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Improving Early Reading Skills through Contextual Picture-Based Media for Grade VII Students in an Inclusive Junior High School

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Abstract

This study aimed to (1) describe the implementation of contextual picture-based media in improving early reading skills for students with learning difficulties in Grade VII inclusive junior high school, and (2) improve early reading skills through the application of contextual picture-based media in each action cycle. This research employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, conducted in two cycles. The participants consisted of three students from Class VIIB identified as having reading difficulties. Data were collected through observation and oral tests using validated instruments. Data were analyzed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative techniques by comparing pre-action, Cycle I, and Cycle II results. The success criterion was a minimum mastery level of 80% in early reading skills. The results showed that the implementation of contextual picture-based media followed these stages: (a) teacher introduced words using picture cards, (b) students observed images and connected them with corresponding words, (c) students practiced reading progressively from letters, syllables, to simple words, and (d) teacher connected words with students' real-life contexts through questioning. Improvements in the learning process were observed from pre-action to Cycle I and Cycle II. In the pre-test, the average score was 68 with 33% mastery. In Cycle I, the average score increased from 70 in the first meeting to 72 in the second meeting (66.67% mastery). In Cycle II, the average score increased from 75.33 in the first meeting to 77.33 in the second meeting, achieving 100% mastery. Thus, the application of contextual picture-based media effectively improves early reading skills for students with learning difficulties in inclusive Grade VII classrooms.

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Keywords: Early Reading Skills; Contextual Picture-Based Media; Learning Difficulties; Inclusive Education.

INTRODUCTION

Early reading is a basic competency that must be mastered by every student as it serves as the foundation for understanding learning materials. However, in schools implementing inclusive education, there are still students experiencing learning difficulties, particularly in early reading. Early reading is the initial process in literacy mastery that involves the ability to convert written symbols into meaningful sounds (Fauziah, Mulyadi, & Mulyana, 2024). In practice, students with reading difficulties often face obstacles in recognizing letters and spelling words correctly (Bersky & Alwi, 2024). Reading difficulties at the early stage will impact low reading comprehension at the subsequent level if not immediately addressed through appropriate intervention (Denton et al., 2020).

This issue is influenced by internal and external factors. The lack of instructional strategy variation and low learning motivation are the main causes of students' low reading ability (Fitriani & Suyitno, 2021). Furthermore, the OECD (2019) study results through the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) show that the reading literacy ability of Indonesian students is still relatively low, indicating the need for innovation in reading instruction. In the context of inclusive education, the early reading problem becomes more complex due to the diversity of student characteristics. Students with learning difficulties require explicit, systematic learning strategies supported by media that aid comprehension (Hallahan, Kauffman, & Pullen, 2019).

Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) is a learning approach that connects learning materials with students' real-life situations so that learning becomes more meaningful. Contextual learning helps students understand materials by connecting them with everyday experiences (Johnson, 2017). This approach is capable of increasing student motivation and learning outcomes by providing relevant and authentic learning experiences (Berns & Erickson, 2018).

Alongside the contextual approach, the appropriate use of instructional media plays a highly crucial role. The use of picture media in reading instruction can improve the reading ability of students with learning difficulties because it provides strong visual stimulation (Wibowo & Nugroho, 2023). Theoretically, the use of visual media in learning is supported by the dual coding theory proposed by Paivio (2014), which states that information presented in both visual and verbal forms simultaneously will be easier for students to understand and remember.

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Additionally, Mayer (2017) in the multimedia learning theory explains that the combination of text and pictures can improve comprehension because it helps the information processing in working memory more effectively.

Learning that involves direct experience and daily life contexts can increase student retention and comprehension, particularly for students with special learning needs (Slavin, 2018). By integrating picture media into contextual learning, students do not merely learn to recognize words abstractly, but also understand their meanings within the context of real life. Therefore, this research is conducted to determine the improvement of early reading skills through contextual-based picture media for students with learning difficulties in inclusive junior high school classrooms.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The type of research used in this study is Classroom Action Research (CAR). This research uses the CAR model from Kemmis and McTaggart which is carried out in two cycles, where each cycle consists of four stages, namely planning, action, observation, and reflection (Kemmis and McTaggart, 2024). This research aims to repair and improve the quality of the learning process and outcomes, specifically in improving early reading skills for students with learning difficulties in grade VII of an inclusive junior high school.

