

STUDENTS' LEARNING PREFERENCES AND INSTRUCTIONAL ADAPTATION IN ISLAMIC RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AT SMK NEGERI 3 MEDAN: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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Abstract

Background: Conventional lectures often cause fragmented attention among vocational students. *Objective:* This study explored students' learning preferences and instructional adaptations in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classrooms at SMK Negeri 3 Medan. *Methods:* A qualitative descriptive case study was conducted from February 27 to June 18 (AY 2025/2026). One experienced teacher and three eleventh-grade Pharmacy students were selected via purposive sampling. Data were gathered through 5× classroom observations, 4× semi-structured interviews (12–30 minutes), and lesson plan analysis, then analyzed using Miles, Huberman, and Saldana's interactive model with manual coding. Trustworthiness was ensured via triangulation, member checking, peer debriefing, and audit trails. *Findings:* Students preferred practical, hands-on activities and audiovisual media over fixed learning styles, contextually shaped by the procedural nature of Islamic rituals and vocational learning-by-doing habituation. Instructional adaptations, such as short moral videos and ability-based reading groups, effectively enhance student engagement and classroom focus. *Conclusion:* Creative adaptations temporarily boosted student interest but could not eliminate structural constraints like weak parental reinforcement at home. *Implications:* Instructors should flexibly blend practical, visual, auditory, and reflective activities within a single flow rather than labeling students into rigid categories.

Keywords: Islamic Religious Education, learning preferences, kinesthetic learning, audiovisual media, vocational education.

A. Introduction

Education basically aims to develop the entire human potential of students as a whole, both from cognitive, affective, and moral aspects (Juleha et al., 2025). In the context of Islamic Religious Education (PAI), the Qur'an provides guidance that humans are born without knowledge, but are equipped with sensory facilities in the form of hearing (as-sam'), sight (al-ab ṣ ā r), and heart or reason (al-af'idah) to absorb knowledge QS. An-Nahl: 78 (Az-Zuhaili, 2013).

QS. An-Nahl verse 78:

وَاللّٰهُ أَخْرَجَكُمْ مِنْ بُطُونِ أُمَّهَاتِكُمْ لَا تَعْلَمُونَ شَيْئًا وَجَعَلَ لَكُمُ السَّمْعَ وَالْأَبْصَارَ وَالْأَفْئِدَةَ لَعَلَّكُمْ تَشْكُرُونَ ﴿٧٨﴾

Meaning: "Allah brought you out of your mother's wombs knowing nothing and gave you hearing, sight and hearts so that you might be grateful ("Al-Qur'an Dan Terjemahannya," 2022). "

According to Wahbah Az-Zuhaili in *Tafsir Al-Munir* (Wahbah Az-Zuhaili, 2013), This verse explains that humans are born ignorant. To acquire knowledge, Allah SWT bestows three primary faculties: hearing (as-sam') , sight (al-ab ṣ ā r) , and the heart or mind (al-af'idah) . These three faculties are the primary tools in the learning process (Alfanzari & Fitra, 2025).

In a simple interpretation, hearing can be associated with an auditory learning style, sight with a visual learning style, and the heart, as the center of understanding and appreciation, can be associated with cognitive and kinesthetic aspects. This shows that each individual has different potential and ways of receiving information, so the learning process requires adapting methods to student characteristics.

On the other hand, the hadith narrated by Al-Bukhari No. 69 and Muslim No. 1734 which contains the message *yassirū wa lā tu'assirū* theologically commands educators to use a teaching approach that is easy and wise according to the capacity of the object of da'wah or students (An-Nawawi, 1972). In modern educational literature, differences in the way students process sensory stimuli are often associated with the concept of learning styles or multiple intelligences from Howard Gardner. However, it is important to distinguish these terminologies academically to avoid overlap. Learning styles refer to individual sensory preferences (such as visual, auditory, or kinesthetic) in absorbing information (Azizah & Widyartono, 2024), while multiple intelligences describe the spectrum of intelligence potential that a person has. Meanwhile, teaching methods are practical strategies for teachers in the classroom, and differentiated learning (differentiated instruction) is a systematic framework for teachers in modifying content, processes, or learning products to accommodate this diversity.

