The Use of Interactive Storytelling to Improve Reading Literacy Abilities in Islamic Cultural History at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi, Central Maluku Regency

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Abstract

One of the learning elements in Islamic Religious Education is the element of Islamic Cultural History (SKI). Through the right learning approach, Islamic Religious Education teachers play a role in improving literacy skills and reading comprehension of Islamic Cultural History events by using interactive storytelling methods. Interactive storytelling is not a contemporary learning method. However, interactive storytelling is rarely employed in the field of Islamic Religious Education studies, despite its potential to enhance the quality of learning, particularly in aspects such as literacy and storytelling skills. The purpose of this study is to describe and explain the planning, implementation, and implications of using interactive storytelling to improve the reading literacy skills of seventh-grade students in Islamic Cultural History material at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi. This type of research employs a qualitative approach, utilising data collection techniques that include observation, interviews, and documentation. The results of the study indicate that the use of interactive storytelling in the material of Islamic Cultural History at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi has been implemented quite effectively as an effort to improve reading literacy and foster storytelling skills.

Keywords: Interactive Storytelling, Reading Literacy, Islamic Cultural History.

INTRODUCTION

There are six literacy capabilities widely recognised as central to participation in the twenty-first century. These comprise reading and writing literacy, numeracy, scientific literacy, financial literacy, civic and cultural literacy, and digital literacy (Banawi et al., 2022, pp. 253-254). Of these, reading literacy remains a persistent challenge within schooling in Indonesia, where large cohorts of students continue to demonstrate limited comprehension of written texts. Evidence from the Programme for International Student Assessment in 2018 and 2022 indicates that Indonesian students' reading comprehension scores are below international averages (Bilad et al., 2024, pp. 2-3), suggesting systemic weaknesses rather than isolated shortcomings. On this basis, it is reasonable to conclude that reading-literacy initiatives have not yet achieved their intended impact across the system, and that more targeted, contextually appropriate interventions are required to build decoding, inferencing, and critical interpretation skills.

Several factors are frequently cited as explanations for the limited engagement with reading among children. These include restricted access to varied and age-appropriate texts, classroom methods that fail to spark curiosity or sustain attention, and a lack of consistent support from families and communities for reading beyond school hours (Colgate & Colgate, 2025, pp. 1-3). The consequences are visible in subject areas that rely heavily on comprehension of complex texts, notably Islamic Cultural History within Islamic Religious Education. Islamic Cultural History examines sequences of events in the development of Kusumaningputri (2019, p. 216), suggesting that Muslim communities, over time, encompass social, political, and cultural dimensions that demand careful reading, chronological reasoning, and evaluation of sources. Students, consequently, require a sufficiently developed literacy repertoire to identify central ideas, trace causal relations, and distil the significance of historical episodes from often dense narrative prose.

One pedagogical approach with promise for addressing these literacy and comprehension challenges is interactive storytelling. In contrast with conventional storytelling, which positions students primarily as listeners, interactive storytelling integrates the narrative trajectory with structured participation, inviting students to take on roles, pose questions, and co-construct events as narrators (Hisey et al., 2024, p. 152). This dialogic configuration supports attention, meaning-making, and memory by aligning story structure with turn-taking, prediction, and elaboration. It can also scaffold key reading-comprehension strategies, including activating prior knowledge, monitoring understanding, and synthesising information, while offering opportunities to link textual content with visual, oral, and performative modes that many students find accessible. In doing so, interactive storytelling provides a principled bridge between oral interaction and the competent interpretation of written historical texts.

There is comparatively little empirical work that examines interactive storytelling within Islamic Cultural History specifically, which creates a clear opportunity for focused study. The present research, therefore, investigates Year 7 students at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi with three interrelated aims. First, it describes and analyses the planning of interactive storytelling as a means to strengthen reading literacy for Islamic Cultural History. Second, it examines how the approach is enacted in classroom practice within the school, including task design, materials, and teacher–student interaction. Third, it evaluates the implications of this approach for students' reading comprehension in Islamic Cultural History, as well as for teachers' instructional decision-making and classroom culture. The study's contribution lies in demonstrating that interactive storytelling can enhance not only students' verbal storytelling skills and social interaction, but also their ability to extract main ideas, infer meaning, and retain content knowledge from written historical texts, thereby offering practicable guidance for curriculum and pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education.

