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Improving the Language Skills of Children Aged 5-6 Years Through Storytelling Activities Using Hand Puppet Media

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Abstrack

Language development is a fundamental aspect of early childhood education because it supports communication, social interaction, and cognitive growth. However, preliminary observations made in Group B of Idhata State TK revealed that many children aged 5-6 years have not reached the expected level of language proficiency. This research aims to improve children's language skills through storytelling activities using hand puppet media. The study used Classroom Action Research (CAR) involving 15 children consisting of 8 boys and 7 girls. This research was carried out in two cycles, each consisting of planning, action, observation, and reflection stages. Data was collected through observation sheets, teacher interviews, field notes, and documentation. These findings showed a substantial improvement in children's language skills, with learning completeness increasing from 33% in the pre-action stage to 60% in Cycle I and reaching 87% in Cycle II. The qualitative findings further revealed that children became more confident, actively engaged in storytelling activities, and showed a greater willingness to express their ideas orally. These findings suggest that storytelling with the help of hand puppets is an effective and fun strategy for improving early childhood language development. This study contributes to the field of early childhood education by providing practical evidence that interactive storytelling media can facilitate meaningful language learning experiences while encouraging children's active participation.

Keywords: storytelling, hand puppet media, language skills, early childhood, classroom action research

INTRODUCTION

Language development is one of the most important aspects of early childhood growth because it serves as the basis for communication, social interaction, emotional expression, and cognitive development. (Yusuf & Kurniati, 2024) Interactive learning media and language development among preschoolers. Children who have well-developed language skills are better able to communicate their ideas, understand information, establish social relationships, and actively participate in learning activities (Papalia & Martorell, 2021) In early childhood education settings, language competence is considered a key indicator of children's readiness for later stages of education and lifelong learning.

Children's language skills are important because with this language children can communicate with friends or people around them (Nurhadijah & Rahma, 2021). The importance of language development has been emphasized by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), which states that young children learn language most effectively through meaningful interactions, play-based experiences, and active engagement with their environment (Children, 2020). Therefore, teachers are required to create learning experiences that encourage children to listen, speak, ask questions, and express ideas with confidence.

Children's success is only measured by the child's compliance, cognitive and social, while children with kinesthetic, intrapersonal, and naturalist intelligence are only considered problematic children. Misperception of children's potential is fatal so that it underestimates the development of children who do not even realize that what happens to children is true (Rahma & Isralidin, 2022). Despite its importance, language development remains a challenge in many early childhood education settings. Based on initial observations made in Group B of UPTD Negeri TK Idhata, which consisted of 15 children aged

5-6 years, children's language skills were still below the expected developmental standards. The results showed that only 2 children (13%) were categorized as Very Well Developed (BSB) and 3 children (20%) as Developing as Expected (BSH). Meanwhile, 6 children (40%) were categorized as Starting to Develop (MB), and 4 children (27%) were categorized as Not Developing (BB). Overall, learning completeness only reached 33%, indicating that most children had difficulty expressing ideas, answering questions, and retelling stories during classroom activities (Munar et al., 2024).

Several factors contribute to this condition. Classroom observations revealed that language learning activities were largely teacher-centered and relied heavily on question and answer sessions without the support of engaging instructional media. As a result, children tend to be passive participants and show limited opportunities to practice their speaking and listening skills. This situation highlights the urgent need for innovative learning strategies that can increase children's motivation, engagement, and active participation in language learning activities.

Storytelling has long been recognized as an effective pedagogical approach to promoting children's language development. The storytelling method is one of the effective learning strategies to improve children's language development (Putri & Yulsyofriend, 2022) Through storytelling activities, children are exposed to new vocabulary, sentence structure, and narrative patterns that enrich their linguistic competence (Musfiroh, 2019) In addition, storytelling stimulates imagination, listening comprehension, verbal expression, and critical thinking skills. (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022). argues that interactive storytelling experiences support children's communication skills because they provide opportunities for active engagement and meaningful use of language.

