

Enhancing Higher Order Thinking Skills through Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education at a Vocational High School in Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the effect of implementing the Active Learning technique and its urgency on enhancing students' Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) at SMKN 3 Banten, South Tangerang. The research employed a descriptive qualitative methodology, incorporating 15 interviewees, including the vice principal, Islamic Religious Education instructors, and students from grades X and XI of the Office and Animation Study Program. Data were gathered via structured interviews, observations, and documentation, then analyzed employing an interactive analysis approach. The study's findings indicated that (1) the systematic implementation of active learning occurred through strategies such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, think-pair-share, and role-playing, facilitated by two cultural approaches: the administrative mode (RPP organization, classroom management, HOTS assessment) and the self-internalization mode (habituation of reflective thinking and value instillation). The efficacy of this strategy is evidenced by the enhancement of students' competencies in analysis (C4), assessment (C5), and invention (C6), as assessed through HOTS-based projects, conversations, and inquiries. The Active Learning technique is demonstrably effective as it engages students' cognitive and emotive qualities in a balanced manner. Learning becomes more significant, pertinent, and contextual, enabling students to comprehend Islamic teachings not just theoretically but also to critically and creatively apply them to real-life situations. Consequently, Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMKN 3, South Tangerang, enhances students' cognitive abilities while cultivating a thoughtful and responsible religious character.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) is a crucial foundation in cultivating students' religion, ethical integrity, and critical thinking skills to confront contemporary difficulties (Safaruddin, 2020). During the Industrial Revolution 4.0, technology advancements and information dissemination need that students acquire 21st-century competencies, including Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), which include the capabilities to analyze, evaluate, and create, as outlined in Bloom's taxonomy. These skills are crucial for students to comprehend religious concepts intellectually and to apply them contextually in their social, ethical, and spiritual lives (Anita et al., 2022).

Nevertheless, numerous studies indicate that Islamic Religious Education in many schools, especially vocational institutions, is predominantly reliant on traditional approaches such as lectures and rote memorization (Yusup & Basri, 2024). This method frequently restricts opportunities for pupils to engage actively, converse, or cultivate critical thinking abilities. Consequently, students often exhibit passivity, struggle to relate the content to real-life contexts, and are inadequately equipped to make decisions grounded in Islamic beliefs (Sun'iyah, 2022). This tendency is supported by research indicating that monotonous learning approaches can impede the development of critical reasoning and value awareness (Suprpto et al., 2024).

The Active Learning methodology (Aryani et al., 2024) offers a solution to these challenges. Active Learning, by prioritizing students in the educational process (student-centered learning), engages them physically, cognitively, and emotionally using several tactics like problem-based learning, project-based learning, think-pair-share, role-play, and contextual simulations. Prior studies have demonstrated that model-based Active Learning methodologies (Cooperative, Discovery, Active, and Contextual Learning) effectively enhance learning engagement and higher-order thinking skills (HOTS) accomplishment (Jannah, 2021). According to Astuti et al., (2024) demonstrate that value-based learning and reflection can enhance students' critical thinking skills in making ethical decisions (Huang et al., 2024).

At the international level, research on Active Learning and HOTS focuses more on science and humanities education (Prince, 2004) (ILO, 2021). Currently, research pertaining to Islamic Religious Education (PAI), especially within vocational schools (SMK), is exceedingly scarce. This indicates a notable study deficiency, considering the practical and skill-oriented characteristics of vocational school pupils, which necessitate a learning methodology pertinent to the industry and rooted in religious principles (Ir Sintha Wahjusaputri et al., 2023).

SMKN 3 Banten, located in South Tangerang, is a compelling case study. This institution has experienced an enhancement in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning results, rising from below the Minimum Completion Criteria (KKM) to above the KKM (>75), following the execution of curriculum management reforms, teacher training, and the adoption of more student-centered learning methodologies. SMKN 3 South Tangerang, an A-accredited Center of Excellence School, possesses a conducive ecosystem for the optimal integration of the Active Learning approach into Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction.

