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Revitalizing reading and writing traditions in pesantren through Surah Al-'Alaq 1–5

Fatimah Citra Handayani

Universitas Nurul Jadid

citrahandayani25@gmail.com

Muhammad Firhan Abbas Ramadhan

Universitas Nurul Jadid

firhanabbas2225@gmail.com

Abstract

The tradition of reading and writing in Islam is deeply rooted in Surah Al-'Alaq verses 1–5. These five verses of the Qur'an emphasize the significance of reading as the gateway to knowledge and writing as a medium for sharing it. However, in some pesantren (Islamic boarding schools), the culture of reading has not been fully nurtured, largely due to the dominant emphasis on memorization over critical understanding in the learning process. This reliance on rote learning has gradually marginalized reading and writing practices within pesantren education. This study explores how the values embedded in Surah Al-'Alaq can be implemented to revive the traditions of reading and writing in pesantren. Using a qualitative approach, the research found that the low reading culture among santri is primarily caused by limited access to diverse reading materials, lack of a supportive environment, and the absence of pedagogical methods that promote active reading. Likewise, the underdeveloped writing culture stems from the lack of structured writing programs and the absence of institutional encouragement for students to produce written works. As a solution, this study proposes the integration of Qur'an-based literacy practices, including providing engaging reading materials, adopting understanding-based teaching strategies, promoting reflective writing practices, and fostering a pesantren environment that supports the growth of reading and writing habits.

Keywords: reading tradition; case study; Surah Al-'Alaq 1–5; revitalization; pesantren

INTRODUCTION

Pesantren, or Islamic boarding schools, are widely recognized as one of the most trusted Islamic educational institutions by many communities in Indonesia. Santri (students in pesantren) follow structured daily routines determined by the caretakers and administrators, involving both academic learning and religious practices. In addition to these core activities, santri are also engaged in exercises that are expected to prepare them for life outside the pesantren.

As stated by Junaris (2023), pesantren are not merely centers for religious instruction but also serve as environments for character building. In the learning

process, pesantren emphasize not only the mastery of religious knowledge (*tafaqquh fi al-dīn*) but also the cultivation of morality and ethical conduct.

However, it is important to note that not all pesantren activities guarantee a comprehensive understanding of knowledge. This issue becomes evident when some pesantren graduates struggle to apply what they have learned once they are integrated into broader society (Afidah & Anggraini, 2022).

In fact, some studies have shown that a considerable number of pesantren alumni still face challenges in mastering essential competencies such as reading classical texts and comprehending basic materials (Muhith, 2019). This reality appears contradictory, given that santri are exposed daily to classical Islamic texts and religious learning. Although this issue may not apply to all students, it certainly raises questions about the overall quality and effectiveness of pesantren education.

This concern underpins the rationale of the present study, which focuses on santri at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyyin (PPNAA). The aim is to offer a constructive contribution to other pesantren facing similar challenges in aligning students' comprehension with the educational process.

This research proposes the revitalization of reading and writing as a potential solution to address the declining comprehension among santri. While prior studies have discussed the urgency of literacy and the implementation of reading and writing programs (Ahmadi, n.d.; Istianah & Haq, 2023), very few have explored the root causes of the erosion of literacy traditions within the pesantren environment.

Although reading and writing are integral to daily pesantren life, they are often perceived as routine activities rather than meaningful academic engagement. Many santri lack a deep understanding of the purpose, objectives, and long-term benefits of these practices. This situation leads to the formulation of the following research questions: What are the underlying factors contributing to low interest in reading and writing among santri? And what strategies can be used to revitalize these traditions?

This study intends to provide critical insight into pesantren pedagogy, specifically on how certain teaching methods may inadvertently marginalize reading and writing practices. As mentioned earlier, this research aspires to support other pesantren seeking to improve their educational quality and bridge the gap between learning and comprehension.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative research method with a case study approach. The data collection was carried out through observation and interviews conducted with selected informants involved in the educational processes at Pondok Pesantren Nurul Abror Al-Robbaniyyin (PPNAA). The primary focus of the observation was to examine the learning activities and daily academic routines of santri at PPNAA.

In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with educators and pesantren administrators to gather information regarding the existing learning programs, educational targets, and the extent to which those targets have been successfully implemented. The interviews also explored the perceptions of educators concerning the role of reading and writing in supporting students' understanding of the material.

The selection of informants was based on their involvement and authority in shaping the educational strategies within the pesantren. The collected data were then

analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns and factors contributing to the decline of reading and writing culture among santri. This approach allowed the researchers to derive in-depth insights into the internal dynamics of the pesantren, particularly in relation to literacy practices.

Through the triangulation of observational data and interview findings, the study ensures the credibility and validity of its results. The research design is intended to reflect the authentic learning context of PPNA and to serve as a model for other pesantren seeking to revitalize literacy traditions based on Islamic principles.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Reading and Writing Traditions in Pesantren

Discussing reading and writing within the pesantren context inevitably touches on the concept of literacy. According to Richard Kern, as cited in Istianah and Haq (2023), literacy can be narrowly defined as the ability to read and write. In most pesantren, literacy is a normative practice, as students are routinely exposed to activities that involve both reading and writing.

