

Learners' Abilities in Solving Math Story Problems: A Lesson Learned from Young Language Learners

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Abstract

The importance of young language learners' understanding in solving math story problems in the 21st century learning era is crucial, because this ability is not only the key to competition in the world of work but also essential in developing students' critical logic, creativity, and independence in solving everyday problems. This study aims to measure students' ability to solve math story problems by using qualitative and descriptive quantitative methods. The data from this study is presented in the form of paragraphs describing the test results, with 20 fourth-grade elementary school students as respondents who worked on 10 essay questions. Data collection techniques were carried out through test results, interviews, and documentation. Furthermore, data analysis data display, reducing, and drawing conclusions. The results showed that young language learners' ability to solve story problems can be seen from several indicators. The average value for the ability to write known aspects is 21.50, for the ability to write aspects that are asked is 12.67, for the ability to solve math problems is 55, and for the ability to write conclusions is 59. With an overall student average score of 37.04, it can be concluded that the ability of students in the class can be categorized as less.

Keywords: Solve story problems; Math story; Learning problems; Young language learners

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INTRODUCTION

In the 21st century, education necessitates that students develop critical thinking, creativity, and independent problem-solving skills to thrive in the professional world and in the fields of science and technology (Mardhiyah et al., 2021; Rahayu et al., 2022; Albina et al., 2022). A key element in this educational process is the communication between educators and learners, which remains an invaluable asset in both traditional and modern learning environments. At the primary level, education is characterized by an interactive and communicative process between teachers and students, where teachers assume the role of instructors and students are the learners. This dynamic process evolves continuously to meet human needs, with mathematics playing a central role in numerous aspects of life (Kamarullah, 2017).

Mathematics is a focal subject from elementary school through higher education, recognized for its significant role in everyday life and its contribution to scientific and technological advancements (Murtiningsih & Kusmiyati, 2023; Siagian, 2016). The primary objective of mathematics education is to equip students with the ability to understand numerical concepts, discern relationships between ideas, and apply these concepts effectively and flexibly in problem-solving contexts (Ayu & Rakhmawati, 2019).

To achieve this, it is crucial for educators to provide learning experiences that are relevant to real-life situations. An effective strategy involves using real-life examples or problems that students can identify with. Story problems, in particular, serve as a practical tool for linking mathematical concepts to everyday experiences, thereby fostering deeper comprehension and enhancing critical thinking and problem-solving skills.

Interviews with fourth-grade teachers at SD Negeri 003 Sabak Auh have revealed that students encounter significant difficulties when solving story problems in mathematics. Despite adherence to the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) and syllabus, students struggle to grasp the material, particularly in applying concepts through story problems (Chubko et al., 2020; Lazarinis et al., 2020). This underscores the importance of setting appropriate parameters for evaluating student progress, where the ability to solve story problems serves as a vital indicator. These difficulties highlight the necessity of story problems not only as part of the curriculum but also as a measure of students' understanding of mathematical concepts in practical scenarios. Students' struggles with math story problems often indicate broader issues in comprehending and applying mathematical concepts in real life. Story problems play a crucial role in education by helping students appreciate the relevance of their learning (Tarelluan & Rufiana, 2017). They also aid in developing mathematical skills and reinforcing the understanding of taught concepts (Sihaloho et al., 2024). Problem-solving in mathematical story problems involves logical and systematic steps to arrive at a solution (Nugroho et al., 2023), making their implementation in mathematics education essential.

Research has consistently shown that students face numerous challenges in solving mathematical story problems. Common difficulties include identifying known and unknown elements, generalizing, determining formulas, and drawing conclusions (Kraeng et al., 2021). Studies by Sulestry and Meliyana (2018) have categorized students' abilities to solve mathematical models and draw conclusions from story problems as low. This finding is echoed by Fahlevi and Zanthy (2020), who noted that even students with high mathematical abilities struggle with understanding underlying concepts and theories. These challenges are generally attributed to a lack of understanding of essential mathematical concepts such as the meaning of problems, known and unknown elements, and comprehensive problem-solving strategies. Story problems reflect real-life situations, and their use in the classroom is intended to engage students and motivate them to find solutions (Kurnia et al., 2014). By presenting story problems that relate to everyday life, educators can increase student interest and motivation. Therefore, this study aims to assess students' abilities to solve mathematical story problems, focusing on four main indicators: identifying known aspects, determining unknown aspects, creating mathematical models, and completing calculations.