In some early literature, religious texts on the potential of hearing, sight, and the heart are often directly associated as the basis for auditory, visual, and kinesthetic learning styles. This interpretation requires academic caution; the relationship is not an absolute or established scientific certainty, but rather a theological metaphor that shows that Islam has from the beginning recognized the diversity of information absorption pathways in humans. The research gap underlying this study lies in the lack of studies exploring how students' learning preferences interact with the vocational school environment specifically for normative subjects such as Islamic Religious Education.

Previous studies, such as those conducted by (Najmi et al., 2025) serta (Ashari et al., 2025), have generally focused on elementary schools or religious-based public high schools. These studies tend to treat learning styles as fixed psychological characteristics and link them mechanistically to student achievement. In contrast, studies in vocational schools offer a different contribution and novelty. The Vocational High School (SMK) environment has unique characteristics, including a practical orientation and the formation of work habits (learning by doing) in laboratories or workshops.

Empirical issues at SMK Negeri 3 Medan indicate an imbalance in understanding of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) material when teachers apply a one-way classical approach that is generalized to all students. This raises a critical question: is student psychomotor activity in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classes driven by rigid, innate kinesthetic learning styles, or is it a situational preference shaped by the habits of the SMK environment and the procedural characteristics of religious materials (such as ablution and prayer)? Based on this background, this descriptive qualitative study aims to explore in depth how variations in learning preferences of grade XI FKK students at SMK Negeri 3 Medan emerge in Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classes, as well as how teachers adapt

their teaching to manage class attention amidst the limited hours of regular school lessons. Specifically, this study aims to determine the diversity of student learning styles (visual, auditory, kinesthetic), variations in teacher teaching methods, Learning Urgency, instructional obstacles, and efforts to resolve them.

B. Method

This qualitative research with a single case study design at SMK Negeri 3 Medan aims to explore the interaction of student learning preference patterns and teacher teaching adaptation strategies within the boundaries of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) classroom system. Using a purposive sampling strategy, the research focused on a unit of analysis consisting of four participants: one PAI teacher (T1, teaching since 2019) with a minimum of five years of service, and three 11th-grade students of the Clinical and Community Pharmacy Vocational Program (S1, S2, S3) who exhibited variations in sensory learning responses. This field research was conducted from February 27 to June 18 in the even semester of the 2025/2026 academic year. Data were collected through various sources of evidence to capture the full reality, including 5× non-participant classroom observation sessions to observe instructional interactions, 4× structured in-depth interviews lasting 12 to 30 minutes per session, and document analysis of the Lesson Implementation Plan (RPP) (Sugiyono, 2021).

The instrument was independently developed by the researcher by deriving theoretical indicators regarding sensory information processing preferences and teaching adaptations. All interviews were recorded using digital tools with the informant's permission, transcribed verbatim, and kept confidential through numerical coding and restricted access to the raw data. Data analysis was conducted inductively manually following the interactive model of Miles, Huberman, and Saldana through three rigorous stages. The reduction stage involved repeated reading of the transcripts to filter relevant data. In the coding stage, units of meaning were given specific labels such as P-PRK (perception of procedural worship practices), M-VIS (visual media preferences), and T-KLS (classroom focus challenges) which were then grouped into main categories such as "Vocational Environment Habituation" and "Classroom Focus Conditioning" (M. B. dan A. M. H. Miles, 1992).

Finally, the data were critically interpreted to identify patterns of relationships between categories and presented through descriptive narratives and structured summary tables. To ensure data validity, the researcher implemented five research quality procedures: technical triangulation, source triangulation (comparing the perspectives of the teacher and the three students), member checking through verification of draft transcripts by informants, regular discussions with colleagues (peer debriefing), the preparation of a chronological audit trail, and researcher reflexivity. From a legal and ethical perspective, this research has secured official permission from the Principal of SMK Negeri 3 Medan, informed consent from teacher T1, and the school's approval as the formal legal guardian for undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral students under 18 years of age (M. B. Miles et al., 2014).

