

Joy Before Literacy: Why Play, Singing, and Laughter Are the Keys to Children's Reading Success

Kegembiraan Sebelum Literasi: Bagaimana Bermain, Bernyanyi, dan Tertawa Mendorong Keberhasilan Membaca Permulaan

Retno Intan Kuswari¹

¹ Muhammad Ali Shodiq Islamic College

*Corresponding author: intanretno900@gmail.com

Abstract:

Early reading success is commonly viewed as the outcome of systematic reading instruction, whereas the role of joyful learning experiences as a prerequisite for literacy development has received comparatively limited attention. This study aims to analyze how play, singing, and laughter establish psycholinguistic conditions that support children's early reading success. A qualitative case study was conducted at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan, Indonesia. Data were collected through classroom observations, in-depth interviews, and document analysis and were analyzed using the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña, including data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. The findings reveal that play enhances children's attention and learning engagement, singing strengthens phonological awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and verbal memory, while laughter promotes emotional security and confidence during reading activities. The integration of these three activities establishes psycholinguistic conditions that support reading readiness through the interaction of cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social dimensions. This study proposes the Joy Before Literacy framework, which conceptualizes joyful learning as a psycholinguistic prerequisite for early literacy development and offers practical implications for designing more holistic and developmentally appropriate early reading instruction.

Keywords: early reading; early childhood education; joyful learning; play; psycholinguistics; singing.

Abstrak:

Keberhasilan membaca pada anak usia dini umumnya dipandang sebagai hasil dari latihan membaca yang sistematis, sementara peran pengalaman belajar yang menyenangkan sebagai prasyarat perkembangan literasi masih relatif kurang mendapat perhatian. Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis bagaimana aktivitas bermain, bernyanyi, dan tertawa membentuk kondisi psikolinguistik yang mendukung keberhasilan membaca awal pada anak usia dini. Penelitian menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif dengan jenis studi kasus di TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan. Data dikumpulkan melalui observasi, wawancara mendalam, dan dokumentasi, kemudian dianalisis menggunakan model interaktif Miles, Huberman, dan Saldaña yang meliputi kondensasi data, penyajian data, serta penarikan dan verifikasi kesimpulan. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa bermain meningkatkan perhatian dan keterlibatan belajar, bernyanyi memperkuat kesadaran fonologis, penguasaan kosakata, dan memori verbal, sedangkan tertawa menciptakan keamanan emosional yang meningkatkan kepercayaan diri anak dalam aktivitas membaca. Integrasi ketiga aktivitas tersebut membentuk kondisi psikolinguistik yang mendukung kesiapan membaca melalui interaksi aspek kognitif, linguistik, emosional, dan sosial. Penelitian ini mengusulkan kerangka konseptual **Joy Before Literacy**, yang memposisikan kegembiraan belajar sebagai prasyarat psikolinguistik bagi perkembangan literasi awal serta memberikan implikasi bagi pengembangan pembelajaran membaca yang lebih holistik dan sesuai dengan karakteristik perkembangan anak.

Kata kunci: membaca awal; anak usia dini; bermain; bernyanyi; psikolinguistik; joyful learning.

History:

Submission: 08/07/2026

Accepted: 25/09/2026

Published: 02/10/2026

Publisher: Published by the Arabic Education Department, Miftahul Ulum Islamic institute of Pamekasan.

Licensed: This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/)



INTRODUCTION

An interesting phenomenon was observed in the Qur'anic reading instruction at Ummul Quro Assuyuty Kindergarten. Unlike conventional early reading instruction, which often begins with direct recognition of Arabic letters, teachers at this institution create a joyful learning environment through play, singing, educational clapping activities, body movements, and simple humor that naturally encourages children's laughter. Throughout the learning process, children actively participate, interact with their peers and teachers, laugh together, and demonstrate high enthusiasm during reading activities. Such a joyful classroom atmosphere transforms Qur'anic reading from a demanding task into an enjoyable learning experience that children eagerly anticipate. This phenomenon suggests that joy may constitute an essential component of early reading instruction; however, the underlying mechanisms through which joyful experiences contribute to reading success remain insufficiently understood.

