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Improving Students' Skills in Reading the English Alphabet and Building Confidence through English Camp-Based Learning Activities

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Abstract

This research looks at the implementation of an English Camp program at Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School and its efficacy in boosting students' self-assurance and capacity to read the English alphabet. The study employed a descriptive qualitative methodology and included 39 pupils' little self-assurance in their ability to read or speak English. Through organized activities like alphabet games, outdoor learning, introductions, and group-based instructional sessions, the English Camp lasted three days. Information was gathered through pre- and post-assessments, documentation, and observations. The results demonstrate a notable increase in pupils' proficiency in identifying alphabetic characters, pronouncing letter sounds correctly. Additionally, pupils showed an improvement in their self-assurance, less anxiety, and a higher desire to engage in reading and speaking activities. By integrating outdoor games and cooperative exercises, the English Camp's interactive and experiential learning method effectively improved basic literacy abilities and fostered a favorable affective learning atmosphere. Overall, the English Camp was a successful learning model for improving basic English literacy and boosting students' self-assurance in the setting of an Islamic boarding school.

Introduction

English Camp is one of the alternative ways for an educational institution to improve students' English skills. According to Mustakim and Ismail English Camp is an effective method to enhance students' speaking skills. Through this activity students are taught several materials that can improve English skills such as speaking skills, listening skills, reading skills, and writing skills. English camp will be a good activity that can effectively develop students' language learning. English camps provide a unique opportunity for participants to use English authentically. This activity provides a good opportunity for students to use English in several situations. In the learning process, English camp is commonly done outdoors to create a more diverse and fun learning atmosphere. English is taught through various activities, games, singing, etc. If students learn with games, have fun, feel happy and free, it means you have achieved the goal. In addition, games also strengthen language skills, students develop social skills and good relationships as they interact with each other, students can gain new knowledge and experience (Muthalib, A. (2025).

English language learning at the elementary level plays a crucial role as a foundation for developing students' literacy and language skills at subsequent levels of education (Jihad, 2025). One fundamental aspect of this learning is mastery of the English alphabet, which encompasses not only letter recognition but also phonics, combining letters into syllables, and reading simple words correctly. A good understanding of the alphabet better prepares students for advanced reading, vocabulary, and confidence in using

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English in both academic and everyday contexts (Nation, 2008). Studies show that systematic phonics instruction improves early reading performance and reduces pronunciation errors in young learners (Siddiq, M., et. Al 2024). English language learning at the elementary level plays a central role in building students' literacy foundations, particularly in the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL). One crucial early aspect is the ability to read the English alphabet. Mastery of the alphabet not only serves as the first step in recognizing letters but also lays the foundation for understanding the relationship between letters and their sounds (letter-sound correspondence), which is the core of early reading skills (Alsaad, 2021).

Recent research shows that a phonics approach and systematic letter recognition exercises can improve children's early reading skills, while minimize pronunciation errors and strengthen phonological awareness. This confirms that early literacy in English needs to be taught through methods that are not only informative but also interactive.

These limitations are not only caused by ability factors, but also by learning methods that still tend to be traditional. Much alphabet learning is done through rote memorization without varied practical activities, so students easily become bored and less actively engaged. Low motivation and self-confidence are additional obstacles. Students often feel afraid of making mistakes, embarrassed to speak in front of their peers, or anxious when reading new words. Affective factors such as these can significantly impact academic performance (Brown, 2001). Therefore, a learning approach is needed that not only develops cognitive competence but also fosters students' courage and self-confidence.

The Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School, which implements an intensive boarding school system, provides a significant opportunity to implement English Camp effectively. Close interaction among students, a structured schedule, and a shared atmosphere creates ideal conditions for experiential learning. Through activities such as alphabet games, phonics chanting, group spelling, and pair reading, students can learn the alphabet in a fun and meaningful way. Recent findings indicate that game-based alphabet learning and outdoor activities significantly increase student motivation, early literacy skills, and engagement (Alfajri, M. F. (2024). Furthermore, the collaborative approach and educational games help build students' confidence, making them more confident in reading and speaking in front of a group (Sari, 2023). Activities such as alphabet games, phonics chanting, group challenges, and peer reading help improve phonological awareness and increase self-confidence (Alfajri, 2024).

