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The Application of the Puzzle-Based Syllable Method to Improve Early Reading Skills in Elementary School Students: A Study in Islamic Elementary Education

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Articles Information

Abstract

Early reading instruction is a foundational component of literacy development in elementary education, particularly within Islamic schooling contexts where cognitive skills are nurtured alongside moral and spiritual values. However, challenges such as limited engaging media and low student motivation often impede reading acquisition. This study aims to examine: (1) teacher and student activities in implementing a puzzle-based syllabic method, and (2) improvements in early reading skills among first-grade students at State Elementary School 435 Sanggalangi'. The study employed Classroom Action Research consisting of two cycles—planning, action, observation, and reflection—with a total of 19 students. Data were collected through observation, tests, and documentation, and analyzed using qualitative and quantitative descriptive techniques. The results show that the use of interactive puzzle media enhanced teacher performance and increased student participation in syllable assembly and sentence formation. Early reading skills improved significantly, with mastery rising from 57.89% in Cycle I to 89.47% in Cycle II. The integration of an engaging puzzle-based syllabic method, aligned with Islamic educational principles such as tarbiyah-oriented guidance and value-based learning, proved effective in stimulating students' cognitive abilities, interest, and active involvement. This study contributes to the development of innovative, enjoyable, and value-integrated literacy instruction within Islamic elementary education.

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Introduction

Early reading skills are a crucial foundation in the learning process in elementary schools, especially for first-grade students. At this early stage, students are introduced to the basic concepts of reading and writing, which are fundamental skills for later learning. However, challenges often arise in teaching early reading, with students experiencing difficulty recognizing letters, combining syllables, and putting words together into sentences. Traditional learning methods, which tend to be monotonous, are often ineffective in arousing students' interest and motivation to learn to read (Ardianti & Amalia, 2022). As a result, students' early reading skills do not develop optimally, which impacts their ability to follow subsequent learning materials.

In the context of elementary education, particularly in the lower grades of elementary school, learning is ideally characterized by a supportive, interactive, and enjoyable environment. Teachers play a key role in creating a learning environment that stimulates students' curiosity and creativity. Teaching methods should be designed to accommodate children's diverse learning styles, such as visual, auditory, and kinesthetic. The use of teaching aids and learning activities involving movement and play is also crucial for maintaining interest and motivation in young students. Ideal early reading skills in elementary school students are characterized by mastery of the basics of literacy, such as letter recognition, syllable comprehension, and the ability to combine them into simple words. At this stage, students should begin to develop the ability to read simple texts with good comprehension. They should also be able to recognize common words and decode new words using phonemic knowledge. These skills are essential as a foundation for further literacy development.

The use of innovative and interactive learning media is crucial to addressing this issue. Engaging learning media can help students grasp reading concepts more easily and enjoyably (Ahmad Suryadi, 2020; Falahudin, 2014). One such media is syllable puzzles. Puzzles offer a concrete and participatory learning experience, allowing students to actively assemble syllables into words and words into sentences. This approach is expected to stimulate students' imagination, enhance cognitive skills, and create a more dynamic and effective learning environment for improving early reading skills. This study focuses on the application of the puzzle-based syllable method to see how effective it is in improving the initial reading skills of first grade students at SDN 435 Sanggalangi'.

Method

This study used classroom action research (CAR) using Kurt Lewin's model, which consists of four stages of activity in each cycle: planning, implementation, observation, and reflection (Hanifah, 2014). The subjects were 19 first-grade students at SDN 435 Sanggalangi'. This study was conducted in the odd semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. The researcher was assisted by Mirda (a colleague) and Sandra Noloan, S.Pd., the first-grade homeroom teacher of SDN 435 Sanggalangi', who acted as observers throughout the learning process.

In the planning stage, the researcher made preparations for the research, including creating a lesson plan (RPP), preparing test sheets, student worksheets (LKPD), observation sheets for teacher activities, observation sheets for student activities, and a test assessment rubric. The teaching module was designed to facilitate early reading learning using a puzzle-based syllable method. The LKPD included activities for arranging syllables into words and arranging words into sentences. The puzzle media was made using used cardboard, colored markers, and HVS paper.

The implementation phase of the activity represents the implementation of the previously developed planning. The plan implemented in this course is the realization of all the instructional speculations and reading procedures that have been developed. The steps taken refer to the lesson plan used.