This study seeks to: (1) investigate the application of Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education at SMKN 3 Tangerang Selatan, (2) assess its effect on enhancing students' Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), and (3) identify factors that affect the efficacy of this approach. This study's results are anticipated to enhance the theoretical framework of HOTS-based Islamic Religious Education literature and to furnish practical recommendations for educators and educational institutions in developing interactive, pertinent, and 21st-century skills-oriented learning experiences.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative methodology within an interpretive framework. This methodology was selected due to the research's emphasis on not only gathering and analyzing data but also on achieving a profound comprehension and interpretation of the significance of the observed phenomena. The interpretive paradigm posits that social reality is intricate and subjective, hence researchers engage in comprehending phenomena from the participants' viewpoint. This research positions the Active Learning method as a strategy aimed at addressing the deficiency in Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) within Islamic Religious Education, facilitating the enhancement of students' higher-order thinking capabilities. This technique is implemented through experiential learning models and activities grounded in values and collaboration, enabling students to develop critical thinking, solution-oriented approaches, and creativity in their learning.

This study was performed in SMKN 3 Tangerang Selatan, situated on Jl. Raya Puspipitek, Perum Puri Serpong 1, Setu Village, Setu District, South Tangerang City, Banten Province. This school was selected due to its designation as a model school and a driving school by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology in 2021. The majority of educators at this institution include teachers who have engaged in the learning leadership development program, resulting in having the ability to execute creative, original, and fun pedagogical tactics. The research participants comprised 12 students from grades X and XI enrolled in the Graphic Design and Animation expertise program, selected through a purposive sample technique, which is based on specific criteria relevant to the research aims. Each class consisted of two male learners and two female students. The supporting informants were the vice principal for curriculum and two Islamic Religious Education instructors who were directly involved in the implementation of the Active Learning technique.

The research was conducted from December 2024 to June 2025, covering all stages of the research, from instrument preparation, permit processing, field data collection, data analysis, and final report preparation. The preparation stage included determining the research focus, selecting subjects and informants, and developing data collection instruments. The data collection stage was conducted through three main methods: observation, interviews, and documentation. The observation used was non-participatory observation, where the researcher was present at the learning location to observe the implementation of the Active Learning method by Islamic Religious Education teachers and student responses, but was not directly involved in the learning process. Observations (John W Creswell, 2018) focused on learning method patterns, student and teacher activities, and learning outcomes related to HOTS improvement.

The data analysis in this study used an interactive analysis model (John W Creswell, 2018), which includes three main stages: data reduction, data presentation, and drawing and verifying conclusions. Data reduction was carried out by sorting and simplifying the raw data to focus on information relevant to the research objectives. Data presentation was done in the form of descriptive narratives, tables, or charts to make it easier for researchers to identify patterns and relationships between findings (Endahati & Triastuti, 2024). The final stage is drawing conclusions which are carried out continuously from the beginning of the data collection process and verified through triangulation to ensure the validity of the findings (Sugiyono, 2019).

Data validity was tested using several criteria. Credibility was assessed through extended observation, increased diligence, and triangulation of sources, methods, and theories (Safarudin et al., 2023). Transferability was maintained by providing a detailed description of the research context so readers could assess the relevance of the research results for application to other contexts. Dependability was ensured through comprehensive documentation of the research process (Arikunto, 2015), while confirmability was conducted to ensure that research findings were free from researcher bias and fully supported by the collected data. With these procedures, research is expected to produce valid, reliable, and beneficial findings for the development of Active Learning-based learning strategies to improve students' HOTS skills (Murjani, 2022).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Implementation of Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education Learning at SMKN 3 South Tangerang

The results of the study indicate that the implementation of the Active Learning method in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning at SMKN 3 Tangerang Selatan has been carried out in a planned, gradual manner, and is oriented towards strengthening higher-order thinking skills (HOTS). PAI teachers apply student-centered learning through various models, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, group discussions, case studies, role plays, and religious simulations. Learning planning refers to learning outcomes, HOTS indicators (C4–C6), and student characteristics. The Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) is prepared by integrating collaborative, exploratory, and reflective elements.

Learning is implemented through contextual problems, discussions, presentations, and the creation of products or solutions based on Islamic values. Evaluation is conducted through observation of attitudes, project assignments, presentations, and HOTS-based tests, while reflection is directed at strengthening the internalization of values. The implementation of Active Learning is also supported by a school culture that combines administrative approaches (preparing learning documents, schedules, supervision) and self-internalization (habituating critical thinking, value reflection, and dialogic communication), so that learning is both cognitive and transformative.

