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Utilising Contextual Picture Series Media to Improve Early Childhood Storytelling Skills in Sihitang Village

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Abstract

Storytelling skills are a fundamental part of early childhood language development, yet Group B children in Sihitang Village showed limited vocabulary, difficulty arranging story sequences, and speech anxiety when speaking in front of the class. This study aimed to improve children's storytelling skills through contextual picture series media drawn from the local socio-cultural environment. The study employed Classroom Action Research (CAR) using the Kemmis and McTaggart spiral model in two cycles, involving 15 children aged 5–6 years. Data were collected through structured observation, field notes, and documentation, and were analysed using descriptive quantitative and comparative qualitative techniques. The results showed that classical mastery increased from 33.3% in the pre-cycle to 60% in Cycle I and 86.7% in Cycle II. Contextual picture series reduced children's cognitive load and served as visual scaffolding, so that children became more fluent, coherent, and confident in storytelling.

Keywords: contextual picture series; storytelling skills; early childhood; Sihitang Village; cognitive load

Abstrak

Keterampilan bercerita merupakan manifestasi fundamental perkembangan bahasa anak usia dini, tetapi anak Kelompok B di Kelurahan Sihitang masih menunjukkan keterbatasan perbendaharaan kata, disorientasi kronologis saat menyusun alur cerita, dan kecemasan berbicara (speech anxiety) di depan kelas. Penelitian ini bertujuan meningkatkan keterampilan bercerita anak melalui media gambar seri kontekstual yang dianggit dari kebiasaan sosiokultural dan lingkungan lokal anak. Penelitian menggunakan Penelitian Tindakan Kelas (PTK) model spiral Kemmis dan McTaggart dalam dua siklus dengan subjek 15 anak usia 5–6 tahun. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi terstruktur, catatan lapangan, dan dokumentasi, lalu dianalisis secara deskriptif kuantitatif dan kualitatif komparatif. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan ketuntasan klasikal meningkat dari 33,3% pada pra-siklus menjadi 60% pada Siklus I dan 86,7% pada Siklus II. Media gambar seri kontekstual mereduksi beban kognitif dan berfungsi sebagai perancah visual (visual scaffolding) sehingga anak lebih lancar, runtut, dan berani bercerita.

Kata Kunci: *gambar seri kontekstual; keterampilan bercerita; anak usia dini; Kelurahan Sihitang; beban kognitif*

INTRODUCTION

Within the landscape of early childhood development, language competence occupies a central position as an instrument of cognitive mediation that enables children to structure symbols, negotiate meaning, and absorb the socio-cultural reality around them. Mature receptive and expressive language in the preschool phase is not merely a modality of everyday communication but the main architecture for building verbal-linguistic intelligence, which correlates linearly with reading readiness at the primary school level. Recognising the significance of this golden developmental phase, Sukma and Saifudin (2021:45) state that "speaking ability can be developed through communication activities that give learners the opportunity to express their thoughts and

experiences orally." Consequently, preschool institutions are required to provide literacy-rich environments and to design interactive pedagogical simulations that encourage children to produce oral language actively, naturally, and recursively.

However, an empirical review and initial diagnostic assessment conducted by the researcher in the Group B classroom in Sihitang Village revealed a worrying anomaly. There was a wide pedagogical gap between the targets of the Child Development Achievement Level Standards (*Standar Tingkat Pencapaian Perkembangan Anak*, STPPA) and the children's actual language performance. When instructed to describe a holiday experience, retell a simple fairy tale, or express a spontaneous opinion, most children were dominated by silence and nervousness and used fragmented sentences. Their vocabulary deficit often led to the tip-of-the-tongue phenomenon, a condition in which children understand the concept of an object or activity but fail to retrieve the phonetic code of the word orally. In addition, affective anxiety (speech anxiety) in the form of fear of being laughed at and loss of self-confidence aggravated the children's passivity. The root of the problem was reinforced by the teacher's conventional teaching pattern, which relied on low-quality black-and-white Children's Worksheets (*Lembar Kerja Anak*, LKA) as the sole instrument of stimulation. Such abstract media, detached from the children's cultural roots, failed to activate their interest in verbal communication.

