Teachers' Strategies in Introducing Literacy to Early Childhood: Lesson from Indonesia

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Abstract

Purpose – This study aims to analyze teachers' strategies in introducing literacy to early childhood.

Design/methods/approach – The researchers used the case study method. The research subjects are two teachers who teach in early childhood education institutions in Bandung, Indonesia.

Findings – The results of this study indicate that in introducing literacy to children, teachers use multiple strategies, such as optimizing role-play activities, stimulation through active teacher conversations that encourage children to communicate (rich teacher talk), utilizing the use of big book media, and focusing on phonological awareness. The study results show that the teacher's role is significant in optimizing literacy learning for children.

Research implications/limitations – This case study focuses on literacy learning in early childhood based on the experiences of two teachers in Bandung, Indonesia.

Practical implications – This case study shows that multiple strategies are appropriate to introduce early childhood literacy and prepare children for the next level of education.

Originality/value – This study contributes to the understanding of literacy in early childhood. In addition, this study recommends that teachers apply multiple strategies in introducing literacy through play activities.

Keywords Early childhood, Play strategy, Teacher, Literacy

Paper type Case study

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1. Introduction

Early age is a golden age for children, so education is fundamental and becomes the foundation for further development (Dekker, 2000). At this time, children can maximize their potential in supporting their growth and development so that appropriate stimulation needs to be given (Caceres et al., 2016; Fadlillah et al., 2020; Uce, 2015). One of the often-discussed issues in early childhood education is children's ability to read and write, commonly known as literacy (Neumann, 2016; Puranik et al., 2018). Literacy is very important for children's lives because if they are literate, they will be able to become members of a global society who can seek and process information to make decisions (Bröder et al., 2017), respect others (Olsson et al., 2016), and criticize things well so that they are not easily fooled and deceived by people (Musthafa, 2008).

Children educated and trained from an early age to read, criticize texts, and then free-write things that are criticized understood, and interpreted can ask various kinds of questions that we do not expect (Barratt-Pugh et al., 2000). Musthafa (2008) suggests that children are active meaning builders. As an active meaning builder, the learning process in schools, especially in early childhood education, must foster children's passion to listen, identify, reconstruct what they get, and interpret everything they receive at school. Early literacy is a process of reading and writing related to language and cognitive aspects through interaction between parents, teachers, and children and is focused on matters relating to children's daily lives (Lonigan et al., 2017; Neuman & Roskos, 1997). As for the opinion of Barratt-Pugh et al. (2000), literacy is children's participation in an environment that will sharpen children's communication skills and knowledge. It is supported by Inten's (2016) opinion, which states that early literacy is not only limited to reading books but is broader, i.e., being able to read the surrounding environment. The hallmark of early literacy is informal learning through various fun activities so that children do not feel that they are learning (Inten, 2016).

Children's literacy or communication skills will affect their social, emotional, and cognitive development (Alzahrani et al., 2019; Davies et al., 2016). Children who have a high literacy culture during their growth period will be able to think critically, creatively, communicatively, and able to collaborate (Wandasari, 2017). Introducing literacy to children begins with introducing things that are close to children's lives. Reading activities are not always direct reading activities through books, but reading activities in early childhood are more about reading the surrounding environment, not such as reading the writings around them, which can train children's language and cognitive development like to writing, children are writing on paper, but the doodling activity carried out by children regardless of the medium is a form of writing activity. However, parents often demand that their children read and write well as adults as early as possible. This leads to confusion in understanding literacy for early childhood. Parentsexpectationsnl sometimes forces children and teachers to continue to suppress literacy skills that are seen as limited to the ability to read, write, and count in a conventional context. To amend this misconception, the role of the teacher is needed. Literacy teaching certainly needs to be adapted to the characteristics of children and through fun activities, i.e., playing, because children's world is playing. Thus, they can know various kinds of knowledge, including things related to literacy.

Play activities in children have been a focal point of investigation since the 1920s, but it is only in the last 15 years that their role in developing children's literacy has become a topic of interest and investigation (Saracho & Spodek, 1998). This development is related to Piaget's theory of mental processes, which links play to reading and writing, as well as Vygotsky's promotion of the importance of sociocultural context in children's cognitive development and the extensive research on literacy that has emerged in the last three decades (Ferreiro & Teberosky, 1982; Levin et al., 1996).

