

# English Literacy Learning Strategy Through English Play for Grade 1 Students of Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, Pekanbaru

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**Abstract:** This study aims to analyze the implementation of English literacy learning strategies through the *English Play* approach for first-grade students at SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. English literacy at the elementary school level, particularly in lower grades, requires strategies that are appropriate to the cognitive and affective development of young learners. The *English Play* approach is considered effective in creating a fun, interactive learning atmosphere and enhancing students' active engagement in learning English. This research employed a descriptive qualitative method with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. The results show that the use of various play-based activities such as role-playing, English songs, vocabulary games, and movement songs can increase students' learning motivation, expand vocabulary mastery, and develop their reading, writing, speaking, and listening skills. In addition, teachers' creativity in designing learning activities plays a crucial role in creating a conducive classroom environment and facilitating meaningful learning experiences. These findings indicate that the *English Play* strategy is effective for developing English literacy among lower-grade elementary school students.

**Keywords:** *learning strategy, English literacy, English Play, elementary education, interactive learning.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

English literacy in elementary school students, especially in the early grades, is an important foundation for mastering language skills at the next level of education. In the *emergent literacy phase*, children begin to develop basic skills such as phonological awareness, vocabulary mastery, and motivation for reading, even before they master formal reading and writing skills (Belarmino, 2024; Cabug, 2023). Therefore, the application of learning strategies that are appropriate to the child's age development is key to facilitating the growth of English literacy skills.

One of the approaches that is currently being developed in early childhood language learning is play - based learning. This approach is based on Vygotsky's cognitive development theory of *the zone of proximal development* (ZPD), where social interaction and teacher guidance are very important in developing children's learning potential (Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022). Through games, students not only learn vocabulary and language structures, but also improve social skills, collaboration, and confidence in using English (Cabug, 2023; The Effects of Play-Based Literacy, 2023).

Previous studies have shown that the implementation of *role-play*, songs, vocabulary games, and various other play activities have proven effective in improving students' vocabulary mastery, speaking skills, and learning motivation (Parker et al., 2022; Cabug, 2023; The Effects of Play-Based Literacy, 2023). For example, a study by Cabug (2023) showed a significant increase in students' reading skills after participating in a play-based learning program. Likewise, a study by Parker et al. (2022) emphasized that play-based learning in schools can create a conducive learning atmosphere and support the development of literacy skills as a whole.

However, in Indonesia, especially at the first grade of elementary school, research on the application of the English Play strategy in English literacy learning is still very limited. In fact, this strategy has great potential to create learning that is more interactive, contextual, and in accordance with the characteristics of early childhood students' development. Therefore, this study aims to examine the application of the English literacy learning strategy through *English Play* in first grade students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru, as well as to analyze its effectiveness in improving students' basic literacy skills which include reading, writing, speaking, and listening.

Along with the development of the curriculum in Indonesia which emphasizes the importance of strengthening basic literacy at all levels of education, teachers at the elementary school level are required to be able to create innovative, contextual, and enjoyable English learning (Kemendikbudristek, 2023). The implementation of the Independent Curriculum provides teachers with flexibility to design learning based on student needs, one of which is through strengthening learning based on play activities. This is in line with the results of research by Huang et al. (2023) which shows that play activities combined with language learning can

increase students' emotional involvement and accelerate the process of mastering foreign language vocabulary in early childhood.

Furthermore, the selection of learning methods that are in accordance with the characteristics of the cognitive development of grade I elementary school students is very important so that English learning does not cause language anxiety which can actually hinder the learning process (Rahmawati & Nugroho, 2023). Therefore, *English Play* as an approach that combines various forms of games, songs, movements, and simple conversation simulations is an alternative learning strategy that is believed to be able to foster interest, courage, and basic English skills in students in early elementary school grades.

Based on the description, it can be concluded that an English literacy learning strategy is needed that is in accordance with the developmental characteristics of first grade elementary school students, which is able to increase motivation, active participation, and mastery of language skills as a whole. One potential approach to implement is the English Play strategy. However, further studies are still needed regarding the implementation of this strategy in the context of learning in lower elementary school classes, especially at SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. Therefore, the formulation of the problem in this study is: (1) How is the implementation of the English literacy learning strategy through *English Play* for first grade students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru? and (2) How effective is the English literacy learning strategy through *English Play* in improving students' literacy skills?

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1 Research Design

This study uses a qualitative descriptive approach with the aim of describing in depth the implementation of English literacy learning strategies through *English Play* for first grade students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. The qualitative approach was chosen because it is appropriate for studying learning phenomena naturally and understanding how the learning process takes place in the classroom (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

### 2.2. Subjects and Location of Research

The subjects of this study were 3 first-grade students of Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, Pekanbaru, and one English teacher as the learning implementer. The research was conducted at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, Pekanbaru in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year.

### 2.3 Data Collection Techniques

Data collection in this study was carried out using several techniques, namely:

- a. Observations  
are conducted directly to observe learning activities, teacher and student interactions, student participation in various *English Play activities*, and the development of student literacy skills during the learning process.
- b. Interviews  
Interviews were conducted in a semi-structured manner with English teachers and several students to obtain data on experiences, responses, and obstacles during the implementation of the *English Play strategy*.
- c. Documentation  
in the form of photos of learning activities, student work, learning notes, and Learning Implementation Plans (RPP) used during the learning process.