C. Finding and Discussion

Finding

The research findings identified diverse student learning styles (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), variations in teacher teaching methods, instructional barriers, and solutions. Data were collected through classroom observations, analysis of lesson plan documents, and in-depth interviews. To avoid bias regarding the dominance of certain learning styles, all findings were analyzed transparently using the thematic matrix below:

Table 1. Thematic Matrix of PAI Research Partners

Participant Code	Data source	Main Category	Representative Evidence (Quotations/Observations)	Basis for Determining Tendency
T1 (Islamic Education Teacher)	Interview & Observation	Learning Style & Strategies Diversity	"On average, they don't like just the lecture method... I often make them practice."	Identifying the need for method variations due to low student focus.
S1 (Student XI FKK)	Interview	Kinesthetic Learning Style	"Practice is more suited to my learning style. I understand better when teachers use practice."	Shows a strong preference for direct physical activity (ablution/prayer).
S2 (Student XI FKK)	Interview	Visual & Auditory Learning Styles	"I prefer taking notes, because it's a habit. Usually I look at my mother's explanation first..."	Contrasting Evidence: Prefers note-taking, video visualization, and verbal explanations.
S3 (Student XI FKK)	Interview	Kinesthetic & Memorization Learning Style	"I like practicing and memorizing. Because practicing and memorizing makes me understand things faster."	Shows resistance to the method of taking notes or simply listening.

Analysis of Diversity of Learning Styles and Variations in Islamic Education Learning Methods and Media

Field findings indicate that no single learning style dominates all eleventh-grade FKK students. Initial claims regarding the dominance of kinesthetic learning styles need to be reconsidered due to the contrasting preferences among students. While undergraduate and postgraduate participants strongly stated that they grasped Islamic Religious Education material more quickly through hands-on simulations in the prayer room (such as ablution and prayer movements), postgraduate participants showed the opposite tendency. They were more comfortable using traditional methods of taking notes and listening to the teacher's detailed explanations before engaging in other activities.

Variations in Islamic Education Learning Methods and Media

T1, as the teaching teacher, recognized this polarization of needs in the classroom. To bridge this gap, T1 combined interactive lectures with audiovisual media in the form of short films. This video usage successfully accommodated S2's visual needs while maintaining the

focus of S1 and S3, who were easily bored by monotonous lectures. This balance of evidence underscores the importance of instructional flexibility over imposing a single dominant learning style.

The Urgency of Differentiated Learning in Vocational School Islamic Religious Education Classes

Data from the analysis of lesson plan (RPP) documents and in-depth interviews identified that the implementation of differentiated instruction principles in grade XI FKK has a high level of urgency. This urgency is not based on rigid theoretical assumptions, but rather is observed as an emergency response of teachers (T1) to two specific sociological and practical conditions in the field, namely: Pattern of Disparity Relationship between Student Input Abilities: The main findings through interviews with T1 indicate a very unequal gap in terms of basic religious literacy of students. During Al-Qur'an reading class hours, some students were identified as still spelling at the basic level (Iqra), while other groups of students (S1, S2, and S3) were already at the level of fluency in independent tadarus.

Procedural Material Characteristic Demands: The RPP document shows that the core PAI material at this grade level (such as ablution procedures and prayer movements) is procedural and applicable. The characteristics of this material naturally require physical involvement, which then intertwines with the habituation of SMK students who are accustomed to the learning by doing method in the pharmacy vocational laboratory. Facts in the field show that a single classical approach (such as continuous one-way lectures) risks ignoring the variety of these needs.

When teachers adapt the teaching process by dividing study groups (direct Iqra guidance groups by teachers and independent tadarus groups for students who are already fluent), this strategy is observed to help manage class attention more balanced. This condition shows that the urgency of differentiated learning at SMK Negeri 3 Medan arises due to pragmatic demands in the classroom. Teachers are required to be flexible in modifying the teaching process and content not to separate students into permanent learning style labels, but as a conditioning instrument so that disparities in the ability to read the Qur'an and student boredom with theory can be minimized during class hours.

