

## CHARACTERIZATION OF FOUNDATIONAL LITERACY INSTRUCTION FOR EARLY GRADE STUDENTS BASED ON THEIR SKILL LEVELS

Syarifudin<sup>1</sup>, Nurrahmah<sup>2</sup>, Sholihin<sup>3</sup>, Ria Widiyanti<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1,2,3</sup>STKIP Taman Siswa Bima, Indonesia

<sup>4</sup>SD Islam Sabilillah Malang, Indonesia

Email: <sup>1</sup>[syarifudinsyarif745@gmail.com](mailto:syarifudinsyarif745@gmail.com), <sup>2</sup>[nurrahmah27058501@gmail.com](mailto:nurrahmah27058501@gmail.com), <sup>3</sup>[lihinsholihin7@gmail.com](mailto:lihinsholihin7@gmail.com),

<sup>4</sup>[ria.widiyanti.sdis@sekolahsabilillah.sch.id](mailto:ria.widiyanti.sdis@sekolahsabilillah.sch.id)

### ABSTRACT

This research aims to describe the characteristics of basic literacy learning among early grade students based on their skill levels or through Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach. The research subjects consist of 15 third-grade students from Rompo Elementary School. The research instruments include initial diagnostic tests and progress tests conducted during the learning process. This research employs a descriptive research design utilizing a qualitative approach to elucidate the basic literacy learning. The research findings indicate that the first level group's approach involves introducing children to the smallest components of literacy skills, namely sounds and letters, as well as distinguishing various phonetic variations of these letters. In Group B, students enhance their reading fluency through regular reading exercises, building text comprehension skills, and starting to understand unusual combinations of letters and pronunciations. Group C engages in collaborative reading within small groups, answering a series of questions about the text, drawing conclusions about the meanings of foreign words, and transitioning from simple to complex conceptual understanding. Students are encouraged to practice writing daily, read together, and evaluate each other's work to strengthen their abilities in identifying spelling errors, grammar, and common punctuation.

Keywords: Literacy, Proficiency Levels, TaRL

\* Corresponding Author Email: [syarifudinsyarif745@gmail.com](mailto:syarifudinsyarif745@gmail.com)

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## INTRODUCTION

The current learning issue that is widely discussed by society and the government is the low level of basic literacy skills in reading at the Elementary School (SD) level, even though reading ability is an integral part in supporting the smooth process of learning. Students will face significant challenges in comprehending the content of the lessons if they lack reading abilities (Sismulyasih, 2018). In the early grades, the function of basic literacy skills in reading is crucial in determining the academic success of students. Januar (2021) asserts that basic literacy skills in reading are fundamental requirements that students must possess as a foundation for absorbing information from various sources. In alignment with this, Hasma et al. (2014) also reveal that students with low reading abilities in the early grades tend to

encounter further difficulties as they struggle to comprehend all the materials presented in written form.

However, based on research data from various institutions regarding students' reading abilities in the early grades, it is truly concerning. The PISA 2018 assessment revealed that Indonesia is one of the countries categorized with low reading proficiency (OECD, 2019). This is evidenced by research indicating that in Maluku, East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), and Papua, over 20% (one out of five) of second-grade students are considered 'non-readers'. They are unable to comprehend even simple words in the reading materials (INOVASI, 2016). More specifically, ALIBACA's 2019 report illustrates that NTB is ranked 33rd out of 34 provinces in terms of reading proficiency (Puspendik, 2019).

Furthermore, based on a survey conducted by AKSI (Assessment of Indonesian Student Competencies), the West Nusa Tenggara Province is ranked 30th out of 33 provinces. This indicates that the literacy skills of students in NTB are at a very low level (Smeru Research Institute, 2016). This is further supported by the findings of a study released by ACDP (Education Sector Analytical and Capacity Development Partnership), which also indicate that only one out of three 8th-grade students in NTB can answer questions about the content of a short story (The SMERU Research Institute, 2018).

Therefore, due to the issue of low reading literacy among students in the NTB region, especially in Bima Regency, West Nusa Tenggara, it needs to be addressed. There is a successful learning model that has been implemented by the GEMAR Literacy program in three sub-districts, as mentioned by Ningsyih, et al. (2022). This model is called Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL).