Learning through play is a shared learning approach in early childhood education; it is also valuable for children's growth and development (Bodrova, 2008; Hyvonen, 2011). Play-based learning activities provide a variety of ways for children to learn different skills and concepts, including literacy. Studies show that play can optimize early childhood development such as moral development (Trisnawati, 2020; Walker et al., 2019), cognitive (Holis, 2016; Kesäläinen et al.,

2019), physical motor (Faulkner et al., 2015), emotional social (Ananda & Fadhilaturrahmi, 2018; Cheng & Ray, 2016), language (Holmes et al., 2019), and art (Savva & Erakleous, 2018).

To support children to become literate people, a supportive role and environment, of course, are needed from various parties. A child who has a high interest in reading comes from an environment that has good reading habits. The home, school, social, and cultural environment accompanying growth are the main determinants of a child's literacy ability (Fajriyah, 2018). Play activities such as role-playing can be a medium for optimal child literacy development if, in its implementation, there is adult intervention, in this case, the teacher, who will direct and make play more meaningful so that children can understand the material presented properly, correctly, and fun. Teachers do not need to be complicated in terms of goals when stimulating children in the process of reading, writing, and teaching things that are close to children's lives. In this case, teacher creativity is needed to stimulate children to love reading and interpret the results of reading critically. Previous studies on teacher strategies in developing reading literacy in Early Childhood Education (ECE) (Lorenza et al., 2021) and the application of literacy learning in stimulating early childhood literacy (Purnamasari et al., 2019). Research conducted by Lorenza et al. (2021) used a survey method with 20 teachers as research subjects, while Purnamasari et al. (2019) used ethnography in conducting their research. The results of the two studies explain that teachers stimulate children's literacy through print media, pictures, and storybooks. This study has differences in methodological terms and focuses more on the analysis of literacy development strategies carried out by the teachers themselves in introducing literacy to early childhood. Thus, researchers continue using different research methods to research teacher strategies in introducing literacy to early childhood.

2. Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study uses a qualitative approach to understand the teacher's strategy in introducing literacy to early childhood through play activities. A qualitative approach is carried out to understand the phenomenon in detail based on the meanings of the people who experience it in the form of a natural context (Denzin & Lincoln, 2009) by analyzing words, perceptions of research subjects, and the cultural environment in a society (Creswell, 2015). The data obtained from the qualitative approach is descriptive data regarding the words expressed by the respondents (Moleong, 2019). The researcher uses a qualitative approach because this study aims to understand individual or group interactions so that information about teachers' experiences as research subjects can be dug deeper and obtain essential findings related to this case.

Specifically, the qualitative approach used in this research is a case study. Researchers can comprehensively describe various aspects of an individual, group, or social situation through case studies. Data related to research on teacher strategies in introducing literacy to early childhood need to be reviewed periodically through open-ended research questions. Yin (2009) argues that a suitable research method used in this research is a case study because it aims to answer various questions that will lead to cause and effect in a phenomenon being studied.

2.2. Research Subjects and Ethical Issues

This study involved two early childhood education teachers in the city of Bandung. In line with the explanation from Creswell (2015), who suggests that in case of studies it is better to involve no more than four or five cases in a single study, this study will involve two cases, namely two women who work as early childhood education teachers to expand further the opportunity for researchers to identify the theme of the case. The researcher chose the two teachers because they have taught in early childhood education institutions for a dozen years, and one of them is active in the read-aloud community so that many things can be extracted from their experience related to the introduction of literacy to early childhood.

In the early stages of conducting the research, the researchers asked for the willingness and consent of these two teachers who work at the Early Childhood Education Institute. Researchers will not force if participants do not give their consent. The consent of the participants must be

voluntary; the researchers must not impose the will of the participants in any way if they are not willing to be involved in the research conducted (Heppner et al., 2008). Consent is not only considered initially, but researchers also need to re-check regularly to see the availability of research subjects involved in the research being conducted. The researchers tried to get their consent by paying attention to body language, facial expressions, and attitudes when answering the questions asked. During the interview, the researcher was careful in asking questions for fear that things could offend them. This caution is carried out not only during interviews but also when the data has been obtained. Researchers are also careful in the report writing process by not ignoring self-reflexivity and the existing environmental and cultural differences (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

2.3. Data Collection and Analysis Techniques

Choosing a qualitative research approach using the case study method makes the researcher act as the main instrument or the human instrument to explore and obtain data in the field (Creswell, 2015). This study's data collection techniques were interviews with two early childhood education teachers to reveal their strategies in introducing literacy to early childhood through play activities. Interviews were conducted for approximately 60-90 minutes using a voice recorder to facilitate researchers making transcripts.