The teacher introduces syllables such as "ba, bi, bu, be, bo, ca, ci, cu, ce, co, da, di, du, de, do, fa, fi, fu, fe, fo," then guides students in assembling the syllable puzzles into words such as "Ma ta, Ka ya, ta li, gu la," and arranging the words into simple sentences. Students are divided into small groups to encourage interaction and collaboration.

The observation phase is conducted concurrently with the implementation phase, where researchers observe teacher and student activities during the learning process using a prepared observation sheet. Data collected includes student participation, enthusiasm, question-and-answer skills, and group collaboration.

The reflection phase is conducted after each cycle, where researchers analyze the observation and evaluation results to identify strengths and weaknesses in the learning implementation. The results of this reflection are then used as the basis for developing an improvement plan for the next cycle, with the goal of achieving optimal improvement in students' beginning reading skills. Student learning outcome data is analyzed using the learning completion percentage formula: $P = F/N \times 100\%$.

Students are considered to have completed their individual learning if they have achieved a minimum score of 75% and a minimum classical completion score of 80%.

Results

The study was conducted in two cycles at SDN 435 Sanggalangi', with each cycle consisting of two instructional meetings. Cycle I was implemented on 23 and 30 September 2024, while Cycle II was carried out on 21 and 28 October 2024. The results of each cycle are presented as follows.

Cycle I
1. Implementation of the Learning Activities

The implementation of the puzzle-based syllabic method in Cycle I demonstrated an initial improvement in both teacher and student activities. The teacher was able to organize students into several groups and guide them in arranging syllables into words. However, some aspects required refinement, particularly in providing more structured instructions for group formation and scaffolding learning tasks.

Observation data indicated that teacher activity reached 68.75%, categorized as adequate. Student activity during instruction also showed developing engagement; students began participating in arranging syllables and forming simple words. Nevertheless, their reading proficiency had not yet met the expected criteria.

2. Students' Early Reading Mastery

Mastery learning in early reading during Cycle I reached only **57.89%**, which was below the classical mastery criterion of **80%**. Table 1 summarizes student performance.

Table 1. Students' Mastery in Early Reading – Cycle I

Mastery Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Mastery Achieved	11	57.89
Not Yet Mastery	8	42.11
Total	19	100

These results indicate that 11 out of 19 students achieved individual mastery, while 8 students had not yet met the minimum competency requirements. The overall classical mastery level remained below the school's Minimum Mastery Criterion (KKM).

Cycle II

1. Improvements in Teaching and Learning Processes

Cycle II was conducted after reflecting on the limitations identified in Cycle I. Several improvements were implemented, including clearer group instructions, more focused teacher guidance, and improved facilitation through the distribution of student worksheets (LKPD). The teacher played a more active role as a facilitator and motivator during the learning process.

As a result, teacher activity showed a substantial increase, reaching 88.75%, categorized as *very good*. This improvement reflected better classroom management, clearer instructions, and more effective monitoring of group activities.

2. Enhancement of Student Engagement

Student activity also improved markedly in Cycle II, achieving a total activity score of **87.5%*, classified as *very good*. Students demonstrated high levels of involvement throughout the lesson. During the introductory phase, they responded attentively to greetings, followed instructions, and actively asked and answered questions. Their engagement in assembling puzzles, forming syllables, and reading words showed significant progress, indicating that the learning process had become more effective and enjoyable.

3. Students' Early Reading Mastery

A notable improvement was observed in students' early reading proficiency. Mastery learning increased dramatically to 89.47%, exceeding the classical mastery criterion.

Table 2. Students' Mastery in Early Reading – Cycle II

Mastery Category	Number of Students	Percentage (%)
Mastery Achieved	17	89.47
Not Yet Mastery	2	10.53
Total	19	100

These results demonstrate that 17 students achieved mastery, with only 2 students remaining below the expected level. The improvement reflects the effectiveness of the puzzle-based syllabic method in enhancing students' early reading skills.