METHOD

This study employs a qualitative design to describe and explain how interactive storytelling is deployed to strengthen the reading literacy of Year 7 students in Islamic Cultural History at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi, with close attention to pedagogic processes as they unfold in the classroom. The participants comprise one participating teacher and thirty-nine students. The data were generated through classroom observation to document real-time teaching, interactional organisation, and student engagement, through semi-structured interviews with the teacher and a purposive subset of students to elicit perspectives on planning, enactment, and perceived outcomes, and through analysis of documents including lesson plans, student worksheets, and evidence of comprehension in written work. Analysis proceeded through four linked stages. First, data condensation was undertaken to organise, code, and reduce field notes, transcripts, and artefacts into analytically meaningful categories. Second, data display arranged relationships in matrices and narrative charts that clarified connections among planning moves, interactional practices, and reading-comprehension behaviours in lessons. Third, verification involved repeated checking across sources, constant comparison within and across datasets, and systematic researcher memo writing to test the stability and credibility of emerging claims. Finally, conclusions were drawn by integrating convergent evidence on the contribution of interactive storytelling to decoding, inference making, and synthesis in Islamic Cultural History, with attention to how these processes supported students' understanding of events, actors, and causal sequences in the historical narratives studied.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Planning for Integrating Interactive Storytelling to Enhance Students' Reading Literacy

The planning of interactive storytelling comprised the development of a Lesson Implementation Plan that explicitly integrated reading literacy objectives with the content of Islamic Cultural History, the careful selection of historically appropriate and age relevant materials, the creation of supporting media such as curated visual illustrations, timelines, and accessible narrative texts, and the design of interactional routines that position students as active participants who collaboratively build meaning through questioning, predicting, and collective retelling. The plan articulated clear success criteria for identifying main ideas, tracing chronological sequences, and recognising cause-and-effect relations across episodes. It specified preparatory vocabulary work, guided reading prompts, and discussion protocols that structure turn-taking and ensure broad participation. Through this integrated approach, the expectation is a substantive improvement in students' reading literacy, most notably in decoding specialised terms, drawing inferences from context, synthesising information across modalities, and consolidating independent comprehension of written historical narratives.

1. Teaching Materials

Teaching materials were conceived as the core pedagogic apparatus that orients instruction and enables learning, functioning both as a guide for the teacher and as a scaffold for students. Their purpose was to support the achievement of the specified competencies while fostering an active and productive classroom climate. In the interview, the teacher explained the planning in the following terms.

"I designed the lesson plan with learning objectives that included the use of interactive storytelling and reading literacy. I prepared worksheets that contain a synopsis of the history of the establishment of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, and a task sheet that asks students to order the events of the story based on their understanding. The narrative is then developed in interactive storytelling using a relay storytelling technique."

2. Media

Observation and interview data indicated that the teacher employed a short video sourced from YouTube as an auxiliary resource to support instruction. As an audiovisual medium, the platform offered accessible and varied content that could enrich the historical narrative, highlight setting and actors, and sustain attention at key points in the lesson. The teacher of Islamic Religious Education described the rationale as follows.

"The programme on the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, accessed through a YouTube channel, serves as a teaching aid that supports students' understanding and interest through audiovisual presentation."

3. Strategy

Across observations and interviews, the pedagogic strategy was consistently student-centred, with the teacher acting as facilitator and designer of tasks that placed responsibility for sense-making with the students. The intention was to raise engagement and strengthen reading literacy by ensuring that students questioned, predicted, and justified interpretations using evidence from the text. The teacher articulated this stance in the interview.

"To improve reading literacy and student engagement, I use a student-centred approach. I act as a facilitator and provide learning materials. Students take an active role in learning and discover knowledge through the texts they read."