After getting the data, the researchers transcribed the interview, reread it, and sorted out what data was obtained for analysis. The data analysis technique used in this research is grounded theory. Data analysis in this study consisted of three stages, open coding, axial coding, and selective coding (Charmaz, 2006). Researchers do open coding by labeling each event or view based on the results of the interview. Furthermore, the researchers did axial coding, i.e., grouping the data resulting from open coding in one category. After that, in the last stage, selective coding, the researchers categorize the data more precisely so that the main themes are formed that describe the teacher's strategy in stimulating literacy in early childhood through play activities.

In the final stage, to check the validity of the data, the researchers also carried out a member check. The researchers showed the interview transcript and consulted the obtained data during the interview to the research subject. It is done to ensure that the information written on the interview transcript is in line with what was discussed by the research subject during the interview (Gunawan, 2013). The researchers also conducted brief interviews with colleagues of the research subjects such as teachers, school principals, and several parents. These interviews were conducted to strengthen and complement the data that had been previously obtained so that the results of the study became more comprehensive.

3. Result

3.1. Role-Play

The strategy used by the two research subjects in introducing literacy to children is through play and game strategies. Research subjects encourage literacy learning through classroom setting games by providing materials related to the theme, such as putting menus, pencils, and notebooks to order food in restaurants in the play area. The teacher provides intervention through examples to help children engage in literacy practice through the game. Research subjects incorporate literacy into children's dramatic games that can help early literacy recognition. It shows that play activities, especially role-playing, can be a suitable medium for children's learning and development in literacy. It is in line with the opinion of Neuman and Roskos (1997) and Ariska and Fauzia (2021). Role-playing with scaffolding provided by the teacher can positively affect the improvement of early academic skills (Bodrova, 2008). Adequate playing time can contribute to improving cognitive skills and gaining more confidence in playing. This development can lead children to get to know their environment and use thinking and speaking skills in their lives (Tabors, 1998).

Role-play areas provide many opportunities to improve communication and social interaction between children. One example of activities carried out by research subjects is that they conduct classroom arrangements and provide materials related to the theme, for example,

putting down menus, pencils, and notebooks to order food in restaurants in the play area and the teacher providing intervention through examples. These examples are given to help children who are involved in the practice. Integrated activities like this hone language and literacy skills in children more meaningfully.

3.2. Rich Teacher Talk

After interviews with two teachers who teach in early childhood education institutions, they agreed that children should introduce early literacy. However, literacy must be introduced in a fun and easy way and does not force the children. According to the research subject, teachers need to actively speak to encourage children to communicate and improve their literacy skills. It is one of the strategies that educators need to understand. Active conversation means that a teacher must have a large and active vocabulary to speak to children (Madyawati, 2017; Studhalter et al., 2021). Active conversation can also be built by using questions that invite children to gain new knowledge, express opinions, or discuss. Both research subjects strongly agree that teachers should always involve children in daily conversations. The vocabulary possessed by children is not as much as that of adults. Therefore teachers play a role in increasing children's vocabulary mastery (Aryani, 2020). Children can talk to each other by telling stories in large groups, small groups, or they can pair up with their friends. For example, they can tell their experiences while on vacation or things they like wrapped in socio-drama play activities. All children should be given the same opportunity to tell stories. It can build good communication between teachers and students as well as between fellow students.

3.3. Phonological Awareness

Another thing that the research subjects pay attention to in introducing literacy when playing a role is to train children's phonology. They explained that it is essential to build phonological awareness so that children can distinguish between syllables in words and words in sentences. It is reinforced by Bryant et al. (1990), who explained that increasing phonological awareness in preschool children is a reading preparation training that can be a prerequisite or facilitator for reading skills in the school phase. Sound or noise becomes the central aspect when the language is produced or spoken by humans and dramatically determines the speakers' meaning. It means that if children understand language sounds according to their function, it will be easier to read. Before getting to know letters to read, children will listen to the pronunciation or sound of the language for what is read or spoken by other people first. It can be implemented to children when playing sports, singing, dancing, reading poetry while playing roles. At this time, the child makes movements, sounds words, and makes expressions. Activities that are often carried out to increase children's awareness of the sound of language are listening to stories, poems, or songs that involve similar sound rhythms, such as Dimas is picking up a glass in the class, a new blue shirt, a snake coiling around the fence, and others.

