

Teachers' Strategies in Handling Children with Speech Delays in the Umar Group at Al Muttaqin PG

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Abstract: This study aims to describe teachers' strategies in dealing with children with speech delay disorder in the Al Muttaqin Playgroup, especially in the Umar group. Children who experience speech delay often show limited vocabulary, difficulty following simple commands, use body language more often than verbal language, and experience emotional barriers that lead to tantrum behavior. This research uses a Classroom Action Research (PTK) approach with a focus on improving learning strategies through four main stages, namely planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. The subjects of the study were several children of Umar's group who experienced speech delays. The strategies used by teachers include teacher communication strategies, environmental therapy strategies, speech therapy strategies, and compassion strategies. Data collection techniques are carried out through observation, field notes, documentation, and consultation with a team of school psychologists. The results of the study showed that there were positive developments in children, such as increased ability to pronounce new vocabulary, increased ability to express opinions, and reduced tantrum behavior due to improved communication skills. Thus, the implementation of consistent communication strategies, supported by a conducive environment and a compassionate approach, has proven to be effective in helping the language development of children with speech delays.

Keywords: Teacher strategies, speech delays, early childhood.

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INTRODUCTION

Early childhood education has an important role in optimizing children's growth and development, both in terms of cognitive, affective, social, and psychomotor. Early childhood is known as the golden age of development where the stimulation given will have a great influence on the development of the next child. One of the aspects of development that is an important focus is language skills, because language is the main means for children to communicate, express themselves, and build social interaction with their environment. According to Vygotsky (1978), language is not only a means of communication, but also a fundamental instrument in children's cognitive development. With language, children can think, learn, and understand their environment better.

However, in practice, not all children develop according to their developmental stages. One of the obstacles that is often found in PAUD institutions is speech delay. Speech

delay can be interpreted as a condition when a child is unable to use language skills according to his age. Children experience limited vocabulary, difficulty understanding instructions, and tend to use body language to convey meaning. According to Paul and Norbury (2012), speech delays that are not handled appropriately can affect children's cognitive, social, and emotional development, and even have an impact on future academic achievement.

In the Al Muttaqin Playgroup, especially the Umar group, several children were found with speech delay disorders. They exhibit typical symptoms, such as difficulty imitating simple words, lack of responsiveness to the teacher's instructions, and often exhibiting tantrum behavior when they fail to express their desires. This condition is certainly a challenge for teachers in providing learning that suits children's needs. Teachers not only play the role of educators, but also as facilitators of language development who are able to create appropriate learning strategies.

The urgency of this research lies in the importance of early intervention for children with speech delays. According to Owens (2016), intervention at an early age has proven to be more effective than treatment at school age, because the plasticity of children's brains is still very high. Teachers as educators in PAUD have a strategic role in providing appropriate stimulation, both through communication strategies, a conducive learning environment, and a compassionate approach. Without appropriate interventions, children with speech delays are at risk of learning difficulties, low confidence, and obstacles in building social relationships with peers.

Theoretically, teachers' strategies in dealing with speech delay can be explained through several perspectives. First, behavioristic theory emphasizes the importance of reinforcement in shaping children's language behavior. Skinner (1957) emphasized that language is acquired through a stimulus-response process, so the role of teachers in providing positive reinforcement is very important. Second, interactionist theory emphasizes the importance of social interaction as a means of children's language development (Bruner, 1983). In other words, children's language develops when they are given the opportunity to interact with adults and peers through meaningful communication. Third, a neuropsychological perspective suggests that speech delays can be influenced by biological factors, such as delayed brain maturation or hearing loss (Leonard, 2014). Therefore, teachers' strategies need to be adjusted to the individual needs of children.

Several previous studies have shown the effectiveness of teachers' strategies in helping children with speech delays. For example, research by Kurniasih (2018) shows that affection-based communication strategies can increase children's courage in trying to say new words. Another study by Hurlock (2012) states that a stimulating learning environment can accelerate early childhood language development. In addition, a study conducted by Nuryanti (2020) found that the use of role play media can help children express language more naturally and pleasantly.