In response to this methodological impasse, this study offers an intervention model through the optimisation of contextual picture series media. Conceptually, a contextual picture series is a sequence of two-dimensional visual media designed chronologically and sequentially by incorporating conceptual objects, geographical landscapes, social interactions, and fragments of livelihoods that exist around Sihitang Village. The use of this medium rests on Paivio's Dual-Coding Theory, which holds that visual and verbal information that are contextually linked accelerate memory retention and retrieval. By presenting visual stimuli drawn from children's everyday empirical reality, the intrinsic cognitive load of processing unfamiliar information can be reduced, so that children's attention can be directed to constructing sentence syntax and expanding oral semantic variation. Based on this background, this classroom action research was conducted to analyse and demonstrate the empirical effect of contextual picture series media in improving children's storytelling achievement in a measurable manner.

METHOD

This study was designed as collaborative Classroom Action Research (CAR), in which the researcher partnered with the classroom teacher as an observer to improve the quality of language learning. The operational design adopted the Kemmis and McTaggart spiral model, which integrates four essential moments into one systemic unit: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting. The research was conducted in two planned cycles to ensure the retention and stability of improvements in children's abilities. The research site was an Early Childhood Education (*Pendidikan Anak Usia Dini*, PAUD) institution located in Sihitang Village, and the subjects comprised all 15 children of Group B (8 boys and 7 girls) aged 5–6 years.

Intervention procedure

The intervention was divided into structured meeting units within the Daily Learning Implementation Plan (*Rencana Pelaksanaan Pembelajaran Harian*, RPPH). The researcher designed laminated A3 picture series containing coloured illustrations based on real photographs of the Sihitang environment. The visual scenarios included: (1) the Sihitang Rice Field Series, depicting farmers ploughing the soil, planting rice, guarding against birds, and harvesting; (2) the Sihitang Market Series, depicting a child helping their mother ride a motorised rickshaw (*becak motor*), vegetable transactions, and paying the vendor; and (3) the River and *Sobi* Series, depicting a child bathing with peers in a nearby river, finding fish, and returning home in the late afternoon. In the

classroom, children were stimulated through three phases: the Visual Decoding Phase (observing object details), the Cognitive Sequencing Phase (independently arranging shuffled picture cards in logical order), and the Expressive Narration Phase (presenting the storyline orally in front of the class using a mini podium).

Data collection techniques and instruments

Data collection prioritised scientific objectivity through source and method triangulation. Quantitative data were obtained through an observation sheet of children's storytelling performance validated by a child development expert, covering four core indicators: (a) speaking fluency (speed, clarity of articulation, natural pauses); (b) story sequence coherence (beginning–middle–end chronological logic); (c) affective factors/courage (eye contact, voice volume, minimised anxiety); and (d) vocabulary variation (richness of nouns, verbs, and adjectives). Assessment was based on a 1–4 ordinal rubric: Not Yet Developed (*Belum Berkembang*, BB = 1), Starting to Develop (*Mulai Berkembang*, MB = 2), Developing as Expected (*Berkembang Sesuai Harapan*, BSH = 3), and Very Well Developed (*Berkembang Sangat Baik*, BSB = 4). Complementary qualitative data were gathered through field notes to record spontaneous verbal responses and the sociometry of children's interactions during learning.

Data analysis techniques

Data on children's development were analysed using descriptive quantitative statistics to calculate individual achievement percentages and classical mastery percentages. The intervention was considered successful if the classical mastery of children achieving at least BSH (score ≥ 3) reached $\geq 80\%$ of all subjects in the class.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Theoretical foundations of children's language competence

The success of pedagogical interventions to accelerate the expressive language of preschool children depends on the teacher's accuracy in selecting media that have strong emotional and cognitive resonance with the children. Sukma and Saifudin (2021) position the practice of expressing ideas orally through topics close to children's daily lives as the main pillar stimulating the maturity of early childhood language competence. When learning topics are indigenous (local), children have cognitive schemas that are ready to be activated. This requires the elimination of one-way instruction that positions children as passive listeners. In line with this, Hayati (2021) demonstrated that two-way interactive activities in preschool classrooms provide ample space for children to practise the courage to communicate verbally.