This research was conducted at SMP Negeri 2 Malinau Utara in Malinau Regency, North Kalimantan Province, during the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year, starting from February to May 2026. This school implements an inclusive education system. The subjects in this study were class VII/B students totaling 17 people. This research focuses on 3 students with learning difficulties who experience obstacles in early reading, which include difficulties recognizing letters, reading syllables, reading simple words, and understanding word meanings in a limited manner.

Data collection in this study was carried out systematically through observation, test, interview, and documentation techniques. Observation is used to directly observe the learning process, teacher activities in applying picture media and contextual-based learning, as well as student activeness. Tests are used to measure students' early reading skills (letters, syllables, and simple words) before and after the action. Interviews and documentation are used to obtain in-depth information and complete the research data.

Data analysis techniques in this study were carried out qualitatively and quantitatively. Qualitative data obtained from observations, interviews, and documentation were analyzed to

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describe teacher activities, student involvement, and changes in student motivation. Quantitative data obtained from early reading skill tests were analyzed to calculate the average score and the percentage of completeness. The success of the result is considered achieved if a minimum of 75% of students reach a score of ≥ 70 (complete category), and there is an increase in the class average score in each cycle. If these criteria have not been achieved, the action will be continued to the next cycle by making improvements based on the reflection results.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Initial Condition

This classroom action research was conducted at an inclusive SMP Negeri 2 in Malinau Utara District, Malinau Regency. The subjects of this study were class VII/B students, focusing on 3 out of 17 students. The research process began with an initial observation aimed at identifying problems related to early reading skills based on contextual pictures. The initial observation revealed difficulties experienced by students in early reading skills; they were unable to read texts because some students could not yet recognize letters and lacked confidence. The initial test conducted from Monday, June 5, 2026, to June 10, 2026, showed students' early reading skills were still low. The average student learning score was 68 with a completeness percentage of 33.33%.

Table 1. Student Reading Completeness Level in the Initial Test

No.	Student Name	Score	Description
1.	KJ	66	Incomplete
2.	KY	68	Incomplete
3.	HL	70	Incomplete
Student Average Score		**68**	
Completeness Percentage		**33.33%**	

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Graph 1. Initial Test Pie Chart of Cycle I Class VII SMP Negeri 2 Inklusif Malinau Utara District

Cycle I

Cycle I consisted of two meetings with the material of contextual-based picture media and the home environment. In the first meeting, the learning action was carried out using contextual-based picture media where students were asked to come forward to read letters according to the picture. Observation results showed an improvement from the initial condition.

Table 2. Recapitulation of Assessment of Early Reading Results Through Contextual Picture Media Cycle I Meeting 1

No.	Student Name	Letter Score	Category
1.	Karlo Ignitius	D	Incomplete
2.	Krislay	D	Incomplete
3.	Hengki Lare	D	Incomplete

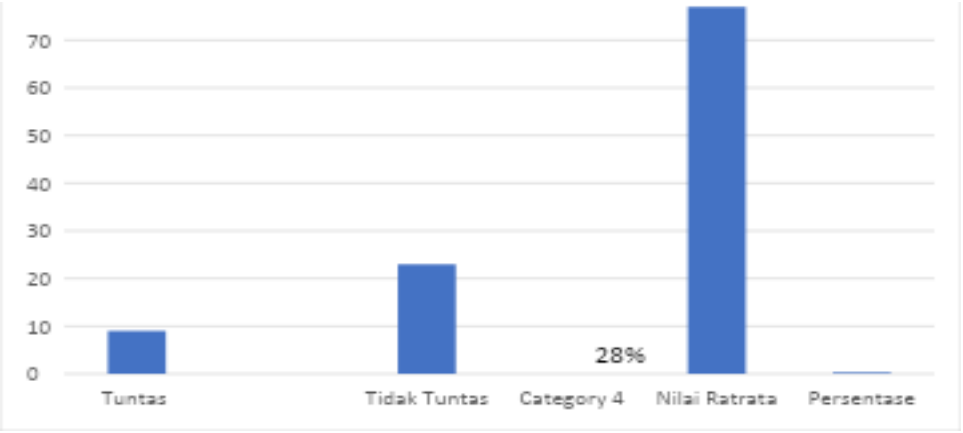
The students' early reading skills were still low and not yet according to expectations, as some students had low IQs, were slow to understand, and were not yet proficient in recognizing letters. There was, however, an improvement from the initial condition because the teacher focused more attention on students who were less capable.

