



The Effect of Guided Play on Early Literacy Skills in Muaro Jambi Kindergarten Children

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ABSTRACT

Early literacy is a critical foundation for young children's academic development that determines lifelong learning success. This research is motivated by the low early literacy ability of Group A children at TK Al-Azhar, Muaro Jambi Regency, indicated by limited letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary. This study aims to analyze the effect of the Guided Play strategy on early literacy abilities of Group A children at TK Al-Azhar, Muaro Jambi Regency. The method used is a quasi-experimental approach with a pretest-posttest nonequivalent control group design. The research sample comprised 40 children, consisting of 20 in the experimental group and 20 in the control group. The research instrument was an early literacy observation sheet with 20 indicators. Data analysis techniques included Shapiro-Wilk normality test, Levene's homogeneity test, and Paired Sample t-Test. The results showed a significant improvement in early literacy ability in the experimental group, with the pretest mean score of 44.75 increasing to 74.85 in the posttest. The Paired Sample t-Test yielded $t = -18.392$ with Sig. (2-tailed) = $0.000 < 0.05$. Therefore, H_0 is rejected and H_a is accepted, indicating that the Guided Play strategy significantly affects early literacy ability of Group A children at TK Al-Azhar, Muaro Jambi Regency. This study recommends the systematic application of the Guided Play strategy in literacy learning at the early childhood education level.

INTRODUCTION

Early literacy skills are one of the most fundamental developmental aspects that need to be stimulated from an early age. Early literacy encompasses the knowledge, skills, and attitudes acquired by children before they master formal reading and writing abilities (A. Elif Isik Uslu, et.al, 2022). Longitudinal studies have shown that literacy skills developed during the preschool years are strongly correlated with children's academic success at later educational levels (Jean Ecalle, et.al 2023). Children who possess a strong foundation in early literacy tend to learn conventional reading skills more easily, comprehend texts better, and participate actively in academic activities Dicataldo, Rowe % Roch, 2022). In other words, investment in early literacy represents one of the most efficient long-term investments within a national education system.

In Indonesia, attention to the development of early childhood literacy has increased alongside the implementation of various educational policies. Regulation of the Minister of Education and Culture No. 137 of 2014 concerning National Standards for Early Childhood Education (PAUD) emphasizes that language development, including components of early literacy, is one of the developmental areas that must be stimulated in young children. Nevertheless, the results of the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) 2022 indicate that Indonesia remains at a concerning level in reading proficiency, with an average score of 359 points, far below the OECD average of 476 points (OECD, 2023). This condition suggests that literacy problems in Indonesia have deep roots, one of which is the lack of high-quality literacy stimulation at the early childhood education level.

Early Childhood Education (PAUD) plays a strategic role in building children's literacy foundations. At the age of 4–5 years (Group A), children are in a sensitive period for language and literacy development. This period is known as a window of opportunity during which children's brains are highly plastic and responsive to environmental stimulation (Ecalle et al., 2023). Supraptiningsih et al. (2022), in their study conducted in West Java, found that young children who received high-quality literacy stimulation in PAUD demonstrated faster development of conventional reading skills compared to those who did not receive similar stimulation. Therefore, the selection of appropriate learning strategies at this stage is crucial in determining the quality of children's literacy development in the future.

One learning strategy that has gained significant attention over the last decade is Guided Play. Guided Play is defined as a learning approach that combines the characteristics of children's free play—namely intrinsic motivation, enjoyment, and active engagement—with pedagogical scaffolding designed by teachers to achieve specific learning objectives (Skene et al., 2022). Unlike direct instruction, which is top-down in nature, and free play, which is open-ended, Guided Play occupies a middle ground that enables children to learn meaningfully through guided exploration (Pyle et al., 2022). Research has shown that Guided Play is effective in improving various aspects of children's





cognitive and language development, including letter recognition, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary acquisition (Pyle et al., 2024).