4. Technique

To operationalise the strategy, the teacher combined structured discussion with interactive storytelling through a relay technique that distributed narrative turns across the class. This technique ensured that no single student dominated the floor, created repeated opportunities for retrieval and elaboration, and compelled readers to cross-check their oral contributions against the written text. The teacher summarised the approach as follows.

"To create active learning that focuses on students, I combine discussion with interactive storytelling using a relay storytelling technique."

5. Assessment

Observation and interview data revealed that the assessment combined knowledge tests with performance-based evaluations. The teacher administered a pre-test to establish a baseline and a post-test at the end of the lesson to gauge immediate learning gains, treating the initial scores as a point of comparison for subsequent performance. For the storytelling performance, the teacher used an analytic rubric with criteria that included the accuracy of historical content, the coherence across sentences, the quality of language, and the degree of collaboration within the group. The teacher explained,

"To measure the students' knowledge, I conduct a pre-test and a post-test, using the first to understand the students' starting point. For storytelling performance, I apply a rubric that rates accuracy of content, inter-sentential linkage, language quality, and teamwork."

The findings indicate that the teacher produced a clear and coherent lesson plan that functioned as a practical guide for implementing interactive learning within Islamic Cultural History. In preparation, the teacher assembled targeted teaching materials, including a concise summary of the Umayyad Caliphate's founding

in Damascus and an interactive storytelling worksheet. These materials were designed not only as reading inputs but also as instruments that prompt students to construct meaning, generate new ideas, and reconstruct the narrative in line with their evolving understanding. Tasks required students to identify main ideas, track chronology, and reformulate key episodes in their own words through guided discussion and collaborative retelling. In this way, the materials aligned literacy goals with narrative activity, encouraged accountable talk, and made comprehension visible in students' contributions. The planning, hence positioned resources, interaction, and assessment as mutually reinforcing components of a single pedagogic design.

The school-based evidence aligns with prior studies that stress the importance of deliberate planning and judicious media use in history education. Schmitt et al. (2022, p. 77) argue that careful selection of content that matches students' cognitive readiness, together with appropriate audiovisual media, enhances students' activity and understanding of historical subject matter. Quinn and Traga Philippakos (2023, p. 266) report that systematic instructional design and well-matched materials, when paired with a suitable method, lead to relevant gains in reading comprehension. The present case reflects those claims through the integration of structured texts, a focused video, and interactional routines that connect reading with oral narration. The convergence between local findings and the reported literature suggests that the observed improvements are not incidental but arise from principled alignment across aims, materials, and classroom processes. This alignment strengthens the plausibility that interactive storytelling can serve as a viable pathway to improved literacy outcomes in Islamic Cultural History.

Students acquire meaningful and memorable learning experiences through interactive activities and social interactions, while the teacher adopts a facilitative role within a student-centred environment. The approach resonates with a constructivist view, associated with Piaget (as cited in Ahmad Radenan Mohd & Hasnah, 2025, p. 4), in which knowledge is built through active engagement with tasks that require interpretation, negotiation, and problem solving. It also reflects a humanistic stance, associated with Reeve and Shin (2020, p. 150), that recognises students' need to be heard and to express their views, which can nurture intrinsic motivation when classroom structures provide space and respect for their voices. From a cognitive perspective, drawing on Gagné (as cited in McNeill & Fitch, 2023, pp. 521-523), learning progressed through stages that included the activation of attention, the encoding of new information, the integration of this information with prior knowledge, and the consolidation of meaningful representations. The blend of participation, recognition, and structured processing appears to have supported deeper comprehension and more confident expression.

In summary, the observed design effectively operationalised three complementary traditions. The constructivist dimension created opportunities for exploration and meaning-making through reading, discussion, sequencing, and relay storytelling, which required students to justify their claims with reference to the text. The humanistic dimension sustained a classroom climate in which students' contributions were valued and in which they were encouraged to take interpretive risks and to articulate their understanding of historical narratives. The cognitive dimension was evident in the use of advance organisers, episodic ordering, retrieval practice, and the coupling of verbal and visual information to aid encoding and recall. Through this combination, the teaching fostered comprehension, memory, and expression, resulting in observable gains in reading literacy for Islamic Cultural History.

