EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT GAZETTE
Vol. 03, No. 02 (2026), p. 70-81
Available online at https://serambi.org/index.php/gazette

Enhancing Preschoolers' Cognitive Development and Expressive Language Through an Integrated Congklak and Islamic Storytelling Intervention

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DOI : https://doi.org/10.61987/gazette.v3i2.2999

Abstract:
Early childhood education requires learning approaches that support cognitive development and expressive language while incorporating meaningful cultural and religious values. Traditional games and storytelling offer opportunities to develop these abilities through active and contextual learning. This study aimed to examine the effectiveness of integrating the traditional congklak game with Islamic storytelling in improving cognitive development and expressive language among children aged 5–6 years. A quasi-experimental study employed a nonequivalent pretest-posttest control-group design involving 30 children, divided into an experimental group (n = 15) and a control group (n = 15). The experimental group participated in eight sessions combining Islamic storytelling with guided congklak play, while the control group received conventional instruction using number cards and regular story reading. Cognitive development and expressive language were assessed using observation sheets converted to a 0–100 scale. Gain-score comparisons were analyzed using independent-samples t-tests. The experimental group demonstrated greater improvements in cognitive development (58.17 to 80.66) and expressive language (53.86 to 78.43) than the control group. The between-group differences were statistically significant for cognitive development ($t = 11.04$, $p < .001$) and expressive language ($t = 8.84$, $p < .001$). These findings suggest that integrating traditional games with Islamic storytelling may provide an engaging instructional approach to support both developmental domains.

ARTICLE HISTORY
Received 7 August 2026
Revised 20 October 2026
Accepted 02 November 2026

KEY WORDS
Congklak Game, Islamic Storytelling, Cognitive Development, Expressive Language

INTRODUCTION

Early childhood development is a public concern because children's cognitive and language abilities help prepare them to participate in learning and communicate their needs, ideas, and experiences. In the preschool years, learning opportunities should therefore do more than deliver information; they should invite children to think, speak, make choices, and interact with others. Research has examined play as a context for cognitive development, including loose-parts play (Cankaya et al., 2023), and has considered cognitively engaging physical activity as a way to support preschool children's cognitive outcomes (Mavilidi et al., 2023 Retnoningsih et al., 2026). Studies have also

explored play-based interventions for creativity and social-emotional competencies (Garaigordobil et al., 2022; Umasugi et al., 2026). Together, this literature supports the importance of active, developmentally appropriate learning experiences. Therefore, designing learning activities that combine purposeful play and meaningful communication is relevant to early childhood education and merits careful empirical systematic evaluation.

This study draws on play-based learning and narrative-language development as complementary perspectives for examining congklak integrated with Islamic storytelling. Play-based learning treats children's activity, exploration, and decision-making as opportunities to engage with concepts, while narrative approaches create opportunities to listen, organize ideas, and express meaning. Prior research has examined loose-parts play in relation to cognitive development (Cankaya et al., 2023), and cognitively engaging physical activity in relation to cognitive outcomes (Mavilidi et al., 2023). For language, storytelling and narrative interventions have been studied in early childhood settings, including digital kinetic storytelling (Kanaan et al., 2025), drama-based oral-language intervention (Faitaki et al., 2025), and narrative development through PlayWorld (Veresov et al., 2025; Shabila et al., 2026). These perspectives inform the study's two outcome variables: cognitive development and expressive language. They also support evaluating whether a combined activity can address both domains within one structured intervention.

Despite the educational potential of play and storytelling, children may not receive learning experiences that deliberately connect cognitive practice with opportunities to express ideas orally. A counting activity may focus on correct answers without inviting children to explain their thinking, while story reading may provide language exposure without including strategic play or repeated opportunities to retell. The studies reviewed in the available literature examine different parts of this challenge, such as traditional games and social skills (Lathifah et al., 2025), traditional games and literacy (Mufidah et al., 2025), and storytelling's relationship with expressive language (Lestari et al., 2026; Furqon et al., 2026). These different emphases suggest a need to investigate activities that bring counting, turn-taking, listening, and oral expression together. A structured intervention can help assess whether integration is associated with gains in cognitive development and expressive language among children aged five to six.

