

Literacy Habituation as a Strategy for Developing Early Reading Skills: A Qualitative Case Study in Kindergarten Education

Ismujasih¹, Zulkarnaen²

Early Childhood Education Teacher Education, Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta

A520241027@student.ums.ac.id, zul193@ums.ac.id

Abstract

Reading skills as an element of early childhood basic literacy remain a challenge in Indonesia, primarily because most previous studies have emphasized the use of specific learning media, rather than routine and contextual literacy habits as a strategy to improve reading skills. To address this gap, this study aims to describe the implementation of literacy habits through the Kawal Pagi program and its contribution to early childhood reading skills. This study used a qualitative approach with a case study design at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga. The research subjects consisted of 36 children from group B, two teachers, one principal, and six parents. Data were collected through participant observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation, then analyzed using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña model through a process of reduction, presentation, and conclusion drawing. The findings indicate that daily literacy habits have a significant impact on the development of early reading skills. A total of 91.7% of children were able to recognize letters, 86.1% demonstrated phonemic awareness, 83.3% understood letter-sound relationships, and 75% were able to read simple words. Furthermore, 97.2% of children demonstrated an increased interest in reading, demonstrated through independent book selection and initiatives to interact with texts in their surroundings. The effectiveness of this activity was supported by the teacher's role as a facilitator, a text-rich classroom environment, and parental involvement. This research highlights the importance of literacy habituation as an alternative strategy to strengthen early childhood reading skills that does not rely on a single medium, but rather through natural and enjoyable routines. The implementation of the Kawal Pagi program can be recommended for early childhood education institutions as a model for strengthening a culture of literacy, with the caveat that there is a need to develop a variety of activities, provide a wider variety of reading materials, and increase parental participation to optimize learning outcomes.

Keywords: early childhood, early literacy, literacy habits, early reading, kawal pagi

Introduction Section

Literacy skills, especially reading, are the main foundation for the development of children's intellectual and social potential from an early age. At this stage, children are sensitive to language simulations, symbols and written forms, which form the basis for future academic abilities. Data from the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 shows that the reading literacy skills of Indonesian students are still below the OECD average, with a score of 359, far below the international average of 487 (OECD). This low achievement indicates that basic literacy skills have not developed optimally since the Early Childhood Education (PAUD) level.

This condition is reinforced by a report from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research and Technology (Kemendikbudristek, 2023), which shows that around 32% of children aged 5-6 years are not yet able to recognise vowels and consonants correctly, and only 48% are able to read simple texts before entering primary school. This fact emphasises the importance of developing early literacy skills (emergent literacy) from preschool age to prepare children for the formal stage of learning to read.

In the context of early childhood education, early literacy is not interpreted as teaching reading academically, but rather as a natural process in which children learn symbols, sounds, and the meaning of words through meaningful play activities (Ganarsih, 2022). This approach is in line with Marie Clay's *Emergent Literacy* theory, which states that literacy develops gradually through social interaction and an environment rich in written language. Enjoyable literacy learning can foster children's intrinsic motivation to read and write (Sari & Widyasari, 2022).

Previous studies have examined strategies for developing early literacy in young children. Rahayu & Wardhani (2023) found that the use of picture-word cards effectively improved children's early reading skills. Putra & Astuti (2023) showed that literacy posters helped children understand the relationship between sounds and letters. Astuti & Artikel (2022) proved that the use of *loose parts* can stimulate creativity and literacy. Sa'adiyah et al. (2023) reported that letter ball games increase the reading interest of children in group B. Dinda Suci et al. (2024) developed a *Construct 2-based* digital educational *game* as an interactive medium for letter recognition, while Agustina (2024) proved the effectiveness of flannel boards in improving children's early reading skills.

Various studies have attempted to offer strategies for improving early reading skills in young children, particularly through the use of learning media such as syllable cards, literacy posters, interactive digital media, loose-leaf pages, and flannel boards. These findings provide important contributions, particularly in developing phonemic skills, letter recognition, and simple word reading. However, previous research tends to focus on the effectiveness of specific media within a relatively limited learning period. Literacy in these studies is presented as a tool-based intervention, rather than as a daily experience that grows repeatedly and creates long-term habits.