Furthermore, the acquisition of new vocabulary does not occur in cognitive isolation but is mediated by the quality of the classroom's social network. Kurnia (2019) argues that children's closeness to their social environment, with both educators and peers at school, is an important instrument for accelerating the mastery of new vocabulary. In Sihitang Village, this dynamic has its own complexity due to transitional bilingualism. Children often experience linguistic confusion due to code-switching between the Tapanuli/Batak Angkola regional language used at home and formal Indonesian at school. According to Hia et al. (2025), mapping the language variations children use at home requires special attention from teachers so that the transition to the school's language of instruction runs smoothly. Educators should not degrade children's home language variety but should use inclusive visual media to unify these differences in conceptual codes into standard Indonesian vocabulary.

Analysis of the impact of contextual picture series

The use of visual media rooted in children's living environment triggers spontaneous verbal motor engagement because of sensory memory attachment. Regarding the importance of positioning children as active subjects in educational communicative interaction in the preschool classroom, Aulina (2021:88) explains:

> "Teachers need to give children the opportunity to communicate actively through activities that suit children's characteristics. The use of environmental stimuli familiar to children's daily lives has been shown to trigger verbal motor engagement naturally."

From a neuroscience perspective, familiar visual stimuli stimulate the visual cortex and connect directly with Broca's area (the centre of language production) without complicated barriers to meaning-making. This has a direct impact on reducing children's affective barriers in the classroom. This finding is supported by Yuliana et al. (2024), who verified that the use of directed and contextual visual stimuli can motivate preschool children to express their ideas more boldly without feeling anxious. Anxiety reduction frees up children's working memory capacity to produce more complex and varied utterances.

Discussion of the classroom action results

A comparative analysis of quantitative data from the pre-cycle, Cycle I, and Cycle II showed a highly satisfactory improvement in children's storytelling skills. A recapitulation of the mastery percentages of the storytelling indicators (the percentage of children achieving at least BSH) is presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mastery Percentages of Storytelling Skill Indicators of Group B Children (N = 15)

Storytelling Skill Indicator	Pre-Action	Cycle I	Cycle II	Increase (Pre to Cycle II)
1. Speaking Fluency	26.7%	53.3%	86.7%	+60.0%
2. Story Sequence Coherence	33.3%	60.0%	80.0%	+46.7%
3. Affective Factor (Courage)	40.0%	66.7%	93.3%	+53.3%
4. Vocabulary Variation Richness	33.3%	53.3%	86.7%	+53.4%

The rate of improvement of the four indicators is visualised in Figure 1. All indicators exceeded the 80% success criterion by the end of Cycle II.