Although there has been research that highlights the role of teachers in children's language development, studies that focus on teachers' strategies in dealing with speech delays in early childhood education institutions are still relatively limited. Most previous studies have focused more on the aspect of speech therapy conducted by experts, while the role of teachers in the classroom as direct educators has not been studied in depth. In fact, teachers have daily interactions with children so that they have great potential to provide consistent interventions. This research gap is what we want to bridge through this research.

This study aims to describe the strategies used by teachers in dealing with children with speech delays in the Umar Playgroup Al Muttaqin group. The focus of the research includes teachers' communication strategies, environmental therapy strategies, speech therapy strategies, and the affection strategies given by teachers in accompanying children. In addition, this study also aims to evaluate the effectiveness of these strategies

in improving children's language skills, both in terms of adding vocabulary, the ability to respond to instructions, and the courage to express desires.

Thus, this research has an important contribution, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, this study enriches the literature on teachers' strategies in early childhood education, especially in the context of children with speech delay disorders. Practically, the results of this research can be a reference for PAUD teachers in designing learning that suits children's needs, as well as providing input for educational institutions to improve inclusive services for children with special needs.

METHODS

This study uses the Classroom Action Research (PTK) approach which is carried out collaboratively between the researcher and the teacher of the Umar group in the Al Muttaqin Playgroup. The selection of PTK is based on the need to improve learning practices directly in the classroom, with the aim of providing appropriate interventions for children with speech delay disorders. According to Arikunto, Suhardjono, and Supardi (2016), PTK is a reflective research conducted by teachers to improve the quality of learning through a systematic cycle of action. This research model is relevant to apply because it allows teachers to take real actions, observe the impact, and then reflect on them to determine the next steps for improvement.

This type of research is Classroom Action Research with a spiral model developed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Each cycle consists of four stages, namely planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. In the planning stage, researchers and teachers design learning strategies that emphasize language stimulation through communication, environmental therapy, and compassion approaches. At the implementation stage, teachers implement these strategies in teaching and learning activities. Observations are carried out by researchers to record the child's development, while reflection is carried out to evaluate the success of actions as well as design improvements in the next cycle.

The research design was carried out in two cycles. Cycle I focuses on implementing simple communication strategies, such as giving short instructions and repeating basic words. Cycle II is a follow-up to the reflection of cycle I with the addition of strategies, such as the use of visual media, role plays, and simple rewards to motivate children. The spiral model used allows for continuous improvement according to the needs of children. The subjects of the study were children of the Umar Playgroup Al Muttaqin who experienced speech delays. Of the total number of students, there are some children who show signs of speech delay, such as limited vocabulary, difficulty responding to teachers' instructions, and tendencies to use body language. These children are the focus of the interventions provided by teachers.

The research location is in Playgroup Al Muttaqin which is located in an Islamic-based education environment with the support of early childhood learning facilities. The school environment is relatively conducive to learning, equipped with flexible classrooms, play areas, and sensorimotor support facilities. The factor of a child-friendly school environment is considered important because it can support the effectiveness of the strategies implemented by teachers (Hurlock, 2012). The research procedure was carried out in two cycles. In cycle I, teachers start with a lesson plan that focuses on basic language stimulation. The teacher gives a simple vocabulary, such as the name of an object or limb, and then repeats it with the child. In addition, the teacher provides short, easy-to-understand instructions. Observations show that some children are starting to respond, although their involvement is still limited.

Reflections from cycle I show progress, but there are still obstacles, for example, children are not consistent in pronouncing new words, and still often show tantrum behavior when not understood by peers. Therefore, in cycle II, improvements were made by adding media-based communication strategies, such as pictures and word cards.

Teachers also apply simple role plays so that children can use vocabulary in a more real context. In addition, the approach to affection is more emphasized, for example by giving hugs or praise every time the child succeeds in trying to say a new word.