Instructional Barriers

The Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning process at SMK Negeri 3 Medan faces multidimensional challenges that affect the effectiveness of material absorption. Based on T1's perspective, the main obstacles in this vocational class include low initial student interest, lack of focus, and non-compliance with dress codes that do not reflect Islamic values. These obstacles are exacerbated by a lack of synergy and support from the family environment at home. When questioned by the students, S2 confirmed that internal obstacles such as loss of focus often make it difficult for them to understand the lessons.

Teacher Efforts

In response to these obstacles, T1 implemented two main approaches. First, T1 implemented an indirect contextual approach by inserting moral messages through visualizations of the negative impacts of deviant behavior (such as the dangers of drugs) in short videos. Second, T1 differentiated study groups based on their ability to read the Quran,

where students who were not yet fluent were guided directly using Iqra, while students who were already fluent (such as the S1-S3 group) were directed to independently study together. This strategy has proven to be effective in increasing student active engagement, although motivational challenges from outside the school still require ongoing management.

Discussion

Characteristics of Various Student Learning Preferences

Field data summarized through a thematic matrix shows a pattern of learning orientation tendencies of class XI FKK students of SMK Negeri 3 Medan that leads to physical or psychomotor activities. This pattern at first glance seems to be in line with DePorter and Hernacki's sensory modality theory regarding the unique way individuals process information, as well as the concept of fitrah (innate potential) in Islamic theology (HR. Bukhari No. 1358; HR. Muslim No. 2658) whose development is influenced by the external environment (Al-Asqalani, 2001). However, the similarities with these established theories should not be interpreted definitively that students have a fixed or permanent kinesthetic learning style. A more critical alternative explanation suggests that students' preferences for hands-on activities are more influenced by the contextual influences of two situational factors.

First, the characteristics of the Islamic Religious Education (PAI) subject being tested (such as ablution practices and prayer movements) are epistemologically procedural (step-by-step), thus naturally demanding physical visualization rather than merely abstract theoretical understanding. Second, there is a strong influence of the institutional habituation of Vocational High Schools (SMK) which systematically shapes students' learning-by-doing mindset through vocational practical activities (Pharmacy) in laboratories supported by school practice facilities. These motor habits are carried over by S1 and S3 students into religious classes. The fact that there is contrasting evidence from S2 students who are more comfortable with material notes and verbal explanations provides an important comparative nuance for the quantitative data (Fatmala, 2024) at SMK Negeri 7 Semarang; the tendency for physical activity in the vocational environment is driven by factors of habituation to the school environment and material demands, not by rigid psychological characteristic labels. This is also in line with observations (Najmi et al., 2025) at MAN 1 Pekanbaru regarding the importance of paying attention to the diversity of student learning styles, but in the context of SMK, these preferences are adaptive and situational. Allah SWT also says in **QS. Az-Zumar verse 9** :

قُلْ هَلْ يَسْتَوِي الَّذِينَ يَعْلَمُونَ وَالَّذِينَ لَا يَعْلَمُونَ إِنَّمَا يَتَذَكَّرُ أُولُو الْأَلْبَابِ

Meaning: "Say, are those who know equal to those who do not know? Indeed, only those who possess understanding receive admonition ("Al-Qur'an Dan Terjemahannya," 2022). "

According to **M. Quraish Shihab** in *Tafsir Al-Misbah* This verse emphasizes the lofty status of knowledge in Islam. To optimally acquire knowledge, the learning process must consider student characteristics, including their learning styles. Therefore, Islamic Religious

Education teachers need to implement diverse learning strategies so that all students can understand the material according to their learning style preferences (Quraish Shihab, 2002).

Variations in Islamic Education Learning Methods and Media

To bridge the differences in students' learning styles, the Islamic Religious Education teacher (T1) implemented a combination of interactive lecture methods, group discussions, demonstrations, and the use of audiovisual media in the form of short films. This combined approach theoretically reflects Jean Piaget's constructivism principle, where knowledge is not transferred passively but is actively constructed by students through direct experience and interaction with the media in their learning environment (Lestari et al., 2024). The use of this media also shows similarities with studies (Trisnanda & Asriyanti, 2024) that conclude that dual stimulation of the senses of hearing (audio) and sight (visual) greatly helps students digest information effectively according to their learning characteristics. The positive influence of this experience-based method is also similar to observations (Lathifah & Hidayati, 2025) in the vocational high school environment, and is in line with studies (Alfahnum et al., 2022) that emphasize the importance of paying attention to the combination of learning styles and disciplines.