Table 1. The Process of Implementing Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education Learning at SMKN 3 South Tangerang

Stages	Teacher Activity	Student Activity	Learning Objectives
Planning	Developing HOTS-based lesson plans, selecting active methods	Preparing discussion materials and initial assignments	Preparing contextual and reflective learning
Implementation	Providing cases, facilitating discussions, guiding projects	Group discussions, presentations, and problem-solving	Developing analytical and evaluation skills
Evaluation	Providing HOTS questions, assessing students' attitudes and products	Answering analytical questions, creating reports or products	Assessing higher-order thinking skills
Reflection	Providing feedback and reinforcing values	Conveying experiences and perceived learning	Reinforcing the meaning and internalization of religious values

Five key aspects of the implementation of Active Learning methods in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning were identified as follows:

1. Teacher Implementation of Active Learning Methods

PAI teachers consistently implemented various Active Learning strategies according to the topic and class needs, such as group discussions, problem-based learning, role-play, and project-based learning. This approach demonstrates a paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered learning, creating a more dynamic and interactive learning environment.

2. Active Student Involvement in the Learning Process

Students were actively engaged both cognitively and socially. They demonstrated enthusiasm in discussions, courage to ask questions, and the ability to express their opinions.

This indicates the success of Active Learning in increasing student motivation and confidence in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material that was previously considered abstract.

3. Strengthening Critical Thinking Skills

Teachers utilized open-ended questions and contextual problems to stimulate critical thinking skills. For example, students were invited to analyze moral dilemmas related to Islamic values in the digital age. This activity honed analysis and evaluation skills (C4 and C5 of Bloom's Taxonomy) and emphasized the relevance of the material to real life.

4. Social Interaction and Collaboration Between Students

The learning process is designed to encourage collaboration through pair discussions, group work, and joint projects. The teacher acts as a facilitator, enabling students to learn from each other's perspectives and experiences. This approach fosters social skills such as empathy, communication, and cooperation.

5. Exploration and Reflection as Part of HOTS

Students are given space to explore Islamic values independently or in groups, followed by reflection activities through learning journals, presentations, or value discussions. These activities strengthen students' affective and metacognitive aspects, while supporting the comprehensive development of HOTS.

Overall, the implementation of Active Learning methods in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMKN 3 South Tangerang has created a participatory, reflective, and contextual learning environment. Students not only understand the material textually but also process it through analysis, evaluation, and creativity. These results demonstrate the significant contribution of Active Learning to improving students' HOTS (Higher Self-Skills), supported by thorough lesson planning, a variety of methods, and the role of teachers as facilitators of collaboration and value reflection.

This implementation is reinforced through two approaches to school culture: an administrative mode, manifested in lesson planning and supervision, and a self-internalization mode, which instills habits of reflective thinking and acting based on Islamic values. These two approaches create a fun, meaningful, and transformative learning environment for students. The following are two modes of implementing Active Learning at SMKN 3 South Tangerang:

1. Administrative Mode in Improving HOTS through Active Learning

Administrative mode is a learning management approach carried out systematically and structured by teachers and schools, as part of the planning and management of the learning process. In the context of Active Learning for HOTS improvement, administrative mode includes:

a. HOTS-oriented learning planning

- a) Teachers develop a Learning Implementation Plan (RPP) that includes HOTS-based objectives, methods, and assessments (levels C4–C6).
- b) The selection of learning strategies, such as problem-based learning, project-based learning, and reflective discussions, is based on an analysis of the teaching materials and the characteristics of vocational school students.

b. Class and Time Management

- a) Teachers establish classroom rules that allow for effective discussion, collaboration, and reflection.
- b) Learning time is structured to provide space for active and exploratory activities, not just lectures or memorization.

c. Integrated Supervision and Evaluation

- a) The principal or curriculum representative supervises the implementation of Active Learning and evaluates whether the learning strategies align with HOTS principles.
- b) Learning assessments utilize not only multiple-choice questions but also project assignments, presentations, case studies, and value reflections.

Through this administrative model, students are given a systematic space to actively engage and think critically, as the entire learning system is designed to encourage HOTS.

2. Self-Internalization Mode in Improving HOTS through Active Learning

The internalization mode uses an approach that emphasizes habituation, instilling values, and consciously engaging students' inner selves in the learning process. In Active Learning, this approach encourages students to interpret, experience, and reflect on what they learn so that it becomes not only cognitive knowledge but also shapes thought patterns and attitudes.

a. Reflection of Values and Meaning

- a) Students are invited to analyze verses or hadith and then relate them to real-life situations, for example: "What is the meaning of honesty in the era of social media?"
- b) Reflection is carried out by teachers through references to various journals, value discussions, or discussion forums.

