



Implementing the Fernald Method to Improve Early Reading Skills among Students with Reading Difficulties

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Abstract

This study aimed to improve the early reading skills of Grade II students with reading difficulties at SDN 006 Teluk Pandan through the Fernald Method. It employed Classroom Action Research based on the Kemmis and McTaggart model, conducted in two cycles comprising planning, action, observation, and reflection. Five students with identified reading difficulties participated. Data were collected through reading tests, observations, interviews, and documentation, then analysed using descriptive quantitative and qualitative techniques supported by Normalised Gain (N-Gain) analysis. The results showed improvements in all assessed aspects. Letter recognition increased from 84.0 to 95.0 (N-Gain 0.75; high), syllable reading from 80.8 to 87.0 (0.36; moderate), word reading from 56.0 to 75.2 (0.44; moderate), and sentence reading from 36.0 to 75.0 (0.61; moderate). All participants achieved the predetermined mastery criteria by the end of Cycle II. The findings indicate that the Fernald Method is an effective alternative for improving early reading skills among students with reading difficulties in inclusive primary schools.

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Introduction

Education is a fundamental right of every citizen and must be provided in a fair, equitable, and inclusive manner, as mandated by Article 31(1) of the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia. This principle is also consistent with the fourth Sustainable Development Goal (SDG 4), which emphasizes the provision of inclusive, equitable, and quality education for all. In Indonesia, the

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implementation of inclusive education is reinforced by the Regulation of the Minister of National Education No. 70 of 2009, which guarantees all learners, including those with special educational needs, the opportunity to study together in mainstream schools. Consequently, elementary schools are expected to provide instructional services that accommodate the diverse characteristics and learning needs of every student.

Beginning reading is one of the fundamental literacy skills that students are expected to master during the early years of elementary education. This competency encompasses letter recognition, decoding syllables and words, and reading simple sentences, all of which form the foundation for successful learning across subject areas. Ardana (2025) argues that reading proficiency serves as the cornerstone of academic success by supporting the development of higher-order thinking skills and improving students' overall academic achievement. Conversely, inadequate reading skills hinder students' ability to comprehend instructional materials, thereby negatively affecting their overall learning outcomes (Nia Della Yolanda & Ummul Quro, 2022).

Despite its importance, many elementary school students continue to experience difficulties in acquiring beginning reading skills. Ain and Ain (2024) reported that students frequently struggle to recognize letters, pronounce letter sounds, and combine letters into meaningful syllables and words. These challenges become even more pronounced in inclusive elementary schools, where teachers are required to address the diverse learning characteristics of students, including those with reading difficulties or dyslexia. According to Irsan et al. (2025), dyslexia is a specific learning disorder that affects an individual's ability to read, write, spell, and comprehend written texts. Data from the Indonesian Dyslexia Association, as cited by Sepsita and Wijaya (2024), estimate that millions of school-aged children in Indonesia experience dyslexia and therefore require instructional support tailored to their learning needs.

Numerous studies have shown that reading instruction in schools continues to rely predominantly on conventional teaching approaches that inadequately address the needs of students with reading difficulties. Emiliawati et al. (2024) found that teachers in inclusive schools still face challenges in implementing effective instructional strategies for students with reading disabilities, while Putra et al. (2024) reported that teachers generally apply the same instructional approach to all students regardless of their individual learning characteristics. However, Nurdiantika, Febriani, and Vera Handayani (2022) emphasized that instructional approaches relying on a single learning modality tend to be less effective for students with dyslexia.

One instructional approach recommended for addressing these challenges is multisensory learning. Putri and Hendriani (2024) explained that multisensory instruction integrates visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities, enabling students to establish stronger connections among letter forms, sounds, and motor movements during the reading process. One of the most widely recognized multisensory approaches is the Fernald Method, also known as the Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile (VAKT) Method. This approach actively engages students in seeing, listening, pronouncing, tracing, and writing words, thereby reinforcing memory for both word forms and their corresponding sounds. The effectiveness of the Fernald Method has been supported by several empirical studies. Jannah and Ainin (2025) demonstrated that the VAKT multisensory approach significantly improved beginning reading skills among students with learning difficulties. Similar findings were reported by Sulistyaningrum and Nursalim (2025) as well as Hayati, Rochyadi, and Iswara (2025), who concluded that multisensory instruction effectively enhanced the reading abilities of students with dyslexia in inclusive school settings. Nevertheless, studies examining the implementation of the Fernald Method through Classroom Action Research (CAR), particularly