From a theoretical perspective, early reading instruction should be designed in accordance with children's linguistic and psychological development. Psycholinguistic theory argues that reading acquisition depends not only on letter recognition but also on children's language readiness, including phonological awareness, vocabulary development, oral language comprehension, and confidence in using language during everyday interactions (Kuhl, 2004). These foundational abilities develop most effectively when children engage in enjoyable, interactive, and low-pressure learning experiences. Play allows children to explore language naturally, singing strengthens their awareness of sounds, rhythm, and pronunciation, while laughter creates positive emotional conditions that enhance attention, motivation, and confidence in language use. Accordingly, previous studies have emphasized that a positive and joyful learning environment serves as an essential foundation for children's language development and early literacy success (Dickinson & Porche, 2011; Hirsh-Pasek et al., 2020).

Previous studies have consistently demonstrated that play contributes to children's language development and early literacy by promoting social interaction, language exploration, and active engagement in learning (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Other studies have reported that singing enhances phonological awareness, vocabulary acquisition, and speech processing skills, all of which are fundamental to early reading development (Moritz et al., 2013). Furthermore, positive and enjoyable learning environments have been shown to strengthen children's motivation, attention, and engagement, thereby facilitating more effective language acquisition (Fredrickson, 2001). Nevertheless, existing studies have generally examined play, singing, or joyful learning as separate instructional components. Limited attention has been given to understanding how the integration of play, singing, and laughter creates psycholinguistic conditions that support early reading success, particularly in the context of Qur'anic reading instruction for young children. This gap provides the rationale for the present study.

Based on the empirical phenomenon and the identified research gap, this study aims to analyze how play, singing, and laughter create psycholinguistic conditions that support children's early reading success. The study is grounded in the assumption that reading achievement is influenced not only by children's ability to recognize linguistic symbols but also by their psycholinguistic readiness, which develops through positive, interactive, and enjoyable learning experiences. The primary contribution of this study is to provide a psycholinguistic perspective on the relationship between play, singing, and laughter in fostering early reading success, thereby enriching the literature on early literacy, particularly in the context of Qur'anic reading instruction in early childhood education.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employed a qualitative approach using a case study design to investigate the learning ecology of Arabic reading instruction for young children at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan. A qualitative approach was selected because the study sought to gain an in-depth understanding of the meanings, experiences, and interactions emerging throughout the learning process within its natural setting, thereby providing a comprehensive account of the phenomenon under investigation (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case study design was adopted because it enables researchers to conduct an intensive investigation of a bounded system through the collection of multiple sources of evidence within a real-life context (Yin, 2018). Accordingly, this approach facilitated an in-depth exploration of the relationships among teachers, learners, learning environments, instructional media, and the activities of playing, singing, laughing, and reading as interconnected components that collectively constitute the learning ecology of early Arabic reading instruction.

The study was conducted at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan, an early childhood education institution that integrates Arabic language instruction into daily learning activities through a child-centered approach. The research site was selected purposively because it possesses characteristics that align with the objectives of the study, particularly the integration of playing, singing, laughing, and reading as essential components of early Arabic reading instruction. Purposive site selection is widely employed in qualitative research to identify information-rich cases that enable researchers to gain an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon under investigation (Patton, 2015). Therefore, TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan provides a relevant and representative setting for examining the learning ecology of Arabic reading instruction within a natural educational context.

The data sources in this study comprised both primary and secondary data. Primary data were obtained from the principal, classroom teachers, and children who were directly involved in Arabic reading instruction at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan. Participants were selected through purposive sampling based on their involvement, experience, and knowledge of the instructional practices under investigation. This sampling strategy enabled the researcher to recruit information-rich participants capable of providing detailed and relevant insights into the research phenomenon (Patton, 2015). Secondary data were collected from supporting documents, including instructional modules, lesson plans, learning schedules, photographs, classroom videos, and institutional documents related to Arabic reading instruction. The integration of primary and secondary data allowed the researcher to develop a comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon while enhancing the credibility of the findings through the use of multiple sources of evidence (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Table 1. Characteristics of Research Participants

