

STRATEGIES FOR STRENGTHENING CRITICAL THINKING THROUGH ACTIVE LEARNING AQIDAH AKHLAK IN STATE MTS IN KEDIRI CITY

Ahmad Khoirul Mustamir

Universitas Islam Tribakti (UIT) Lirboyo Kediri, Indonesia

Corresponding E-mail; Khoirulldr52@gmail.com

Abstract

The issue of critical thinking skills in the face of the challenges of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 era is a significant one. The prevalence of information and rapid knowledge services through technology can potentially lead students to neglect their critical thinking skills. This is particularly true in doctrinal subjects such as Aqidah Akhlak. The impact of this trend is evident in the learning process of Akidah Akhlak subjects at MTsN in Kediri City. The research focuses on the role of Active Learning strategies in supporting students to develop critical thinking skills through participatory learning. The qualitative research method was implemented through non-participant observation, interview, and document analysis approaches. The researcher explored the interaction between teachers and students in the implementation of Active Learning strategies, as well as assessing students' responses to the learning process centered on active participation and critical reflection. The results showed that the construction of Active Learning strategies in State MTs in Kediri City was built in response to the demands of the times. In practice, the construction of this strategy is supported by government regulations, internal madrasah policies, educational theories, teacher readiness, and the availability of facilities and infrastructure. Active Learning strategies are implemented through systematic planning, implementation, and evaluation stages. The Active Learning strategy has been proven highly effective in strengthening students' critical thinking skills, providing reassurance about the positive impact of these strategies. With continuous support, this strategy has the potential to become a relevant and transformative learning model in forming an adaptive and solution-oriented Islamic generation.

Keywords: Reinforcement Strategy; Critical Thinking; Active Learning

A. Introduction

Education in the era of the Industrial Revolution 4.0 requires students to possess high critical thinking skills, enabling them to filter information wisely and address increasingly complex social challenges. According to Williya Novianti, "In the 4.0 era, education is becoming increasingly important to ensure that students have the skills to learn and innovate, skills to use technology and information media, and can work and survive by mastering one of the life skills, namely high-level thinking skills (HOTS)". (Williya Novianti, 2020)

Critical thinking is not just the ability to analyze an idea, but also a reflective skill that allows individuals to make rational decisions based on evaluating available evidence. This aligns with the definition of critical thinking put forward by Ennis: "Critical thinking, according to Robert Ennis, has the ultimate goal of making decisions, whether it is about

beliefs (what is considered true) or actions (what will be done).” Thus, critical thinking is not only related to cognitive aspects but also to an individual's ability to consider the relevance and validity of information before trusting or using it in everyday life.

The conceptual framework of this study is based on field data that demonstrates the application of Active Learning strategies in teaching Aqidah Akhlak at State MTs in Kediri City, and their role in strengthening students' critical thinking skills. Initial observations suggest that this approach enables students to be more actively engaged in analyzing, evaluating, and internalizing religious values in their daily lives. In addition, interviews with teachers indicate that applying this strategy not only aims to improve cognitive understanding but also to shape character and critical attitudes by Islamic principles.

In this context, the Active Learning Strategy allows students to learn more deeply through direct experience, reflective discussion, and problem-solving-based learning. In practice, the teacher acts as a facilitator who guides students in connecting Aqidah Akhlak concepts with the social realities they face. As part of this research analysis, Gagné's learning theory can be one perspective in understanding how external stimulation, such as teaching methods, interacts with students' internal conditions to create more meaningful learning. By adapting Active Learning strategies to the religious environment at MTsN in Kediri City, it is expected that Aqidah Akhlak learning is not only effective in developing critical thinking skills, but also contributes to forming students who have a deep understanding of religious values and can apply them in facing social and moral challenges in the modern era. (Aksin Nuruh Huda & Muhammad Anas Ma`arif, 2021)

The reality at MTsN in Kediri City reveals that some teachers still tend to employ conventional approaches in learning, assuming that the effectiveness of teaching depends on the smooth delivery of material by the teacher, rather than on the active involvement of students in the learning process. (Umi Khafidzotul Ilma, komunikasi pribadi, 11 November 2024) As a result, learners tend to be passive recipients, with limited opportunities to develop the critical thinking and problem-solving skills they need in real life.