Preliminary observations conducted by the researcher at Al-Azhar Kindergarten in Muaro Jambi Regency during September–October 2024 revealed that most Group A children still demonstrated early literacy skills categorized as Not Yet Developed (BB) to Beginning to Develop (MB). Of the 40 children observed, approximately 65% were unable to recognize letters correctly, 72% had not yet demonstrated adequate phonemic awareness, and 60% possessed limited vocabulary. This condition was exacerbated by learning approaches that were still dominated by conventional methods such as memorization and worksheets, which provided limited opportunities for children to learn through meaningful experiences. Teachers were also not accustomed to using guided play strategies as a medium for developing early literacy skills. These findings reflect a gap between the ideal conditions for early literacy development and the reality observed in the field.

Although several studies have examined the effects of Guided Play on child development (Skene et al., 2022; Pratiwi & Hasanah, 2022), research specifically investigating its influence on the early literacy skills of Group A children (aged 4–5 years) within the Indonesian PAUD context, particularly in Muaro Jambi Regency, remains limited. Existing studies generally focus on only one dimension of literacy, such as letter recognition or vocabulary, without measuring early literacy holistically as a multidimensional construct (Sari et al., 2023). This study seeks to fill this gap by examining the effect of the Guided Play strategy on children's early literacy skills comprehensively through a quasi-experimental design.

Emergent literacy refers to the foundational reading and writing abilities that develop before children enter formal education. These abilities include letter recognition, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, and simple reading and writing skills that serve as the basis for future learning success. The development of emergent literacy is influenced by the quality of stimulation and learning experiences received by children.

One effective strategy for developing emergent literacy is Guided Play, a learning approach that combines play activities with purposeful teacher guidance. Through this strategy, children can learn actively, enjoyably, and meaningfully while still achieving learning objectives. Various studies have shown that Guided Play can enhance young children's language and literacy skills more effectively than passive learning approaches.

Based on theoretical reviews and previous studies, this research assumes that the implementation of Guided Play can improve children's early literacy skills. Therefore, the research hypothesis states that there is a significant effect of the Guided Play strategy on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency.

Based on the background described above, the research problem is formulated as follows: "Does the Guided Play strategy have a significant effect on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency?"

The objective of this study is to analyze the effect of the Guided Play strategy on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Early literacy refers to the foundational knowledge, skills, and attitudes that children develop before acquiring formal reading and writing abilities. Early literacy encompasses a range of competencies, including letter recognition, phonological awareness, vocabulary development, oral language skills, print awareness, and comprehension, which serve as important predictors of later reading achievement and academic success. Recent studies have emphasized that literacy experiences during the preschool years play a crucial role in fostering these foundational skills and preparing children for formal schooling (Dicataldo et al., 2022; Başa et al., 2025). Therefore, early childhood education programs are expected to provide developmentally appropriate learning experiences that support children's emerging literacy competencies. One instructional approach that has gained increasing attention in promoting early literacy development is Guided Play. Guided Play integrates children's natural play experiences with intentional teacher guidance to achieve specific learning objectives. This approach enables children to actively explore, interact, and construct knowledge while receiving appropriate scaffolding from educators (Skene et al., 2022). Guided Play is grounded in constructivist and sociocultural theories, emphasizing the importance of meaningful interactions and learner autonomy within structured learning environments. Recent research has demonstrated that teacher-facilitated play can effectively support children's literacy development by enhancing vocabulary, language skills, phonological awareness, and other literacy-related competencies (Pyle et al., 2024; Skene et al., 2022). Furthermore, guided and scaffolded play experiences have been shown to create rich literacy environments that foster children's engagement and learning outcomes (Pyle et al., 2024; Lindholm et al., 2023). Consequently, Guided Play is considered an effective and developmentally appropriate strategy for improving the early literacy skills of preschool children.

METHOD

This study employed a quantitative approach using a quasi-experimental method with a Nonequivalent Control Group Design. This design involved two groups: an experimental group that received the Guided Play strategy as the treatment and a control group that received conventional instruction. The study was conducted at Al-Azhar





Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency, from October to November 2024 and consisted of 16 instructional sessions. The study population comprised 40 Group A children divided into two classes, and the entire population was selected as the sample through a total sampling technique. Group A1 was assigned as the experimental group, while Group A2 served as the control group.

