

The Effect of the Whole Language Approach on Improving the Reading Comprehension Skills of Fourth-Grade Students at MI NW Serijata

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Abstract

Low reading comprehension among fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata highlighted the need for meaningful reading instruction. This study examined changes in students' reading comprehension following the implementation of the whole language approach. A quantitative pre-experimental study employed a one-group pretest–posttest design involving 24 fourth-grade students selected through total sampling. Data were collected through observation and tests and analyzed using the Shapiro–Wilk normality test, a paired-samples t-test, and normalized gain (N-gain) analysis. The mean reading comprehension score increased from 57.33 at pretest to 69.50 at posttest, representing a 12.17-point improvement. The paired-samples t-test indicated a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores ($p < .001$), while the mean N-gain was 58.569%, classified as moderate. These results indicate improved reading comprehension following the implementation of the whole language approach. The findings suggest that this approach may offer a contextual and meaningful alternative for elementary reading instruction, emphasizing integrated learning experiences that support students' active engagement with texts and construction of meaning.

Keywords: Whole Language; Reading Comprehension; Reading Instruction; Elementary Education; Indonesian Language Learning

INTRODUCTION

Reading is one of the fundamental skills that plays an important role in the learning process because it enables students to acquire, understand, and develop information from various written sources. At the elementary school level, reading ability is not limited to fluently recognizing words or sentences, but also includes the ability to understand content, identify important information, interpret meaning, and connect information within a text. Research on elementary school students' reading abilities indicates that reading comprehension is a competence closely related to the process of acquiring knowledge and achieving learning outcomes across various areas of learning (Aisyah et al., 2020). This ability is increasingly important because reading comprehension requires students to construct meaning from the information they read rather than merely recognize linguistic symbols (Alpian & Yatri, 2022). Differences in elementary school students' reading comprehension abilities also indicate the need for appropriate instructional practices to address their learning needs (Lestari et al., 2022).

Reading comprehension is essentially a process involving cognitive activity and active reader engagement in constructing meaning from texts. Difficulties in reading comprehension may occur when students are unable to identify main information, understand relationships among pieces of information, determine the meaning of particular parts of a text, or draw conclusions from what they have read (Restiani et al., 2022). Research involving fourth-grade students indicates that reading comprehension includes the ability to understand the content of a text, answer questions based on the text, summarize information, and restate the content of a reading passage (Febrianti et al., 2023). Therefore, reading instruction needs to be designed so that students do not merely engage in mechanical reading activities, but also have opportunities to interact with texts, process information, and actively construct understanding.

These issues were also identified in the learning conditions at MI NW Serijata. Based on the preliminary observations underlying this study, students' reading abilities were still relatively low, particularly in terms of their interest, concentration, and enthusiasm when engaging with reading materials. Students tended to experience difficulties when reading relatively long texts, while classroom activities were commonly conducted through reading passages, question-and-answer activities, and assignments. Interviews with teachers also indicated that some students continued to experience difficulties in understanding the

content of texts, while limited access to varied reading materials and the use of relatively less diverse instructional approaches further contributed to the problem. Similar conditions have been identified in research showing that low reading comprehension among elementary school students may be associated with limited supporting materials, reading motivation, and instructional processes that do not fully support student engagement (Primasari & Hidayat, 2022). Other research has also demonstrated that the development of interactive learning materials can help create more structured reading activities and support students' comprehension (Ambarwati & Wati, 2025).

One approach that can be used to create more integrated language learning is the whole language approach. The whole language approach views language as an integrated whole, in which listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills are not learned separately but are developed through interconnected language experiences (Viora et al., 2021). This approach provides students with opportunities to use language in meaningful contexts so that learning is not solely oriented toward mastering language elements separately (Sari, 2021). In its implementation, whole language can also be used to develop reading and writing skills through language experiences that are integrated with students' developmental characteristics (Fauzi & Basikin, 2020).

The whole language approach is relevant to the needs of reading instruction in elementary schools because it positions students as active participants in the learning process. Research involving children aged five to six years indicates that the whole language approach can be used to improve reading abilities through learning activities conducted gradually and in an integrated manner (Kartini & Wantini, 2021). Other research involving elementary school students has shown that the whole language approach can influence early reading abilities when implemented in accordance with students' learning needs (Aditya et al., 2022). In addition, the use of the whole language approach with supporting media has been examined through an experimental design and demonstrated changes in students' reading abilities following the treatment (Kurniawati et al., 2022).