Several previous studies have highlighted the importance of student-centered learning strategies in encouraging critical thinking skills. Hulaimi demonstrated that Contextual Teaching and Learning (CTL) enabled students to participate more independently in discussions and decision-making. (Ahmad Hulaimi, 2019) Sujalmo, Hayatina, and Amiroh) demonstrated that Problem-Based Learning (PBL) can help students develop analytical skills through context-based problem-solving. (Sujalmo dkk., 2024) Meanwhile, Toha's research on Active Learning confirms that this approach improves students' understanding in Islamic Religious Education through more dynamic interactions. (Toha, 2018) However, these studies have not specifically discussed how Active Learning strategies can be applied in Aqidah Akhlak learning to strengthen students' critical thinking skills. Additionally, existing studies continue to focus primarily on cognitive aspects. In contrast, the affective dimensions and emotional involvement of students in internalizing religious values through active approaches are rarely studied in depth.

This research gap is the basis for the urgency of this research. If so far, Aqidah Akhlak learning has relied more on the lecture and memorization methods, then the Active Learning strategy offers a more contextual and collaborative approach, where students are invited to play an active role in exploring religious concepts through discussion, case analysis, and critical reflection on social phenomena related to Islamic values. Thus, this research not only contributes to the development of a more interactive learning model but also offers new insights into how this strategy can be optimized to build a deeper and more applicable understanding of religion for madrasah students.

B. Method

This research employs a qualitative method with a phenomenological approach, enabling in-depth exploration of the application of Active Learning strategies in enhancing students' critical thinking skills in Aqidah Akhlak subjects at MTs Negeri in Kediri City (Safarudin dkk., 2023). This qualitative research is field research, where researchers conduct direct observations at the location to collect data. According to Sugiyono, "The qualitative research method is an approach used to examine phenomena in a natural context, where the researcher plays a direct role as the main instrument in the process of collecting and interpreting data (Sugiyono, 2014). State MTs in Kediri City were chosen as the research location because they have a conducive environment for implementing Active Learning, supported by adequate facilities and a curriculum that promotes participatory learning. Teachers' academic qualifications and experience in applying activity-based methods further strengthen the implementation of this strategy. Data were collected through observation, interview, and document analysis. Observation was conducted by directly observing learning activities without the involvement of researchers, to capture the dynamics of interaction between teachers and students objectively. Interviews involved the Head of Madrasah, the WAKA Curriculum, and teachers to explore their experiences, challenges, and effectiveness in improving critical thinking skills through Active Learning strategies. Meanwhile, document analysis included a review of the Learning Implementation Plan (RPP), Learner Worksheets (LKPD), and student evaluation results, which served as complementary data to verify findings from observations and interviews (Sugiyono, 2014).

C. Finding and Discussion

1. Finding

Construction of Active Learning Strategies

Construction of thought is the process of building, designing, and compiling an idea, concept, and theory based on various sources of information, experience, and critical analysis. According to Siswanto et al, "Thought construction is a process of building a mindset according to a particular perspective (Siswanto dkk., 2021). In the process, the construction of thought not only combines existing ideas but also adapts them to a particular context or even forms a new paradigm in a scientific field. In the context of education, the construction of ideas through learning strategies plays a crucial role in determining the direction and ensuring that learning objectives are achieved optimally. The

construction of ideas in learning strategies does not just appear out of thin air. Still, it is rooted in the exploration process that forms the basis for the formulation and implementation of educational policies. In the implementation theory developed by Dean L. Fixsen and his colleagues, the exploration stage is the first step that serves to identify needs and evaluate the suitability of a program or strategy with the existing context. (Dean L. Fixsen dkk., 2005) This process is the foundation for the construction of thought, because through exploration, the approach applied can be ensured to be appropriate and relevant to the real conditions in the field, so that the application of learning strategies is not just a theoretical concept, but the result of an in-depth study that considers the needs and dynamics of education.

