

Enhancing Children's Spiritual Language Expression Through the Picture Story Method in Islamic Early Childhood Education

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Abstract

Many young children are not yet accustomed to expressing Islamic values through verbal habits such as kalimat thayyibah (e.g., bismillah, alhamdulillah). This study explores the effectiveness of the picture story method in enhancing early childhood spiritual language expression. Using a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, the study was conducted in two cycles at an Islamic kindergarten with 12 students. Data were collected through observation, interviews, and documentation. In Cycle 1, 75% of students met the learning criteria, which increased to 91.6% in Cycle 2. These findings indicate that integrating visual narratives with Islamic verbal expressions fosters the contextual use of kalimat thayyibah among young children. This method not only enhances language development but also supports character formation, offering valuable insights into spiritual pedagogy in early childhood Islamic education.

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INTRODUCTION

Early Childhood Education is the initial and most important stage in forming a person's character ([Aziz et al., 2024](#)). Commonly called the "golden age," this period is marked by children's heightened receptivity to moral, cognitive, and spiritual input ([Bonita et al., 2022](#)). At this stage, they are forming the foundation of their personality that will determine how they behave and think in the future ([Fitriani & Vinayastri, 2022](#)). As such, ECE teachers play a critical role in fostering early expressions of religious values, including developing positive verbal habits that reflect Islamic ethical teachings.

One essential aspect of Islamic character building in early childhood is the habituation of *kalimat thayyibah*—meaningful and virtuous phrases such as *bismillah*, *alhamdulillah*, *Subhanallah*, and *astaghfirullah* ([Harahap, 2021](#); [Tanenji & Munawaroh, 2023](#)). These expressions do not merely serve a linguistic function but are deeply rooted in monotheistic theology, gratitude, and ethical behavior ([Ningsih & Lisnawati, 2022](#)). Reciting *kalimat thayyibah* reinforces polite and spiritual behavior and aligns with the prophetic tradition of moral education through habitual speech.

However, preliminary observations at an Islamic kindergarten indicate that many children have not internalized *kalimat thayyibah* as spiritual language expression in their daily routines, such as eating, playing, or interacting socially. Despite the institution's adequate infrastructure and status as a leading ECE provider in the region, this spiritual-linguistic dimension remains underdeveloped.

Within the Islamic pedagogical framework, *kalimat thayyibah* symbolizes linguistic goodness and moral purity. Rooted in Qur'anic references—such as Surah Ibrahim (14:24–25)—this concept is likened to a blessed tree whose fruits consistently benefit its environment ([Jannah & Syayfi, 2024](#)). Thus, cultivating these expressions from an early age is a spiritual imperative and a pedagogical opportunity for character education.

Scholars have emphasized that children are inherently spiritual beings, capable of expressing profound concepts through varied forms of language—including religious expression ([Rowland, 2023](#)). According to Maslow's view, spirituality is an innate aspect of human development, and in early learning contexts, it becomes a natural entry point for nurturing belief systems ([Papaleontiou-Louca et al., 2023](#)). Their emerging sense of spirituality strongly influences children's behavior, emotional responses, and narratives ([Alejandro, 2020](#)).

Early learners thrive through concrete, visual, and narrative stimuli ([H, 2025](#); [L. Hasanah et al., 2024](#)), so the picture story method presents a strategic pedagogical intervention. Children can connect abstract religious values to tangible experiences by embedding spiritual language expression within visual storytelling, enhancing comprehension and internalization. The teacher's role, therefore, extends beyond knowledge transmission to value formation through structured, engaging, and meaningful interaction.

Previous studies have explored the development of children's spiritual intelligence, yet most have not explicitly focused on spiritual language expression. Noor (2020) examined participatory methods, games, and modeling in fostering spiritual intelligence ([Noor, 2020](#)). Similarly,

Sholehuddin et al. (2023) investigated the use of verbal discourse and digital tools to support Islamic spiritual development (Sholehuddin et al., 2023). While research has addressed expressive language development using various methods (Asrifan et al., 2022), media (Ghofur & Nurhayati, 2023), and environmental factors (Hidayati et al., 2022), the intersection between spiritual expression and linguistic development remains underexplored. This study fills that gap by exploring how the picture story method can be strategically implemented by ECE teachers to enhance the spontaneous and contextual use of *kalimat thayyibah* in children's daily speech.

This study seeks to address the pedagogical gap in spiritual language development by investigating how ECE teachers can effectively employ the picture story method to nurture children's verbal expression of Islamic values. The research focuses on the strategic design and implementation of this method in improving children's spontaneous and contextual use of *kalimat thayyibah* in daily life. Ultimately, this study contributes to the discourse on character-based education and offers practical insights for Islamic early childhood pedagogical innovation.