This is where the research gap becomes clear. To date, studies on early childhood literacy have rarely explored how literacy habits—rather than a single learning medium—can become a systematic strategy for developing early reading skills. Few studies have examined literacy as part of a daily routine integrated into play, social interactions, and text-rich environments. Yet, literacy develops not only through learning aids but also through a consistent, interactive, and meaningful habituation process.

Based on this gap, this study offers a new perspective by exploring Kawal Pagi as a form of literacy habituation at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga. This program does not rely on a single type of learning media, but rather positions literacy as a daily activity through simple practices such as reading storybooks, recognizing letters, observing writing in the surrounding environment, and discussing reading in a fun atmosphere. With this approach, literacy is understood not as a formally taught academic skill, but as a reading behavior that is formed naturally through habits and direct experience.

Theoretically, this study is based on the synergy between Lev Vygotsky's *Zone of Proximal Development* (ZPD) theory, which emphasises the importance of the teacher's role as a facilitator and provider of *scaffolding* in social interactions, and Marie Clay's *Emergent Literacy* theory, which asserts that literacy develops through rich and natural language experiences.

This study aims to understand how literacy habits are implemented in the Kawal Pagi program and how they contribute to the development of early childhood reading skills. These findings are expected to enrich the body of early childhood literacy research by demonstrating that reading skills can develop progressively through consistent daily practice and do not have to rely on a single media intervention.

Research method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a case study design to gain an in-depth understanding of the implementation and results of *the Kawal (Early Literacy) Morning* programme in improving the reading skills of early childhood students at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga. According to Creswell and Poth (2018), case studies allow researchers to explore educational phenomena contextually and comprehensively. The case studied was the low level of early literacy readiness among early childhood, which was addressed through the implementation of the *Kawal Pagi* programme as a strategy for early literacy familiarisation that is enjoyable and appropriate to the characteristics of child development.

The study was conducted at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga, an institution under the leadership of 'Aisiyiah Salatiga City, Central Java. The location was chosen purposively because it had routinely implemented the *Kawal Pagi* activity and was in line with the focus of the study. The research subjects consisted of 36 children in group B (aged 5–6 years), two classroom teachers, one principal, and six parents. Informants were selected using purposive sampling based on their direct involvement and in-depth understanding of the *Kawal Pagi* activity (Sugiyono, 2021).

The research data consists of primary data (results of observations, interviews, and documentation) and secondary data (lesson plans, development records, and photos of activities). Data collection techniques include participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted to observe children's behaviour in *Kawal Pagi* activities, interviews were conducted to explore the views of teachers, principals, and parents, while documentation was used as supplementary evidence and data verification.

The indicators of early childhood reading ability refer to *the Child Development Achievement Level Standards (STPPA)* in Permendikbud No. 137 of 2014 and Clay's (1991) *Emergent Literacy* theory, as presented in the following table:

Aspects of Early Reading Ability	Operational Indicators
Letter Recognition	Recognising and naming vowels and consonants
Phonemic Awareness	Identifying the initial sound of a word and grouping words based on sound
Letter-Sound Relationship	Connecting letters with their corresponding Sounds
Reading simple words	Reading one's own name or two to three Syllables
Interest and motivation in reading	Demonstrating enthusiasm and choosing one's own reading materials

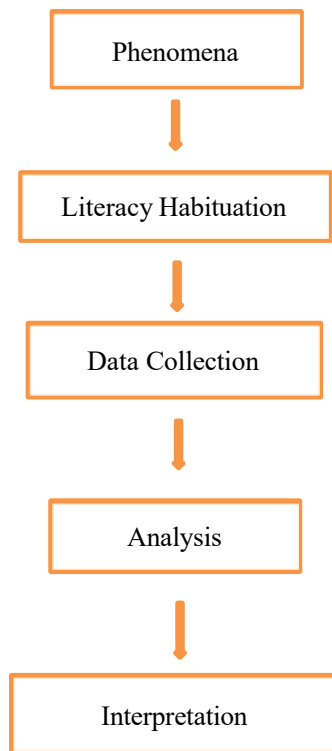
Observation sheets were specifically designed to cover aspects such as letter recognition (recognizing vowels and consonants), phonemic awareness (initial sounds of words), letter-sound relationships, reading simple words (own names or 2-3 syllable words), and reading interest (enthusiasm in choosing reading materials). Semi-structured interview guides and documentation instruments (such as RPPH, anecdotal notes, activity photos) were designed to complement the participatory observations, focusing on exploring the implementation of the morning guard program at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga.