among second-grade students in inclusive elementary schools, remain limited, highlighting the need for further investigation. Based on the foregoing discussion, this study aims to describe the implementation of the Fernald Method and examine its effectiveness in improving the beginning reading skills of second-grade students with reading difficulties in an inclusive elementary school. The findings are expected to provide teachers with an evidence-based instructional alternative for enhancing beginning reading skills while strengthening the implementation of inclusive education at the elementary school level.

Methods

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design based on the spiral model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart, which consists of four stages: planning, acting, observing, and reflecting (Hartono, 2024). The research was conducted over two cycles, with each cycle comprising three instructional sessions. The participants were five second-grade students at SD Negeri 006 Teluk Pandan who had been identified as experiencing beginning reading difficulties based on preliminary classroom observations and the classroom teacher's diagnostic assessment. The intervention consisted of implementing the Fernald Method, also known as the Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile (VAKT) approach, in beginning reading instruction. The instructional procedures included tracing words with a finger on a sand tray while pronouncing them aloud, writing words from memory, reading words displayed on word cards, and identifying new words by recognizing similarities in syllable patterns (Imron, 2022). The intervention was supported by instructional materials, including word cards, sand trays, a whiteboard, and colored markers.



Figure 1. Classroom Action Research Model Adapted from Kemmis and McTaggart

Data were collected through beginning reading assessments, classroom observations, interviews, and documentation. The reading assessments were administered to measure students' progress in letter recognition, syllable reading, word reading, and simple sentence reading. Classroom observations were conducted to evaluate both the implementation of the instructional activities and students' participation throughout the intervention. Interviews and documentation served as supporting sources of qualitative data. The collected data were analyzed using both quantitative and qualitative approaches. Quantitative analysis involved calculating individual scores, mean scores, the percentage of students achieving learning mastery, and learning improvement using the Normalized

Gain (N-Gain) formula (Hake, 1998). Qualitative data were analyzed following the interactive model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2020), which includes data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing/verification. The intervention was considered successful if at least 80% of the participants demonstrated improvement in beginning reading skills and the overall instructional process achieved a good level of implementation

Results and Discussions

1. Baseline Condition (Pre-Cycle)

Prior to implementing the intervention, a baseline assessment (pre-cycle) was conducted to establish participants' initial levels of beginning reading skills. The assessment was administered individually in the classroom without time constraints, allowing the participants' performance to accurately reflect their actual reading abilities. The results indicated that the five participants demonstrated varying levels of beginning reading proficiency across the four assessed domains: letter recognition, syllable reading, word reading, and sentence reading. In the letter recognition domain, the participants achieved a mean score of 84.0, which falls within the very good category, and all participants met the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC), resulting in a 100% mastery rate. Nevertheless, several participants continued to experience difficulty distinguishing visually similar letters, particularly b-d, p-q, and m-n. AU and N, who each obtained a score of 90, still made occasional errors when identifying these letter pairs, whereas AK, JV, and MF, each scoring 80, also demonstrated confusion when discriminating between letters with similar visual characteristics. This finding is consistent with Kurniaman and Noviana (2024), who reported that students with learning difficulties often continue to experience challenges in visual letter discrimination despite having acquired basic alphabet knowledge.

In the syllable reading domain, the participants achieved a mean score of 80.8, which is categorized as good, and all participants also met the Minimum Mastery Criterion. However, considerable variation was observed among participants. N obtained the highest score (90), whereas MF achieved the lowest (72). The most common difficulties involved reading closed syllables with a consonant-vowel-consonant (CVC) structure and syllables containing consonant clusters. These findings suggest that the participants had not yet developed automatic phoneme blending skills for syllable decoding, as described by Rahayu and Setiawan (2024). In contrast, performance in the word reading domain remained relatively low. The mean pre-cycle score was only 56.0, placing participants in the poor category, and none of the participants met the Minimum Mastery Criterion. AU obtained the highest score (60), while AK and MF recorded the lowest scores (50). These findings indicate that the ability to recognize letters and read syllables had not yet translated into fluent word decoding and word reading. This phenomenon corresponds to what Handayani and Pratiwi (2025) describe as the decoding gap, referring to the discrepancy between recognizing written symbols and reading complete words accurately and fluently.