However, observations at various elementary educational institutions indicate that alphabet mastery remains a significant challenge for students, including those in Islamic boarding schools. This is also evident among students at the Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School, a boarding school where this community service and research activity was conducted. Despite its disciplined and structured learning system, most students have limited exposure to English because their primary focus is on religious knowledge, character development, and Islamic-based values. Consequently, basic skills such as alphabet recognition, letter pronunciation, and English reading fluency remain low.

Furthermore, alphabet learning is typically conducted using conventional methods such as lectures, memorization, and an emphasis on writing on the blackboard. This one-way approach quickly leads to students becoming bored, unmotivated, and reluctant to attempt independent reading. Low self-confidence further exacerbates these barriers.

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Many students, despite knowing certain letters, feel embarrassed or afraid of making mistakes when asked to read aloud in front of the class. This psychological factor is a crucial aspect that is often overlooked in elementary English learning. Yet, self-confidence is fundamental for students to confidently use language in various learning contexts (Fussalam, 2020).

Along with the development of learning innovations, English camps have emerged as an alternative learning model capable of addressing these issues. English camps are intensive activities that combine language learning with play activities, collaboration, educational competitions, and a fun learning environment. Previous research has shown that English camps can improve language skills, foster learning interest, and strengthen students' confidence in using English more actively (Mustakim & Ismail, 2018; Muthalib, 2025). The experiential learning approach used in English camps allows students to learn through direct practice, rather than simply theory.

This instructional approach is especially useful for Islamic boarding schools. The Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School offers a lot of opportunity for intensive language-based activities, like English camp, because students' learning activities are intensive from morning till night. The positive boarding atmosphere fosters group activities, encourages student collaboration, and establishes an enjoyable learning environment outside the classroom. Furthermore, community-based activities like alphabet games, singing, spelling games, group cheers, and peer mentoring practices are easier for students used to living in a community to adjust to.

English camp greatly contributes to emotional growth, especially self-assurance, in addition to enhancing alphabetic competence. This boost in confidence is especially important in the setting of the Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School since many students are reluctant to speak English in front of their peers. Students learn to perform, speak, and accept feedback in a pleasant, low-stress setting through activities such as self-introductions, group reading, simple contests, and mini-presentations.

Due to this urgency, this study and community service project was carried out at the Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School to see how English camp activities may increase alphabet reading skills and boost student self-assurance. The execution process for three days, the development of student skills both before and after the action, and an examination of the enabling elements that contribute to the program's success are the main topics of this study.

This verse emphasizes the importance of reading as a gateway to knowledge, aligning with efforts to improve students' alphabet reading skills and build their self-confidence through English Camp activities. Therefore, the implementation of English Camp at the Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School is not only relevant to modern pedagogical developments but also in harmony with Islamic values that emphasize the importance of learning, reading, and self-improvement.

Based on this background, this study aims to analyze how English Camp activities can improve English alphabet reading skills and build students' self-confidence at the Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School. This research is expected to make a significant contribution to the development of an effective, engaging, and appropriate English language learning model for the Islamic boarding school environment in Indonesia.

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Methods

Research Design

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to describe in depth how English Camp activities contributed to the development of students' English alphabet reading skills and self-confidence. A qualitative descriptive design was selected because it enables researchers to capture learning processes and behavioral changes as they naturally occur in the educational setting. In this study, the approach was used to explore students' development in letter recognition, basic phonics, reading confidence, participation, motivation, and social interaction throughout the English Camp. This was particularly relevant because the study focused not only on students' learning outcomes but also on the processes and experiences through which those changes occurred (Miles et al., 2020).

The study was conducted at Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School**,** located in Sapohiring Hamlet, Balassuka Village, Gowa Regency. The research involved 39 students who participated in a three-day English Camp program. The participants were selected because their initial English alphabet reading abilities were relatively limited. At the beginning of the program, several students experienced difficulties distinguishing English letter sounds, recognizing and pronouncing letters accurately, and reading or spelling simple words. In addition, some students demonstrated low confidence when they were asked to read or speak English in front of others. Therefore, the intensive and structured boarding-school environment provided an appropriate context for implementing English Camp activities designed to support both language development and confidence building (Fitria, 2021; Fitria, 2025).

Research Setting and Participants

The research was conducted over three consecutive days through an intensive English Camp program. The activities were organized in a structured sequence, beginning with basic letter recognition and pronunciation and progressing toward syllable reading, alphabet games, and confidence-building activities. The participants consisted of 39 students from Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School. All students participating in the English Camp were involved in the learning activities and observations.