Instrument validation was conducted through triangulation of techniques and sources, as per Patton (2015). This involved comparing data from observations, interviews, and documentation, and verifying data between informants via member checking to ensure consistency. Operational indicators on the observation sheets were validated using teachers' anecdotal notes that measure individual child development on an ongoing basis. The interview guides were adjusted based on purposive sampling of

informants (teachers, principals, and parents) directly involved. The documentation instruments served as supplementary evidence and were validated through simultaneous analysis using the Miles, Huberman, and Saldana model (2014).

The instrument is aligned with a conceptual framework that integrates Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theory (the role of teacher scaffolding) and Clay's Emergent Literacy (the natural development of literacy through interaction). Each observation indicator reflects emergent literacy, such as phonemic awareness supporting letter symbol recognition in daily routines, while interviews explore supporting factors such as teacher commitment and a text-rich environment. Documentation captures contextual evidence such as photographs of morning guard activities, ensuring methodological rigor in a qualitative case study targeting reading improvement (letter recognition and simple reading).

Conceptually, the research model illustrates the logical relationship between phenomena, programmes, research processes, and conceptual outcomes, as follows:



Results and discussion

Research Findings

This study describes the implementation of literacy habits at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga and its impact on the development of reading skills in early childhood. The findings were obtained through observation, interviews and documentation conducted repeatedly during routine literacy activities in the morning literacy programme. Based on data analysis, three main focuses were identified, namely (1) the form of literacy habit formation implementation, (2) the development of children's reading skills, and (3) the supporting and inhibiting factors of the activity implementation.

1. Forms of Literacy Habit Formation

Literacy habits at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga are implemented routinely every morning before teaching and learning activities begin. These activities last for 20-30 minutes and are part of the children's daily routine. Teachers prepare various simple literacy activities such as reading letter cards, playing the letter wheel game, reading children's story books, recognising the names of objects in the classroom environment, and discussing the content of the pictures or stories read.

These activities are designed to be fun and interactive. Teachers act as facilitators who provide scaffolding or step-by-step guidance to children. For example, when children have difficulty pronouncing letters, teachers give verbal or visual cues while encouraging children to imitate them. Literacy activities are also linked to everyday experiences, such as recognising their own names, labels of objects in the classroom, or simple words that are used.

The results of the observation show that these activities not only familiarise children with interacting with text, but also foster curiosity and excitement about reading activities. Teachers consistently use verbal praise (Good, you can read your friend's name) to foster children's intrinsic motivation.

2. Development of Children's Reading Skills

The implementation of literacy habits has a positive impact on the development of children's reading skills. Based on the results of observations and teachers' notes, most children show consistent improvement in the following aspects:

Table of development of early reading skills of early childhood in the morning guard program

Aspects of Early Reading Skills	Observed Development	Percentage of Children Developing
Letter Recognition	Children recognise almost all vowels and consonants correctly. Children can name letters shown by the teacher without assistance.	91.7% (33 children)
Phonemic Awareness	Children are able to identify the initial sounds of simple nouns such as "ball," "table," and "book."	86.1% (31 children)
Letter-Sound Relationship	Children begin to understand the relationship between letter symbols and their sounds. They are able to pronounce letters according to the symbols shown.	83.3% (30 children)
Reading Simple Words	More than 75% of children are able to read their own names, their friends' names, and two- to three- syllable words such as "book," "ball," and "flower."	75.0% (27 children)
Interest and Motivation in Reading	Children show high enthusiasm for literacy activities. They ask to reread storybooks and choose their own books from the classroom shelf.	97.2% (35 children)

These tables and figures are to clarify the findings and help provide an overview of the research. The table shows that the aspect with the highest achievement was reading interest (97.2%), indicating that daily literacy routines not only improve technical reading skills but also create engagement and intrinsic motivation in children. This aligns with the concept of Emergent Literacy, which emphasizes

that affective engagement is the foundation of early literacy development. The high percentages of letter recognition (91.7%) and phonemic recognition (86.1%) reinforce the ZPD framework, which states that consistent literacy stimuli with gradual scaffolding enable children to move from dependence to independence in reading.

