



The Role of Hand Puppets in Listening Instruction for First Grade Students at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan

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Abstract

This article aims to describe in depth the role of hand puppets in mediating listening instruction for first grade students at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan, Yogyakarta. The study was motivated by the low focus, participation, and comprehension of students during listening activities in Indonesian language lessons, which were still dominated by teacher talk and lacked multisensory media. The research employed a qualitative case study design. The participants were one classroom teacher and thirty-three first grade students of class I Al Khawaritzmi. Data were collected through participant observation, in-depth interviews with the teacher and selected students, and documentation of lesson plans, student work, and photos or videos of teaching and learning. Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, namely data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing, while trustworthiness was strengthened through source and method triangulation. The findings indicate three main roles of hand puppets in listening lessons. First, hand puppets function as multisensory attention mediators that help students concentrate and sustain attention on oral narratives. Second, hand puppets act as social interaction facilitators that reduce psychological barriers, so that more students are willing to respond, ask questions, and retell parts of the story. Third, hand puppets become concrete tools for meaning-making and emotional expression that support students' understanding of characters, plot, and moral messages. These findings confirm the sociocultural view that learning is mediated by cultural tools and that hand puppets can serve as a form of scaffolding within children's zone of proximal development. The study recommends that hand puppets be used systematically in early grade listening instruction as part of joyful, contextual early literacy programs.

Keywords: Hand Puppets; Listening Skills; Primary School; Sociocultural Theory; Early Literacy

1. Introduction

Listening is one of the earliest and most frequently used language skills in children's daily lives. At the primary school level, especially in Grade I, listening skills function as a foundation for the development of speaking, reading, and writing. Children who are not accustomed to listening carefully

tend to have difficulty following teachers' instructions, understanding the content of stories, and tracking explanations across different subjects. However, in early grade practice, listening is often not taught explicitly and systematically. Instruction is still dominated by lecturing, with teachers talking a great deal while students are simply asked to "sit still and listen" without the support of engaging media.

Various national and international studies have shown that the quality of oral language experiences in the early years of schooling correlates with long-term literacy outcomes. Assessment results such as the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and local diagnostic studies in several regions indicate that many primary school students in Indonesia struggle not only with decoding written text, but also with oral comprehension. Contributing factors include limited literacy environments, teacher-centered instructional approaches, and a lack of sufficient oral language activities. This situation is also evident at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan, particularly in class I Al Khawaritzmi, where the teacher has identified symptoms such as easily distracted attention, low participation, and shallow comprehension of stories.

Within Vygotsky's sociocultural framework, learning is viewed as a process mediated by social interaction, language, and cultural tools. Hand puppets can be categorized as a cultural tool that reorganizes communication patterns in the classroom. Through puppets, teachers can portray characters with distinct voices, movements, and expressions so that oral narratives become more concrete and closer to children's worlds. Puppets are not merely decorations; they have the potential to become communication agents that reduce psychological distance between teacher and students, extend attention span, and invite wider verbal participation.

A number of studies on storytelling methods and the use of puppets show promising results. Al-Mansour and Al-Shorman (2011) found that storytelling improved listening comprehension among elementary students. Research conducted in Indonesia by Fitriyah and Lestari (2022), Astuti and Rahmawati (2021), and Rohmah and Sari (2021) reported that hand puppets can increase children's engagement and willingness to speak. However, most of these studies focus on early childhood education (kindergarten) or upper primary grades and predominantly employ quasi-experimental or classroom action research designs that emphasize test score improvement.

There is still a limited number of qualitative studies that describe in depth how hand puppets mediate listening processes in Grade I of primary school, especially in the context of private Islamic schools such as SD Muhammadiyah Sapan. Yet, a deep understanding of the dynamics of teacher-puppet-student interaction is crucial for designing instruction that aligns with children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. Therefore, this study was designed as a qualitative case study that aims to describe in detail the role of hand puppets in teaching oral narrative listening in class I Al Khawaritzmi at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan.

Specifically, this study aims to: (1) explore and describe the role of hand puppets in improving students' focus and attention during listening activities; (2) analyze the interaction dynamics between teacher, hand puppets, and students in facilitating the comprehension of oral messages; and (3) identify the scaffolding mechanisms activated by hand puppets in Grade I students' listening instruction. Theoretically, this research extends the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural perspective in the context of Indonesian language learning in lower primary grades. Practically, the findings are expected to serve as a reference for teachers and primary schools in developing enjoyable, contextual, and developmentally appropriate listening instruction.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

Listening ability can be understood as an active process of receiving, understanding, and interpreting oral messages. Tarigan (2015) explains that listening forms the basis for other language skills, because through listening children acquire vocabulary, sentence structures, and discourse patterns.

Nurgiyantoro (2013) adds that listening requires the activation of prior knowledge (schema) so that new information can be integrated meaningfully. In Grade I, this ability is still developing and therefore requires structured and engaging instructional support.