METHOD

This study employed a Classroom Action Research (CAR) design, emphasizing reflective, iterative cycles of planning, action, observation, and reflection (Sugiyono, 2018). The study was conducted at an Islamic kindergarten located in North Labuhanbatu Regency.

The researchers collaborated with classroom teachers to implement corrective actions to enhance children's spiritual language expression, particularly their ability to recite *kalimat thayyibah* using pictorial media. This action-oriented collaboration emphasized mutual reflection and continuous improvement in teaching practices.

The study involved 20 students (7 boys and 13 girls) enrolled at the kindergarten. The institution, known for its adequate infrastructure and strong parental support, presents a conducive environment for character-based early childhood learning. However, before the intervention, this potential had not been fully harnessed to develop children's spiritual expression through *kalimat thayyibah* recitation. A rubric was developed to assess five key indicators of children's spiritual language expression during the picture story activities:

Table 1
Rubric for assessing five key indicators of children's use of
***kalimat thayyibah* during the picture story activities**

No	Rated aspect	Indicator	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3	Score 4
1.	Pronunciation of <i>Kalimat Thayyibah</i>	(e.g., bismillah, alhamdulillah, astaghfirullah)	Cannot pronounce it yet	Saying with full assistance	Saying with a small amount of help	Pronounce independently and correctly

No	Rated aspect	Indicator	Score 1	Score 2	Score 3	Score 4
2.	Contextual Accuracy	correct usage in daily routines	Not accurate or not understood yet	Sometimes, it is accurate, but it still needs to be remembered.	Right, in some situations	Always accurate and contextually appropriate
3.	Clarity of Articulation	fluency and intelligibility	Not clear or vague	Sometimes, it is still unclear	It is already clear and understandable.	Clear, fluent, and accurate in pronunciation
4	Speaking Enthusiasm	confidence and engagement	Not showing interest	Showing interest with hesitation	Enthusiastic in several activities	Very enthusiastic, confident, cheerful
5.	Participation in Story Activities	active involvement and verbal response.	Not involved at all	Involved but passive	Actively involved with guidance	Involved very actively and spontaneously

Table Information:

Score 1: (Not Developed)

Score 2: (Beginning to Develop)

Score 3: (Developed as Expected)

Score 4: (Fully Developed)

Data were collected through three primary techniques: observation, interviews, and documentation. Observations were conducted throughout the learning activities to monitor teaching strategies' implementation and assess student engagement and verbal responses related to *Kalimat Thayyibah*. Interviews were held with the principal and classroom teachers to gain insights into instructional planning, challenges, and perceptions regarding children's spiritual language development. Documentation, including lesson plans, student worksheets, and photographs of classroom activities, was used to support and validate observational findings. These methods were triangulated to ensure the credibility and depth of the data collected.

RESULT

1. Pre-Cycle

This classroom action research (CAR) was conducted from May 14 to 16, 2024. The study aimed to evaluate early childhood teachers' strategies for enhancing children's verbal expression of *kalimat thayyibah* through the picture story method. The CAR was implemented in two cycles, each consisting of planning, implementation, observation, and reflection.

Before the intervention, a pre-cycle observation was conducted to assess baseline performance. Among the 12 students observed, children's spiritual language use was evaluated based on indicators derived from the learning implementation plan. These indicators measured behavioral and verbal expression competencies.

Student achievement was categorized as follows:

- a. Completed: Students met or exceeded the minimum standard (KKM).
- b. Not Completed: Students did not meet the required standards and required further support.
- c. Initial findings of student learning outcomes in the learning plan can be seen in the table.

Table 2
The pre-cycle learning outcomes

No	Aspect of Completion	Number of Students	Percentage	Information
1.	Completed	1	8,33 %	86-100
2.	Completed	8	66,67 %	71-85
3.	Not Completed	2	16,67 %	56-70
4.	Not Completed	1	8,33 %	40
Amount		12	100 %	

Interpretation:

- a. 9 out of 12 students (75%) achieved scores above 70, indicating initial success.
- b. Three students (25%) had not reached the minimum expected performance.
- c. The average score was 76.14%, with 30% of students still below the target standard.
- d. The results of student learning on the learning plan or score are 8.33% of 12 students, and those who get a score below the learning plan are 8.33% of 12 students.

2. Cycle 1 Implementation

Following the pre-cycle, the research team conducted Cycle 1 with the theme "The Universe." The planning stage included developing a Daily Learning Implementation Plan, preparing visual story-based learning media, and developing observation sheets for data collection. Supporting materials such as image-based worksheets and documentation tools were also prepared.