Implementing Interactive Storytelling to Enhance Students' Reading Literacy

The implementation phase of teaching Islamic Cultural History on the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus followed the pre-agreed lesson plan consistently and transparently. The participating teacher affirmed in the interview that classroom activities were guided by this plan in order to achieve two linked goals: the development of students' storytelling capabilities and the enhancement of reading comprehension skills.

> *"I carried out the teaching process with reference to the lesson plan I designed in order to achieve the learning objectives, which are storytelling ability and enhanced reading literacy."*

Delivery was structured into three interlocking stages, which comprised an opening phase, a core learning phase, and a closing phase. This sequencing ensured an orderly progression from orientation, through supported exploration and collaborative construction of meaning, to consolidation and evaluation of learning.

1. Opening activities. The teacher greeted the class and took the register. The learning objectives were presented with explicit reference to storytelling and reading literacy. The teacher motivated the value of studying the emergence of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus for understanding the development of Islamic civilisation. Students then completed a short pre-test to establish their initial knowledge of the topic and to provide a baseline for subsequent comparison.

2. Core activities. The core phase comprised exploration, elaboration, and confirmation. In exploration, students viewed a short video sourced from YouTube on the origins of the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus, after which the teacher asked orienting questions to focus attention and to check immediate understanding of events, actors, and chronology. In elaboration, the teacher organised students into groups according to attendance, distributed student worksheets, and guided students to read a prepared summary text on the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate. Within groups, students completed the worksheet by continuing a partially initiated narrative in the story column, drawing directly on the summary text and group discussion. In confirmation, groups arranged the order of narrators based on the content they had composed, and each group delivered an interactive storytelling performance lasting seven to ten minutes, utilising a relay technique. The teacher assessed performance with and then reinforced core content and, together with students, distilled the principal points concerning the Umayyad Caliphate in Damascus.

3. Closing activities. Students completed a post-test to measure immediate gains relative to the baseline. The teacher distributed a brief reflection sheet to gather students' views on the lesson and the historical material. Verbal praise acknowledged active participation and sustained effort. For the following week's Islamic Religious Education session, students were assigned home reading on Umayyad advancements in governance, law, social life, economy, religion, and education. The lesson concluded with the recitation of the Kafaratul Majlis supplication.

Implementation is understood as the coordinated set of actions through which a plan is translated into concrete classroom activity, and the present study shows that interactive storytelling functions as an effective vehicle for this translation within Islamic Cultural History. The findings indicate measurable gains in reading literacy and noticeable growth in critical thinking, as students are required to interpret sources, relate events, and justify narrative choices with reference to textual evidence. Prior research resonates with these outcomes. McErlean (2018, pp. 161-163) asserts that instruction built around video and historically grounded texts, when aligned with interactive storytelling, helps students sustain attention and extract deeper meaning from historical accounts. Koenitz and Eladhari (2025, pp. 219-221) suggest that interactive storytelling, combined with discussion and presentation, fosters active participation and supports the construction of understanding, as well as the development of critical analysis. The mechanism is straightforward. Consistent with Vygotskian sociocultural theory (as cited in Qureshi et al., 2023, p. 2374), students acquire new knowledge through direct engagement with texts and media, and they consolidate their understanding through social interactions that invite explanation, challenge, and repair. In this configuration, storytelling is not an ornament to reading but a structured practice that exposes comprehension processes to view and renders them available for formative guidance.