Previous research provides several relevant foundations, although the interventions and outcomes vary. Cankaya et al. (2023) reviewed literature on preschool children's loose-parts play and cognitive development, while Mavilidi et al. (2023) examined cognitively engaging physical activity and cognitive outcomes. Research on traditional games has also addressed literacy, as in the study of engklek among children aged five to six (Mufidah et al., 2025; Anisa, 2026), and social skills through games grounded in Ki Hadjar Dewantara's philosophy (Lathifah et al., 2025; Fikriyah, 2026). For language learning, Rahnang et al. (2023) examined the development of a traditional-game module to stimulate early childhood language development. These studies indicate that play can be designed around different developmental aims and educational contexts in preschool. However, their stated focuses do not establish whether congklak combined with Islamic storytelling can improve cognitive development and expressive language simultaneously within one intervention package.

Storytelling research likewise offers evidence for using narratives as structured learning experiences, but it addresses varied formats and outcomes. Lestari et al. (2026) examined storytelling methods and expressive language skills in early childhood, while Faitaki et al. (2025) piloted a drama-based oral-language intervention. Kanaan et al. (2025) investigated digital kinetic storytelling for language learning, and Veresov et al. (2025) examined PlayWorld as a means of promoting narrative development. Catalá et al. (2023) studied guidance in storytelling tables in relation to kindergartners' emotional development. This body of work shows storytelling's adaptability in varied settings. Nevertheless, the available studies do not directly resolve whether combining an Indonesian traditional counting game with Islamic value-based stories and child retelling activities can produce gains in both cognitive development and expressive language. This gap warrants comparison. This merits evaluation.

The novelty of this study lies in the integration of congklak, short Islamic stories, guided counting, and oral retelling within one intervention for children aged five to six. Rather than treating the game and storytelling as separate activities, the intervention links them so that children practise counting, making choices, waiting for turns, listening to a story, and expressing its meaning. The approach also places familiar traditional play within a value-based narrative context. Its contribution is evaluating their combined use against conventional instruction across two outcomes. By examining cognitive development and expressive language together, the study can provide evidence relevant to educators seeking culturally meaningful preschool activities. The intervention's effectiveness must be judged from observed data rather than assumed. It also offers a clear framework for classroom implementation and evaluation in real classroom settings.

This study asks whether congklak integrated with Islamic storytelling is more effective than conventional instruction in improving cognitive development and expressive language among children aged five to six. The argument is that guided congklak play creates opportunities to count, compare, plan, and follow rules, while storytelling and retelling encourage children to listen, recall events, sequence ideas, and express themselves. Combining these activities may therefore support both outcomes in one learning sequence. To examine this argument, the study compares children who receive the integrated intervention with children who receive number-card activities and regular story reading, using pretest and posttest observations of both outcomes. The study tests a combined, culturally grounded learning approach empirically. Its findings can inform teaching decisions and future research on integrated learning activities for preschool children. The results may help teachers select activities that connect thinking with speaking.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a quasi-experimental nonequivalent pretest–posttest control-group design to examine whether congklak integrated with Islamic storytelling improves cognitive development and expressive language among children aged five to six. This design allows comparison between intervention and control groups when random assignment may not be feasible in an educational setting. Both groups completed assessments before and after the intervention, enabling analysis of change within groups and differences between groups. The study took place at an early childhood institution or Raudhatul Athfal (RA). The institution's name, research location, and study period were not provided and should be inserted from records. The site rationale should reflect

documented reasons, such as eligible participants, classroom suitability, and permission to conduct the intervention. Transparent reporting strengthens methodological clarity (Lim & Koay, 2024; Miller & Lengler, 2025).