To increase the effectiveness of storytelling activities, educators can integrate a variety of instructional media that engages

children and encourages participation. One of these media is hand puppets. Hand puppets provide visual and concrete representations of the story's characters, making abstract narratives easier for young children to understand. According to (Papalia & Martorell, 2021) Children aged 5-6 years are in the preoperational stage of cognitive development, where learning is facilitated through symbolic representations and concrete experiences. As a result, hand puppets can serve as an effective learning tool that supports children's language acquisition and narrative comprehension.

(Wahyuni & Hartati, 2021) Storytelling as an effective strategy to develop language skills in early childhood education. Previous research has reported the positive effects of storytelling on children's language development. (Musfiroh, 2012) found that storytelling activities significantly improved children's listening and speaking skills. Similarly, research conducted by (Kurniawati & Suryana, 2022) showed that storytelling contributes positively to the development of vocabulary and oral communication skills in TK children. The use of hand puppet media is effective in improving early childhood communication skills (Sari & Suryana, 2023) However, most previous research has focused primarily on storytelling as a teaching method without exploring the active integration of hand puppet media within the framework of Classroom Action Research (CAR). In addition, relatively few studies have investigated how children's direct involvement in manipulating hand puppets during storytelling activities affects language development outcomes.

This condition reveals a research gap. While previous research has established the benefits of storytelling, limited attention has been paid to the role of hand puppet media as an interactive storytelling tool that encourages children not only to listen but also to actively participate in retelling and expressing ideas. Therefore, further research is needed to investigate how storytelling activities assisted by hand puppet media can improve language

skills in children aged 5-6 years (Rahma & Yunmahlizar, 2020).

The novelty of this research lies in the integration of storytelling activities with the media of hand puppets through the active participation of children. In contrast to previous studies that mainly positioned children as listeners, this study encouraged children to interact directly with the dolls, re-enact the characters of the story, answer questions, and retell the content of the story. Such an approach is expected to create a more engaging and meaningful language learning environment that supports the development of receptive and expressive language. In addition to its theoretical contribution to the literature on early childhood language development, this research also provides practical implications for teachers. These findings are expected to offer alternative instructional strategies that are fun, easy to implement, and developmentally appropriate to improve children's language skills. In addition, storytelling activities using hand puppet media can contribute to preserving storytelling traditions as part of children's cultural learning experiences.

Therefore, this study aims to: (1) describe the implementation of storytelling activities using puppet media in Group B at UPTD TK Negeri Idhata; (2) to assess the improvement of children's language skills from the pre-action stage to Cycle II; and (3) to analyze the effectiveness of hand puppet-assisted storytelling in promoting language development among children aged 5-6 years.

METHODS

The study uses Classroom Action Research (CAR), a reflective research approach designed to improve educational practice through a continuous cycle of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. CAR allows teachers to identify classroom problems, implement interventions, and evaluate their effectiveness systematically (Arikunto et al., 2021) This approach was chosen because it is well suited to address

practical problems in the early childhood classroom and allows teachers to immediately make improvements to instructional practices.

The research was conducted at UPTD TK Negeri Idhata, Bireuen Regency, Aceh Province, Indonesia, during the 2025/2026 academic year. The participants consisted of all children in Group B, totaling 15 children aged 5-6 years, including 8 boys and 7 girls. Early observations show that many children have difficulty expressing ideas, answering questions, communicating verbally, and retelling stories. Only 33% of children achieved the expected developmental categories of Progressing as Expected (BSH) and Progressing Very Well (BSB), indicating the need for instructional interventions.

The study was carried out in two cycles following the CAR model proposed by (Kemmis et al., 2014) which consists of four stages: planning, action, observation, and reflection. Two cycles were carried out because the success criteria set at the beginning of the study had not been achieved during Cycle I. The research was stopped after Cycle II because the targeted level of learning completeness, namely 80% of children who reached the BSH and BSB categories, was successfully achieved.

