

**INTEGRATING THE EXEGESIS OF SURAH AL-‘ALAQ (1-5)
WITH LITERACY EDUCATION IN THE
MERDEKA CURRICULUM**

Mufida Ulfa

UIN Kiai Achmad Siddiq Jember, Indonesia

mufida_ulfa@yahoo.com

Abstrak

Rendahnya capaian literasi membaca peserta didik Indonesia berdasarkan hasil PISA 2022 menunjukkan tantangan serius dalam sistem pendidikan nasional. Sementara itu, dalam perspektif Islam, urgensi literasi telah ditegaskan sejak wahyu pertama dalam QS. al-‘Alaq 1-5 melalui perintah *iqra'* yang bermakna luas, meliputi pembacaan teks, realitas alam, dan fenomena sosial. Penelitian ini bertujuan mengisi kekosongan kajian yang mengintegrasikan tafsir QS. al-‘Alaq 1-5 dengan kebijakan Kurikulum Merdeka Belajar, khususnya dalam penguatan multiliterasi. Metode penelitian yang digunakan adalah studi pustaka dengan pendekatan kualitatif melalui analisis isi terhadap tafsir klasik (Ibn Katsir, al-Kasysyaf) dan tafsir modern (al-Misbah, al-Munir, al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir). Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mufasir klasik menekankan *iqra'* sebagai perintah membaca wahyu dengan menyebut nama Tuhan, sementara mufasir modern memperluas maknanya mencakup bacaan terhadap wahyu, alam, dan masyarakat. Temuan ini menunjukkan relevansi QS. al-‘Alaq 1-5 dengan multiliterasi dalam Kurikulum Merdeka, yang mencakup literasi baca-tulis, sains, digital, budaya, numerasi, dan spiritual. Kontribusi penelitian ini terletak pada tawaran kerangka konseptual “literasi Qur’ani” yang dapat memperkuat implementasi Kurikulum Merdeka dengan menekankan integrasi nilai spiritual dan moral ke dalam pendidikan literasi kontemporer.

Kata kunci: QS. al-‘Alaq, literasi Qur’ani, multiliterasi, Kurikulum Merdeka

Abstract

The low reading literacy performance of Indonesian students, as revealed by the 2022 PISA results, highlights a critical challenge for the national education system. From an Islamic perspective, the urgency of literacy has been emphasized since the first revelation in QS. al-‘Alaq 1-5, with the command iqra' encompassing the reading of texts, nature, and social realities. This study aims to address the research gap by integrating the exegesis of QS. al-‘Alaq 1-5 with the Merdeka Curriculum's literacy framework, particularly in strengthening multiliteracy. Employing a qualitative library research design with content analysis, the study examines classical exegesis (Ibn Kathir, al-Kasysyaf) and modern exegesis (al-Misbah, al-Munir, al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir). The findings reveal that classical exegetes interpret iqra' as reading revelation in the name of God, while modern exegetes expand its scope to include revelation, nature, and society. These interpretations demonstrate strong relevance to the Merdeka Curriculum's multiliteracy orientation, which covers reading-writing, scientific, digital, cultural, numerical, and spiritual literacies. The study's novelty lies in proposing a “Qur’anic literacy” framework as a conceptual foundation for enhancing the implementation of the Merdeka Curriculum by integrating spiritual and moral values into contemporary literacy education.

Keywords: QS. al-‘Alaq, Qur’anic literacy, multiliteracy, Merdeka Curriculum

Introduction

Education is the fundamental foundation of nation-building, as the quality of education directly determines the quality of human resources. Nevertheless, the current state of education in Indonesia continues to face serious challenges, particularly in the domain of literacy. The 2022 Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) reported that Indonesian students' reading literacy remains among the lowest levels globally and significantly lags behind other Asian countries, despite relatively better performance in mathematics and science (Budiawan et al., 2025). This finding indicates that reading literacy constitutes one of the most critical weaknesses that must be addressed in the national education system.