Several previous studies have provided evidence regarding the potential of the whole language approach in reading instruction. Permatasari et al. (2023), for example, employed a pre-test–post-test control group experimental design to examine the implementation of whole language among third-grade students and reported an effect on students' early reading abilities. Another study applied the reading aloud component of the whole language

approach and demonstrated that the activity could be used in Indonesian language instruction at the elementary school level (Maharani et al., 2023). The whole language approach has also been implemented among fourth-grade students through advanced reading activities supported by PowerPoint media, resulting in improved reading abilities following the instructional intervention (Juraeba et al., 2024). Research involving fifth-grade students has likewise demonstrated that the whole language approach can support the improvement of reading comprehension skills (Aisyah et al., 2024).

More specific research on reading comprehension indicates that the whole language approach can be implemented in instruction oriented toward understanding textual content. Denabila et al. (2024) examined the effect of the whole language approach on fourth-grade students' reading abilities using a quasi-experimental design and pre-test and post-test measurements. Research by Saripah et al. (2025) also demonstrated that the implementation of several whole language components, including reading aloud, shared reading, guided reading, independent reading, and journal writing, can support elementary school students' reading comprehension. Meanwhile, Gunawan et al. (2023) examined the whole language approach in Indonesian language instruction using a quasi-experimental design, providing further evidence that the approach can be empirically examined within elementary school learning contexts.

Although various studies have examined the implementation of whole language in reading instruction, previous research has demonstrated variation in terms of grade level, type of reading ability, instructional media, and research design. Some studies have focused on early reading, whereas others have employed classroom action research to examine improvement across several instructional cycles (Aisyah et al., 2020; Permatasari et al., 2023). Research on other reading strategies has also demonstrated that improvements in reading comprehension can be examined using experimental designs involving measurements conducted before and after treatment (Ni'matuzahroh et al., 2024). Studies of learning models for reading have further emphasized the importance of active student engagement in constructing meaning from texts (Nurmahanani et al., 2021). Therefore, there remains an opportunity to examine the effect of whole language specifically on reading comprehension among fourth-grade students in a madrasah ibtidaiyah context, particularly through a pre-experimental design using pre-test and post-test measurements.

The novelty of this study lies in the implementation of the whole language approach to examine changes in fourth-grade students' reading comprehension through a pre-experimental design. This study does not introduce whole language as a new instructional approach; rather, it provides a specific empirical context by focusing on fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata and defining reading comprehension as the primary dimension of measurement. An approach that positions students as meaning-makers is also consistent with research emphasizing the importance of active engagement and cognitive processes in reading comprehension instruction (Mutiaru et al., 2026). Recent research on reading instruction among elementary school students has likewise indicated that interactive learning activities can support students in understanding both explicit and implicit information in texts (Sari & Kusuma Wardana, 2026).

Based on these considerations, this study focuses on the implementation of the whole language approach in Indonesian language instruction, particularly to improve the reading comprehension of fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata. Reading ability in this study is limited to the ability to comprehend textual content, including identifying main information, identifying detailed information, understanding the meaning of words or sentences within context, drawing conclusions, and identifying messages conveyed in the text. This focus is based on the students' initial learning conditions and the need for learning activities that are more active, meaningful, and integrated. This study aims to determine whether the whole language approach affects the reading ability of fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata. The findings are expected to provide empirical evidence regarding the implementation of whole language in reading comprehension instruction and to serve as a consideration for developing more active and meaningful Indonesian language instruction at the elementary school or madrasah ibtidaiyah level.

METHODS

This study employed a quantitative approach using an experimental research design. More specifically, the study used a pre-experimental design by providing treatment in the form of the whole language approach to the research subjects to determine its effect on students' reading comprehension ability without involving a control group. The research design was a one-group pretest-posttest design, in which one group was assessed before the treatment (pre-test), received the treatment, and was subsequently assessed after the

treatment (post-test). This design was selected because the study involved only one class as the research subject and aimed to compare students' reading comprehension ability before and after the implementation of the whole language approach. Thus, the independent variable in this study was the whole language approach (X), while the dependent variable was students' reading comprehension ability (Y).