The teacher's pedagogic judgement is central to these effects. Drawing on a cognitive perspective associated with Gagné (as cited in Li et al., 2025, p. 2), the teacher selects an approach that captures attention, supports encoding, and promotes retention, thereby creating a classroom climate in which students are motivated to read purposefully and to share what they have interpreted. Reading is treated as an active process in which information is extracted, organised, and stored in long-term memory (Sangia, 2014, p. 2), and interactive storytelling provides the communicative pathway through which students articulate, test, and refine that information. The delivery follows three staged phases that accord with principles of active and meaningful learning. The opening phase activates prior knowledge in line with constructivist theory and prepares a cognitive scaffold for new material. The core phase integrates video viewing, close reading of a summary text, structured discussion, and interactive storytelling, which together reflect both cognitive and constructivist assumptions about how understanding is built and monitored through cycles of hypothesis, evidence, and revision. Finally, the closing phase consolidates learning by eliciting key points, prompting reflection, and setting forward-looking reading, which strengthens transfer and retrieval. Across these phases, the coordinated use of audiovisual media, written texts, collaborative dialogue, and performance-based narration produces a coherent experience in which comprehension, inference-making, and critical evaluation are rehearsed and made durable.

Implications of Interactive Storytelling to Enhance Students' Reading Literacy

Based on interviews with the participating teacher and seven Year 7 students concerning performance skills and knowledge attainment, two principal areas of implication were identified. The testimonies were supported by classroom evidence gathered during the lesson sequence and by artefacts that documented planning, materials, and assessment. Taken together, these sources indicate that the approach shaped both the quality of teaching–learning interactions and the pattern of students' achievement in Islamic Cultural History.

1. From both viewpoints, the use of interactive storytelling proved advantageous. The teacher reported more purposeful delivery and a livelier classroom climate that drew students into the task, with the approach prompting creative preparation of materials that matched students' needs, such as concise historical synopses and structured worksheets that directed attention to key events and actors, while also supporting the management of participation and the maintenance of instructional focus across groups. Students, in turn, found it easier to remember historical names, places, and sequences when narration and reading were integrated, and they described sustained enthusiasm during lessons that combined discussion with shared storytelling. The format fostered verbal storytelling skills, promoted orderly turn-taking, and created repeated opportunities for coherent retelling anchored in the source text.
2. Learning outcomes were evidenced through a performance rubric that examined historical accuracy, inter-sentential coherence, language quality, and collaboration, enabling the teacher to judge how well students represented events, linked propositions, controlled vocabulary and grammar, and contributed productively to groups. Knowledge was measured through a short pre-test and a post-test administered at the end of the lesson, with post-test scores ranging from 70 to 100, which indicates a secure understanding of the targeted content. These results indicate attainment that aligns with the stated learning objectives and a positive effect of the interactive storytelling sequence on both reading comprehension and communicative performance.

Drawing on interviews with the Islamic Religious Education teacher and the seven Year 7 students, and reinforced by observation of classroom practice, the study concludes that teaching Islamic Cultural History through interactive storytelling is effective in strengthening reading literacy for this cohort at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi. The method aligned materials, interaction, and assessment in a way that supported comprehension, recall, and confident oral expression.
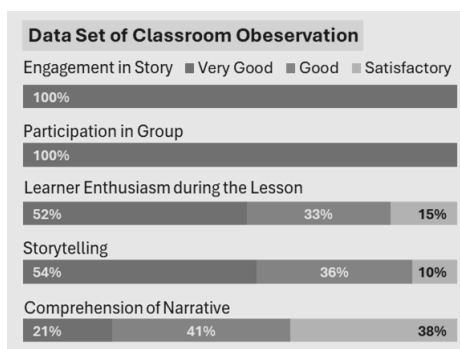

Figure 1. Data Set of Classroom Observation

The study identifies two principal domains of implication for the use of interactive storytelling to enhance the reading literacy of Year 7 students within Islamic Cultural History. The first domain concerns the enactment of interactive storytelling itself and its effects on teachers and students. The second domain concerns demonstrable learning outcomes, including performance in storytelling and gains in reading comprehension and subject knowledge. Interviews with the participating teacher and students, supported by observation of lessons and review of classroom artefacts, indicate that the method shaped both the quality of classroom interaction and the pattern of achievement across the cohort.

These findings are consistent with prior work. Katifori et al. (2018, p. 610) report that interactive storytelling increases student activity and deepens comprehension of written texts while fostering a favourable learning climate. Cao and Kim (2021, p. 2) have confidence that literacy improves when students retell information in their own words, which they present as a core practice in reading literacy. The present case reflects these claims through the combined use of structured texts, guided discussion, and shared narration, which together supported attention, meaning making, and sustained engagement with historical content.

