

The Utilization of The Snakes and Ladders Game to Develop Early Reading Skills in Children Aged 3-4 Years

Endra Eka Kasih^{1*}, Anik Lestarinigrum¹, Isfauzi Hadi Nugroho¹

¹Universitas Nusantara PGRI Kediri, INDONESIA

Abstract

This study aims to describe the process and outcomes of using the snakes and ladders game to develop early reading skills in children aged 3-4 years. Early reading skills, including letter recognition and picture-word association, are foundational competencies that need to be introduced through enjoyable and age-appropriate learning media. This research employed a descriptive qualitative approach, conducted at Playgroup Laboratory School of Nusantara PGRI University Kediri, with data collected through observation, interviews, and documentation of learning activities from October 22 to November 6, 2025. The snakes and ladders game was adapted as a learning medium for letter recognition, implemented in sessions lasting 30-40 minutes at the end of each lesson. During the initial sessions, children demonstrated enthusiasm toward game-based activities such as rolling the dice and observing the pictures on the board, although their active involvement in naming letters remained uneven. This was attributed to the children's strong focus on the game mechanics itself and an insufficiently conducive classroom atmosphere. In subsequent sessions, notable improvements were observed in children's participation, their understanding of the game rules, their courage in pronouncing letters and picture names aloud, and their verbal interaction with the teacher. Teachers also reported measurable progress in children's letter recognition ability, their skill in matching pictures with flashcards, as well as improvements in concentration and self-confidence during learning activities. In conclusion, the snakes and ladders game proves to be an effective and promising learning medium, offering an enjoyable, concrete, and interactive approach to early reading development, while requiring careful classroom management and consistent teacher guidance to maximize its benefits.

Keywords: letter recognition; learning through play; snakes and ladders game; early childhood.

* Corresponding author. E-mail addresses: ekaendrakasih@gmail.com

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INTRODUCTION

Early reading ability is a fundamental component of children's overall literacy development, serving as the cornerstone upon which more complex language and cognitive skills are later built. During the early childhood years, particularly between the ages of 3 and 4, children undergo a critical period of language acquisition in which their brains are highly receptive to new information, including the recognition of letters, sounds, and symbols. Providing appropriate stimulation for children to recognize letters at this stage is therefore essential, as it not only introduces them to the alphabetic system but also lays the groundwork for learning to read and write at a later stage (Hayati and Sit 2024). Letter recognition itself involves several interrelated skills, such as the ability to identify letter shapes, associate letters with their corresponding sounds, and eventually connect these sounds to form meaningful words. Without adequate early exposure to these foundational skills, children may experience difficulties in subsequent stages of literacy development, including reading fluency and comprehension.

In addition to direct instruction, pre-literacy exposure through play-based methods from an early age has been shown to be vital as a foundation for children's school readiness. Play-based learning allows children to engage with literacy concepts in a natural, enjoyable, and non-threatening manner, which is particularly important given their limited attention span and developmental characteristics at this age. Through play, children are able to explore letters and sounds in a context that feels meaningful and relevant to their daily experiences, thereby fostering intrinsic motivation to learn rather than relying solely on rote memorization or repetitive drills. This approach aligns with the broader understanding in early childhood education that learning should be developmentally appropriate, hands-on, and centered around children's natural curiosity and desire to explore their surroundings.

Despite the well-documented importance of early literacy stimulation, the reality observed in the field often presents a different picture. Many children aged 3 to 4 years still struggle to recognize and differentiate letters, particularly those with similar shapes or sounds, which subsequently results in suboptimal early reading ability (Lestarinigrum et al. 2024). This gap between theoretical expectations and actual classroom conditions may be attributed to various factors, including limited access to engaging and age-appropriate learning media, insufficient teacher training in delivering literacy instruction through play, as well as classroom environments that are not consistently conducive to focused learning. Consequently, there is a pressing need to identify and implement innovative, play-based learning media that can effectively bridge this gap, making early literacy instruction both enjoyable and pedagogically effective for young learners.

Early literacy encompasses foundational skills in understanding and using language, including letter recognition as the basis for future reading and writing competencies. Several studies report that the interest and early reading ability of preschool children in Indonesia remain relatively low, indicating that literacy practices in the early phases of schooling have not been running optimally. This situation is compounded by the dominance of conventional instructional

approaches in early childhood literacy, such as direct instruction and worksheet-based activities that leave little room for exploratory and contextual learning (Annisa & Wulandari, 2023).

Beginning reading constitutes the initial stage in the development of reading ability, encompassing activities such as recognizing letters and words, connecting written symbols with their sounds and meanings, and comprehending simple texts. This skill becomes the foundation for children to develop language and literacy competencies at subsequent educational levels. Therefore, beginning reading instruction should be delivered in accordance with children's developmental stages, free from coercion, through enjoyable and play-oriented activities. An appropriate approach will help children gradually recognize letters, words, and simple sentences so that their literacy readiness can develop optimally (Yuliani et al., 2020).