A narrative or storytelling approach holds an important position in listening instruction. Bruner (1990) notes that humans naturally understand the world through stories; narrative provides a framework for children to organize events, characters, and moral messages. Fitriyah and Lestari (2022) found that story-based instruction improved primary students' listening skills compared to conventional explanations. However, without media that fit children's developmental characteristics, oral narratives may still be uninteresting and difficult to follow for Grade I students whose attention spans are relatively short.

Hand puppets are one type of concrete medium relevant to strengthening narrative-based listening instruction. Arsyad (2017) states that instructional media functions to clarify messages, increase attention, and foster motivation. Hand puppets enable teachers to present story characters visually and kinesthetically so that children can observe movements, expressions, and interactions as if the characters were alive. Studies by Ismawati and Dewi (2020), Astuti and Rahmawati (2021), and Heryati and Widyastuti (2019) indicate that the use of hand puppets increases children's activeness, speaking confidence, and concentration during story listening activities.

The main theoretical framework in this study is Vygotsky's sociocultural theory (1978). Vygotsky emphasizes that cognitive development occurs through social interaction mediated by language and cultural tools. The concept of the zone of proximal development (ZPD) implies that children can accomplish more complex tasks with assistance from adults or more capable peers (more knowledgeable others). Scaffolding, in this context, refers to the gradual support provided by teachers so that children can understand oral messages that initially lie beyond their actual level of competence.

From this perspective, hand puppets can be positioned as cultural tools that help teachers facilitate interaction within students' ZPD. Teachers can embed questions, clarifications, or emphases through puppet characters, while students respond as if they are communicating with a friend. The triadic communication pattern of teacher–puppet–student that emerges in the classroom becomes an important space where scaffolding is formed, linking oral language with children's concrete experiences and emotions.

A synthesis of the literature shows that although the effectiveness of storytelling and hand puppets for language skills has been widely reported, there is still a paucity of research focusing specifically on the role of hand puppets in Grade I listening instruction using qualitative approaches. This is the gap addressed by the present study by describing in detail how hand puppets function as attention mediators, social interaction facilitators, and tools for concretizing meaning in oral narrative listening instruction.

3. Research Method

This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design. A qualitative approach was chosen because the goal was not to statistically test the effectiveness of an intervention, but to understand the processes and meanings underlying the use of hand puppets in listening instruction. A case study design made it possible to examine one bounded case in depth, namely class I Al Khawaritzmi at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan, within the natural school context.

The research was conducted in the second semester of the academic year at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan, Yogyakarta. The subjects were one Grade I classroom teacher and 33 students of class I Al Khawaritzmi. The teacher served as the practitioner implementing listening instruction using hand puppets, whereas the students were the focus of observation in terms of listening behavior, participation,

and interpretation of the stories. The key informant was the classroom teacher, while three to five students were purposively selected as supporting informants to represent a range of listening abilities and levels of engagement.

The primary instrument in this qualitative research was the researcher, who planned, collected, analyzed, and interpreted the data. To support traceability and enhance the depth of the findings, several auxiliary instruments were developed: a participant observation sheet, in-depth interview guides, a narrative listening comprehension test, and documentation formats. The observation sheet contained indicators such as visual focus on the teacher or puppets, verbal responses, nonverbal responses, and emotional expressions. Each indicator was rated on a four-point scale and accompanied by narrative field notes.

The teacher interview guide included open-ended questions about reasons for using hand puppets, classroom management experiences, observed changes in students' listening behavior, and the strengths and limitations of this medium. The student interview guide was designed using simple language to explore their feelings when learning with puppets, their favorite characters, parts of the story they remembered, and why they were interested or not interested in listening. Interviews were conducted face-to-face, audio-recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim.

The narrative listening comprehension test was used as supporting data to capture students' literal and inferential understanding. The test consisted of a short story related to the current instructional theme, accompanied by 8–10 multiple-choice and short-answer questions assessing the ability to recall characters, settings, sequences of events, and to infer moral messages. Test results were analyzed descriptively and used to confirm patterns emerging from qualitative data. In addition, the researcher collected documents such as lesson plans, students' worksheets, photos, and video recordings for triangulation purposes.

Data analysis followed the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, comprising four stages: data collection, data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data condensation was carried out by selecting and focusing on data relevant to the role of hand puppets, forming categories and themes, and discarding information that was not related. Data were presented in descriptive narratives and thematic matrices. Conclusions were drawn gradually, always checking the consistency of findings across data sources.

Data trustworthiness was strengthened through source triangulation (comparing observation data, teacher interviews, student interviews, and test results) and method triangulation (observation, interviews, tests, and documentation). The researcher also conducted informal member checks with the teacher to ensure that preliminary interpretations were consistent with classroom realities.

4. Findings and Discussion

This section presents the main findings of the study, which are grouped into three major themes: (1) hand puppets as multisensory attention mediators; (2) hand puppets as social interaction facilitators; and (3) hand puppets as tools for concretizing meaning and emotional expression. Each theme is described narratively and linked to relevant theoretical frameworks.