This study aims to evaluate the ability of students to solve mathematical story problems, focusing on the identification of known and unknown aspects, the creation of mathematical models, and the execution of calculations. The novelty of this research lies in its comprehensive approach to understanding and addressing the specific challenges students face in solving story problems, thereby providing insights into improving mathematics education and enhancing students' problem-solving skills.

RESEARCH METHOD

Research Design

This study employs a quantitative descriptive approach to investigate the competencies of young language learners in using language to solve mathematical story problems. The quantitative descriptive method is particularly appropriate for this research because it allows for the collection and analysis of numerical data, which can be used to identify patterns and trends in the learners' abilities. By presenting the data in a descriptive

format, the study provides a comprehensive view of the test results, highlighting the strengths and weaknesses of the learners in a clear and systematic manner.

The research aims to assess and describe the abilities of these learners in a systematic and detailed manner. This involves collecting data from a representative sample of young language learners, administering a series of tests that measure their ability to understand and solve mathematical story problems, and then analyzing the results to identify common patterns and trends. By using a quantitative descriptive approach, the study is able to provide detailed and accurate information about the competencies of these learners, which can be used to inform educational practices and policies. Overall, the use of a quantitative descriptive method allows for a thorough and objective assessment of the learners' abilities, providing valuable insights into their strengths and areas for improvement.

Research Sample and Population

The study was conducted with a sample of 20 fourth-grade elementary school learners, carefully selected to represent the broader population of fourth-grade students. These participants were chosen based on their typical characteristics and academic performance, ensuring that the sample accurately reflected the diversity of the target population. The primary focus of the research was to explore the students' challenges in learning mathematics through their responses to 10 essay questions. Each participant was asked to articulate their specific difficulties with math learning, providing detailed narratives about their experiences and obstacles. To ensure the validity and reliability of the data, the teacher closely monitored the students' language abilities as they described their mathematical struggles. This involved paying attention to how effectively the students could express their thoughts and identify specific issues they encountered.

The teacher's observations were crucial in understanding not only the content of the students' responses but also the clarity and coherence of their language use. Furthermore, all necessary permissions were obtained to involve young learners in the research. Consent forms were signed by the parents or guardians of the participants, ensuring that they were fully aware of the study's objectives and the involvement of their children. This ethical consideration was paramount in the research design, adhering to the standards of conducting studies with minors. By systematically selecting a representative sample and securing the appropriate permissions, the research aimed to provide a comprehensive understanding of the math learning problems faced by fourth-grade students, contributing valuable insights into educational practices and interventions.

Data Collection Technique

Data collection for this study was conducted through a comprehensive approach, utilizing test results, interviews, and documentation. These research instruments were chosen to provide a well-rounded and representative assessment of the young learners' competencies in using comprehensive language to describe their math learning problems. Each instrument was selected based on its ability to yield detailed and reliable data, ensuring that the findings accurately reflected the students' experiences and abilities.

The test results were a primary data source, designed to assess the students' understanding and articulation of their math learning issues. The tests consisted of carefully crafted questions that required the students to tell stories about their mathematical challenges, thereby measuring their competence in using comprehensive language. The responses were then corrected using a pre-prepared answer key, which provided a standardized method for evaluating the students' answers. This answer key was developed based on established criteria, ensuring consistency and objectivity in the scoring process. In addition to the tests, interviews were conducted to supplement and enrich the collected data. These interviews provided a deeper insight into the students' thought processes and language use, offering qualitative data that complemented the quantitative

test results. During the interviews, students were encouraged to elaborate on their written responses, allowing the researchers to capture a more nuanced understanding of their language abilities and the specific nature of their math learning problems.

Documentation was utilized to support the findings from the tests and interviews. This included collecting relevant records and notes that provided additional context and verification for the data obtained through the other instruments. By triangulating data from multiple sources, the research ensured a robust and comprehensive analysis of the students' competencies in using language to describe their math learning challenges. This methodical approach to data collection and analysis reinforced the validity and reliability of the research findings.

Data Analysis

The data analysis in this study was conducted through a systematic process consisting of data reduction, data display, and conclusion drawing. This structured approach ensured a thorough and reliable examination of the collected data, providing clear insights into the young learners' competencies in using comprehensive language to describe their math learning problems.