Participant Code	Role	Years of Experience/Study	Selection Criteria
P01	Principal	12 years	Responsible for institutional management, curriculum implementation, and the integration of Arabic language learning at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan
P02	Arabic Language Teacher	8 years	Responsible for planning and implementing Arabic reading instruction for young children

P03	Classroom Teacher	6 years	Integrates play-based and child-centered learning activities into Arabic language instruction
P04	Classroom Teacher	5 years	Actively implements learning activities involving playing, singing, laughing, and reading during classroom instruction
P05	Student	2 years	Regularly participates in Arabic reading learning activities and demonstrates active classroom engagement
P06	Student	2 years	Actively participates in play-based Arabic language learning activities
P07	Student	1 year	Demonstrates consistent participation in Arabic reading and literacy activities
P08	Student	1 year	Selected based on active involvement during classroom learning and interaction with teachers and peers

Data were collected using three primary techniques: observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis. The use of multiple data collection techniques was intended to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the learning ecology of Arabic reading instruction at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan. Observations were conducted to examine classroom activities, teacher–student interactions, and the utilization of the learning environment during instructional processes. In-depth interviews were employed to explore the experiences, perspectives, and pedagogical strategies of the principal and teachers in integrating playing, singing, laughing, and reading into Arabic language instruction. Document analysis involved reviewing instructional modules, lesson plans, photographs, classroom videos, and institutional documents related to Arabic reading instruction. Employing multiple techniques facilitated data triangulation, thereby enhancing the completeness, consistency, and credibility of the research findings.

Table 2. Data Collection Techniques

Data Collection Technique	Data Sources	Focus of Data Collection	Purpose
Observation	Teachers, students, classroom environment	Learning activities, classroom interaction, implementation of playing, singing, laughing, and reading	To examine the natural learning process and classroom ecology
In-depth Interview	Principal and teachers	Learning objectives, instructional strategies, curriculum implementation, and learning experiences	To explore participants' perspectives and pedagogical practices
Document	Learning modules,	Curriculum	To corroborate and

Analysis	lesson plans, photographs, videos, institutional documents	implementation, instructional materials, and supporting evidence	enrich findings obtained from observations and interviews
----------	---	--	--

The data were analyzed using the interactive analysis model proposed by Miles, Huberman, and Saldaña (2014), which consists of three interconnected stages: data condensation, data display, and conclusion drawing and verification. Data analysis was conducted iteratively throughout the research process, allowing the researcher to continuously refine codes, categories, and emerging themes as new data were collected. During the data condensation stage, information obtained from observations, interviews, and document analysis was selected, simplified, and categorized according to themes related to playing, singing, laughing, and reading activities in Arabic language instruction. The organized data were subsequently presented through matrices, narrative descriptions, and thematic relationships to facilitate interpretation. Finally, conclusions were drawn and verified by comparing evidence across multiple data sources, ensuring the credibility, consistency, and trustworthiness of the findings regarding the learning ecology of Arabic reading instruction at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan.

RESULTS

3.1. Play as a Foundation for Children's Psycholinguistic Readiness

Classroom observations revealed that every Arabic reading lesson at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan began with approximately 10–15 minutes of structured play-based activities. Teachers employed educational games such as Arabic letter-card matching, picture guessing, Arabic letter puzzles, and movement-based games accompanied by simple Arabic instructions. Throughout these activities, most children participated enthusiastically, responded actively to teachers' questions, and interacted confidently with their peers. As the classroom atmosphere became more engaging and relaxed, children appeared better prepared to participate in subsequent reading activities.

These observational findings were supported by interview data. One Arabic language teacher explained, *"We never begin with reading activities. Children need to enjoy the lesson first. After playing, they become more attentive, more willing to speak, and more confident in recognizing Arabic letters and vocabulary."* (P02). This statement indicates that play was intentionally implemented as a pedagogical strategy to establish children's readiness before introducing written language.

Document analysis further confirmed that play-based activities were systematically embedded within the daily lesson plans. Each instructional plan incorporated structured games as introductory activities before letter recognition, vocabulary presentation, and guided reading practice. Classroom photographs and instructional videos also demonstrated that colorful visual materials, letter cards, concrete objects, and collaborative games enhanced children's engagement throughout the learning process.