The selection of the boarding-school setting was based on its potential to provide an intensive and supportive learning environment. Unlike conventional classroom instruction, English Camp provides opportunities for students to engage with English through repeated practice, games, group interaction, and communicative activities. Such an environment can encourage students to participate more actively and reduce anxiety when attempting to use English. Previous research has indicated that intensive and activity-based English learning can support students' language development and self-confidence (Fitria, 2021; Fitria, 2025).

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using observation, interviews, documentation, and pre- and post-tests. Observation was conducted throughout the three-day program to identify changes in students' alphabet recognition, basic phonics, reading performance, participation in learning activities, confidence, and collaborative interaction. Particular attention was given to students' willingness to pronounce letters, read syllables, respond to instructions, participate in games, and perform English tasks in front of their peers.

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Observation enabled the researchers to document behavioral and learning changes that might not be fully captured through test results alone (Azizah & Mahendra, 2025).

Interviews were also used to obtain information about students' learning experiences, difficulties, and perceptions of the English Camp activities. Documentation, including photographs, activity records, and students' learning products, was used to complement the observational and interview data. In addition, pre-tests and post-tests were administered to identify changes in students' basic alphabet reading abilities before and after participation in the English Camp. The combination of these techniques provided a more comprehensive description of students' cognitive, affective, and behavioral development during the program (Alsaad, 2021; Rahman & Ramadhani, 2022).

English Camp Learning Strategies

The English Camp activities were designed around experiential and activity-based learning strategies. The strategies emphasized direct participation, repeated practice, collaboration, games, and meaningful interaction rather than relying exclusively on conventional explanation. The learning activities focused on letter recognition, pronunciation, phonics, syllable reading, and simple English communication. By engaging students in hands-on activities, the program created opportunities for students to practice English repeatedly in a supportive and enjoyable environment.

Several activities were implemented to support alphabet reading development, including alphabet recognition exercises, pronunciation practice, syllable-reading activities, and educational alphabet games. The games were designed to encourage students to recognize letters, associate letters with their sounds, and practice pronunciation collaboratively. Collaborative activities also encouraged peer support, allowing students to learn from one another and become more comfortable using English. Previous studies have reported that educational games and collaborative learning can increase student engagement and support early English literacy development (Apoko & Yunus, 2023; Sari, 2024).

In addition to reading activities, specific strategies were implemented to strengthen students' self-confidence. These included English self-introductions, English Camp cheers, group activities, and mini-presentations. Students were encouraged to speak and perform in front of their peers in a supportive atmosphere. The activities were gradually structured from less demanding forms of participation toward more public speaking tasks so that students could develop confidence through repeated successful experiences. This strategy is consistent with findings that English Camp activities can contribute to increased students' confidence and willingness to use English (Fitria, 2025).

Data Analysis

The collected data were analyzed descriptively by comparing students' conditions and participation throughout the English Camp. Observation and interview data were examined to identify recurring patterns related to alphabet recognition, pronunciation, reading ability, confidence, participation, and interaction. Documentation was used to corroborate these findings, while the pre-test and post-test results were compared to identify observable changes in students' alphabet reading performance.

The analysis emphasized the learning process and changes observed during the three-day program, rather than focusing solely on numerical improvement. The qualitative findings were interpreted alongside the pre- and post-test results to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how the English Camp activities influenced students'

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English alphabet reading skills and self-confidence. Through this approach, the study sought to explain not only whether changes occurred but also how the instructional activities and learning environment contributed to those changes.

Flagship Program

The first flagship program is English Alphabet Mastery, which focuses on systematically improving mastery of the English alphabet. In this program, students are introduced to the letters of the alphabet and their sounds through chanting activities, and exercises to distinguish similar letter sounds. This approach is designed to help students understand the relationship between letters and sounds correctly, so they can read syllables and simple words independently. This activity is carried out through a fun method so that students do not feel burdened and more easily remember letters and their sounds. This program has been proven effective in increasing reading readiness in young learners, as demonstrated by various recent phonics-based literacy studies.

