

Analysis of Initial Reading Ability in Dyslexic Students at Elementary School

Aswasulasikin^{1*}, Sri Pujiani², Ilmanul Yakin², Mazda Leva Okta Safitri¹, Nurdin Kamil¹, Ilham Arya Susanto¹

¹Sriwijaya University, Indonesia

²Madrasah Tsanawiyah Negeri 1 Lombok Timur, Indonesia

*Corresponding Author: kien.ip12@gmail.com

Abstract

Inclusive education is a fundamental right for all children, including students with dyslexia who experience specific learning difficulties in reading and writing. However, implementing inclusive education in Indonesia still faces numerous challenges, such as inadequate early identification, limited suitable teaching methods, and a lack of understanding of dyslexia among teachers and the community. This study aims to analyze the initial reading abilities of dyslexic students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that four dyslexic students experienced difficulties recognising letters, reading syllables, and comprehending simple sentences. Key contributing factors included confusion over visually similar letters, weak phonological awareness, and insufficient reading practice at home. These reading difficulties negatively impacted students' academic performance, highlighting the need for more adaptive teaching strategies, such as phonics-based approaches, engaging educational media, and sustained support from teachers and parents. With proper methods and support dyslexic students can enhance their reading skills and attain equitable educational opportunities.

Keywords: *dyslexia, inclusive education, initial reading, adaptive learning, elementary school*

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INTRODUCTION

Inclusive education is a fundamental right for every child, including those experiencing specific learning difficulties such as dyslexia. Law Number 20 of 2003 on the National Education System and related regulations mandate that every student should receive education tailored to their needs. However, in practice, students with dyslexia still face various obstacles in accessing equal educational opportunities. One of the primary issues is the lack of early identification and intervention for dyslexic students. Many children with reading and writing difficulties do not promptly receive the necessary assistance, adversely affecting their academic progress. Moreover, educators' limited knowledge and skills in implementing dyslexia-friendly teaching methods present significant challenges within the education system.

Despite inclusive education policies, current regulations remain general and lack clear technical guidelines on assessment, adaptive curricula, and suitable evaluation methods for dyslexic students. Additionally, many schools lack supportive facilities and resources, such as specialised books, assistive technology, and a conducive learning environment tailored for students with reading and writing

difficulties. In addition to systemic barriers, social stigma remains a significant issue. The limited understanding of dyslexia among teachers, parents, and the broader community often results in dyslexic students being unfairly labelled as lazy or unintelligent, negatively impacting their self-esteem and hindering their true potential.

Inclusive education is a fundamental right for all children, including students with dyslexia, who experience specific learning difficulties in reading and writing. The United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (UNCRPD) underscores the obligation of member states, including Indonesia, to ensure inclusive education systems at all levels (UN, 2006). Despite this commitment, the implementation of inclusive education in Indonesia remains fraught with challenges, especially for students with dyslexia.

Numerous studies have highlighted the critical gaps in early identification, appropriate teaching methods, and teacher preparedness. For instance, research by Sari & Rahmawati (2020) found that only 30% of primary school teachers in Indonesia were able to correctly identify characteristics of dyslexia, underscoring the lack of awareness and training. Similarly, Widodo et al. (2019) observed that many schools lack access to diagnostic tools and trained specialists, delaying the identification and intervention process.

This study aimed to analyse the initial reading abilities of dyslexic students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1. A descriptive qualitative method was employed, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The findings indicate that four dyslexic students experienced consistent difficulties recognising letters, reading syllables, and comprehending simple sentences. These results are in line with international findings—for example, the work of Snowling and Hulme (2012), who demonstrated that children with dyslexia commonly struggle with phonological decoding and letter recognition.

Key contributing factors in this study included:

- Confusion over visually similar letters, such as 'b' and 'd'—a common dyslexic trait supported by Shaywitz et al. (2004), who showed that dyslexic students process visual-orthographic features differently.
- Weak phonological awareness, which is widely documented as a core deficit in dyslexia (Wagner et al., 1999).
- Insufficient reading practice at home, which compounds difficulties and limits reading fluency development (National Reading Panel, 2000).

These reading challenges significantly impacted students' academic performance, reducing their ability to keep up with curriculum demands and participate fully in classroom activities. The urgency of addressing this is underscored by evidence showing that early and appropriate intervention can dramatically improve reading outcomes for dyslexic learners (Torgesen et al., 2001). Delays in support lead to widening achievement gaps, increased frustration, and reduced self-esteem among affected students.