The sample comprised 30 children aged five to six from the institution, with 15 children in the experimental group and 15 in the control group. The draft describes gender distribution as balanced across groups. However, the sampling technique was not specified and must be reported according to the procedure actually used. If intact groups were selected because they were available and eligible, the authors should describe the recruitment approach accurately rather than assume random sampling. The manuscript should state inclusion criteria, how families were approached, and how consent and child assent were obtained where applicable. It should clarify whether groups were existing classes and explain differences. These details help readers assess selection and generalizability. Sampling guidance recommends explaining the selection procedure and its fit with the research question (Ahmed, 2024).

Data were collected using two observation sheets administered before and after the intervention to assess cognitive development and expressive language. Each sheet contained 10 indicators rated on a four-point scale and converted to a 0–100 score. Cognitive indicators covered counting, classification, sequencing, prediction, and problem-solving. Expressive-language indicators covered answering questions, retelling, vocabulary use, sentence construction, and dialogue. Over four weeks, the experimental group completed eight sessions lasting 30–35 minutes, combining short Islamic stories, guided congklak play, questions, and retelling. The control group received number-card activities, simple worksheets, and regular story reading. Figure 1 presents the intervention model, while Tables 2 and 3 summarize the instrument blueprint and session scenario. Report validity evidence, scoring procedures, and observer preparation based on activities actually completed (Hill et al., 2022; Reed et al., 2024).

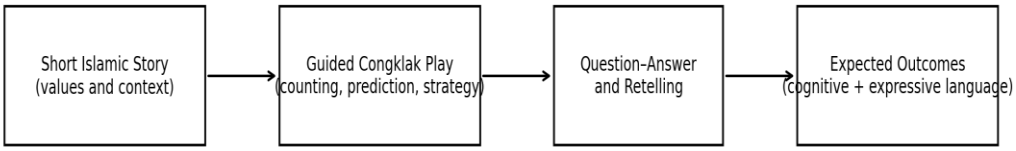


Figure 1. Intervention model developed by the authors for the study

Table 2. Research Instrument Blueprint

Variable	Main Indicators	Brief Descriptor
Cognitive development	Classifying, counting, sequencing, predicting moves, and solving simple problems	The child can recognize the number of seeds, select a move, reason about outcomes, and demonstrate basic strategies during play.
Expressive language	Answering questions, retelling, naming vocabulary, constructing sentences, and participating in dialogue	The child can express ideas orally, respond to stories, use new vocabulary, and communicate a simple sequence of events.

Table 3. Summary of the Experimental-Group Intervention Scenario

Sessions	Islamic Value Theme	Congklak Activity	Expected Outcome
1–2	Honesty and turn-taking	Introducing board rules, number of seeds, and turns	Children understand basic rules and state quantities correctly.
3–4	Patience and focus	Counting moves and predicting the destination hole	Children improve attention, sequencing, and prediction.
5–6	Trustworthiness and responsibility	Recording results, comparing quantities, and discussing winning strategies	Children compare results and explain their reasoning.
7–8	Sharing and cooperation	Playing in pairs, retelling the story, and brief reflection	Children become more confident in speaking, responding, and retelling.

Descriptive statistics summarized pretest, posttest, and gain scores. The Shapiro–Wilk test assessed the normality of gain scores, while Levene's test examined homogeneity of variance. Paired-samples t-tests assessed pretest-to-posttest changes within each group. Independent-samples t-tests compared gain scores between groups when assumptions were satisfied; Welch's t-test was used when equal variances could not be assumed. Statistical significance was set at $\alpha = .05$, and normalized gain (N-gain) was calculated to describe improvement. The manuscript should report test statistics, degrees of freedom, p-values, and effect sizes with confidence intervals when available. The tests must match the data structure and assumptions, and departures from assumptions should be disclosed. Interpretation should distinguish statistical significance from practical importance. These reporting practices support transparent and reproducible quantitative analysis (Hair & Alamer, 2022; Legate et al., 2024).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

Sample Characteristics and Preliminary Statistical Assumptions

The study included 30 children aged 5–6 years, with 15 assigned to the experimental group and 15 to the control group. As presented in Table 4, the experimental group had a mean age of 5.26 years (SD = 0.20), while the control group had a mean age of 5.31 years (SD = 0.22). The experimental group comprised seven boys and eight girls, whereas the control group comprised eight boys and seven girls. These descriptive characteristics indicate similar age distributions and gender compositions across the groups. However, descriptive similarities alone do not establish baseline equivalence in cognitive development or expressive language.

