

Teaching at the Right Level Without Grouping: A Qualitative Single-Case Study of Individualised Reading Support for a Fifth-Grade Student

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Abstract: Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) is widely adopted in Indonesian schools, yet its defining mechanism — grouping learners by assessed ability rather than by grade — cannot operate when only one child in a class is far behind. This study examines what remains of the approach when grouping is removed. Using a qualitative single-case design, it documents two planning–action–observation–reflection cycles of individualised reading support provided to a fifth-grade student who had not yet mastered the alphabet, in a public primary school in West Java. Data were drawn from participant observation, field notes, and semi-structured interviews with the classroom teacher and the parents. Analysis followed reflexive thematic analysis of the observational record. Three findings are reported. First, when applied to a single learner, TaRL reduces to level-matched individual instruction, and its distinctive contribution shifts from differentiation to diagnostic sequencing. Second, the interest-linked and picture-supported materials that sustained the student’s engagement also carried a pedagogical risk, since reliance on picture cues may support word identification without building the phonological decoding needed for unillustrated text. Third, the observed change in engagement and willingness to attempt reading was clear, whereas change in decoding skill could not be established from two sessions. The study argues that individualised TaRL is best understood as an entry point to sustained remedial instruction rather than as a substitute for it, and that reporting short interventions honestly matters more than reporting them favourably.

Keyword: Teaching at the Right Level; reading difficulties; individualised instruction; primary education; single-case study

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Introduction

Teaching at the Right Level was developed by the Indian non-governmental organisation Pratham in response to a persistent finding: large numbers of children in upper primary grades could not read simple text, and curricula pitched to grade level left them further behind each year. The approach replaces grade-based instruction with instruction matched to assessed ability, and it does so through a specific mechanism — children are assessed, grouped by current level, and taught in those groups (Banerjee et al., 2017; Banerji et al., 2020).

The evidence base is unusually strong. Six randomised evaluations across seven Indian states found the approach consistently effective when implemented systematically, producing some of the largest effect sizes rigorously measured in the education literature; gains in language reached 0.15 standard deviations in one scale-up model and 0.70 standard deviations in another (Banerjee et al., 2016). Earlier randomised work had

already shown that remedial instruction targeted at children's actual level produced substantial learning gains (Banerjee et al., 2007).

The same body of work also documents a condition on that success. Where the approach was handed to individual teachers without structural support, it was frequently not adopted, and the literature notes that TaRL demands considerable flexibility and adaptive capacity when it becomes the responsibility of a single educator (Banerjee et al., 2016). Effectiveness, in other words, is contingent on implementation conditions rather than inherent in the approach.

In Indonesia, TaRL has been widely promoted and reported favourably at school level, including gains in literacy and numeracy attributed to ability-based grouping (Suharyani et al., 2023). What has received less attention is a structural condition common in Indonesian primary schools: classes in which a single child, rather than a group, is severely behind. Grouping cannot be performed on one learner. The mechanism that carries TaRL's effect is unavailable, yet the label continues to be applied.

A fifth-grade student who has not mastered letter-sound correspondence is not simply a slower reader. Word-level reading difficulty is the most common form of reading difficulty, and phonological processing weakness — in phoneme awareness, letter-sound knowledge, and rapid naming — is its most consistent correlate across languages (Snowling et al., 2020; De Jong & van der Leij, 2003). Meta-analytic evidence covering four decades of intervention research indicates that multicomponent instruction providing explicit, systematic work on foundational skills is what moves such learners, and that effects are smaller when intervention begins later in primary school (Hall et al., 2023).

Dosage matters as much as content. Reviews of phonics-based intervention report that most studies delivered instruction several times weekly over roughly ten weeks, with sessions of about thirty minutes, and that outcomes depend heavily on intensity and duration. Interventions for older students with severe and persistent difficulties typically require sustained programmes rather than brief exposure (Boucher et al., 2024; Jeffes, 2016; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2010).