3.4. Reading Big Book Together

The big book is a medium used by research subjects in introducing literacy to early childhood. Karges and Bone (1992) give a special meaning to big books, i.e., storybooks with unique characteristics that are large, both in text and images, to enable shared reading activities between teachers and students. This book has unique characteristics such as being colorful, having words that are easy to repeat, having a storyline that is easy to understand, and having a simple text pattern. Picture books can be used to help children recognize different environments and situations from their own. Picture books can motivate them to learn because a good picture book will help children understand and enrich the experience of the story (Rothlein & Meinbach, 1991). Pictures in children's stories must match the story's theme, setting, character, and plot. Good picture books can give children pleasure and aesthetic experiences, for example, picture storybooks, alphabet books, toys books, wordless picture books. The types of picture books that have been described above can provide particular messages for children to understand the elements in the story. The research results conducted by Setiyaningsih and Syamsudin (2019) argue that books with large text and images can make it easier for children to observe each letter and symbol contained in the book.

Usually, the teacher does this activity by asking the children to sit in order in front of the teacher. Books are shown to children to see what is in the book while listening to the story being told by paying attention to clear articulation and loud voices, differences in voice, intonation, and facial expressions that match the story's content. The teacher also allowed the children to ask questions. Through this big storybook, the teacher can direct the letters in the book to the child, ask what pictures and letters are in the book, distinguish between pictures and letters; at the same time, the child will also observe the writing starting from left to right, and read from top to bottom (Setiyaningsih & Syamsudin, 2019). They will also see what the cover of the book that will be read, the title of the story, and the pages in the book will look like. The teacher can read the children's favorite stories repeatedly and encourage them to re-explain the parts of the story that they still remember so that children's literacy skills are honed.

4. Discussion

Children's literacy skills are not limited to reading and writing, but they can also process words and form sentences that can help them develop their language competence (Santos et al., 2012). It is also mentioned that literacy skills are related to children's language, cognitive, and social-emotional development (Nahdi & Yunitasari, 2019).

Play contributes to optimizing child development (Lai et al., 2018). The play environment can support the development of literacy in children (Saracho, 2004). Play, especially role play, helps children learn about their intellectual, social, symbolic, and language worlds. When children participate in role-playing, they enrich their social language by using different conversation patterns, flexible tones, expressive language, and language rules. Children's socio-drama games support their language and literacy development (Saracho, 2004). Roskos and Christie (2004) found that a well-designed and literacy-promoting play environment can lead children to build connections between their oral and written expressions to support literacy learning.

Play can offer an ideal experience for children to integrate literacy into their understanding. Myck-Wayne (2010) found that role-play areas provide many opportunities to improve communication and social interaction between children. Role-playing can improve literacy learning, especially reading, because children are motivated to produce explicit language (Tsao, 2008). Conflict resolution, cooperation, acceptance of other people's points of view, and acknowledging differences are things children learn during play. Research subjects observed that when they included literacy props such as books, markers, and signs in the role play area, children engaged in activities more related to literacy, such as reading and writing.

Children's literacy skills are not limited to reading and writing but are also related to speaking, listening, and representing what they have read and heard (Davidson, 2012). It is closely related to children's language and cognitive aspects, which can help children adapt to their environment. To maximize this potential, teachers can use strategies to build active conversations with children. The teacher can build an active conversation by asking the child's opinion during the game. When children interact with their friends, it cannot be separated from literacy skills because it is related to the use of language, which will lead to children's reading and writing abilities (Aida & Rini, 2015). The research subjects provide new vocabulary through writing that children need to read during the game by encouraging the teacher to speak actively. Vocabulary will continue to be added as children's ability to understand the words they know. It is in line with Nash and Snowling's (2006) opinion that teachers can add more new vocabulary when they feel that children can master the previously given vocabulary so that their knowledge increases about the vocabulary they have just heard.