The Shapiro–Wilk tests on gain scores did not indicate statistically significant departures from normality for either outcome in either group. For cognitive development, the p-values were .753 for the experimental group and .532 for the control group. For expressive language, the corresponding values were .828 and .064. Levene's test indicated no statistically significant difference in gain-score variances for cognitive development, $p = .120$. However, the variance homogeneity assumption was not supported for expressive language, $p = .012$. Accordingly, the Welch independent-samples t-test was used to compare expressive-language gains between groups.

Table 4. Sample Characteristics

Group	n	Mean Age ± SD	Gender (M/F)
Experimental	15	5.26 ± 0.20	7/8
Control	15	5.31 ± 0.22	8/7

Changes in Cognitive Development and Expressive Language

Table 5 presents the descriptive statistics for cognitive development and expressive language before and after the intervention. Both groups showed higher posttest scores than pretest scores for both outcomes. However, the magnitude of improvement differed between groups.

For cognitive development, the experimental group's mean score increased from 58.17 (SD = 5.22) to 80.66 (SD = 5.65), producing a mean gain of 22.49 points (SD = 2.58). The control group's mean increased from 55.83 (SD = 5.96) to 65.15 (SD = 5.95), with a mean gain of 9.31 points (SD = 3.83). The corresponding N-gain values were 0.54 for the experimental group and 0.21 for the control group, classified as moderate and low, respectively.

For expressive language, the experimental group's mean score increased from 53.86 (SD = 4.60) to 78.43 (SD = 7.82), yielding a mean gain of 24.57 points (SD = 6.06). In the control group, the mean increased from 54.72 (SD = 5.07) to 64.10 (SD = 6.37), with a mean gain of 9.38 points (SD = 2.75). The N-gain values were 0.54 for the experimental group and 0.21 for the control group. Thus, the descriptive results show larger improvements in both developmental outcomes in the experimental group.

Table 5. Descriptive Statistics for Pretest, Posttest, Gain, and N-Gain Scores

Variable	Group	Pretest M ± SD	Posttest M ± SD	Gain M ± SD	N-gain	Category	Interpretation
Cognitive	Experimental	58.17 ± 5.22	80.66 ± 5.65	22.49 ± 2.58	0.54	Moderate	Greater improvement after the intervention
Cognitive	Control	55.83 ± 5.96	65.15 ± 5.95	9.31 ± 3.83	0.21	Low	Smaller improvement
Expressive language	Experimental	53.86 ± 4.60	78.43 ± 7.82	24.57 ± 6.06	0.54	Moderate	Greater improvement in expressive language
Expressive language	Control	54.72 ± 5.07	64.10 ± 6.37	9.38 ± 2.75	0.21	Low	Smaller improvement

Note. M = mean; SD = standard deviation. N-gain categories follow the classification used in the original analysis.

