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PROMOTING LEARNER ENGAGEMENT IN ENGLISH THROUGH TEACHING AT THE RIGHT LEVEL (TARL) AND INTERACTIVE MEDIA: A CLASSROOM ACTION RESEARCH

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ABSTRACT

This study addresses the low level of student interest in English learning among Grade VII-8 students at SMP Negeri 2 Kisaran by implementing the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in combination with interactive media. The primary challenge identified was students' lack of engagement, which contributed to reduced participation and suboptimal learning outcomes. Employing a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design over two cycles, the study followed the stages of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection. The participants consisted of 32 students, with data collected through observation, documentation, and learning outcome tests. Results demonstrated a positive impact on both student interest and academic performance. Notably, the proportion of students in the "very good" performance category (scores 90–100) increased from 0% to 6.6%, and those in the "good" category (80–89) rose from 6.6% to 26.7%. Concurrently, the number of students in the "poor" category (below 75) decreased from 55.7% to 41.4%. Observations also indicated improved classroom participation, enthusiasm, and involvement in discussions. While these findings suggest that the TaRL approach and interactive media can enhance student engagement and outcomes, further research employing statistical analysis is recommended to confirm the significance of these improvements.

Keyword : *Learning interest, teaching at the right level, interactive media*

INTRODUCTION

In the face of global challenges in the 21st century, education is expected not only to provide knowledge but also to equip learners with critical thinking, creativity, collaboration, and communication skills (Zhou et al., 2022). These competencies, often referred to as the 4Cs, have become central to modern educational paradigms. In response to these demands, the role of teachers has shifted significantly—from knowledge transmitters to learning facilitators—who must design learning experiences that are active, responsive, and student-

centered. A key aspect of this transformation is the recognition that effective learning must be tailored to students' actual abilities, not merely their age or formal grade level.

One approach that embodies this principle is *Teaching at the Right Level* (TaRL), which originated as an intervention to address foundational learning gaps in developing countries. TaRL focuses on grouping students according to their actual skill level based on diagnostic assessments and then providing instruction suited to their needs, rather than relying on grade-based grouping. Evidence from large-scale implementations in India and Africa shows that TaRL significantly improves students' literacy and numeracy outcomes, particularly in low-resource educational contexts (J-PAL, 2022). This model enables more equitable and effective learning, as it directly addresses the mismatch between curricular expectations and learners' actual capabilities.

Although TaRL was originally applied to foundational subjects like reading and mathematics, its principles have also been found relevant in language education. According to Rahmayanti, Hadi, and Suryanti (2023), the TaRL framework allows teachers to adjust English instruction based on students' language proficiency, including vocabulary knowledge and structural understanding. Such adaptation extends not only to instructional content but also to the selection of delivery strategies and learning media, which are crucial for maintaining learner motivation.

In parallel with instructional adaptation, the integration of interactive media has gained traction as a strategy to enhance student interest and engagement. Research by Ning et al. (2022) emphasizes that educational technologies—especially in the form of "serious games" and e-learning platforms—can significantly increase learner motivation and comprehension. Similarly, Ul Haq (2023) found that Augmented Reality (AR)-based media contributed to higher levels of enthusiasm and achievement in English language classrooms. Interactive media, such as educational videos, PowerPoint games, and digital platforms like Wordwall, are known to create enjoyable and meaningful learning environments that encourage student participation and deeper learning (Innab & Alqahtani, 2022; Amelia & Handayani, 2022).

Despite the proven potential of both the TaRL approach and interactive media, their combined application in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) instruction remains underexplored, particularly at the lower secondary level. Preliminary observations at SMP Negeri 2 Kisaran revealed that many seventh-grade students exhibited low interest in English learning, as shown by minimal classroom participation, low responsiveness, and poor

academic performance. These findings suggest a significant gap between pedagogical approaches currently used and the needs of students with diverse ability levels.

Existing studies have separately highlighted the benefits of differentiated instruction (via TaRL) and digital media in enhancing motivation and learning outcomes. However, there is limited empirical evidence on how these two strategies can be integrated effectively in EFL contexts to address student disengagement. This gap underlines the need for classroom-based research that combines TaRL and interactive media to develop more adaptive and engaging instructional models.

Therefore, this study aims to investigate the effectiveness of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach combined with the use of interactive media in enhancing students' interest and learning outcomes in English. Conducted as a Classroom Action Research (CAR) project in a Grade VII classroom at SMP Negeri 2 Kisaran, this study seeks to contribute to the growing body of literature on differentiated and technology-enhanced language instruction, particularly in underrepresented educational contexts.

METHOD

This study applies the Classroom Action Research (CAR) approach as a method to solve problems that arise in the learning process. Classroom action research is an approach that focuses on efforts to improve learning practices continuously through real actions in the classroom.