These two literatures rarely meet. TaRL research is conducted at system scale and reports average effects; reading-difficulty research is conducted at individual level and reports what intensive remediation requires. A teacher facing one severely delayed child in an otherwise functioning class stands between them, with guidance from neither.

Three gaps follow. First, studies of TaRL in Indonesia report implementation at class or school level and do not examine what happens to the approach when its grouping mechanism is unavailable. Second, reports of short school-based interventions rarely situate their claims against the dosage established as necessary in the reading-intervention literature, which makes their findings difficult to interpret. Third, accounts of individualised support in Indonesian primary classrooms seldom examine the pedagogical trade-offs embedded in the materials used, treating engagement gains as unambiguously positive.

Research questions:

- RQ1. How was the TaRL approach adapted when applied to a single fifth-grade student rather than to ability groups, and what remained of the approach after that adaptation?
- RQ2. What changes in the student's reading behaviour and engagement were observable across two intervention cycles, and what changes were not?
- RQ3. What conditions supported or constrained the intervention, as reported by the classroom teacher and the parents?

This study does not claim to demonstrate that TaRL improves reading. Two sessions cannot support such a claim, and the analysis is explicit about that. Its contribution is conceptual and practical: it examines what an approach defined by grouping becomes when grouping is removed, and it documents a pedagogical tension in interest-linked materials that is rarely acknowledged in Indonesian practitioner literature. It also offers a worked example of reporting a short intervention without overstating it.

Methodology

The study uses a qualitative single-case design. The case is the individualised reading support provided to one student, and the unit of analysis is the intervention as enacted rather than the student as such. This design suits questions about how a process unfolds in a bounded real-world setting where the researcher does not control events (Yin, 2018).

The study took place in a public primary school in a rural district of West Java Province, during the second semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. The focal participant, referred to throughout as S, was a fifth-grade student identified by the classroom teacher as substantially behind classmates in reading. Secondary participants were the classroom teacher (T) and S's parents (P1).

S was selected purposively as an information-rich case: the combination of severe delay, late primary grade, and an otherwise typically performing class is precisely the configuration in which TaRL's grouping mechanism becomes unavailable.

The intervention comprised two cycles delivered one week apart. Each cycle followed a planning, action, observation, and reflection sequence, with the second cycle revised in response to the first.

Table 1. Intervention structure

Cycle	Planned focus	Enacted activities
Cycle 1	Re-establish letter-sound knowledge; build willingness to attempt reading	Rapport-building conversation about hobbies; picture-linked letter cards (B for bola, S for sepeda, G for gambar); guided syllable reading (ba, bi, bu, be, bo); syllable blending into hobby-related words (bola, buku, seni, gambar, musik); shared reading of a short illustrated text; closing reflection
Cycle 2	Build fluency on known material; reduce dependence on adult prompting	Oral description of own hobby in simple sentences; song-based passing game with hobby books, reading aloud when the song stopped; independent reading of a short hobby text with minimal assistance; closing reflection and reward

The sequence from letter-sound knowledge to syllables, then to whole words, then to connected text follows the progression recommended in structured literacy instruction, and materials were linked throughout to S's stated interests.

Three sources were used. Participant observation during both cycles was recorded in field notes covering S's responses to each activity, the prompting required, and

observable affective indicators. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with T, who had taught S since the previous grade, and with P1 concerning home reading practices and available support. Documentation comprised the teaching materials used and S's written work produced during the sessions.

Field notes and interview records were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2019), supported by a matrix display comparing observations across the two cycles (Miles et al., 2014). Coding proceeded inductively from the observational record, and codes were then organised against the three research questions. Observations were recorded as described behaviours rather than as rated performance, since no scored instrument was administered.

Credibility was supported by triangulating observation against teacher and parent interviews, and by member checking the summary of observed changes with the classroom teacher. Field notes were written immediately after each session to reduce recall error. The limitations of a two-session record, and the consequences for what can and cannot be claimed, are stated explicitly in Section 4.6 rather than treated as a residual caveat.