The instruments used in this study included observation sheets, field notes, documentation, and interviews with teachers. Observation sheets are used to record children's language skills, such as the number of vocabulary they can spoken, their response to instructions, and their ability to express their desires. Field notes are used to record specific phenomena that occur during the learning process. Documentation in the form of photos of activities, voice recordings, and children's works is used to strengthen the data obtained. In addition, interviews with teachers were conducted to obtain additional information about changes in children's daily behavior. According to Creswell (2018), the use of varied instruments helps researchers obtain more valid data through triangulation.

Data was collected through observations, interviews, documentation, and field notes. Observation was carried out in a participatory manner by recording the child's involvement in learning activities, while in-depth interviews with teachers provided additional information related to strategies that were considered effective and less effective. Documentation complements the data with visual evidence, while field records are used to record important events that are not covered by the observation sheet. According to Sugiyono (2019), the combination of various data collection techniques in PTK aims to strengthen the validity of data while providing a comprehensive picture of the ongoing process.

Data analysis was carried out using a simple qualitative and quantitative descriptive approach. Qualitative analysis includes data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion drawing as proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014). Data from observations, field notes, and interviews were reduced to find patterns of effective strategies. Simple quantitative analysis is used to calculate the number of new vocabulary spoken by children, the percentage of engagement in activities, and the frequency of positive responses to teacher instruction. This combination of analysis aims to provide a comprehensive picture of the effectiveness of teachers' strategies in improving children's speaking skills.

To maintain the validity of the data, this study uses triangulation techniques, namely by comparing the results of observations, interviews, and documentation. In addition, the involvement of teachers as collaborators also helps to increase the credibility of the data. According to Cohen, Manion, and Morrison (2018), collaboration in PTK serves to reduce the subjectivity of researchers and ensure that reflection is carried out honestly and objectively. This research was carried out by paying attention to the research ethics of early childhood education. Research permits are obtained from the school, and the child's parents are given an explanation of the purpose and procedure of the research. The child's identity is kept confidential, and research activities are carried out in a play atmosphere so that children feel comfortable. According to Fraenkel, Wallen, and Hyun (2015), research involving children must uphold the principles of subject protection, comfort, and safety of children.

RESULTS

This class action research was carried out in the Umar Playgroup Al Muttaqin group with subjects of children who experienced speech delays. The focus of the research is to describe teachers' strategies in dealing with speech delays and evaluate their effectiveness in improving children's language skills. The results of the research are presented narratively in three parts, namely the initial conditions before the action, the implementation of cycle I, and the implementation of cycle II. Before the study began, researchers and teachers made initial observations on the children of Umar's group. The results of observations showed that some children experienced speech delays with

characteristic delays. Children have difficulty pronouncing simple vocabulary, are less able to imitate the words spoken by the teacher, and more often use body movements or point when they want something. In addition, children seem to have difficulty understanding simple instructions, for example when asked to pick up objects or participate in group activities.

This delay in speech also has an impact on children's emotions and behavior. Children often feel frustrated because they have difficulty expressing their desires, leading to tantrum behavior. Some children become quiet and withdraw from the play group. The results of teachers' field notes show that speech delays inhibit children's social interaction with peers. This condition is in accordance with the opinion of Paul and Norbury (2012) who stated that speech delays that are not treated immediately can have implications for children's social and emotional development.

Based on the results of the initial test in the form of language proficiency assessment, it is known that only a small percentage of children are able to pronounce more than ten simple vocabulary words consistently. Most children are still at the stage of nonverbal communication. This condition shows the need for appropriate learning strategies to stimulate children's language skills. In cycle I, teachers begin to implement simple communication strategies that focus on the introduction of basic vocabulary and brief instructions. The teacher uses the repetition method by repeating words such as "ball", "eat", "water", and "mother" consistently. Children are invited to imitate the word through play activities. The teacher also gives short instructions, such as "pick up a ball" or "sit on a chair," then show movements to strengthen the child's understanding.