Firstly, data reduction was carried out to manage and simplify the vast amount of data collected from tests and interviews. The initial step involved grouping the test results to determine the levels of language proficiency among the young learners. Each student's responses were analyzed and categorized based on predefined criteria, which assessed their ability to articulate math learning challenges. This reduction process was essential to identify patterns and key themes within the data, making it more manageable for further analysis. Following data reduction, the data were displayed in an organized manner to facilitate interpretation and understanding. The test results and interview findings were presented in a table, categorizing the learners' abilities into five distinct levels: very good, good, sufficient, less, and very less. This categorization provided a clear and concise visual representation of the data, allowing readers to quickly grasp the overall distribution of language competencies among the participants. The table served as a crucial tool for summarizing the findings and highlighting the variations in the learners' abilities.

Subsequently, interviews were conducted to obtain additional data that complemented the test results. The qualitative data from the interviews provided deeper insights into the learners' thought processes and language use, enriching the overall analysis. This triangulation of data sources enhanced the validity and reliability of the findings. To ensure the data's validity and reliability, the analysis was assessed by experts in educational research and language proficiency. These experts reviewed the data reduction and categorization processes, verifying the accuracy and consistency of the results. Their assessments confirmed that the data were analyzed rigorously and that the findings were robust and dependable.

Finally, conclusions were drawn based on the comprehensive analysis. The clear categorization and expert validation of the data provided a solid foundation for interpreting the study's results, offering valuable insights into the language abilities of young learners in the context of math learning problems. This systematic approach to data analysis ensured that the study's conclusions were well-supported and credible. The score range can be presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Score Range

Score Range	Assessment criteria
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81-100	Very Good
61-80	Good
41-60	Sufficient
21-40	Less
<20	Very Less

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Result

This study aims to evaluate students' ability to solve story problems in mathematics learning. The following are the general results of students working on test questions:

Table 2. Percentage of General Test Results

Qualitative Form	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	81-100	1	5%
Good	61-80	3	15%
Sufficient	41-60	1	5%
Less	21-40	12	60%
Very Less	0-20	3	15%
Average		37,04	
Category			Less

Source: Processed research data

In this study, researchers focused on four aspects of the indicator, namely students' ability to write down known aspects, write down aspects that are asked, make mathematical models, and draw conclusions. The following are the results of the study:

Table 3. Ability to Write Known Aspects in Working on Math Story Problems

Qualitative Form	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	81-100	2	10%
Good	61-80	2	10%
Sufficient	41-60	1	5%
Less	21-40	2	10%
Very Less	0-20	13	65%
Average		21,5	
Category			Less

Based on Table 2, it can be observed that students' ability to write down known aspects of working on story problems, which contain flat building material, shows results that reflect the level of difficulty. From a total of 20 respondents in class IV of SDN 003 Sabak Auh, there were 2 students who could be categorized in the "very good" category, 2 students in the "good" category, 1 student in the "sufficient" category, and 2 students in the "less" category, while 13 other students fell into the "very less" category. The average score of all students was 21.5%. Thus, it can be concluded that students' ability to write down known aspects is still considered very difficult.

Table 4. Ability to Write the Asked Aspects in Working on Math Story Problems

Qualitative Form	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	81-100	0	0%
Good	61-80	2	10%
Sufficient	41-60	1	5%

Less	21-40	1	5%
Very Less	0-20	16	80%
Average			12,67
Category			Less

Based on Table 4, it can be observed that students' ability to write down the aspects asked in working on story problems on flat shapes is low. Out of a total of 20 respondents in class IV SDN 003 Sabak Auh, the results show a fairly high level of difficulty. No student can be categorized in the "very good" category; only 2 students are in the "good" category, 1 student in the "sufficient" category, and 1 student in the "less" category. While the other 16 students fall into the "very less" category. The average score of all students is 12.67%. Thus, it can be concluded that the students' ability to write the aspects in question is still very poor, even lower than their ability to write the known aspects.

Table 5. Ability to Solve Math Story Problems

Qualitative Form	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	81-100	3	15%
Good	61-80	4	20%
Sufficient	41-60	8	40%
Less	21-40	4	20%
Very Less	0-20	1	5%
Average			55
Category			Sufficient

Based on Table 5, it can be seen that students' ability to solve mathematical models, starting from formulas to how to solve them, in working on story problems on flat building material shows variations in the level of proficiency. Of the 20 students in class IV of SDN 003 Sabak Auh, there were 3 students in the "very good" category, 4 students in the "good" category, 8 students in the "sufficient" category, 4 students in the "less" category, and 1 student in the "very less" category. The average score of all students was 55. This indicates that students' ability to solve mathematical models can be considered sufficient.