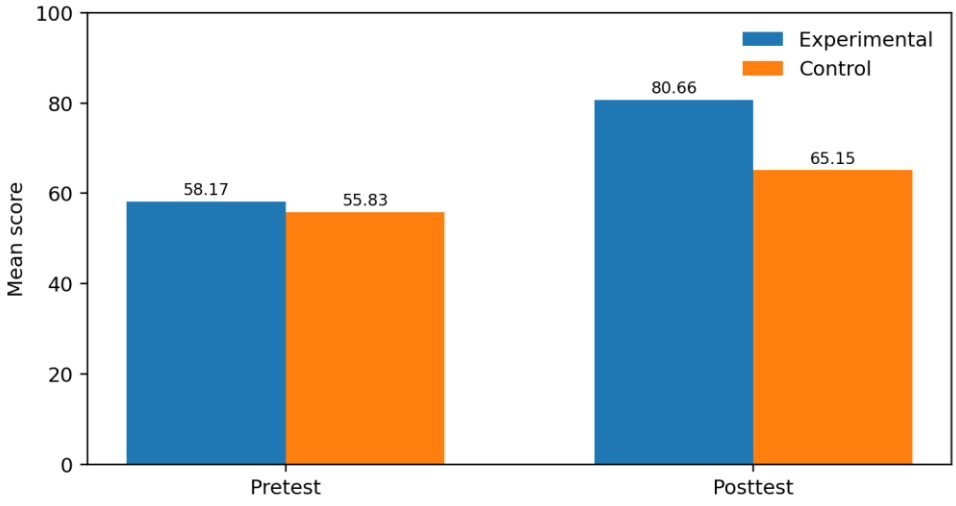


Figure 2. Comparison of pretest and posttest cognitive scores between groups

Figure 2 illustrates the increase in mean cognitive scores in both groups. The experimental group shows a larger difference between pretest and posttest scores than the control group, consistent with the descriptive statistics in Table 5.

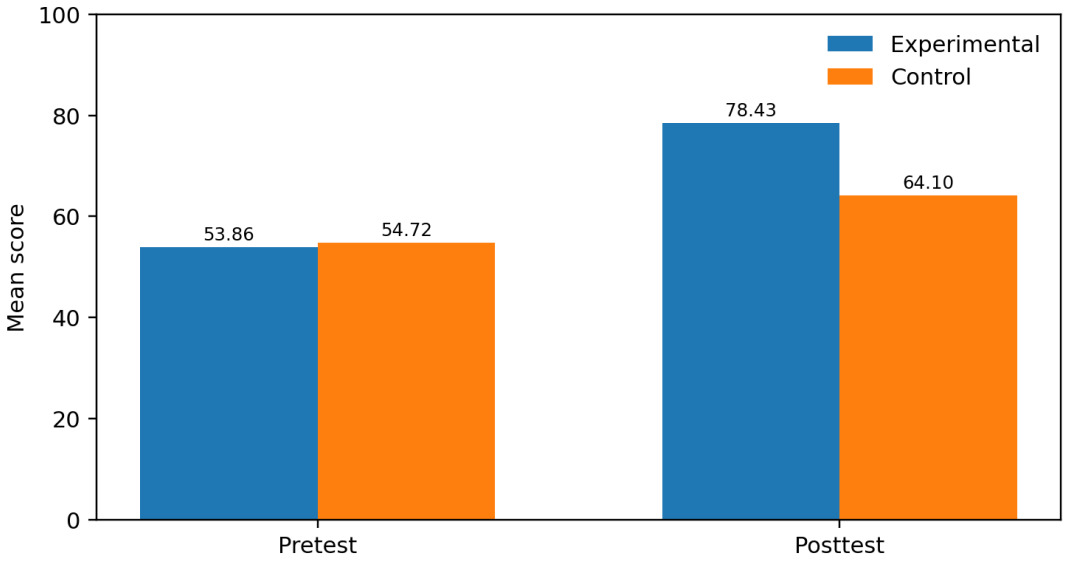


Figure 3. Comparison of pretest and posttest expressive-language scores between groups

Figure 3 illustrates the increase in mean expressive-language scores in both groups. The experimental group shows a larger pretest-to-posttest increase than the control group, consistent with the descriptive statistics in Table 5.

Within-Group and Between-Group Comparisons

Paired-samples t-tests indicated statistically significant increases in cognitive scores in both groups. The experimental group showed a significant pretest-to-posttest increase, $t = 33.75$, $p < .001$. The control group also demonstrated a significant increase, $t = 9.41$, $p < .001$. These results indicate that scores increased over time in both instructional conditions.

For expressive language, the experimental group demonstrated a statistically significant increase, $t = 15.71$, $p < .001$. The control group also showed a significant increase, $t = 13.19$, $p < .001$. Therefore, statistically significant within-group changes occurred for both outcomes in both groups. These tests alone do not establish that the experimental intervention was more effective than the control condition; that question requires a direct between-group comparison.