b. Liberty to Express Ideas

- a) Students are given space to express their opinions, discuss, and debate, similar to quizzes, which train logic, evaluation, and argumentation.
- b) Example: a thematic debate on "Islam and Interfaith Tolerance" that leads to active participation in religious competitions such as Islamic Religious Education (PAI) performances or religious skills competitions.
- c) Creating innovative animated videos like *Sari and Mulya*, which have been widely viewed by all groups, especially children, on YouTube. They encourage and educate students about Islamic and Pancasila values, such as tolerance and religiousness.

c. Experience-Based Religious Projects

- a) Students are asked to create zakat campaigns, digital da'wah content, or ethical decision simulations in everyday life. Animated videos by students of SMKN 3 Tangerang Selatan have attracted the attention of all groups and have been endorsed by private companies and Indonesian television to appear on television channels. For example, the animated video of *Sari and Mulya* has had a positive impact on education regarding Islamic values and local wisdom based on the diversity of diversity. The impact is felt through the YouTube channel which contains animated videos about education and calls to do good. Making students skilled and innovative in analyzing, evaluating and creating output products that are beneficial to the wider community and have an impact on the entertainment market.
- b) This helps them not only understand religious law but also internalize its values and apply them in a social context. Thus, Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning not only successfully increases student participation and engagement but also has a significant impact on character development and higher-order thinking skills. This approach has proven relevant and effective in supporting the achievement of holistic and contextual Islamic religious education goals in vocational high schools (SMK). In implementing Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, there are continuous steps taken by Islamic Religious Education teachers to improve students' HOTS as follows:

Table 1. The results of the analysis of the steps for implementing Islamic Religious Education learning with various methods used by teachers to increase students' HOTS.

Method Type	Benefits	Description	Examples of Material in Islamic Religious Education
Project-Based Learning (PjBL)	Combines analysis, creativity, evaluation, and collaborative work across the HOTS spectrum.	Students work on short- or long-term projects to solve real-life problems relevant to the lesson.	Students create a digital campaign about the importance of maintaining oral hygiene in accordance with Islamic teachings, which is presented to the school.
Problem-Based Learning (PBL)	Develops critical thinking, logical argumentation, and problem-solving skills.	Students are given real-life or hypothetical problems and then seek solutions based on knowledge and group discussion.	Problem: "How do we address differences in schools of thought in social life?" Students explore sources, discuss, and develop argumentative solutions.

The results indicate that the Active Learning technique in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) effectively enhances students' Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) by fostering a participatory, reflective, and contextual classroom environment. The educator serves as a facilitator, promoting students' investigation, evaluation, and ideation grounded in Islamic principles.

1. The impact of Active Learning in Assessment increases student HOTS
Assessment of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning is conducted to determine the success of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process through Active Learning methods in improving Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) in the independent curriculum. Student learning outcomes are paramount in evaluating student learning outcomes throughout the learning process. Assessment of learning outcomes allows us to determine the extent to which students have mastered the competencies or learning outcomes in each subject.
2. Implications of using HOTS in learning Islamic Religious Education
Islamic religious instruction in every classroom meeting utilizes a Student-Centered Learning (SCL) approach, which focuses on students actively participating in the learning process, preferably in the classroom.

The curriculum at SMKN 3 South Tangerang reinforces the emphasis on active learning and HOTS through robust curriculum and administrative support. The learning management system is reused to host asynchronous discussion forums, allowing students to expand critical debates outside of class. Teachers collaboratively develop performance-based assessments such as project portfolios and case study analyses that go beyond rote tests, aligning evaluations with the school's HOTS goals.

1. Impact of Active Learning on Student Learning Outcomes
Based on this reference, each school naturally has different assessment standards for each student after taking a series of school exams. Based on these results, SMKN 3 South Tangerang explained that in 2012, the method still implemented was a competency-based curriculum, with methods relatively tailored to the expertise of the teachers. Because the majority of these

teachers were nearing retirement, the methods applied tended to be conventional and not yet integrated with technology, meaning they still used the lecture method.

2. Impact of Learning Outcomes After Active Learning Implementation

The implementation of Active Learning has a significant impact on improving student learning outcomes. By actively involving students in the learning process, such as through group discussions, problem-solving, simulations, or reflection, students gain a deeper understanding of the material. These activities encourage them to think critically, relate knowledge to real-world contexts, and develop analytical and synthesis skills.

3. The Relationship between Active Learning and HOTS in Intracurricular Islamic Religious Education Learning

Active Learning, with each Islamic Religious Education subject, creates a participatory, reflective, and cognitively challenging atmosphere. Activities such as discussions, problem solving, value simulations, and grouping of Islamic concepts are effective in training students to think analytically, critically, and creatively.