The research was conducted at MI NW Serijata, Serijata Hamlet, Perian Village, Montong Gading District, East Lombok Regency. The population consisted of all students at MI NW Serijata. The sample was determined using saturated sampling or total sampling, in which all fourth-grade students were selected as research subjects. The sample consisted of 24 students, including 13 female students and 11 male students. This sampling technique was used because the research population was relatively small and consisted of only one class, allowing all fourth-grade students to be included as the research group.

Data were collected through observation and tests. Observation was conducted using a checklist observation sheet to monitor the implementation of the learning process and the activities of teachers and students during the application of the whole language approach. The observation indicators included students' readiness and attention, reading activities, shared reading, students' ability to explain the content of the text, identification of the main idea, identification of important information, interpretation of word or sentence meanings, summarization of the text, identification of the message or moral value, and students' responses to the learning process. The main instrument was a reading comprehension test consisting of 30 multiple-choice items. The test indicators covered identifying the main idea, finding detailed information, interpreting word meanings, drawing conclusions from the text, and determining the message or moral value. These indicators were used to measure students' ability to comprehend texts at cognitive levels C1 to C4 based on the Revised Bloom's Taxonomy developed by Anderson and Krathwohl.

Before being administered, the test instrument was examined for validity and reliability. The validity test was conducted using the Pearson Product-Moment correlation with the assistance of SPSS version 27 at a 5% significance level. Of the 30 test items, 25 were declared valid because their calculated r values were greater than the r table value of 0.423, while five items were considered invalid. The reliability test was conducted using Cronbach's Alpha, which resulted in a coefficient of 0.625, indicating that the instrument was reliable.

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 27 through normality testing, hypothesis testing, and N-Gain analysis. The normality test employed the Shapiro-Wilk test because the sample consisted of fewer than 50 students. If the data were normally distributed, hypothesis testing was conducted using the Paired Sample t-Test to compare the pre-test and post-test scores. If the data were not normally distributed, the Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test was used. Furthermore, the improvement in students' reading comprehension ability was analyzed using the N-Gain Score based on the pre-test and post-test scores.

RESULTS

1. Students' Reading Comprehension Test

Table 1. Recapitulation of Students' Reading Comprehension Test Scores

Description	Pretest	Posttest
Highest Score	68	80
Lowest Score	44	56
Mean	57.33	69.50
Median	60	72
Mode	60	72 and 76
Standard Deviation	6.945	7.535
Total	1,376	1,668

source: Compiled by the researcher (2026)

Table 1. Recapitulation of Students' Reading Comprehension Test Scores shows that students' reading comprehension scores increased after the implementation of the Whole Language approach. The mean score increased from 57.33 in the pretest to 69.50 in the posttest, while the highest score increased from 68 to 80 and the lowest score from 44 to 56. These results indicate an improvement in students' reading comprehension after the treatment.

2. Learning Implementation Percentage

Table 2. Recapitulation of Learning Implementation Percentage

Meeting	Obtained Score	Maximum Score	Percentage	Criteria
Meeting I	26	60	43%	Fair
Meeting II	39	60	65%	Good
Meeting III	44	60	73%	Good
Average	109	—	61%	Good

source: Compiled by the researcher (2026)

Table 2. Recapitulation of Learning Implementation Percentage shows that the implementation of learning using the Whole Language approach increased gradually across the three meetings. The implementation percentage increased from 43% in Meeting I to 65% in Meeting II and 73% in Meeting III, with an overall average of 61%, categorized as Good. These results indicate that the implementation of the Whole Language approach, particularly the independent reading activity, improved progressively throughout the learning process.

3. Normality Test

Table 3. Normality Test Results (Shapiro-Wilk)

Data	Statistic	df	Sig.	Description
Pretest	0.233	24	0.058	Normal
Posttest	0.172	24	0.091	Normal

source: Compiled by the researcher (2026)

Table 3. Normality Test Results (Shapiro-Wilk) shows that the significance value for the pretest was 0.058, while the posttest was 0.091. Both values are greater than 0.05, indicating that the pretest and posttest data were normally distributed.