The study involved a minor with a documented learning difficulty, which required particular care. The name of the school and its district are not reported, and the student, teacher, and parents are identified by code only. No photographs of participants are included. Permission was obtained from the school principal, and consent was obtained from S's parents together with S's own assent before the sessions began.

Result and Discussion

Result

1. Initial condition

An informal reading assessment conducted before the first cycle, combined with classroom observation and interview with T, established S's starting point. S had not mastered the full alphabet: recognition of upper- and lower-case letters was uneven, and several letters were consistently misnamed or miswritten. S had particular difficulty distinguishing letters of similar visual form, including b and d, p and q, and m and n. Blending letters into syllables was not established, and reading of simple words required continuous adult prompting.

Affective indicators were equally clear. When asked to read aloud before the class, S lowered their head, spoke almost inaudibly, or remained silent while waiting for adult assistance. T reported that S avoided reading-related tasks and disengaged quickly when given independent reading work.

T and P1 together identified four interacting conditions. Letter-sound knowledge was incomplete. Interest and motivation in reading activities were low, with frequent off-task behaviour. The gap between S's pace and the class average created pressure on both S and the teacher, who had to balance individual and group needs. Finally, home support was limited: P1 reported that work schedules left little time for reading practice at home.

2. What remained of TaRL after individual adaptation (RQ1)

The adaptation removed the approach's central mechanism. No grouping occurred, no comparison across ability levels was possible, and no peer modelling within a level group took place. What was retained was the diagnostic principle:

instruction began from an assessment of what S could actually do, and proceeded from that point rather than from the grade-five curriculum.

In practice this produced a sequence that began substantially below grade level - at letter-sound correspondence, a first-grade objective - and moved forward in small steps. The curriculum topic nominally under study, self-expression through hobbies, functioned less as content to be mastered than as a source of familiar vocabulary and motivating context.

This is a meaningful adaptation, but it is not TaRL in the sense established in the source literature. It is level-matched individual remediation, in which the diagnostic logic of TaRL is retained and its organisational mechanism is discarded.

3. Observed change across two cycles (RQ2)

Table 2. Observed behaviour by cycle

Domain	Cycle 1 — observed	Cycle 2 — observed
Letter recognition	Named most letters when supported by the associated picture; continued to confuse b and d	Named letters more readily; confusion between visually similar letters still observed on some items
Syllable reading	Read syllables only after modelling; required repetition before each attempt	Attempted syllables before modelling on several occasions
Word reading	Read hobby words when the accompanying picture was visible; did not attempt without it	Read familiar hobby words with less prompting; unfamiliar words still required assistance
Willingness to attempt	Waited for adult prompting before each attempt; hesitated visibly	Initiated attempts during the song-based activity; volunteered to read aloud
Dependence on adult support	Continuous prompting required throughout	Prompting still required, but at longer intervals
Engagement	Interest emerged when illustrated media were introduced	Sustained engagement throughout the song-based activity

The change in willingness to attempt reading, and in engagement, was clear and consistent across sources: it appeared in field notes from both cycles and was independently reported by T. This is the most defensible finding in the study.

The change in decoding skill is a different matter. Letter confusion persisted into the second cycle, and word reading remained dependent on picture support for unfamiliar items. What the record shows is that S attempted more, not that S could decode more. These are distinct, and the distinction is examined in Section 4.3.

4. Supporting and constraining conditions (RQ3)

T identified the structural constraint directly: sustaining individual attention for one student while managing a full class was not feasible on a routine basis, and the sessions were possible only because external researchers were present. P1 confirmed limited capacity for home reading practice, attributing this to work schedules rather than to unwillingness.