In addition to getting new vocabulary, when teachers encourage children to speak actively, children's phonology will also be trained because they understand the pronunciation of words, so it will be easier to read. Research subjects choose one theme, for example, animals on land, i.e., chickens. They experimented with putting chicken eggs in a glass filled with water and making them sink, float in water, and float on the surface. The teacher writes new vocabulary for children on the blackboard, i.e., the word experiment, which means trying something, is introduced when starting the activity. When the child already knows the purpose of the experiment by being able

to read and repeat the word, the teacher can add new vocabulary related to the activity, i.e., the words sink, float in water, and float on the surface when a chicken egg is placed in a glass filled with water. Children also have to understand what the words sink, float in water, and float on the surface mean by paying attention to the experiments. Children understand the sounds of language according to their function to make it easier to read a word. Children will feel interested and challenged to recognize these words; they can explore further because eggs are very close to children's daily lives.

In addition to adding vocabulary in their language development, children's cognitive can also develop with new vocabulary obtained because they will think about the word and are curious, so they continue to find out. Often, many people say they do not use "god" language to children because they will not understand it. On the one hand, this may be true, but on the other hand, I feel that sometimes this is used as a reference not to increase children's knowledge of a new vocabulary. Children are considered unable to do anything and do not give complex vocabulary when they may master it. It cannot be generalized; the scaffolding theory proposed by Vygotsky can be used in this context. In addition, teachers need to be good listeners (Rothlein & Meinbach, 1991). One of the research subjects told how they gave children the freedom to tell stories about the chicken eggs they had for breakfast. As a teacher, they responded and praised that eating eggs is very healthy because it has various benefits. Teachers can provoke children's curiosity with simple questions such as "Why are some eggs large, and some are small?" Children's literacy skills will continue to be trained if the teacher is active in speaking in class so that new questions are raised and the discussion continues. For example, they discussed the different colors of chicken eggs and duck eggs. They can discuss why this happened and why.

Talking about literacy, of course, one of the media that can be used is storybooks. Large storybooks can make it easier for children to see the pictures and writings listed in the book to hone them to read. Teachers can provide appropriate literacy materials in a play environment (Fadool, 2009; Tsao, 2008), such as a large book that can be read together. Various popular books entitled Si Kancil and Friends of the Jungle (Nurfatin & Triadi, 2018), Rabbits and Turtles (Serfia et al., 2019), and other stories are easy to understand children. Children often use words during play to convey thoughts, feelings, and ideas, all of which support the growth of their literacy skills. Early childhood naturally understands literacy. Children gain experience and knowledge related to reading and writing through fun and simple ways such as participating in various role-playing activities. For example, children can express ideas through their meaningful doodles (Joyce et al., 2011).

When playing a role, the choice of the theme must be concrete and close to the child's personal experience, attractive, and essential for children so that children gain a lot of experience (Fajriyah, 2018). It is important to note that the final decision for choosing a topic is left to the child. The position of the teacher is only as a friend to discuss with the child. Because if the child has determined a specific theme, it means that the child has been interested in discussions related to the theme they chose. Once a topic is selected, children can listen to the teacher read a book related to the topic and let the child see the books. After that, the child can observe something or experiment with what the teacher has read. To reinforce and express what they already know, children can engage in dramatic games to express what they have learned (Musthafa, 2008).

5. Conclusion

This study indicates that teachers use multiple strategies in introducing literacy to children, such as optimizing role-play activities, stimulation through active teacher conversations that encourage children to communicate (rich teacher talk), utilizing big book media, and focusing on phonological awareness. Role-playing provides opportunities for children to practice and hone their literacy skills because several game characteristics provide motivation and opportunities to learn literacy in children. In developing literacy learning, teachers must prepare a play environment rich in literacy, such as books that match the interests and development of children. In addition, role-playing provides opportunities for children to be involved in literacy development because they will have conversations and use symbols related to literacy. Teacher support and participation in play facilitate literacy development by providing interactive materials and feedback. In addition to role-playing, teachers can also build active conversations (rich teacher talk) with children. Their vocabulary will increase, and of course, they can practice their phonology. The togetherness of teachers and children when reading big books together is an activity that can optimize children's literacy skills. Teachers play an essential role in children's growth and development. They can be involved in children's literacy games by observing and taking roles to provide examples of how children can incorporate literacy activities into the games they do.

Declarations

Author contribution statement

Anita Febiyanti initiated the ideas presented. Euis Kurniati and Ibrahim Emilly Nzunda completed the theory and discussion on development strategies in introducing literacy to early childhood. All authors discussed the results and contributed to the final manuscript.

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Data availability statement

The collection of data obtained and analyzed during the study is the property of the author.

Declaration of interests statement

As authors, we declare that we are not involved in financial or personal matters that may affect the research results in this paper.

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