The between-group comparison of cognitive gain scores indicated a statistically significant difference, $t = 11.04$, $p < .001$. The experimental group's mean gain was greater than that of the control group. For expressive language, Welch's t-test also indicated a statistically significant difference in gain scores, $t = 8.84$, $p < .001$, with a greater mean gain in the experimental group. These findings provide evidence of larger observed improvements in both outcomes in the experimental group under the conditions examined.

Table 6. Summary of Statistical Tests

Variable	Analysis	t	p	Decision	Interpretation
Cognitive	Paired t-test, experimental	33.75	< .001	Significant	Cognitive scores increased from pretest to posttest.
Cognitive	Paired t-test, control	9.41	< .001	Significant	Cognitive scores also increased in the control group.
Cognitive	Between-group gain difference	11.04	< .001	Significant	Cognitive gains were greater in the experimental group.
Expressive language	Paired t-test, experimental	15.71	< .001	Significant	Expressive-language scores increased from pretest to posttest.
Expressive language	Paired t-test, control	13.19	< .001	Significant	Expressive-language scores also increased in the control group.
Expressive language	Between-group gain difference (Welch)	8.84	< .001	Significant	Expressive-language gains were greater in the experimental group.

Note. Statistical significance was evaluated at α = .05. Welch's t-test was used for expressive-language gain scores because Levene's test indicated unequal variances.

Discussion

The findings indicate that children in the experimental group achieved greater improvements in cognitive development and expressive language than those receiving conventional instruction. Cognitive scores increased from 58.17 to 80.66, while expressive-language scores increased from 53.86 to 78.43. Between-group comparisons of gain scores were statistically significant for cognitive development (t = 11.04, p < .001) and expressive language (t = 8.84, p < .001). These results suggest that combining traditional play with Islamic storytelling may offer advantages over the instructional approach used in the control group. The cognitive findings are consistent with Hidayah and Fauziyah (2023), who examined congklak and cognitive development in children aged five to six. The storytelling component also relates to Maharjan et al. (2024), who highlighted storytelling as a pedagogical approach to meaningful preschool learning. However, the quasi-experimental design limits causal conclusions.

The improvement in cognitive development is consistent with research examining traditional games as educational resources. Hidayah and Fauziyah (2023) investigated congklak as a means of supporting cognitive development among children aged five to six. Their study provides a direct comparison with the present intervention, which incorporated congklak into a broader instructional sequence. In this study, children engaged in activities involving counting, classification, sequencing, prediction, and simple problem-solving. These activities required children to recognize quantities, follow rules, and make decisions during play. The present findings extend previous research by examining cognitive development within an intervention that combines congklak with Islamic storytelling. However, the current results do not establish which game activities contributed most to the observed improvement. Because the intervention incorporated multiple instructional elements, the gains should be interpreted as outcomes associated with the integrated learning package rather than the isolated effect of congklak.

The expressive-language findings correspond with previous research on storytelling and language development. Yunita et al. (2025) examined storytelling as a strategy for stimulating expressive-language skills in early childhood, while Huda et al. (2022) investigated storytelling for developing language skills and character values. These studies provide relevant support for using narrative activities in early childhood

education. In the present study, expressive-language scores increased more in the experimental group than in the control group. This difference suggests that combining storytelling with guided play and oral retelling may provide opportunities for children to practice verbal expression. During these activities, children can answer questions, recall narrative events, identify objects, and communicate ideas. Maharjan et al. (2024) also emphasized the role of storytelling pedagogy in engaging preschool children in meaningful learning. Nevertheless, the current design cannot determine the independent contribution of storytelling, congklak, or retelling to expressive-language improvement.