To address these issues, there is an urgent need for:

- Phonics-based teaching approaches, proven to be effective in improving decoding skills (Ehri et al., 2001).
- Use of engaging, multisensory educational media, which has been shown to enhance motivation and learning outcomes for students with learning disabilities (Hehir et al., 2016).
- Sustained support from teachers and parents, which is critical to reinforce reading strategies and provide emotional encouragement (Gomez & Gomez, 2017).

With proper, research-based methods and support systems, dyslexic students can significantly improve their reading abilities and achieve equitable educational opportunities. The time to act is now, as every year without intervention widens the gap in literacy and academic success. A systemic commitment to inclusive education—rooted in awareness, training, and resources—is not only necessary but urgent.

Therefore, despite regulations that affirm the educational rights of dyslexic students, practical implementation still faces considerable challenges. Concrete actions, including more specific policies, capacity building for educators, and adequate supportive facilities, are needed to ensure dyslexic students can access quality and equitable education.

Dyslexic students are children who experience specific learning difficulties, primarily in reading, writing, and spelling, despite having normal or above-average intelligence. Dyslexia is a neurological disorder that affects how the brain processes written language, causing difficulties in comprehending texts, recognising letters, and connecting sounds to letter symbols (Ginting et al., 2023; Loeziana, 2017).

According to the American Psychiatric Association (2013) in the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), dyslexia is categorized as a specific learning disorder with impairment in reading. Dyslexic students commonly struggle with reading speed, accuracy, and comprehension. They also experience difficulties in writing and spelling due to confusion between visually similar letters, such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q" (Shah, Banner, Heginbotham, & Fulford, 2014).

At school, dyslexic students frequently face challenges in following standard curricula. Hence, more adaptive teaching methods are necessary, such as multisensory approaches (Orton-Gillingham), phonological-based learning, and the use of assistive technologies like audiobooks and text-to-speech software (Astutik & Minarsih, 2024); (Yogantari, Yoenanto, & Marhaeni, 2023).

Legally, dyslexic students' rights to appropriate education are recognised by inclusive education policies. In Indonesia, Law No. 20 of 2003 on the National Education System asserts that every child, including those with special needs such as dyslexia, has the right to equitable and quality education. Moreover, the Minister of Education Regulation (Permendikbud) No. 70 of 2009 on Inclusive Education mandates schools to provide tailored educational services to accommodate the needs of students with special requirements, including dyslexia. Improved awareness and application of effective teaching strategies are essential for dyslexic students to fully realise their potential and gain equitable and inclusive access to education.

Based on observations conducted at elementary schools in Selong district, indications of various issues related to dyslexic students have emerged. These issues primarily concern the initial reading abilities of fourth-grade students. According to the fourth-grade teacher, four male students identified with dyslexia (initials H, A, B, and S) are struggling significantly with initial reading skills. Observations and teacher interviews revealed specific difficulties experienced by these students, such as spelling each letter individually, requiring extended time to complete reading tasks, and challenges in combining letters into coherent words. The teacher has implemented targeted interventions to address these challenges, including creating specialised reading guidebooks and providing individualised, private reading sessions to support students' progress. Given these findings, this research analyses initial reading skills among dyslexic fourth-grade students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School

METHOD

Type of Research

This study employed a descriptive qualitative research design aimed at understanding and describing the initial reading abilities of dyslexic students in a natural school setting. The qualitative approach was chosen to explore in-depth the specific difficulties experienced by the students, as well as the contextual factors influencing their learning processes.

Time and Place of Research

The research was conducted over a period of three months, from August to October 2024, at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1, located in [insert specific district/region if available], Indonesia. The school was selected based on its inclusive education program and the presence of students officially identified or suspected of having dyslexia.

Research Targets and Subjects

The target of this research was students in inclusive elementary school settings who exhibit characteristics of dyslexia.

The subjects of the study included:

- Four dyslexic students in early grade levels (Grades 1–3)
- Classroom teachers responsible for teaching literacy skills
- Parents or guardians of the dyslexic students
- School administrators familiar with inclusive practices

Research Procedures

The research was conducted through the following steps:

1. Preliminary study – obtaining permission from the school and identifying students showing signs of dyslexia.
2. Observation – regular classroom observation of the selected students to monitor reading activities and behavior.
3. Interviews – semi-structured interviews with teachers, parents, and students to gain insights into their experiences and perspectives.
4. Documentation – collection of students' reading work, report cards, and teaching materials used during the learning process.