Table 6. Students' Ability to Draw Conclusions about Math Story Problems

Qualitative Form	Score Range	Frequency	Percentage
Very Good	81-100	0	0%
Good	61-80	8	40%
Sufficient	41-60	12	60%
Less	21-40	0	0%
Very Less	0-20	0	0%
Average			59
Category			Sufficient

Based on Table 7, it can be concluded that out of a total of 20 students in class IV of SDN 003 Sabak Auh, there are 8 students who fall into the "good" category, which is equivalent to a percentage of 40%, and 12 students have sufficient ability, reaching a percentage of 60%. The average overall score of the students was 59, which placed them in the "sufficient" category.

Discussion

The ability to solve math story problems is essential for young learners, as it enables them to complete various math tasks and articulate their learning challenges in

comprehensive Indonesian language. This encompasses the ability to identify known aspects, delineate the aspects being asked, formulate mathematical models, and draw appropriate conclusions from the learning materials (Wahyuddin, 2016).

The study analyzed the performance of fourth-grade learners at SD Negeri 003 Sabak Auh in tackling math story problems related to flat building materials. The findings revealed that the learners' abilities generally fell into the "less" category, with an average score of 37.04. This indicates significant difficulties among the learners in understanding and solving math story problems. Many learners struggled to grasp the meaning of the problems and failed to solve them correctly. Additionally, difficulties were observed in determining the known and asked aspects, with frequent mistakes in interpreting the problems and deriving solutions. This aligns with the research by Dwidarti et al. (2019), which found that students often encounter challenges in solving math story problems due to a lack of conceptual understanding, difficulty in applying mathematical principles, and inadequate problem-solving skills.

When it comes to writing down the known aspects, the young learners' abilities were found to be insufficient. The research indicated that many learners did not fully comprehend the problem instructions. A majority could not accurately list the known aspects, with only a few managing to do so correctly. Some learners even provided incorrect information, such as writing "dik: $a=50$, $b=150$ " instead of the correct " $a=50$, $t=150$ ". This suggests a significant gap in the learners' understanding of the problems. This issue is consistent with findings by Ayu & Rakhmawati (2019), who reported that students often make errors in identifying known information, either omitting it, presenting it incompletely, or making mistakes in recording it. Some learners also tended to write down formulas without clearly indicating the known aspects.

The learners' ability to specify the aspects being asked in math story problems was found to be very poor, even lower than their ability to list the known aspects. The research showed that the learners were generally unable to adequately state the information requested by the problem. As a result, fourth-grade learners at SD Negeri 003 Sabak Auh were not able to properly identify the questions posed in math story problems. Many learners focused directly on solving the mathematical models without paying attention to the requested information. This was evident from the number of learners who only noted the known aspects and immediately applied mathematical formulas. However, identifying the asked aspects is crucial for selecting the correct mathematical model to solve the problem. Some learners did attempt to write down the aspects being asked, but their efforts were often incomplete or inaccurate. This finding is supported by Ayu & Rakhmawati (2019), who also found that students frequently made errors in identifying the requested information, resulting in incomplete, inaccurate, or incorrect answers.

In solving math problems, while some learners were able to perform well, many encountered difficulties despite understanding the problem. There were instances where learners knew the correct initial steps but made mistakes in the final answer. Some learners used the correct formulas and steps but still arrived at incorrect results. Additionally, a number of learners simply wrote down the formula without providing a thorough explanation or complete steps. Mistakes such as incorrect units or incomplete final answers were also observed. These issues are consistent with the findings of Pitoweas et al. (2020), who noted that students often make errors when using multiplication and subtraction operations, despite knowing the correct methods.

The learners' ability to draw conclusions from math story problems was classified as sufficient, with only about 50% of the learners able to provide the correct final result. This indicates that many learners did not emphasize the step of drawing conclusions when solving problems. Some learners did not review their answers, while others attempted to write conclusions but made errors, likely due to a lack of understanding in preparing the

problem-solving model. The majority of learners admitted that they were not accustomed to writing conclusions and preferred to abbreviate their answers. This observation is supported by Farida (2015), who found that students tend to avoid drawing conclusions, preferring to simplify their answers due to a lack of experience in summarizing the solutions.

In analyzing the performance on the five math story problems given to the learners, significant difficulties were noted particularly with problems 9 and 10, which involved determining the area of a triangle. While some learners managed to solve these problems well, others found them very challenging. On the other hand, the learners' performance on problems 1 and 2, which dealt with the perimeter of a square, was categorized as sufficient, with an average score of 52.08. Despite some learners not including the known and asked aspects, most were able to construct the mathematical models correctly and solve the problems appropriately. Problems 1 and 2 were the ones most frequently solved well by the learners. However, there were still instances where learners provided incomplete answers, such as omitting the words "known" and "asked" and only writing "dit: area," which is not a complete response. From this analysis, it can be concluded that two-thirds of the total learners (20 participants) received good or very good scores for these problems. The learners demonstrated the ability to transform the problem into a mathematical model effectively.