3.2. Singing as a Psycholinguistic Mechanism for Phonological Awareness and Vocabulary Development

The findings indicate that singing was an integral component of Arabic reading instruction at TK Ummul Quro Pamekasan. Classroom observations revealed that teachers regularly incorporated simple Arabic songs at the beginning and throughout lessons to introduce letter sounds, vocabulary, and pronunciation patterns. The songs were repeatedly performed alongside body movements, enabling children to imitate sounds and words in a

natural and enjoyable manner. During these activities, most children demonstrated clearer pronunciation, improved vocabulary recall, and greater confidence in repeating newly introduced words independently.

Interview data supported these observations. One teacher explained, *"Children memorize much faster when vocabulary is introduced through songs. They often continue singing outside the classroom, which means they keep repeating Arabic words without realizing it."* (P03). Another teacher noted that songs helped children distinguish Arabic sounds that were unfamiliar in their native language, particularly consonants that required more precise articulation.

Document analysis further showed that each instructional theme included songs specifically designed to reinforce vocabulary and letter recognition. Classroom videos illustrated the consistent integration of songs, movements, and visual materials to strengthen the association between sounds, meanings, and written symbols. Overall, the findings suggest that singing functions not merely as an enjoyable classroom activity but as a psycholinguistic mechanism that enhances phonological awareness, verbal memory, and vocabulary acquisition, thereby supporting children's early reading development.

3.3. Laughter as an Emotional Catalyst for Children's Reading Readiness

The findings revealed that a joyful classroom atmosphere characterized by laughter played a significant role in establishing children's emotional readiness before engaging in reading activities. Classroom observations indicated that teachers intentionally created an enjoyable learning environment through simple humor, expressive games, informal conversations, and positive reinforcement that elicited children's laughter and enthusiasm. During the instructional process, children appeared more relaxed, willingly attempted to pronounce new Arabic words, and showed little hesitation when making mistakes in pronunciation or letter recognition. This positive emotional climate encouraged active participation without creating pressure or fear of failure.

These observations were supported by interview data. One teacher explained, *"We always try to make children laugh during the lesson. When they enjoy the class, they are not afraid of making mistakes. They become more confident in trying to read and repeat new vocabulary."* (P02). The principal further emphasized that early childhood education should prioritize emotional security rather than academic pressure, allowing children to explore language confidently within a supportive learning environment.

Document analysis also demonstrated that classroom interactions were consistently warm and encouraging. Photographs and instructional videos showed teachers providing positive reinforcement through smiles, applause, and verbal praise whenever children attempted to answer questions or read Arabic words. Such supportive feedback maintained children's motivation even when errors occurred, making the learning process more natural and enjoyable. Overall, the findings suggest that laughter functions not merely as an expression of enjoyment but as an emotional catalyst that promotes confidence, motivation, and readiness for early reading development.

Analysis of the observation, interview, and document data revealed that children's early reading success was not produced by a single instructional activity but emerged from the integration of play, singing, and laughter, which collectively established psycholinguistic conditions that facilitated reading development. These three activities formed a complementary instructional sequence. Play promoted children's attention, curiosity, and engagement in learning. Once children became engaged, singing strengthened phonological processing, vocabulary acquisition, and verbal memory through rhythm and repetition. A classroom atmosphere characterized by laughter subsequently created emotional security, encouraging

children to pronounce, recognize, and read written symbols without fear of making mistakes. The integration of these activities enabled children to participate in reading instruction more actively, confidently, and meaningfully.

Table 3. Integrated Psycholinguistic Conditions Supporting Children's Early Reading Success

Learning Activity	Immediate Outcome	Psycholinguistic Condition	Contribution to Early Reading
Play	Active engagement and sustained attention	Cognitive readiness	Increased readiness to recognize symbols and letters
Singing	Improved pronunciation and vocabulary recall	Phonological awareness and verbal memory	Easier decoding and word recognition
Laughter	Positive emotions and self-confidence	Emotional security and learning motivation	Greater willingness to participate in reading
Integrated Activities	Meaningful and enjoyable learning experiences	Comprehensive psycholinguistic readiness	Improved early reading performance

Table 3 demonstrates that each learning activity contributes in a distinct yet complementary way to the development of children's readiness for early reading. Play primarily enhances cognitive readiness by increasing children's attention and engagement in learning. Singing strengthens phonological processing, enriches vocabulary acquisition, and improves verbal memory, all of which are essential for early word recognition. Meanwhile, laughter fosters emotional security, encouraging children to attempt reading without fear of making mistakes. When these three activities are integrated into the learning process, they create psycholinguistic conditions that optimally support early reading development. These findings suggest that children's reading success is the result of the integration of enjoyable learning experiences rather than merely the product of repetitive reading practice.