The sentence reading domain exhibited the lowest level of performance among all assessed aspects. The participants achieved a mean score of only 36.0, which falls within the very poor category, and none of them met the Minimum Mastery Criterion. Most participants were able to read only a few isolated words within a sentence but were unable to read complete sentences fluently and meaningfully. These findings indicate that the participants continued to experience difficulties integrating letter recognition, syllable decoding, and word reading into coherent sentence reading. This result is consistent with the findings of Wahyuni and Hidayat (2024), who reported that second-grade students with reading difficulties in inclusive elementary schools typically experience the greatest

challenges in sentence reading because it requires the simultaneous integration of multiple foundational reading skills.

2. Implementation and Results of Cycle I

Cycle I was implemented over six instructional sessions following the sequential stages of the Fernald Method (Visual, Auditory, Kinesthetic, and Tactile [VAKT]). The initial stage focused on tracing activities, during which participants learned to recognize vowels, consonants, and simple syllables using letter cards, syllable cards, and sand trays. Participants then progressed to the writing without tracing stage, where they wrote words from memory using illustrated word cards and individual word boxes. In the subsequent stage, participants practiced reading words and simple sentences through illustrated storybooks before advancing to the word analysis stage, in which they learned to recognize unfamiliar words by identifying recurring syllable patterns. All instructional activities were carefully sequenced to provide participants with a structured multisensory learning experience.

Throughout the intervention, participants demonstrated increasingly positive responses to the implementation of the Fernald Method. At the beginning of the cycle, several participants—particularly AK, MF, and JV—experienced difficulties performing tasks that required the coordination of visual perception, verbal articulation, and hand movements. However, through repeated practice, positive reinforcement, and individualized support, they gradually became more proficient and confident in completing each stage of the instructional process. The use of instructional materials, including sand trays, word cards, and illustrated storybooks, effectively enhanced participants' attention, learning motivation, and self-confidence during reading activities. Furthermore, several participants began reading independently and displayed greater enthusiasm when they successfully recognized and wrote newly learned words.

The evaluation conducted at the end of Cycle I revealed improvements in beginning reading skills across all assessed domains compared with the pre-cycle condition. The most substantial gains were observed in word reading and sentence reading, although the predetermined criterion for classical learning mastery had not yet been fully achieved in these two domains. These findings indicate that the implementation of the Fernald Method had begun to positively influence the development of participants' beginning reading skills. Consequently, the reflections derived from Cycle I informed the refinement of instructional strategies implemented in Cycle II to maximize learning outcomes. Quantitative analysis further demonstrated improvements across all four assessed domains. The mean score for letter recognition increased from 84.0 during the pre-cycle assessment to 90.4, with all participants continuing to meet the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC). The greatest improvement was observed in participant MF, whose score increased by 17 points, suggesting that the multisensory approach of the Fernald Method effectively enhanced participants' ability to discriminate and recognize visually similar letter forms.

Similarly, the mean score for syllable reading improved from 80.8 to 84.6. Although this increase was smaller than those observed in the other domains, it nevertheless reflects progress in participants' ability to blend letters into syllables. However, several participants continued to experience difficulty reading syllables containing consonant clusters, indicating the need for more intensive and sustained practice. More pronounced improvements were found in word reading and sentence reading. The mean score for word reading increased from 56.0 to 69.0, with three of the five participants meeting the Minimum Mastery Criterion, resulting in a 60% classical mastery rate. Sentence reading demonstrated the largest improvement, with the mean score increasing from 36.0 to

55.0, representing a gain of 19 points. Although none of the participants had yet achieved the Minimum Mastery Criterion in sentence reading, all participants exhibited measurable progress compared with their baseline performance. Overall, the findings indicate that the implementation of the Fernald Method during Cycle I positively contributed to the development of participants' beginning reading skills. Nevertheless, further refinement of the instructional procedures and continued intervention were considered necessary to ensure that all research success indicators would be achieved in Cycle II.