Based on the analysis, the learners' ability to solve story problems in math learning at SD Negeri 003 Sabak Auh can be evaluated across several indicators. The average score for writing known aspects was 21.50, for writing the aspects asked was 12.67, for solving math problems was 55, and for writing conclusions was 59. With an overall average score of 37.04, it can be concluded that the learners' abilities in the class fall into the "less" category. These findings are consistent with the research by Halimah et al. (2023), which showed that high-ability students are able to solve story problem tests well, whereas low-ability students continue to struggle, particularly in understanding and solving the problems correctly based on given indicators. This can be attributed to a lack of understanding of the problems and the steps required for solving math story problems. Farida (2015) also highlighted similar challenges, noting that students often have difficulty converting problem information into appropriate mathematical expressions and selecting the necessary formulas. Furthermore, many students tend not to draw conclusions, preferring to simplify their answers and lacking familiarity with summarizing their solutions.

In general, these findings emphasize the need to enhance learners' understanding of mathematical concepts and their ability to apply this knowledge in the context of story problems. A learning approach that focuses more on comprehending mathematical story problems and developing skills to analyze and solve mathematical issues is essential. This could involve integrating more problem-solving activities that encourage learners to identify known and asked aspects, create mathematical models, and draw conclusions systematically. Moreover, these challenges point to the importance of teachers adopting instructional strategies that promote a deeper understanding of math story problems. This could include using visual aids, interactive problem-solving sessions, and guided practice to help learners build confidence and competence in tackling these problems. Teachers could also provide more opportunities for learners to practice writing and articulating their thought processes, which would help improve their language skills in describing math problems.

The study suggests that targeted interventions are needed to address the specific difficulties learners face in solving math story problems. These interventions could include providing additional support for learners who struggle with identifying known and asked aspects, as well as those who find it challenging to formulate and solve mathematical

models. By focusing on these areas, educators can help learners develop a stronger foundation in math problem-solving, ultimately leading to better performance and a more positive attitude towards mathematics.

The ability to solve math story problems is a critical skill for young learners, enabling them to effectively complete math tasks and articulate their learning challenges. The findings from this study highlight the significant difficulties learners face in this area, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions and instructional strategies to improve their competencies. By adopting a comprehensive approach to teaching math story problems, educators can help learners build the necessary skills to succeed in mathematics and beyond.

CONCLUSION

The ability to solve math story problems is crucial for young learners, as it enables them to complete various math tasks and articulate their learning challenges comprehensively. This study revealed significant difficulties among fourth-grade learners at SD Negeri 003 Sabak Auh in understanding and solving math story problems, with most falling into the "less" category. The learners struggled with identifying known and asked aspects, formulating mathematical models, and drawing conclusions. These findings align with previous research, highlighting common challenges such as conceptual misunderstandings, difficulty applying mathematical principles, and inadequate problem-solving skills. The data showed that while some learners could solve math problems correctly, many made errors in final answers or omitted crucial steps, reflecting a lack of thorough understanding. The learners' ability to write conclusions was also found lacking, with many avoiding this step due to inexperience or preference for simplified answers. Significant difficulties were observed in more complex problems, while simpler problems were solved more successfully, indicating variability in problem-solving skills.

The study underscores the need for targeted interventions to address these challenges. Educators should adopt instructional strategies that promote deeper understanding of math story problems, such as visual aids, interactive sessions, and guided practice. Providing additional support for learners struggling with specific aspects of problem-solving can help build a stronger foundation in math. In conclusion, enhancing learners' understanding and skills in solving math story problems is essential for their success in mathematics. By focusing on comprehensive teaching approaches and targeted support, educators can significantly improve learners' math competencies, leading to better performance and a more positive attitude towards the subject.

RECOMMENDATION

Future research can focus on the implementation of effective learning strategies to improve students' ability to solve math story problems in grade 4. The necessary steps include in-depth training for teachers in implementing innovative learning strategies that are oriented towards developing students' critical thinking skills. However, it should be noted that resistance to change on the part of teachers and students can be an obstacle in the implementation process. Therefore, effective socialization and continuous support are needed to ensure good acceptance of the proposed learning strategy.

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