

## Integrating the Whole Language Approach in Multicultural Education: Developing Reading Comprehension Skills and Cross-Cultural Awareness in Elementary School Students

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to analyze the integration of the whole language approach in multicultural education for third grade students at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang in the 2022/2023 academic year. This classroom action research consisted of four stages in each cycle: planning, action, observation, and reflection. The subjects were 25 third grade students at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang. In cycle 1, the percentage of students reaching mastery learning was 20% with 5 students succeeding. In cycle 2, the percentage increased to 92% with 23 students succeeding. From cycle 1 to cycle 2 there was an improvement that met the success indicators. Thus, this classroom action research was successful, indicating that implementing the whole language approach can improve students' reading comprehension skills. The whole language approach is used as a key instrument in multicultural education, helping to develop a generation that is not only literate but also able to appreciate and positively interact with various cultures.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Education is one of the most important pillars in developing character and broad understanding for students, especially in an increasingly pluralistic and multicultural society (Hakim & Darajat, 2023). In today's era of globalization, it is important for education not to only focus on the transfer of knowledge, but also on developing an understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity (Najmina, 2018). In this context, the whole language approach in language education plays an important role in fostering reading comprehension skills (Sari, 2021). Further, the relationship between multicultural education and the whole language approach is important to explore, considering these two complementary aspects in enriching the learning experience of students. The whole language approach, with its focus on holistic and contextual language learning, allows students to recognize and appreciate cultural diversity through diverse and inclusive literature. This becomes the foundation for developing a generation that is not only literate, but also has sensitivity to cultural and social diversity around them (Gunawan et al., 2023). Therefore, this research is important to review in the context of multicultural education, demonstrating how language and literature education can be an effective tool in promoting awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity.

The learning process, when we associate it with UNESCO's 4 pillars of learning consisting of (1) learning to know, (2) learning to do, (3) learning to be, (4) learning to live together, indicates that in the education process there must be a student-centered education process. Teachers must innovate in the education process from teacher-centered to student-centered. This kind of education process is in line with the constructivism education paradigm which views that knowledge cannot be transferred directly from teacher to others (Hasyda, 2021).

Constructivism-based learning is an approach that supports students to actively build their own knowledge through meaningful experiences. This approach emphasizes in-depth understanding rather than mere memorization, guiding students to construct knowledge in ways that are relevant and contextual to the real world. In the context of learning the Indonesian language in elementary schools, the constructivist approach has significant relevance. Considering that the Indonesian language plays a key role in supporting children's intellectual, social and emotional development, as expressed by Hidayah in 2015, this approach can facilitate students to understand and use language not only as a communication tool but also as a medium for understanding various concepts.

Deepening students' understanding of the Indonesian language is important not only in the academic context but also in forming national identity and cross-cultural understanding. Good language education will equip students with the ability to understand and appreciate the wealth of national literature and culture, as well as increase their awareness of the importance of language as the social glue that connects various groups in a pluralistic society. Through student-centered learning experiences, Indonesian language education is expected to not only produce students who can communicate fluently, but also students who internalize the values contained in the language, such as local wisdom and universal values contained in Indonesian literature (Harianto, 2020).

The constructivist approach in learning Indonesian also opens up opportunities for students to develop higher-order thinking skills, such as analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. This can be achieved through class discussions, group projects, and tasks that require reflection and critical appraisal of the material being studied. Teachers can facilitate this by providing rich and authentic contexts in which students can explore

language use in various situations, ranging from formal to informal, as well as from functional to creative.

Integrating technology in learning Indonesian also plays an important role. The use of digital tools in the learning process can support the constructivist approach by providing students with access to diverse and interactive learning resources, such as e-books, language learning applications, and communication platforms. This allows students to learn in broader contexts and interact with larger learning communities, which in turn can broaden their insights and improve their communication skills in various situations. Constructivism-based Indonesian language learning is not just about teaching students how to speak or write, but also about developing their critical thinking, social and cultural awareness, as well as the ability to interact in an increasingly connected society. With this approach, students become not only competent language users but also reflective and responsive citizens to the social and cultural dynamics around them.