In the planning stage, the researcher prepares lesson plans, observation instruments, storytelling materials, hand puppet media, and assessment criteria. The stories were chosen based on themes that are familiar to young children and contain moral values such as honesty, cooperation, responsibility, and kindness.

During the action stage, storytelling activities were carried out using the media of hand puppets. Teachers introduce the characters of the story through dolls, tell stories using expressive language and gestures, and encourage children to interact with the characters. In Cycle II, children are given additional opportunities to manipulate the dolls directly, reenact story scenes, answer questions, and retell the story in their own words.

The observation stage involves monitoring children's participation and

language development during learning activities. Observations are carried out collaboratively by researchers and classroom teachers to ensure objectivity. The aspects assessed include: (1) listening to and understanding the story, (2) answering questions related to the story, (3) expressing ideas orally, and (4) retelling the content of the story. A reflection stage is conducted after each cycle to evaluate the effectiveness of the intervention and identify areas that need improvement. Findings from Cycle I revealed that some children remain hesitant to speak and are easily distracted during storytelling sessions. Therefore, several modifications were applied in Cycle II, including the use of more familiar story themes, increased child participation, and positive reinforcement through praise and encouragement.

Data was collected using four instruments. First, an observation sheet is used to assess the child's language development based on predetermined indicators. Second, field notes are used to record children's responses, behaviors, and participation during learning activities. Third, semi-structured interviews with classroom teachers are conducted at the end of each cycle to gain qualitative insights into the child's progress and the challenges faced during implementation. Fourth, documentation in the form of photos is used to support the findings of observations. Children's language development is assessed using four development categories set by the Indonesian Early Childhood Education Assessment Standards: Not Yet Developed (BB), Starting to Develop (MB), Developing As Expected (BSH), and Developing Very Well (BSB) (Kementerian Pendidikan Riset, dan Teknologi Republik Indonesia, 2022). Quantitative data were analyzed descriptively by calculating the percentage of children who reached the BSH and BSB categories in each cycle using the following formula:

Percentage of Completeness = (Number of Children Who Reach BSH and BSB / Number of Children) × 100%

The results obtained from the pre-action stage, Cycle I, and Cycle II were then compared to determine the level of improvement in children's language skills. Qualitative data obtained from field notes and teacher interviews were analyzed through data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing to provide a deeper understanding of the child's learning experiences and behavioral changes during the intervention process. The criteria for the success of the study were set at least 80% of children who reached the BSH and BSB categories. This criterion is set based on national standards for early childhood development achievement and is used as a benchmark to evaluate the effectiveness of storytelling activities using hand puppet media in improving children's language skills.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Pre-Action Observation Results

Before the implementation of the storytelling intervention, initial observations were made to identify the condition of children's language skills in Group B at UPTD TK Negeri Idhata. The assessment focuses on four language indicators: (1) listening to and understanding the story, (2) answering questions related to the story, (3) expressing ideas orally, and (4) retelling the content of the story.

Table 1. Pre-Action Results of Children's Language Skills

Categories	Number of Children	Percentage
BSB (Very Well Developed)	2	13%
BSH (Growing As Expected)	3	20%
MB (Starting To Develop)	6	40%
BB (Not yet developed)	4	27%
Quantity	15	100%

The results of the study show that children's language development has not reached the expected level. Only five children (33%) managed to achieve the Developing as Expected (BSH) and Developing Very Well (BSB) categories, while ten children (67%) remained in the MB and BB categories. During observations in class, many children seem hesitant to answer questions, have difficulty expressing ideas verbally, and struggle to retell stories in a coherent order. These findings suggest that the learning process does not sufficiently stimulate children's expressive and receptive language skills. According to (Papalia & Martorell, 2021) Children aged 5-6 years are in a developmental stage where language growth is strongly influenced by meaningful interaction and active communication experiences. Limited opportunities for children to actively participate in classroom communication may have contributed to the low achievement observed during the pre-action stage.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Cycle I was carried out through storytelling activities using hand puppet media during four learning meetings. Teachers tell stories using expressive voice intonation, gestures, and puppet characters while encouraging children to listen attentively and answer questions related to the story.