- a. Determining the theme. In determining the theme, the researcher used a theme that was adjusted to the theme. The theme used was the theme of "The Universe".
- b. Prepare a Daily Learning Implementation Plan. The school allowed the researcher to create the documents in accordance with the theme used in the initial activities until the end of the activity.
- c. Preparing learning media. Before conducting research, researchers first explain what is on their minds, which is what they draw. These images will be used in the learning process. Preparing observation instruments as a data collection tool during the research.

- d. Preparing research instruments. Before conducting research, researchers prepare instruments using observation sheets. These observation sheets are used as data collection tools during the research.
- e. Documentation tools. Researchers prepare cameras to document the ongoing activities to improve children's speaking skills through the Storytelling Method with Pictures and HPS paper that already has pictures, and they think about what color is good for the picture.

The Cycle 1 action process consists of the first, second, and third meetings, which consist of initial, core, and final activities. Cycle 1 use the theme "Universe". The description of each meeting is as follows: The implementation of the Cycle 1, the first meeting, was held on Tuesday starting at 08.00 - 10.00 WIB. Using the theme of the Universe, sub-themes of rainbows, clouds, and suns, Sub-sub-themes of celestial bodies. The steps of implementing the action are as follows: initial activities \pm 30 minutes, core activities \pm 45 minutes, and final activities \pm 15 minutes. There were 12 children present, and eight children were absent.

The first activity is for children to take their respective positions to sit. In the initial stage of implementing learning activities, the opening begins with saying greetings, reading qiran, and reading prayers before studying together and singing songs so that children are better prepared to start the activity and not get bored easily. Next, the teacher conveys the theme that will be studied that day: "The Universe." Before carrying out the teaching and learning process, the teacher first provides an overview by discussing the Universe, the sub-themes of rainbows, clouds, and the sun, and the sub-themes of celestial bodies.

Next, the teacher asks each child to mention what Universe is around them. In the core activities, ask the children to draw anything around them and imagine. After the paper was distributed, it was seen that some children could not focus, and some were still talking to their friends. After finishing the drawing, the teacher asked the children to tell what pictures they had drawn individually. Then, the teacher prepared an HPS paper to be drawn, which was used for learning activities to improve speaking skills.

The final activity of the teacher and researcher is to evaluate the learning. The teacher reviews by asking questions about the learning carried out that day. Then, the children read short verses, prayers from both parents, prayers for the world's safety, and afterschool prayers.

3. Cycle 1 Results and Reflection

Recapitulation of Cycle 1 can be obtained, with each aspect having five indicators. When added up with improving children's spiritual expression, the maximum score obtained by students is 76, so determining the student competency score is the number of scores obtained multiplied by 100 and then divided by the number of students. The number of students who completed their *kalimat thayyibah* recitation was nine students, with a percentage of 75%, while students who did not complete it were three students. So, the percentage value obtained in the first cycle of the first meeting was very low. So, observations were carried out at the second meeting to improve children's ability of reciting *kalimat thayyibah*.

Table 3
Observation Results in Cycle 1

No	Name	value	Explanation
1	Aska	76	Complete
2	Abangan	66	Not Complete
3	Afifa	81	Complete
4	Azka	76	Complete
5	Dela	85	Complete
6	Hamzah	78	Complete
7	Maharani	84	Complete
8	Pina	65	Not Complete
9	Rassya	98	Complete
10	Reyhan	79	Complete
11	Zaki	78	Complete
12	Zakir	55	Not Complete
Average		75%	

In Cycle 1, the intervention was implemented using the theme “The Universe,” which included structured storytelling sessions supported by visual media and drawing activities. Students participated in three phases: initial, core, and final learning sessions. Observation during these sessions revealed improvement, with 9 out of 12 children (75%) achieving the learning target.

However, some children struggled with focus, coloring tasks, and recalling the content of the story. Additionally, insufficient motivation and scaffolding from the teacher led to gaps in learning consistency. These challenges suggested the need for revised strategies in the next cycle, including enhanced teacher explanations, clearer visual-narrative links, and more interactive discussions.

4. Cycle 2 Implementation

The implementation of this cycle is carried out at a time starting from 08.00 - 10.00 WIB. Using the theme of the Universe. Rainbows, Clouds and Sun, Sub-sub-themes Celestial Bodies, and children are present the same as in the first cycle. The first activity is for children to take their respective positions to sit. In the initial stage of implementing learning activities, the opening begins by saying hello, reading Iqra' Book for those who arrive first, reading prayers before studying together, singing songs so children do not get bored in learning, ready to start activities.