Indonesian language learning emphasizes four language skills (Harianto, 2020). Those four skills are listening, speaking, reading and writing. The four language skills are presented in an integrated manner but it is possible to emphasize one particular skill, for example reading skills. Reading is a process that is carried out and used by readers to obtain messages that the author intends to convey through the medium of written words/language (Anas & Sapri, 2022). Reading must have a purpose, because someone who reads with a purpose will tend to understand what they read compared to readers who do not have a purpose. Reading is a process in which the reader obtains the message conveyed by the author (Friantary, 2019).

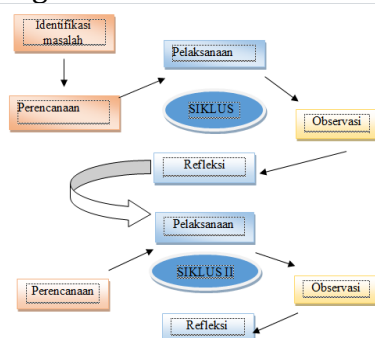
Reading skills also have a very large role when someone is learning a language (Sari 2021). One of the most important language skills is reading ability, where this ability is used to assist in carrying out a learning activity. If elementary school students do not immediately have reading skills, they will experience many difficulties in studying subject matter in subsequent classes (Viyana et al., n.d.). Therefore, students must learn to read so that it is easier for them to learn the material to be studied at the next level (Azizah et al., 2022). Good reading skills will further support students to participate well in learning across all subjects. Students' reading comprehension ability is very important, because as the foundation that determines success, reading ability will greatly help broaden students' experience and comprehension ability.

Developing reading comprehension skills in early childhood is a key step to sharpen reasoning and support their personal growth. Without this foundation, the risk of delays in further lessons becomes apparent, hampering their academic development. In many schools, Indonesian language teaching methods have not been effective enough in supporting the development of reading skills, which should be seen as an enjoyable activity rather than a burden. Observations at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang have revealed that reading difficulties remain a challenge faced by the majority of third grade students. To overcome this problem, an innovative teaching approach is needed that can make the learning process more interesting and interactive, thus motivating students to become diligent and competent readers. Such an approach may include the use of learning materials that are more relevant to students' lives, interesting educational technology, and teaching methods that encourage active student participation in the reading process. Therefore, the low reading ability of students in comprehending reading content in Indonesian language subjects in grade III of SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang requires an improvement effort that will later be able to improve students' reading skills. In this

study the effort that will be made to improve students' reading skills is by applying the whole language approach. According to (Dharma et al., 2023) whole language is a language learning approach that presents language teaching in a complete, integrated manner. Learning is provided continuously, language skills and language components such as grammar and vocabulary are presented completely meaningfully and in authentic real-life situations (Fitri & Ummah, 2022). Whole language is based on the constructivism paradigm. The constructivism paradigm or in Indonesian can be translated as constructivism, which is to build. So in the whole language approach students build their own knowledge and understanding through their activeness in the learning process as a whole and integrated according to their needs (Suparya, 2021).

## 2. METHODS

The type of this research is classroom action research (CAR). This research was conducted in third grade at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang in the 2022/2023 academic year. The subjects in the study were 25 third grade students. Meanwhile, the object of research was students' reading comprehension skills. Classroom action research is research embedded in teachers, which raises actual problems experienced by teachers in the field. The procedure for conducting classroom action research are: (1) planning, (2) action, (3) observation, (4) reflection. The cycles in this study were carried out repeatedly and continuously, meaning the longer the learning process, the more reading comprehension skills students obtained. Data collection techniques in this study were through tests, observation and documentation. The instruments in this study consisted of tests and non-tests. Data analysis techniques used in this study were quantitative data analysis and qualitative data analysis. Qualitative descriptive data analysis was used to determine the learning implementation carried out using observation sheets. Quantitative descriptive data analysis was used to determine students' reading comprehension skills through tests. This classroom action research uses the model from Kemmis and Mc Taggart. The stages of classroom action research can be seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** Classroom Action Research Design

Based on Figure 1, the first thing that must be done is to plan something before carrying out the learning process, carry out actions in the learning process, observe the actions that have been taken in the learning process, and reflect on the learning outcomes, whether they have reached the specified success indicators or not. If the specified indicators have been reached, the research is ended, but if the specified indicators have not been reached, the research will continue with the same stages.