A play-based learning approach is considered aligned with the developmental characteristics of early childhood. Play positions children as active subjects who explore their environment, construct understanding, and develop language abilities naturally (Cendana & Suryana, 2021). Through game-based interactions, children not only enrich their vocabulary but also develop their communicative and storytelling abilities. Thus, early literacy develops as a social practice involving interaction between children and their peers as well as their teachers (Royani and Adiningsih 2026).

A gap exists between the ideal and the actual state of early reading instruction. Learning to read should take place through enjoyable, interactive, and developmentally appropriate activities learning through play. However, conventional methods such as coloring sheets and flashcards often cause children to become bored and disengaged, resulting in less effective letter recognition outcomes. According to (Arijani 2013), an unenjoyable approach can cause children to miss the critical window for mental development and lose their motivation to read. Dewi (2022) further affirms that game-based learning significantly and positively influences early childhood development across cognitive, language, and social emotional domains.

The snakes and ladders game offers a solution by being enjoyable, concrete, and interactive, thereby avoiding monotony in letter recognition activities. Research shows that this game can significantly improve letter recognition ability, with one study recording an increase from 63% to 92% in Group B after two cycles (Hayati and Sit 2024) and another demonstrating an improvement in early reading ability from 49% to 75% through board game modification (Zetri 2012). The use of structured game-based media has a significant impact in facilitating children's cognitive and motor development. This is reinforced by Yuliani et al. (2020) who demonstrated that a planned play method can optimally stimulate children's abilities through systematic stages of socialization, adaptation, and implementation. Furthermore, Chayati, Sugiyo, and Sulistiyorini (2021) found that the snakes and ladders game had a significant effect on early childhood mathematics skills, confirming that board game media have a multi-dimensional impact on children's development.

This study aims to describe the process and outcomes of using the snakes and ladders game to develop early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years at Playgroup Laboratory School of Nusantara PGRI University Kediri through a

descriptive qualitative approach. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the development of innovative, play-based learning methods in early childhood education (Fadli and Muhammad Rijal 2021; Sugiyono 2010; Zaini, Kholid, and Nurkhasanah 2023).

METHOD

This study employs a descriptive qualitative method. According to Walidin (2015) the qualitative approach is a method aimed at exploring and understanding in depth various phenomena occurring in the context of human life and social interaction. This method was chosen to comprehensively describe the learning process through the snakes and ladders game in developing early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years. A descriptive qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the researchers sought to depict the learning process accurately and factually (Sugiyono 2010).

The study was conducted at Playgroup Laboratory School of Nusantara PGRI University Kediri during the period of October 22 to November 6, 2025. Prior to commencing the research, the researchers conducted preliminary observations to obtain permission from the school principal and to examine classroom conditions and the school environment. Data in this study were obtained from two primary sources: teachers and the school principal as key informants, and school documents, photographs of learning activities, and field notes as non-verbal sources. To collect data, the researchers employed three techniques as outlined by Zaini et al. (2023).

First, direct observation was conducted throughout the snakes and ladders game activities to monitor children's enthusiasm, active engagement, concentration, and their ability to name letters and pictures. The researchers also prepared observation guidelines to ensure the observation process ran effectively. Second, face-to-face interviews were conducted with the teachers and school principal to gather information regarding lesson planning, media usage, teacher and student activities, and supporting learning facilities. Third, documentation comprising the collection of important documents, photographs, daily notes, regulations, and relevant policies was used to strengthen the research data while providing an overview of the social situation and other supporting factors.

Data analysis in this study followed the Miles and Huberman (1994) model, which consists of three main stages. The first stage is data reduction, a process of filtering and simplifying the information gathered during the research. At this stage, important elements are selected, themes and patterns are identified, and irrelevant data are discarded. Reduced data provide a clearer picture and assist researchers in managing subsequent data while facilitating retrieval when needed.

The second stage is data display, in which data are organized into narratives, diagrams, inter-category relationships, and other forms that facilitate understanding of the phenomena being studied. According to Miles and Huberman (1994), qualitative data display is narrative in nature and aims to ease understanding and support inductive theory-building from field data, which is continuously tested through ongoing data collection. The final stage is conclusion

drawing and verification, which according to Barrett and Twycross (2018) involves deriving meaning from the data that have been reduced and displayed, including causal and proportional analysis. The researchers sought to explore the meaning of data carefully, completely, and in depth to ensure the validity of the research findings.