Confidence Building, which aims to build students' courage to perform, speak, and read in front of others. Activities include self-introduction practice, pair speaking, and English Camp cheerleading, which encourage students to use English more confidently. Students are trained to overcome shyness, fear of mistakes, and doubt that often arise when having to read or speak English. Through repetitive, structured, and supportive activities, this program helps students develop self-confidence gradually. Research shows that camp-based learning can significantly increase student self-confidence due to the more relaxed and enjoyable atmosphere.

Outdoor English Adventure, an outdoor English learning activity designed to create a more lively, free, and enjoyable learning environment. Students participate in activities such as reading simple instructions in English, and challenge-based group activities. Outdoor learning encourages students to be more physically active, improves concentration, and broadens their learning experience. This strategy also helps reduce anxiety and boosts self-confidence because students don't feel confined by a formal classroom setting. Research shows that outdoor learning can significantly improve early literacy and learning motivation, especially in early learners.

This program aims to help students master the correct recognition of the English alphabet, understand the relationship between letters and their sounds (phonics), and be able to read syllables and simple words independently as a foundation for English literacy skills. To foster students' courage in speaking and reading aloud in front of friends and teachers through various collaborative activities, educational games, and simple public assignments that are fun and stress-free.

English Camp provides a platform for students to actively learn through experiential learning, phonics games, group challenges, and outdoor activities, making learning more meaningful, less monotonous, and fostering interest in learning. Through activities integrated into the Islamic boarding school routine, students are trained to apply English through simple instructions, self-introductions, and informal communication, making English use a habit that continues to develop..

Results and Discussion

Observations and initial assessments showed that most participants had difficulty recognizing letters of the alphabet, distinguishing letter sounds, and reading simple syllables. In the pre-test, only about 28% of students were able to read letters correctly. Many students still mixed-up letters with similar shapes, such as b–d, m–n, and struggled

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to understand letter-sound correspondence. This finding aligns with previous findings that EFL learners at the elementary level experience early reading difficulties due to a lack of systematic phonics practice (Alsaad, 2021).

However, after attending the three-day English Camp, significant improvement was observed. The implementation of phonics-based instruction and intensive practice through chanting, phonics flashcards, and song-based alphabet activities helped students internalize letter sounds more quickly. In the post-test, 87% of students were able to correctly recognize all letters of the alphabet, while 73% were able to read simple syllables such as ba–be–bi–bo–bu and CVC word combinations (e.g., cat, pen, dog). This improvement demonstrates that the activity-based phonics method can improve early reading skills in a relatively short time, as confirmed by research by Rahman & Ramadhani (2022).

In addition to improving alphabet skills, students also showed significant growth in self-confidence. On the first day, many students appeared hesitant when asked to read aloud or introduce themselves in English. They tended to nod to another classmate to come forward, exhibiting common symptoms of shyness, fear of making mistakes, and linguistic anxiety often found in young learners (Sari, 2023).

However, throughout the activity, student participation continued to increase. Activities such as self-introduction practice, mini-presentations, English Camp cheers, and group games successfully made students feel comfortable and confident in performing. By the third day, more than 80% of students voluntarily appeared in front of the class to read letters, spell short words, or introduce themselves. This positive change occurred because the learning took place in a non-formal, fun, and pressure-free atmosphere, as suggested by Fitria (2021) who stated that a relaxed learning environment can significantly improve speaking confidence.

Observational data shows that English Camp encourages higher student engagement than conventional learning. Game-based activities such as the Alphabet Treasure Hunt, Alphabet Relay, Mini Spelling Bee, and Phonics Puzzle Games encourage students to be more active, collaborative, and enthusiastic about participating. Initially quiet students become more communicative and often provide spontaneous responses in English, even if they are still simple.

This active engagement demonstrates that experiential learning strategies can increase motivation and focus, as supported by research by Ariffin & Yunus (2020), which demonstrated that game-based learning effectively increases students' alphabet mastery and enthusiasm for learning to read.

Students' improved alphabet mastery demonstrates that the phonics approach is a highly effective method for early literacy learning. The implementation of hands-on, activity-based phonics chanting, letter sound repetition, phonics games, and interactive drilling helps students connect letters with their sounds more quickly. Alsaad (2021) emphasized that systematic phonics instruction can reduce pronunciation errors and strengthen early reading skills. This was evident in this study, where students who previously mis differentiated letters with similar shapes were now able to read more accurately.