3. Implementation and Results of Cycle II

Cycle II was implemented based on the reflections derived from Cycle I while maintaining the instructional stages of the Fernald Method and refining the teaching strategies. The improvements included greater emphasis on the auditory component through explicit pronunciation of letter sounds, the use of more varied tactile learning materials, the expansion of instructional content covering letters, syllables, and vocabulary, and the provision of more intensive individualized feedback. In addition, the teacher increased opportunities for independent reading practice using word cards and illustrated storybooks, enabling participants to further develop their reading fluency.

Throughout the implementation of Cycle II, all participants demonstrated greater progress than in Cycle I. They were able to complete each stage of the instructional activities more independently, while the coordination of visual observation, verbal articulation, tracing, and writing improved considerably. Participants also exhibited greater confidence during oral reading activities. Furthermore, the use of a word bank and more varied reading passages helped participants retain newly acquired vocabulary and apply it when reading both individual words and simple sentences. By the end of the cycle, AU and N were able to read simple sentences independently, whereas AK, JV, and MF demonstrated substantial improvement and required only minimal teacher assistance.

The evaluation results indicated further improvement across all assessed domains of beginning reading skills. The mean score for letter recognition increased from 90.4 in Cycle I to 95.0, while the mean score for syllable reading increased from 84.6 to 87.0, with all participants continuing to meet the Minimum Mastery Criterion (MMC). Similarly, the mean score for word reading increased from 69.0 to 75.2, enabling all participants to achieve the Minimum Mastery Criterion. The most remarkable improvement occurred in sentence reading, where the mean score increased from 55.0 to 75.0, resulting in a 100% classical mastery rate. These findings indicate that the refined implementation of the Fernald Method in Cycle II successfully enhanced participants' beginning reading skills and fulfilled all predetermined research success indicators.

Table 1. Summary of Participants' Beginning Reading Skills Across All Assessed Domains

No	Name	PH Pra	PH SII	SK Pra	SK SII	MK Pra	MK SII	KAL Pra	KAL SII
1	AU	90	100	87	92	60	80	50	80
2	AK	80	87	75	80	50	70	20	70
3	JV	80	90	80	90	55	75	40	75
4	MF	80	98	72	78	50	70	20	70
5	N	90	100	90	95	65	81	50	80

Mean	84,0	95,0	80,8	87,0	56,0	75,2	36,0	75,0
Improvement		+11,0		+6,2		+19,2		+39,0
Mean N-Gain		0,75 (T)		0,36 (S)		0,44 (S)		0,61 (S)

Based on the overall results, the implementation of the Fernald Method effectively improved participants' beginning reading skills across all assessed domains. The mean score for letter recognition increased from 84.0 to 95.0, with an N-Gain of 0.75 (high category). Syllable reading improved from 80.8 to 87.0 (N-Gain = 0.36, moderate category), while word reading increased from 56.0 to 75.2 (N-Gain = 0.44, moderate category). The greatest improvement was observed in sentence reading, where the mean score increased from 36.0 to 75.0, representing a gain of 39 points with an N-Gain of 0.61 (moderate category). These findings demonstrate that the Fernald Method was effective in improving the beginning reading skills of participants with learning difficulties, particularly in the domains of word reading and sentence reading, which exhibited the most substantial gains from baseline to the completion of the intervention.

Table 2. Mean Scores Across Reading Domains (Pre-Cycle → Cycle I → Cycle II)

Reading Domain	Pre-Cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II	N-Gain
Letter Recognition	84,0	90,4	95,0	0.75 (High)
Syllable Reading	80,8	84,6	87,0	0.36 (Moderate)
Word Reading	56,0	69,0	75,2	0.44 (Moderate)
Sentence Reading	36,0	55,0	75,0	0.61 (Moderate)