Table 3. The Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills in Cycle I Meeting 1

No.	Student Name	Score	Description
1.	KJ	68	Incomplete
2.	KY	70	Incomplete

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3.	KY	72	Incomplete
Student Average Score		**70**	
Completeness Percentage		**66.67%**	



Graph 2. Graph of the Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills Cycle I Meeting 1

In the second meeting, the teacher invited students using contextual-based picture word cards. Students began to enjoy the media more and were more focused, although some were still not fully focused. Observation results showed learning was better than the first meeting.

Table 4. Recapitulation of Assessment of Early Reading Results Through Contextual Picture Media Cycle I Meeting 2

No.	Student Name	Letter Score	Category
1.	KJ	D	Incomplete
2.	KY	C	Complete
3.	HL	C	Complete

Table 5. The Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills in Cycle I Meeting 2

No.	Student Name	Score	Description
1.	KL	70	Incomplete
2.	KY	73	Incomplete
3.	HL	75	Complete

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Student Average Score	72
Completeness Percentage	66.67%



Graph 3. Graph of the Improvement of Early Reading Skills Cycle I

Cycle II

Cycle II actions were a refinement of Cycle I, using the same contextual-based picture media. In the first meeting, students used a contextual-based picture storybook titled "Let's Find Out: Examples of Environmental Care Activities" in groups. Students enjoyed the media more, were attracted to the pictures, and began to understand the content. Observation results showed learning began to be implemented well and smoothly.

Table 6. Recapitulation of Assessment of Early Reading Results Through Contextual Picture Media Cycle II Meeting 1

No.	Student Name	Letter Score	Category
1.	KJ	C	Complete
2.	KY	C	Complete
3.	HL	B	Complete

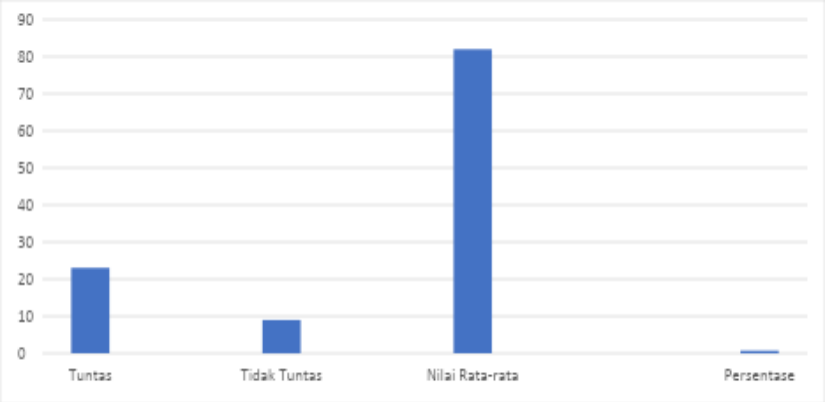
Student learning outcomes experienced an improvement from cycle I, with the students' average score reaching 75.33 and a 100% completion percentage.

Table 7. The Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills in Cycle II Meeting 1

No.	Student Name	Score	Description
1.	KJ	75	Complete

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2.	KY	75	Complete
3.	HL	76	Complete
Student Average Score		**75.33**	
Completeness Percentage		**100%**	



Graph 4. Graph of the Improvement of Early Reading Skills Results Cycle II Meeting 1

In the second meeting, students were highly enthusiastic and constantly asked about the contextual-based picture media. Students became more focused and understood the displayed media. Observation showed learning was carried out well and smoothly, with high student active participation.