DISCUSSION

The principal finding of this study is that children's early reading success does not begin with intensive reading practice but with the establishment of psycholinguistic conditions that prepare children to receive, process, and interpret linguistic information. The findings demonstrate that the integration of play, singing, and laughter creates a learning environment that enhances children's attention, engagement, emotional security, and linguistic readiness before they interact with written symbols. This finding extends the perspective of emergent literacy, which conceptualizes reading development as the outcome of accumulated meaningful language experiences within language-rich learning environments rather than merely the product of repetitive reading instruction (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). From a psycholinguistic perspective, joyful learning experiences facilitate the development of attention, phonological awareness, verbal memory, and emotional regulation, all of which are fundamental to early reading acquisition (Goswami, 2001). The significance of the finding lies in the relationship between the emotional quality of learning and the cognitive processes required for literacy development. When children experience learning as enjoyable and psychologically secure, they are more likely to attend to linguistic input, participate in verbal interactions, and repeatedly engage with sounds and words. Therefore, this study argues that joyful learning should be viewed not merely as an instructional strategy for increasing motivation but as a psycholinguistic condition that prepares children for successful early literacy development.

These findings can be explained from a psycholinguistic perspective, which considers cognitive and emotional readiness as fundamental prerequisites for reading acquisition. Learning to read requires children not only to recognize written symbols but also to sustain attention, process phonological information, activate working memory, and connect visual forms with their corresponding sounds and meanings. Before children can efficiently decode written language, they need sufficient opportunities to listen to, manipulate, repeat, and interpret spoken language. Consequently, learning environments that incorporate enjoyable experiences through play, singing, and laughter can provide repeated opportunities for these processes to occur in meaningful contexts. The present findings are consistent with the emergent literacy framework, which argues that literacy develops gradually through children's interactions with their social environment and meaningful language experiences before formal reading instruction begins (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998). Furthermore, the findings support psycholinguistic research suggesting that phonological awareness, vocabulary knowledge, attention, and verbal memory are important foundations of early reading achievement (Goswami, 2001). The implication is that reading readiness should be conceptualized more broadly than the ability to recognize letters or reproduce sounds. It also involves children's readiness to attend, remember, interpret, participate, and regulate their responses during language interaction. From this perspective, joyful learning constitutes an environment in which these capacities can develop simultaneously.

The findings of this study are consistent with previous research demonstrating that joyful learning experiences contribute to children's early literacy development. Earlier studies have reported that play enhances learning engagement, self-regulation, and cognitive readiness, all of which serve as important foundations for reading development (Nicolopoulou, 2010). Play is particularly relevant because it allows children to encounter language in contexts that are interactive rather than purely instructional. During play, children negotiate meanings, respond to others, repeat linguistic expressions, and use language to regulate social interaction. Such experiences provide opportunities for children to develop oral language competencies that later support literacy. Singing represents another important component because its rhythmic and repetitive structure draws children's attention to the sound patterns of language. Research has shown that singing can support phonological awareness, pronunciation, and vocabulary acquisition by providing repeated exposure to sounds, syllables, rhythm, and patterned language (Degé & Schwarzer, 2011). Laughter, meanwhile, represents an affective dimension of learning that may contribute to emotional security and willingness to participate. Positive emotional experiences can broaden children's engagement with learning activities and encourage participation in social and linguistic interactions (Fredrickson, 2001). These three dimensions indicate that joyful learning has cognitive, linguistic, and emotional functions that are relevant to literacy development.