Table 2. Cycle I Children's Language Skills Results

Categories	Number of Children	Percentage
BSB	4	27%
BSH	5	33%
MB	4	27%
BB	2	13%
Quantity	15	100%

The implementation of storytelling activities using the media of hand puppets resulted in a real improvement in children's language skills. The completeness of learning increased from 33% during the pre-action stage

to 60% in Cycle I. The number of children categorized as BSB increased from two to four children, while the number of children in the BB category decreased from four to two. Classroom observations showed that children became more attentive during storytelling sessions. Colorful and attractive hand puppets attract children's interest and motivate them to participate in learning activities. Some children who were previously passive began to respond to the teacher's questions and show curiosity about the character of the story.

Field records show that children often focus on the character of the doll and show excitement whenever the doll appears. However, some children still lack confidence when speaking in front of their peers. They tend to give short answers and ask the teacher for direction to continue expressing their ideas. Interviews conducted with classroom teachers revealed that hand puppets help create a more interesting learning atmosphere. Teachers reported that children showed greater enthusiasm than during conventional storytelling activities. However, teachers also observed that some children remained reluctant to speak independently and needed additional opportunities to practice verbal communication.

Although the results of Cycle I showed significant improvement, the predetermined success criterion of 80% had not been achieved. Therefore, further improvements are planned for Cycle II. These improvements include choosing stories that are more closely related to children's everyday experiences, increasing children's direct involvement in manipulating dolls, and providing positive reinforcement to encourage participation.

Based on the reflection of Cycle I, several modifications were applied to Cycle II. Children are no longer positioned just as listeners but are actively involved in operating hand puppets, reenacting story scenes, answering questions, and retelling stories using their own words.

Table 3. Results of Cycle II Children's Language Skills

Categories	Number of Children	Percentage
BSB	7	47%
BSH	6	40%
MB	2	13%
BB	0	0%
Quantity	15	100%

Cycle II results showed substantial improvement. The completeness of the learning reached 87%, exceeding the success criteria set at the beginning of the study. The number of children categorized as BSB increased to seven, while there were no children left in the BB category.



Figure 1. Storytelling Activities Using Hand Puppet Media



Figure 2. Children pay attention and answer questions



Figure 3. Children holding hand puppets and retelling the contents of the story

The class documentation describes the implementation of storytelling activities using the medium of hand puppets. Teachers use hand puppets to present the characters of the story and facilitate interaction with children. The photos show the active involvement and concentration of the children during the learning process.

Teacher interviews conducted after Cycle II revealed considerable changes in children's communication behavior. According to the classroom teacher, children become more confident in answering questions, expressing opinions, and participating in classroom discussions. Some children who previously avoided speaking voluntarily retold the events of the story using complete sentences and appropriate vocabulary.

Field records further documented that children showed longer attention spans, greater enthusiasm, and increased interaction with teachers and peers. The opportunity to manipulate the hand puppet directly arises to reduce children's anxiety and provide a supportive environment for verbal expression. Children become more willing to communicate because dolls serve as symbolic tools that help them convey ideas comfortably.

INTER-CYCLE UPGRADES

Table 4. Comparison of Pre-Action, Cycle I, and Cycle II Outcomes

Categories	Pre-Actions	Cycle I	Cycle II
BSB	2 (13%)	4 (27%)	7 (47%)
BSH	3 (20%)	5 (33%)	6 (40%)
MB	6 (40%)	4 (27%)	2 (13%)
BB	4 (27%)	2 (13%)	0 (0%)
Completeness	33%	60%	87%

Comparison of results across three stages showed consistent improvements in children's language skills. The completeness of learning increased by 54 percentage points from the pre-action stage to Cycle II. This increase shows that storytelling activities using puppet media are effective in supporting children's language development.