RESULTS

Initial Condition of Children's Early Reading Ability

The research conducted at Playgroup Laboratory School of Nusantara PGRI University Kediri demonstrates that the use of a modified snakes and ladders game can serve as a medium for developing early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years. Initial observations revealed that the children's early reading ability was low, particularly in recognizing letters, differentiating between letters, and naming simple vowels. At the outset, instruction was predominantly conventional, relying on simple paper-based materials attached to the board, which resulted in suboptimal participation and easily distracted attention.

Description of the Modified Snakes and Ladders Media

Following the introduction of the snakes and ladders game, a change was observed in the children's engagement during learning activities. The medium used consisted of a large banner-based snakes and ladders board equipped with letters, pictures, dice, and flashcards as additional challenges. The board was laid out as a winding path of numbered squares in the conventional snakes-and-ladders format; squares along the path displayed printed letters and pictures representing words beginning with the target letters, while selected squares functioned as the game's "snakes" and "ladders" that moved a player's token backward or forward. A single die determined how many squares each child advanced on their turn, and flashcards were used as a supplementary set of challenge cards that children drew when landing on designated squares, prompting them to name the pictured object, identify its initial letter, or match the card to a letter already displayed on the board.

Table 1. Specification of the Modified Snakes and Ladders Media Components

No	Component	Physical Description	Function in Learning Process
1	Board / Banner	Large floor banner printed as a numbered, winding (boustrophedon) path of squares in the traditional snakes-and-ladders layout, consisting of 30 squares arranged in five columns and six rows, running from a "start" square to a "finish" square, with a brown-runged ladder and a curving snake illustration connecting selected squares along the route (see Figure 1).	Serves as the main playing arena and the route along which each child's token moves.
2	Letters	Individual letters printed on every square along the path, using the complete alphabet from A to Z arranged in alphabetical order along	Introduces letters and trains children to recognize and pronounce them when their

		the winding route from the “start” square to the “finish” square; since 26 letters do not evenly fill 30 squares, a small number of letters are repeated to complete the path (see Figure 1).	token lands on a lettered square.
3	Pictures	Pictures of familiar objects printed on the same square as each letter, each depicting an animal, fruit, or everyday object whose Indonesian name begins with that letter (e.g., K-kuda/horse, S-sapi/cow, C-cicak/lizard), so that letter and picture are seen together at a glance (see Figure 1).	Helps children associate a letter's sound with a meaningful object and provides a naming task when landed on.
4	Dice	One standard six-sided die, rolled in turn by each child.	Determines how many squares a child advances and trains turn-taking and waiting.
5	Flashcards	A supplementary deck of cards showing pictures and letters, drawn when a child's token lands on a designated square. Each card is printed with a capital-and-lowercase letter pair (e.g., Aa, Bb, Cc), a matching picture, and the corresponding Indonesian vocabulary word (e.g., Aa-apel/apple, Bb-buaya/crocodile, Cc-cicak/lizard, Dd-dasi/necktie, Ee-ember/bucket, Ff-foto/photo), presented on a colorful, dot-bordered card (see Figure 2). When a card is drawn, the child is asked to name the picture, pronounce its letter, or match the card to the corresponding letter already displayed on the board.	Reinforces picture-letter matching and letter recognition, and gives an additional, focused naming challenge.

Table 1 summarizes the main components of the media and their function in supporting early reading development. Children appeared noticeably more enthusiastic because learning was packaged in the form of a game that gave them the opportunity to participate directly as players. The learning atmosphere became more active, enjoyable, and varied, leading children to show greater interest in engaging in early reading activities.

Implementation Process: From the Initial Session to Subsequent Sessions

Observations during implementation indicated that in the initial session children still required considerable guidance and explanation to understand the rules of the game. Some children were more focused on rolling the dice than on paying attention to the letters and pictures on the board. Nevertheless, children continued to show interest in the medium being used. In subsequent sessions, children began to better understand the flow of the game, became more willing to respond to the teacher's instructions, and started to name letters and pictures appearing on the game squares.



Figure 1. Documentation of the modified snakes and ladders board media, showing the alphabet letters and pictures printed on each square and the ladder/snake connectors along the winding path.



Figure 2. Documentation of the flashcard media, showing capital-lowercase letter pairs with matching pictures and Indonesian vocabulary words.

Development of Participation, Letter Recognition, and Self-Confidence

Progress was also evident in terms of the children's active participation and self-confidence. Children who had previously been passive began to answer questions willingly, wait for their turn, and attempt to name the letters or pictures on the snakes and ladders board. The use of flashcards as part of the game further assisted children in matching pictures and recognizing letter symbols. In addition, social interaction among the children increased because the game was played in turns, enabling them to learn to communicate, cooperate, and respect the rules of the game.