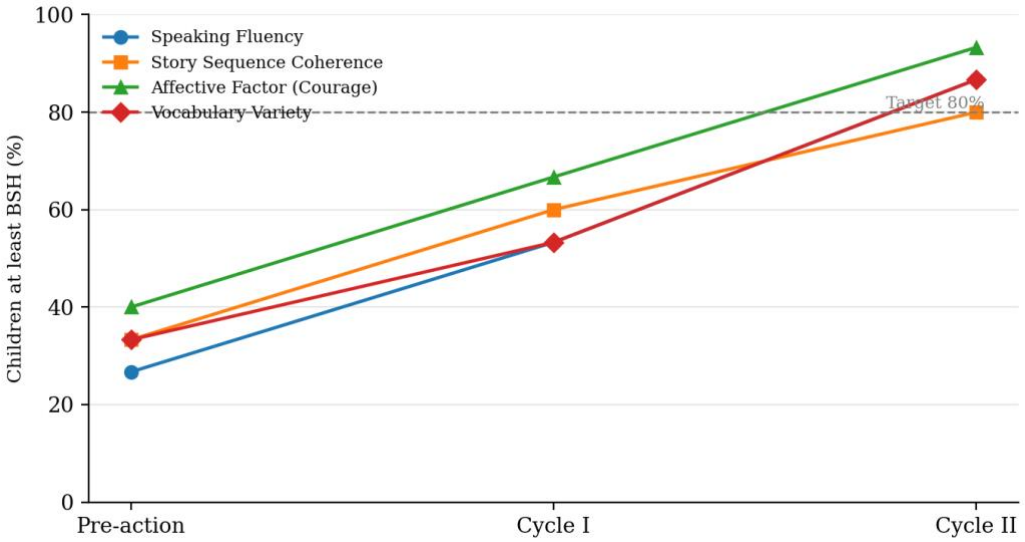


Figure 1. Growth Rate of Verbal Skills of Group B Children in Sihitang Village

To explain scientifically why the implementation of contextual picture series media was able to accelerate children's linguistic abilities, an analysis was conducted on the following three psycholinguistic pillars.

1. **Cognitive load reduction (Cognitive Load Theory).** In the pre-action condition, children were burdened by conventional learning media displaying abstract pictures (such as illustrations of subway trains or snow, which do not exist in Sihitang Village). As a result, children experienced an accumulation of cognitive load because they had to imagine unfamiliar objects while also thinking about word structure. When the media were replaced with a picture series of rice harvesting in the Sihitang rice fields, children experienced instant cognitive recognition. Their long-term memory immediately activated words already stored, such as "rice field", "rice", "conical hat" (*topi caping*), and "bird". The cognitive energy saved was redirected to constructing fluent and articulate oral sentences.
2. **Sequential visual scaffolding.** The greatest difficulty for children aged 5–6 years in storytelling is maintaining the logical consistency of the storyline. Children tend to jump from one idea to another without coherence. A picture series arranged chronologically (1-2-3-4) functions as external cognitive scaffolding. Each contextual picture guides the boundaries of children's thinking, directing them to understand the concept of temporal sequence: what happens at the beginning, what activity occurs in the middle, and how the story ends. The CAR results showed that story sequence coherence increased from 33.3% to 80.0% in Cycle II.
3. **Two-way sociolinguistic convergence.** The use of contextual picture series fostered a democratic communicative climate in the classroom. When children arranged the pictures in groups, intensive two-way social interaction took place between children and the teacher and among peers. In line with Vygotsky's concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), this interaction accelerated the mastery of new vocabulary. When children accustomed to using a regional dialect at home struggled to find formal Indonesian equivalents, the teacher and peers immediately provided vocabulary assistance (lexical restoration). This process eroded children's affective anxiety (mastery of the affective aspect reached the highest figure, 93.3% in Cycle II) and smoothed the children's language transition in Sihitang Village towards fluent standard Indonesian.

CONCLUSION

The results of this classroom action research empirically demonstrate that the use of contextual picture series media significantly and measurably improved the storytelling skills of Group B children in Sihitang Village, with classical mastery rising from 33.3% (pre-cycle) to 60% (Cycle I) and 86.7% (Cycle II). This improvement was achieved because contextual visual media reduced children's intrinsic cognitive load through visual stimulation familiar to their long-term memory, while the sequential picture flow acted as visual scaffolding that corrected the chronological disorientation of children's stories; the two-way conversational interaction accompanying the media also reduced speaking anxiety and accelerated the acquisition of Indonesian vocabulary in an area of language transition. Early childhood teachers are advised to reduce their reliance on abstract commercial worksheets and to independently produce visual media based on the local environment and wisdom; PAUD administrators are expected to integrate contextual visual media into the operational curriculum and facilitate their provision; and future researchers may explore digital contextual picture media (interactive multimedia) on children's early literacy with a broader range of subjects.

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