Table 8. Recapitulation of Assessment of Early Reading Results Through Contextual Picture Media Cycle II Meeting 2

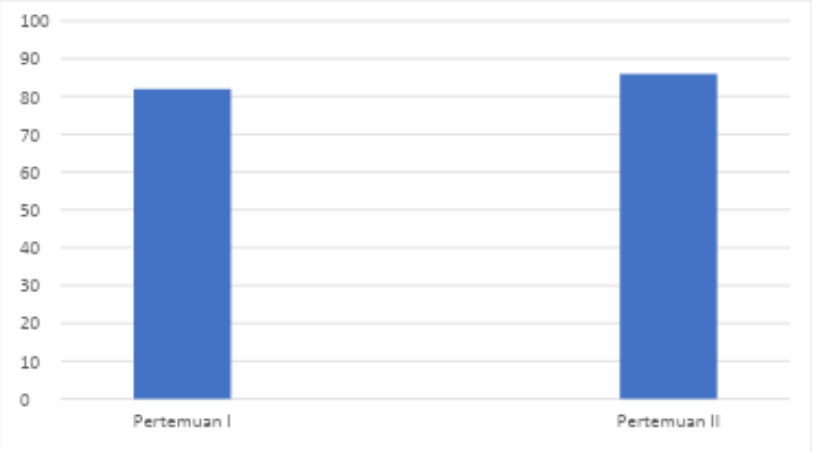
No.	Student Name	Letter Score	Category
1.	KJ	B	Complete
2.	KY	B	Complete
3.	HL	B	Complete

Success was seen through the application of contextual-based picture word card media to improve students' early reading skills, with the cycle II average score at 77.33 and 100% graduation percentage.

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Table 9. The Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills in Cycle II Meeting 2

No.	Student Name	Score	Description
1.	KJ	76	Complete
2.	KY	76	Complete
3.	HL	80	Complete
Student Average Score		**77.33**	
Completeness Percentage		**100%**	



Graph 5. Graph of the Improvement of Students' Early Reading Skills Cycle II

DISCUSSION

The media developed in this study is a contextual-based picture word card media designed to improve the early reading skills of students with learning difficulties in grade VII of an inclusive junior high school. The media is arranged in printed form containing picture cards and activity sheets combined with the Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) approach. The pictures used originate from the environment close to the students' daily lives, such as the school environment, home, pencils, whiteboards, food, and social activities, making it easier for students to connect reading materials with real experiences.

Contextual-based picture word card media is an innovation in instructional media that integrates word elements, pictures, and students' real experiences. Unlike traditional instructional media that typically only uses textbooks, whiteboards, or lectures, this media provides a more concrete, interesting, and meaningful learning experience.

The improvement in early reading skills was caused by the combination of picture media

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and the contextual approach. Picture media strengthens the relationship between visual and verbal elements, as explained in Paivio's Dual Coding Theory, allowing students to more easily understand letters, words, and sentences. The contextual approach adds meaning to learning because students learn through real experiences. Visual media can increase student motivation and learning outcomes.

On cycle II, a more significant improvement occurred. Students are more confident in reading, able to read words more fluently, and began to understand the content of simple sentences. Errors in pronouncing letters and syllables also decreased in each learning cycle. The use of contextual-based learning picture media effectively improves the early reading skills of students with learning difficulties in grade VII inclusive junior high school classrooms.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the classroom action research on improving early reading skills using contextual-based picture word card media for students with learning difficulties in grade VII of an inclusive junior high school, the media is applied through four stages: planning, action implementation, observation, and reflection in each cycle. In the learning process, the teacher utilizes picture word cards that are relevant to the students' everyday experiences and environment, making the material more concrete and easier to understand. Students are directed to observe pictures, associate pictures with words, read syllables, read words, and read simple sentences sequentially. The use of this media creates a more active, interesting, and meaningful learning atmosphere, so students become more enthusiastic, brave to read, and find it easier to master early reading materials.

After conducting the classroom action research by analyzing observation results and student test results, it is proven that there is an improvement in students' early reading skills from the initial test to cycle I up to cycle II. In the initial test, the students' early reading skills were still low because some students could not yet recognize letters and lacked confidence, obtaining an average student learning score of 68. In cycle I, after applying the contextual-based picture word card media, there was an improvement in early reading skills in the Indonesian language learning where the average student score increased to 70 in the second meeting. In cycle II, success was seen through the application of the picture storybook media, where the students' average score increased to 74 in the second meeting. The percentage of students who completed early reading skills in the initial test was 28%, which then increased in cycle I from 33% to 66%, and in cycle II the percentage increased from 66.67% to 100%.

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