The subjects in this study were 32 students in grades VII-8 of SMP Negeri 2 Kisaran. This research was conducted from March to April 2025, in the even semester of the 2024/2025 academic year. Before the research was conducted, the researcher had obtained approval from the school and. The entire research process follows ethical principles, including maintaining the confidentiality of participant identities and ensuring that participation is voluntary.

The CAR design in this study refers to the Kurt Lewin model, which consists of four stages, namely: Planning, Acting, Observing, Reflecting. The cycle of classroom action research activities according to Kurt Lewin's strategy can be explained as follows:

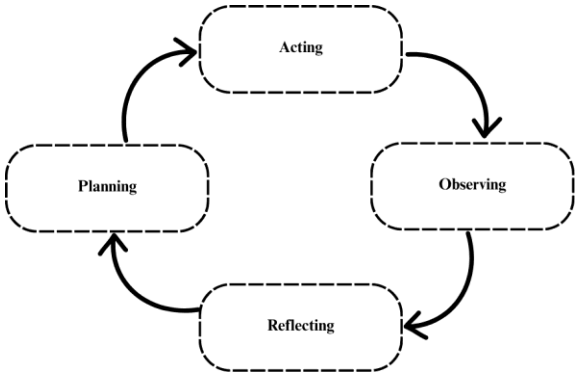

Figure 1: Kurt Levin Research Model

This research was conducted in two cycles, and at the end of each cycle students were given a learning outcome test as the main research instrument. This test is compiled based on learning achievement indicators and has gone through a validation process filled out by two English education experts. The validation results show that the questions are in accordance with the material and learning objectives. The test was also tested for reliability using Cronbach's Alpha with a result of $\alpha = 0.81$, which indicates high reliability.

Student learning outcome data were analyzed using descriptive statistics and the normalized gain formula (N-Gain), to determine the effectiveness of learning on improving student understanding. The N-Gain formula is as follows:

$$N - Gain = \frac{post\ test\ score - pre\ test\ score}{maximum\ score - pre\ test\ score} + \cdots$$

Interpretation of the N-Gain results refers to the Hake (1999) criteria, namely:

- High if N-Gain> 0.7
- Moderate if 0.3 < N-Gain ≤ 0.7
- Low if N-Gain ≤ 0.3

The results of this analysis are used to strengthen the effectiveness of the application of the TaRL approach and interactive media in improving student learning outcomes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

a. Pre-cycle

Before the study was conducted, English learning in grades VII-8 of SMP Negeri 2 Kisaran showed that most students were less enthusiastic and had difficulty understanding the material. The results of the initial test showed that only 6 out of 32 students (18.75%) achieved the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM), with an average class score of 35. This indicates the need for a more adaptive learning approach to students' ability levels.

b. Cycle 1

In cycle 1, it was carried out in three meetings. Before carrying out the research action, the author prepared all the research requirements, such as a learning plan using the problem-based learning (PBL) model, teaching materials, LKPD, and research instruments in the form of learning outcome tests. The learning material raised was the My Class Schedule material where in the first meeting there were two learning objectives, namely:

1) By using the Problem-Based Learning learning model, students can analyze information from the lesson schedule table correctly.
2) By using the Problem-Based Learning learning model, students can make their lesson schedules at school in English correctly and neatly.

The implementation of the action was carried out in cycle I, which consisted of two meetings. The first meeting was held on March 25, 2025, and the second meeting was held on April 8, 2025. The test results showed the highest score was 87 and the lowest score was 15. The average score increased to 35, and the number of students who completed remained at 6 people. The completion category can be seen in Table 1.

Table 1: Categories of Learning Outcome Values in Cycle I

Category	Interval Value	percentage Value
Very good	90 – 100	0%
Good	80 – 89	6,6%
Quite good	75 – 79	37,7%
Poor	< 75	55,7%

(Source: *Data Analysis Results)*

Reflection was conducted to improve classroom actions in the next cycle. The results of the reflection were that during the implementation of learning that was lacking due to students being late to return to class after break time and being constrained by

learning media in the form of LCD. As an improvement for the next cycle, researchers should make an agreement with students to return to class on time and prepare learning tools and materials earlier so that the learning process runs effectively.

c. Cycle 2

In cycle 2 there were two meetings. Before carrying out the research action, the author prepared all the research requirements, such as a learning plan using the Problem-Based Learning model, teaching materials, LKPD, and research instruments in the form of learning outcome tests, the author also prepared interactive teaching media, namely PowerPoint and wordwall. The learning material raised was the My Class Schedule material where in the first meeting there was one learning objective, namely: (1) By using the Problem-Based Learning learning model, students were able to analyze information from the lesson schedule table correctly. In the second meeting, there was one learning objective achieved, namely: (1) By using the Problem-Based Learning learning model, students can make their lesson schedules at school in English correctly and neatly. The implementation of the action was carried out in cycle 2, which consisted of two meetings. The first meeting was held on April 15, 2025, and the second meeting was held on April 22, 2025. In the implementation of the study still refers to the syntax of the learning model used. It can be explained that in cycle 2 the average value increased significantly: the average class value became 55, with 18 students (56%) reaching KKM. The highest value reached 100 and the lowest value increased to 40.