## 3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Multicultural education is an important aspect of contemporary education systems, especially in facing the challenges of globalization and cultural diversity. This

culturally sensitive education not only enriches students' learning experiences, but also encourages the development of awareness and appreciation for cultural differences. The whole language approach in language education views language learning as a holistic and integrative process, where students are invited to understand texts in a broader context, including social and cultural contexts. Good reading skills are key to understanding and appreciating cultural diversity. With good reading skills, students can explore various perspectives and experiences reflected in literature from various cultural backgrounds. This is important in building multicultural awareness among students, which is an important aspect of 21st century education. The whole language approach, with its focus on holistic and contextual language learning, offers an effective way to integrate multicultural education into the school curriculum. Through this approach, students not only develop language skills, but also gain deeper understanding about cultural diversity. This aligns with the goals of multicultural education to shape a generation that is not only academically intelligent, but also sensitive and open to cultural diversity.

The Whole Language approach in education is a philosophy that integrates various aspects of language learning, such as spelling, reading, writing, speaking, and grammar, into thematic units rather than teaching them as separate components. This method is particularly influenced by research fields including education, linguistics, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. This approach is suitable for multicultural education because it situates language learning within students' life experiences, providing a tangible alternative to traditional methods that often spend a large part of reading instruction time on workbooks and other static materials. By utilizing multicultural literature, the Whole Language approach can effectively enhance and utilize literature in diverse settings, shifting away from the traditional canon to include writers representing various ethnic and cultural groups. This change acknowledges the strong interactive relationship between language, culture, and learning. In the context of multicultural education, the Whole Language approach can play an important role in promoting equal educational opportunities and accommodating cultural differences in elementary and secondary educational practices. It can help develop reading comprehension skills and cross-cultural awareness among elementary school students by incorporating culturally diverse content and inclusive teaching practices.

Integrating the Whole Language approach in multicultural education at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang involves,

1. Incorporating various multicultural literature into the curriculum to expose students to diverse perspectives.
2. Designing thematic units that reflect cultural diversity and promote cross-cultural understanding.
3. Encouraging students to relate the content they read and write to their personal experiences, which helps in developing deeper understanding of different cultures.
4. Utilizing group discussions and collaborative projects to facilitate the exchange of cultural perspectives among students.
5. This combination of strategies can help shape students' reading comprehension skills and enhance their awareness and appreciation of cultural diversity, which is a critical competence in a globalized world.

To integrate the Whole Language approach in multicultural education with the goal of developing reading comprehension skills and cross-cultural awareness in elementary school students, SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang can take several steps,

1. Use of Multicultural Literature. Integrate books and reading material reflecting diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds into the curriculum. This will aid students in recognizing and valuing differences, as well as seeing reflections of themselves in the literature they study.
2. Diverse Thematic Units. Develop thematic units incorporating different cultural aspects and relating them to other subjects like history, geography, and arts. This links language with broader cultural contexts.
3. Inclusive Classroom Activities. Conduct activities supporting active participation from all students, allowing them to share life experiences and learn about others' experiences. This enriches learning with diverse perspectives.
4. Project-Based Learning Approach. Have students explore and present topics related to their own or other cultures, building research, presentation, and cross-cultural understanding skills.
5. Guided Discussions. Facilitate classroom discussions on multicultural themes for students to discuss values, norms, beliefs from various cultures and develop listening/respect skills.
6. Diverse Assessments. Employ varied assessment methods evaluating not just academic skills but abilities to interact and participate in multicultural contexts.
7. Teacher Training. Provide training and resources supporting teachers in applying the Whole Language approach in multicultural contexts, including cultural sensitivity and responsive teaching skills development.

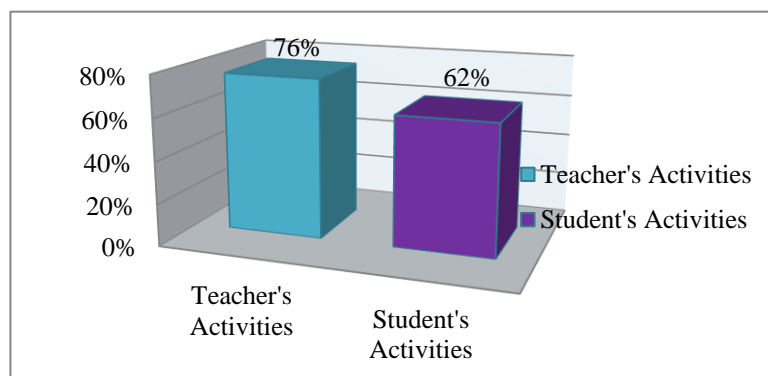
Through these measures, multicultural education via the Whole Language approach at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang fosters a dynamic, responsive learning environment that not only enhances reading comprehension but promotes cultural diversity awareness and appreciation. This is vital in equipping students with skills needed as informed, empathetic global citizens.