4. Hypothesis Test

Table 4. Hypothesis Test Results (Paired-Samples t-Test)

Data	Mean	t-Count	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	57.33	0.05	23	< 0.001
Posttest	69.50	0.05	23	< 0.001

source: Compiled by the researcher (2026)

Table 4. Hypothesis Test Results (Paired-Samples t-Test) shows that the mean score increased from 57.33 in the pretest to 69.50 in the posttest. The significance value was < 0.001, which is lower than 0.05. Therefore, H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted, indicating a significant difference between students' pretest and posttest reading comprehension scores after the implementation of the Whole Language approach.

5. N-Gain Score

Table 5. N-Gain Score Analysis

N	Mean N-Gain	Category
24	58.569%	Moderate

source: Compiled by the researcher (2026)

Table 5. N-Gain Score Analysis shows that the mean N-Gain score was 58.569%, which falls into the Moderate category. This indicates that the implementation of the Whole Language approach resulted in a moderate improvement in students' reading comprehension.

DISCUSSION

The findings demonstrate that the implementation of the Whole Language approach was associated with a positive change in the reading comprehension ability of fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata. Descriptively, the students' mean reading comprehension score increased from 57.33 in the pre-test to 69.50 in the post-test, representing an improvement of 12.17 points. The highest score increased from 68 to 80, while the lowest score increased from 44 to 56. These changes indicate that students demonstrated better reading comprehension after participating in learning activities based on the Whole Language approach. More importantly, the improvement was not limited to the overall score but was also observed across several reading comprehension indicators targeted by the study.

The indicator-level findings provide a more detailed interpretation of this improvement. The largest increase occurred in students' ability to draw conclusions from the text, which rose from 53.13% in the pre-test to 71.88% in the post-test, representing an increase of 18.75 percentage points. The ability to identify the main idea increased from 57.64% to 72.22%, whereas the ability to locate detailed information increased from 63.33% to 66.67%. Students' ability to interpret the meaning of words or sentences also increased, although to a more limited extent, from 61.81% to 64.58%. This pattern suggests that the implementation of Whole Language, particularly through Independent Reading, supported students not only in retrieving explicit information but also in integrating information to construct a more coherent understanding of a text. The stronger gains in identifying main ideas and drawing conclusions suggest that students increasingly engaged in higher-level comprehension processes rather than merely locating isolated information.

This pattern can be interpreted in relation to the conceptualization of reading comprehension adopted in the study. Tarigan (2021) views comprehension as a process involving the construction of meaning from a text and the subsequent utilization of that meaning for further thinking. In the present study, these processes were reflected in students' activities as they read texts independently, connected information across the text, interpreted words and sentences, and subsequently used the information to answer questions, formulate conclusions, and identify the message of the text. Accordingly, Independent Reading appears to have provided students with opportunities to engage directly with texts and actively construct meaning rather than relying primarily on explanations provided by the teacher.

The improvement in reading comprehension was accompanied by a gradual increase in the implementation of the learning activities. The observed implementation rate increased from 43% in the first meeting to 65% in the second and 73% in the third. This progression suggests that the implementation of the approach became increasingly organized as students became more familiar with independent reading activities. During the initial meeting, implementation remained at a sufficient level, whereas the second and third meetings reached the good category. Students gradually became more capable of reading independently, identifying main ideas and important information, interpreting explicit and implicit information, and using information from the text to formulate conclusions and identify its message.

These findings are consistent with the underlying principles of the Whole Language approach, which conceptualizes language learning as an integrated and meaningful experience. Viora and Wahyuningsi (2021) describe Whole Language as an approach to Indonesian language learning in elementary schools that connects language skills within meaningful learning experiences. In the present study, this principle was particularly evident through independent reading activities, which allowed students to interact directly with texts and construct understanding through their own reading processes. Krissandi et al. (2017) similarly emphasize the importance of meaningful language activities in elementary Indonesian language learning. From this perspective, the improvement observed in the present study supports the argument that reading comprehension can be strengthened when students actively engage with texts within meaningful learning contexts.