However, as a descriptive qualitative study, these findings do not establish causal effectiveness, implying that the method variations automatically change student learning outcomes. In the classrooms of SMK Negeri 3 Medan, these method variations function more as classroom conditioning instruments to manage student attention. The limited hours of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) lessons in public vocational schools make the monotonous single-lecture method risk triggering fragmentation of student attention. The integration of short video stories about social consequences acts as a visual intermezzo that re-engages students, especially for students who prefer video visualizations and verbal explanations, such as S2. This descriptive study only shows a specific pattern of relationship between the creativity of teacher method packaging and student attention retention in vocational classrooms, without establishing a mechanistic causal relationship.

The Urgency of Differentiated Learning

The implementation of various strategies and media variations by T1 is a form of practical adaptation of the principle of Differentiated Instruction to create change for the better (Salsabila et al., 2024). This approach emphasizes that teachers must understand the diversity of student characteristics to present teaching strategies that are relevant to the potential of each individual (Mutiara et al., 2024) in order to optimize educational output (Afnanda, 2023). Theologically, the urgency of adapting methods to student characteristics is strongly supported by QS. An-Nahl verse 125 concerning the command to preach and educate with wisdom (wisdom in choosing the right method according to the condition of the object) and mau'izhah hasanah ("Al-Qur'an Dan Terjemahannya," 2022).

M. Quraish Shihab in Tafsir Al-Misbah (2002) explains that educators must be wise in adapting their teaching methods to students' thinking abilities. This principle of caution is emphasized by the hadith of Abdullah bin Mas'ud ra (HR. Muslim No. 14) and the commentary of Imam An-Nawawi in Syarah Sahih Muslim that delivering material that goes

beyond the reach of students' reason will only trigger confusion or slander in learning. This theoretical relationship is supported by previous studies from (Bire & Geradus, Uda Bire, 2014) which shows the relationship between the suitability of teacher teaching methods with student characteristics, as well as studies (Aini et al., 2025) that find a linear impact on increasing student active participation in Islamic Religious Education learning. This understanding helps teachers optimize the learning process (Meriyanti et al., 2024).

However, contextual influences at SMK Negeri 3 Medan show a stark practical difference. The urgency of differentiation in grade XI FKK is not simply the application of ideal modern curriculum theory, but rather an emergency response to sociological disparities in students' ability backgrounds. Researchers identified a significant initial disparity in Quranic literacy (some still spell at the Iqra level, others are already fluent). The teacher's decision to divide the direct guidance group (Iqra) and the independent tadarus group (S1-S3) shows that differentiation in SMK is driven by pragmatic demands to address the disparity in input from vocational school students.

Obstacles in the Learning Process

Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning in the field faces real obstacles in the form of low internal student learning interest, behavioral disorders in class (such as focus problems), and minimal control support from the family environment. These passive family environmental factors hinder the internalization of religious values, considering that child development is largely determined by the surrounding ecosystem, as warned in the review of Syarh Sahih Muslim (Muslim ibn al-Hajjaj, 2006). These obstacles can be analyzed using the perspective of Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory where interest is defined as an emotional attachment that directs students' attention and engagement (Hidayat & Santosa, 2024). When their focus of concentration is fragmented by internal problems or a less supportive home environment, their orientation towards learning will decline.

The characteristics of Islamic Religious Education (PAI) learning, which demands not only cognitive aspects but also the appreciation of spiritual values, (Siregar & Hasibuan, 2024) make this behavioral obstacle a serious challenge for teachers. The sociological context of vocational high schools (SMK) as public schools based on work readiness also explains why this obstacle specifically arises. In contrast to faith-based institutions that have a homogeneous religiosity culture, vocational high school students have a casual sociological background with a primary orientation towards work readiness after graduation. The content of Islamic Religious Education subjects that demand changes in affective-spiritual behavior is often perceived differently by students who are accustomed to practical-pragmatic vocational competency targets. As a result, religious material is vulnerable to being perceived as an additional theoretical burden that does not support their work skills, which then triggers the emergence of less focused behavior during class hours, and is exacerbated by the absence of reinforcement of religious values from the home environment.