The learning process applying the whole language approach was observed by an observer. Observation was carried out during the teaching process. The observation was guided by observation sheets prepared beforehand by the researcher. The results obtained were then analyzed using data analysis techniques. The observational data on teacher and student activities are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Results of Classroom Observation Activities for Teachers and Students in Cycle 1

No	Observation Results	Quantity	Percentage
1	Teacher's Activities	72	76%
2	Student's Activities	59	62%

Based on Table 1, it can be seen that the whole language approach was used in cycle 1, with 25 students obtaining average teacher and student group observation scores of 72 and 59, with percentages of 76% and 62%, categorized as good and fairly good. Teacher and student observational results are illustrated in Figure 2.



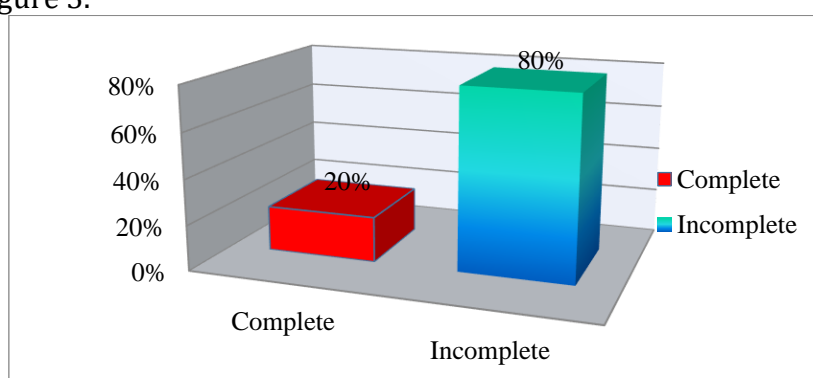
**Figure 2.** Diagram of Data from Classroom Observation Activities for Teachers and Students in Cycle 1

Assessment tests were carried out at the end of learning with fill-in-the-blank questions aligned with reading skill indicators. Test results showed 5 students reaching mastery and 20 not reaching it. Test data on students' ability to comprehend reading content obtained from the evaluation questions in cycle 1 is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Description of Data on Students' Reading Abilities in Cycle 1

<b>Deskripsi</b>	<b>Postes</b>
Minimum Score	40
Maximum Score	72
Mean	59.44
Number of Learners who Passed the	5
Number of Learners who did not Pass the	20
Completion Percentage	20%
Non-Completion Percentage	80%

Table 2 shows posttest scores in cycle 1 had an average of 59.44, with the highest score 72 and lowest 40. 5 students reached the minimum mastery criteria while 20 did not, giving a mastery percentage of 20% and unsatisfactory percentage of 80%. This is depicted in Figure 3.



**Figure 3.** Diagram of Student Test Data in Cycle 1

The test results and reflection from cycle 1 were used as guidelines for improving the subsequent learning process. It was hoped implementation in cycle 2 would enhance the learning process and improve students' ability to comprehend readings.

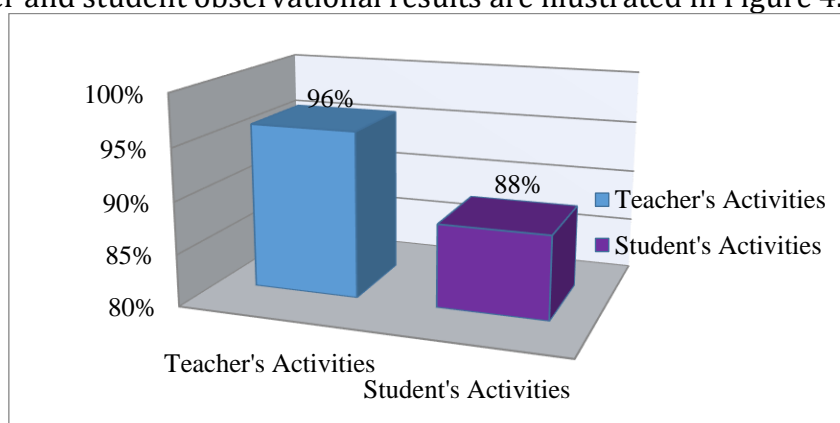
Observations during cycle 2 found the whole language approach effectively improved students' reading comprehension skills. Through this approach, students not only learned to read words and sentences but also understood meaning in broader