Most previous studies have examined these activities independently, focusing on the effectiveness of play, singing, or positive emotions as separate instructional variables. This tendency creates a fragmented understanding of joyful learning because children's learning experiences rarely occur through isolated activities. In actual classroom interactions, play may involve singing, singing may generate laughter, and laughter may encourage children to remain engaged in subsequent linguistic activities. The present study contributes to this discussion by conceptualizing play, singing, and laughter as interconnected components of a single learning environment. Their significance therefore lies not only in the individual contribution of each activity but also in their cumulative and mutually reinforcing effects. Play creates opportunities for active participation, singing strengthens attention to linguistic sound patterns, and laughter

contributes to emotional security. When these elements operate together, children encounter language through multiple and complementary pathways. This integrated perspective provides a stronger explanation of why joyful learning may support early literacy than an approach that treats each activity as an independent technique.

The integration of these activities can also be understood through the relationship between oral language and emerging written language. Early reading does not develop independently from children's previous linguistic experiences. Before encountering written symbols, children have already developed representations of sounds, words, meanings, and communicative patterns through oral interaction. Play provides opportunities to use these representations in meaningful situations, while singing repeatedly highlights the acoustic structure of language. Laughter and positive emotional interaction may further sustain children's willingness to participate in these experiences. The resulting environment is therefore language-rich as well as emotionally supportive. Such an environment can increase the frequency and quality of children's encounters with linguistic input before formal reading begins. In this respect, the present study extends emergent literacy theory by emphasizing not only the quantity of language exposure but also the emotional and interactional quality of the environment in which language exposure occurs.

The principal contribution of this study lies in proposing a more integrative perspective on the relationship between joyful learning and early reading success. Unlike previous studies, which have generally examined play, singing, or positive emotions as independent instructional strategies, the present study demonstrates that these three activities operate as an interconnected system that establishes psycholinguistic conditions before formal reading begins. In other words, play, singing, and laughter are conceptualized not merely as teaching techniques or enjoyable classroom activities but as complementary mechanisms that simultaneously support attention, phonological awareness, verbal memory, emotional security, and confidence in language use. This perspective extends current understandings of early literacy by suggesting that children's reading success depends not only on the quality of reading instruction itself but also on the quality of learning experiences that precede it. Accordingly, this study proposes the concept of Joy Before Literacy, a conceptual framework that positions joyful learning as a psycholinguistic condition for successful early literacy development.

The Joy Before Literacy concept can be further understood by examining the distinct but interconnected functions of play, singing, and laughter. Play primarily provides a context for cognitive engagement and active language use. Through play, children are encouraged to explore, respond, negotiate meaning, and use language in situations that are meaningful to them. Singing provides structured exposure to the phonological properties of language. Its rhythm, repetition, and melodic patterns can direct children's attention toward sounds and sequences that might otherwise remain less salient in ordinary conversation. Laughter contributes an affective dimension by creating an atmosphere in which children can participate without excessive fear of error. These functions are not mutually exclusive. Instead, they intersect during classroom interaction and collectively support children's readiness to engage with language. The following table synthesizes this relationship.

Table 3. Joy Before Literacy Framework: The Psycholinguistic Functions of Joyful Learning

Joyful Learning Component	Primary Learning Experience	Psycholinguistic Mechanism	Linguistic Function	Contribution to Early Literacy
Play	Interactive,	Attention, self-	Encourages	Establishes

	exploratory, and language-based activities	regulation, working memory, and active engagement	vocabulary use, verbal interaction, and meaning construction	cognitive readiness and active engagement with language
Singing	Rhythmic repetition, songs, chants, and patterned language	Phonological processing, auditory memory, rhythm recognition, and sound discrimination	Strengthens awareness of syllables, sounds, pronunciation, and vocabulary	Supports phonological awareness and the transition from oral to written language
Laughter	Positive emotional interaction and spontaneous enjoyment	Emotional regulation, reduced anxiety, attentional engagement, and psychological security	Encourages verbal participation and willingness to communicate	Creates an emotionally supportive condition for language and literacy learning
Integrated joyful learning	Play, singing, and laughter occurring as interconnected classroom experiences	Interaction of cognitive, linguistic, and emotional readiness	Combines oral language experience, sound awareness, memory, and communicative participation	Establishes psycholinguistic readiness before formal reading instruction
Joy Before Literacy	Sustained joyful, language-rich learning environment preceding formal reading	Integration of attention, phonological awareness, memory, emotional security, and engagement	Connects meaningful oral-language experiences with emerging literacy	Positions joyful learning as a psycholinguistic foundation for early reading development