The observation results show an increase although it is not significant. Some children begin to dare to imitate words even though the pronunciation is not clear. There are also children who are able to respond to simple instructions faster than before. Children's activeness in participating in activities increased, although there were still children who were reluctant to speak and preferred to communicate with body movements. The learning outcome test at the end of cycle I showed positive development. Some children are able to say 5-7 new vocabulary with the help of the teacher, while others have started to try to form simple sentences even though they have not yet collapsed. The percentage of children who experience improved language skills reaches about 50% of the overall subject. Although this progress has not yet reached the expected target, it shows that simple communication strategies are starting to be effective.

Cycle I reflection identifies several constraints. First, children's involvement is not evenly distributed, because some are still passive. Second, children easily lose concentration if the activity lasts too long. Third, teachers need additional media so that children are more interested in trying to say words. Therefore, in cycle II, improvements were made by adding picture media, word cards, role plays, and giving awards in the form of praise and hugs every time the child successfully tried to speak. In cycle II, teachers apply more varied and interactive strategies. Children are invited to play while learning using visual media in the form of picture word cards. For example, pictures of fruits, animals, and objects around the class are shown, and the teacher mentions the vocabulary and asks the child to imitate it. In addition, teachers use simple role-plays, such as playing doctors or buying and selling, to stimulate children using vocabulary in context.

The results of the observation showed a more significant increase compared to cycle I. Children seemed to be more enthusiastic about participating in activities, trying to speak more, and showing greater confidence. For example, a child who was previously just pointing is now able to pronounce the word "water" clearly when asked to drink. Other children who previously had frequent tantrums began to be able to express their desires in simple words, so that tantrum behavior was reduced. This supports the view of Owens (2016) that language stimulation through meaningful interaction can help children develop their communicative skills.

Learning outcome tests at the end of cycle II showed that most children were able to pronounce 10–15 new vocabulary consistently. Some children even start stringing

together simple sentences, such as "want to eat" or "want to play football". The percentage of children who have experienced a significant increase has reached more than 80%. The research target, namely the overall improvement of children's speech skills, was successfully achieved in cycle II. In addition to the quantitative improvement, the qualitative results also show positive developments. Children are more active in interacting with peers, have fewer tantrums, and show more cheerful facial expressions. Teachers report that children seem more confident in participating in daily activities. This change is in line with the opinion of Hamalik (2019) that learning that is designed with children's needs in mind can create a meaningful learning experience.

Comparisons between the initial condition, cycle I, and cycle II showed consistent development. In the initial condition, most children only communicate nonverbally. After the intervention in the first cycle, the child began to imitate simple vocabulary. In cycle II, children not only imitate, but also are able to use vocabulary in a simple context. This proves that teachers' strategies that involve direct communication, visual media, and affection have a positive impact on children's language development. Behavioral changes are also noticeable. If in the initial condition the child often shows tantrums due to communication difficulties, then in the second cycle the tantrum behavior decreases because the child is able to express himself with words. According to Bruner (1983), children's language development is closely related to cognitive and social development, so that improving language skills also encourages children to be more socially adaptive.

DISCUSSION

The results of this study show that teachers' strategies in dealing with children with speech delays in the Umar Playgroup Al Muttaqin group have proven to be effective in improving children's language skills. The improvement occurred gradually from the initial condition, cycle I, to cycle II. Simple communication strategies, the use of visual media, role-playing, and an affectionate approach are the main factors that support the success of the intervention. The following discussion outlines the results of the research by linking it to theories and findings of previous research, as well as explaining its practical contribution to early childhood education.

The communication strategies applied by teachers in this study are in accordance with the theory of language development which emphasizes the importance of direct interaction between children and adults. Vygotsky (1978) asserts that children's cognitive and language development takes place through social interaction in the proximal developmental zone. Teachers as significant figures play a role in helping children imitate, understand, and finally internalize language. The results of this study show that children are more likely to absorb new vocabulary when the teacher gives short instructions that are repeated consistently. This reinforces the view of Skinner (1957) who emphasized that positive reinforcement, such as praise or smiles, can motivate children to repeat language behaviors.