Research Instruments

The instruments used in this study included:

- Observation checklists tailored to reading behavior and dyslexic symptoms
- Interview guides for structured and semi-structured interviews
- Field notes for recording non-verbal behavior and contextual details
- Student reading samples and worksheets to assess literacy performance

Techniques of Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using Miles and Huberman's (1994) interactive model of qualitative data analysis, which includes:

1. Data reduction – selecting, focusing, simplifying, and transforming raw data from field notes and transcripts.
2. Data display – organizing data in the form of matrices, charts, and narrative summaries to facilitate understanding.
3. Conclusion drawing and verification – identifying patterns, explanations, and drawing conclusions based on the evidence gathered, followed by triangulation to ensure the validity of findings.

This comprehensive methodological framework allowed the researchers to gain a holistic understanding of the initial reading abilities of dyslexic students and identify practical implications for inclusive education strategies in Indonesian primary schools.

This research aims to analyse the initial reading abilities of dyslexic students at the elementary school level. The study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology involving directly observing real-life conditions to gather comprehensive data and information relevant to the current context. Data collection techniques included triangulation methods consisting of observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations allowed researchers to directly examine the students' reading behaviours, while interviews provided teachers and school staff insights regarding students' specific reading challenges. Documentation was utilised to cross-verify and support findings obtained through observation and interviews. Data analysis in this research was conducted through three stages: preliminary analysis before fieldwork, ongoing analysis during data collection, and final analysis after completing field observations.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on observations and interviews conducted on the analysis of initial reading skills among dyslexic Based on observations and interviews conducted on the analysis of initial reading skills among dyslexic elementary school students in the Selong district, the following findings and discussions emerged:

1. Initial Reading Ability

Observations and interviews were conducted among 25 fourth-grade students. Four individuals, identified with the initials H, A, B, and S, demonstrated significant difficulties in initial reading skills. To effectively analyse these challenges, the research assessed several critical aspects, including letter recognition, vowel reading, consonant reading, digraph reading, syllable reading, and reading simple sentences.

Initial reading skills are fundamental in early literacy development, particularly crucial at the elementary school level. At this stage, students are expected to recognise letters, comprehend the relationship between letters and sounds, and read simple words and sentences fluently. However, the findings from the observations and interviews at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1 revealed that students H, A, B, and S struggled noticeably with these initial reading skills.

Drawing from previous studies by (Aryani & Fauziah, 2020; Haryanti, Muhibbudin, & Junaris, 2022; Nurfadhillah et al., 2022), several critical indicators were utilised to assess the initial reading challenges faced by students, as detailed below:

1. Letter Recognition Ability—Students struggling with initial reading often experience difficulties recognising letter shapes and names, mainly letters with visually similar forms such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q."

2. Vowel Reading Ability – Vowel recognition is essential in forming words. Challenges in recognising vowels can impede a student's capability to construct syllables and comprehend words as a whole.
3. Consonant Reading Ability – Some students encounter difficulties linking consonant sounds with vowels, hindering their ability to form meaningful words.
4. Digraph Reading Ability – Digraphs, combinations of two letters producing a single sound like "ng" or "ny," present significant challenges because they require more advanced phonetic comprehension.
5. Syllable Reading Ability—students must correctly combine vowels and consonants to form syllables at this stage. Difficulty in syllable reading prevents students from successfully assembling complete words.
6. Simple Sentence Reading Ability – This skill demonstrates a student's comprehension of words organised into sentences. Students facing initial reading difficulties typically read sentences hesitantly, with frequent errors or interruptions.

These initial reading difficulties substantially affect students' overall academic performance, particularly regarding their ability to grasp instructional materials that heavily rely on reading proficiency. Consequently, there is an urgent need for targeted and intensive learning strategies. Implementing phonics-based instructional approaches, engaging educational media, and providing specialised guidance for students experiencing reading challenges are highly recommended (Maghfiroh & Liansari, 2024; Rofi'i & Susilo, 2022; Witono, 2024).

2. Difficulties Experienced by Students in Initial Reading

Researchers conducted observations and interviews with students, the school principal, and fourth-grade teachers at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1. The documentation provided detailed data on the initial reading skills of fourth-grade dyslexic students. Among 25 students observed, four were identified as dyslexic and exhibited significant challenges in initial reading. According to (Witri, Saputra, Rahmatih, & Witono, 2022), initial reading difficulties among students occur when there is a gap between their abilities and academic achievements due to disruptions or obstacles in early reading development. Internal and external factors influence these challenges. Rahim suggests that internal factors include physical, intellectual, and psychological aspects, while external factors involve the home and school environments (Rabiatullisani, 2023; Rafika, Kartikasari, & Lestari, 2020; Rahma & Dafit, 2021).

