

## **Teaching during the Covid-19 Pandemic in Indonesia: The Effectiveness of Online Learning and Pre-Reading Skills**

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**ABSTRACT** Changes in the face-to-face teaching to online learning provided by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic may influence the pre-reading skill of elementary school students in Indonesia.

The research aims to examine the overview of rural areas and students' pre-reading skills in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This study used a descriptive qualitative approach. The instruments used were the interview guideline for teachers and the pre-reading test using the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA).

The results showed that online learning conducted by teachers in rural areas was less effective because of the bad internet connection. Also, teachers need training in using digital technology as a learning medium. Assignments and exercises given to the students could not measure student development. Then students' pre-reading skills were as follows, namely: 1) the ability to read letters data showing 26.67% of students with excellent ability, 43.33% of students with good ability, 16.67% of students with fair ability, and 13.33% of students with poor ability, 2) the ability in distinguishing the initial sounds data showing 76.67% of students with poor ability, and 3) the fluency of students reading aloud was also still relatively low because only five students could read the words presented correctly and precisely.

Online learning carried out by teachers during the COVID-19 pandemic has not been effective to be implemented in Indonesia, especially for rural areas, and students' pre-reading skill is relatively poor.

The research shows that online learning in rural areas is less effective. Therefore, there is a

need for training in learning technology for teachers on online learning to improve students' pre-reading skills and parents cooperation in providing reports on student progress honestly and responsibly is also necessary.

**Keywords:** pre-reading; online learning; EGRA; covid19 pandemic

## INTRODUCTION

More than a year ago, schools began to shift from school to home using digital technology. This change is due to exposure to COVID-19 to Indonesia in March 2020. The Indonesian government issues uninterrupted regulations starting from the Lockdown, Large-Scale Social Restrictions, and the Enforcement of Restrictions on Community Activities. These regulations greatly affect many aspects of life in Indonesia, including education.

Teaching usually carried out in schools is now carried out online for an uncertain time. The government regulations stipulating the teaching process to be conducted online caused learning objectives to not be achieved optimally. As teachers' partners in online teaching, parents are considered ineffective because of their different backgrounds, resulting in the learning not meeting the learning objectives. Now, children learn with the teacher's guidance and accompanied by parents. Grades 1 and 2 students are called the early grade, aged 6-8 years, experiencing transition. At these grades, students should experience a change from playing to learning and need direct experience interpreting social life in the school and community environment. The learning objectives of the early grade students are reading, writing, and arithmetic. In terms of the development of student's cognitive abilities, they are at a concrete level. Students learn by real objects, and learning must be repeated so that the understanding gained by students becomes permanent.

The implementation of teaching carried out by teachers in urban and rural areas cannot be equated, especially in Indonesia. Indonesia is a large country, so it requires different standards depending on parents' geographical location, livelihood, and educational background. In urban areas, where the progress is rapid, the tools used at work are modern, the income is very good, and parents' educational level is high, students can keep up with technological developments. However, it is different from those living in rural areas. People's lives are related to farming, gardening, and raising livestock. Their life and way of life mainly utilise traditional tools limited use of technology as only a few of them could afford it.

Teachers in urban areas have better access to information than those in rural areas, affecting the students. It is in line with Liu et al. (2012) and Musa and Adeyinka (2021), who reported that the pre-reading skills of rural children were lower than their peers in urban areas. This circumstance was due to teachers' influence in the learning process, including methods and school locations, on students' language skills. The condition may be worse during the pandemic due to online learning. Thus, education policy through the ministry of education can support through training programs by providing social and technological support to parents and teachers to meet the needs of online learning and digital equality for families in rural areas (Daniela et al. (2021); Kanapathipillai and Narayanan, 2021)

The use of applications as learning media for pre-reading during the COVID-19 pandemic gives a different influence on the ability and implementation of learning carried out by teachers (Hasanudin and Asror, 2017); Sabri et al., 2018); Widyowati et al., 2020); Yolandasari, 2020). The use of visual video is a suitable alternative at this time; it can be accessed on various digital

media, such as YouTube, web, blogs, and other applications. The video can be uploaded or accessed directly using rather affordable data credit. Sholeh et al. (2021) used google classroom to improve students' literacy skills. Google classroom is better than teaching via zoom meeting. Zoom meetings are burdensome for students and parents because parents work in the fields or the farm in the morning, or those traders parents go to trade in the morning. So, it was difficult to guide children to learn via zoom meeting. The platform where teachers can upload learning materials is better because then learning can be done independently by children. When their parents return, they could ask for their help, so teachers can evaluate the next video or create further materials

during (Aswan, 2020; Fauziah, Hartati and Sulaeman, 2021; Hidayati and Aslam, 2021) school hours.