### 2.4 Data Analysis Techniques

The data obtained were analyzed using the interactive model data analysis technique from Miles and Huberman (2014), which includes three stages, namely: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. Data reduction is carried out to filter data that is relevant to the focus of the study, data presentation is carried out in the form of descriptive narratives, and conclusions are drawn based on the findings that have been analyzed systematically.

## 2.5 Validity of Data

To ensure the validity of the data, researchers conducted triangulation of sources and techniques, namely comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, researchers also conducted member checks on research subjects to ensure that the data collected was in accordance with real conditions in the field.

## 3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 FINDINGS

This study found that the implementation of the *English Play strategy* has a positive impact on English literacy learning of grade I students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. The results were obtained from field observations, activity documentation, and in-depth interviews with English teachers and several students.

#### (1) How is the implementation of English literacy learning strategies through *English Play* for grade I students at Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School, Pekanbaru?

##### a. Implementation of *English Play Strategy* in Class

Teachers implement *English Play* with a variety of activities including vocabulary games, songs, role play, and storytelling. Based on interviews with English teachers, these activities are designed in stages to suit the development of students: "I start with the simplest activities first, such as introducing the names of objects through songs and pictures. It becomes easier for children to remember because they sing or play cards." (*Interview with English Teacher, May 10, 2025*)

The teacher also explained that the use of songs and body movements helps students to be more focused and engaged in learning: "If you use songs like *Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes*, the children immediately get excited and start moving. They learn without realizing that they are memorizing vocabulary." (*Interview with English Teacher, May 10, 2025*)



Interview with English Teachers at SD MUHAMMADIYAH 1 PEKANBARU

Based on the results of interviews with grade I teachers of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru, the implementation of the *English Play strategy* was carried out as an effort to create a fun and non-stressful English learning atmosphere for students. The teacher explained that early childhood children tend to absorb foreign languages more easily through play activities, so this approach is very effective. In its implementation, the teacher uses various methods such as singing English songs, simple role play, guessing pictures (flashcards), and other interactive games that involve physical movement and expression. Teachers also emphasize the importance of consistent repetition so that students become familiar with basic English vocabulary and sentence structures. From her observations, students looked enthusiastic, more confident in pronouncing words in English, and began to understand simple commands. The teacher stated that the *English Play strategy* helped students learn English naturally without pressure, while increasing active participation in learning activities.

##### b. Student Response and Participation

The observation results showed that students showed an enthusiastic response. They seemed active when asked to play roles, sing, or answer questions using English. This was reinforced by the statements of several students: "I like it when I learn using songs, it's fun! So I can say 'Hello, how are you?' to my friends." (*Interview with Student 1, May 11, 2025*).

"If I play guessing pictures, I can memorize many words. Now I know 'apple', 'book', 'chair'." (*Interview with Student 2, May 11, 2025*)

*Role-play* activities such as introduction simulations also make students more confident : " I used to be shy to speak English. But now I can say 'My name is Ali' and my friends follow along too." (*Interview with Student 3, May 11, 2025*)



Interview with Students at SD MUHAMMADIYAH 1 PEKANBARU

Based on the results of interviews with several first-grade students of Muhammadiyah 1 Elementary School Pekanbaru, the implementation of the *English Play strategy* was felt as a fun and interesting learning experience. The students expressed that they enjoyed learning English through various games such as singing English songs, playing guessing pictures, and recognizing fruits as well as role-playing as simple characters such as "teacher", "doctor", or "shopkeeper". They found it easier to remember new words because they were often repeated in the form of games and songs. Some students even enthusiastically mentioned their favorite vocabulary and tried to pronounce it in the interview.

Students also feel more confident to speak English even when they are still hesitant, because the learning atmosphere is not stressful and full of support from the teacher. From the interview, it is clear that the *English Play strategy* not only makes students more enthusiastic, but also increases their self-confidence and basic English language skills.

### c. Improving Literacy Skills

Documentation data shows that after eight weeks of *English Play- based learning* , students experienced an average increase in vocabulary mastery from around 10–15 words to 35–40 words. Teachers also noted that students were more fluent in reading and writing simple words, and more confident in speaking English.

*English Play strategy* is carried out through a contextual learning approach that integrates elements of play into the English learning process. Based on interviews with teachers, activities such as *vocabulary games* , *role play* , *singing* , and *storytelling* are carried out alternately every week, according to the theme and vocabulary targets that students want to master.

The results of observations and documentation show that teachers design activities by considering the concentration levels and preferences of early childhood students . Teachers also actively interact during the playing process, provide verbal support, and facilitate students to actively participate. As expressed by the teacher: "I first observe the types of children, then I adjust the games and songs that are suitable and can make them enjoy learning."