Research findings indicate that English Camp significantly impacts students' affective aspects, particularly self-confidence. Barriers caused by shyness, anxiety, and fear of mistakes can be minimized through fun activities, positive competition, and small-group interactions. A relaxed learning environment makes students more comfortable taking

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linguistic risks, a crucial step in foreign language acquisition. This aligns with research by Fitria (2021) and Sari (2023), which confirms that an experiential approach can significantly improve students' self-esteem and speaking confidence.

Outdoor activities like the Alphabet Treasure Hunt and the Outdoor Reading Challenge provide a different learning experience than traditional classrooms. Students are freer to move, express themselves, and feel less pressured. Outdoor learning has been shown to improve concentration and make it easier for students to absorb new material (Rahman & Ramadhani, 2022). This explains why students appear more enthusiastic and actively engaged during English Camp.



Figure 1. English camp teaching program

Evaluation and Monitoring Stages

The evaluation and monitoring stages in the English Camp activity at Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School were carried out systematically to ensure that the program effectively improved students' English alphabet reading skills and self-confidence. In the initial stage, a preliminary evaluation was conducted through a pre-test aimed at mapping students' baseline abilities. In this phase, students were asked to read the alphabet letters one by one and distinguish several basic letter sounds. Initial observations were also conducted to assess students' affective conditions, such as their willingness to speak, their reactions when asked to read, and signs of linguistic anxiety. The results of the pre-test and initial observations provided an overview of the students' challenges and helped determine the most relevant learning approach to be applied during the English Camp.

During the implementation of the program, daily monitoring was conducted to observe students' progress directly. The researcher recorded the extent to which students were able to alphabet chanting, and educational games designed to strengthen their recognition of letters and their sounds. This monitoring assessed changes in students' cognitive abilities, including increased accuracy in identifying letters and pronouncing sounds that were previously incorrect. Affective aspects were also monitored, such as the growth of students' confidence in reading aloud in front of the group and their willingness to attempt pronouncing new English words.

The monitoring process also included observing students' participation in group activities such as outdoor alphabet games, mini-presentations, and self-introduction practice. Observations regarding participation showed that experiential learning and

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game-based activities successfully encouraged initially passive students to become more enthusiastic and willing to take risks. Documentation in the form of photos, videos, and field notes was collected to record the process and progress of each student, enabling the researcher to analyze the changes more comprehensively.

After the English Camp program concluded, a final evaluation was conducted through a post-test to measure improvements in students' alphabet reading skills and phonics understanding. Students were again asked to read alphabet letters and simple syllables to identify the extent of improvement compared to the pre-test. The results showed significant progress, both in letter recognition accuracy and fluency in reading basic syllables. In addition, an affective evaluation was carried out to observe changes in students' confidence, such as their willingness to speak, read aloud in front of peers, and demonstrate initiative to participate.

Follow-up monitoring was conducted after the program ended by involving the teachers at the Islamic boarding school, who continue to interact with the students daily. The teachers were guided to reinforce the learning outcomes of the English Camp through simple routines such as daily phonics chanting, practicing reading simple words, and allowing students to regularly perform short English introductions. This approach is essential to ensure that the skills students gained during the program are not lost, especially among students who previously had low self-confidence.

The evaluation and monitoring stages were then followed by the preparation of recommendations as part of the program's further development. Based on the evaluation results, recommendations included extending the duration of the English Camp, enriching the variety of game-based activities to increase student enthusiasm and confidence-building strategies for young learners. With comprehensive evaluation and monitoring stages, the English Camp program not only produced short-term outcomes but also served as a sustainable learning model that can be further developed in Islamic boarding schools to strengthen English literacy among elementary-level students.

Conclusion

The English Camp course at Darul Arqam Muhammadiyah Balassuka Islamic Boarding School was successful in increasing students' reading proficiency with the English alphabet and raising their self-esteem. According to pre-test and post-test data, students made considerable gains in letter recognition, phonics comprehension, and syllable reading fluency. In addition to fostering positive emotional shifts, the program helped students become more receptive to expressing themselves, presenting themselves, and engaging in group activities. Students were more motivated and experienced less learning anxiety due to the use of experiential learning, fun games, and a laid-back camp environment.

The program's success was also aided by the helpful boarding school atmosphere, since the organized and demanding environment allowed students to rehearse constantly for three days. The English Camp, overall, improved students' basic English literacy and boosted their confidence, a crucial quality for their future education.

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