A notable feature of the intervention is its simultaneous focus on cognitive development and expressive language within one instructional sequence. This approach is relevant to Marina et al. (2025), who examined interactive storytelling in relation to cognitive and social-emotional development, and Scionti et al. (2023), who reviewed the relationship between narrative skills and executive functions. The latter provides a broader context for examining possible connections between narrative activities and cognitive processes, although executive functions are not equivalent to overall cognitive development. The present study contributes empirical evidence on an integrated activity sequence involving physical manipulation, strategic counting, narrative exposure, and oral retelling. The greater gains in both measured outcomes suggest that this combination warrants further investigation. However, the study did not independently manipulate each instructional component. Therefore, it remains uncertain whether combining play and storytelling produces synergistic effects beyond those achievable through each approach separately.

The integration of Islamic storytelling adds cultural and ethical relevance to the intervention. Huda et al. (2022) examined storytelling as a means of developing language skills while introducing character values, while Ramadhani and Istikowati (2025) investigated storytelling for developing moral and religious values in early childhood. These studies provide relevant context for incorporating values into narrative-based learning. In the present intervention, Islamic-themed stories addressed honesty, patience, responsibility, and cooperation. These themes provided contexts for children to discuss events, answer questions, and retell narratives while participating in traditional games. The cultural contribution lies in incorporating religiously meaningful narratives into activities that also address developmental learning objectives. However, the measured outcomes concerned cognitive development and expressive language rather than religious understanding, moral reasoning, or behavioral change. Consequently, the findings demonstrate the feasibility of integrating Islamic narratives into developmental instruction but do not establish improvements in children's religious understanding or moral conduct.

The principal contribution of this study lies in evaluating a structured intervention that combines congklak, Islamic storytelling, guided counting, and oral retelling for children aged five to six. Previous research has examined congklak in relation to cognitive development (Hidayah & Fauziyah, 2023), storytelling for expressive-language development (Yunita et al., 2025), and storytelling as a means of supporting meaningful preschool engagement (Maharjan et al., 2024). The present study brings these elements together and evaluates cognitive development and expressive language as parallel outcomes. Its practical contribution is a session-based learning approach that educators can adapt to connect numerical exploration, oral communication, and culturally relevant

narratives. Its empirical contribution is the statistically significant between-group difference in gain scores for both developmental outcomes. Its potential novelty lies in evaluating this particular combination of traditional play and Islamic storytelling within one intervention, rather than in claiming that either method is new independently. Further comparative research is needed to establish its distinctive advantages.

Several limitations should guide interpretation and future research. First, the sample included only 30 children, and nonrandomized group assignment may introduce selection effects and limit generalizability. Second, the intervention combined several instructional elements, preventing researchers from attributing the observed improvements to any single component. Third, the observation-based measures require clear evidence of validity, reliability, and consistent scoring procedures. Future studies should recruit larger and more diverse samples, examine baseline differences, report effect sizes and confidence intervals, and include follow-up assessments to determine whether improvements persist. Researchers should also compare congklak alone, storytelling alone, and the integrated intervention to identify the contribution of each component. Additional studies could examine children's engagement and narrative performance as potential explanatory factors. Overall, the findings provide preliminary empirical support for further investigating culturally grounded, play-based instruction as an approach to supporting cognitive development and expressive language in early childhood education.

CONCLUSION

This study found that integrating the traditional congklak game with Islamic storytelling was associated with greater improvements in cognitive development and expressive language among children aged 5–6 years than conventional instruction. The key lesson is that combining strategic counting, listening, questioning, and retelling within a structured learning activity may provide opportunities to stimulate both developmental domains simultaneously. The implications of these findings suggest that early childhood educators can consider culturally relevant, play-based storytelling as an alternative approach to integrating cognitive and language learning with Islamic values. Scientifically, this study contributes to early childhood education research by examining two developmental outcomes within a single intervention framework that combines traditional play and religious storytelling. However, the small sample, quasi-experimental design, and combined intervention components limit generalizability and prevent attribution of the observed improvements to individual components. Future research should involve larger and more diverse samples, strengthen instrument validity and reliability, include follow-up assessments, and compare individual intervention components to clarify their respective contributions.

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