However, achievement in simple word reading was lower (75%), indicating that the transition from letter recognition to word decoding takes longer. This means that literacy habits are effective as a foundation, but require further reinforcement at the letter-to-word transition stage. Overall, this table shows that habitual literacy exposure improves basic reading skills, with the strongest improvement in reading motivation, followed by letter recognition and phonemic recognition.

3. Supporting and Hindering Factors

The implementation of literacy habits at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga has been effective due to the support of teachers, the school, and a learning environment that supports children's reading activities. Supporting factors include the high commitment of teachers in carrying out literacy activities regularly and enjoyably. The classroom environment is rich in literacy, with reading corners, letter cards and picture media. In addition, there is support from the school and involvement from parents, who provide reading materials and accompany their children while reading at home, as well as enjoyable activities so that children learn to read through play and stories without pressure.

The inhibiting factors include differences in children's abilities, which require teachers to provide individual assistance, and limited reading media, resulting in less than optimal activity variety. In addition, parental participation is not yet widespread, and the implementation time is limited to only about 20-30 minutes per day.

Nevertheless, teachers strive to overcome these challenges through creativity, collaboration with parents, and adapting activities to children's needs.

The research findings revealed three main findings, namely:

1. Literacy habits build the foundation for children's reading. Children learn to recognise letters, sounds and words through fun routine activities rather than formal teaching.
2. The role of teachers is very important. Teachers act as facilitators who provide gradual guidance (scaffolding) so that children are able to read independently.
3. Literacy becomes part of children's daily routine. Activities such as reading, singing and playing with letters are carried out every day so that children become accustomed to interacting with text.

The finding that routine literacy habits increased phonemic awareness (86.1%) aligns with Rahayu Wardhani (2023), who reported the effectiveness of illustrated syllable cards, and Putra & Astuti (2023) on poster media, as both emphasized letter recognition through repetitive activities. However, the results of this study challenge the specific media focus of Saadiyah et al. (2023) and Dinda Suci et al. (2024), who relied on letter balls or digital games, because morning guard was integrated into the routine without special tools, resulting in higher motivation through scaffolding and various media.

Contradictions arise with Astuti (2022), who prioritized loose parts for creativity, while findings at ABA 5 Kindergarten showed loose parts were effective only as a complement (not the primary factor). This study expands knowledge by demonstrating a more inclusive contextual habituation for 36 children in Group B, differing from the small sample in Agustina (2024) with flannel boards, because it incorporates emergent literacy clay holistically (letters, sounds, and interests).

Overall, literacy habits have proven to be effective in improving early reading skills in young children, showing an interest in reading and strengthening a culture of literacy in both school and home environments.

Discussion

According to Jean Piaget's theory of cognitive development, children's development occurs through the process of constructing knowledge and understanding through experience. Early childhood is in the preoperational stage (2-7 years), where children begin to use symbols, pictures, and words to represent objects. In early literacy, children begin to recognise letters and words as symbols that represent specific meanings. At this stage, children begin to use symbols to represent objects, including language and writing. They begin to understand the relationship between sounds and letter symbols, known as phonological awareness. Based on Piaget's theory, literacy learning is adapted to the cognitive development stage of children and emphasises that early childhood learns to read through exploration of symbols, language and interaction with their environment. They begin to understand that writing is a symbol of spoken words, through reading picture books, using picture cards, interactive books, reading with teachers/parents, and letter-building games. Introducing letters in the morning utilises symbolic abilities, with letters understood as graphic representations of sounds. In addition, a consistent morning routine provides scheduled repetition that strengthens long-term memory.

Lev Vygotsky argued that learning occurs through social interaction and that children need help from adults to build knowledge and understanding of written language through interaction with adults. The concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) states that children can learn to read better with the guidance of adults or more skilled peers through reading together. A child with the help of a teacher who guides them through early literacy in the morning will help the child understand how to read properly and correctly. Similarly, scaffolding is a technique where teachers/adults provide gradual guidance, slowly reducing their assistance as the child becomes more independent. Initially, the teacher helps the child pronounce each word and points to the letters. Over time, the child will recognise patterns and be able to read independently. If the child has difficulty pronouncing a letter, the teacher provides verbal or visual cues while encouraging the child to imitate them.