Discussion

The findings of this study show that storytelling activities assisted by hand puppet media significantly improve children's language skills. Improvements were observed not only in quantitative outcomes but also in children's confidence, participation, and communication behavior.

These findings support Vygotsky's sociocultural theory, particularly the concept of Proximal Development Zones (ZPDs), which emphasize that children learn most effectively through social interaction and guided participation (Vygotsky, 2018). In this study, hand puppets function as scaffolding tools that facilitate meaningful interaction between teachers and children. Through storytelling activities, children receive continuous language stimulation that supports the development of receptive and expressive language.

These findings are also consistent with (Papalia & Martorell, 2021) which argues that children in the preoperational stage learn more effectively through concrete and symbolic representations. Hand puppets transform abstract story concepts into visual and real

experiences, allowing children to understand narratives more easily and communicate their understanding more effectively.

Furthermore, these results corroborate the findings (Musfiroh, 2019) who report that storytelling activities contribute significantly to the development of vocabulary, listening comprehension, and speaking skills in young children. However, the study expands on previous findings by showing that children's direct involvement in manipulating hand puppets increases active participation and self-confidence. Instead of functioning solely as listeners, children become active storytellers who build and communicate meaning through verbal interaction.

Another important finding concerns the socio-emotional development of children. Teacher interviews and field notes show that storytelling with the help of hand puppets reduces children's reluctance to speak in front of peers. Dolls appear to act as communication mediators, allowing children to express thoughts and feelings with greater confidence. Similar findings were reported by (Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2022) which emphasizes that a fun learning experience encourages communication, collaboration, and self-expression of children.

The practical implication of this study is that the hand puppet medium can serve as an effective, affordable, and developmentally appropriate instructional tool for early childhood classes. By integrating storytelling and interactive media, teachers can create meaningful learning experiences that simultaneously support language development, creativity, confidence, and social interaction. In addition, storytelling activities can contribute to preserving the oral storytelling tradition as part of children's cultural learning experiences.

Overall, these findings confirm that storytelling using hand puppet media is an effective strategy for improving language skills among children aged 5-6 years and provides valuable guidance for teachers seeking innovative approaches to language learning in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

The findings of this Class Action Research show that storytelling activities using hand puppet media effectively improve the language skills of children aged 5-6 years in Group B of UPTD TK Idhata. The improvement was evidenced by an increase in learning completeness from 33% in the pre-action stage to 60% in Cycle I and 87% in Cycle II, exceeding the predetermined success criteria. Beyond quantitative improvement, children showed greater confidence, enthusiasm, and willingness to participate in verbal communication activities, including answering questions, expressing ideas, and retelling stories. This study confirms that storytelling with the help of hand puppets provides a meaningful language learning experience by creating an interactive, fun, and child-centered learning environment. The use of hand puppets helps transform abstract story content into concrete and engaging experiences that support the development of receptive and expressive language. These findings reinforce sociocultural perspectives on learning, emphasizing the importance of interaction, scaffolding, and active participation in children's language acquisition.

The study contributes to increasing knowledge about early childhood language development by showing that storytelling combined with interactive media can serve as an effective instructional strategy to improve children's communication skills. In practical terms, these findings provide early childhood educators with an innovative and easy-to-apply approach to language learning that promotes children's active engagement and confidence. In addition, storytelling activities using the medium of hand puppets can contribute to cultural education by introducing children to oral storytelling traditions and narrative values embedded in local culture. Therefore, the integration of storytelling media and hand puppets not only supports language development but also offers opportunities to preserve the practice of storytelling as part of

children's cultural learning experiences in early childhood education settings.

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