In this article, researchers found conformity between the problems and alternatives being built to overcome the implementation of learning during the COVID-19 pandemic with various alternatives to using technology through online learning applications. The use of the WhatsApp application during long-distance learning became one of the alternatives categorised as quite effective in language literacy learning activities in elementary school students (Aswan, 2020; Fauziah et al. 2021); Hidayati and Aslam, 2021). However, the usefulness and effectiveness were different when viewed from the geographical presence and economic level of the community in Solok Districts and cities.

This study describes the implementation of online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and describes students' pre-reading skills in rural areas of Sumatra.

## **METHODS**

The study employed descriptive qualitative research (Creswell, 2014; Setiana and Ningsih, 2021). The research with a descriptive qualitative approach aimed to describe the perceptions of early grade teachers towards online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study focused on the implementation of online teaching for early grade students through interviews and observations.

The sample was selected (Creswell, 1998; Arikunto, 2012) using a purposive sampling technique (Creswell, 1998; Arikunto, 2012). The sample was ten early grade teachers (first and second grades) who conducted online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic in Solok district, Indonesia. Research data were collected using in-depth interviews directly and direct observation. Researchers obtained information about the experience of teachers in implementing online learning and asked the difference between face-to-face learning and online learning. Researchers used interview guidelines that accurately identified teachers' perceptions of online teaching during the Covid-19 pandemic. The interview guidelines were developed according to research needs; they were conducted informally, interactively, and with open-ended questions. Furthermore, to measure the pre-reading skill, the researchers used a modified test instrument from EGRA, including letter recognition, distinguishing sounds, and fluency in reading aloud of Grades 1 and 2 students in the research environment.

## **RESULTS**

### **Implementation of Online Learning by Teachers**

Teachers experienced significant changes in planning the learning process. The implementation of learning before COVID-19 consisted of developing basic competencies to be indicators and presented using approaches, strategies, and learning methods (Susanti et al., 2021). Based on the results of the teacher interview, it can be concluded that the current design of lesson plans made by teachers cannot be implemented effectively because of the educational background and busyness of parents. The implementation of learning does not run well, so the learning objectives desired by teachers and schools were not achieved, and students did not get the same treatment and adequate facilities to participate during online learning. The teacher stated that they usually come to teach at the school at 07.00 to teach the students. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, they could not identify whether the students were developing cognitive, motoric, psychomotor, and characters.

Some studies have been conducted concerning online learning during COVID-19. Irhandayaningsih (2020) and Melinia (2021) conducted online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and found that teachers need creativity and innovation to achieve learning objectives in the implementation of online learning. Online learning utilising digital applications multimedia, if carried out well, will give very satisfying results in learning. This learning has been implemented in Indonesia, especially during the COVID-19. Hartati (2017) provided multimedia training to teachers to innovate and use multimedia that supports online learning. Fauziah et al. (2021) and Widyowati et al. (2020) argued that the implementation of online learning using applications, such as google classroom, google meet, youtube, and WhatsApp, will provide more interesting learning and can help teachers convey the objectives of the learning materials. Another study found that applications in online learning were used well (Hasanudin and Asror, 2017; Kartini et al., 2021), but to deliver learning materials during the COVID-19 pandemic, parents have a vital role. Besides, several factors become barriers faced by teachers in the rural area, namely the lack of internet connection and low educational background of parents who accompany their children participating in online learning. A similar finding was mentioned by Rigianti (2020).

To achieve the objectives of online learning, training is needed for teachers and parents as facilitators for teaching at home. Training is essential to improve teacher professionalism in planning the learning using technology. Thus, teachers can be more innovative and creative in presenting the lesson. However, the implementation of online learning in rural areas should be reconsidered due to the challenges faced by students, teachers and parents in remote areas.

#### Teacher's response to the implementation of online learning

Most teachers have a dual role, namely in school and family. Teachers also play a role as a parent and guide their children in participating in online learning. Salsabila et al. (2020) explained that besides being an educator, teachers also have an economic burden, such as expenses for daily needs; teachers have greater responsibilities, so they often choose one of these responsibilities. Thus, the use of technology as a learning medium was critical.

The beginning of the online learning implementation in the study area changed teaching significantly. The face-to-face learning at school was shifted to the activities carried out at home. So, it was difficult for teachers to observe students' cognitive, affective, and psychomotor development. The implementation of online learning at home forces parents to

play a role as mentors and teachers (Hamdani and Priatna, 2020; Syarifudin, 2020; Soura and Suminar, 2021). The interview responses of online learning are as follows.

1. 7 out of 10 teachers said that online learning provided the freedom to participate in learning or not. This change did not occur due to several factors, namely flexible learning hours where students learn only by assignments given so that the work was often not on time. In addition, when children feel they do not want to learn, parents do not give attention and motivate the students to complete the tasks. Even, it was often found that the parents or siblings were doing the students' work. Hence, there was no independent, responsible, disciplined behaviour change in children.