The study was conducted using a quasi-experimental design with a Nonequivalent Control Group Design involving 40 Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency. The participants were divided into an experimental group (A1), which received the Guided Play strategy, and a control group (A2), which received conventional instruction. Before the treatment, a pretest was conducted using a validated and reliable observation instrument to assess children's early literacy skills.

The Guided Play strategy was implemented in the experimental group over 16 instructional sessions from October to November 2024, while the control group continued with regular learning activities. After the intervention, a posttest was administered to both groups using the same instrument. The collected data were analyzed using normality and homogeneity tests, followed by a Paired Sample t-Test in IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 to determine the effect of the Guided Play strategy on children's early literacy skills.

The independent variable in this study was the Guided Play strategy, while the dependent variable was children's early literacy skills, which included letter recognition, phonemic awareness, story comprehension, vocabulary, and print concepts. To measure these skills, an observation instrument consisting of 20 indicators was developed based on early childhood development standards and underwent validity and reliability testing. The results of the testing indicated that the instrument possessed satisfactory validity and reliability, making it suitable for use as a research data collection tool.

Data were collected through structured observations conducted at two stages: before the treatment (pretest) and after the treatment (posttest). The observations were carried out by two observers to enhance the objectivity of the measurement results. The collected data were then analyzed using normality tests, homogeneity tests, and a Paired Sample t-Test with the assistance of IBM SPSS Statistics Version 26 software. These analyses were conducted to determine whether there was a significant difference in children's early literacy skills before and after the implementation of the Guided Play strategy.

RESULT

A total of 40 children participated in this study and were equally distributed between the experimental group ($n = 20$) and the control group ($n = 20$). The demographic characteristics indicated a relatively balanced distribution of gender and age across both groups. In the experimental group, 50% of the participants were male and 50% were female, while in the control group, 55% were male and 45% were female. Most participants in both groups were five years old, accounting for 60% of the experimental group and 65% of the control group.

Table 2. Respondent Characteristics

Characteristics	Experimental Group ($n=20$)	Control Group ($n=20$)
Gender		
Male	10 Children (50%)	11 Children (55%)
Female	10 Children (50%)	9 Children (45%)
Age		
4 years old	8 Children (40%)	7 Children (35%)
5 years old	12 Children (60%)	13 Children (65%)

The pretest results demonstrated that both groups had comparable initial levels of early literacy skills.

Table 3. Pretest Results of Early Literacy Skills

Descriptive Statistics	Experimental Group	Control Group
N	20	20
Minimum Score	33	32
Maximum Score	58	59
Mean	44,75	45,10
Std. Deviation	6,23	6,45
Category	Beginning to Develop	Beginning to Develop

The experimental group obtained a mean score of 44.75 ($SD = 6.23$), while the control group achieved a mean score of 45.10 ($SD = 6.45$). Both scores fell within the "Beginning to Develop" category, indicating that the groups were equivalent prior to the intervention. Following sixteen sessions of Guided Play conducted over eight weeks, substantial differences emerged between the two groups.



Table 4. Posttest Results of Early Literacy Skills

Descriptive Statistics	Experimental Group	Control Group
N	20	20
Minimum Score	60	40
Maximum Score	88	68
Mean	74.85	54.30
Standard Deviation	7.12	7.35
Category	Developing as Expected	Beginning to Develop
Improvement from Pretest	+30.10 points	+9.20 points

Table 4 presents the posttest results of early literacy skills following the intervention period. The experimental group achieved a mean score of 74.85 (SD = 7.12), with scores ranging from 60 to 88, and was classified in the “Developing as Expected” category. In contrast, the control group obtained a mean score of 54.30 (SD = 7.35), with scores ranging from 40 to 68, and remained in the “Beginning to Develop” category.

A substantial difference was observed between the two groups after the intervention. The experimental group demonstrated an improvement of 30.10 points from the pretest, whereas the control group improved by only 9.20 points. These findings suggest that the Guided Play strategy contributed considerably to the enhancement of children's early literacy skills compared with conventional instructional practices.