Two supporting conditions were observed. Linking materials to S's own interests reduced initial resistance to reading tasks. The absence of an audience of peers during instruction appeared to lower the anxiety that T had described as

characteristic of S's classroom reading behaviour, although this was not the case during the song-based activity in Cycle 2

Discussion

1. What an approach defined by grouping becomes without grouping

The evidence supporting TaRL rests on a specific operational form: assessment, grouping by level, and instruction to those groups (Banerjee et al., 2017; Banerji et al., 2020). The effect sizes reported in the randomised literature are effects of that package, not of the general principle that teaching should meet learners where they are (Banerjee et al., 2016).

This matters for how Indonesian practitioner studies invoke the approach. Where TaRL is reported as effective at school level, ability-based grouping is typically the operative element (Suharyani et al., 2023). The present case removed that element and retained only the diagnostic principle. The result functioned reasonably as remediation, but describing it as TaRL implementation overstates the connection to the evidence base.

The distinction is practically consequential. A teacher who reads that TaRL produces large learning gains, and who then applies level-matched instruction to one child, is not implementing the intervention that produced those gains. The literature's own caution is relevant here: adoption failed in several settings where the approach was handed to individual teachers without structural support, and it demands substantial flexibility and adaptive capacity when it rests on a single educator (Banerjee et al., 2016). The case reported here is an extreme instance of that condition — a single educator, a single learner, and no structural provision at all.

The constructive reading is that individualised level-matched instruction is a legitimate response to a real problem, and should be named accurately rather than borrowed from a stronger evidence base. What the present case demonstrates is that the diagnostic component of TaRL travels to the individual level, while its organisational component does not.

2. Interest-linked and picture-supported materials: engagement gained, decoding deferred

The materials used — illustrated letter cards, picture-word cards, hobby-themed texts — clearly supported engagement, and engagement was the domain in which change was most evident. This is consistent with Indonesian findings that media matched to student interest raise reading engagement (Fahmi & Rochmiyati, 2023).

There is, however, a tension that practitioner literature rarely raises. Where picture cues become the primary route to word identification rather than a temporary support, they can substitute for phonological decoding rather than build it, and may leave learners without the skills required for unillustrated text (Kilpatrick, 2015; National Reading Panel, 2000). The observational record in this study is consistent with that concern: S read hobby words when the accompanying picture was visible and did not attempt them without it in Cycle 1, and unfamiliar words continued to require assistance in Cycle 2.

This does not mean the materials were wrong. For a student who avoided reading altogether, restoring willingness to engage is a prerequisite for any instruction. The point is that picture support should be understood as scaffolding to be withdrawn systematically, and that evidence of word reading under picture support is not evidence of decoding. Meta-analytic findings are consistent on this: what moves

learners with word-level difficulties is explicit, systematic instruction in foundational skills, delivered as a multicomponent programme (Hall et al., 2023).

A practical implication follows for the design of similar interventions: sessions might pair interest-linked material for engagement with a short, explicit, picture-free decoding component, so that motivation and skill development are not carried by the same activity.

3. Two sessions and what they can support

The intervention comprised two sessions one week apart. The reading-intervention literature provides a clear reference point: reviews of phonics-based intervention report that most studies delivered instruction several times weekly over approximately ten weeks with sessions of around thirty minutes, and that outcomes depend substantially on intensity and duration (Boucher et al., 2024; Wanzek & Vaughn, 2010). Programmes for older learners with severe and persistent difficulties are typically sustained rather than brief (Jeffes, 2016).

Against that benchmark, two sessions fall far below the dosage at which skill change would be expected. Meta-analytic evidence further indicates that intervention effects are smaller when remediation begins later in primary school, which applies directly to a fifth-grade student (Hall et al., 2023).

This has a direct consequence for interpretation. The change observed in willingness to attempt reading is plausible over two sessions, since engagement can shift quickly in response to changed conditions, and it was corroborated across sources. Change in decoding skill is not plausible over the same period, and the observational record does not show it: letter confusion persisted and picture dependence remained.