contexts, including multicultural contexts. Improvements occurred in student engagement, teacher performance, and reading comprehension scores. Teacher and student observational data for cycle 2 are presented in Table 3 below.

**Table 3.** Results of Classroom Observation Activities for Teachers and Students in Cycle 2

No	Observation Results	Quantity	Percentage
1	Teacher's Activities	91	96%
2	Student's Activities	84	88%

Table 3 shows in cycle 2, with 25 students, average teacher and student observation scores reached 91 and 84, with percentages of 96% and 88%, categorized as good. Teacher and student observational results are illustrated in Figure 4.



**Figure 4.** Diagram of Classroom Observation Activities for Teachers and Students in Cycle II

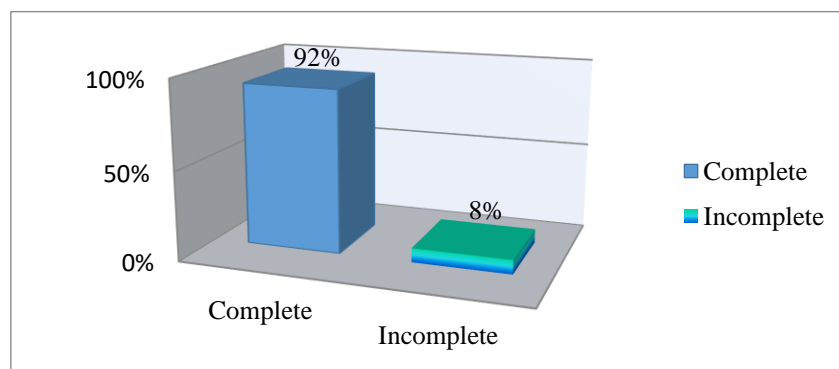
The cycle 2 test results shown in Figure 4 prove the whole language approach successfully improved reading comprehension mastery. This is evidenced by improved scores, with students reaching mastery increasing from 5 to 23, while those not reaching mastery decreased to only 2. Reading comprehension test data from the cycle 2 posttest is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4.** Description of Data on Students' Reading Abilities in Cycle II

Description	Po
Number of Learners who Passed the Learning	23
Number of Learners who did not Pass the Learning	2
Completion Percentage	92
Non-Completion Percentage	8%

Table 4 shows 23 students achieved mastery in the cycle 2 posttest, while 2 did not. The mastery percentage was 92% while unsatisfactory percentage was 8%. This is depicted in Figure 5.





**Figure 5.** Diagram of Student Test Data in Cycle II

The data analysis in Figure 5 indicates students' reading comprehension scores increased using the whole language approach in third grade at SD Muhammadiyah 2 Kota Kupang. The average score rose from 20% in cycle 1 to 92% in cycle 2. Teacher observational performance scores also improved from 76% in cycle 1 to 96% in cycle 2, categorized as very good. Similarly, student engagement observational scores rose from 62% in cycle 1 to 88% in cycle 2, categorized as good.

#### 4. CONCLUSION

The whole language approach, with its focus on holistic and contextual language comprehension, has great potential in facilitating more inclusive, culturally sensitive learning experiences. The reading skills enhanced through this approach aid students not just academically but also enrich their understanding of a diverse world. This is highly relevant in an era of globalization, where cross-cultural understanding and appreciation of differences are essential skills. Thus, the whole language approach can be seen as a key instrument in multicultural education, helping shape a generation that is not only literate but also able to positively value and interact with diverse cultures. This is vital in equipping students with the knowledge and skills needed to thrive in an increasingly connected, diverse society. The research results demonstrate improved student reading comprehension across all indicators. This proves the whole language approach can effectively improve reading comprehension. It can hence be concluded that through the whole language approach reading comprehension skills can be enhanced, marked by increased student engagement in learning and improved teacher performance from cycle 1 to cycle 2.

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