Prerequisite Tests for Statistical Analysis

Normality Test

A normality test was conducted using the Shapiro–Wilk Test on both the pretest and posttest data from the experimental and control groups. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Results of the Shapiro–Wilk Normality Test

Group	Test	Statistic (W)	df	Sig.	Interpretation
Experimental	Pretest	0.951	20	0.389	Normal
Experimental	Posttest	0.958	20	0.512	Normal
Control	Pretest	0.947	20	0.341	Normal
Control	Posttest	0.962	20	0.584	Normal

As shown in Table 5, all pretest and posttest data for both groups yielded significance values greater than 0.05. Specifically, the significance values ranged from 0.341 to 0.584, indicating that the data were normally distributed. Therefore, the assumption of normality was satisfied, allowing the use of parametric statistical analyses for hypothesis testing.

Homogeneity Test

The homogeneity of variance assumption was examined using Levene's Test of Equality of Error Variances. The results are presented in Table 6.

Table 6. Results of Levene's Test of Homogeneity

Test	F	df1	df2	Sig.	Interpretation
Pretest	0.164	1	38	0.687	Homogeneous
Posttest	0.082	1	38	0.776	Homogeneous

The results presented in Table 6 indicate that the pretest data produced a significance value of 0.687, while the posttest data yielded a significance value of 0.776. Both values exceeded the significance threshold of 0.05, demonstrating that the variances of the two groups were homogeneous. Consequently, the assumption of homogeneity of variance was met, indicating that the experimental and control groups originated from populations with similar variance characteristics. Since both the normality and homogeneity assumptions were satisfied, further parametric analyses could be conducted with confidence.

Hypothesis Testing (Paired Sample t-Test)

Hypothesis testing was conducted using a Paired Sample t-Test on the experimental group data to compare the mean scores obtained before and after the implementation of the Guided Play strategy. The results of the analysis are presented in Table 7.



Table 7. Results of the Paired Sample t-Test for the Experimental Group

Measurement	N	Mean	Standard Deviation	Standard Error	t	df	Sig. (2-tailed)
Pretest	20	44.75	6.23	1.393			
Posttest	20	74.85	7.12	1.592			
Mean Difference	20	30.10	7.32	1.636	-18.392	19	0.000*

Note: Significant at $\alpha = 0.05$.

The results of the Paired Sample t-Test presented in Table 7 indicate a statistically significant difference between the pretest and posttest scores of the experimental group. The analysis yielded a t-value of -18.392 with 19 degrees of freedom and a significance value (p-value) of 0.000. Since the significance value was lower than the established alpha level of 0.05 ($p < .05$), the null hypothesis (H_0) was rejected and the alternative hypothesis (H_1) was accepted. This finding demonstrates that the Guided Play strategy had a significant effect on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency.

To determine the magnitude of the treatment effect, Cohen's d effect size was calculated by dividing the mean difference by the pooled standard deviation. The resulting effect size was 4.50 ($d = 30.10 / 6.68 = 4.50$). According to Cohen's criteria, an effect size greater than 0.80 is considered large. Therefore, a Cohen's d value of 4.50 indicates an exceptionally large effect, suggesting that the Guided Play strategy had a highly substantial impact on improving children's early literacy skills.

The experimental group achieved a posttest mean score of 74.85 ($SD = 7.12$), classified as "Developing as Expected," whereas the control group obtained a mean score of 54.30 ($SD = 7.35$), which remained within the "Beginning to Develop" category. The experimental group demonstrated an average improvement of 30.10 points, compared with only 9.20 points in the control group. The results of the Shapiro-Wilk test indicated that all pretest and posttest data were normally distributed ($p > .05$), while Levene's Test confirmed homogeneity of variance between groups ($p > .05$). Furthermore, the Paired Sample t-Test revealed a statistically significant difference between pretest and posttest scores in the experimental group, $t(19) = -18.392$, $p < .001$. The calculated effect size was extremely large (Cohen's $d = 4.50$), indicating that the Guided Play strategy had a substantial positive effect on children's early literacy skills.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study provide strong empirical evidence that the Guided Play strategy has a significant positive effect on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency. The substantial improvement observed in the experimental group ($\Delta = 30.10$ points, $d = 4.50$) compared to the control group ($\Delta = 9.20$ points) confirms the effectiveness of Guided Play in fostering early literacy development among children aged 4–5 years. These findings are consistent with the meta-analysis conducted by Skene et al. (2022), which concluded that guided play significantly enhances children's cognitive and language development when compared with less interactive instructional approaches. The effectiveness of Guided Play can be explained through Vygotsky's Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which emphasizes the importance of adult scaffolding in supporting children's learning. During Guided Play activities, teachers acted as facilitators by providing open-ended questions, language modeling, and contextualized vocabulary support. Such scaffolding enabled children to actively construct literacy knowledge through meaningful and engaging learning experiences.