However, it is essential to note that not all pesantren can ensure the effective internalization of these literacy practices among their students. In fact, the successful implementation of literacy is crucial for improving the overall outcomes of the educational process (Junaris, 2023).

Recent studies and discussions have highlighted that literacy has become an increasingly critical issue in pesantren. Many observers acknowledge a decline in reading and writing habits among santri. One of the contributing factors to this decline is the advancement of digital technology and the proliferation of information access, which can distract students from engaging in deeper reading and writing activities (Ahmadi, n.d.).

Ahmadi further argues that although digital technologies offer certain benefits, they often encourage passive consumption of information. This tendency runs counter to the pesantren tradition, which historically emphasizes the active pursuit of knowledge through reading and writing. The literacy crisis in Indonesia in general is also affected by the public's preference for gadget use over books, making reading and writing less appealing (Rofiq & Syamsul, 2024).

Interestingly, based on field observations at PPNA, the researcher found that the decline in reading and writing among santri is not entirely due to technological distractions. In most pesantren, especially traditional ones, the use of technological devices such as smartphones, laptops, and tablets is heavily restricted or even prohibited.

This finding indicates that the root of the problem lies elsewhere. Based on qualitative data collected through observations and interviews, the study identified several core factors contributing to the weakening of reading and writing habits in pesantren:

Learning Methods

Learning methods are a critical component in any educational institution, including pesantren. As stated by Afidah and Anggraini (2022), the method used in

teaching plays a vital role in achieving learning objectives. It serves as the most effective tool in facilitating the process of knowledge acquisition.

It is widely acknowledged that memorization-based learning (rote learning) is the dominant method applied in many pesantren. While this method has proven effective in helping students retain religious texts and verses, it also presents challenges. One major concern is the inability of some students to maintain the quality of their memorization due to a lack of repetition, mental fatigue, or distraction (Rifki et al., 2023).

From the researcher's perspective, the overemphasis on memorization can lead students to prioritize achieving targets rather than understanding content. Although the memorization system may motivate students to strive for goals, it often results in superficial learning, where students neglect deep comprehension and critical engagement with the material.

Effective understanding requires repeated reading of materials, exploring similar themes through different books, and rewriting content based on personal interpretation. These practices not only strengthen literacy skills but also enhance comprehension and retention.

Inadequate Facilities

Another major factor affecting literacy among santri is the lack of adequate learning facilities. In this context, "facilities" refer primarily to the availability of diverse and engaging reading materials. A strong reading habit typically leads to a parallel interest in writing. Therefore, improving library resources becomes crucial.

As highlighted by Asy'ari (2022), libraries in pesantren should be well-equipped with a variety of books tailored to the needs of students. A comfortable and inviting space further enhances students' motivation to read. The optimization of library facilities is particularly important in pesantren, where access to digital information is often limited.

The benefits of an improved library include broadening students' exposure beyond traditional religious texts, expanding their ability to seek knowledge from various sources, and fostering more nuanced critical thinking when approaching complex problems (Istianah & Haq, 2023).

Lack of Institutional Support

The final key factor is the lack of consistent encouragement from influential figures within the pesantren. Motivation to engage in reading and writing often depends on sustained support from pesantren leaders, teachers, and administrators. Without this support, even students with initial interest in literacy may lose motivation over time.

According to Nurhasanah and Mustika (2024), the role of teachers is central in shaping educational outcomes and student engagement. Interviews conducted in this study revealed that many santri admitted to having low interest in reading and writing due to the absence of encouragement from their environment—particularly from authority figures in the pesantren. Some students even expressed a desire to improve their literacy skills but felt discouraged due to lack of support.

This disconnect indicates that the interest in literacy among santri is not entirely absent. Rather, the lack of continuous and structured reinforcement has led to the erosion of these traditions over time.

Implementing the Concept of Surah Al-'Alaq Verses 1–5 as a Strategy to Revitalize Reading and Writing Traditions in Pesantren

Tafsīr of Surah Al-'Alaq from Various Perspectives

This study offers the implementation of Qur'anic values, particularly those found in *Sūrat al-'Alaq*, verses 1–5, as a solution to reinvigorate reading and writing traditions in pesantren. Most Muslim scholars agree that these five verses comprise the first divine revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him). The verses emphasize the commands to read and write, as seen in the passage below:

اَقْرَأْ بِاسْمِ رَبِّكَ الَّذِي خَلَقَ ۝ خَلَقَ الْاِنْسَانَ مِنْ عَلْقٍ ۝ اَقْرَا وَرَبُّكَ الْاَكْرَمُ ۝ الَّذِي عَلَمَ بِالْقَمَرِ ۝ عَلَمَ الْاِنْسَانَ مَا لَمْ يَعْلَمْ ۝

Recite in the name of your Lord who created. Created man from a clinging substance. Recite! And your Lord is the Most Generous—Who taught by the pen—Taught man that which he knew not. (Sūrat al-'Alaq 96:1–5)

The Qur'an, as the ultimate source of guidance for Muslims, must be interpreted using established *tafsīr* methodologies. As cited by Adawiah and Robbaniyah (2024), understanding the Qur'an requires not only linguistic analysis but also contextual knowledge, such as the *asbāb al-nuzūl* (reasons for revelation), transmission history, and associated rulings.