Active Learning as a Demand of the Times

The ability to think critically is a much-needed skill, so learning is no longer sufficiently centered on memorization and note-taking alone. Therefore, the construction of thoughts in current learning strategies should be oriented towards active learning, which encourages students to build understanding, process information, and develop critical thinking skills. (Condro Sujalmo dkk., 2024) Critical thinking, according to Robert Ennis, has the ultimate goal of making informed decisions, whether about beliefs (what is considered valid) or actions (what will be done). This definition emphasizes that critical thinking involves not only the analysis of information but also deep reflection to evaluate the validity, relevance, and implications of information based on logical reasoning and solid evidence. Therefore, education must be able to train students to thoroughly sort and analyze data. In the context of the Aqidah Akhlak subject, critical thinking skills are highly relevant because they enable students to understand religious values more deeply and connect them to the realities of everyday life. MTs in Kediri City recognize that critical thinking is no longer just an additional skill, but a fundamental necessity for students to navigate the increasingly digitalized era. Therefore, the education applied at MTs N in Kediri City continues to strive to remain dynamic and relevant to the times. If learning methods remain fixated on conventional methods without innovation, students' understanding is potentially hampered, and their readiness to face new challenges becomes suboptimal.

Support for the installation and implementation of Active Learning strategies is provided through the provision of infrastructure that facilitates effective learning. As an adaptation to the times, the integration of technology in education is a crucial factor in supporting the effectiveness of Active Learning strategies. In State MTs in Kediri City, technology has been utilized in the learning process, including the use of Android TV, which enables students to access digital materials with teacher guidance, and the implementation of more interactive digital literacy resources.

Policy Foundation for Active Learning Implementation

Active learning strategies are expected to provide a solid foundation for improving the quality of learning while adapting to the demands of modern education. To support this, the government, through the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Religious

Affairs, continues to formulate policies that encourage innovation in learning, including in the State MTs in Kediri City. As an institution committed to improving the quality of education, this madrasah consistently adopts policies based on continuous evaluation to ensure the effectiveness of its learning programs. The implementation of this policy aligns with Minister of Religious Affairs Decree No. 450 of 2024, which emphasizes the importance of developing adaptive learning methods. (Kementerian Agama Republik Indonesia, 2024).

In line with the regulations required by the government, MTs N in Kediri City also made internal regulations in the form of a one-semester learning evaluation through the KTSP review meeting held at the end of each semester. The KTSP review is a program that aims to assess the effectiveness of teaching strategies and design more innovative methods. This evaluation not only takes the form of one-way discussions in seminars, but also includes a compulsory workshop for teachers, where they draw up lesson plans as guidelines for the next semester. If obstacles are found during the implementation of learning, the madrasah also has a mechanism for sudden official meetings to find appropriate solutions and implement them immediately. This policy shows institutional awareness in ensuring that learning strategies are always relevant to students' needs as well as dynamic educational developments.

Teacher Awareness in Implementing Active Learning

Successful implementation is highly dependent on the alignment between supporting infrastructure and human resource readiness. The synergy between conducive policies, adequate infrastructure, and educators' awareness in developing competencies and applying knowledge in the learning process is a significant factor in ensuring the effectiveness of the curriculum. Thus, the curriculum not only functions as a regulation that must be followed, but also becomes an instrument for continuous improvement in the quality of education. PAI learning itself is often considered boring because it still focuses on memorizing concepts without encouraging critical thinking and student engagement. (Ahmad Hulaimi, 2019) A lack of student motivation for learning is one of the obstacles to learning activities at MTs N in Kediri City. Some students tend to underestimate the subject of Aqidah Akhlak because it is perceived as an easy subject. This requires teachers to continually try to arouse students' enthusiasm for learning, so that they remain focused and have an interest in the material presented.