The framework presented in Table 3 clarifies that the contribution of joyful learning to early literacy does not originate from a single activity. Rather, it emerges from the interaction of several psycholinguistic processes. Play primarily activates children's attention and participation, singing increases sensitivity to sound structures, and laughter contributes to emotional security. These processes converge in an environment where children can repeatedly encounter language without experiencing learning as a purely formal or demanding task. The framework therefore positions joyful learning as a condition that precedes and supports formal literacy instruction. The distinction is important because it changes the pedagogical question from "How can children be taught to read more intensively?" to "What conditions enable children to become cognitively, linguistically, and emotionally ready to learn to read?" This conceptual shift represents the central theoretical implication of the study.

The Joy Before Literacy framework also provides a basis for reconsidering the meaning of reading readiness. Traditional approaches may emphasize observable pre-reading

competencies such as letter recognition, phonemic discrimination, or the ability to reproduce specific sounds. Although these competencies remain important, the present findings indicate that they should be situated within a broader developmental environment. Children need opportunities to attend to language, remember linguistic patterns, engage in interaction, experience repetition, and respond emotionally to learning situations. Reading readiness, therefore, is not simply a collection of isolated skills possessed by individual children. It is also shaped by the interaction between children and the learning environment. A joyful environment may facilitate children's willingness to repeatedly engage with language, while repeated engagement provides opportunities for linguistic and cognitive processes to develop. This interpretation is consistent with the broader principle of emergent literacy that literacy development begins before formal reading instruction and is embedded in children's everyday language experiences (Whitehurst & Lonigan, 1998).

The findings also have implications for teachers and early childhood curriculum development. Teachers should not position play, singing, and laughter at the margins of literacy instruction as activities used only to fill transition periods or entertain children after formal learning tasks have been completed. Instead, these activities can be intentionally connected to language and literacy objectives. For example, play can be structured around vocabulary and oral narrative, singing can emphasize sound patterns and repeated linguistic forms, and humorous interaction can be used to encourage verbal participation. Such integration does not mean transforming every joyful activity into a formal literacy exercise. The pedagogical value of joyful learning depends partly on preserving children's sense of meaningful participation and enjoyment. The teacher's role is consequently to create conditions in which enjoyment and language development support one another rather than allowing one to replace the other.

The theoretical and practical implications of this study are therefore closely connected. Theoretically, the study reinforces a psycholinguistic understanding of early reading as a multidimensional process involving cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social dimensions. Practically, it suggests that early childhood educators should create language-rich environments in which children can engage with sound, vocabulary, memory, interaction, and meaning through enjoyable experiences. Curriculum developers may use the Joy Before Literacy framework as a conceptual reference when designing early literacy programs that place language readiness before intensive formal reading instruction. The framework does not imply that formal reading instruction is unnecessary. Rather, it proposes that formal instruction is likely to be more meaningful when children enter it with sufficient cognitive, linguistic, and emotional readiness.

Overall, this study suggests that joyful learning occupies a more fundamental position in early literacy development than is often assumed. Play, singing, and laughter are not merely complementary classroom activities; they constitute interconnected experiences through which children develop the attention, phonological sensitivity, verbal memory, emotional security, and engagement required for early reading. The conceptual contribution of the study is captured in the Joy Before Literacy framework, which connects the emotional quality of learning environments with the psycholinguistic foundations of literacy. By positioning joy before formal literacy instruction, the framework highlights that children's readiness to read is shaped not only by what they are taught but also by how they experience language before reading becomes a formal task. This perspective provides a basis for future empirical research examining whether sustained integration of joyful learning experiences produces measurable changes in phonological awareness, vocabulary, attention, reading readiness, and subsequent reading achievement.