The findings are also supported by Lindholm et al. (2023), who reported that guided play environments promote children's language development and participation through authentic social interactions. In the present study, literacy-rich play centers such as bookstores, post offices, mini libraries, and classroom simulations provided meaningful contexts in which children could engage directly with literacy concepts. Similarly, Pyle et al. (2024) found that teacher-facilitated play creates rich opportunities for literacy learning by integrating reading, writing, vocabulary, and communication skills into enjoyable play experiences. Through Guided Play activities, children encountered letters, sounds, and print concepts in authentic situations, such as reading labels, writing messages, and engaging in role-play conversations. These experiences made literacy learning more meaningful and easier to internalize. Furthermore, recent evidence suggests that play-based literacy interventions provide more effective opportunities for language and literacy growth than conventional teacher-centered approaches because children remain actively engaged throughout the learning process (Skene et al., 2022; Pyle et al., 2024). Therefore, the significant gains observed in this study reinforce the growing body of evidence supporting Guided Play as an effective strategy for enhancing young children's early literacy development.

The remarkable improvement in vocabulary development also deserves particular attention. During profession-themed Guided Play sessions, children were naturally exposed to domain-specific vocabulary through rich interactions with teachers and peers. Neumann (2020) argued that verbally rich play environments provide optimal conditions for vocabulary acquisition through fast mapping and repeated exposure across varied contexts. This mechanism may explain why vocabulary gains in the experimental group were substantially greater than those observed in the control group, which primarily received conventional memorization-based instruction. Moreover, these findings have important



implications for educational policy, particularly for the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum in early childhood education. The philosophy of “Merdeka Belajar,” which emphasizes experiential learning, creativity, and active child participation, aligns closely with the principles of Guided Play (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2022). Therefore, the present findings provide strong empirical support for the broader adoption of Guided Play strategies in Indonesian early childhood education settings. From a practical perspective, teachers should shift their focus from merely teaching letters to creating rich and meaningful literacy environments. Classrooms should be redesigned to incorporate literacy-rich play centers, and teachers should be trained in responsive scaffolding techniques, including asking open-ended questions, extending children's responses, and modeling literacy-related language in authentic contexts. Such professional development initiatives are essential for maximizing the potential of Guided Play to enhance early literacy outcomes among young children.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results and discussion presented, it can be concluded that the Guided Play strategy has a significant effect on the early literacy skills of Group A children at Al-Azhar Kindergarten, Muaro Jambi Regency. This conclusion is supported by the results of the Paired Sample t-Test, which yielded a value of $t = -18.392$ with a significance level of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$), indicating that H_0 is rejected and H_1 is accepted. The experimental group, which received the Guided Play intervention over 16 sessions, showed a substantial increase in early literacy skills with a mean gain of 30.10 points (from 44.75 in the pretest to 74.85 in the posttest). This improvement was considerably higher than that of the control group, which increased by only 9.20 points (from 45.10 to 54.30). The very large effect size (Cohen's $d = 4.50$) further confirms that Guided Play is not only an effective instructional strategy but also a transformative approach in enhancing early literacy development among children aged 4–5 years.

The findings of this study have important implications for early childhood education practitioners and policymakers. For teachers, the results highlight the necessity of shifting from teacher-centered and worksheet-based instruction toward child-centered, meaningful, and play-based learning approaches. For school leaders, this study provides a foundation for designing professional development programs focused on equipping teachers with the skills to design and facilitate Guided Play activities effectively. For education authorities, the findings can serve as evidence-based input for developing more innovative early childhood education policies that align with the principles of the Merdeka Curriculum and emphasize active, experiential, and developmentally appropriate learning for young children.

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