2. Out of 10 teachers, eight stated that current learning teachers could not provide an objective assessment because the assignments given to students are often not submitted on time. Also, the student's cognitive abilities were low based on the evaluation of learning student assignments.

3. Teachers believed that online learning should be abolished for areas with a minor impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, such as rural areas. They argued that offline learning should be conducted following health protocols. Teachers explained that in their school, the internet connection is limited, the number of students was small, and parents' educational background was low. Hence, online learning is inappropriate for students to get the same and proper education as other regions. Cekiso (2017) revealed "learning with practice in the classroom", and Lukhele (2013) found that reading ability correlated with students' vocabulary. Based on the interviews, it can be concluded that face-to-face learning has a positive impact on students' reading skills because teachers can directly see students' oral language skills and students' understanding of reading.

Based on teacher interviews, it is implied that online learning was not effectively implemented in the study area in Sumatra, Indonesia. Thus, the policy of implementing online learning should not equally apply to all regions in Indonesia. Some considerations must be taken so that the objective of learning for areas with limitations, such as the location of this research, can be achieved optimally.

#### How is the Pre-Reading Skill of Students in Online Learning?

Students had poor emotional development because they lost the social relationships they used to have in the school environment. In Indonesia, students started semester 1 in July 2020 - December 2020, with new enrollment usually starting this semester. Grade 1 students in the age range of 6-8 years are enthusiastic about starting school, meeting with their teachers and friends, and wearing uniforms. These dreams and hopes cannot be fulfilled because teaching was carried out online, starting from the introduction (Andrich et al., 2015). Due to these circumstances, the criteria for student acceptance were unclear. Students who were accepted at school met the minimum age requirements and the age of compulsory education. Teachers cannot analyse the initial abilities of students, so teachers cannot provide accurate treatment or strategy to improve students' abilities, especially in achieving the learning objectives desired by the school and national teachers.

The lesson is designed to measure some basic literacy skills. Dubeck and Gove (2015) explained that at the early grade reading assessment, the readers need to start with a collection

of subtasks, each with a specific purpose. The teacher obtained students' pre-reading skills for approximately one and a half years during the COVID-19 pandemic. The pre-reading skill test was carried out using a modified early grade reading assessment instrument to measure the following students' ability: 1) recognise letters, 2) distinguish initial sounds, and 3) read (aloud) the word correctly and precisely.

The reading abilities of elementary school 1<sup>st</sup> graders who do online learning based on the EGRA reading ability test are presented in Table 1.

Table. 1 Reading ability between the district and urban students

No	Aspects assessed	SD X average (District)	SD N average Y (Urban)
1	Letter recognition	42	63
2	Distinguishing the initial sound	33	65
3	Read (aloud) words correctly and precisely	46	52
Average		40,33	60

The students' pre-reading skill is low because of 30 students doing pre-reading test are those currently studying in grades 1 and 2 of elementary school. The results of the students' pre-reading skills are as follows.

1. Nineteen children (63.33%) aged 6-8 years have not distinguished letters if the letters presented were randomised. Students only memorised or recognised letters based on their place and order orally and did not know the letter by symbols.
2. Ten children (33.33%) had inaccurate articulation in mentioning the sound of letters or letter symbols. The students were not trained properly and correctly to mention the letters.
3. Concerning distinguishing the initial sound, 22 students (73%) were incorrect in choosing the words presented orally. Furthermore, when given in writing, 17 students (56.67%) were able to distinguish the symbols or pronounce them precisely and correctly.
4. The ability to read (aloud) words conducted by students were low because only 16.67% of students can read precisely and correctly. Most students (63.33%) were stammering when reading. In addition, 76.67% of students were reading by spelling, and 20% could not read precisely and correctly.

To clarify the reading ability of district and urban students between SD X and SD N Y, Figure 1 is presented.

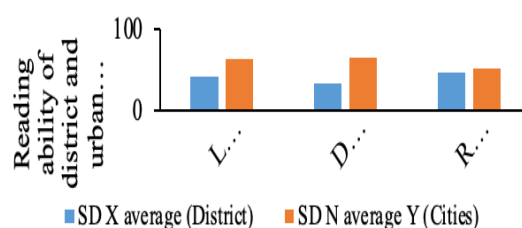


Figure 1. The reading ability of district and urban students

Online learning presented with innovation using interesting media and learning resources will enhance learning, so teachers must innovate some interesting strategies and learning materials to influence students to develop their cognitive abilities. Pre-reading skills include recognising letters, sounds, stringing, interpreting (Ehri, 2005; Ritchey, 2008). The Grade 1 students' pre-reading skill in Indonesia during the COVID-19 pandemic in the second semester of the 2020/2021 academic year is as follows: 1) concerning the ability to recognise letters, on average, students recognised 37 out of 100 letters presented, 2) concerning the students' ability to distinguish initial letters, the results showed that students could choose the 15 correct words with different initial sounds out of 20 words presented, and 3) concerning students' ability to read words fluently, none students can read the 20 20-16 words, and two students could read 15-11 words, and nine students can read 10-6 words precisely and correctly. These results indicate that the students' pre-reading skills during the COVID-19 pandemic are categorised as good.