Reporting this honestly is more useful than reporting it favourably. A study claiming substantial reading gains from two sessions invites disbelief and, if repeated across the practitioner literature, distorts expectations of what brief interventions can achieve. A study reporting that two sessions changed a child's willingness to try, while leaving decoding untouched, tells teachers something true and actionable: the first barrier for a disengaged struggling reader may be affective, and removing it is necessary but not sufficient.

4. The home literacy environment as a structural constraint

P1 reported limited capacity to support reading at home. This is consistent with Indonesian findings that the home literacy environment and parental involvement materially affect reading development, and that limited involvement functions as a barrier (Hermawati & Sugito, 2021).

The framing matters, though. P1 attributed the limitation to work schedules, not to indifference. Treating limited home support as a deficit in parental commitment would misread the situation and would make the resulting recommendation — that parents should read with their children more — unhelpful. The more useful reading is structural: where home practice cannot be relied upon, the school must supply the repetition that skill development requires, which returns the question to institutional capacity rather than family motivation.

5. Implications for practice

For teachers, the case suggests separating two goals that are easily conflated. Restoring a disengaged student's willingness to attempt reading is achievable in a short period with interest-linked material. Building decoding skill is a longer project requiring explicit, systematic, and sustained instruction. Confusing progress on the

first for progress on the second risks concluding that a child is improving when the underlying difficulty is untouched.

For schools, the case identifies a structural gap. T could not sustain individual attention within normal classroom duties, and the sessions were possible only because external personnel were available. Where one child in a class requires instruction several years below grade level, the response has to be organisational — scheduled remedial time, assigned personnel, or referral — rather than a matter of individual teacher effort.

For those adopting TaRL in Indonesian primary schools, the case suggests checking whether the structural condition for the approach is present. Where several children share a level, grouping is available and the approach can operate as designed. Where one child is isolated at a much lower level, a different response is required, and it should be named as such.

6. Limitations

The limitations of this study are substantial and bound its conclusions closely.

- a. The intervention comprised two sessions, far below the dosage at which reading skill change would be expected. No claim about skill improvement is made or supportable.
- b. No standardised or scored reading assessment was administered. Development is reported as observed behaviour, which supports description but not measurement, and does not permit comparison with other studies.
- c. No baseline phase with repeated measurement was established, so the design does not meet single-case experimental standards and observed change cannot be attributed to the intervention rather than to novelty, adult attention, or ordinary variation (Ledford et al., 2023).
- d. The intervention was delivered by external researchers rather than by the classroom teacher, so what is documented is not sustainable practice under normal conditions.
- e. A single case in one school does not support generalisation. Transferability must be judged by readers against their own settings.
 - a. Future work could address the most consequential of these directly. A sustained programme of eight to twelve weeks, delivered by the classroom teacher within school arrangements, with a documented baseline and a simple repeated measure of letter-sound knowledge and word reading, would permit claims this study cannot make while remaining feasible in an Indonesian primary school.

Conclusion

This study asked what remains of Teaching at the Right Level when its grouping mechanism is unavailable, as it is when a single child in a class is severely behind. The diagnostic principle transfers: instruction can begin from assessed ability rather than from grade level, and doing so is a reasonable response. The organisational mechanism does not transfer, and with it goes the connection to the evidence base that makes the approach attractive. Individualised level-matched remediation deserves its own name.

Across two cycles, the student's willingness to attempt reading and engagement with reading activities changed observably and was corroborated by the classroom teacher. Decoding skill did not change observably, which is what the intervention literature would predict from two sessions. Interest-linked and picture-supported

materials carried the engagement gain, but the same picture support that enabled word identification may defer the phonological decoding that unillustrated text requires.

The practical conclusion is that brief individualised support of this kind is best understood as an entry point rather than a remedy. It can restore a disengaged child's willingness to try, which is a genuine and necessary achievement. What follows must be sustained, explicit, and institutionally provided, because the child who has begun to try still cannot read.

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