From a constructivist perspective associated with Vygotsky, the emphasis falls on processes through which students build knowledge by exploring problems, making connections, and testing interpretations. Teaching that follows this view places students' needs at the centre of design and affords space for students to develop their skills, exercise agency, and take responsibility for outcomes (Mesibov & Drmacich, 2022, p. 32)**. In this study, the classroom structures invited students to co-construct narratives from source texts and to articulate their understanding in ways that could be examined, supported, and refined.

Regarding social learning theory, Bandura (as cited in Rayes & Albelaihi, 2023, p. 29) identifies that learning occurs through observing others, modelling effective behaviours, and interacting within a community of practice. In the observed lessons, students who witnessed peers produce fluent and well-ordered storytelling were prompted to emulate those features in their own performances. An information processing view, drawing on Gagné (as cited in Mangtani, 2024, pp. 360-362), clarifies the cognitive pathway through which reading supports durable understanding. Furthermore, Mayer (2024, p. 8) discovers that information is encountered through listening or reading, interpreted and organised through discussion and rehearsal, and then expressed and stored as meaningful knowledge. The teacher strengthened these processes by pairing reading with storytelling, enabling students to encode, retrieve, and reformulate historical information with increasing confidence.

In conclusion, the implications concentrate on two outcomes that are closely linked. With respect to classroom practice, interactive storytelling made lessons more purposeful and more engaging, encouraged teachers to design materials that matched students' needs, and enabled students to remember names and sequences of events while developing their confidence in verbal storytelling. With respect to assessment, improvements were observed in performance on interactive storytelling tasks and in measures of reading comprehension and knowledge, indicating that the approach supported both the interpretive work of reading and the communicative work of retelling within Islamic Cultural History.

CONCLUSION

1. The study identified three interlinked dimensions, namely planning, implementation, and implications, of integrating interactive storytelling to enhance reading literacy in Islamic Cultural History at SMP IT Al Bina Masohi, Central Maluku Regency. Planning fused storytelling with literacy through coherent lesson design that linked aims, texts and tasks, supported by a narrative overview and a carefully selected video on the founding of the Umayyad Caliphate, with assessment aligned to historical accuracy, sentence-level control, clarity of expression, and the interpretation and restatement of key ideas. Implementation unfolded across three phases that built rapport and a baseline, guided viewing, close reading, collaborative interpretation and relay storytelling with feedback, and concluded with a post-test and structured reflection. Across the sequence, students participated more consistently and demonstrated sharper content understanding, with gains in lesson quality, recall, storytelling performance, reading comprehension, and subject knowledge, which collectively strengthened interest in reading and supported accurate, coherent historical communication.
2. The research findings offer a concrete, classroom-ready model for curriculum and pedagogy in Islamic Religious Education by showing how interactive storytelling can be planned, taught, and assessed in Islamic Cultural History. It details how teachers can align objectives, texts, media, and tasks with three clear lesson phases and an analytical rubric that captures historical accuracy, coherence, and clarity of expression. For curriculum planners, it indicates the competencies to be targeted, the points of integration within schemes of work, and the resources and timetable time needed for adoption. The contribution lies in turning a general approach into an implementable design that can be replicated, adapted across topics, and monitored through clear indicators of pupil progress.
3. Future research should employ quantitative or mixed-methods designs to estimate effect sizes with precision and to test the robustness of gains in reading comprehension, storytelling performance, and historical understanding. Studies across multiple schools and regions should utilise larger, purposive samples with preregistered protocols, clear comparison groups, and fidelity checks to enhance both internal and external validity. Replication across diverse settings, including different types of Islamic schools, ought to examine moderators such as teacher experience, resource availability, and baseline literacy, while incorporating longitudinal follow-up to assess persistence and transfer. A cost and feasibility analysis would further inform curriculum decision-making and the scalability of interactive storytelling within Islamic Religious Education.

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