Foorman et al. (1997) and Stanovich et al. (1984) stated that the ability to recognise symbols, phonological awareness and listening comprehension would increase when the learning provided by the teacher can be interesting. Furthermore, some research stated that fun learning would improve student learning outcomes if reading is presented in fun teaching using interesting animations and software for low grades (Chera and Wood, 2003; Irhandayaningsih, 2020; Thaba-Nkadimene and Emsley, 2020). However, this study found that the online learning during COVID-19 assisted by digital media for Grades 1 and 2 was ineffective. The teachers were unable to measure students' abilities objectively. Besides, students enjoyed their day playing and using mobile phones/gadgets without parental control. Psychologically, teachers also had different emotional levels because, on the one hand, teachers also act as parents for their children and sometimes often argue with them. On the other hand, the teacher must perform their duties and obligations as civil servants (PNS) to keep their earnings.

Online teaching has been implemented since March 2020. At the end of the second semester, a final evaluation is usually carried out to decide who are eligible to go to the second grade. The evaluation also measured the abilities of early grade students in reading, writing, and arithmetic. The assessment provides information about children's characteristics and learning difficulties (Liu et al., 2008). However, the semester final exam was not done because first graders studied from home with parents' guidance during the pandemic. Parents in the Solok district were mainly farmers and traders. The farmers left in the morning and would return in the afternoon. While the traders left to the halls (traditional markets) and returned at night. The parents' working hours disturb students' learning. This is explained by Kurniati et al. (2020), Tabi'in (2020), Suciati (2021) that the role of parents was highly influential on the learning process of students at home. Parents' role is even more needed in Solok district, where interaction between teachers and students was mainly by sending an introductory video. Some students had never even met the teacher at all. Some teachers took the initiative and decided to directly visit the students to see the abilities and background of the parents. In short, government policy to conduct online learning was ineffective, especially for Grade 1 students.

The teachers considered that the current early grade children's ability was poor because some students in Grade 2 could not read fluently. The learning from a home program conducted for

about three months did not improve Grade 2 students' reading ability. Meanwhile, for the 2020/2021 academic year, the ability of early grade students cannot be measured objectively because some parents were busy with their household needs. Rule and Land (2017) and Dean et al. (2021) argued that the direct involvement of teachers and parents in teaching reading was through understanding the learning process developing ways to support teachers in teaching students to read in schools with games. Hartati (2009) stated that early grade reading learning was reading with pictures and without pictures. Andrich et al. (2015), Hartati (2012), Kartini et al. (2021), and Mujianto (2019) believed that learning using visual media for pre-reading was effective.

This study found that in Semester 2 of the 2019/2020 academic year, the use of digital media was also limited, including the skills of teachers related to multimedia (Widiyati, 2014; Cheng and Weng, 2017). In addition, the teaching and learning process in Semester 1 of the 2020/2021 academic year also did not run well. Students were starting to feel bored participating and doing assignments from the teacher. Parents were starting to feel stressed because they were thinking about what they will eat and playing an active role in their child's educational process. On the other hand, the teachers also did not only think about their responsibilities as a teacher but also their children's education. Even some uneducated parents had to teach their children who were already in higher grades, resulting in their learning being out of control. Digital media is required control and discipline in its use because today's generation is highly proficient in using it. Children's literacy in understanding symbols or codes was high; it can be seen from how they interact with digital technology from an early age (Moodley and Aronstam, 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The spread of COVID-19 in Indonesia has changed several implementations in the education sector in Indonesia. The application of online learning in elementary schools has resulted in enormous changes. Learning that was originally done face-to-face evolved instantly to online learning. To implement online learning in rural areas, the teachers need to be given training on technology and organisational learning in digital media. Indonesia is a big country with different geography characteristics, and it was necessary to evaluate government policies in implementing online learning.

The pre-reading skills of early grade students, including letter recognition, were low. Students only memorised the sequence of letters introduced orally and did not recognise symbols in writing. They lacked the training to pronounce letters correctly and precisely and had a low ability to distinguish symbols or pronounce them correctly. The ability to read (aloud) the words were also categorised as low because 16.67% of students can read correctly, 63.33% of students still stammer when reading, 76.67% read by spelling, 20% of students could not read properly.

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