In response, the Indonesian government has embedded literacy as a core competency within the Merdeka Curriculum (Independent Learning Curriculum). Literacy in this framework is conceptualized beyond the conventional notion of reading and writing skills; it expands into multiliteracies, encompassing scientific literacy, numeracy, digital literacy, cultural literacy, and civic literacy (Wahyudin et al., 2024). Strengthening multiliteracy is thus regarded as a strategic approach to shaping the profile of *Pelajar Pancasila*—students who are critical, adaptive, creative, and grounded in national values.

From an Islamic perspective, the urgency of literacy had been emphasized long before modern educational discourse. The first Qur'anic revelation, QS. al-'Alaq 1–5, which the majority of Muslim scholars agree was the earliest revealed passage, begins with the imperative *iqra'* (read) (al-Zarkasyi, 2001). The command is not confined to reading written texts but extends to engaging with nature, social realities, and the signs of God's greatness (Shihab, 2009). Thus, Qur'anic literacy encompasses broader dimensions: textual, natural, social, and spiritual literacies.

Previous studies have examined QS. al-'Alaq from different perspectives. Ulvah (2018) explored it through a conventional exegetical approach, while Akhyar and Syafitri (2023) discussed its educational implications. Mansur (2021) analyzed literacy in the Qur'an by comparing Tafsir al-Misbah and Tafsir al-Azhar. However, these works remain largely normative and exegetical in nature, without explicitly connecting the exegesis of QS. al-'Alaq to contemporary educational policies. To date, there is still a lack of scholarly research that integrates the interpretation of QS. al-'Alaq 1–5 with the multiliteracy framework of the Merdeka Curriculum. This research gap forms the primary rationale for the present study.

Accordingly, this research aims to offer a novel perspective by analyzing the interpretation of QS. al-‘Alaq 1–5 in both classical and modern exegesis and linking it to the multiliteracy orientation of the Merdeka Curriculum. The study seeks to contribute theoretically by developing a conceptual framework of “Qur’anic literacy” grounded in spiritual and moral values, and practically by strengthening the implementation of literacy education in Indonesia’s national curriculum.

The research is guided by two main questions: (1) How do classical and modern exegetes interpret QS. al-‘Alaq 1–5? and (2) How are these interpretations relevant to the multiliteracy framework in the Merdeka Curriculum? In addressing these questions, this study not only reaffirms the centrality of literacy as a fundamental educational competence but also positions Qur’anic literacy as a conceptual foundation for integrating spiritual values with contemporary educational policy.

Method

This research employs a library research design with a qualitative approach. The selection of this method is based on the object of study, namely *Surah Al-‘Alaq* and the literacy concept within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. The library research was conducted by collecting, reviewing, and analyzing tafsir texts, both classical and modern, as well as educational literature and national education regulations. The purpose of this methodological choice is to establish a comprehensive understanding of the meaning of *Surah Al-‘Alaq* verses 1–5 and to examine their relevance to the development of literacy education in contemporary contexts.

The primary sources of data in this study consist of representative tafsir works from both the classical and modern periods. Among the classical sources are *Tafsir Ibn Kathir* and *Tafsir al-Kasysyaf*, while the modern works include *Tafsir al-Mishbah*, *Tafsir al-Munir* by Wahbah al-Zuhaili, and *Tafsir al-Tahrir wa al-Tanwir* by Ibn ‘Ashur. These works were selected purposively because of their authoritative status and their wide recognition in the field of Qur’anic exegesis. Secondary data sources include books, educational literature, academic articles, and relevant research findings related to Islamic education, literacy, and curriculum studies. The combination of primary and secondary sources allows the researcher to build a solid theoretical and conceptual foundation for analysis.

The data collection technique employed in this research is documentation. This technique involves systematically tracing tafsir texts, reviewing educational literature, and examining national educational regulations that provide insights into the conceptualization of literacy within the framework of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. Relevant verses, interpretations, and theoretical perspectives were identified, documented, and organized according to the objectives of the study.