Discussion

The analysis of teacher activities across the two instructional cycles indicates a consistent improvement in the implementation of the syllabic method supported by puzzle-based media. Teacher performance increased from 75% in Cycle I ("good") to 88.75% in Cycle II ("very good"), reflecting stronger pedagogical control and more effective facilitation of students' early reading development. This progress aligns with Gagné's theory of systematic instruction, which stresses the importance of structured steps and well-organized teaching procedures. From the perspective of Islamic education, the enhanced teacher performance also reflects the principle of *itqan* (excellence and thoroughness in work), which encourages educators to carry out instructional responsibilities with increasing quality and continuous refinement. The teacher's consistency in improving lesson delivery across cycles mirrors the Islamic pedagogical ethic of *tazkiah*—a process of gradual improvement and self-discipline—ensuring that each stage of instruction leads students closer to the intended learning outcomes.

Student learning activities similarly exhibited significant growth over the course of the study. Engagement levels increased from 68.75% in Cycle I ("good") to 87.5% in Cycle II ("very good"), suggesting that the integration of puzzle-based media successfully fostered active involvement and heightened motivation in reading tasks. This outcome corresponds with Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, which highlights the role of mediating tools in enhancing cognitive engagement. Within the Islamic educational framework, student engagement may also be understood through the lens of *tarbiyah*, which views learning as a holistic nurturing process involving intellectual, emotional, and behavioral development. By utilizing puzzles as interactive learning tools, the instructional process became more aligned with *tarbiyah* principles, encouraging students to participate joyfully, collaboratively, and with curiosity—traits valued in Islamic character formation (*akhlaq al-karimah*). Moreover, previous studies in Islamic education contexts have noted that multisensory and hands-on learning media can promote *tafaqquh* (deep understanding), particularly in foundational literacy skills.

The improvement in students' learning outcomes provides further support for the effectiveness of the puzzle-based syllabic method in early literacy instruction. Students' reading performance rose from 68.42% in Cycle I to

84.21% in Cycle II, indicating notable progress in decoding, fluency, and syllable recognition. The structured nature of the syllabic method—which progresses from syllables to words and then to sentences—aligns with the stepwise pedagogical approach emphasized in classical Islamic scholarship. Traditional Islamic learning methods, such as *tadarruj* (gradualism in instruction), advocate for progressive mastery, where learners move from simple units of knowledge to more complex forms. Similar patterns were observed in the present study as students demonstrated steady development from syllable identification to independent reading.

Furthermore, the use of puzzle-based media reflects the Islamic value of *rahmah* (compassion and facilitation in teaching). By presenting reading tasks in a playful and supportive manner, the teacher ensured that learners experienced literacy not as a burden but as a meaningful and enjoyable activity. This approach resonates with prophetic pedagogy, where the Prophet Muhammad is described as teaching in ways that were accessible, motivating, and considerate of learners' capacities. The students' improved outcomes therefore not only demonstrate cognitive gains but also affirm that literacy development grounded in gentle guidance and engaging methods aligns well with Islamic educational ideals. Overall, the consistent upward trends across the two cycles indicate that the integration of the syllabic method with puzzle-based media effectively supports both academic achievement and the holistic nurturing goals central to Islamic pedagogy.
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Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the application of a puzzle-based syllabic method effectively enhances early reading skills among first-grade students at SDN 435 Sanggalangi'. The method succeeded in improving both teacher performance and student engagement by integrating interactive puzzle media that stimulated syllabic awareness, decoding skills, and word formation abilities. Quantitative findings show a significant increase in reading mastery, with student achievement rising from 57.89% in Cycle I to 89.47% in Cycle II, indicating that the intervention produced substantial and consistent learning gains.

The integration of Islamic educational values—such as tarbiyah-oriented guidance, cultivation of discipline, cooperation, and respect for knowledge—also contributed to shaping a supportive learning environment rooted in holistic character development. The learning process aligned with Islamic pedagogical principles, emphasizing gradual instruction (*tadarruj*), learner-centered facilitation (*ta'dib*), and nurturing motivation through meaningful and enjoyable literacy experiences.

Overall, the puzzle-based syllable method proves to be not only pedagogically effective but also compatible with Islamic education frameworks that prioritize both intellectual and moral development. This approach offers practical implications for teachers in Islamic elementary education seeking innovative, engaging, and value-integrated strategies to strengthen early reading competencies.

Future research may explore larger samples, compare alternative game-based syllabic media, or examine long-term retention of reading skills in diverse Islamic schooling contexts.

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