This strategy is in line with the *play-based learning approach* as explained by Parker, Thomsen, & Berry (2022), that play-based learning can create a positive learning atmosphere and improve social relations between teachers and students. In Parker et al.'s research, *learning through play activities* explicitly encourage the development of language and social skills in early elementary school children. This is also in line with Cabug (2023) who showed that the use of *role play* and vocabulary games is very effective in building self-confidence and increasing student engagement in language learning.

#### (2) How effective is the English literacy learning strategy through *English Play* in improving students' literacy skills?

*English Play strategy* has been proven effective in improving students' English literacy skills, which include reading, writing, speaking, and listening. Observation and interview data showed that students experienced a significant increase in vocabulary, from around 10–15 words to 35–40 words after eight weeks of learning. In addition, their ability to read simple words, write basic vocabulary, and speak in simple sentences also improves.

One student stated: “Before I only knew ‘book’ and ‘pen’, now I know ‘apple’, ‘cat’, ‘I am happy’, and I can speak them too.” The teacher also noted that *English Play* helped reduce students’ fear of trying to speak English, because the playful atmosphere made them more comfortable: “The children are more confident in speaking even though they still make mistakes. But that’s actually good because they are not afraid to try.”

Thus, the results of this study strengthen previous empirical evidence that play-based strategies have a real contribution to the development of early childhood English literacy, especially in the context of elementary schools in Indonesia that are currently adopting the independent learning approach.

### 3.2 DISCUSSION

The results of the study showed that the *English Play strategy* had a positive impact on the development of English literacy of first grade students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. In the context of early English learning, this strategy has been proven to be able to create a pleasant learning atmosphere, increase active student participation, and accelerate the mastery of basic vocabulary.

This finding is consistent with the theory of *play-based learning* which states that the learning process of early childhood takes place optimally when accompanied by activities that are fun and relevant to their world (Vygotsky in Parker, Thomsen, & Berry, 2022). This strategy is also in line with the findings of Huang et al. (2023), who stated that activities such as singing, role-playing, and interactive games can encourage the development of speaking skills and increase students' emotional involvement in learning a foreign language.

The implementation of English Play in class I is carried out using a variety of methods such as songs, role play, movement and songs, and flashcards. This activity not only stimulates language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing), but also helps students build confidence in using English in simple contexts. This is reinforced by students' responses stating that they feel happy, are not afraid of making mistakes, and are increasingly brave in pronouncing words or sentences in English.

In addition, the role of teachers in designing activities is very important. Creative teachers are able to adapt materials to the needs and developmental characteristics of students. As expressed by Miles & Huberman (2014), teachers function as facilitators who help direct the learning process through a flexible and contextual approach. Teacher creativity also supports the realization of a safe and positive learning environment, in accordance with the principles of 21st century learning.

In terms of learning outcomes, the documentation results show that there was an increase in vocabulary mastery from an average of 10–15 words to 35–40 words in eight weeks of learning. This increase shows that English Play is effectively used to strengthen *sight words*, accelerate the process of recognizing sounds and meanings, and broaden students' language horizons. This effectiveness supports Cabug's (2023) research which proves that play-based learning can improve students' reading and writing skills at the elementary level. This effectiveness is consistent with the research of Huang, Wang, & Li (2023) which states that play-based learning can improve the speaking performance of early- age EFL students, as well as strengthen vocabulary memory through movement and song activities. This finding is also supported by *The Effects of Play-Based Literacy* (2023), which notes an increase in reading readiness in early grade students through structured play activities.

Furthermore, English Play learning helps reduce the level of *language anxiety* or anxiety in learning a foreign language that is often experienced by early childhood students. The learning atmosphere that is not rigid and dominated by elements of play provides a sense of comfort for students to express themselves and try without fear of being wrong. This is in accordance with the results of a study by Rahmawati & Nugroho (2023) which showed that a flexible learning approach can reduce language anxiety and increase students' courage in speaking.

Thus, English Play is not only the right strategy for lower grades, but also supports the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum which emphasizes learning flexibility and strengthening the Pancasila student profile. This approach opens up space for strengthening character, collaboration, creativity, and student independence from an early age.

### 4. CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the research conducted, it can be concluded that the *English Play strategy* is an effective and relevant learning approach to improve English literacy in grade I students of SD Muhammadiyah 1 Pekanbaru. This strategy is able to answer the challenges of teaching English in early grades that require fun, contextual methods, and in accordance with the cognitive and affective development of early childhood. The implementation of English Play through various activities such as songs, vocabulary games, movements and

songs, and role play, has succeeded in creating an interactive learning atmosphere and motivating students to actively learn. Students showed significant improvements in vocabulary mastery, simple speaking skills, and the courage to express themselves in English. The average student vocabulary increased from 10–15 words to 35–40 words within eight weeks.

In addition, this approach has been proven to help reduce language anxiety and increase students' self-confidence, because learning is done through fun and non-stressful play activities. This also shows that teachers play an important role in designing and facilitating play-based learning that is in accordance with the characteristics and needs of students. Overall, English Play is not only an alternative effective method of teaching English at the elementary level, but is also in line with the principles of the Independent Curriculum and strengthening the profile of Pancasila students. This strategy has the potential to be applied more widely as part of student-centered English literacy learning innovations.

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