Next, the children say the names of the days. Before carrying out the teaching and learning process, the teacher first provides an overview by having a conversation about the theme of the Universe, the sub-themes of Rainbows, Clouds, and the Sun, and the sub-themes of Heavenly Bodies. The teacher invites the children to sing together so that they share enthusiasm.

The core activity begins with giving children a task, which is to color a picture of a rainbow according to their favorite colors. Before starting the activity, the teacher first explains and gives an example of how to do the task. After finishing coloring, the children explain that the rainbow is beautiful and then mention the colors of the rainbow that they colored. Before asking about the colors they used for the rainbow that had been colored, the teacher reminded them of the rules of the coloring process.

After watching the video, the teacher asks the children to come forward to retell the story. In each rainbow, there are clouds in the picture that they color. The final activity is the teacher and researcher conducting a learning evaluation. The teacher reviews by asking questions about the learning carried out that day. Then, the children read short verses, prayers from both parents, prayers for the world's safety, and afterschool prayers.

5. Cycle 2 Results and Reflection

Cycle 2 presentation was conducted in 2 meetings to improve and enhance the presentation results in Cycle 1 in improving children's speaking skills through the Storytelling Method with Pictures. The stages in Cycle 2 are the same as those in Cycle 1, namely Planning, Action, Observation, and Reflection. The theme used is "The Universe."

The following is a description of the implementation of Cycle 2 research. From the observations in Cycle 2, the first and second meetings have shown satisfactory results where no more children cannot answer questions from the teacher or retell the story that has been played. Children's spiritual language expression has improved well, which shows that improving spiritual language expression through the storytelling method with pictures that have been carried out has a good impact on children's spiritual language expression by looking at the results obtained in Cycle 1 and Cycle 2. Based on these results, improving children's spiritual language expression through the storytelling method with pictures has succeeded based on the established criteria, namely 81.8%. Thus, implementing actions to improve children's spiritual language expression through the Storytelling Method with Pictures does not need to be continued in the next cycle.

Table 4
Observation Result in Cycle 2

No	Name	Value	description
1	Aska	79	Complete
2	Abangan	77	Complete
3	Afifa	89	Complete
4	Azka	79	Complete
5	Dela	87	Complete
6	Hamzah	80	Complete
7	Maharani	92	Complete
8	Pina	76	Complete
9	Rassya	99	Complete
10	Reyhan	85	Complete
11	Zaki	80	Complete
12	Zakir	60	Not Complete
Average		91,66%	

In Cycle 2, pedagogical adjustments were made. The same theme ("The Universe") was used, but teachers introduced more explicit demonstrations, reinforced story-image associations, and encouraged children to retell stories and respond to prompts. Children showed improved attention, fluency, and engagement.

As a result, 11 out of 12 children (91.6%) successfully met the learning criteria. The average class performance rose to 81.8%, confirming significant improvement in verbal expression and spiritual language use. Given these outcomes, the action research was concluded successfully, and no further cycles were deemed necessary.

DISCUSSION

Applying the picture story method was the central approach for enhancing children's spiritual language development, specifically children's spiritual language expression. This method was chosen based on the understanding that young children are exceptionally responsive to visual stimuli, which can enhance imagination and facilitate comprehension. As universal communication tools, images are emotionally engaging and support children in constructing meaning from abstract information ([Lawson-Adams & Dickinson, 2021](#); [Mosako & Ngoepe, 2020](#)). Through oral narratives and visual illustrations, children engage in a multisensory learning experience that stimulates their listening and verbal skills. That aligns with Prayitno (2022), who emphasizes that picture story methods simultaneously nurture imagination and verbal expression in early learners ([Prayitno, 2022](#)).

From the perspective of language acquisition theory, this approach aligns with Stephen Krashen's hypothesis of *comprehensible input*, which stresses that language is best acquired when it is understandable and contextually meaningful ([Lichtman & VanPatten, 2021](#); [Pauzan, 2024](#)). In this case, visual media reduces the cognitive burden of abstract language, helping children internalize words and their appropriate usage more effectively ([Warseto et al., 2021](#)). Moreover, Vygotsky's sociocultural theory underscores the role of interaction and visual scaffolding within the *zone of proximal development* ([Taber, 2020](#)), where guided learning supports emergent verbal skills ([Etnawati, 2022](#)).

Cycle 1 revealed that while the method generated enthusiasm, many children struggled to connect the story they heard with the illustrations they colored. That suggests their visual-verbal association was still developing, and learners required additional scaffolding and explanation. The outcome—only 75% achieving the desired learning targets—indicated that while the method had promise, further refinement was needed to ensure inclusivity and effectiveness for all children.