In addition, many teachers still use conventional methods, which can cause students to become passive, become quickly bored, and lack enthusiasm for learning. (Ahmad Hulaimi, 2019) Some teachers at MTs N in Kediri City consider that MTs students are still in the stage of building basic understanding, so if directly invited to think more deeply, they often have difficulty following. The lecture method enables the delivery of material in a systematic and structured manner, ensuring that all students receive the same information consistently and uniformly. This is in line with research conducted by Ahmad Hulaimi, "The mistake also occurs

in teachers, they think that PAI is a lesson full of concepts, notions, and facts that must be memorized."

The madrasah policy related to the implementation of student-centered learning at MTs N in Kediri City confirms that the role of the teacher is not only that of a conveyor of information, but also as a facilitator who guides students in exploring and constructing their knowledge. This approach aligns with Lev S. Vygotsky's theory of constructivism, which emphasizes two key concepts: the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) and Scaffolding. ZPD describes the distance between what students can achieve independently and what they can potentially achieve with the guidance of a teacher or a more skilled peer. In this case, scaffolding serves as a gradual support provided by the teacher to help students develop a more complex understanding, ultimately enabling them to learn independently. (Begjo Tohari & Ainur Rahman, 2024).

The madrasah policy in State MTs in Kediri City, which is also based on learning theories, encourages teachers to consistently apply active learning strategies. The consistency of the teachers also departs from the understanding that the learning process is not just receiving information, but must produce fundamental changes in students' behavior. This view is in line with the behavioristic learning theory proposed by Thorndike, "Learning is an interaction between stimulus and response. The stimulus includes everything that stimulates learning, while the response is the student's reaction, either in the form of thoughts, feelings, or actions." (Hamruni dkk., 2021) This theory emphasizes that behavior change occurs through stimulus-response relationships controlled by experience. Actions that are positively reinforced tend to be maintained, while those that are punished or not reinforced tend to be abandoned. (Jelita dkk., 2023).

In line with this, teachers believed that teachers' understanding of students' prior knowledge was an essential aspect of adjusting the level of guidance provided. This aligns with Gagné's theory, which emphasizes that learning success is determined by the interaction between internal and external factors. Internal factors include prior knowledge and skills, which are then developed through the learning process. Meanwhile, external factors include various stimuli from the environment that support learning and development. Gagné also emphasizes that learning is not just a response to an external stimulus, but a complex cognitive process. With the right approach, teachers can avoid repeating material that students have already mastered while ensuring that learning remains progressive and encourages optimal development throughout the learning process.

E. Conclusion

The Active Learning learning strategy is rooted in the construction of thoughts that are oriented towards exploring the needs and dynamics of education, so that it does not merely become a theoretical concept, but a solution relevant to the challenges of the times. The implementation of this strategy in MTN, Kediri City, is supported by national and internal madrasah policies, including continuous evaluation through KTSP reviews and teacher workshops, to ensure the effectiveness of learning methods. However, the success of Active Learning depends not only on policies and infrastructure, but also on the readiness and awareness of teachers in adapting strategies that suit the characteristics of students. In the implementation of Active learning strategies in MTs N in Kediri City refers to Gagné's Nine Events of Instruction theory, which includes the stages of fostering student interest and attention, conveying learning objectives, connecting previous concepts, conveying interesting new material, providing learning guidance, encouraging students to do exercises, providing feedback, measuring student performance, and encouraging reflection and transfer of learning. The methods applied involve interactive approaches, critical discussions, and the use of technology to enhance student engagement. Thus, Active Learning is not just a teaching strategy, but also an effective means to develop students' competencies and readiness to face real-world challenges.

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