The findings are also broadly consistent with previous studies examining the application of Whole Language to reading comprehension. Puspitasari (2013) reported improvements in students' reading comprehension following the implementation of Whole Language across successive learning cycles. Satrijono (2019) likewise found an improvement in reading comprehension following the implementation of the approach. The consistent direction of these findings strengthens the empirical indication that Whole Language can support reading comprehension development among elementary-level students. Nevertheless, the present study extends the existing evidence by examining the approach in the context of fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata through a pre-experimental one-group pretest-posttest design. It also examines several specific dimensions of comprehension, including identifying main ideas, locating detailed information, interpreting word or sentence meanings, drawing conclusions, and identifying the message of a text. Thus,

the study contributes contextual evidence from a madrasah setting and provides a direct comparison of students' performance before and after treatment.

The statistical findings further strengthen the interpretation of the descriptive changes. The Shapiro-Wilk test produced significance values of 0.058 for the pre-test and 0.091 for the post-test. Since both values exceeded 0.05, the normality assumption was satisfied, allowing the use of the Paired Sample t-Test. The resulting significance value was <0.001 , indicating a statistically significant difference between students' reading comprehension scores before and after the implementation of Whole Language. Therefore, the observed improvement cannot be interpreted solely as a descriptive increase in mean scores; it was also supported by inferential statistical evidence within the research group.

However, the magnitude of improvement should be interpreted cautiously. The mean N-Gain score was 58.569%, which falls within the moderate category. This indicates that the intervention produced a meaningful level of improvement, but the magnitude of improvement did not reach the high category. This distinction is important because statistical significance does not necessarily imply that all dimensions of reading comprehension improved to the same degree. The relatively modest gains in locating detailed information and interpreting word or sentence meanings indicate that some aspects of comprehension may require more intensive instructional support. Therefore, the findings suggest that Whole Language can contribute positively to reading comprehension while also indicating the need for sustained instructional guidance to achieve stronger gains across individual comprehension dimensions.

Theoretically, this study contributes evidence that opportunities for direct and meaningful interaction with texts can facilitate the construction of reading comprehension. The findings reinforce the Whole Language perspective that reading development can be supported through integrated, meaningful, and student-centered language experiences. Practically, the findings provide teachers with an alternative framework for designing reading instruction that emphasizes not only correct answers but also the processes through which students identify, interpret, integrate, and use information from texts. Schools may therefore consider Whole Language as one alternative for Indonesian language instruction, while adapting its implementation to students' characteristics and the nature of the reading materials.

Several limitations should nevertheless be considered when interpreting these findings. The use of a one-group pretest-posttest design without a control group means that the observed improvement cannot be attributed exclusively to the intervention because external factors may also have contributed to the change. The sample was limited to 24 students from one class in a single school, which restricts the generalizability of the findings to other populations and educational settings. The treatment was also conducted over only three meetings, preventing the study from determining the longer-term effects of the approach. In addition, observational data may be affected by observer subjectivity, while the study focused on the reading materials and text types used during the intervention. Future research could address these limitations by employing a control group, involving larger and more diverse samples, extending the intervention period, and incorporating broader text types and assessment instruments. Such limitations do not invalidate the present findings but provide important boundaries for interpreting their applicability across different learning contexts.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that the implementation of the Whole Language approach significantly affected the reading comprehension ability of fourth-grade students at MI NW Serijata. The students' mean reading comprehension score increased from 57.33 in the pre-test to 69.50 in the post-test, representing a gain of 12.17 points. The Paired Sample t-Test yielded a significance value of <0.001 , indicating a statistically significant difference between students' performance before and after the intervention. Improvements were also observed across the assessed comprehension dimensions, including identifying main ideas, locating detailed information, interpreting word or sentence meanings, and drawing conclusions, with the greatest improvement occurring in students' ability to formulate conclusions from texts. The mean N-Gain score of 58.569% indicates a moderate level of improvement. These findings suggest that Whole Language, particularly through Independent Reading activities, provides students with opportunities to engage actively with texts and construct meaning from the information they encounter. Theoretically, the study reinforces the value of integrated, meaningful, and student-centered language learning for developing reading comprehension. Practically, the approach may serve as an alternative instructional strategy for reading comprehension in elementary schools and madrasahs. Nevertheless, the absence

of a control group, the limited sample size, the relatively short intervention period, and the single-school context constrain the generalizability of the findings. Future research should therefore employ broader samples, comparison groups, longer intervention periods, and more varied instructional materials and text types to examine the effectiveness of the Whole Language approach more comprehensively.

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