The study found that the initial reading abilities of fourth-grade students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1 were generally adequate, though specific challenges remained for dyslexic students. The main difficulties identified were:

a. Difficulty Recognizing Letters

Fourth-grade students experienced significant obstacles in recognising alphabetical letters. Based on interviews and observations, students who had difficulty recognising letters rarely practised reading at home due to a lack of parental guidance and tended to be quieter and less participative in classroom activities.

b. Difficulty Reading Vowels

Observations and interviews revealed that the four dyslexic students (H, A, B, and S) had varying difficulties with vowel recognition, incredibly confusing vowels with similar visual forms, such as "u" and "n." These difficulties were primarily attributed to low memory retention, which caused frequent confusion and letter reversals during reading tasks.

c. Difficulty Reading Consonants

Several fourth-grade students struggled significantly in reading consonants. This was attributed to difficulties pronouncing consonant sounds such as "p" and "f," along with confusion distinguishing similar-looking consonants like "b" and "d."

d. Difficulty Recognizing Digraphs

Students also had trouble recognising and reading digraphs (e.g., "ny," "ng," "sy," "kh"). The challenge was primarily due to the educational focus on single vowel sounds, resulting in inadequate phonetic understanding required to master complex letter combinations.

e. Difficulty Reading Syllables

A syllable represents a word segment based on pronunciation. Some fourth-grade students faced considerable difficulty reading syllables. Although they recognised letters individually, they struggled to combine them fluently into coherent, meaningful units. Regular practice and guided reading exercises are crucial to accelerating their reading skills.

f. Difficulty Reading Simple Sentences

Reading simple sentences posed additional challenges. Students often paused or stopped after reading individual words and found difficulty proceeding smoothly to subsequent words. This issue arose from weak decoding skills, insufficient vocabulary comprehension, and a lack of reading fluency. Regular reading practice helps improve students' letter recognition and sentence-reading capabilities, while inconsistent practice naturally leads to diminished reading skills.

The observed initial reading difficulties significantly impacted students' ability to engage in classroom reading activities. This challenge extended to examinations, where students faced trouble comprehending written questions, adversely affecting their academic performance.

The findings of this study highlight several critical challenges experienced by dyslexic students in learning to read, specifically at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1. Through observations, interviews, and documentation, it was identified that dyslexic students face difficulty in recognizing letters, reading syllables, and comprehending simple sentences. These difficulties are underpinned by several contributing factors, which align with previous research in the field and emphasize the urgency for more inclusive and adaptive educational strategies.

One of the core issues observed was students' difficulty in recognizing letters, particularly those that are visually similar such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q." This finding aligns with Snowling (2000), who states that visual confusion between letters is a common characteristic in dyslexic children due to impaired visual processing skills, making it difficult for them to build a strong foundation in decoding.

Furthermore, students were found to have trouble reading syllables and constructing simple sentences, often reading slowly, inaccurately, or skipping parts of words. Lyon, Shaywitz, and Shaywitz (2003) explain that this difficulty stems from phonological processing weaknesses, which hinder the automaticity and fluency needed for effective reading comprehension. These decoding issues directly impact students' ability to understand text, limiting their engagement with the curriculum.

Phonological awareness deficits were another prominent finding. Students struggled with identifying and manipulating sounds in words, which is a key skill for decoding unfamiliar vocabulary. Wagner and Torgesen (1987) emphasize that phonological awareness is a critical predictor of reading success and its absence can be a hallmark of dyslexia. This deficit prevents students from establishing sound-symbol correspondences and acquiring reading fluency.

Additionally, the research found that the lack of reading practice at home further exacerbated students' difficulties. This often stemmed from limited parental understanding of dyslexia and the absence of a literacy-rich environment. Sénéchal and LeFevre (2002) found that home literacy activities significantly contribute to reading development, particularly for students with learning challenges. Without adequate home support, the learning process remains fragmented and inconsistent.

These learning difficulties were observed to have a direct negative impact on academic performance. Dyslexic students not only struggled with reading-related tasks but also showed signs of reduced self-confidence and motivation. Shaywitz (2003) asserts that when dyslexia is not appropriately supported, it can lead to broader academic failure and emotional distress, highlighting the need for early intervention.