Summary of Findings

Overall, the findings show that the snakes and ladders game made a positive contribution to the development of early reading ability in children aged 3–4 years. The medium not only helped children recognize letters and pictures but also improved their attention, concentration, courage, and active engagement in the learning process. Accordingly, the snakes and ladders game is suitable for use as a learning medium that supports the development of early literacy in young children.

DISCUSSION

The Snakes and Ladders Game as a Relevant Learning Strategy

The discussion reveals that the use of the snakes and ladders game constitutes a relevant learning strategy for developing early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years. Field findings showed that prior to the use of this medium, children's early reading ability remained in a low category, particularly in recognizing letters and differentiating the symbols of language sounds. This situation affirms that reading instruction for young children requires a more concrete, enjoyable, and developmentally appropriate approach.

The implementation of the modified snakes and ladders game using a large banner board, letters, pictures, dice, and flashcards was able to create an active learning experience for the children. The medium enabled children to become directly involved in the learning process, not merely as listeners but as players who had to respond to letters, pictures, and challenges on the game squares. This direct involvement is consistent with the goals of early childhood education, which emphasize learning-through-play activities so that children can more easily grasp the material presented.

Attention and Participation Indicators in Light of Early Childhood Developmental Psychology

The findings further show that in the initial sessions children still required fairly intensive guidance from the teacher to understand the game rules. Some children tended to focus more on rolling the dice than on the letters and pictures on the board. However, this improved in subsequent sessions as children began to understand the flow of the game, showed greater willingness to name letters, and responded more actively to the teacher's instructions. These changes indicate that the snakes and ladders game medium has the potential to improve children's attention, concentration, and courage in early literacy activities.

These field dynamics can be further understood through the lens of early childhood developmental psychology. Children aged 3-4 years are situated within Piaget's preoperational stage, which is marked by single-focus attention and an egocentric orientation in which children primarily process a situation from their own immediate, sensory point of view (Piaget, 1962). This developmental characteristic helps explain why some children became absorbed in the concrete, physical act of rolling the dice rather than in the cognitively demanding task of naming letters: their attention naturally gravitated toward the single most salient stimulus available to them. This interpretation is reinforced by empirical evidence indicating that children's overall attentional capacity undergoes a particularly

rapid improvement precisely between the ages of three and four, a period during which the ability to sustain, orient, and regulate attention is still consolidating (Casagrande et al., 2022). Viewed in this light, the uneven participation and easily distracted attention observed in the early sessions should not be read as a shortcoming of the snakes and ladders game as a medium, but rather as an expected manifestation of children's developmental stage at this age.

Implications for Classroom Management

Recognizing these characteristics carries direct implications for classroom management in a playgroup setting. Because children at this age are still egocentric and easily captured by a single stimulus, teachers need to actively structure turn-taking, deliver short and explicit verbal cues before each turn, and gently but firmly redirect children's attention back to the letter or picture task immediately after the dice is rolled. Breaking the game into short, tightly guided segments punctuated by simple, repeated instructions helps accommodate the still-developing attention span of 3-4 year olds, while the consistent guidance and repetition provided across sessions in this study gradually trained children to sustain focus for longer periods and to become more willing to name letters. This combination of developmental awareness and deliberate classroom management is what ultimately allowed the snakes and ladders game to shift from a source of distraction in the initial session into an effective medium for letter recognition in subsequent sessions.

Letter Recognition and Social-Emotional Development through *Flashcards*

From a pedagogical perspective, the use of flashcards as part of the game provided additional support in helping children recognize letters and match pictures. Matching pictures to letters or challenge cards offered visual experiences that reinforced children's memory of language symbols. Furthermore, the turn-taking nature of the game also trained children's social-emotional aspects, such as waiting for their turn, cooperating, communicating, and respecting the rules of play. The snakes and ladders game therefore functions not only as a medium for developing early reading ability but also simultaneously supports the children's social development.

Synthesis: Answering the Research Question

Taken together, the findings of this study address the research question by demonstrating that the snakes and ladders game can be utilized to develop early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years through a learning process that is enjoyable, interactive, and contextual. The medium is effective in attracting children's interest, increasing active participation, and providing opportunities for children to recognize letters and pictures progressively. For these reasons, the snakes and ladders game is recommended as an alternative learning medium in the development of early literacy for young children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research findings, the answer to the research question indicates that the use of the snakes and ladders game can improve early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years. This is evidenced by children's more active

engagement, increased learning motivation, and their growing ability to recognize letters, differentiate between letters, and respond to early literacy activities through an enjoyable game-based medium.

The snakes and ladders game is therefore an appropriate learning medium for developing early reading ability in children aged 3-4 years, as it effectively addresses the needs of early childhood learning that emphasizes learning through play.

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