and its name, modelled the relevant sound-symbol correspondence, guided students in reading syllables and words, asked students to match pictures with written forms, and provided individual oral-reading turns. In Cycle II, the action was revised

by using clearer and more familiar images, enlarging the printed text, increasing guided repetition, organizing students in smaller turns, and providing additional support to students who remained hesitant or inaccurate in Cycle I.

Three instruments were used: (1) a beginning-reading test covering letter recognition, syllable blending, and simple-word reading; (2) an observation sheet recording attention, response to questions, participation in image-word activities, and willingness to read aloud; and (3) field notes documenting instructional difficulties and changes between cycles. The original manuscript did not report evidence of instrument validation or inter-observer agreement. The authors should add the instrument blueprint, scoring rubric, validation procedure, and observer information when available.

RESULTS

The diagnostic assessment identified ten students who required targeted beginning-reading support. Detailed pre-cycle scores and the number of students experiencing difficulty on each indicator were not available in the original manuscript; therefore, these data must be inserted from the school records before publication.

Student performance improved between Cycle I and Cycle II. The mean score increased by 13 points, from 70 to 83. The highest score increased from 80 to 95, while the lowest score remained 60. Because the KKM was 60, the lowest score in Cycle II was consistent with the report that all students achieved mastery.

Table 1. Summary of Students' Reading Performance

Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II
Mean Score	70	83
Highest Score	80	95
Lowest Score	60	60

Table 1 shows a consistent increase in students' reading achievement across cycles, particularly in the mean and highest scores. The percentage of students achieving the minimum mastery criterion also increased. In Cycle I, 60% of students met the minimum mastery criterion, while in Cycle II all students achieved the expected level of performance. The distribution of students' mastery is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Students' Mastery of Minimum Criteria

Indicator	Cycle I	Cycle II
Students Achieving KKM	60%	100%
Did not achieve KKM	40%	0%

Table 2 indicates that all students reached the minimum mastery criterion by the end of Cycle II. Observation data were used to examine students' participation during learning activities. An increase in active participation was observed from Cycle I to Cycle II. The results are presented in Table 3.

Table 3. Student Participation During Learning Activities

Category	Cycle I	Cycle II
Active	60%	90%
Less Active	40%	10%

Reflection on Cycle I indicated that several students still confused similar letter forms, required repeated support when blending syllables, and were reluctant to read aloud. Some image-text pairs were not sufficiently clear for all students, and whole-class turns limited individual practice. In Cycle II, the teacher used larger text and clearer familiar pictures, repeated modelling and guided blending, increased individual and small-group turns, and provided direct prompts for hesitant readers. Following these revisions, four additional students achieved the KKM, the mean score rose by 13 points, and three additional students were categorized as active.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that the use of image media contributes significantly to the improvement of students' beginning reading skills. The observed increase in reading performance across cycles reflects the role of visual support in facilitating early literacy development. These results align with contemporary perspectives in cognitive learning theory, which emphasize that visual representations enhance the processing of linguistic information by reducing cognitive load and strengthening dual-channel learning (Mayer, 2021; Liu, 2024). Image media allows learners to connect abstract symbols with concrete representations, thereby supporting more efficient decoding and comprehension processes.

The improvement in students' reading outcomes can also be interpreted through the lens of early literacy development frameworks. Foundational reading skills, including letter recognition and phonemic awareness, require structured scaffolding that aligns with learners' developmental stages. Visual media provides such scaffolding by offering contextual cues that facilitate word recognition and meaning construction. Empirical studies have shown that picture-supported reading environments improve vocabulary acquisition and decoding abilities among young learners (Takacs et al., 2020; Piasta et al., 2025). The findings of this study extend this evidence by demonstrating that even simple image media can produce meaningful improvements when systematically implemented in classroom settings.

A dialogical analysis with recent empirical studies reveals both convergence and extension of existing knowledge. Research by Regondola et al. (2025) indicates that visual learning strategies enhance student engagement and cognitive efficiency, which supports the observed increase in active participation in this study. Similarly, Cabell et al. (2019) emphasize that engagement is a critical factor in early literacy development, as it influences students' persistence and motivation. Increased classroom participation observed across cycles in this study suggests that image media contributes not only to cognitive gains but also to affective engagement. This dual impact reinforces the argument that effective literacy instruction should integrate both cognitive and motivational components.

Despite these consistencies, the present study offers a distinct contribution by addressing a gap in the literature related to the use of non-digital instructional media. A significant portion of recent studies focuses on digital technologies and multimedia learning environments (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020; Neumann, 2020). These approaches, while effective, may not be accessible in all educational contexts. The findings of this study demonstrate that simple and low-cost image media can achieve comparable improvements in early reading skills. This result challenges the assumption that technological sophistication is a prerequisite for effective literacy instruction and highlights the importance of pedagogical design over technological complexity.

Methodologically, this study contributes to the literature through the application of classroom action research. Many previous studies rely on controlled experimental designs that prioritize outcome measurement but often overlook the dynamic nature of classroom interactions. Classroom action research enables iterative refinement of instructional practices, allowing teachers to respond to students' needs in real time (Burns, 2024). The progressive improvement observed across cycles in this study illustrates how reflective teaching practices can enhance instructional effectiveness. This finding supports the argument that practitioner-based research plays a crucial role in bridging the gap between theory and practice.

The implications of this study are particularly relevant for educational practice. The results suggest that teachers can effectively use image media as an instructional strategy to support beginning reading skills. The integration of visual elements into reading instruction can enhance students' understanding, engagement, and overall learning outcomes. Practical implementation does not require advanced technological resources, making this approach suitable for diverse educational settings, including those with limited infrastructure. Teachers are encouraged to design learning activities that incorporate meaningful visual representations aligned with instructional objectives.

The study also contributes to the theoretical understanding of early literacy instruction by reinforcing the importance of multimodal learning approaches. The findings support the view that combining visual and textual elements enhances learning effectiveness, particularly in early stages of

literacy development. This contribution extends existing literature by providing empirical evidence from a classroom-based context, which strengthens the ecological validity of the findings.

Several limitations should be acknowledged to contextualize the findings. The study involved a relatively small sample size and was conducted within a specific classroom setting, which may limit generalizability. Future research is encouraged to involve larger samples and diverse educational contexts to further validate the effectiveness of image media. Additional studies may also explore the integration of image media with other instructional strategies to enhance early literacy outcomes.

Overall, the findings confirm that image media serves as an effective and practical instructional tool for improving beginning reading skills. The study highlights the importance of aligning instructional strategies with students' developmental needs and demonstrates that meaningful learning improvements can be achieved through simple yet well-designed pedagogical interventions.

CONCLUSION

The use of image media in this classroom action research was associated with an increase in first-grade students' beginning reading performance. The mean score increased from 70 in Cycle I to 83 in Cycle II, the number of students achieving the KKM of 60 increased from 6 of 10 (60%) to 10 of 10 (100%), and active participation increased from 6 of 10 (60%) to 9 of 10 students (90%). These improvements followed revisions to the clarity and familiarity of the images, text size, guided repetition, and opportunities for individual reading.

The findings apply to this specific classroom and should not be generalized beyond it without further evidence. Teachers using image media should align each picture and written item with the targeted reading indicator, students' vocabulary familiarity, visual clarity, and individual support needs. Students who achieve only the minimum score or remain less active still require remedial practice and ongoing monitoring. Before publication, the authors should complete the missing pre-cycle, schedule, and instrument-quality information identified in this revision.

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