In addressing these challenges, the study underscores the importance of implementing adaptive teaching strategies, such as phonics-based instruction, the use of engaging educational media, and consistent support from both teachers and parents. Ehri et al. (2001) found strong evidence that structured phonics instruction improves the reading abilities of students with learning difficulties. These methods, when delivered systematically and with sensitivity to individual needs, can help dyslexic students achieve significant progress in reading and overall academic success.

Based on the research, the overall initial reading skills of fourth-grade students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1 were generally satisfactory. However, specific challenges persist among dyslexic students. These issues vary significantly, from difficulties recognising letters to problems reading simple sentences. The primary factors causing these reading difficulties among dyslexic students include insufficient reading practice, limited memory retention, and inadequate support from family members.

One major challenge identified was the inability to recognise letters. Several students struggled significantly with letter recognition, primarily due to limited practice at home. Students have difficulty establishing strong memory associations with letter shapes and sounds without sufficient repetition and practice. Additionally, some students encountered specific difficulties with vowel recognition, especially in distinguishing visually similar vowels such as "u" and "n." These issues are closely related to weak memory retention and insufficient visual and phonological stimulation.

Another notable difficulty discovered in this study was consonant recognition. Students faced significant barriers in differentiating and pronouncing consonants, particularly similar-sounding consonants such as "p" and "f" or visually similar consonants like "b" and "d." These issues are likely influenced by phonological factors, precisely difficulties distinguishing similar sounds. Additionally, students experienced problems recognising digraphs, such as "ny," "ng," "sy," and "kh," because these letter combinations typically require advanced phonetic understanding, usually taught after students master individual vowels and consonants.

Regarding syllable reading, some students had difficulty combining letters into coherent syllabic sounds despite recognising individual letters. They often struggled to articulate syllables fluently, indicating a clear need for additional guidance to understand how letters relate to words. An even more complex difficulty arose with reading simple sentences. Students frequently paused after reading a single word and found it challenging to transition to the next word smoothly. These difficulties primarily stemmed from inadequate decoding skills, limited vocabulary comprehension, and a lack of reading fluency.

These initial reading difficulties significantly affect students' ability to engage effectively in classroom activities. Students with reading limitations have trouble comprehending reading-based

instructional materials, such as exam questions and text-based assignments, consequently falling behind their peers academically.

To address these issues, more intensive and adaptive teaching strategies are necessary. Implementing phonics-based instructional approaches, engaging visual media, and establishing regular reading practice can enhance students' reading skills. Additionally, teachers and parents play crucial roles in providing ongoing guidance, encouragement, and motivation, which is essential for supporting the literacy development of students with reading difficulties.

CONCLUSION

Based on this study's findings regarding initial reading abilities among dyslexic students at Gunung Malang Public Elementary School 1, it was determined that the overall initial reading skills of fourth-grade students are relatively good. Nevertheless, specific challenges remain evident for four dyslexic students identified by the initials H, A, B, and S. These challenges include difficulties in letter recognition, vowel and consonant reading, understanding digraphs, syllable reading, and reading simple sentences. A primary difficulty identified was insufficient letter recognition, particularly with visually similar letters such as "b" and "d" or "p" and "q". Additionally, some students struggled to differentiate between visually similar vowels, notably "u" and "n". These issues were closely related to low memory retention and limited reading practice within the home environment.

Further difficulties were found in consonant and digraph reading. Dyslexic students frequently faced challenges linking consonant sounds with vowels and recognising complex letter combinations like "ny," "ng," "sy," and "kh." These issues underscore the students' weak phonological awareness, indicating a need for targeted instructional support. In syllable reading, students encountered difficulties combining letters into coherent, meaningful syllables. Even though individual letter recognition was adequate, difficulties synthesising these letters into fluent syllables disrupted their reading fluency. Reading simple sentences posed significant challenges; students frequently hesitated or paused between words, primarily due to insufficient decoding skills, limited vocabulary comprehension, and irregular reading practice.

These initial reading challenges have considerable implications for students' overall academic performance. They tend to struggle with learning materials requiring reading proficiency, including test questions, risking falling behind their classmates. To address these issues effectively, intensive and adaptive teaching strategies are necessary. Using phonics-based approaches, engaging educational media, and ensuring consistent reading practice can significantly enhance students' reading capabilities. Furthermore, ongoing support from teachers and parents, including guidance and motivational reinforcement, is vital in fostering literacy development among dyslexic students.

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