CONCLUSION

This study concludes that children's early reading success is not determined solely by the intensity of reading practice but by the establishment of psycholinguistic conditions developed through the integration of play, singing, and laughter within the learning process. These three activities function synergistically to foster attention, phonological awareness, verbal memory, emotional security, and learning engagement, which together form the foundation of children's readiness for reading. Based on this synthesis, the study proposes the Joy Before Literacy framework, which conceptualizes joyful learning as a psycholinguistic prerequisite for early literacy development. This framework contributes to the advancement of psycholinguistic and emergent literacy research by demonstrating that early reading success emerges from the interaction of cognitive, linguistic, emotional, and social dimensions within children's learning experiences. From a practical perspective, the findings suggest that teachers, curriculum developers, and early childhood education institutions should systematically integrate play, singing, and laughter into reading instruction as essential pedagogical components that promote children's holistic development.

Despite its conceptual and practical contributions, this study has several limitations. It was conducted in a single early childhood education institution using a qualitative approach; therefore, the findings primarily provide an in-depth understanding of how psycholinguistic conditions are established rather than testing causal relationships or measuring the effectiveness of individual instructional activities. Consequently, the findings should be interpreted within the specific context of the study. Future research is encouraged to examine the Joy Before Literacy framework across different educational settings, learner characteristics, and sociocultural contexts using quantitative, experimental, or mixed-methods designs. In addition, future studies may investigate how family involvement, home literacy environments, and educational technologies contribute to strengthening the psycholinguistic conditions that support children's early reading success.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, A., & Shattuck, J. (2012). Design-based research: A decade of progress in education research? *Educational Researcher*, 41(1), 16–25.
<https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X11428813>
- Bus, A. G., & van Ijzendoorn, M. H. (1999). Phonological awareness and early reading: A meta-analysis of experimental training studies. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 91(3), 403–414.
- Cabell, S. Q., Zucker, T. A., DeCoster, J., & Justice, L. M. (2019). Impact of teacher–child conversations on preschool language and literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 48, 14–29.
- Degé, F., & Schwarzer, G. (2011). The effect of a music program on phonological awareness in preschoolers. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 2, Article 124.
<https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2011.00124>
- Fredrickson, B. L. (2001). The role of positive emotions in positive psychology: The broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions. *American Psychologist*, 56(3), 218–226.
- Goswami, U. (2001). Early phonological development and the acquisition of literacy. In S.

- B. Neuman & D. K. Dickinson (Eds.), *Handbook of Early Literacy Research* (pp. 111–125). Guilford Press.
- Justice, L. M., Jiang, H., & Strasser, K. (2018). Linguistic environment of preschool classrooms: Implications for children's language and literacy development. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 42, 79–92.
- Kempert, S., Götz, R., Blatter, K., Tibken, C., Artelt, C., Schneider, W., & Stanat, P. (2016). Training early literacy related skills: To which degree does a musical training contribute to phonological awareness development? *Frontiers in Psychology*, 7, 1803. <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2016.01803>
- Neuman, S. B., & Roskos, K. (1991). Peers as literacy informants: A description of young children's literacy conversations in play. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 6(2), 233–248.
- Nicolopoulou, A. (2010). The alarming disappearance of play from early childhood education. *Human Development*, 53(1), 1–4.
- Shalev, L., & Share, D. L. (2021). Cognitive foundations of early literacy development. *Reading and Writing*, 34(5), 1145–1167.
- Whitehurst, G. J., & Lonigan, C. J. (1998). Child development and emergent literacy. *Child Development*, 69(3), 848–872.
- Wood, E. (2014). Free choice and free play in early childhood education: Troubling the discourse. *International Journal of Early Years Education*, 22(1), 4–18.
- Zosh, J. M., Hopkins, E. J., Jensen, H., Liu, C., Neale, D., Hirsh-Pasek, K., Solis, S. L., & Whitebread, D. (2017). Learning through play: A review of the evidence. *LEGO Foundation*.
- Zucker, T. A., Cabell, S. Q., Justice, L. M., Pentimonti, J. M., & Kaderavek, J. N. (2013). The role of frequent, interactive shared reading in the development of language and literacy skills in preschool children. *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 41(4), 295–305.