Table 2: Categories of Learning Outcome Values in Cycle II

Category	Interval Value	Percentage Value
Very good	90 – 100	6,6%
Good	80 – 89	26,7%
Quite good	75 – 79	25,3%
Poor	< 75	41,4%

(Source: *Data Analysis Results)*

It can be seen in the table above that out of 32 students, 18 students have achieved minimal completion. Reflection on cycle 2 where students are more interested in interactive learning media. So it is necessary to have continuous innovation related to the use of interactive media in each material.

d. N-Gain Analysis

To measure the effectiveness of the intervention, N-Gain analysis was used with the formula:

$$N - Gain = \frac{post\ test\ score - pre\ test\ score}{maximum\ score - pre\ test\ score} + \cdots$$

The average N-Gain result was 0.31, which is included in the moderate category (Hake, 1999). This shows that the approach applied has a positive impact on improving student learning outcomes, although it is not yet optimal.

Discussion

The findings from this classroom action research confirm that the integration of the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach with interactive media positively influences students' interest and achievement in English learning. The improvement in student performance from Cycle I to Cycle II, particularly in the increase of students reaching the "good" and "very good" achievement categories, suggests that instruction aligned with students' actual ability levels is more effective than grade-based teaching. This result reinforces the importance of learner-centered differentiation, especially for students with diverse initial competencies.

The results are in line with Tomlinson's Differentiated Instruction theory (2014), which emphasizes the need to tailor content, process, and product based on students' readiness, interests, and learning profiles. In this study, grouping students according to their real proficiency levels and adjusting materials accordingly allowed more targeted instruction, reducing cognitive overload and enabling students to process language input more effectively. Furthermore, the flexible pacing and repetition embedded in the TaRL structure ensured that lower-performing students received sufficient support before progressing to more complex material.

The incorporation of interactive media played a key role in increasing students' affective engagement. According to Mayer's Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (2005), learning is enhanced when information is presented using both verbal and visual channels, as it helps reduce extraneous load and improves retention. In this study, visual elements such as animations, pictures, and interactive digital games contributed to a more stimulating learning environment, which, as evidenced by student feedback, made the content easier to understand and more enjoyable. One student remarked, "I understand more easily because the material is

adjusted to my abilities," while another noted, "Learning is fun because there are games and pictures," illustrating both cognitive and emotional engagement.

The findings also echo Fredricks et al. (2004), who conceptualize student engagement as a multidimensional construct involving behavioral, emotional, and cognitive dimensions. The observed increase in student participation, willingness to respond in class, and visible enthusiasm suggests that the intervention addressed all three domains. When learning activities are perceived as meaningful and appropriately challenging, students are more likely to invest effort and persist in learning tasks.

Nevertheless, several limitations should be acknowledged. While descriptive data indicate improved outcomes, this study did not apply inferential statistical analyses (e.g., t-tests or effect size measures), which limits the ability to generalize the significance of the findings. Additionally, while qualitative feedback from students was documented, a more systematic coding and thematic analysis would have provided deeper insights into learner perceptions and attitudes. The study was also limited to a single class with a small sample size, which affects the external validity of the results.

Despite these limitations, the study offers important pedagogical implications. The combined use of leveled instruction and interactive digital tools shows promise in making English learning more inclusive and engaging, particularly in contexts where students exhibit varied levels of readiness. Future research should consider expanding the scale of implementation, incorporating mixed-methods designs, and evaluating the long-term effects of TaRL-integrated media on different language skills, including speaking and listening. Such approaches will provide a more comprehensive understanding of how differentiated, technology-enhanced instruction can be institutionalized in EFL classrooms.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Based on the findings from two cycles of classroom action research, this study concludes that implementing the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) approach in combination with interactive media, such as PowerPoint and Wordwall, effectively enhances Grade VII students' interest and understanding in English learning. By aligning instruction with students' actual proficiency levels, the TaRL approach facilitates differentiated learning that is responsive to individual needs, as evidenced by improvements in average scores (from 35 to 55), completion rates (from 19% to 56%), and a moderate N-Gain score of 0.31. Despite these promising outcomes, the study's scope was limited by the small sample size, single-

class setting, short duration, and the absence of a control group and qualitative instruments. These constraints suggest that further research employing quasi-experimental designs with larger and more diverse populations, as well as mixed-methods approaches, is necessary to validate and deepen the understanding of TaRL's effectiveness. Practically, the findings highlight the importance of student-level diagnostic mapping and the integration of engaging digital media to foster motivation and active participation. It is also recommended that teacher professional development programs and educational policy initiatives support the adoption of adaptive, level-based instructional models like TaRL across various subjects and educational levels to enhance instructional quality and student learning outcomes.

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