Thus, Active Learning in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) at SMKN 3 South Tangerang not only improves religious understanding but also instills tolerance, social awareness, reflective thinking, and creativity in addressing various issues. This model is highly relevant for developing a generation of Muslims who think critically, have noble morals, and are ready to face the challenges of the times, with Islamic values as their primary foundation.

Discussion

Anderson and Krathohl have categorized the ability to analyze, evaluate, and create in high-level thinking processes called Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS), namely in the C4 to C6 domains (Wiralodra, n.d.). HOTS-Based Assessment is very important for teachers to implement to be able to evaluate and measure the level of students' understanding by implementing HOTS learning starting from HOTS-based questions and implementing learning carried out with HOTS in the school environment, this learning pattern trains students to think critically in solving problems that exist in life (Rahmanto & Ramadhan, 2024).

The application of HOTS uses the Cooperative Learning and Problem Solving methods, namely by Cooperative Learning determining study groups in one class, training students to be more active in thinking critically and creatively. At this stage, students can evaluate, as analyzed, critical thinking is an ability to say something with confidence, allowing students to determine the truth of themselves from information and an organized process through evidence, assumptions, logic, and language that underlies other people's statements occurs in critical thinking, and is strengthened by relevant and easily obtained learning resources, both through digital ebooks and libraries (Venkatraman et al., 2022).

Melvin L. Silberman sees that active learning is best achieved by "doing" rather than passively absorbing information (Cahyati Khasani & Ahmad Ma'ruf, 2020). His work is not simply a collection of teaching tricks; it is a call to restructure the educational environment to prioritize engagement. For Silberman, active learning requires careful planning and insight that shifts the conversation from classroom tactics to institutional strategies (Roberts et al., 2024). Administrators, not only as a form of writing but the role of teachers and schools can be said with administrators, especially Islamic Religious Education teachers who are more focused on improving student competencies through various activities carried out as fulfillment of teacher competencies. When students shift from passive recipients to active builders of meaning, they are not only required to analyze the material but also to monitor their own cognitive and affective responses. Through Student-Centered Learning (SCL), students become active from various perspectives and foster critical thinking (Aryani et al., 2024).

The implementation of administration has been running in accordance with what is contained in the theory and what is practiced by the school, where there is continuity between the grand theory developed by Silberman and Bloom and findings in the field. Active Learning to apply active, contextual, and reflective thinking in understanding and applying Islamic values in real life. The

internalization that emerges from Active Learning is also strengthened through a process of habituation, repetition in different contexts, and open dialogue of values. Students are given space to process values cognitively (thinking), affectively (feeling), and psychomotor (acting). Thus, Active Learning is an approach that not only develops knowledge and skills, but also shapes the character and spirituality of students as a whole.

4. CONCLUSION

This study was designed to answer the main question: to what extent the application of the Active Learning method in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) can strengthen students' Higher Order Thinking Skills (HOTS) at SMKN 3 South Tangerang. Based on field findings, it can be concluded that this learning strategy was successfully implemented systematically and creatively, combining thorough administrative planning such as developing HOTS-based (Setyarini et al., 2023) lesson plans, classroom management, and learning supervision with efforts to internalize values through reflection, fostering critical thinking habits, and dialogic communication. The synergy of these two approaches creates a participatory learning environment, encourages active student engagement both cognitively and emotionally, and strengthens higher-order thinking skills within the framework of Islamic values.

The effectiveness of Active Learning (Munfaridatus, 2018) is reflected in the increased competence of students in the three main HOTS domains: analyzing (C4), evaluating (C5), and creating (C6) (Czepula et al., 2018). This improvement is manifested not only in analytical answers or logical arguments but also through original work, such as digital animations based on religious values produced by students. This confirms that Active Learning can bridge the gap between conceptual understanding and practical application, and help students internalize Islamic values through learning experiences relevant to their social realities (Roberts et al., 2024).

From a theoretical perspective, this research enriches the study of the relationship between Active Learning (Cahyati Khasani & Ahmad Ma'ruf, 2020) and strengthening HOTS in the context of religious education in vocational schools. From a practical perspective, these findings can serve as a reference for Islamic Religious Education teachers and educational administrators in designing learning that not only hones higher-order cognitive abilities but also shapes students' character and spiritual values. For educational policymakers, these results provide an empirical basis for encouraging the broader implementation of active learning strategies across various subjects, particularly in curricula oriented toward developing 21st-century skills.

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