The study also draws on Richard Mayer's cognitive theory of multimedia learning, which argues that learning improves when verbal and visual elements are meaningfully combined. The picture story method employs the modality, coherence, and contiguity principles by aligning narration with illustrations, reducing distractions, and reinforcing key concepts ([Mayer, 2014](#); [Suryandaru, 2020](#)). The resulting cognitive load can hinder understanding when visual materials are not explicitly tied to the narrative content ([Huff et al., 2020](#)). Additionally, Paivio's dual coding theory supports the idea that verbal and visual information together enhance memory and comprehension ([Camp et al., 2021](#)), helping children encode and retrieve *kalimat thayyibah* more effectively. Consequently, in Cycle 2, the researchers implemented more precise explanations and allowed more time for reflection and discussion, resulting in greater engagement and comprehension.

The improved results in Cycle 2—where 91% of students reached the learning objectives—affirm the effectiveness of the revised approach. Children could associate images with the moral messages embedded in the stories and articulate *kalimat thayyibah* in appropriate contexts. That reflects linguistic development and value internalization, illustrating that contextually meaningful visual learning fosters gradual mastery of spiritual expression.

In an Islamic pedagogical framework, this finding is particularly significant. The habitual recitation of *kalimat thayyibah*—such as *bismillah*, *alhamdulillah*, and *Subhanallah*—is a key component of character education ([Khilmiyah & Setiawan, 2021](#)). These phrases are more than verbal cues; they embody the values of monotheism, gratitude, and ethical behavior. Al-Ghazali, in *Ihya' Ulumuddin*, emphasized that moral education in childhood begins with consistent verbal guidance and gentle behavioral modeling ([Basri & Hasibuan, 2024](#)). When supported with visual stories, this guidance becomes even more accessible and meaningful to young children.

The Prophet Muhammad taught through *qasas* (stories) ([Yusoff, 2023](#)), reinforcing moral lessons through vivid imagery and verbal repetition ([Alhassen, 2021](#)). That mirrors the Qur'anic pedagogy of *tadhkirah* (reminder), where good speech is portrayed as a fruitful tree (QS Ibrahim: 24–25) ([Jannah & Syayfi, 2024](#)). Thus, training children to use *kalimat thayyibah* through stories connects pedagogical theory with religious tradition.

The picture story method also encourages children to think critically and creatively. The emotional resonance of stories, coupled with the clarity of images, helps children internalize values as rules and lived experiences. As shown by Kurniatin and Aryani (2021), illustrated story methods can stimulate broader cognitive growth and imaginative thinking. ([Kurniatin & Aryani, 2021](#)). Additional studies by Niland (2023) and Rozi and Zubaidah (2021) further support the idea that pictures enhance children's ability to express themselves independently and meaningfully. ([Niland, 2023](#); [Rozi & Zubaidah, 2021](#)).

Ultimately, the success of this strategy lies in its alignment with Islamic values and evidence-based early childhood education principles. Combining storytelling and illustration with religious content allows educators to build verbal competence and spiritual awareness ([Huth et al., 2021](#)). The approach strengthens the foundation for character education, providing children with tools to express goodness, purity, and ethical understanding through everyday speech.

This study reinforces that teachers play a critical role in shaping children's character through well-designed pedagogical strategies. As Hasanah (2023) and Oktaviana et al. (2022) noted, words have a moral and psychological influence. Teaching children to recite *kalimat thayyibah* is not merely a linguistic practice, but a foundational act in cultivating noble behavior ([U. Hasanah, 2023](#); [Oktaviana et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, educators must deliberate in designing meaningful, engaging, and spiritually grounded learning experiences. When supported by research, theory, and reflective practice, such strategies have the potential to make a lasting impact on young learners' character development.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the picture story method is a practical and effective strategy for enhancing young children's spiritual language expression in Islamic early childhood education. Through structured storytelling supported by visual media, children not only improved their verbal use of *kalimat thayyibah* but also began to understand and apply these phrases meaningfully in daily life.

Implemented across two action research cycles, the strategy demonstrated measurable progress—from 75% of children achieving the learning objectives in Cycle 1 to 91.6% in Cycle 2. These outcomes affirm the importance of combining narrative, image, and interaction to reinforce spiritual and linguistic development in early learners.

Moreover, the results highlight the value of integrating Islamic moral content into age-appropriate pedagogical methods. Teachers play a pivotal role in this process, functioning as facilitators of both speech and spiritual identity. By adopting the picture story method, educators can effectively bridge the gap between character formation and language acquisition.

Future studies could expand on this work by exploring long-term impacts on character development and examining its applicability across diverse educational settings and religious contexts.

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