Overall, participants' beginning reading skills demonstrated consistent improvement from the pre-cycle assessment through Cycle II across all assessed domains. Letter recognition improved from a mean score of 84.0 during the pre-cycle assessment to 90.4 in Cycle I and 95.0 in Cycle II, yielding an N-Gain of 0.75 (high category). Syllable reading also improved progressively from 80.8 to 84.6, and subsequently to 87.0, with an N-Gain of 0.36 (moderate category). Likewise, word reading increased substantially from 56.0 during the pre-cycle assessment to 69.0 in Cycle I and 75.2 in Cycle II, producing an N-Gain of 0.44 (moderate category). The greatest improvement was observed in sentence reading, which increased from 36.0 to 55.0 and finally to 75.0, with an N-Gain of 0.61 (moderate category). These findings indicate that the implementation of the Fernald Method produced gradual and sustained improvements across all domains of beginning reading skills, with the most substantial gains occurring in word reading and sentence reading, which represented the weakest areas at baseline.

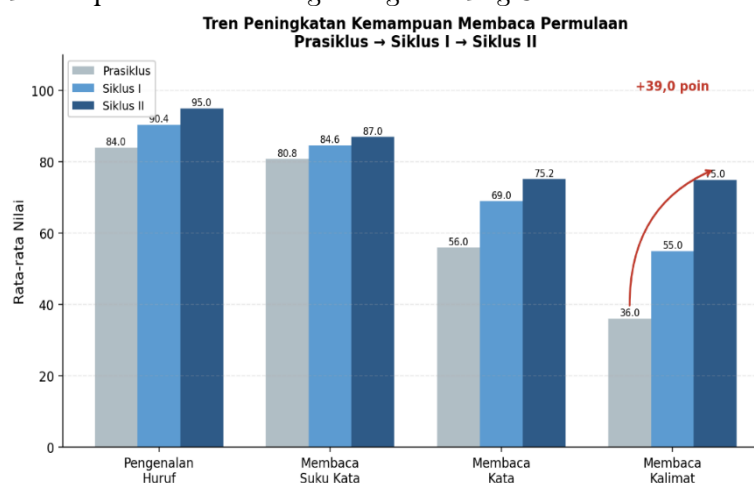
Table 3. Classical Learning Mastery Rates (MMC ≥ 70)

No	Reading Domain	Pre-Cycle	Cycle I	Cycle II	Criterion Achieved
1	Letter Recognition	100%	100%	100%	✓

2	Syllable Reading	100%	100%	100%	✓
3	Word Reading	0%	60%	100%	✓
4	Sentence Reading	0%	0%	100%	✓

Based on the classical learning mastery rates, all research success indicators were achieved by the end of Cycle II. Letter recognition and syllable reading had already attained a 100% mastery rate during the pre-cycle assessment and successfully maintained this level throughout the intervention. In contrast, the mastery rate for word reading improved substantially from 0% in the pre-cycle assessment to 60% in Cycle I, before reaching 100% in Cycle II. The most remarkable improvement occurred in sentence reading, which showed no mastery during either the pre-cycle assessment or Cycle I (0%), but achieved a 100% mastery rate by the end of Cycle II. These findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Fernald Method effectively enhanced participants' beginning reading skills and enabled all research success indicators to be fully achieved.

Figure 2. Trend of Improvement in Beginning Reading Skills Across the Assessed Domains



Conclusion

This study concludes that the Fernald Method, which integrates visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and tactile modalities, effectively improved the beginning reading skills of Grade II students with learning difficulties in an inclusive primary school. Improvements were observed in letter recognition, syllable reading, word reading, and sentence reading, with all participants achieving the Minimum Mastery Criterion by the end of Cycle II. The strongest relative improvement occurred in letter recognition, while sentence reading showed the largest absolute gain. Although each participant demonstrated a different learning trajectory, the multisensory and scaffolded intervention accommodated individual needs and supported gradual progress towards independent reading.

Further research should involve larger participant groups, longer intervention periods, and comparative or experimental designs to examine the sustainability and broader effectiveness of the Fernald Method. Teachers are encouraged to implement multisensory reading activities systematically using accessible learning materials and to adapt instruction through continuous observation and reflection. Schools should strengthen teacher training in inclusive literacy interventions and provide

appropriate learning resources for students with reading difficulties. At the policy level, multisensory reading support should be integrated into inclusive education programmes, early identification procedures, and remedial literacy guidelines.

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