In line with this, Marie Clay, in her theory of emergent literacy, states that literacy does not appear suddenly, but develops early on through children's interactions with their literacy environment, such as books, signs and writing around them, and develops gradually through everyday experiences such as listening to stories, watching parents read or scribbling on paper. Early literacy includes awareness of letter shapes, language sounds (phonemes) and word meanings. Clay emphasises that reading and writing do not develop separately, but are interrelated. Children who are frequently introduced to letters and words will find it easier to write and read. The environment plays a major role in the development of early literacy in children.

Thus, Piaget's theory provides a cognitive foundation for early childhood development, namely the ability to understand symbols and construct meaning through interactions with objects and texts. Meanwhile, Vygotsky emphasized that children's reading skills will improve when they receive guidance from teachers or more capable peers. Clay provides the perspective that literacy is a growth process, and the more frequently a child is exposed to text, the more rapidly reading maturity develops.

These three theories are not mutually exclusive but form a complementary framework. Piaget's developmental focus is cognitive as the basis for understanding letters and sound symbols. Vygotsky's focus is social through guidance to accelerate the reading process. Clay's focus is on the environment

and literacy habits that automate reading. This demonstrates that reading ability is not simply a result of cognitive maturity, but rather the interaction between a child's thought structure, social stimulation, and a strong literacy environment.

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Early reading skills are very important to be introduced from an early age because early reading is a cognitive process that involves recognising letters, symbols and sounds, which form the basis for understanding words and sentences and are the main foundation for a child's readiness to enter further levels (Dinda Suci et al., 2024).

Morning activities include:

1. Teachers read stories to children. Teachers communicate verbally with children so that they can expand their vocabulary. In addition, children also learn symbols in preparation for reading and writing. Teachers use storybooks chosen by the children.
2. Teachers encourage children to find letters, syllables and words to help them recognise letter symbols and name them. Activities can be packaged in the form of games. Teachers provide letter cards or use smart wheels.
3. Teachers use loose parts so that children can recognise letter symbols, syllables and words while developing their creativity. Teachers can prepare tools and materials such as letter or word cards to be imitated, for example, seeds, beads, buttons, pebbles and so on.
4. While waiting for their turn, the children flip through the pages of the "cool" book.

One form of receptive written language skill is reading, which enables a person to obtain a wealth of information, knowledge and experience. Reading skills are very important for the learning process of students. According to national standards for early childhood education, indicators of basic reading skills include recognising vowel and consonant symbols, distinguishing words with the same initial letters, distinguishing words with the same initial syllables, and combining syllables to form words (Rika Widhi Rahayu & Dwi Wardhani, 2023).

Strategies need to be implemented so that children perceive reading as an interesting and enjoyable activity using creative media appropriate to their development. One strategy that can be used to improve reading skills is through morning activities carried out routinely before teaching and learning activities, which are packaged using interesting, creative, and enjoyable learning media so that a productive and conducive learning environment is created without pressure or coercion, for example, through reading wheels, picture cards, storybooks, and so on.

Based on initial observations at ABA 5 Kindergarten in Salatiga, it was found that many children in Kindergarten B were still unfamiliar with letters and reading. Therefore, in order to improve reading skills, in addition to using strategies appropriate to their stage of development,

morning activities were also carried out regularly. Reading indicators include: letter recognition, phonemic awareness, the relationship between letters and sounds, reading simple words, and interest and motivation. The assessment methods used are observation and anecdotes. By directly observing children's ability to recognise letters and read simple words and recording their progress regularly. One of the benefits of this research is that educators will gain a better understanding of learning approaches and ideas so that they can apply learning methods that are appropriate for the developmental stage of children. In addition, educators can use fun learning approaches, learning through play so that it becomes meaningful play.

Conclusion

This research shows that literacy habits through the Kawal Pagi program play a significant role in improving early childhood reading skills. Findings show high achievement in reading interest (97.2%), followed by letter recognition (91.7%), phonemic awareness (86.1%), and letter-sound relationships (83.3%). Meanwhile, simple word reading (75%) still requires further stimulation to achieve optimal development.

The integration of Emergent Literacy (Clay) and Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) theories provides a framework that literacy develops through exposure, language experiences, and gradual support (scaffolding) until independence is achieved. Thus, the Kawal Pagi program not only develops technical reading skills but also forms positive dispositions and ingrained literacy habits from an early age. Overall, literacy habits have proven to be a comprehensive, natural, and sustainable approach to fostering the foundations of early literacy.

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