The addition of visual media in cycle II has been proven to be able to increase children's involvement in the learning process. Children are more enthusiastic when shown pictures and word cards, so they can remember and pronounce new vocabulary more easily. This is in accordance with Bruner's (1983) theory which explains that early childhood learns more easily through iconic representations, which are visual symbols that are concrete and close to their experiences. These findings are in line with the research of Nuryanti (2020) who found that the use of visual media significantly improves children's language skills with speech delays because children can connect words to pictures directly.

In addition to visual media, role-playing also has a positive impact on children's language development. Through doctor-doctor games or buying and selling, children not only imitate words, but also learn to use them in social contexts. This supports Piaget's (1959) view that role-playing encourages children to be imaginative as well as to train

communicative skills. The results of this study are consistent with the findings of Hasanah (2020) who show that role play effectively improves early childhood expressive skills because it allows them to use language spontaneously and meaningfully. The affectionate approach has also been shown to play a big role in reducing children's emotional barriers with speech delays. In the initial condition, some children show tantrum behavior due to frustration when they are unable to express themselves. However, after the teacher applies an affectionate approach of hugs, smiles, and praise, the child is calmer and motivated to try to speak. This supports the view of Lickona (2014) that character-based learning that emphasizes empathy and compassion can create a conducive learning atmosphere. Kurniasih's research (2018) also proves that affection-based communication strategies can increase children's courage in speaking.

The results of this study are in line with the findings of Hurlock (2012) who emphasized the importance of a stimulating environment in accelerating children's language development. In addition, research by Owens (2016) shows that consistently administered language stimulation through daily interactions is more effective than occasional interventions. This is also seen in this study, where the teacher's consistency in using communication strategies every day contributes greatly to improving children's abilities.

Compared to previous studies that emphasized more speech therapy by experts, this study highlights the role of teachers in the classroom as the main facilitators. This difference shows a new contribution in the literature, namely that teachers in early childhood education can play a direct role in speech delay interventions, provided they are equipped with the right strategies. Thus, this study broadens the horizon that speech delay intervention is not only the responsibility of the therapist, but also the teacher as a daily educational figure.

The findings of this study have several practical implications. First, PAUD teachers need to be equipped with an understanding of strategies for dealing with children with speech delays. Teachers not only teach, but also become facilitators of children's language development. Second, PAUD institutions should provide special training for teachers to deal with cases of speech delay, including the use of visual media and role-playing. Third, the approach of affection must always be the foundation in early childhood education, because a positive emotional atmosphere can accelerate children's development. In addition, this study confirms the importance of parental involvement. Positive results obtained in school need to be reinforced at home through consistent communication between parents and children. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), a child's development is influenced by interactions in various systems, including family, school, and social environment. Therefore, collaboration between teachers and parents is key in dealing with speech delays.

This research has several limitations. First, the study was only conducted on one study group with a limited number of children, so the results could not be generalized. Second, the research only lasted in two cycles, so it was not possible to see the long-term impact of the strategies implemented. Third, this study emphasizes more on teachers' strategies without comparing them with the interventions of speech therapists. Nevertheless, this research still makes a significant practical contribution.

CONCLUSION

This classroom action research proves that teachers' strategies have an important role in dealing with children with speech delay disorders in the Umar Playgroup Al Muttaqin group. The strategies applied, namely simple communication strategies, the use of visual media, role play, and an affectionate approach, have been proven to be able to improve children's language skills. The results of the study showed consistent development from the initial condition to cycle II, both in terms of quantitative in the form of an increase in the number of vocabulary and the ability to string simple sentences, and qualitatively in

the form of increased self-confidence, reduced tantrum behavior, and improved social interaction between children and peers. Thus, this study confirms that the role of teachers in providing early intervention is very effective in helping children's language development with speech delays.

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