TaRL (Teaching at the Right Level) is a learning model that involves the process of aligning instructional levels with the cognitive abilities of learners. In the TaRL learning process, students are required to be more active, emphasizing a learner-centered approach (Meishanti et al, 2022). This model stands in stark contrast to the current educational model in Indonesia, where students are consistently grouped based on age (Grade 1, Grade 2, Grade 3, and so on). On the other hand, the TaRL instructional model groups students not by age but by their proficiency levels. Literacy levels in reading are categorized into five levels: beginner level, letter level, word level, paragraph level, and story level (Erfan et al, 2021). Based on prior research, utilizing TaRL (Teaching at the Right Level) methodology can enhance students' literacy. This aligns with the findings of Frahmadia's study (2017), which indicated that the TaRL instructional model can improve students' listening comprehension literacy skills. Therefore, this research focuses on basic literacy education structured around the levels of students' reading abilities in elementary schools, employing the TaRL model. Consequently, the aim of this study is to investigate the impact of TaRL-based instruction on the reading literacy of early-grade students.

## METHOD

This research employs a descriptive research design utilizing a qualitative approach to elucidate the basic literacy learning of early-grade students through the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) instructional model at Rompo Elementary School in Langgudu Sub-district, Bima Regency. The research was conducted from April 2023 to June 2023, involving early-grade students as the participants. The subjects of this study were 15 third-grade students. Data collection methods consisted of oral tests conducted twice, initially and progressively, to assess the reading literacy development of the students through the implementation of the TaRL instructional model.

In this research, the primary data collection instrument (key instrument) is the researcher themselves. Data analysis employs data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Data validity is ensured through prolonged researcher

presence, enhanced perseverance, and data triangulation (Kerlinger, 2006). Furthermore, the data is categorized based on the levels of ability possessed by the students. The reading proficiency of the students is grouped into three categories: Group A, Group B, and Group C (Innovation Team (SAC), 2021).

## RESULT

This research were obtained through a 3-month study period, specifically from April to June 2023, involving third-grade students at Rompo Elementary School, Langgudu Subdistrict. The research commenced with an initial testing process, also known as preliminary diagnosis. The initial diagnosis was conducted by individually summoning each student to read the prepared initial diagnostic instruments.



Figure 1: Methods of Initial Diagnosis and Reading Assessment Instruments

The results of this initial test are categorized based on the levels of reading proficiency. Reading literacy levels are divided into five levels. The first level is the beginner level, where learners are not familiar with letters at all. The second level is the letter level, where learners can only recognize letters. The third level is the word level; at this level, learners are able to read words clearly. The fourth level is the paragraph level, where learners are capable of reading paragraphs clearly. The fifth level is the story level, at which point learners can read a simple story well and clearly. These five levels can be grouped into three: Group A (beginner and letter), Group B (word and paragraph), and Group C (story). In Figure 2 below, the Reading Proficiency Level Groups are presented.

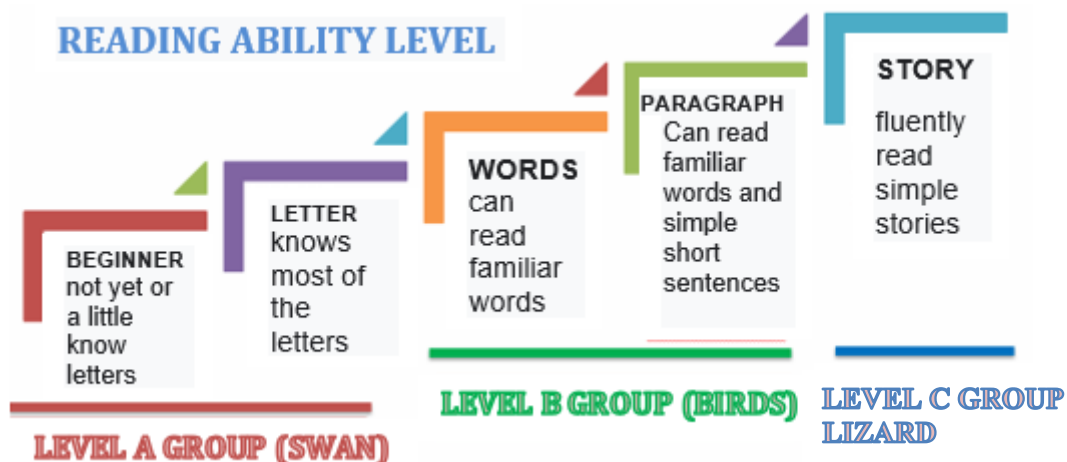


Figure 2. Grouping of Reading Skill Levels

## DISCUSSION

Early grade literacy instruction based on abilities can be categorized as follows:

### Level A (Beginner and Letters)

The implementation flow of ability-based literacy instruction for beginner and letter groups of students is as follows. Every lesson in all groups always begins by engaging in non-cognitive activities to ensure students' readiness to learn. Once students are prepared to learn, they sit together in their respective groups as shown in the following illustration. Learners engage in learning while playing using tools such as letter cards, arranged to form a word.