4.1 Hand Puppets as Multisensory Attention Mediators

Before the use of hand puppets, initial observations showed a pattern of passive listening in class I Al Khawaritzmi. During story listening activities without media, nearly half of the students were easily distracted: they turned their heads elsewhere, talked to friends, or played with objects on their desks. The teacher frequently paused the story to reprimand students and repeat important parts. When asked simple

literal questions, such as identifying the main character or the setting of the story, only a small proportion of students answered correctly.

After hand puppets were introduced, a marked change occurred in attention patterns. Puppets with bright colors and lively movements became the focal point of students' attention. Observation notes show that most students were able to maintain visual focus on the puppets throughout the main storytelling segment, and off-task behaviors decreased significantly. The teacher also modified her voice for each character so that students were encouraged to listen carefully to the dialogue. These findings reinforce Arsyad's (2017) view that visual-kinesthetic media can extend attention span and support the processing of oral messages.

The role of hand puppets as multisensory attention mediators is consistent with theories of multimedia learning, which emphasize that the integration of visual, auditory, and kinesthetic modalities helps children process information more effectively. For Grade I students, who are still strongly oriented toward concrete experiences, seeing and "meeting" story characters through puppets makes the narrative more tangible and interesting, thus reducing the cognitive load required to maintain attention.

4.2 Hand Puppets as Social Interaction Facilitators

The second theme relates to the role of hand puppets as facilitators of social interaction. Interviews with the teacher and students reveal that puppets help lower students' psychological barriers to speaking. Several students who had previously tended to be passive became more willing to answer questions when they were posed by a puppet character. They felt as though they were talking to a "friend" rather than responding to a teacher figure with authority.

The teacher often positioned the puppet as a character who was confused, did not understand, or needed help, so that students were prompted to explain, predict, or give advice. In this way, the classroom conversation shifted from a one-way lecture to a more dialogic pattern, where students took on the role of "helpers" or "advisors" to the puppet. This triadic communication pattern between teacher, puppet, and students reflects the scaffolding concept in Vygotsky's theory, in which support is provided through cultural tools to bring students to a higher level of understanding.

The findings indicate that hand puppets not only facilitate cognitive aspects of listening, but also contribute to affective aspects, such as confidence and willingness to speak. For lower primary students in particular, feelings of safety and comfort in expressing ideas are crucial prerequisites for active participation. By symbolically shifting the interaction from teacher-student to puppet-student, hand puppets create an intermediate space that feels less threatening and more playful.

4.3 Hand Puppets as Tools for Concretizing Meaning and Emotional Expression

The third theme shows that hand puppets help concretize meaning and emotional expression in stories. The teacher used puppet movements and intonation to portray emotions such as anger, sadness, pride, and remorse. Students frequently referred to the puppets' expressions when explaining the characters' feelings.

For example, after a story about a character who lies, several students said that the puppet looked embarrassed and regretful because it had lost the trust of its friends. This indicates that hand puppets help students move beyond merely recalling events toward the ability to infer moral messages, as emphasized in Bruner's (1990) narrative theory.

Through puppets, moral values such as honesty, responsibility, and empathy are not only stated verbally but are also shown concretely through actions and expressions that children can observe. This strengthens the link between cognitive and emotional dimensions in listening instruction. Students are not

only able to recount what happened in the story, but also to explain why a character's actions were right or wrong and how the character felt.

Overall, these three themes portray hand puppets not just as visual aids, but as pedagogical mediators that connect cognitive, social, and emotional aspects in listening instruction. The results are consistent with previous research highlighting the importance of concrete media in lower primary learning, while offering a new contribution in the form of a more detailed process description situated in a modern Islamic primary school context such as SD Muhammadiyah Sapan.

5. Conclusion and Recommendations

This study concludes that hand puppets play a significant role in mediating listening instruction for Grade I students at SD Muhammadiyah Sapan. Hand puppets function as multisensory attention mediators that help focus and sustain students' attention on oral narratives; as social interaction facilitators that reduce affective barriers and promote verbal participation; and as tools for concretizing meaning that support the understanding of emotions, character motivations, and moral messages in stories. These findings strengthen the view that effective listening instruction cannot rely solely on teacher talk, but needs to involve cultural tools that are close to children's lived experiences.

Theoretically, this study enriches the application of Vygotsky's sociocultural theory in language instruction for lower primary grades. Hand puppets are identified as cultural tools that enable teachers to implement scaffolding within students' zone of proximal development through triadic teacher–puppet–student interaction. Practically, the findings provide concrete examples of how teachers can design enjoyable, interactive, and meaningful listening lessons by using hand puppets as living story characters.

Based on these findings, it is recommended that lower primary teachers confidently use hand puppets as an integral part of storytelling and listening instruction. Teachers need training to develop puppet characters, plan dialogues, and create communication situations that provide space for students to respond and express opinions. Schools and policymakers should incorporate the use of interactive media such as hand puppets into early literacy programs and provide adequate support in terms of facilities and professional development.

This study has limitations because it focuses on a single class in one school within a limited time frame. Future research could adopt multiple case study or ethnographic designs to compare the use of hand puppets across different school contexts, or employ mixed methods that combine qualitative and quantitative data to examine the impact of hand puppets on the broader development of listening and language skills.

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