Teachers' Efforts to Overcome Learning Barriers

As a solution to overcome these obstacles, teachers' efforts focused on utilizing learning videos (audiovisual media) and providing contextual real-life examples. Based on

Carl Rogers' Humanistic Theory, teachers take an optimal role as facilitators to build a fun and student-centered learning atmosphere to trigger intrinsic motivation (Dmitrichenkova & Dolzhich, 2020). The use of technology-based instruments and real-life examples was observed to support student attention and bridge the limitations of home support. This solution effort shows a pattern similar to the results of empirical research (Ashari et al., 2025) that concluded that the use of teaching methods that are adaptive to student characteristics is associated with higher levels of engagement when they gain direct experience. Critically, interpretation of the success of these teachers' efforts must be closely integrated with the limitations of generalizability of this descriptive qualitative study.

The contextual approach and use of short videos by teachers are short-term, situational coping strategies in the classroom. This classroom conditioning strategy has been identified as being able to reduce behavioral distortions and temporarily attract students' attention in the classroom, but it does not have the causal reach to address the root of sociological structural problems outside of school. The teacher adaptation patterns at SMK Negeri 3 Medan are closely tied to the availability of school technology facilities, the sociological background of the students' families, and the personal capacity of the teachers themselves, so the results cannot necessarily be generalized absolutely to all vocational education institutions that have different cultural characteristics and backgrounds.

E. Conclusion

This study concludes that eleventh-grade students of the Family and Family Education Faculty (FKK) at SMK Negeri 3 Medan have varied learning preferences, with a tendency to prefer physical-practical activities and the use of audiovisual media. Islamic Religious Education teachers have attempted to accommodate these needs through a combination of lecture methods, worship simulations, and grouping of Quran recitation skills. Although the learning process is faced with obstacles in the form of low internal focus of students and minimal supervisory support from the family environment, the implementation of creative teaching strategies with real-life examples and moral video displays is observed to support student interest and active participation in class. The main contribution of this manuscript is to provide an in-depth description of how the characteristics of procedural religious materials (such as ablution and prayer practices) and the habituation of a practicum-based vocational school environment interact in shaping students' practical learning preferences, beyond the assumption of rigid psychological categories of learning styles. While providing an in-depth overview, this qualitative descriptive study has several important limitations that need to be acknowledged in interpreting the results. The first limitation lies in its single-site scope, as data were collected only from within the internal environment of SMK Negeri 3 Medan, making the findings highly dependent on the sociological characteristics, technological facilities, and culture of the local school. The second limitation is the relatively small participant group size, involving only one Islamic Religious Education teacher and three students. Finally, because it employed a descriptive qualitative design, this study was not designed to establish causal relationships or mechanistically test the causal effectiveness of a method, but rather aimed

only to map patterns of relationships, perceptions, and situational tendencies that occurred in the field.

As a step towards future improvement, this study yields several specific recommendations, both for practical classroom needs and academic development. Practically, teachers are advised not to permanently categorize students into a single, rigid learning style label. Instead, Islamic Religious Education (PAI) instruction should be designed to integrate practical activities (simulations), visuals (video presentations), auditory (oral explanations), and reflective sessions (meaning discussions) within a single, flexible learning flow. Meanwhile, for academic needs, future studies are recommended to expand the scope of research by involving several schools (multi-site), involving a larger group of participants, implementing more systematic classroom observation instruments, and using mixed-methods designs to quantitatively test the effectiveness of instructional methods.

F. Acknowledgment

The authors express their deepest gratitude to the thesis advisors for their invaluable guidance, continuous support, and constructive feedback throughout this study. High appreciation is extended to the home university for providing institutional resources and support. The authors are immensely grateful to their parents for their endless prayers, motivation, and support. Finally, sincere thanks are due to the Principal, the PAI teacher, and the eleventh-grade Pharmacy students of SMK Negeri 3 Medan for their institutional permission and active cooperation during the fieldwork.

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