The data were analyzed using content analysis, which was carried out through several operational steps. First, the researcher identified data by extracting relevant verses and interpretations of *Surah Al-‘Alaq* verses 1–5. Second, the data were categorized into thematic clusters such as literacy values, epistemological foundations, and educational implications. Third, a process of critical interpretation was conducted by comparing the perspectives of classical and modern tafsir, followed by situating them within the discourse of contemporary literacy education. Finally, the researcher drew conclusions by synthesizing the findings and highlighting the interconnection between the Islamic exegetical tradition and the literacy concept promoted in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. This systematic procedure ensures that the analysis remains rigorous, coherent, and aligned with the research objectives.

Results and Discussion

The Exegesis of Surah Al-‘Alaq According to Classical and Modern Commentators

Surah Al-‘Alaq verses 1–5 is classified as a *Makkiyyah* surah because it was revealed in Mecca before the Prophet’s migration to Medina. The majority of scholars agree that these verses represent the first revelation received by the Prophet Muhammad in the cave of Hira’, although some scholars differ in opinion, suggesting that *Surah Al-Muddaththir* or *Surah Al-Fatihah* might have been revealed earlier (al-Zarkasyi, 2001). The *asbāb al-nuzūl* of these verses is narrated by Sayyidah ‘Aisyah, who recounted the moment when the Angel Jibril came to the Prophet Muhammad in the cave of Hira’ and commanded him to “Read” (*iqra*). The Prophet responded, “I am not able to read.” The angel embraced him and repeated the command three times, until finally Jibril continued with the revelation of verses 1–5 (al-Suyūṭī, 2011).

The command *iqra*’ (read) in the opening verse constitutes the first divine directive to the Prophet Muhammad, marking the beginning of his prophetic

mission and transforming his entire life. Ibn Kathīr (n.d.) interprets this revelation as the initial manifestation of Allah’s mercy and blessing upon His servant. The verses highlight Allah’s power in teaching humankind what they previously did not know, and they emphasize that knowledge can manifest in the heart, on the tongue, and in writing. Similarly, al-Zamakhsharī (2009) in *al-Kasysyāf* explains that the verse may be interpreted as “Read, O Muhammad, before reading the Qur’an, with the name of your Lord,” or, more simply, “Say *bismillāh* and then read.” Wahbah al-Zuhailī (2009) echoes this interpretation, stressing that the command refers to reciting the Qur’an with God’s name, while also noting that reading and writing are means by which Allah has dignified humanity, distinguishing them from other creatures.

Quraish Shihab (2009) provides a nuanced interpretation of the term *iqra’*. He notes that when the Prophet was commanded to read, no specific object was presented to be read. Consequently, exegetes differ on the object of this command. Some argue that the object is the divine revelation that would subsequently descend, while others maintain that the object is “bi ismi rabbika” (“in the name of your Lord”), making the phrase mean “Read your Lord’s name.” Drawing on linguistic principles, Shihab observes that when a verb requiring an object omits it, the meaning becomes general and all-encompassing. Thus, the command *iqra’* may refer not only to reading the Qur’an but also to reading nature, society, and the broader realities of existence—all acts that must be undertaken in God’s name, with ethical and spiritual awareness.

Meanwhile, Ibn ‘Āshūr (1984) interprets the omission of the object of *iqra’* in two possible ways: either because *iqra’* is intransitive and means “to generate a reading,” or because the object is contextually obvious, meaning “Read what We shall reveal to you from the Qur’an.” He concludes that knowledge acquisition occurs through three channels: (1) learning from others through study and written works, enabling knowledge transmission across nations and generations; (2) direct instruction and dictation; and (3) intellectual reasoning through inference and discovery, as alluded to in the verse: “He taught man what he did not know.” Taken together, these interpretations underscore that *iqra’* signifies more than reading sacred texts alone; it encompasses reading the natural world, social reality, and knowledge in all its forms, provided it is grounded in “the name of your Lord.”

The Concept of Literacy

The *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum aims to cultivate students as lifelong learners with the character of *Pelajar Pancasila*. This vision is articulated through six dimensions of the *Pelajar Pancasila* profile: (1) faith in God Almighty, piety, and noble character, (2) cooperation, (3) critical reasoning, (4) global diversity, (5) independence, and (6) creativity (Wahyudin et al., 2024). Literacy is a central component in achieving these objectives, serving as a foundation for building the competencies required of Indonesian learners in the 21st century.