**Figure 3. Learning at Level A (for beginners and letters)**

Based on the observations from this activity, it can be characterized that children are beginning to build self-confidence, resulting in a strong foundation to progress to the next level. The learning activities utilized are child-centered, thus creating a comfortable environment for children to learn, develop self-confidence, and enhance their curiosity. This aligns with the viewpoint of Amris and Desyandri (2021), who state that student-centered learning enhances students' self-confidence and independence. Consequently, in this activity, children are introduced to the smallest components of literacy skills, namely sounds and letters. At this level as well, the learning activities are focused on how children can recognize letters as the smallest units and differentiate the various phonetic variations of these letters.

### Level B (Words and Paragraphs)

The implementation flow of literacy learning based on students' abilities for word and paragraph groups involves initially grouping the learners. At this level, students learn by utilizing instructional tools such as word cards, and they are instructed to compose words into sentences. The following are some of the activities involved.





**Figure 4. Learning at Level B (Words and Paragraphs)**

At this level, students can enhance their understanding of grammar and punctuation, instill the habit of daily reading, and reinforce comprehension of texts. If students are able to read paragraphs or short stories fluently, they will be better prepared to begin reading and writing longer texts, and to engage with texts that involve more complex concepts. Students at this level hone their critical thinking skills through comprehension activities. Within this group, students continue to develop fluency through regular reading exercises. At this stage, children build mastery of texts, develop confidence, and derive enjoyment from reading activities. Students need to be encouraged to tackle new and more challenging texts, and grapple with the meanings of longer texts. Teachers should introduce new and unfamiliar words to help students expand their vocabulary and begin understanding combinations of letters and unfamiliar pronunciation.

### **Level C (Story)**

In group C we applied a tool in the form of story books where we asked them to read story books.



**Figure 5. Learning at Level C (Stories).**

Characteristics of students in the fluent reader story reading group include the ability to read fluently and tackle longer texts. Teachers need to focus on enhancing reading comprehension and presenting more complex texts, while fostering creativity and assisting learners in planning and organizing their writing. Students at this level are encouraged to engage in shared reading within small groups and respond to a series of questions about the text. They are also supported in deducing the meanings of unfamiliar words and transitioning from understanding simple concepts to complex ones. Teachers must find engaging ways to encourage children to read and discuss stories.

At the storytelling level, students are encouraged to practice writing every day. They also read and evaluate each other's work to enhance their abilities in identifying spelling errors, grammar issues, and common punctuation mistakes. During individual writing activities, the teacher assists students one by one, praising their creative storytelling abilities and challenging them to employ correct spelling, grammar, and punctuation. In this manner, the instructor builds the students' confidence while aiding in the improvement of their writing skills.

The supporters that can be implemented in schools to enhance students' reading literacy include reading corners, reading trees, poster campaigns, 15 minutes of pre-lesson reading, all of which can contribute to improving the reading skills of students (Ramadhani, 2019). The improvement in reading skills ranges from low to high levels and is influenced by the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) model, which doesn't focus on age and grade but rather on the students' ability levels. This distinction sets the TaRL model apart from other instructional approaches. Therefore, the TaRL model provides a solution to the problem of comprehension gaps that have persisted in classrooms. This aligns with the findings of Banerji (2022), whose research indicates that tailored instruction based on ability levels effectively addresses illiteracy among students. Additionally, in line with the research by Rosyidah (2022), the TaRL teaching model is capable of delivering optimal learning support to struggling students, consequently leading to an improvement in students' reading literacy.

## CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

This research begins with an initial diagnostic process, and the results of these initial tests are categorized based on the levels of reading proficiency. Reading literacy levels are divided into five levels: the first is the beginner level, the letter level comes next, followed by the third level which is the word level, the fourth level deals with paragraphs, and the fifth level focuses on stories. From these five levels, they can be grouped into three categories: Group A (beginner and letter), Group B (word and paragraph), and Group C (story). Group A introduces children to the smallest components of literacy skills, namely sounds and letters. This level also distinguishes various phonetic variations of these letters. Group B students continue to develop fluency through regular reading practice, building mastery of texts, and starting to understand unusual combinations of letters and pronunciations. Group C engages in collaborative reading within small groups and answers a series of questions about the text.

They are also assisted in deducing the meanings of foreign words and transitioning from understanding simple concepts to complex ones. Students are encouraged to practice writing daily; they also read and evaluate each other's work to enhance their abilities in identifying spelling errors, grammar, and common punctuation. The recommendation to be carried out next is that this activity is carried out in schools that experience the same problems and conditions.

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