In *Tafsīr Ibn Kathīr*, the renowned exegete Ibn Kathīr explains that these verses highlight Allah's majesty and the honor bestowed upon human beings through knowledge. It is through divine teaching that humans gain understanding and become dignified (Katsir, n.d.).

Similarly, in *Tafsīr Juz 'Amma*, Shaykh Muḥammad 'Abduh reflects on the significance of the Prophet receiving the command to "read" despite being unlettered (*ummī*). He emphasizes that the central message of these verses is not merely literacy, but the profound value of acquiring and transmitting knowledge through reading and writing (Adawiah & Robbaniyah, 2024).

In *Tafsīr al-Munīr*, Wahbah al-Zuḥaylī explains that Allah enabled the Prophet to read by divine power, even without formal learning. Furthermore, Allah taught humans to write with the pen—a great blessing and a means of preserving knowledge and fostering human communication. The *tafsīr* emphasizes that without writing, much knowledge would be lost and religion would leave no lasting impact (Az-Zuhaili, n.d.).

From these interpretations, it becomes clear that *Sūrat al-'Alaq* 1–5 underscores the foundational role of reading (*qirā'ah*) and writing (*kitābah*) in human intellectual development. Reading allows for the acquisition of knowledge, while writing preserves and transmits that knowledge for future generations.

Applying the Values of Surah Al-'Alaq in the Pesantren Context

To revitalize the reading and writing culture within pesantren, this study implemented a series of practical steps inspired by the values in *Sūrat al-'Alaq* verses 1–5. These efforts were carried out to increase students' interest in literacy and deepen their understanding of academic and religious content.

1. Improving Library Facilities

As previously discussed, one major factor affecting literacy in pesantren is the inadequacy of library resources. Therefore, the first step was to improve the quality of the pesantren library. This was achieved by:

- a. Adding new books across various subjects and categories;
- b. Removing outdated or damaged materials;
- c. Enhancing the library's physical space to make it more inviting.
- d. The library staff were also engaged to conduct outreach activities, such as:
- e. Promoting new collections through posters and pamphlets;
- f. Creating a special display area for newly arrived books;
- g. Publishing a bulletin board featuring book reviews and summaries.

These efforts significantly boosted student interest. Prior to the improvements, monthly library visits ranged from 100 to 200 out of 950 santri. After implementation, the visitor numbers rose to 397 in the first month, 435 in the second, and 520 in the third month.

2. Organizing Literacy-Based Activities

To sustain and strengthen students' interest, the pesantren also organized a series of literacy-focused activities, including:

- a. Educational seminars on effective reading strategies;
- b. Writing workshops;
- c. Competitions such as book review writing, fiction writing, and other creative writing contests.

These programs involved not only students but also pesantren administrators and teachers, who acted as role models. One notable outcome of these initiatives was the compilation and publication of a short story anthology featuring winning entries from the fiction writing competition.

The growing enthusiasm among santri for writing was evident in the increasing number and quality of submissions across various contests. The researchers argue that this improvement was closely tied to enhanced reading habits, confirming that better reading skills contribute directly to better writing performance.

CONCLUSION

Based on the research conducted over a three-month period, it can be concluded that an overemphasis on a single learning method—particularly rote memorization—has contributed to the decline in students' interest in reading and writing within pesantren. The absence of diversified learning strategies has led to limited comprehension and passive engagement with educational content among santri.

The study identified three main contributing factors to the weakening of reading and writing culture in pesantren: the dominance of memorization-based pedagogy,

inadequate reading and writing facilities, and the lack of consistent encouragement from pesantren authorities. These factors collectively create an environment that is not conducive to fostering literacy.

However, the research also found that these issues can be addressed through the implementation of literacy initiatives grounded in Qur'anic values, specifically those found in *Sūrat al-'Alaq* verses 1–5. The revitalization process was successfully initiated through two primary strategies: (1) improving library infrastructure and resources, and (2) organizing literacy-based programs that involved both students and pesantren leadership.

The impact of these initiatives was clearly reflected in the increased student participation in library activities and writing programs, as well as in the improved quality of written works submitted by santri. These findings demonstrate that the integration of Islamic principles with contemporary literacy development strategies can significantly enhance the learning experience and intellectual growth of students in pesantren.

This research not only offers a practical model for other pesantren facing similar challenges but also reaffirms the relevance and applicability of Qur'anic guidance in addressing modern educational issues. The revitalization of reading and writing traditions in pesantren, when rooted in the values of revelation, is not only possible but essential for the future of Islamic education.

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