In the context of the curriculum, literacy is defined as the ability of students to understand, use, evaluate, and reflect on various types of texts in order to solve problems and develop their capacity as both Indonesian citizens and global citizens who can contribute productively to society (Wahyudin et al., 2024). UNESCO (2025) extends the definition beyond basic skills of reading, writing, and arithmetic, framing literacy as the ability to identify, comprehend, interpret, create, and communicate in a rapidly digitalizing world. This perspective integrates digital literacy, media literacy, education for sustainable development, and work-related skills, alongside traditional literacy skills. Reflecting this global definition, the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum mandates that literacy-based learning be embedded across all subjects, not confined to language education alone.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology also emphasizes multiple literacies through its National Literacy Movement. These include: (1) reading and writing literacy, (2) numeracy literacy, (3) scientific literacy, (4) digital literacy, (5) financial literacy, and (6) cultural and civic literacy (CNN Indonesia, 2023). Together, these literacies represent a holistic approach to preparing students for active participation in society, equipping them with critical, creative, and ethical capacities.

The Relevance of Surah Al-‘Alaq to Literacy Education

An analysis of the various interpretations of Surah Al-‘Alaq verses 1–5 demonstrates a profound connection between the Qur’anic concept of *iqra’* and the objectives of literacy education in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. First, the verses emphasize the importance of reading and writing, aligning closely with the curriculum’s prioritization of literacy. While classical exegetes focus on the reading of sacred texts, modern interpretations expand the scope to include scientific inquiry, social awareness, and engagement with broader realities. This

interpretation resonates with the curriculum's multidimensional literacy framework, which encompasses textual, scientific, digital, financial, cultural, and civic literacies.

Second, one of the fundamental goals of the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum is to foster learners who are faithful, pious, and morally upright. This aligns with the Qur'anic directive that all acts of reading and learning be grounded in "bi ismi rabbika" (in the name of your Lord). In this sense, literacy is not merely a technical skill but also an ethical and spiritual practice. The integration of Qur'anic principles into literacy education thus ensures that students approach knowledge with humility, responsibility, and reverence.

Finally, the convergence between the exegesis of Surah Al-'Alaq and literacy education provides a foundation for integrating Islamic education into contemporary curricular frameworks. Literacy can be understood not only as a cognitive skill but also as a spiritual endeavor rooted in divine guidance. The curriculum can therefore be developed to integrate sacred texts, general literature, and social realities, reinforcing lifelong learning as envisioned in the Qur'an. Surah Al-'Alaq thus serves as a cornerstone for cultivating learners who are intellectually competent, ethically grounded, and spiritually aware.

Conclusion

The examination of various interpretations of Surah Al-'Alaq verses 1–5, both from classical and modern tafsir, reveals that the meaning of the word *iqra'* should not be confined merely to the command of reading the forthcoming Qur'anic revelations. Rather, it also encompasses reading the realities of nature and even the dynamics of social life. The command *iqra'* is directly followed by the phrase *bi ismi rabbika* ("in the name of your Lord"), which emphasizes that the act of reading must always be grounded in divine consciousness. This principle highlights that literacy in Islam is inseparable from spiritual and moral values, thereby forming a strong foundation for character education. Furthermore, the verses underscore not only the importance of reading but also of writing, since through writing the knowledge of scholars can be transmitted across generations.

The exegesis of Surah Al-'Alaq demonstrates significant relevance to literacy education within the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. The interpretation of these verses aligns with the goals of literacy education itself, namely, to equip learners with multiliteracy competencies. This means that learners should not only be

proficient in reading and writing literacy but also in scientific literacy, digital literacy, as well as social and cultural literacy. Thus, the tafsir of Surah Al-‘Alaq verses 1–5 may serve as a conceptual foundation for strengthening literacy education in the *Merdeka Belajar* Curriculum. The integration of Qur’anic values with contemporary education provides a more holistic and comprehensive understanding of literacy, one that combines cognitive, ethical, and spiritual dimensions.

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